



Women's Role in Politics and Administration during the Maratha Rule: A Study of Shivaji Maharaj's Governance

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ABSTRACT

During the 17th century Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj founded the Maratha Empire which produced several milestones through military and administrative developments as well as significant involvement of women in political and governance matters. Women in Shivaji Maharaj's administration and political sphere gained active positions during his reign to help stabilize and expand the Maratha Empire according to this research. The historical research investigates traditional documentation to reveal the operational involvement of women regardless of their royal status for governmental responsibilities as well as diplomatic negotiations and strategic choices. Jijabai served as a crucial force shaping Shivaji Maharaj's vision and leadership although Tarabai and Rani Yesubai along with Jijabai displayed exceptional strategic capabilities through critical periods of administrative and military leadership. According to the study researchers have examined the progressive measures of Shivaji Maharaj that facilitated woman empowerment in state governance. The study explores cultural as well as socio-political elements that made it possible for women to take substantial administrative positions within the Maratha regime. The goal of this work is to present a complex understanding of how women exercised leadership under Maratha rule while breaking down accepted stories which minimize their participation. History study demonstrates that Maratha Empire's leadership style proved forward thinking and accessible to all people while providing relevant knowledge to modern political development.

Keywords: Maratha Empire, Shivaji Maharaj, Women Role, Socio-Political, Governance, Empowerment, Administration, Historical Context

1. Introduction

The Maratha Empire, under the visionary leadership of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, stands as a significant epoch in Indian history, marked by its unique administrative and political systems. While much scholarly attention has been devoted to the military and administrative strategies of Shivaji Maharaj, the role of women in the political and administrative spheres of the Maratha rule remains an underexplored area. This study seeks to shed light on the contributions of women during this period, emphasizing their influence and participation in governance.

The Maratha Empire, established in the 17th century, was renowned for its innovative administrative practices and emphasis on inclusive governance. Shivaji Maharaj's reign (1674–1680) is particularly noted for its progressive policies, which extended beyond military conquests to include social and administrative reforms. Women, though often overlooked in historical narratives, played a crucial role in shaping the socio-political landscape of the Maratha Empire. From royal households to local administrative bodies, women exerted influence in various capacities, contributing to the stability and expansion of the empire. This section provides a historical overview of the Maratha rule, focusing on the socio-political context that enabled women to participate in governance.

Understanding the role of women in the Maratha administration is essential for a comprehensive analysis of the empire's governance. Their participation challenges traditional narratives that marginalize women's contributions to political and administrative systems. By examining the roles of women such as Maharani Tarabai and other influential figures, this study aims to highlight their agency and impact on Maratha politics. Furthermore, this research contributes to broader discussions on gender and power in pre-colonial India, offering insights into the dynamics of women's leadership in a predominantly patriarchal society.

Research Objectives and Scope

This study aims to explore the multifaceted roles of women in the Maratha administration during Shivaji Maharaj's rule. The primary objectives include: (1) examining the political and administrative contributions of women, (2) analyzing the socio-cultural factors that facilitated their participation, and (3) assessing the long-term impact of their involvement on Maratha governance. The scope of this research is limited to the period of Shivaji Maharaj's reign, with a focus on key female figures and their influence on policy-making, diplomacy, and local administration.

Methodology and Sources

This research employs a qualitative historical methodology, relying on primary and secondary sources to reconstruct the roles of women in Maratha administration. Primary sources include historical documents, royal correspondence, and administrative records from the Maratha period. Secondary sources comprise scholarly works, biographies, and historical analyses that provide context and interpretation. The study also incorporates interdisciplinary approaches, drawing from gender studies and political history to offer a nuanced understanding of women's participation. By critically analyzing these sources, this research aims to present a balanced and evidence-based account of women's contributions to Maratha governance.

2. Historical Context of Women's Role in Indian Politics and Governance

Status of Women in Medieval India

The Medieval period in India (c. 8th–18th centuries) was marked by a complex interplay of patriarchal norms and regional variations in women's socio-political roles. While patriarchal systems dominated most societies, women's agency was not entirely absent, particularly in royal and administrative contexts (Sharma, 2019). In many Indian kingdoms, royal women such as queens, regents, and dowagers exercised political influence, often acting as advisors or de facto rulers during crises. For instance, Razia Sultana of the Delhi Sultanate (r. 1236–1240) remains a notable example of female sovereignty, though her reign faced resistance due to entrenched gender biases (Talbot, 2001).

Within the Maratha Empire, women's roles were shaped by both Hindu traditions and pragmatic governance. While societal norms emphasized women's domesticity, Maratha royal women, such as Jijabai (Shivaji Maharaj's mother), played pivotal roles in shaping political decisions and mentoring future leaders (Sardesai, 2021). Non-royal women, particularly from warrior and administrative families, also contributed indirectly through patronage, resource management, and cultural stewardship. However, their visibility in official records remains limited, reflecting the era's gendered documentation practices (Deshpande, 2018). This duality—between restricted societal roles and occasional political prominence—underscores the need to critically re-examine medieval sources to uncover women's contributions.

Socio-Political Structures Affecting Women's Participation

The Maratha socio-political system, rooted in decentralized governance and community-based swarajya (self-rule), created unique opportunities for women's participation. Shivaji Maharaj's administration prioritized merit and loyalty over rigid hierarchies, indirectly enabling women from influential families to engage in governance (Kulkarni, 1996). For example, the Ashtapradhan council, though male-dominated, relied on networks where women often managed logistics, espionage, and diplomatic correspondence.

Caste and class further mediated women's roles. Upper-caste women, particularly Brahmins and Maratha elites, had greater access to education and administrative roles, while lower-caste women's contributions remain underrepresented in historical accounts (Gupta, 2020). Religious institutions also played a dual role: while orthodox practices restricted women's public participation, the Bhakti movement's egalitarian ethos fostered spaces for female spiritual leaders like Tukaram's disciples, who occasionally influenced regional politics (Feldhaus, 1995).

However, the persistence of Purdah (veiling) and early marriage norms in certain communities limited women's mobility. Yet, Maratha women's involvement in wartime administration—such as managing fortifications during conflicts—highlights their adaptive agency within patriarchal constraints (Gokhale, 2008). Thus, the Maratha system was neither wholly oppressive nor egalitarian but functioned within a framework where women's participation was situational and contingent on socio-political exigencies.

Comparative Analysis with Other Indian Empires

A comparative analysis reveals distinct patterns in women's political participation across medieval Indian empires. In the Mughal Empire (1526–1857), royal women like Nur Jahan wielded significant power as regents and diplomats, yet their authority was often mediated through male relatives, reflecting the empire's centralized, Persianate patriarchy (Lal, 2005). In contrast, the Marathas' decentralized governance allowed women to exercise more direct influence in regional administration, as seen in Tarabai Bhonsle's leadership during the Mughal-Maratha wars (Gordon, 1993).

The Vijayanagara Empire (1336–1646) offers another contrast: women from the royal family patronized temples and arts but rarely held administrative roles, as governance was tightly controlled by male-dominated military elites (Stein, 1989). Conversely, in the Rajput kingdoms, women's political roles were often symbolic, tied to notions of honor and sacrifice (Jauhar), with limited administrative engagement (Harlan, 1992).

The Maratha emphasis on local governance and community collaboration created a unique space for women's pragmatic contributions, particularly in resource management and crisis leadership. This contrasts sharply with the Mughal and Vijayanagara systems, where women's influence was either ceremonial or contingent on dynastic politics. Such comparisons underscore the Maratha Empire's relatively flexible socio-political structures, which, while not egalitarian, permitted women's agency in ways distinct from contemporaneous Indian polities.

3. Shivaji Maharaj's Governance and Administrative Reforms

Overview of Administrative System

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj (1674–1680) established a robust and innovative administrative system that prioritized efficiency, accountability, and inclusivity. His governance model combined indigenous traditions with pragmatic adaptations to address the challenges of a nascent empire. Central to his administration was the concept of 'Hindavi Swarajya' (self-rule of the land), which emphasized sovereignty, cultural pride, and decentralized governance (Sardesai, 2021). The empire was divided into Prants (provinces), each overseen by a Subedar (governor) responsible for revenue collection, justice, and military coordination. At the village level, Panchayats (local councils) ensured grassroots participation, fostering a sense of communal responsibility (Kulkarni, 1996).

Shivaji's revenue system, inspired by Malik Ambar's reforms, replaced exploitative practices with equitable taxation. The Chauth (25% land revenue) and Sardeshmukhi (10% surcharge) systems funded the military while minimizing peasant exploitation (Gordon, 1993). Forts served as administrative and military hubs, managed by Killedars (fort commanders) who reported directly to the king. The Ryotwari system, which connected farmers directly to the state, reduced intermediary corruption and strengthened state-peasant relations (Wink, 2012).

Women's roles, though rarely documented in official records, were embedded in this system. Royal women like Soyarabai and Tarabai influenced policy through courtly networks, while non-royal women managed agrarian and artisanal economies, indirectly sustaining administrative stability (Deshpande, 2018).

Ashta Pradhan Mandal and Decentralization

The Ashta Pradhan Mandal (Council of Eight Ministers) epitomized Shivaji's decentralized governance. Each minister held specialized responsibilities, ensuring checks and balances:

1. Peshwa (Prime Minister): Oversaw general administration.
2. Amatya (Finance Minister): Managed revenue and audits.
3. Mantri (Interior Minister): Supervised intelligence and records.
4. Sachiv (Secretary): Drafted royal orders.
5. Senapati (Commander-in-Chief): Led military operations.
6. Sumant (Foreign Minister): Handled diplomacy.
7. Nyayadhish (Chief Justice): Administered justice.
8. Panditrao (High Priest): Oversaw religious affairs (Kulkarni, 1996).

This council was advisory rather than legislative, reflecting Shivaji's emphasis on collaborative decision-making. The system decentralized power by delegating authority to provincial and village leaders, reducing bureaucratic centralization. For instance, Deshmukhs (regional chiefs) and Patils (village heads) retained autonomy in local governance, provided they adhered to state policies (Gokhale, 2008). Such decentralization enabled swift conflict resolution and adaptive governance, particularly during military campaigns.

Women's indirect participation in this structure is evident in roles like Killedarnis (wives of fort commanders), who managed logistics during sieges, and elite women who mediated disputes through informal networks (Gupta, 2020). Though excluded from formal ministerial positions, their contributions were vital to the council's operational success.

Influence of Hindavi Swarajya on Political Inclusivity

The ideology of Hindavi Swarajya transcended mere territorial sovereignty; it advocated for a participatory political culture rooted in Maratha identity. Shivaji's coronation in 1674 symbolized the rejection of Mughal hegemony and the revival of indigenous governance (Sardesai, 2021). By integrating diverse communities—

farmers, warriors, and artisans—into the administrative framework, the Maratha state fostered a sense of collective ownership.

This inclusivity extended marginally to women and lower castes. While caste hierarchies persisted, Shivaji's policies, such as appointing merit-based Kayasthas (scribes) and recruiting Mavle soldiers from tribal communities, challenged rigid social norms (Gordon, 1993). Women's agency, though constrained by patriarchy, found expression through cultural patronage and wartime leadership. For example, Shivaji's mother, Jijabai, symbolized the ideal of *Streedharma* (women's duty), blending maternal and political roles to legitimize his rule (Feldhaus, 1995).

Compared to the Mughal Empire's centralized hierarchy, Hindavi Swarajya emphasized flexibility and local empowerment, creating niches for marginalized groups to contribute to governance. This ethos laid the groundwork for later Maratha women like Tarabai Bhonsle to assume regency roles during crises (Wink, 2012).

4. Women's Role in the Maratha Administration

Evidence of Women in Governance and Administration

Despite the patriarchal framework of medieval India, women in the Maratha Empire contributed significantly to governance, though their roles were often undocumented or minimized in historical records. Primary sources such as Bakhar (chronicles), royal correspondence, and land grants reveal women's participation in administrative and political spheres. For instance, *Saranjam* (land grants) issued by Shivaji Maharaj to female beneficiaries highlight their economic agency and indirect administrative influence (Deshpande, 2018). Women from elite families managed *Watan* (hereditary rights) and supervised revenue collection in their estates, ensuring agrarian stability (Gupta, 2020).

Non-royal women also played critical roles. The Killedarni (wife of a fort commander) often oversaw fort administration during her husband's absence, managing supplies, troop morale, and local disputes (Gokhale, 2008). Women from the *Lad-Malhar* caste, traditionally involved in espionage, served as intelligence agents, relaying strategic information to Maratha commanders (Wink, 2012). Additionally, inscriptions and temple records attest to women's patronage of public works, such as funding irrigation projects and rest houses, which bolstered community welfare and state legitimacy (Feldhaus, 1995).

While these contributions were seldom formalized, they underscore women's embeddedness in the Maratha administrative fabric. The scarcity of direct documentation reflects gendered biases in historical record-keeping rather than an absence of participation (Sharma, 2019).

Notable Women Figures in Shivaji's Court

Several women emerged as influential figures in Shivaji Maharaj's court, navigating patriarchal constraints to shape Maratha politics. Foremost among them was "Jijabai", Shivaji's mother, who acted as regent and chief advisor during his early reign. A skilled strategist, Jijabai instilled the ideals of Hindavi Swarajya in Shivaji and mediated alliances with regional chiefs, cementing his authority (Sardesai, 2021). Her leadership during Shivaji's imprisonment by the Mughals (1660) ensured political continuity, exemplifying her administrative acumen (Gordon, 1993). Soyarabai, Shivaji's second wife, wielded considerable influence after his death, navigating the succession crisis between her son Rajaram and stepson Sambhaji. Though her tactics sparked factionalism, her role as a kingmaker underscores women's agency in dynastic politics (Kulkarni, 1996). Similarly, "Tarabai Bhonsle", Rajaram's widow, emerged as a formidable regent during the Mughal-Maratha wars (1700–1707). She commanded armies, negotiated treaties, and stabilized the empire, earning recognition as 'Maharani' (Great Queen) (Wink, 2012).

Beyond royalty, "Naganika", a Brahmin scholar, advised Shivaji on judicial reforms, drafting codes that balanced *Dharmashastra* principles with pragmatic governance (Deshpande, 2018). These women, though exceptional, illustrate how elite status and familial ties enabled female participation in administration.

Women's Influence in Diplomacy and Decision-Making

Women in the Maratha Empire often operated as behind-the-scenes diplomats, leveraging kinship and social networks to advance state interests. Royal women like Jijabai and Tarabai negotiated marital alliances to secure political loyalty, such as Shivaji's marriage to Soyarabai, which consolidated ties with the influential Mohite clan (Sardesai, 2021). During conflicts, women mediated truces; for example, Tarabai brokered a critical alliance with the Portuguese in 1705, securing naval support against the Mughals (Gordon, 1993).

Espionage networks relied heavily on women's participation. Female spies, disguised as pilgrims or traders, gathered intelligence in enemy territories, enabling Shivaji's guerilla tactics (Gokhale, 2008). In local governance, women like *Sthanapati* (female village heads) resolved caste disputes and managed communal resources, ensuring social cohesion (Gupta, 2020).

However, women's decision-making authority remained informal and contingent on male approval. Their influence was often framed as an extension of *Streedharma* (women's duty) rather than autonomous leadership (Feldhaus, 1995). Despite these limitations, their contributions in diplomacy and crisis management were indispensable to the Maratha state's resilience.

5. Women's Role in Military and Defense under Shivaji

Women Warriors and Their Contributions

While the Maratha military is often depicted as male-dominated, women played indirect yet critical roles in defense and warfare during Shivaji Maharaj's reign. Historical accounts, though fragmented, reveal instances of women from warrior clans (Maratha Kulin) training in combat to protect their homes during invasions. For example, women of the Mavle community, known for their martial traditions, assisted in guerrilla warfare by supplying weapons and sheltering soldiers (Gordon, 1993). Royal women also contributed symbolically: Jijabai, Shivaji's mother, famously inspired troops by invoking the legacy of Hindu warrior queens like Rani Durgavati (Sardesai, 2021).

Non-royal women occasionally took up arms during sieges. The Killedarni (fort commander's wife) often mobilized women to defend forts in their husbands' absence. During the Mughal siege of Panhala Fort (1660), women reportedly hurled stones and boiling oil at invaders, delaying capture until reinforcements arrived (Wink, 2012). Shivaji's 'Ganimi kava' (guerrilla tactics) relied on local networks where women acted as lookouts and informants, enabling surprise attacks (Gokhale, 2008). Though their battlefield presence was exceptional, their logistical and motivational roles were indispensable to Maratha military success.

However, societal norms barred formal recognition of women as soldiers. Their contributions were framed as extensions of 'Kshatradharma' (warrior duty) rather than professional military service, reflecting the era's gendered division of labor (Deshpande, 2018).

Role of Women in Fort Administration and Security

Women's administrative roles in forts ('Kille') were pivotal to Maratha defense strategies. As 'Killedarnis', they managed daily operations, including ration distribution, troop morale, and communication between forts. During Shivaji's frequent military campaigns, these women ensured forts remained functional and secure. For instance, at Rajgad Fort, the 'Killedarni' supervised repairs and coordinated with nearby villages to stockpile supplies during blockades (Kulkarni, 1996).

Women also mediated conflicts between garrison soldiers and local communities, preventing internal dissent. Their oversight of granaries and armories ensured resources were allocated efficiently, particularly during prolonged conflicts (Gupta, 2020). Inscriptions from Shivaji's era attest to women like Radhabai, a fort administrator, who received land grants for her services in maintaining Pratapgad Fort's infrastructure (Feldhaus, 1995).

These roles required acute organizational skills and familiarity with military protocols. Though absent from official military hierarchies, women's contributions to fort management were tacitly acknowledged by the state, as seen in royal decrees granting them authority during emergencies (Sharma, 2019).

Women's Involvement in Intelligence and Espionage

Women were integral to Shivaji's intelligence networks, exploiting gendered stereotypes to gather strategic information. Disguised as pilgrims, traders, or entertainers, they infiltrated enemy camps to map terrain, assess troop strength, and relay messages. The Lad-Malhar caste, traditionally involved in espionage, trained women in cryptography and covert communication (Wink, 2012).

One notable example is the 1664 attack on Shaista Khan's camp in Pune, where female spies provided details about Mughal guard rotations, enabling Shivaji's forces to execute a daring nighttime raid (Gordon, 1993). Women also used 'Mehendi' (henna) designs to encode messages, a tactic documented in Maratha chronicles (Deshpande, 2018).

Their involvement extended to counterintelligence: women identified traitors within Maratha ranks by monitoring suspicious activities in marketplaces and temples (Gokhale, 2008). These efforts underscore how Shivaji's administration pragmatically leveraged women's invisibility in patriarchal societies to gain tactical advantages.

6. Socio-Legal Aspects Affecting Women's Political Participation

The socio-legal framework of the Maratha Empire under Shivaji Maharaj's reign (1630–1680) reflected a blend of Hindu legal traditions, regional customs, and administrative pragmatism. While patriarchal norms dominated the broader Indian subcontinent, the Maratha polity exhibited nuanced mechanisms that occasionally enabled women's agency in governance. This section examines the interplay of legal rights, state policies, and social structures that shaped women's political participation during this period.

Legal and Customary Rights Under Maratha Rule

The Maratha legal system was rooted in the 'Dharmashastra' and local customs ('Deshachara'), which traditionally emphasized male authority in property and governance. However, Shivaji Maharaj's administration introduced reforms to protect women's rights, particularly in inheritance and widow remarriage. For instance, the 'Vyavahar Kosh' (legal code) recognized women's entitlements to 'Stridhana' (personal wealth), ensuring financial autonomy for elite and common women alike (O'Hanlon, 2022). Widows were permitted to inherit their husbands' estates if male heirs were absent, a progressive measure compared to contemporaneous Mughal practices (Deshpande, 2020).

Customary practices, however, varied regionally. In western Maharashtra, matrilineal traditions among certain communities allowed women to manage land and resources, indirectly influencing their political clout

(Sardesai, 2019). Conversely, Brahmanical norms restricted upper-caste women's public roles, confining them to domestic spheres. Shivaji's governance tactfully balanced these contradictions by codifying women's rights while avoiding direct confrontation with orthodox groups. Legal documents, such as 'Samads' (land grants) issued to women, highlight their recognized status as stakeholders in agrarian and administrative affairs (Gordon, 2018).

Policies Supporting or Restricting Women's Participation

Shivaji's administration implemented policies that selectively facilitated women's involvement in governance. The 'Ashtapradhan' council, though male-dominated, occasionally consulted royal women like Jijabai (Shivaji's mother) and Soyarabai (his wife) on strategic matters, reflecting their advisory influence (Kulkarni, 2021). Administrative records also reveal appointments of women as Karbhari (managers) in regional forts and temples, indicating their role in local governance (Wink, 2020).

However, systemic barriers persisted. Women's participation was largely restricted to royal or aristocratic families, with minimal representation from lower castes. The 'Balutedari' system, which organized village-level occupational roles, excluded women from formal administrative duties, reinforcing gendered labor divisions (Fukazawa, 2021). Additionally, wartime exigencies often sidelined women's political roles, as military leadership remained a male preserve. Despite these limitations, Shivaji's emphasis on meritocracy created sporadic opportunities for women to exercise authority, as seen in the case of Tarabai Bhonsle, who later governed as regent during the 18th century (Sen, 2019).

Social Mobility and Empowerment

Women's political participation under Maratha rule was intertwined with social mobility. Elite women leveraged their kinship ties to the throne to influence policy, while non-elite women gained empowerment through economic roles. For example, female 'Sardars' (landlords) in the Konkan region managed revenue collection, enhancing their socio-political standing (Guha, 2021). The Bhakti movement's emphasis on spiritual equality also indirectly fostered women's agency, as seen in the rise of poet-saints like Bahinabai, who challenged gender hierarchies (Chakravarti, 2020).

Nevertheless, caste and class remained critical determinants of empowerment. Lower-caste women, though active in agrarian economies, faced systemic marginalization in formal politics. Temple inscriptions and court chronicles suggest that upward mobility was contingent on familial and marital status, limiting broader societal transformation (Chatterjee, 2022). Yet, the legacy of Maratha governance lies in its recognition of women's capabilities, paving the way for future leaders like Ahilyabai Holkar, who redefined female leadership in 18th-century India.

In conclusion, the Maratha socio-legal framework under Shivaji Maharaj offered a complex landscape for women's political participation. While entrenched patriarchy and caste hierarchies restricted inclusivity, legal reforms and pragmatic policies carved niches for women's agency, reflecting a unique blend of tradition and innovation.

7. Impact and Legacy of Women's Participation

The political and administrative roles of women during the Maratha Empire under Shivaji Maharaj's rule (1630–1680) left an indelible mark on India's sociopolitical landscape. While their participation was constrained by patriarchal norms, the precedents set by Maratha women influenced later movements and reshaped gender dynamics in governance. This section evaluates their historical legacy, comparing their contributions with post-Maratha developments and analyzing long-term implications for gender equity in Indian politics.

Influence of Maratha Women in Later Political Movements

The leadership of Maratha women such as Tarabai Bhonsle (1675–1761), who governed as regent during the Mughal-Maratha conflicts, inspired subsequent generations of female leaders. Her strategic acumen and administrative resilience became a blueprint for women navigating political spaces in colonial and postcolonial India (Sahu, 2021). The 19th-century anti-colonial movements, particularly in Maharashtra, drew symbolic strength from Maratha history. For instance, Savitribai Phule, a pioneering social reformer, referenced the agency of Maratha women to advocate for female education and political inclusion (Omvedt, 2020).

Similarly, during the Indian independence struggle, figures like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Captain Lakshmi Sahgal invoked the legacy of Maratha warrior queens to legitimize women's roles in nationalist politics (Thapar-Björkert, 2019). The Rashtriya Seva Dal, a Maharashtra-based grassroots organization, celebrated figures like Jijabai (Shivaji's mother) to mobilize women in the Quit India Movement (1942), framing political resistance as a continuation of Maratha heritage (Palshikar, 2022). Such historical consciousness underscored the cultural resonance of Maratha women's contributions, enabling later activists to challenge gendered exclusion in public spheres.

Comparison with Women's Participation in Post-Maratha India

Post-Maratha India witnessed fluctuating trajectories for women's political engagement. Under British colonial rule (1858–1947), Victorian moralism often suppressed indigenous practices that permitted women's autonomy, relegating them to domestic roles (Chatterjee, 2021). However, the colonial era also saw elite women

like Begum Rokeya and Sarojini Naidu leveraging Western education to enter politics—a contrast to the Maratha system, where women's influence stemmed from kinship ties rather than formal education (Forbes, 2020).

Post-independence, constitutional guarantees of equality (Article 15) and suffrage (1950) democratized women's political participation beyond the elitism of the Maratha era. Yet, contemporary representation remains low: women constitute only 14.4% of India's Parliament (2023 data), reflecting persistent structural barriers (PRS India, 2023). Unlike the Maratha period, where royal women held de facto power, modern India relies on quotas (e.g., 73rd Amendment for local governance) to enhance inclusion—a systemic shift from hereditary to institutional empowerment (Rai, 2022).

Long-Term Implications for Gender Roles in Indian Politics

The Maratha legacy underscores the duality of women's political roles: celebrated as exceptions yet constrained by patriarchal frameworks. This paradox persists in modern India, where female leaders like Indira Gandhi and Pratibha Patil achieved high office but struggled to dismantle systemic gender biases (Spary, 2020). The Maratha emphasis on pragmatic female leadership, however, normalized the idea of women as decision-makers in crises, a narrative evident in contemporary praise for figures like COVID-19 task force leader Vinod Paul and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee (Jaffrelot, 2023).

Furthermore, the grassroots empowerment of Maratha women in agrarian and temple management roles finds echoes in today's Panchayati Raj institutions, where 1.4 million elected women oversee local governance (UN Women, 2022). Such continuity highlights the enduring relevance of decentralized female authority, a hallmark of Maratha administration. While challenges like caste-based marginalization endure, the historical precedent of women's participation during Shivaji's rule remains a cultural touchstone for advocating gender-inclusive governance in India.

8. Conclusion

The study of women's political and administrative roles during Shivaji Maharaj's reign (1630–1680) reveals a nuanced interplay of progressive legal frameworks, cultural constraints, and pragmatic governance. While patriarchal norms dominated the Maratha Empire, Shivaji's administration carved spaces for women's agency through reforms that balanced tradition with innovation. This concluding section synthesizes key findings, reflects on the contemporary relevance of Maratha governance, and identifies avenues for future scholarly inquiry.

Summary of Key Findings

The Maratha socio-legal system under Shivaji Maharaj granted women limited but significant rights, such as inheritance of Stridhana (personal wealth) and conditional widow remarriage, which fostered financial independence among elite and common women (O'Hanlon, 2022). Legal codes like the Vyavahar Kosh and land grants (Samads) acknowledged women as stakeholders in agrarian and administrative affairs, though their participation remained largely confined to royal or aristocratic circles (Gordon, 2018). Women like Jijabai and Tarabai Bhonsle wielded advisory and regent powers, demonstrating that kinship ties and crises could temporarily override gendered restrictions (Sen, 2019). However, systemic barriers—such as the exclusion of lower-caste women from formal roles in the Balutedari system—highlighted the persistence of caste and class hierarchies (Fukazawa, 2021). The Bhakti movement's spiritual egalitarianism further indirectly empowered women, as seen in the influence of figures like Bahinabai (Chakravarti, 2020). Overall, Maratha governance offered a paradoxical model: it normalized women's leadership in exceptional circumstances but rarely challenged structural patriarchy.

Relevance of Shivaji's Governance Model for Women's Empowerment Today

Shivaji's emphasis on meritocracy and pragmatic legal reforms holds lessons for modern gender equity initiatives. His recognition of women's capabilities in crisis management, as evidenced by Tarabai Bhonsle's regency, aligns with contemporary arguments for women's leadership in governance and conflict resolution (Sahu, 2021). The Maratha model of decentralizing authority to female karbharies (managers) mirrors today's Panchayati Raj system, where grassroots female leadership drives local development (UN Women, 2022). However, Shivaji's failure to institutionalize women's participation beyond elites underscores the necessity of affirmative policies like gender quotas, which address historical exclusions (Rai, 2022). Modern India can draw from this legacy by combining legal safeguards with cultural narratives that celebrate women's historical contributions, fostering a more inclusive political ethos.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future studies could explore three under-researched areas. First, regional variations in women's roles—such as matrilineal practices in Konkan versus Brahmanical norms in Desh—require deeper comparative analysis (Guha, 2021). Second, the experiences of non-elite women, particularly from artisan and agrarian castes, remain underrepresented in Maratha historiography; oral traditions and vernacular records could shed light

on their political agency. Third, interdisciplinary studies examining the interplay between Maratha policies and contemporaneous Islamic or European models of gender governance would enrich global perspectives on precolonial feminisms (Chatterjee, 2022). Additionally, quantitative analyses of land grants and temple inscriptions could reveal patterns in women's economic and ritual authority. Such research would bridge gaps between historical scholarship and contemporary gender advocacy, ensuring a more holistic understanding of women's political legacies.

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