



Interpreting Sustainability In Pre-Modern India: Shivaji's Governance In Marathwada.

¹Dr.Soni T.L , ²Dr.Smitha R

¹Associate Professor of Economics, ²Associate Professor of Economics

¹ Sri C Achutha Menon Govt College Thrissur, India

Abstract: This paper analyses the economic and governance practices of Marathwada under Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj in the 17th century, highlighting their role in maintaining regional economic stability. While existing studies focus on military strategy and political power, economic governance has received little attention. Using a qualitative historical-analytical approach, the study examines agriculture and land revenue, water management, handicraft production, forest control, trade, financial practices, and decentralized governance as interrelated aspects of governance. The concept of sustainability is applied heuristically to assess the long-term orientation of these practices without projecting modern frameworks. The analysis shows that flexible income policies, resource control, and support for local economic networks contributed to continuity and resilience in an ecologically constrained region.

Index Terms - Shivaji Maharaj, Marathwada, economic governance, agrarian administration, sustainability

I. INTRODUCTION

Studies of pre-modern India have focused primarily on questions of political power, military organization, and state formation. Economic governance has often been treated as a secondary concern, discussed primarily in relation to revenue generation or military financing (Ranade, 1900; Sen, 1925). In studies of the Maratha state and Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, historians have paid considerable attention to forts, military strategy, and administrative institutions, while economic policies have often been presented as supporting mechanisms rather than as central elements of governance (Sardesai, 1957; Kulkarni, 2001). As a result, the economic foundations of governance at the local level remain inadequately analyzed.

Marathwada, located on the central Deccan plateau in the 17th century, was an important but environmentally constrained region in Maratha politics. The economy of the region was based on rain-fed agriculture, locally managed irrigation systems, handicraft production, and inland trade networks (Kulkarni, 1996; Chitnis, 2003). Political instability under the Deccan Sultanates and Mughal expansion weakened economic structures through irregular taxation, disruption of trade routes, and pressure on farmers and artisans (Duff, 1826; Nadkarni, 1966). The administration of such a region required administrative arrangements that could ensure economic continuity along with military control.

Shivaji's regime introduced a number of measures that addressed these regional economic conditions. These included reforms in land tax assessment, control of access to water and forest resources, protection of handicraft production, facilitation of trade, and decentralized governance practices (Sen, 1925; Jadhav, 1998). These policies were not uniform across regions, and their effects varied depending on local environmental conditions, administrative capacity, and strategic priorities. Consequently, an analytical assessment rather than a descriptive account of the reform is required.

This paper addresses a gap in the existing literature by examining Shivaji's rule in Marathwada through a multi-sectoral economic perspective. Rather than focusing solely on agricultural policy, the study analyzes agriculture, water-resource management, handicraft production, trade networks, financial practices, and decentralized governance as interrelated components of regional economic governance. This approach allows for a more balanced understanding of how pre-modern states managed economic stability in environmentally fragile regions.

The concept of sustainability is used in this study as an interpretive and heuristic framework. It is not considered a historical category, and the paper does not suggest that Shivaji's policies reflected modern theories of sustainable development. Rather, the concept is used to examine the long-term orientation of economic practices and governance arrangements within the historical context of seventeenth-century Marathwada (Kulkarni, 2001; Lane, 2003). This interpretive use enables interdisciplinary analysis and helps to avoid outdated readings.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 outlines the methodological approach. Section 3 examines economic and governance practices related to resource sustainability in Marathwada, including agricultural governance, water management, handicraft production, forest control, trade, financial practices, and military infrastructure. The concluding section reflects on the relevance and limits of applying sustainability as an analytical lens to pre-modern governance.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative historical-analytical approach to examine economic governance under Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj in the Marathwada region in the seventeenth century. The analysis is based on secondary sources including classical historical works, modern studies on Maratha rule, and research on the economic history of the Deccan (Ranade, 1900; Sen, 1925; Sardesai, 1957; Kulkarni, 2001).

A thematic analytical framework is used to examine various governance domains, such as agriculture, land revenue, water-resource management, handicraft production, trade, markets, financial administration, and decentralized authority. These domains are analyzed independently and in relation to each other to understand how economic governance functioned at the local level. No one domain is considered dominant; rather, the focus is on their interdependence.

The concept of sustainability is used as an interpretive tool rather than a historical claim. It provides a framework for assessing the durability of economic practices, resource use patterns, and administrative arrangements over time, without implying the presence of modern policy frameworks or environmental ideologies (Kulkarni, 1996; Lane, 2003). The study remains qualitative in nature and does not rely on quantitative data. Emphasis is placed on historical context, administrative logic, and regional variation.

The methodology acknowledges the uneven implementation of policies and the varying outcomes across regions. Shivaji's rule is therefore not presented as uniform or consistently effective, but rather shaped by local circumstances and practical constraints.

3. ECONOMIC AND ADMINISTRATIVE PRACTICES SHAPING RESOURCE STABILITY IN MARATHWADA UNDER SHIVAJI

This section examines selected economic and administrative practices that influenced the management of land, water, labor, and financial resources in Marathwada during Shivaji's reign. The discussion is not exhaustive, but illustrative, and focuses on practices that contributed to economic continuity and stability.

3.1 Agrarian Administration and Land Revenue Practices

The primary economic base of the Maratha state was agriculture, and land revenue was its main source of income. Effective agricultural administration was therefore essential for political stability in Marathwada. Shivaji's regime sought to control land revenue by limiting the role of middlemen and strengthening the relationship between the state and the peasantry.

Although the term ryotwari is related to colonial revenue systems, historians have noted that Shivaji's revenue practices reflected similar principles, particularly in assessing taxes based on actual cultivation and production capacity (Sarkar, 1973; Kulkarni, 1996). Revenue rates were not uniform, but varied according to soil quality, crop type, and seasonal conditions. This flexibility was particularly pronounced in a region where agricultural production was heavily dependent on monsoon rainfall.

During periods of drought, famine, or military blockade, temporary revenue concessions and deferrals were granted to prevent abandonment of cultivated land (Ranade, 1900). These measures were administrative responses aimed at protecting the long-term income base rather than manifestations of welfare policy. By maintaining agriculture and preventing population decline, the state ensured the continued availability of agricultural surpluses.

Regular practices that allowed for mixed cropping and diversification also supported agricultural stability. Although there is limited evidence of direct state intervention in crop selection, administrative tolerance of such practices helped reduce risk in an environment of ecological uncertainty.

3.2 Water Management and Irrigation Systems

Water scarcity was a constant challenge in the Deccan Plateau. Shivaji's regime focused on the maintenance and control of existing irrigation systems rather than introducing new technologies. Tanks, reservoirs, barrages, and check dams became the backbone of irrigation in Marathwada (Hardiman, 1998).

Maintenance responsibilities were shared between local communities and state officials. Village-level participation ensured regular maintenance and controlled access during periods of drought. This decentralized approach reduced administrative costs and relied on local ecological knowledge. Structures such as *bhandarams* and earthen bunds were repaired and maintained under this system (Kulkarni, 1996).

These arrangements linked environmental conditions to economic stability. Reliable irrigation supported agricultural production, ensuring predictable income streams. Thus, water management functioned not as an isolated environmental practice, but as a critical component of economic governance.

3.3 Craft Production and Local Economic Activity

In addition to agriculture, handicraft production was an important component of the local economy. Shivaji's regime recognized the strategic importance of handicrafts such as weaving, metalwork, and toolmaking, especially for military supply and local consumption (Gordon, 1993).

Artisans were generally protected from excessive taxation and, in some cases, were given access to raw materials through state channels. Production remained decentralized, embedded in rural and small-town economies. Rather than encouraging large-scale production, the state supported localized networks of artisans who contributed to civilian markets and military needs.

Historical evidence suggests the existence of local production clusters, in which artisans operated within shared labor networks. These arrangements supported the continuity of production and skill transmission, contributing to economic resilience without heavy administrative intervention.

3.4 Forest Resources and Resource Regulation

The forests were strategically important to the Maratha state, supplying timber for fort construction, naval operations, and military equipment. Shivaji's regime restricted access to forest resources to prevent overexploitation and ensure long-term availability (Government, 1973).

Local officials imposed controls on timber extraction and monitored forest use to balance state needs with local livelihoods. These measures were driven by administrative and strategic considerations rather than environmental protection in the modern sense. However, they contributed to the controlled use of natural resources.

3.5 Trade Networks, Fiscal Practices, and Military Infrastructure

Trade connected Marathwada to a wide range of regional and inter-regional markets. Shivaji's regime supported regional markets that facilitated direct exchange between farmers, artisans, and merchants (Gordon, 1993). Strategic forts such as Daulatabad served military and commercial functions by guarding trade routes and exercising administrative oversight. Economic stability was supported through efforts to standardize coinage and regulate revenue collection (Sarkar, 1973). Although monetary uniformity was limited, these measures improved transactional reliability within the Maratha territories.

Military infrastructure played a dual role. Fort construction and maintenance created jobs and supported the local economy, while sustained military operations put pressure on agricultural surpluses and state finances. Economic outcomes were therefore shaped by a balance between security and resource needs.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examines the economic and governance practices of Marathwada under Shivaji through an interpretive framework that focuses on economic stability in a pre-modern context. Without projecting modern notions of sustainable development into the past, the analysis illustrates how agricultural regulation, water management, artisanal production, trade facilitation, financial practices, and decentralized governance together supported economic continuity in an ecologically constrained region.

Shivaji's rule relied on practical governance strategies rather than ideological commitments. Income flexibility, decentralized resource management, and the protection of local economic networks helped the Maratha state manage uncertainty and maintain its economic base. These practices were shaped by the need to secure revenues, maintain military capacity, and prevent economic disruptions.

Although it is historically inaccurate to describe these policies as sustainable development, they reveal how pre-modern states could adopt governance strategies aimed at long-term economic stability. By shifting the focus from political and military narratives to economic governance, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Shivaji's rule.

The study demonstrates the utility and limits of applying sustainability as an analytical lens to pre-modern history. Future research, based on primary archival sources and comparative regional studies, will further refine our understanding of economic governance in early modern India.

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