



CHHATRAPATI SHIVAJI MAHARAJ AS A MODEL OF SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP: HISTORY, GOVERNANCE, AND HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

Leadership becomes historically important when it leaves behind institutions, habits of governance, and public values that outlast the ruler himself. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj is significant for precisely this reason. He is remembered in Indian history as the founder of the Maratha kingdom and as a ruler who challenged Mughal expansion in western India, but his deeper contribution lies in the political order he created. Modern reference works describe his kingdom as one marked by religious toleration and by the functional integration of Brahmans, Marathas, and Prabhus, showing that his rule was not based only on conquest but also on social and administrative balance. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024).



KEYWORDS: *habits of governance, public values, Indian history.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper makes an attempt to understand the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj through the lens of sustainable leadership. In current scholarship, sustainable leadership means leadership that creates long-term institutional strength while balancing social, economic, and environmental responsibility. A recent review in *Frontiers in Psychology* explains that sustainable leadership is linked to resilience, continuity, and value creation beyond immediate success. (Frontiers in Psychology, 2022; Kumar & Singh, 2024). When Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's governance is studied in this framework, it appears that it is less heroic interruption and more as a carefully designed system of rule that tried to secure the future of the polity.

The seventeenth-century Deccan was a difficult political environment. It was shaped by imperial competition, unstable revenue systems, and recurring warfare. (Gordon, 1993; Alam & Subrahmanyam, 2023). In that setting, Shivaji did not simply build a kingdom by force. He built an administrative and moral order that sought legitimacy through justice, discipline, and practical governance. Therefore, the present study makes an attempt to examine the leadership Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj not only as military history but also as an early Indian model of sustainable governance.

Historiography and the Research Gap:

There are several studies have been done on Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, such as Jadunath Sarkar work on *Shivaji and His Times*, remains a foundational text because it approached Shivaji through careful source criticism and historical method (Sarkar, 1920). Govind Sakharam Sardesai's *New History of the Marathas* expanded the field by placing Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj within a longer

Maratha political trajectory (Sardesai, 1946). R. C. Majumdar's synthesis in *The Maratha Supremacy* further situated Shivaji Maharaj within the broader history of Indian state formation (Majumdar, 1977). All these historians established the classic framework within which Shivaji Maharaj's studies developed in Indian historical scholarship. In the later stage, historians widened the discussion beyond state formation alone. Stewart Gordon's *The Marathas 1600–1818* offered a deeper political and economic interpretation of Maratha power (Gordon, 1993), while Prachi Deshpande's *Creative Pasts* showed how historical memory and identity shaped the meaning of Shivaji in western India (Deshpande, 2007). G. B. Mehendale's documentary work on Shivaji, especially his Marathi scholarship, reflects a strong Indian historical tradition that values original records, regional sources, and careful reconstruction (Mehendale, 2011). This historiographical stream is important because it shows that Shivaji Maharaj has not been studied only as a warrior, but he has also been studied as a figure around whom memory, identity, and political imagination were formed.

In spite of all these studies there remains a research gap, as most of these studies are primarily focused on military history, political resistance, or regional pride. Very few studies have been done to connect his governance to sustainability theory, institutional resilience, and heritage studies in one frame (Sharma & Iyer, 2023; Kulkarni, 2024). That gap is especially important today because of recent the 2025 UNESCO recognition of the Maratha Military Landscapes has transformed Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's fort into a globally recognised heritage landscape (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025). Therefore this paper make an attempt to connect historiography, governance, and heritage in a single argument.

Methodology and Sources:

This study uses a qualitative historical-interpretive method. It draws first on early narrative and documentary sources such as the Sabhasad Bakhar and Khafi Khan's Muntakhabu'l-Lubab, both of which are important for understanding the political and moral world of seventeenth-century western India (Sabhasad, 1920; Khafi Khan, 1973). It also uses English East India Company records and later archival translations, which provide outside perspectives on Shivaji Maharaj's reign. These sources are then read alongside major Indian historical works by Sarkar, Sardesai, Majumdar, Gordon, Deshpande, and Mehendale (Sen, 1957; Sen, 1976).

The method is interpretive rather than quantitative. It asks how Shivaji Maharaj's governance worked, why it was durable, and what parts of it can be understood as sustainable leadership (Ostrom, 1990; Bansal & Desai, 2024). The paper therefore uses evidence-based historical reading instead of modern labels imposed without context. This approach is suitable because the subject belongs to pre-modern history, where institutional patterns, administrative practices, and cultural memory are often more revealing than numerical measurement alone.

Institutional Architecture and Decentralisation:

One of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's most important achievements was the creation of an ordered administrative system. The Ashta Pradhan, or Council of Eight Ministers, is widely recognised in historical scholarship as one of the clearest signs of his administrative intelligence. Britannica describes it as a council that supported both military success and good government (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). Its importance lies in the fact that it divided responsibilities across distinct offices rather than leaving all power in one undifferentiated court structure.

This administrative design is important for sustainable leadership because it created accountability and reduced dependence on any one person (Ostrom, 1990; Bansal & Desai, 2024). Finance, justice, military affairs, diplomacy, records, and intelligence were handled through separate offices. That kind of separation made governance more resilient, because failure in one area did not collapse the whole system. The tripartite administration of forts, where military, record, and treasury functions were separated, further strengthened control and reduced corruption. In modern terms, this was decentralisation with oversight; in historical terms, it was a practical way to keep the state functional under pressure.

The fort system of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, which is recognised by UNESCO's 2025 documentation shows that, the Maratha Military Landscapes were strategically built or adapted across hills, coasts, islands, and forests, forming a linked defence network rather than isolated strongholds (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025). That means Chhatrapati Shivaji's administration was spatial as well as political. He did not merely govern from a palace; he governed through a network of fortified nodes that connected military security with administration and communication.

Fiscal Justice and Agrarian Stability:

A sustainable state cannot survive if it weakens the people who produce its wealth. Shivaji Maharaj's revenue policy therefore matters as much as his battlefield record. Indian historians have long emphasised that he tried to reduce the arbitrary burdens often imposed through intermediary systems and to make revenue collection more direct, predictable, and controllable (Sarkar, 1920; Majumdar, 1977; Kulkarni, 1996).. Sarkar and Majumdar both treat this fiscal discipline as central to the making of the Maratha state.

The significance of this can be understood in simple terms. If a cultivator knows the expected demand, he can plan his farming, storage, and local trade. If revenue extraction is arbitrary, the agrarian base weakens. Shivaji's approach sought to protect that base rather than exhaust it. This is why his revenue reforms belong in a discussion of sustainable leadership. They were not only about state income; they were about preserving agricultural life and making political authority durable.

This concern for stability also appears in later scholarship and in practical historical studies of Maratha governance. Research on Maratha-era water and land management shows that forts and surrounding regions were part of an integrated economy of survival, where irrigation, storage, and local production mattered (Patil, 2020; Shinde, 2021; Patankar & Kulkarni, 2023). In this sense, fiscal justice and environmental management were connected. A ruler who protects the productive countryside is also protecting the future of his state

Military Ethics and Strategic Innovation:

Shivaji Maharaj's military success is often discussed as a story of courage, but it is equally a story of discipline. Modern accounts and historical traditions consistently note that he restrained violence against civilians and respected religious places (Sen, 1976; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). Britannica's summary of his reign stresses his religious toleration, and Persian and later narrative traditions repeatedly show that his military code was not based on indiscriminate destruction (Gordon, 1993). This moral restraint gave his state a legitimacy that raw force alone could not produce. His strategic method, known as Ganimi Kava, was shaped by the terrain of the Sahyadri ranges. Instead of confronting larger enemies in open battle at every moment, Shivaji used mobility, surprise, local knowledge, and rapid withdrawal (Gordon, 1993; Kulkarni, 2024). That was not random guerrilla warfare; it was a structured strategy of adaptation. In sustainability terms, it conserved energy and reduced waste. It also turned geography into a partner of governance, which is one reason the fort landscape remains so central to his historical memory.

This combination of ethics and strategy is one of the strongest reasons Shivaji Maharaj fits the title of sustainable leader. He understood that military success without legitimacy would produce instability, and he understood that force had to be bounded by public morality (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Sharma & Iyer, 2023). That balance made his leadership unusually durable for its time.

Cultural Sovereignty and Social Inclusivity:

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj demonstrated a form of leadership that combined political sovereignty with a strong cultural orientation. His governance was not limited to control over territory; it also reflected a conscious effort to align state practices with the cultural context of his people. One of the clearest expressions of this was his promotion of Marathi and Sanskrit in administrative affairs. By adopting these languages, he made governance more accessible to local officials and ordinary subjects, reducing dependence on elite or foreign linguistic systems and enabling wider participation in state processes (Deshpande, 2007; Kulkarni, 2024). Such a policy strengthened political identity and made

state authority more intelligible to society (Sharma & Iyer, 2023). At the same time, his rule was not socially narrow. From the historical observation one can note that his kingdom was marked by religious toleration and the integration of different communities into public life (Ranade, 1999; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). That matters because inclusivity creates political durability. A state that recognises merit and loyalty across social categories can mobilise more human capacity and create wider trust (Bansal & Desai, 2024). This is one reason Deshpande's work on memory and identity is so useful that it reminds us that Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj was remembered not just as a conqueror but as a figure who shaped a wider political identity in western India (Deshpande, 2007). Thus his inclusivity went beyond cultural and battlefield ethics and extended into social, economic, and administrative life. It reflected a broader vision of justice across caste, gender, and class. He recruited talent from different castes rather than limiting authority to traditional elites, allowing individuals from marginalized communities to serve in the army and local administration. In terms of gender, his firm stance on protecting women both within his kingdom and in enemy territories which set a clear moral standard for women, who were to be treated with dignity, not as war trophies. His governance also showed sensitivity toward farmers, who formed the backbone of his state. Thus, by combining respect for social diversity with practical protections for everyday people, he created a system where power was not just centralized but also responsible. (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Sharma & Iyer, 2023). In a period marked by rigid hierarchies and frequent violence, these measures made his rule more balanced and humane, showing that inclusivity could be actively applied in governance, not just spoken about as an ideal. In a premodern world where violence was often normalised, that was a serious political choice. It helped make the state more human, not merely more powerful.

Environmental Stewardship and Water Management:

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj clearly showcases his sustainable Leadership from his governance, in which environmental awareness was closely integrated with military and administrative planning. His fort architecture reflects a deliberate understanding of terrain, climate, and resource constraints rather than mere defensive ambition. Many hill forts were designed to harvest and conserve water through carefully planned catchment systems, step-wells, rock-cut cisterns, and interconnected storage tanks. For example, forts such as Raigad Fort and Rajgad Fort incorporated rainwater harvesting systems that could sustain large populations during prolonged sieges, while Panhala Fort is known for its extensive underground water storage and drainage design. Similarly, the coastal fort Sindhudurg Fort reveals an advanced understanding of marine ecology, with freshwater wells constructed within a saline environment. These examples indicate that water security was treated as a strategic priority rather than a secondary concern, reflecting careful alignment of construction with terrain, rainfall patterns, and geological features (Patil, 2020; Patankar & Kulkarni, 2023; Shinde, 2021). By aligning fort construction with natural slopes, seasonal rainfall patterns, and geological features, his administration reduced ecological strain while ensuring long-term sustainability. This ecological approach extended across a wider network of forts designed to function within diverse landscapes. Sites such as Pratapgad Fort and Vijaydurg fort illustrate how geography was used to strengthen defence while conserving resources. Rather than imposing control over nature, this model worked within environmental limits, integrating terrain, water systems, and strategic planning into a coherent framework. This approach suggests that Shivaji Maharaj's leadership operated within ecological limits rather than attempting to dominate them. From a sustainability perspective, this integration of environment, strategy, and administration represents a form of long-term thinking that remains relevant today. His model shows that durable power can emerge from working with natural systems instead of exhausting them, thereby reinforcing the idea that environmental stewardship is a core component of resilient and sustainable governance (Bansal & Desai, 2024; Singh & Rao, 2024).

In July 2025, UNESCO's inscription of the Maratha Military Landscapes of India placed this legacy within a global sustainability framework (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025). This recognition highlights how his leadership combined environmental awareness with governance and strategy, and why it remains relevant today. It also shows that these forts are not just historical sites but examples of practical planning that support climate resilience, sustainable development, and

responsible resource use in the present era (Bansal & Desai, 2024; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Thus, when we look at historical records and the writings of historians, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj emerges not only as a brave warrior but as a thoughtful and people-centered ruler who aimed to build a just and lasting state (Sarkar, 1920). His leadership was not limited to military success; it focused on creating systems that ensured fairness, stability, and long-term welfare. Jadunath Sarkar, one of the critics of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, also observed that he combined 'courage with strong moral character', which made his governance both effective and respected (Sarkar, 1920). His emphasis on good administration, respect for all communities, and careful use of resources shows a vision that remains relevant even today. The forts which he built, such as Raigad Fort, stand as lasting examples of planning and sustainability, now gaining wider recognition through the UNESCO World Heritage Centre (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025). Thus, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's legacy reminds us that true leadership is not about short-term victories, but about building a sustainable system that ensures justice, stability, and long-term welfare, one that remains highly relevant even in contemporary times and continues to guide modern governance and leadership practices.

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