

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's Agrarian Policy and Its Relevance Today

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History: Received: 26th Sep 2025 Accepted: 10th Oct 2025 Published: 25th Oct 2025</p> <p>Keywords: Swarajya, Ryotwari System, Watandar, Jagirdari,</p>	<p>This paper undertakes a historical-analytical study of the agrarian and revenue policies instituted by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj in the 17th-century Maratha Swarajya. His administration is distinguished by a radical shift from the exploitative feudal practices prevalent under the Deccan Sultanates to a Ryotwari system rooted in direct state-peasant engagement. The core reforms—scientific land measurement (Kathi), progressive land assessment based on crop and fertility, strict abolition of the Jagirdari system, and welfare measures like Tagai loans and tax remissions—prioritised the welfare of the Rayat (peasantry). Critically, this research evaluates the enduring principles of this policy, such as direct accountability, equity, and sustainability, and analyses their potential relevance to contemporary agrarian and land reforms in modern India, particularly in Maharashtra.</p>

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1. Introduction: The Context of Agrarian Reform:

The mid-17th century Deccan Plateau was characterised by political instability, military conflict, and deeply exploitative agrarian systems. The traditional feudal structure, dominated by the **Watandars** (*Deshmukhs, Deshpandes*), allowed for the oppression of the peasantry through arbitrary taxation and land alienation. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's vision of **Hindavi Swarajya** was not merely political independence; it was predicated on establishing **Surajya** (Good Governance), where the prosperity and welfare of the peasant were paramount. This paper argues that Shivaji's agrarian policy was a revolutionary and deliberate departure from the prevailing medieval feudalism, laying the foundation for a more equitable state-peasant relationship.

2. Research Methodology:

2.1. Research Approach

This study employs a **Qualitative, Historical-Analytical Methodology**. The primary goal is a critical analysis and interpretation of available historical records, rather than relying on statistical or quantitative data (which is often sparse for this period). The approach involves:

1. **Contextualisation:** Understanding the agrarian and political conditions in the Deccan under the Bijapur and Ahmadnagar Sultanates to establish the necessity and novelty of Shivaji's reforms.
2. **Exegesis of Sources:** Detailed reading and critical evaluation of primary and contemporary secondary sources related to revenue administration.
3. **Comparative Analysis:** Contrasting Shivaji's system with Mughal and Deccan Sultanate land revenue practices (e.g., the *Zabti* system of Malik Ambar) to highlight its distinct features.
4. **Relevance Evaluation:** Assessing the transferability and application of these historical principles to modern agrarian challenges.

2.2. Sources of Data (Historiographical Base) :

The study relies on a blend of primary and authentic contemporary secondary sources:

Primary Sources (Marathi, Persian, European)

- **Ajnapatra (Royal Edict of Ramchandrapant Amatya):** A key document outlining the principles of Maratha administration, offering invaluable insight into Shivaji's views on peasant welfare, forests, and military conduct in agricultural areas.
- **Sabhasad Bakhari (Krishnaji Anant Sabhasad):** A contemporary chronicle providing details of administrative structure and revenue collection.

- **Shahanavkalam Bakhar (Attributed to Anno Datto's records):** Contains information relevant to the revenue survey carried out by Annaji Datto.
- **Contemporary Correspondence (e.g., The Letter to Ramoji):** Specific royal edicts or letters that detail instructions regarding tax collection, relief measures, and accountability.
- **Non-Marathi Chronicles:** Accounts by Muslim historians like **Khafi Khan**, who often provided contemporary observations, sometimes grudgingly acknowledging the strict discipline enforced on Shivaji's soldiers regarding agricultural damage.

Secondary Sources and Modern Interpretations:

- Works by seminal historians like **Jadunath Sarkar, V. K. Rajwade, G. S. Sardesai, and Setu Madhavrao Pagadi**, who have translated and critically analysed the primary documents.
- Academic papers and monographs focused on the economic and administrative history of the Marathas.

3. Key Features of Shivaji Maharaj's Agrarian Policy:

Shivaji's agrarian reforms were comprehensive, focusing on eradicating intermediary exploitation and establishing direct state accountability to the peasant.

3.1. Abolition of Feudal Intermediaries (Jagirdars/Watandars) :

The most transformative reform was the systematic curbing of the power of the hereditary landholders (*Watandars*—*Deshmukhs*, *Patils*, etc.) and the **abolition of the Jagirdari system** in *Swarajya*.

- **Direct Collection (Ryotwari):** Revenue was collected directly from the **Ryot** (cultivator) by state-appointed officials like **Kamavisdars** or **Karkuns**, replacing the rapacious *Watandars*.
- **Control over Watandars:** Where *Watandars* were allowed to retain certain rights, their power was severely curtailed. They were stripped of their political authority, their dues were fixed, and they were expressly forbidden from harassing the peasantry. Shivaji even ordered the demolition of their private fortresses.

3.2. Scientific Land Measurement and Assessment:

A scientific approach ensured fairness and reduced the scope for arbitrary exaction.

- **Standardised Measurement:** The inaccurate rope measurement was replaced by the **Kathi** (a measuring rod), with **20 Kathis constituting one Bigha** and **120 Bighas one Chavar**.

- **Classification of Land:** Lands were meticulously surveyed and classified based on **fertility** and **crop type** to ensure progressive assessment, similar to the method pioneered by Malik Ambar but rigorously applied.
- **Fixing State Demand:** The state demand was fixed at $\frac{2}{5}$ ths (40%) of the gross produce in some areas, or a standard $\frac{1}{3}$ rd (33.3%) in others, which could be increased to $\frac{2}{5}$ ths if the state provided infrastructure like irrigation.

3.3. Peasant Welfare and State Support:

Shivaji's policy was intrinsically welfare-oriented, providing security against famine and natural calamities.

- **Collection in Kind or Cash:** The revenue was collected either in **kind (grain)** or **cash**, depending on the convenience of the peasant and the requirement of the state. The choice often lay with the farmer.
- **Tagai Loans:** The administration provided **interest-free agricultural advances (Tagai)** to peasants for purchasing seeds, bullocks, and agricultural implements, especially after crop failures or destruction by warfare.
- **Remissions:** In the event of severe drought, floods, or crop destruction due to military campaigns, **tax remissions or deferred payment plans** (installment plans over five to six years) were promptly granted, ensuring the peasant could quickly return to cultivation.

3.4. Protection during Military Campaigns:

A standout feature was the strict military code concerning agriculture. Army personnel were given severe instructions to **refrain from damaging standing crops** during transit, including a specific injunction against felling mango or jackfruit trees, which the peasants were said to rear as their own children (as per *Ajnapatra*).

4. Relevance to Contemporary Indian Agrarian Policy

The principles underpinning Shivaji Maharaj's policies remain profoundly relevant to addressing modern challenges in Indian agriculture, especially in Maharashtra.

Shivaji's Principle

Modern Relevance and Application

Direct State-Peasant Engagement (Ryotwari)

Minimising Intermediaries: Inspires the need for direct benefit transfer (DBT) and digitisation of land records to eliminate corruption and exploitation by local power brokers.

Scientific Measurement/Classification

Land Modern Land Survey and Title: Justifies large-scale, tech-enabled land surveys and classification (using drones, GIS) for

Shivaji's Principle

Modern Relevance and Application

accurate revenue assessment and ensuring clear land titles, which is crucial for modern credit and investment.

Tagai Loans and Tax Remissions

Farm Loan Waiver and Institutional Credit: The *Tagai* model underscores the need for responsive, low-interest, institutional credit (Kisan Credit Cards) and timely, targeted loan waivers/remissions during distress.

Protection of Crops and Environment

Sustainable Agriculture and Military Ethics: The directive to protect crops offers a lesson in environmentally conscious governance and the principle of '**Zero Damage**' during public infrastructure projects or military drills. It stresses the value of agricultural heritage.

Accountability and Welfare

People-Centric Governance: Reaffirms that the state's revenue structure must prioritize farmer welfare and agricultural development over mere revenue maximisation. It offers a blueprint for **Surajya**—a governance model built on equity and social justice.

5. Conclusion:

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's agrarian policy was a masterclass in **people-centric governance**, transforming a region oppressed by feudal lords into a state where the farmer was an owner and a partner in prosperity. By replacing the exploitative *Jagirdari* system with the accountable *Ryotwari* model, standardising land revenue practices through *Kathi* measurement, and implementing robust welfare measures like *Tagai* loans, he fostered a resilient rural economy.

His legacy is a powerful reminder for contemporary governance: that true strength lies not just in military might, but in the prosperity and protection of the most vulnerable section of society—the peasantry. The principles of **equity, direct accountability, and responsive governance** enshrined in his policy offer timeless wisdom for policymakers striving for sustainable and equitable agrarian reforms in the 21st century.

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