

International Journal of Law Research, Education and Social Sciences

Open Access Journal – Copyright © 2026 – ISSN 3048-7501
Editor-in-Chief – Prof. (Dr.) Vageshwari Deswal; Publisher – Sakshi Batham



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share Alike 4.0 International (CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0) License, which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium provided the original work is properly cited.

Administrative System of the Maratha Empire and Its Relevance to Modern Indian Governance

Shriram Jadhav^a Kartik Jadhav^b

^aMaharashtra National Law University, Mumbai, India ^bMaharashtra National Law University, Mumbai, India

Received 26 March 2026; Accepted 27 April 2026; Published 30 April 2026

The administrative system of the Maratha Empire is best understood as efficient in practice but weak in institutional foundations. Governance was centred on the authority of the Chhatrapati, supported by an advisory council, yet decision-making remained personalised rather than rule-based. Decentralisation enabled effective control over vast territories through local officials and flexible arrangements, but the absence of codified structures led to inconsistency and power imbalances. The revenue system, built on chauth and sardeshmukhi, ensured resource mobilisation but lacked regulation, often resulting in exploitation. Similarly, the overlap between military and administrative roles strengthened immediate response but weakened long-term central authority. The judicial system relied on customary practices, offering accessibility but lacking uniformity and fairness. In contrast, modern Indian governance emphasises institutionalisation, legality, and accountability. Overall, the Maratha model demonstrates that while flexibility can ensure short-term efficiency, the absence of strong institutions limits stability and sustainability in the long run.

Keywords: *administrative system, Maratha Empire, modern, power, governance.*

INTRODUCTION

The administrative structure of the Maratha Empire assumes a unique place in the history of administration in India. In some circles, it has been viewed as an efficiently functioning indigenous administration, while in others as an administration characterised by fragmentation and disorganisation.¹ However, this does not adequately characterise the nature of the administration. Rather, it is argued here that this administration can be described as one that was characterised by efficiency but lacked institutionalisation.²

In other words, this paper argues that the Maratha administrative system was institutionally fragile yet functionally effective. The decentralised approach adopted by this administration ensured that the administration could easily cope with changing situations. However, despite the efficiency that was evident in this administration, the absence of any institutions meant that there were several weaknesses. To this end, it is important to note that there is a paradigm shift from the personal sovereign power characteristic of this administration to the present-day administration, which is constitutionally-based.

Evolution of Governance Paradigms: It is important to look at this shift in terms of the larger process of state development. Traditional states like the Maratha state were founded on the principles of relational power, which meant that the basis of governance was loyalty, kinship ties, and negotiations. Modern states, on the other hand, are founded on impersonality, bureaucracy, and legality. The Maratha model is an example of the transitional phase in this process.

CENTRAL AUTHORITY: FROM PERSONAL SOVEREIGNTY TO CONSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMACY

Nature of Monarchical Authority: The administrative structure of the Marathas was based on the supremacy of the Chhatrapati, which was hereditary and autocratic. Though there was an advisory council that helped in making decisions, the responsibility of making decisions rested squarely on the ruler. Despite appearing to be an independent institution, the advisory council served only as an arm of the monarch. Such an arrangement worked well when there was good

¹ Jadunath Sarkar, *SHIVAJI AND HIS TIMES* (Manohar Pubns 2025)

² Surendra Nath Sen, *ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM OF THE MARATHAS* (Life Span Publishers & Distributors 2022)

leadership, since centralisation brought about uniformity and coordination. However, it had a disadvantage in that it depended heavily on the individual strength of the ruler and not on any other organisational structures. This is illustrated by the eventual failure of decision-making by committee members in the later years.

Institutional Deficit and Fragility: The lack of proper procedure, tenure, and institutional accountability was one of the weaknesses that affected institutional independence. The process became personalised as opposed to being systematic, resulting in instability during political transitions.³ One of these cases is when the power passed from the Chhatrapati to the Peshwas. While the concentration of power in an institution that was newly formed might seem like a positive step, it should be noted that the changes were not supported by the restructuring of the institution.⁴ The lack of procedures also meant that the administration was largely guided by precedent. This led to inconsistency in the enforcement of policies. Predictability was one of the crucial elements for sustainable governance, meaning that the system lacked stability because there were no ways to control power dynamics.

Modern Constitutional Transformation: The present-day Indian model reflects an entirely different paradigm altogether. The exercise of authority lies in constitutionally designated positions, wherein the president is the titular leader and the prime minister is the executive authority.⁵ The Council of Ministers derives its legitimacy from the Constitution and not from personal loyalty. This shift in paradigms has involved certain procedural guarantees that allow the exercise of authority within certain parameters. Unlike the Maratha model of governance, where authority was subject to arbitrary change, modern institutions have provided stability and continuity. Theoretical aspects reveal that the change from the embodiment of authority to the institutionality of authority is involved here. In the Maratha system, the source of authority was the ruling personality; in the modern system, authority is vested in office positions governed by certain laws. Thus, the degree of abstraction leads to certainty. The inability of the Maratha system to achieve this level of abstraction explains its vulnerability during times of political change.

³ Mahadeva Govind Ranade, *Rise of the Maratha Power (1900)* (Kessinger Publishing 2010)

⁴ Govind Sakharam Sardesai, *New History of the Marathas* (Gyan Publishing House 2018)

⁵ The Constitution of India 1950

ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE: DECENTRALIZATION AS INSTRUMENT AND CONSTRAINT

Local Governance and Administrative Efficiency: The Maratha Administrative system was highly decentralised in nature. The administration of the provinces was left in the hands of provincial administrators, whereas the villages were managed by local officials like patils and recorders. The local councils played an important part in settling disputes and maintaining peace in society.⁶ Such a system helped the Marathas maintain effective control over vast territorial areas without having to develop a large administrative machine. The system was flexible and dynamic in nature. Also, such a system helped integrate different regions into their administrative system without being bound to impose a common structure on all regions.

Informality and Variability: Nevertheless, such decentralisation was not institutionalised and structured. It was not based on laws but was negotiated, hence causing differences in management styles. The lack of structure caused the process of governance to be locally defined, leading to differences in management styles. Such an approach also created uncertainty in terms of power relations. In the absence of proper demarcation, disagreements between central and local authorities were inevitable.

Fragmentation and Power Asymmetry: The absence of any form of institutional checks and balances meant that local governments wielded their power without much oversight. This led to imbalanced power sharing and fragmentation in the country. Some local leaders ended up gaining considerable power, which put them at odds with the central government. This example highlights one of the biggest shortcomings of decentralised political structures that are not governed by rules.

Modern Federal Structuring: The modern governance structure of India reconciles this conflict by adopting a system of governance that is based on the federation, which clearly separates the functions of the Union government and State governments, further decentralised by constitutionally mandated local authorities. The experience of the Marathas shows that decentralisation needs institution-building in order to prevent disintegration. While

⁶ Stewart Gordon, *THE MARATHAS 1600–1818* (The New Cambridge History of India 2007)

decentralisation might lead to efficient administration, it demands the presence of laws for ensuring accountability, standardisation, and coordination at several levels.

REVENUE SYSTEM: FISCAL PRAGMATISM VERSUS REGULATORY GOVERNANCE

Mechanisms of Revenue Extraction: The Maratha empire's financial structure was aimed at ensuring efficient mobilisation of resources, minimising expenditures on administration. Chauth and Sardeshmukhi ensured revenues not only from the directly ruled regions, but also from the areas lying outside formal rule. As revenue extraction tools, these instruments also had a political dimension since imposing them was perceived as demonstrating the Maratha rulers' authority over certain regions. From a more complex analytical perspective, the above example clearly shows how the concept of fiscal ability was closely linked with political power and military might. The mechanism for collecting taxes was not formalised through creating an administrative system; instead, it relied on broader power relations, whereby state authorities could force citizens to fulfil tax obligations.

Delegation and Fiscal Efficiency: The above system involved a form of fiscal outsourcing, which made it possible for state authorities to expand their taxing reach without building a centralised bureaucracy and achieve higher levels of efficiency. However, this system entailed the emergence of dependencies based on local elites. With significant discretionary powers granted to individuals who collected taxes, the central government did not have much control over the process; the blurred line between public and private interests rendered governance dependent on cooperation between central government officials and local elites.⁷

Absence of Regulation: Without proper oversight, intermediaries engaged in excessive taxation for personal benefit. This situation represented the principal-agent problem, with individual interests of revenue collectors diverging from those of the state and population. Without regulation, it was impossible to ensure uniformity or fairness in taxation, which caused negative consequences in terms of both the economy and society. Such processes cannot bring stable growth and strengthen legitimacy.

⁷ André Wink, 'Maratha Revenue Farming' (1983) 17(4) *Modern Asian Studies*
<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/312237>> accessed 24 march 2026

Economic and Social Impact: Over-taxes had a detrimental effect on farming output and created dissatisfaction in rural areas. Absence of redistributive policies meant that revenue was used for military and political purposes, thus weakening the sustainability of the whole system.

Modern Taxation Framework and Analytical Insight: Today's Indian taxation system is codified, regulated, and oriented towards transparency and accountability.⁸ As opposed to Marathas, it emphasises the significance of redistribution and welfare as much as revenue. Thus, the point of interest moves from the extraction of resources by any means necessary to regulated fiscal policy, where legitimacy relies not only on the revenue-generating aspect but also on its regulation and distribution.

MILITARY ORGANIZATION: INTEGRATION AND ITS RISKS

Military-Administrative Overlap: There was tight integration of the military with the administrative structure. In many cases, military leaders would become politicians as well, making military mobilisation swift and effective. It contributed to the efficiency of the military within a politically volatile environment.⁹ In other words, the structure presented an integration of military and administrative powers, where one followed the logic of the other.

Risks of Concentrated Power: As such, there was little distinction between governance and the use of coercion. Moreover, competing military leaders often engaged in internal power struggles, limiting the power of the state. Another issue entailed by this structure was that military leaders were the ones who provided administrative control. From the perspective of analysis, the structure created a situation of military aristocracy, where military commanders governed as well. On the one hand, it helped in enhancing the military's flexibility; on the other hand, it was detrimental to central authority because it concentrated military power in regional leaders' hands.

Instability in Later Periods: During the final stages of the empire, the absence of centralised management of military forces led to instability. Indeed, the autonomy of regional commanders decreased central control over them. Thus, we have yet another example of how the governance

⁸ Income Tax Act 1961; Central Goods and Services Tax Act 2017

⁹ Gordon (n 11)

of the military is ineffective unless centralised. Once the military becomes decentralised and uncontrolled, it can hardly be managed by the centre anymore.

Modern Separation of Powers: Currently, the civilian government exercises sovereign power over the military in India, thus separating military from political sovereignty. The framework of the Maratha Empire highlighted the dangers of combining different authority domains. When there is overlap between military and political spheres, inefficiency and weak central authority may ensue. Modern approaches to mitigating such threats include specialisation, professionalisation, and hierarchical structuring.

JUDICIAL SYSTEM: CUSTOMARY FLEXIBILITY AND LEGAL UNCERTAINTY

Local Dispute Resolution: The legal process in the Maratha Empire was built on customary practices, thus making access to justice easier and faster, since disputes were resolved swiftly in the community setting.¹⁰ At a more profound level, this is an example of community-based justice where the legal power is embedded in social norms and community activities rather than in institutions, thus making this process flexible and responsive to local conditions.

Lack of Uniformity: At the same time, the existence of inconsistent legal outcomes as a result of the lack of codified laws led to unpredictable resolutions and made it possible for similar cases to end up differently depending on local custom and judicial discretion. As a result, the major problem here was that the absence of codified laws made it impossible to establish consistent legal principles, which would make analogous resolutions uniform.

Impact on Justice Delivery: This resulted in the issue of inequality because various communities faced different kinds of legal resolution, which could reduce trust in the system. Moreover, the fact that the legal process was influenced by custom meant that social order remained intact because decisions depended on the power relations existing in the local community, thus raising concerns about the equity of such a legal system.

Modern Rule of Law: Modern India uses codified legal laws that ensure consistency, fairness, and independence of the judiciary. Thus, there is a clear difference between the two systems

¹⁰ Vithal Trimbak Gune, *The Judicial System of the Marathas* (Isha Book 2013)

about their nature, with modern justice being universal and therefore predictable and uniform, but possibly less responsive.

CONCLUSION

The administrative system of the Maratha Empire is a complex but incomplete model of governance. Its strengths were in its adaptability, decentralisation, and practical financial management, which allowed it to operate effectively in its historical context. However, its dependence on informal structures and absence of institutional safeguards limited its longevity. Modern Indian governance shows an evolution of these principles within a constitutional framework. By placing authority in institutions instead of individuals, it promotes continuity, accountability, and stability.

Final Analytical Reflection: The key lesson from the Maratha experience is that governance must shift from flexibility to institutionalisation. Without this change, administrative effectiveness cannot last over time. Thus, the importance of the Maratha system is not in its structures but in its governing logic. This logic still shapes today's discussions on decentralisation, governance, and the capacity of the state. Ultimately, the change from Maratha administration to modern governance signifies a move from power-based rule to legitimacy-based governance, marking a significant shift in the state itself.