



Women in the Maratha Empire: A Historical Study of Political and Social Participation

Jagdish Bapu Masule

Asst. Professor (History), A. Y. K. K.^S Arts Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Dhule (MS)

Abstract

The history of the Maratha Empire is generally narrated through military campaigns, territorial expansion, administrative institutions, and the political achievements of male rulers and commanders. However, women occupied significant positions within the political, social, economic, religious, and cultural life of Maratha society. The present research paper examines the political and social participation of women during the rise and expansion of Maratha power from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. Particular attention is given to Jijabai, Maharani Tarabai, Yesubai, and other royal and non-royal women whose activities demonstrate different forms of female agency. The study also considers women's participation in household management, property relations, religious patronage, social networks, and the maintenance of political alliances. The research is historical and analytical in nature and is based on primary and secondary historical sources, including chronicles, correspondence, administrative documents, biographies, and modern historical scholarship. The study finds that women's political participation was most visible during periods of succession crisis and military instability, but their influence was not confined to exceptional circumstances. Kinship, marriage, household authority, property, patronage, and religious activity created important spaces for female participation. At the same time, women operated within a patriarchal and caste-stratified social order that placed considerable restrictions on their autonomy. The study therefore argues that the history of the Maratha Empire becomes more comprehensive when women are understood not merely as members of ruling families but as participants in political processes and agents within the social history of early modern Maharashtra.

Keywords: Maratha Empire, Women, Jijabai, Tarabai, Political Participation, Social Participation, Maharashtra, Gender History, Maratha History

1. Introduction

The emergence of the Maratha state in the seventeenth century and its transformation into a major political power during the eighteenth century constitute an important phase in Indian history. Beginning with the establishment of Swarajya under Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, Maratha political influence subsequently expanded across large parts of the Indian subcontinent. Historiography on this period has traditionally concentrated on warfare, diplomacy, administration, revenue arrangements, the Peshwas, military leaders, and relations between the Marathas and contemporary powers. Such approaches are indispensable, but they can leave the impression that political and social history was almost exclusively shaped by men. A closer examination of Maratha society presents a more

complex picture. Women participated in political affairs through regency, succession politics, diplomatic negotiations, household networks, marriage alliances, patronage, and the management of estates and resources. Kinship and marriage themselves formed an important part of Maratha political organization, and affinal relatives could exercise substantial influence in governance. Among the most prominent examples is Maharani Tarabai, who assumed political leadership following the death of Chhatrapati Rajaram in 1700. Richard Eaton's study of the Deccan identifies the anti-Mughal resistance under Tarabai as a major political movement in the western Deccan and emphasizes her command and governmental abilities. Yet women's history in the Maratha period should not be restricted to queens. Royal women are more visible because the historical record preserved information about them, while the experiences of ordinary women are much more difficult to reconstruct. Women participated in family economies, agriculture, household production, religious practices, property arrangements, and community life. The household itself was an important site of economic production, consumption, property relations, and gendered divisions of labour in eighteenth-century western India. Therefore, the present study examines both political participation and broader social participation in order to understand women's place in Maratha history.

2. Need and Significance of the Study

1. The study of women in the Maratha Empire is important because conventional political narratives often foreground kings, Peshwas, sardars, military commanders, and diplomatic conflicts. Such an approach provides only a partial understanding of the historical process.
2. The study of women makes it possible to examine the relationship between family and state, the political significance of marriage, the role of royal households, female participation during succession crises, women's access to property and resources, religious patronage, and the social restrictions created by gender and caste.
3. Recent historical approaches also emphasize that early modern women should not be treated as a homogeneous social group. Rank, caste, wealth, marital status, locality, and access to political networks significantly affected women's experiences. Contemporary scholarship on early modern India increasingly investigates non-royal women as economic, cultural, and social actors rather than concentrating solely on royal households.
4. The present study is therefore significant for developing a more inclusive interpretation of Maratha political and social history.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To study the political position of women during the Maratha period.
2. To examine the contribution of prominent women to Maratha political affairs.
3. To study the social participation of women in Maratha society.
4. To examine the role of women in family, property, religion, patronage, and community life.
5. To analyse the limitations imposed upon women by contemporary social and patriarchal structures.

6. To assess the historical significance of women's participation in the development and continuity of Maratha power.

4. Research Questions

1. What forms of political participation were available to women in the Maratha Empire?
2. How did prominent women contribute to the preservation and development of Maratha political authority?
3. What roles did women perform in the social and economic life of Maratha society?
4. How did family, kinship, marriage, property, caste, and religion shape women's historical experiences?
5. What limitations affected women's participation in political and social life?

5. Research Methodology

The present study adopts the historical research method. It is primarily qualitative, descriptive, analytical, and interpretative in nature. Primary historical materials relevant to the subject include Marathi bakhars, letters, royal correspondence, administrative records, sanads, contemporary Persian accounts, genealogical material, and records relating to the Maratha and Peshwa administrations. Secondary sources include scholarly books, research papers, historical biographies, and modern studies of gender, society, kinship, and political institutions. The method of internal and external criticism is important in using historical sources because contemporary records were produced for different political, administrative, and literary purposes. Particular care is required when reconstructing women's history because surviving records disproportionately represent ruling families and politically influential social groups. The study covers mainly the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with Maharashtra and the wider Maratha political sphere forming its geographical context.

6. Review of Related Literature

G. S. Sardesai's writings on Maratha history provide detailed accounts of Maratha rulers, political developments, administration, and important personalities. Jadunath Sarkar's works on Shivaji and Mughal-Maratha relations remain important for understanding the political and military context within which Maratha women exercised authority.

Stewart Gordon interprets the Marathas through political, military, institutional, and social processes and helps explain the importance of kinship and networks in Maratha expansion.

Richard M. Eaton's *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300–1761* is particularly significant for the study of Tarabai. Eaton describes the anti-Mughal movement in the western Deccan between 1700 and 1710 as being led by Tarabai and situates her career within wider changes in eighteenth-century Maharashtrian politics and society.

More recent scholarship has widened the scope of gender history. Studies of households show that family organization was simultaneously social, political, material, and economic. Research on law and gender also demonstrates that women lived within complex structures of caste and patriarchal regulation. A 2026 study of the Peshwa period, for example, examines kidnapping, forced marriage, elopement, caste and state intervention, demonstrating how legal and administrative practices could reinforce patriarchal structures.

Thus, the literature indicates the need to study both women's agency and the restrictions within which that agency operated.

7. Historical Analysis and Discussion

7.1 Women and the Political Culture of the Maratha State

Maratha politics developed through a combination of kingship, military service, landed interests, administrative networks, kinship, and personal loyalties. Marriage could establish or reinforce political relationships between influential families. Consequently, royal women were not entirely separated from politics. Women belonging to elite households could possess political importance as mothers, wives, widows, regents, estate holders, and intermediaries between families. Their influence was especially visible during disputes concerning succession or during periods when male rulers were absent, imprisoned, young, or deceased. This does not imply political equality between men and women. Formal institutions remained overwhelmingly male dominated. Nevertheless, the structure of early modern politics created circumstances in which women could exercise substantial authority.

7.2 Rajmata Jijabai and the Foundations of Swarajya

Rajmata Jijabai occupies a distinguished position in Maratha historical memory. Born into the Jadhav family and married to Shahaji Bhosale, she belonged to two politically influential lineages. Her historical significance is closely associated with the formative years of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. She supervised household and estate affairs and became an important presence in Shivaji's early political environment. Traditional narratives particularly emphasize her religious values, courage, administrative interest, and influence upon Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. From the perspective of women's history, Jijabai's importance extends beyond her identity as Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's mother. Her position illustrates how elite women could connect household authority, dynastic legitimacy, estate administration, religious patronage, and political culture. Her historical image subsequently became deeply embedded in Maharashtra's collective memory. Consequently, it is important to distinguish between evidence available from the seventeenth century and later representations that transformed Jijabai into a cultural symbol.

7.3 Maharani Tarabai: Political Leadership and Resistance

Tarabai provides perhaps the clearest example of direct female political leadership in Maratha history. She was born in 1675 and was the daughter of Hambirrao Mohite, an important Maratha commander. She married Rajaram, the younger son of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. Following Rajaram's death in 1700, Tarabai assumed leadership on behalf of her young son, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj II. This occurred at a critical moment. Mughal emperor Aurangzeb was personally directing campaigns in the Deccan, and the Maratha state faced intense military pressure. Tarabai nevertheless coordinated resistance and asserted dynastic authority. Contemporary and later accounts recognized her administrative and leadership abilities. Eaton notes that the Maratha resistance expanded during her leadership and describes her as one of the remarkable women of Indian history. Her political activity involved maintaining the loyalty of Maratha commanders, sustaining opposition to Mughal power, asserting her son's claim, and operating within a highly competitive political



environment. Tarabai's significance did not disappear after the return of Shahu. Her political career included conflict, confinement, re-emergence, and renewed intervention in Maratha politics. Scholarship divides her remarkable career into phases of active leadership, confinement, and later influence as a powerful dowager.

Tarabai therefore challenges any assumption that women in early modern Indian states could exercise only ceremonial influence.

7.4 Maharani Yesubai and Political Endurance

Yesubai, wife of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, represents another form of female political experience. Following Sambhaji's capture and execution in 1689, Yesubai and her son Shahu were taken into Mughal custody. Her experience demonstrates the political importance attached to royal women and children. Control over members of a ruling family could become an instrument of negotiation, legitimacy, and dynastic politics. Although Yesubai's circumstances differed considerably from Tarabai's direct regency, her position remained politically significant because she represented dynastic continuity. Her life demonstrates that political participation should not be understood only in terms of holding formal office. Survival, negotiation, preservation of dynastic identity, and management of relationships could themselves acquire political importance during periods of conflict.

7.5 Women, Kinship and Marriage Alliances

Marriage was an important component of political and social organization among Maratha elites. Marriages could connect powerful houses, consolidate status, and create networks of obligation. Modern scholarship emphasizes that affinal relatives occupied an important place within Maratha governance and that patterns of marriage and kinship continued to influence imperial organization. Women consequently stood at the centre of relationships connecting different political families. Their marriages could have consequences for succession, military alliances, estate interests, and factional politics. This perspective shifts historical attention from individual heroic women to the structural importance of women within political networks.

7.6 Women and Household Economy

For the majority of women, participation in society occurred primarily through households and local communities rather than royal courts. The household in eighteenth-century western India functioned not simply as a private domestic space but also as a unit of production, consumption, property ownership, social reproduction, and labour organization. Historical scholarship consequently treats the household as a crucial institution for understanding the relationship between gender and the state. Women contributed to domestic production, food preparation, childcare, agricultural activity, animal care, craft production, and management of household resources. The precise character of such labour differed according to caste, class, occupation, locality, and economic status. Elite women's experience was therefore not representative of all Maratha women. Rural and working women frequently participated directly in productive labour even though such contributions are less visible in conventional political records.

7.7 Property, Economic Rights and Agency

Women's economic position varied considerably. Some women, particularly from influential families, exercised control over estates, maintenance grants, gifts, or other resources. Widows could also become important figures in questions concerning inheritance and household property. However, women's access to economic resources was shaped by customary practice, caste, family structure, and political authority. Evidence from eighteenth-century India demonstrates that women could function as heirs, businesswomen, and holders of social capital, although changing legal systems could restrict such rights. Economic agency should therefore be understood as uneven rather than absent. Wealthy and politically connected women possessed opportunities unavailable to poorer women, while widowhood, marriage, caste position, and family circumstances could significantly alter women's access to resources.

7.8 Religious and Cultural Participation

Religion constituted another important sphere of women's social participation. Women participated in household rituals, pilgrimages, festivals, donations, temple activities, and devotional traditions. Royal and elite women could extend religious patronage through grants, construction, donations, and support to religious institutions. Such patronage was not purely spiritual; in early modern states it could also contribute to prestige, legitimacy, social relationships, and political authority. At the popular level, devotional traditions provided cultural spaces in which women's experiences could be expressed. The wider Bhakti tradition of Maharashtra had already created a significant heritage of female devotional expression, including the memory of women saints such as Muktabai, Janabai, and Bahinabai. Religion therefore provided both structures of social regulation and possibilities for cultural participation.

7.9 Social Restrictions and Patriarchal Structures

Recognition of women's agency should not lead to an idealized representation of Maratha society. Women lived within patriarchal social structures. Marriage practices, caste regulations, expectations concerning sexuality, widowhood, family honour, and unequal access to authority could restrict their choices. Evidence from Peshwa-period legal and administrative practices demonstrates the close relationship among gender, caste, marriage, and state authority. Recent research has shown that disputes concerning forced marriage, kidnapping, and elopement were shaped by Brahmanical legal norms as well as governmental intervention. Therefore, women's history during the Maratha period contained both agency and constraint. Exceptional political power exercised by queens did not automatically produce social equality for ordinary women.

7.10 Political Participation beyond Formal Rule

An important finding emerging from the historical evidence is that political participation should not be defined exclusively as occupying a throne.

Women could influence political developments through:

- regency and direct governance,
- dynastic succession,

- marriage alliances,
- communication between political families,
- management of estates,
- patronage,
- preservation of dynastic claims,
- household networks, and
- religious and social authority.

Viewed from this broader perspective, women become much more visible within Maratha political history.

8. Major Findings

1. The study found that women constituted an important but unevenly documented component of Maratha political and social history. Political participation was particularly visible among women belonging to ruling and aristocratic families. Jijabai's position demonstrates the relationship between motherhood, dynastic formation, estate affairs, religious values, and political culture. Tarabai provides the strongest evidence of direct female political authority, as she led Maratha resistance and exercised governmental responsibilities during a severe political and military crisis. Yesubai's experience demonstrates the political significance of royal women in dynastic continuity and negotiations.
2. The study further found that kinship and marriage were important political institutions. Because women connected powerful families through marriage, their position had consequences extending beyond the household.
3. Social participation was much broader than formal political leadership. Women contributed to household economies, agricultural and productive work, religious life, family property, cultural practices, and community relationships. However, the surviving archive provides far more information about elite women than ordinary women.
4. Another significant finding is that women's agency coexisted with patriarchal limitations. Caste, family status, marriage practices, inheritance structures, and state regulation shaped the opportunities available to women. Thus, neither complete female powerlessness nor unrestricted empowerment adequately describes women's historical experience.
5. Finally, women's participation became particularly visible during moments of political crisis. Yet these moments reveal pre-existing forms of authority embedded in kinship, household management, dynastic status, property, and patronage rather than an entirely sudden emergence of female power.

9. Discussion

The evidence requires a reconsideration of conventional distinctions between the "private" household and "public" politics. In Maratha society, family relationships had direct political consequences. Marriage connected ruling families, households-controlled resources, succession depended upon dynastic relationships, and widows or mothers could become guardians of political legitimacy. Tarabai's career provides the clearest demonstration. Her

leadership was exceptional in scale, but the mechanisms through which she exercised authority—dynastic legitimacy, family networks, military relationships, and political negotiation—were embedded in the existing political structure. At the same time, the historical prominence of Tarabai or Jijabai should not be generalized to suggest that all women possessed similar authority. Social location mattered greatly. The political agency of a royal woman differed fundamentally from the daily social and economic participation of a peasant, artisan, servant, or labouring woman. A balanced history must therefore examine differences among women while recognizing their participation across multiple spheres.

10. Conclusion

Women played meaningful roles in the political and social history of the Maratha Empire. Although political institutions and military structures were predominantly controlled by men, women were neither entirely absent from politics nor restricted exclusively to passive domestic roles. Jijabai contributed to the dynastic and political environment associated with the emergence of Swarajya. Tarabai demonstrated extraordinary political leadership by sustaining Maratha authority during one of its most difficult periods. Yesubai's life illustrates the importance of royal women in dynastic politics and political continuity. Numerous other women contributed through family networks, household economies, estate management, religious patronage, agricultural work, cultural practices, and community relationships.

The study also establishes that female participation must be interpreted within the social realities of the period. Maratha society remained structured by gender hierarchy, caste, family authority, and patriarchal customs. Political prominence among a small number of royal women did not remove these inequalities. Consequently, the history of women in the Maratha Empire is best understood through the interaction of power, kinship, gender, caste, economy, and social status. Incorporating these dimensions expands Maratha history beyond narratives of warfare and male political leadership and produces a richer understanding of early modern Maharashtra. Women were not merely observers of Maratha history. In different capacities and under different constraints, they participated in its political continuity, social organization, economy, culture, and historical development.

References

1. Desai, S. (1980). *Social life in Maharashtra under the Peshwas*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
2. Eaton, R. M. (2005). *A social history of the Deccan, 1300–1761: Eight Indian lives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Fukazawa, H. (1991). *The medieval Deccan: Peasants, social systems and states, sixteenth to eighteenth centuries*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
4. Gordon, S. (1993). *The Marathas 1600–1818*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. Kulkarni, A. R. (1996). *Maharashtra: Society and culture*. Pune: Diamond Publications.
6. Narayan, R. (2016). Widows, family, community, and the formation of Anglo-Hindu law in eighteenth-century India. *Modern Asian Studies*, 50(3), 866–897.
7. O'Hanlon, R. (2000). *A comparison between women and men: Tarabai Shinde and the critique of gender relations in colonial India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.



8. Ranade, M. G. (1900). Rise of the Maratha power. Bombay: Punalekar & Co.
9. Sardesai, G. S. (1946–1948). New history of the Marathas (Vols. 1–3). Bombay: Phoenix Publications.
10. Sarkar, J. (1920). Shivaji and his times. London: Longmans, Green and Co.
11. Sen, S. N. (1928). Administrative system of the Marathas. Calcutta: University of Calcutta.
12. Wagle, N. K. (2000). The government, the jāti and the individual: Rights, discipline and control in the Pune Kotwal papers, 1766–1794. Contributions to Indian Sociology, 34(3), 321–360.