Relational Sovereignty and Sacred Geography: Reimagining the Maratha Polity in Early Modern India

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Abstract

This paper redefines the Maratha polity as a model of relational sovereignty as opposed to an example of a regional military power that primarily fought the Mughal Empire. It states that Maratha power was created as a result of the interplay of *rajadharma*, sacred geography, control of space through forts, mobile warfare, and negotiated local power. By relying on the writings of J. Duncan M. Derrett, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Diana Eck, and Sumit Guha, the study shows that the Maratha polity was not politically incomplete due to the fact that it did not have strict centralization; rather, the ability to integrate ethics, landscape, mobility, and mediation in a sustainable form of rule was its unique strength. The paper provides a theoretical and philosophical framework for explaining the polity based on the ideas of sacred geography and relational sovereignty to comprehend the Maratha state formation as a new model of early modern Indian polity.

Keywords: Maratha Polity, relational sovereignty, sacred geography, early modern India.

Reframing the Maratha Polity: Historiography and Theoretical Intervention

The historiography of the Maratha polity is often placed in the context of a canon of events such as the rise of Shivaji, the weakening of Mughal rule, the development of the Maratha martial prowess and the ultimate development of a broader-based confederacy. Although this story is still consequential, it poses the threat of reducing the Maratha state to a local force that is solely created by war and the expansion of territories. Such a reading is incomplete. The Maratha polity was not merely an instrument of military operation and should not be judged only in terms of what will come in the future centralized empires or states of bureaucracy. It is viewed as a method that acknowledges it as a system formed by interrelations between ruler, land, fort, lineage, movement, and moral authority. In this paper, I argue that the Maratha polity can be interpreted as a model of relational sovereignty, where power is created by *rajadharma*, sacred geography, fort-centric spatial control, mobile warfare, and negotiated local power instead of uniformity in terms of territory (Gordon 1-10; Seshan 35-37).

The need to reinterpret is based on the ineffectiveness of the traditional political language to explain the Maratha case. When the assumption is that the state is a centralized, bureaucratic, geographically homogeneous unit that is supported by a fixed capital and an established chain of command, the Maratha polity will seem disordered or incomplete. Radhika Seshan argues that the Maratha state is more understandable as a conceptual issue and not as an imperfect copy of a European model. Such terms as kingdom, confederacy, or empire all represent some aspect of truth, but none can be used to explain how Maratha power worked in practice. Similar patterns of legitimacy, loyalty, taxation, military organization, and the elite families are also highlighted by Stewart Gordon, which implies that the Maratha power was built on the basis of connective structures instead of centralization alone (Seshan 35-46; Gordon 10-12). As a result, the Maratha polity is not weak politically due to its distributed character; instead, it is uniquely historic with regard to its arrangement of power in the layered and negotiated modes of authority.

***Rajadharma*, Kingship, and Ethical Legitimacy**

*Rajadharm*a is the philosophical centre of this structure. The kingship in the classical Indian political thought is not only domination, but it is associated with responsibility, protection, moral obligations, and preserving the social and political order. The explanation of *rajadharma* by Duncan M. Derrett helps to understand that in the Indian tradition, kingship was associated with the need of the ruler to maintain a normatively ordered world, as opposed to merely using power. This order plays a vital role in understanding the Maratha polity, since the power of Shivaji was not built on mere military strength and conquests. The principle of legitimate authority was also the foundation of the reign of Shivaji. The debate about protection, order, and moral legitimacy broadened political authority and had ethical implications. As a result, the Maratha state cannot be described as the act of resistance or conquest. It can also be viewed as an attempt to render the military success into an ethically intelligible sovereignty. In this regard, *rajadharma* does not offer an external theory that was enforced on Maratha history, but a vocabulary that was already a part of the world in which Maratha kingship was desired to be heard (Derrett 597-609).

This moral code was expressed in the political sphere during the coronation of Shivaji (Desai). This coronation was not an ornament added to an already existing kingdom; it was one of the occasions that contributed to making the kingdom conceivable as a legitimate form of governance. Gordon centers this transition around Shivaji and the establishment of the Maratha polity, to show that issues of descent, power, and political organization were tied up with the construction of kingship itself (88-89). The coronation issue was significant as it made a local war leader a holy monarch. Therefore, it associated the Maratha project with the older idioms of Hindu kingship and sacralised the right to rule. The ceremony is thus not just symbolic. It gave a philosophical and ritualized foundation to the sovereignty. It was through placing kingship in a recognised moral and sacred order that the Maratha polity was able not only to assert its independence from older regimes, but it was also able to assert its legitimacy. The polity was therefore not conceived as accidental power but as order which has been reinstated and as a natural order (Gordon 88-89).

Sacred Geography and the Spatial Logic of the Maratha Polity

The Maratha polity cannot be reduced to kingship alone. Its political reason was also spatial. The western Deccan was not a passive background on which the power of the Maratha emerged; it was a dynamic power centre. According to Gordon, the geopolitics of the state of Maharashtra, and of roads and forts of the Pune area, it is possible to say that terrain, routes, and strongholds were essential to the creation of the polity (10-12, 79-80). And here, a spatial-philosophical view will be useful. According to Henri Lefebvre, space is socially constructed, and it cannot be viewed as an inert vessel that houses political action (26-27). When applied to the case of the Marathas, this means that the forts, mountain passes, and connecting routes were not just strategic resources; they were the material form of political space. They managed communication, defence, taxation, surveillance, and legitimacy. The generalised view of India as the sacred geography by Diana Eck can also be used to shed light on how landscape in Indian tradition has a cultural and civilisational connotation, rather than a physical extension. The hill forts and the regional landscape in the Maratha world were not just strategic advantages to the army, but a site where the sovereignty gained not only visibility, but also memory and symbolic richness (Eck). The landscape, in its turn, was cultivated by expanding the Maratha state, and not by a set of rulers and their authority (Gordon 10-12, 72-74; Lefebvre 26-27; Eck).

Mobility, Negotiation, and Relational Sovereignty

Mobility is central to the Maratha polity as well due to the significance of space. The history of the Maratha military is condensed into a sort of cavalry speed, guerrilla tactics, ambush, and tactical withdrawal. These are not false descriptions, but are too limited when they are purely military. The mobility in the Maratha case did not only amount to a fighting method but also a form of ruling. The topic of warfare, hill forts, and subsequent expansion, as discussed by Gordon, demonstrates that movement was associated with the process of revenue extraction, communication, coercion, and expansion (127-39). The difference between strategies and tactics introduced by Michel de Certeau is applicable in this situation, as it can be helpful to understand how the power can be exercised not only by fixed institutional centres but by practiced movement over the contested space. The power of the Maratha frequently relied upon the skill of moving in and out of hard places, of striking suddenly, of bargaining in the country, of gathering tribute, and of retiring before the more solid imperial institutions could be completely on the alert. Even movement was turned into a political resource. A word like mobile to characterize the polity of the Marathas is not to imply any sign of weakness or incompleteness; rather, it is to acknowledge that circulation was one of the ways in which sovereignty was practiced. As much as it was in control over the routes and rhythms, so was it in control over the territory (Gordon 127-39; de Certeau xix).

A good example of the logic of space and mobility of sovereignty is the encounter with Afzal Khan at Pratapgad in 1659. Instead of engaging Bijapur in an open field battle, Shivaji led the troops of Afzal Khan into rocky terrain and staged a conclusive attack by planning, understanding the terrain, and localizing the military operations. This episode shows that, in the case of the Marathas, geography was not a passive setting for war but an active political resource through which power was organized and exercised (Desai).

This versatile form of power was maintained through negotiated power. The Maratha polity was not united just by the will of one king or one court. The work by Rosalind O'Hanlon on the expansion of the Maratha during the period of the political agents is particularly significant since it demonstrates that the role of diplomacy, mediation, and personal intercession was incorporated into the growth of the Maratha power (O'Hanlon 503-34). Sovereignty was taken outward with the assistance of political agents, chiefs, scribes, financiers, and military households. Gordon also demonstrates that elite families, credit networks, taxation, and administrative adjustment played a central role in the development of the polity, particularly as the move towards conquest was replaced by an administrative move in the eighteenth century (127-39, 143). This organisation implied that the Maratha state was not an easy centralised mechanism. However, it also entailed that power was mobile. Chiefs and intermediaries could be used to exercise political power without necessarily becoming anarchy. A negotiated polity is distinctly different from a weak polity. The decentralisation in the Maratha case was among the same terms of expansion since it enabled the state to be more versatile as it operated in various regional environments. Power was decentralized, yet not non-existent (O'Hanlon 503-34; Gordon 127-39, 143).

Concurrently, sovereignty demanded more than military achievement and political intervention; it demanded a perceivable moral order. The research of Sumit Guha on punishment in the eighteenth century Maharashtra is significant in this respect since it shows that the rule of the Marathas cannot be discredited as arbitrary warlordism. Punishment and hierarchy, as

well as adjudication, are manifestations of a systematized world of rights, obligations, custom, and power as opposed to a simply disorganized domain of coercion (101-26). This is important to a philosophical interpretation of the Maratha polity. Without the institutions and practices that the subjects could gain understanding of, *rajadharma* would have been meaningless. The justice of the Maratha world was not the modern liberal legality, nor was it the lawless force. The polity ruled under forms of custom, penalty, hierarchy, and duty that were historically recognisable. This ethical grounding was useful in transforming coercion into authority. It further demonstrates that relational sovereignty was not just the theory of mobility and negotiation; it was the theory of moral intelligibility. A polity persists when its authority is felt to be significant, rather than feared to be mighty (Guha 101-26).

This kind of reading also clarifies the meaning of *swarajya*. The word has become a common phrase in contemporary popular speech, becoming either nationalism or sentiment. However, in the Maratha context, it is better to perceive *swarajya* as a form of political imagination of legitimate self-governance based on land, duty, and locally intelligible sovereignty. It did not mean a modern nation-state in the later sense of the constitution, but it meant a wish to have an order that was not simply a subordinate one to an imperial one. The Maratha polity in this instance is a replacement of both Mughal imperial centralism and the subsequent Eurocentric concept of the state. It was neither stateless nor yet centralised in the modern sense. It operated in the form of forts, military circulation, ritual legitimacy, personal mediation, fiscal claims, and moral order. In that regard, the Marathas provide a valuable lesson to the effect that the early modern Indian state formation cannot be quantified with one institutional template. Their polity was also coherent, but not uniformly bureaucratic in nature (Seshan 43-45; Gordon 177-81; O'Hanlon 503-34).

There were drawbacks in the Maratha model. The rivalry, the faction, and the unequal coordination could also be experienced in a polity which relied on the initiative of chiefs and intermediaries. Growth in such large scales generated strains that could not be always assimilated by a distributed structure. The strength of relational sovereignty lies just in the fact that it is not rigid, although flexibility may create vulnerability when the magnitude of rule is greater. The Maratha polity neither needs to be seen as an imprecise centralised empire nor a disorganised military alliance on its own. It was a unique political structure, the strengths and weaknesses of which were based on the same reasoning: the source of authority was created through the interactions between the king, chiefs, forts, land, memory, and movement. This is why Maratha experience is still of theoretical significance. It shows how sovereignty in early modern India might be both mobile and incoherent, sacred and yet political, and decentralised and yet formless (Gordon 177-81; Seshan 35-46).

The Maratha polity should be redefined not merely as a local force but as a historically unique polity constructed on the basis of relational sovereignty. *Rajadharma* offered an ethical sanction to kingship. The topography of Maharashtra and its system of forts made sovereignty spatial. Circulation became government by making intermediaries and chiefs mediate between them, and through moral order gave government a visible form. All these combined points to a polity whose political imagination cannot be described by battle history alone. The Maratha state existed not just as a kingdom on paper, but as an actual order in which morality, geography, and motion merged to create a unique model of the early modern Indian state (Derrett 597-609; Gordon 10-12, 59-72, 132-56; O'Hanlon 503-34).

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