

**From Regional Ruler to National Icon: Shivaji Maharaj
between Early Modern Statecraft, History, and
Nationalist Imagination**

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Abstract: *This paper examines how Shivaji's historical persona as a strategic thinker, administrator, and state-builder was reinterpreted across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to generate nationalist consciousness, culminating in his contemporary portrayal as a unified "Hero of India." The paper foregrounds Shivaji's role as the architect of indigenous naval power along the western coast, demonstrating how maritime forts and coastal fleets posed an enduring challenge to European, particularly British, maritime dominance, later reframed within anti-colonial nationalist historiography. Beyond military strategy, the study highlights Shivaji's social and economic reforms, including agrarian regulation, peasant welfare, ecological resource management, and ethical governance, complicating martial and communal readings of his rule. A key intervention of this paper lies in tracing how nineteenth-century reformers expanded Shivaji's image beyond Maratha regionalism, while twentieth-century nationalist and revivalist discourses increasingly recast him within a homogenized Hindu nationalist framework. By examining historiography, folk memory, and cinematic representations together, the paper distinguishes between Shivaji as a historical actor and Shivaji as a symbolic figure mobilized in modern political imagination, contributing to broader debates on memory, nationalism, and historical representation in India.*

Keywords: *Hindavi Swaraj, Iconographical Nationalism, Shivaji Maharaj, Statecraft etc.*

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Introduction

Starting from the early State formation and conceptual limitation of the nation as an analytical portion, this paper will adopt a dual methodology that combines the early modern political

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history with the memory and media studies in order to analyze the historical Shivaji alongside his modern symbolic afterlives.

It intervenes in two overlapping historiographical problems: first, the persistent tendency to retrofit modern ideas of nationhood, Hindu unity, or anti-colonial resistance onto seventeenth-century actors; and second, the relative neglect of the political and cultural processes through which Shivaji was later transformed into a national icon. Applying modern nationalist categories to early modern polities is methodologically problematic, as such anachronistic projections flatten plural and negotiated political cultures into coherent ideological formations, thereby obscuring the ritual, fiscal, military, and genealogical grammars through which sovereignty actually operated. This paper addresses this lacuna by, on the one hand, situating Shivaji's political practice firmly within contemporaneous frameworks of kingship, patronage, warfare, and legitimacy, drawing on administrative records, Marathi bakhars, and early modern political norms; and, on the other, by tracing how his image was retrospectively reworked across colonial historiography, nationalist print culture, textbooks, theatre, cinema, and modern political mobilization. Rather than treating these later representations as transparent reflections of the past, the paper reads them as sites of memory production, where regional practices and folk recollections were selectively appropriated, standardized, and institutionalized into national narratives. Methodologically, this involves close, language-sensitive readings of early sources (Marathi and Persian), combined with a comparative analysis of print and visual media to map shifts in meaning across time. By placing Shivaji at the intersection of history and memory, the paper demonstrates both the historical specificity of his seventeenth-century rule and the constructed nature of his modern symbolic authority, thereby cautioning against retrospective nationalism while explaining its enduring political power.

Early State Formation, Sovereignty, and the Historiographical Context of Shivaji's Rise

Shivaji's rise must be understood not as a sudden nationalist rupture but as the culmination of longer processes of early modern state formation in the Deccan, rooted in Maratha military

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service under the Bahmani and Deccan Sultanates and Shahji Bhonsle's semi-autonomous consolidation of power. As Satish Chandra argues, the rise of the Marathas resembled the earlier kshatriyasation of Rajput lineages, where military service, territorial control, and political assertion reshaped social and political status and produced new ruling elites.

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Operating within a fragmented political environment marked by Mughal–Deccani rivalry, shifting alliances, and ecological constraints, Shivaji's state-building was shaped by strategic necessity rather than ideological nationalism. Stewart Gordon emphasises that his reliance on forts, flexible administration, and pragmatic diplomacy reflected adaptive responses to the political geography of the Deccan rather than any proto-nationalist consciousness.²

Similarly, Sumit Guha's analysis of early modern identity formation highlights the fluid and situational nature of political authority in South Asia, cautioning against projecting modern nationalist categories onto precolonial rulers.³

Shivaji's articulation of Hindavi Swarajya, therefore, represented an early modern claim to regional sovereignty grounded in legitimacy, protection, and administrative order rather than national identity. His institutionalisation of naval power through coastal fortifications such as Sindhudurg and Vijaydurg, the use of mobile vessels suited to Konkan ecology, and the integration of maritime taxation into state revenue illustrate what historians such as Surendra Nath Sen and B. K. Apte identify as a strategic expansion of sovereignty into the maritime sphere.⁴ At the same time, his agrarian reforms, including the regulation of intermediary authority, standardised land measurement, calibrated taxation, and protection of cultivation, created a stable fiscal base essential for sustaining military expansion, which G. S. Sardesai interprets as evidence of systematic administrative consolidation.⁵ However, Shivaji's later image as a heroic, moralised, and proto-nationalist figure owes much to colonial-era historiography; as Jadunath Sarkar's influential reconstruction based on Persian chronicles demonstrates, Shivaji's historical persona was shaped as much by later interpretive frameworks as by seventeenth-century realities.⁶ Taken together, modern historiography situates Shivaji not as a nationalist founder, but as a pragmatic early modern state-builder whose political, military,

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agrarian, and maritime strategies consolidated a durable regional sovereignty within the contested world of the seventeenth-century Deccan.

Shivaji Maharaj in the Records and Writings: Character, Sovereignty, and Statecraft

Shivaji's political thought and practice must be situated within the political grammar of the early modern Deccan, where sovereignty was constituted through dynastic legitimacy, territorial control, and military–fiscal administration rather than through any language of popular sovereignty or national belonging. A close reading of contemporary Marathi court narratives, administrative manuals, Persian chronicles, and European factory records shows a consistent pattern: Shivaji is represented as an exemplary early modern sovereign whose authority flowed from personal virtue, ritual legitimation, and administrative capacity. Later nationalist appropriations therefore represent a retrospective refashioning of a seventeenth-century ruler into a modern political symbol.

Character as Moral Kingship: The Sabhāsad Bakhar

The Sabhāsad Bakhar (1697) constructs Shivaji primarily as a kṣatriya ruler whose authority rests on personal virtue. The Bakhar stresses discipline, justice, restraint, and a paternal concern for cultivators and subjects; these qualities are narrated as royal obligations rather than as responses to popular demands. Key episodes—Shivaji's early training, his regulation of the conduct of troops, and his concern for agrarian security—are repeatedly invoked to portray a ruler whose legitimacy arises from exemplary conduct. The language of the Bakhar thus produces a moral architecture of kingship in which vertical loyalty to the ruler is the primary political bond: subjects obey because the ruler is righteous, not because they possess a collective political identity or rights of representation.⁷

Analytically, the Sabhāsad Bakhar allows us to see Shivaji's "character" as embedded in a moral economy of kingship. The text's silence on citizenship, representative institutions, or popular political participation highlights the discontinuity between early modern sovereign practice and modern nationalist language. Where later historiography reads Shivaji's popularity as nascent

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nationalism, the Bakhar consistently frames obedience as hierarchically structured and personally oriented.

From Personal Rule to Military–Fiscal State: The Ajñāpatra

Where the Bakhar supplies a narrative of exemplary kingship, Ramchandrapant Amatya's Ajñāpatra (1715) supplies a programmatic register of governance. Composed in the wake of Shivaji's reign, the Ajñāpatra systematises principles of surveillance, fiscal discipline, and bureaucratic accountability that convert personal rule into a durable polity. Its concern with revenue extraction (including instruments such as chauth and sardeshmukhi), the disciplining of officials, and the maintenance of military capacity demonstrates that Shivaji's polity was centrally concerned with institutional sustainability and coercive capacity rather than with the production of an imagined political community.⁸

The Ajñāpatra thus moves the argument from narrative representation to normative statecraft: loyalty is vertical and administrative, not political in a participatory sense. Its prescriptions justify revenue institutions in terms of sustaining military capacity and administrative order, reinforcing the claim that Shivaji's political imagination lay within the horizons of an early modern military–fiscal state.

External Perspectives: Persian and European Records

Persian chroniclers and European factory records provide valuable external perspectives that corroborate the early modern framing of Shivaji's authority. Khafi Khan's Muntakhab al-Lubab and the Mughal official history Ma'āshir-i-Alamgiri register Shivaji as a rebellious zamindar who successfully consolidated territorial control and command of fortresses; their critique is political and strategic rather than ideological. As Mughal writers, these sources necessarily evaluate Shivaji in relation to imperial sovereignty, characterising him as a regional rival whose rise posed a pragmatic challenge to Mughal order rather than as the leader of any wider political community.⁹

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European accounts—East India Company factory records, Surat consults, and other mercantile correspondence—read Shivaji through the categories that mattered to traders and diplomats: control of ports, fortifications, taxation, and the security of trade routes. These observers depict him as a regional power-broker whose actions affected commerce and diplomacy; again, there is no language of nationhood, only assessments of strategic capacity and political reliability. The convergence of Marathi, Persian, and European perspectives strengthens the argument that Shivaji's contemporaries understood him as an early modern sovereign, not as a proto-national leader.

Rajyabhishek and Dynastic Legitimacy

The coronation (rajyabhishek) of 1674 is best read as a ritual technology of dynastic legitimation rather than as an assertion of popular sovereignty. Contemporary accounts emphasise Kṣatriya status, sacred genealogy, and royal titles—symbols intended to translate military success into recognised rulership within the idioms of lineage and ritual purity. The ceremony distinguished Shivaji from other Deccan elites and converted martial achievements into an authorised dynastic claim. As a staged assertion of lineage and status, the rajyabhishek reaffirmed hierarchical kingship: it made subjects witnesses to a legitimating spectacle, not participants in constituting political authority.¹⁰

Martial Prudence and Political Pragmatism

Across sources, Shivaji's political behaviour appears strikingly pragmatic. Episodes such as the Treaty of Purandar (1665), the Agra episode and his subsequent escape (1666), and other moments of negotiation reveal a ruler willing to adapt tactics—submission, negotiation, retreat—when required by political survival. Mughal chronicles and the Ma'āshir portray him not as an ideological revolutionary but as a savvy adversary who used violence instrumentally to secure territory and sovereignty.¹¹ This strategic rationality further distances Shivaji from modern

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constructions of ideological resistance: his priorities were territorial control, fiscal sustainability, and the preservation of dynastic rule.

From Early Modern Sovereignty to Modern National Memory

Taken together, contemporary Marathi, Persian, and European sources present Shivaji as an early modern sovereign whose legitimacy rested on dynastic authority, territorial command, and martial discipline. The later transformation of Shivaji into a national hero is therefore a retrospective political project: modern nationalism inscribes contemporary needs onto historical figures. Theoretical frameworks developed by Benedict Anderson, Partha Chatterjee, and Eric Hobsbawm are useful for explaining this retrospective re-signification: nationalism, these scholars show, constructs imagined communities and invents traditions that selectively appropriate the past to legitimate present political imaginaries.¹²

Sources demonstrate that Shivaji's political imagination was institutional and dynastic rather than national. His later elevation as a nationalist icon reflects modern political exigencies rather than the epistemic horizons of seventeenth-century Deccan sovereignty.

Shivaji Maharaj and the Question of Nationhood

The preceding section established Shivaji as an early-modern sovereign whose legitimacy rested on dynastic legitimation, territorial command, and military fiscal administration. It also showed that contemporary Marathi, Persian, and European observers framed his authority in terms of personal virtue, ritual status, and strategic capacity rather than in any language of popular sovereignty. The question that follows naturally is: how and why did Shivaji come to be remembered as a national icon in the modern period? Answering this requires attention to the long process of retrospective re-inscription that modern nationalism performs on the past.

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Eric Hobsbawm's schema worked out most fully in *Nations and Nationalism* since 1780 and *The Invention of Tradition* is analytically useful here. Hobsbawm identifies a three-stage process through which historical figures and practices are reworked into national symbols. First, an elite or proto-national phase in which intellectuals, philologists, and middle-class professionals undertake a cultural project: they collect folklore, standardise language, and write national histories that establish a continuity with a constructed past. Second, a phase of political mobilisation from above, where political leaders and state elites deploy invented symbols flags, ceremonies, school curricula to give institutional and ritual weight to those cultural constructions. Third, a phase of mass nationalism in which popular social groups internalise the symbols and narratives; nationalism thereby becomes a mass ideology capable of mobilising peasants, workers, and urban publics. This framework foregrounds the active, modern construction of tradition and collective memory: nations are rarely the organic continuations that later political rhetoric suggests; rather, they are invented and institutionalized.¹³

Applied to Shivaji, Hobsbawm's analysis clarifies the temporal layers of mnemonic transformation. In the seventeenth century Shivaji appears in courtly Marathi narratives, administrative manuals, Mughal chronicles, and European commercial correspondence as a regional sovereign whose claims were dynastic, ritualised, and strategic. There is little in those materials to suggest an awareness of "nation" in the modern sense. It is in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that elite cultural producers historians, editors of Marathi print culture, dramatists, and colonial-era intellectuals began to reposition Shivaji within a broader story of Hindu resistance and Maratha ascendancy. Jadunath Sarkar's influential writings, for example, read Shivaji's career through teleologies that accentuated military confrontation with the Mughals and thereby lent themselves to later nationalist appropriation.¹⁴

The second phase political mobilisation was observable once public institutions and political organisations began to adopt the new Shivaji as a usable symbol. Education systems, public ceremonies, and the repertoire of print culture turned an elite historical interest into mass-facing iconography. Newspapers, school readers, and political pamphlets circulated standardised narratives that presented Shivaji as a paradigmatic defender of a putative Hindu polity; civic rituals and commemorations turned historical memory into civic practice. The development of

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mass print, increased literacy, and the political organisation of social groups made these narratives legible and persuasive beyond the intellectual classes.¹⁵

Finally, the massification of Shivaji's image its uptake by popular movements, political parties, and eventually film and public spectacle—completed the transformation. In this phase the historiographical construction acquired affective charge and everyday visibility. Popular commemorations, theatre, and cinema recoded Shivaji's story into simple, mobilising tropes: valour, sacrifice, and communal defence. The national icon thus emerged not as the natural continuation of seventeenth-century politics but as the product of selective memory, institutional reproduction, and political deployment.¹⁶

Two analytical points follow from this reconstruction. First, the retrospective application of nationhood to Shivaji is an anachronism if read as a direct reflection of seventeenth-century political consciousness. The epistemic conditions that render a “nation” thinkable—print capitalism, standardised education, mass political organisations, and the repertory of nationalist ideology were absent in Shivaji's world. Benedict Anderson's formulation of nations as “imagined political communities” driven by print networks is therefore instructive: without those material and institutional supports, the category simply could not have functioned in the seventeenth century.¹⁷ Second, the selective appropriation of Shivaji's past demonstrates how modern political projects recode earlier symbols to serve present legitimisation needs. Partha Chatterjee's account of nationalist modernity and the selective interiorisation of cultural elements helps explain how certain attributes of Shivaji—martial prowess, Kṣatriya status, devotion to local polity—were emphasised while others (bureaucratic centralisation, revenue instruments) were downplayed.¹⁸

This is not to deny that Shivaji's memory could be—and was—invoked sincerely by a range of actors; rather, it is to insist on the historicity of that invocation. The nationalist present restructured Shivaji's past in order to supply historical depth and moral authority to contemporary political claims. The historiographical consequence is significant: when historians write of Shivaji as a proto-national leader, they risk presupposing rather than demonstrating the continuities they claim. Such readings flatten the complexities of early modern political practice and obscure the institutional realities of seventeenth-century sovereignty personal loyalty,

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military-fiscal imperatives, and dynastic ritual by translating them into the idiom of nationhood.¹⁹

From Regional Memory to Nationalist Icon: Shivaji, Public History, and the Making of Indian Nationalism

The transformation of Shivaji from a regionally remembered seventeenth-century sovereign into a national symbol of anti-colonial resistance was neither automatic nor continuous; it was the outcome of deliberate historical reinterpretation undertaken during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Indian intellectuals, reformers, and nationalist leaders operating under the epistemic and political constraints of colonial modernity. Whereas early memories of Shivaji circulated predominantly through oral traditions, courtly chronicles, and regional literary forms within the western Deccan, colonial modernity introduced new imperatives for history-writing, mass communication, and political mobilisation that made possible and indeed demanded a different kind of historical imagination.²⁰

Faced with colonial narratives that often portrayed precolonial polities as fractured or despotic, Indian intellectuals sought exemplary pasts that could rebut imperial denigration and supply a moral pedigree for claims to self-rule. In this context Shivaji was selectively recovered and reconfigured as a powerful counter-symbol: a ruler who had challenged imperial authority, constructed functioning institutions, and articulated a moral rhetoric of justice and welfare that could be read as evidence of indigenous polity and efficacy. This recovery was not a mere revival of earlier memories but a conscious act of selective reconfiguration: aspects of regional tradition that served nationalist ends—martial valour, sacrifice, and righteous kingship—were amplified, while administrative complexities, fiscal mechanics, and ritual particularities were frequently muted.²¹

The expansion of print culture in the nineteenth century provided the principal medium for this transformation. Vernacular presses, historical journals, and printed editions of bakhars translated localized, performative memories into standardised texts accessible to a broad reading public. Edited chronicles, popular biographies, and school primers reduced the fluidity of oral performance and recast Shivaji's life into a coherent, linear narrative emphasising resistance and

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exemplarity. Print capitalism thus acted as a vehicle for converting regional memory into a national history: pamphlets, school readers, and nationalist tracts circulated narratives that could travel well beyond Marathi-speaking audiences and be appropriated into a pan-Indian repertoire of resistance.²²

Bal Gangadhar Tilak's interventions exemplify the shift from cultural recovery to political pedagogy. Tilak did not merely celebrate Shivaji as a historical figure; he transformed remembrance into public political action. The institutionalisation of Shivaji Jayanti in the 1890s converted commemoration into ritual spectacle processions, speeches, songs, and dramatized histories staged in public spaces that served as vehicles for mass political education and mobilisation. Tilak's festivals and the pages of his newspaper *Kesari* recoded Shivaji as an emblem of courage, self-rule, and moral leadership, explicitly linking the memory of the seventeenth century to contemporary struggles against imperial rule. By moving Shivaji from the domain of regional history into the arena of popular politics, Tilak forged a potent bridge between past sovereignty and present nationalist aspiration.²³

Educational institutions and the textbook industry consolidated this symbolic migration. The incorporation of Shivaji into school curricula disciplined memory by standardising the story taught to generations of pupils far removed from the Deccan's local memory landscapes. Textbooks highlighted administrative efficiency, military ingenuity, and moral governance as evidence of precolonial capacity for self-rule; in so doing they abstracted Shivaji from the particularities of seventeenth-century polity and embedded him within the shared national past that Benedict Anderson's model of "imagined communities" describes. Classrooms thereby became crucial sites where historical memory was normalised and nationalised.²⁴

Public-history initiatives lectures, commemorative publications, historical societies, and popular theatre further reinforced a dominant, legible narrative of Shivaji. These interventions often smoothed over the contingencies and contradictions of seventeenth-century politics in favour of a morally legible story aligned with nationalist values. Folk forms such as *powadas* and *bakhars* were selectively appropriated: their heroic elements were amplified while their local social embeddedness was downplayed. The result was a symbolic scale shift—from a moral sovereign embedded in specific social relations to a national icon representing collective resistance.²⁵

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This process of mnemonic transformation had two interrelated consequences. Analytically, it cautions historians against uncritical anachronism: the Shivaji of nationalist discourse is not identical to the Shivaji who inhabited the political and administrative realities of the seventeenth-century Deccan. Empirically, it shows how modern political projects rework the past in service of present legitimations selecting, editing, and institutionalising certain memories so that history functions as resource rather than mere record. The expansion of Shivaji's symbolic reach beyond Maratha regionalism thus reflects broader dynamics of Indian nationalism, where historical exemplars were chosen for their usefulness in contesting colonial narratives and in creating moral foundations for claims to self-government.²⁶

Recognizing this trajectory from regional memory to national icon—is essential for analytical clarity. It allows scholars both to distinguish early-modern sovereignty from modern nationhood and to understand how historical figures acquire enduring political power through successive regimes of remembrance. Traced the political uses of Shivaji more concretely: first through Tilak's public rituals and print campaigns, and then through the twentieth-century media especially popular theatre and cinema that finally secured Shivaji's place as a mass nationalist emblem.

Shivaji in Visual Culture and Cinema

Chhatrapati Shivaji's cinematic afterlife illustrates how modern visual culture reframes early-modern sovereignties as contemporary political and moral exemplars. What began in the Deccan as the memory of a dynastic, negotiated, and military-fiscal ruler has, over the twentieth century, been successively reworked through film into a mass-legible figure of charismatic, martial leadership and cultural authenticity. Cinema here functions not as neutral representation but as a site of ideological mediation shaped by colonial historiography, competing currents in nationalist politics, caste negotiations, and postcolonial identity formation.²⁷

The earliest Marathi screen representations brought Shivaji into the visual public sphere during the late colonial period. Silent and early-sound productions such as *Sinhagad* (Baburao Painter, 1923) and the later Prabhat studio remake *Sinhagad* (V. Shantaram, 1933) inserted Maratha episodes into the new mass medium at a moment when nationalist historical consciousness was consolidating. These early films tended to present Shivaji as a valiant strategist and exemplum of

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martial virtue rather than as an explicitly communal or doctrinal figure an openness that partly reflected the ideological fluidity of the period, which included non-Brahmin mobilisations and varied interpretations of Maratha history.²⁸

After Independence the cinematic grammar hardened. Historical productions of the late 1940s and 1950s—such as *Jai Bhawani* (1947) and Bhalji Pendharkar's *Chhatrapati Shivaji* (1952) increasingly aligned Shivaji with narratives that matched emergent forms of majoritarian cultural nationalism. In these films, devotional and cultural motifs, including the protection of sacred symbols and the elevation of spiritual authority, were staged through civilisational binaries, thereby popularising a communalised interpretation of early modern political conflict. This shift corresponded with broader nationalist historiographical trends that reframed Shivaji as a civilisational defender rather than a pragmatic early modern ruler operating within a plural political environment.²⁹

Filmic narration further consolidated particular ideological readings by foregrounding spiritual figures such as Samarth Ramdas and administrators such as Dadoji Konddev as foundational influences in Shivaji's political formation. Despite contested historical evidence regarding their direct political role, cinema retrospectively naturalised Brahmanical intellectual authority within Maratha state formation. Through repetition and visual dramatisation, Shivaji was transformed from a politically autonomous sovereign into the executor of a religious-national mission. This process obscured the complex and socially diverse alliances including Marathas, Muslims, pastoral communities, and maritime actors that historically underpinned Maratha power.³⁰

Through the 1960s and 1970s the historical genre reinforced an increasingly militarised and ritualised depiction of kingship. Films such as *Maratha Tituka Melvava* (1964) and *Raja Shiv Chhatrapati* (1974) extended cinematic tropes of martial heroism, ritual sovereignty, and moral polarity. As cultural historians have argued, such cinematic representations function as technologies of cultural reproduction, producing a “national(ist) hero” whose authority derives less from archival historical complexity than from affective identification and symbolic clarity.³¹ The ebb and transformation of the historical genre corresponded closely with broader social and political developments. The decline of large-scale historical productions during the 1980s and

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1990s coincided with Mandal-era caste politics, economic liberalisation, and increased contestation over historical memory and representation. A renewed cinematic engagement with Maratha history emerged in the 2010s through films such as Digpal Lanjekar's *Farzand* (2018) and *Fatteshikast* (2019), and Prasad Oak's *Hirkani* (2019). These productions foregrounded subaltern actors, regional loyalties, and lesser-known historical episodes, reflecting attempts—however partial—to broaden cinematic memory beyond earlier elite and Brahmanical frameworks. Nevertheless, the persistence of militarised visual language and heroic violence suggests the continued dominance of masculinist and nationalist frameworks in cinematic representations of Shivaji.³²

Finally, the cinematic career of Shivaji underscores a broader methodological insight: the mediated past is inherently political. Cinema does not merely transmit historical knowledge; it actively produces public memory by selecting, stylising, and moralising historical figures in ways that resonate with contemporary ideological concerns. Across successive historical contexts, Shivaji has been reimagined as an anti-colonial hero, a Hindu civilisational protector, and, more recently, a selectively inclusive regional icon. Attending to these cinematic transformations allows historians to critically interrogate not only the historical Shivaji but also the evolving political and cultural anxieties that shape how his legacy is remembered, represented, and mobilized in modern India.³³

Conclusion

This study has argued, and the evidence assembled confirms, that Shivaji Maharaj must be read primarily as an early-modern, dynastic sovereign whose political imagination and practices were situated in the concrete grammars of seventeenth-century Deccan statecraft not as an antecedent of modern nationhood. Close engagement with Marathi court narratives (*Sabhāsad Bakhar*), administrative manuals (*Ajñāpatra*), Mughal chronicles, and European commercial correspondence reveals a recurrent set of legitimating devices: ritualised dynastic claims, personal virtue and moral kingship, territorial command grounded in fort-based military systems, and military–fiscal institutions designed to secure revenue and sustain coercive capacity. These sources portray Shivaji as a pragmatic actor whose primary political aims were dynastic security, territorial consolidation, and administrative durability. His innovations — naval fortification on

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the Konkan coast, calibrated agrarian regulation, and administrative standardisation — are historically significant and measurable in their institutional consequences; yet they remain fully intelligible within early-modern logics of sovereignty rather than within the modalities that produced nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalism.

The transformation of Shivaji into a national icon was neither natural nor inevitable: it was a constructed and politicised process that unfolded across three broad registers. First, intellectual and cultural elites selectively recovered and reworked archival and oral materials, standardising and amplifying those elements of Shivaji's past that served nationalist arguments. Second, political mobilisation from above—most visibly in Tilak's ritualisation of Shivaji Jayanti and the mobilisation of print culture—translated elite reconstructions into mass-facing symbols. Finally, mass cultural forms, especially theatre and cinema, crystallised simplified, affective narratives that naturalised particular ideological readings (martial heroism, civilisational binaries, and Brahmanical consecration of authority) while eliding administrative nuance and social plurality.

The historiographical consequence of this trajectory is twofold. Analytically, it warns historians against anachronistic inference: applying the category nation to seventeenth-century actors risks mistaking modern political projects for continuities of meaning. The epistemic conditions that make nations legible print capitalism, standardised education, mass political organisations — were absent in Shivaji's polity; the social bond in his era remained vertical, patrimonial, and local. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of an interdisciplinary approach that combines philological reading of early sources with media and memory studies; such synthesis clarifies both what the historical Shivaji was, and why later generations reimagined him otherwise.

At the same time, the paper concedes the genuine political efficacy of the modern Shivaji: whether as a pedagogic symbol used by Tilak, as a mobilising figure in nationalist public culture, or as a demi-god in cinematic repertoires, his modern afterlives possess real political force. They shape civic rituals, curricular forms, and popular imaginaries. Recognising this duality that Shivaji was both a consequential seventeenth-century ruler and a modern political symbol manufactured through selective memory is the principal contribution of this study.

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In closing: Shivaji's administrative, agrarian, maritime, and military accomplishments deserve careful historical credit; but his elevation as an ideological emblem of nationhood is a product of modern historical consciousness and political instrumentation. A responsible historiography must therefore keep these two Shivajis distinct: the empirically reconstructible sovereign of the early modern Deccan, and the modern icon fashioned by nationalist culture and mass media. Only by maintaining that distinction can historians both honour Shivaji's historic achievements and critically interrogate the political uses to which his memory has been put.

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¹⁵ On print, education, and the institutionalisation of nationalist symbols, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1983.

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¹⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London 1983

¹⁸ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1993.

¹⁹ sources on seventeenth-century representations of Shivaji: Kṛishnaji Anant Sabhāsad, *Sabhāsad Bakhar* (1697); Ramchandrapant Amatya, *Ajñāpatra* (1715); Khafi Khan, *Muntakhab al-Lubab*; Saqi Musta'id Khan, *Ma'āşir-i-Alamgiri*; East India Company, *Factory Records*, Surat (mid-seventeenth century).

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²⁰ Kṛishnaji Anant Sabhāsād, *Sabhāsād Bakhar* (1697); Ramchandrapant Amatya, *Ajñāpatra* (1715).

²¹ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, (esp. the essays on invented traditions and their relation to modern political projects)

²² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1983; (on vernacular print and nationalist circulation), see also Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993.

²³ For accounts of Tilak's institutionalisation of Shivaji Jayanti and his use of *Kesari* as a vehicle for public history and political ritual, see contemporaneous reportage in *Kesari* (Pune) and subsequent studies of Tilak's politics; see also Jadunath Sarkar, *Shivaji and His Times* (Calcutta: Longmans, 1920), for early historiographical treatments later appropriated by nationalists.

²⁴ On the standardisation of historical narratives via textbooks and schools, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, and studies of colonial education policy and textbook formation.

²⁵ On the appropriation of folk forms and the construction of popular historical memory, see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*; for region-specific studies of powada appropriation, consult edited collections on Marathi public culture.

²⁶ For synthetic reflections on the memorialisation of regional heroes in modern South Asia, see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, and scholarship on public history and nationalism in India.

²⁷ Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema*, Routledge Press, London and New York, 2006, pp15-18. Veronique Bénéï, *Schooling Passions*, nation, history and language in contemporary western India, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2008 pp102-110.

²⁸ *Sinhagad*, directed by Baburao Painter (Maharashtra Film Company, 1923); *Sinhagad*, directed by V. Shantaram (Prabhat Film Company, 1933).

²⁹ *Jai Bhawani*, directed by Jaishankar Danve (1947); *Chhatrapati Shivaji*, directed by Bhalji Pendharkar (Pendharkar Films, 1952); Veronique Bénéï, *Schooling Passions*, nation, history and language in contemporary western India, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2008 pp 115–120.

³⁰ Stewart Gordon, *The Marathas 1600–1818*, CUP, Cambridge, 1993, pp84-110.

Veronique Bénéï, *Schooling Passions*, nation, history and language in contemporary western India, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, pp121-130.

³¹ Bhalji Pendharkar, *Maratha Tituka Melvava* (1964); *Raja Shiv Chhatrapati*, directed by Chandravadan (1974); Veronique Bénéï, *Schooling Passions*, nation, history and language in contemporary western India, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, pp140–150.

³² Digpal Lanjekar, *Farzand* (2018); Digpal Lanjekar, *Fatteshikast* (2019); Prasad Oak, *Hirkani* (2019), Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods*, Routledge Press, London and New York, 2006, pp25–32.

³³ Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema*, Routledge Press, London and New York, 2006, pp35–40.

Veronique Bénéï, *Schooling Passions*, nation, history and language in contemporary western India, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2008 pp150–160.