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From 'Plunderers' to 'Nation-Builders': Analyzing the Historiographical Shifts in Maratha History

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Abstract

The historiography of the Maratha Empire serves as a profound microcosm of the broader ideological shifts within Indian historical scholarship. This article interrogates the transformative trajectory of the Maratha narrative, navigating the conceptual distance between the pejorative portrayals of the colonial era, the hagiographic reconstructions of nationalist historiography, and the socio-economic re-evaluations posited by Marxist scholars. It argues that for over two centuries, the Maratha polity has functioned as a "malleable archive," periodically reshaped to align with the prevailing political zeitgeist and discursive demands of successive intellectual epochs.

The inquiry first deconstructs the Imperialist/Colonialist paradigm, most notably articulated by James Grant Duff. Within this framework, the Marathas were strategically relegated to the status of "predatory freebooters"-a reductionist trope employed to delegitimize indigenous sovereignty and manufacture a moral imperative for British Hegemony. Contrasting this, the article examines the Nationalist intervention of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Spearheaded by luminaries such as M.G. Ranade and V.K. Rajwade, this movement reclaimed the Maratha legacy as Hindavi Swarajya. By framing the empire as a proto-nationalist endeavour and a vanguard of indigenous statecraft, these scholars inverted the colonial "anarchy" thesis, positioning the Marathas as the foundational architects of Indian resistance.

Finally, the paper analyzes the Marxist departure, which pivoted the scholarly gaze away from charismatic leadership and religious identity toward deep-seated socio-economic configurations. Through the rigorous interrogation of the Chauth and Sardeshmukhi fiscal mechanisms, historians like Satish Chandra and Irfan Habib re-envisioned Maratha expansion as a byproduct of systemic agrarian crises and evolving feudal dynamics. By synthesizing these divergent scholarly traditions, this article posits that the Maratha "meta-narrative" is a dynamic socio-political construct, illustrating the persistent instrumentalization of the past to negotiate the identity and ideological exigencies of the present.

Colonial Ideology (often referred to as Imperialist Historiography) is a body of thought developed by European powers-primarily the British, French, and Dutch-to justify their political and economic control over foreign territories.

Rather than seeing colonialism as a quest for profit or resources, this ideology framed it as a moral obligation or a "civilizing mission."

In direct opposition to colonial ideology, Nationalist Ideology is a framework of thought that seeks to restore the dignity, history, and sovereignty of a colonized people. It wasn't just a political movement for independence; it was an intellectual battle to prove that a nation had a distinct, proud identity and was fully capable of governing itself.

While Colonial ideology focuses on the "civilizing" ruler and Nationalist ideology focuses on the "glorious" nation, Marxist Ideology focuses on the struggle between classes. In a historical and political context, Marxism views the world not through the lens of religion, race, or kings, but through the lens of economics and labour.

Keywords: Ideological Shift, Colonial paradigm, Predatory Freebooter, Hindvi Swarajya, Chauth and Sardeshmukhi

Introduction

The Maratha Empire occupies a singular and polarized

space within the Indian historical imagination. Far from being a mere record of territorial expansion and military

engagement, Maratha history has served as a primary site for the articulation of competing political visions. From the fall of the Peshwas in 1818 to the post-independence era, the narrative of the Maratha state has been systematically dismantled and rebuilt by successive generations of scholars. This article explores the metahistorical evolution of this narrative, arguing that the "Maratha" identity in historiography is less a static historical fact and more a reflective surface for the changing ideological priorities of Indian intellectual life.

The foundational layer of this discourse was laid by the colonial school, characterized by an "imperial gaze" that sought to justify British expansionism. By dismissing the Maratha polity as an accidental byproduct of chaos-labeling it a "subaltern insurgency of plunder"-colonial administrators like James Grant Duff crafted a moral justification for the Pax Britannica. However, as the pulse of the Indian freedom struggle quickened, a Nationalist counter-narrative emerged. Historians like M.G. Ranade and V.K. Rajwade performed a monumental task of "archival reclamation," transforming the Maratha state from a chaotic entity into a sophisticated precursor to the modern Indian nation-state. In their hands, the concept of Hindavi Swarajya became a potent tool for mobilizing indigenous political consciousness.

By the mid-20th century, the Marxist intervention introduced a third dimension, shifting the focus from the "great men" of history to the structural underpinnings of the state. By analyzing the fiscal intricacies of Chauth and Sardeshmukhi, Marxist scholars reinterpreted Maratha expansion through the lens of agrarian relations and feudal crises, stripping away the romanticism of previous eras to reveal a complex socio-economic machine.

By critically examining these three pivotal interpretations, this article seeks to illuminate how the Maratha past has been instrumentalized to serve the discursive needs of the present. It posits that the historiography of the Marathas is not merely a study of the past, but a diagnostic tool for understanding the evolution of Indian political thought.

Eurocentric

The authentic colonialist perspective of Maratha power was systematically constructed as a historiographical justification for British expansionism, most notably articulated through the works of James Grant Duff and his contemporaries. At the heart of this paradigm lay the "Predatory State" thesis, which characterized the Maratha Empire not as a legitimate sovereign entity, but as a "Power of Prey." By employing metaphors of natural disasters-such as Duff's description of the Maratha rise as a "sudden conflagration" (Duff 1826)^[7] - colonial historians stripped the movement of its political agency and administrative intentionality. Within this framework, the Maratha fiscal system, specifically the collection of Chauth and Sardeshmukhi, was strategically reinterpreted as "organized dacoity" or "national-scale plunder." This criminalization of indigenous revenue models served a vital teleological purpose: it erased the existence of Maratha statecraft, thereby rendering their governance invisible to the Western gaze (Orme 1782)^[13]. Furthermore, this perspective was reinforced by the "Great Anarchy" thesis, a narrative arc that portrayed 18th-century India as a chaotic vacuum resulting

from the collapse of Mughal authority. Colonial administrators like Sir Alfred Lyall and Mountstuart Elphinstone argued that the Marathas were inherently "incapable of empire-building," acting only as parasitic agents that thrived on the ruins of existing orders (Lyall 1893)^[11]. By categorizing the Maratha confederacy as a source of perpetual instability, British historiography manufactured a "moral imperative" for hegemony. This "Vacuum Theory" positioned the British East India Company not as an aggressor, but as a "benevolent restorer" of law and order (Elphinstone 1821)^[8]. Consequently, the delegitimization of Maratha sovereignty was achieved through a biopolitical reduction - transforming a sophisticated bureaucratic empire into a lawless horde of "mountain rats" and "cunning usurpers," whose eventual subjugation was framed as the inevitable and necessary triumph of Occidental order over Oriental disorder.

The Historiographical Contest: Colonial Constructs and the Maratha State

The historiography of the Maratha Confederacy serves as a critical site for examining the ideological underpinnings of British Imperial scholarship in the nineteenth century. Central to this discourse is James Grant Duff's seminal 1826^[7] work, *A History of the Mahrattas*. While Duff is often credited with the foundational codification of Maratha history through his extensive use of primary Bakhars (chronicles) and Persian manuscripts, his narrative is inextricably bound to the "Orientalist-Administrative" framework of the British Raj. Duff's portrayal of the Marathas was not merely a chronological recording of events but a deliberate sociopolitical characterization designed to legitimize British hegemony in Western India following the final collapse of the Peshwa's authority in 1818.

The "Predatory" Construct and the Forest Fire Metaphor

Duff's most enduring-and most criticized-contribution to the field was his characterization of the Maratha rise as a "natural catastrophe" rather than a political evolution. He famously likened the emergence of the Maratha power to the spontaneous ignition of dry grass in the Sahyadri mountains, suggesting an accidental, unorganized, and explosive growth. This metaphor served a dual purpose: it stripped the Maratha movement of its intellectual and social agency, and it framed their expansion as an inorganic disruption of the prevailing Mughal order. By reducing the sophisticated geopolitical strategies of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj to the impulses of a "freebooter" or "mountain rat," Duff effectively delegitimized the Maratha state as a sovereign entity.

Furthermore, colonial historiography emphasized the "predatory" nature of the Maratha fiscal system. Duff and his contemporaries, such as James Mill and John Malcolm, frequently categorized the collection of Chauth and Sardeshmukhi as a form of legalized brigandage. By focusing exclusively on the extractive elements of the Maratha military machine, these historians ignored the complex internal administrative structures - such as the Ashta Pradhan council-and the nuanced land-revenue systems that provided stability to the agrarian populace.

This "anarchy narrative" was essential for the British; if the Marathas represented chaos, then the British East India Company represented the inevitable restoration of "Rule of Law."

Nationalist Consciousness

In direct opposition to the colonial "Predatory State" framework, the Nationalist historiographical school—led by figures such as M.G. Ranade, V.K. Rajwade, and G.S. Sardesai—reconstructed Maratha history as a conscious, unified movement for Hindavi Swarajya (indigenous self-rule). This perspective argues that the rise of the Marathas was not a "sudden conflagration" of lawlessness, but the political manifestation of a deep-seated socio-cultural revolution. Central to this argument is the concept of "Maharashtra Dharma," which nationalist historians posited as a proto-nationalist ideology. They contended that the egalitarian teachings of the Bhakti saints (such as Tukaram and Ramdas) provided the moral and social cohesion necessary to transcend caste barriers, creating a "national" character that preceded Shivaji's military campaigns (Ranade 1900) [15]. By reframing the Maratha state as an ideological project rather than a bandit state, this school effectively countered the British effort to strip the movement of its political legitimacy.

'One word more of apology is needed from me. The Marathas have long been misjudged by their rivals and adversaries and painted in blackest colours both during and after the period of their downfall, as if they had no single good point to their credit. This attitude became confirmed in popular mind owing to the first flush and glow of the foreign conquest. But more than a century has elapsed since the Maratha State was extinguished, a sufficiently long period for the dust of passion to settle down and enable us to form a sober and rational judgment and to justly appraise the virtues and defects of that race. It is still a difficult task for a Maratha writer to paint his people's history on a canvas with colours that truly represent facts and avoid prejudices.' (Sardesai)

Furthermore, the nationalist "encounter" utilized rigorous archival research to dismantle the colonial "Anarchy" thesis. V.K. Rajwade, through his monumental 22-volume collection of primary sources, shifted the evidentiary base from British military journals to indigenous Bakhars and official Sanads (Rajwade 1898). These records demonstrated that the Marathas were not "freebooters" but "super-administrators" who operated a sophisticated, documented bureaucracy known as the Peshwa Daftar. Nationalist historians argued that taxes like Chauth were not "extortion" but formalized geopolitical instruments of a tributary state, often providing the payer with structured protection and administrative stability (Sardesai 1946) [16]. This scholarship positioned the Maratha Confederacy as a creative, indigenous alternative to imperial rule, asserting that the British did not "restore order" to a vacuum, but rather subverted a maturing Indian state system. Consequently, the nationalist narrative transformed the Marathas from colonial "criminals" into the "architects of Indian resistance," providing a psychological and historical blueprint for the 20th-century independence movement.

Marxist/Socio-Economic

The historical trajectory of the Maratha Empire has long been a battleground for competing ideologies, primarily dominated by the divergent lenses of British Colonialism and Indian Nationalism. However, the Marxist perspective offers a rigorous structural analysis that transcends these binaries by situating the Marathas within the broader transition of the feudal mode of production and the systemic "Agrarian Crisis" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By prioritizing socio-economic substructures over individual "great men" or religious fervor, Marxist historians like Irfan Habib and Satish Chandra redefine the Maratha state not as a religious crusade or a chaotic vacuum, but as a complex manifestation of class conflict and regional surplus realignment.

The Marxist critique begins by systematically dismantling the Colonialist paradigm, which characterizes the Maratha state as a "predatory" entity. Colonial historians, most notably James Grant Duff, framed the Marathas as "locusts" or "plunderers" who survived solely on Chauth (one-fourth) and sardeshmukhi (one-tenth) extracted from neighbouring territories. This "anarchy" narrative was ideologically engineered to justify the British East India Company's "civilizing mission" and its eventual imposition of colonial order. The Marxist response, however, argues that the Maratha expansion was a logical outcome of the structural collapse of the Mughal agrarian system. As the Mughal central authority increased its revenue demands to unsustainable levels, it triggered a "crisis of the jagirdar system." In this context, the Marathas represented a social protest of the peasantry and the local zamindars (landlords) against central extraction. Rather than mere banditry, Maratha "predation" was an attempt to redirect the flow of agrarian surplus away from the Mughal centre and toward a localized military-administrative elite.

Simultaneously, the Marxist perspective provides a necessary corrective to the Nationalist view, which often romanticizes the Maratha movement as Maharashtra Dharma—a proto-nationalist Hindu resurgence against "alien" Islamic rule. While Nationalist historians like M.G. Ranade viewed the Marathas through the lens of cultural and religious identity, Marxists argue that this religious rhetoric served as a super structural mask for underlying economic interests. The rise of Shivaji was fueled by the mobilization of the Kunbi (peasant) and Mavali populations who sought relief from the oppressive feudal ties of the Deccan Sultanates. The Marxist analysis highlights that the Maratha state remained fundamentally a tributary formation; it did not alter the fundamental mode of production but shifted the agents of exploitation. The "Hindu" identity of the state was frequently pragmatic, as evidenced by the Marathas' willingness to integrate into the existing Persianized administrative structures and their frequent alliances with Muslim powers to secure economic hegemony.

A critical component of the Marxist research framework is the analysis of the internal class contradictions within the Maratha Confederacy itself. Marxist scholars observe a distinct shift from the initial "peasant-warrior" character of Shivaji's era to the highly centralized, Brahmin-dominated bureaucracy of the Peshwa period. This transition

represented the "feudalization" of the Maratha movement. As the Peshwas institutionalized power, they recreated many of the same exploitative revenue-farming practices (Kamavisdar system) that the early movement had sought to overthrow. The state evolved into a "War-State" that required constant territorial expansion because its internal revenue base was insufficient to support a growing military aristocracy. This structural reliance on external tribute created a fragile economy that lacked the technological or commercial innovation necessary to challenge the rising British industrial capital.

From the Subaltern Lens

The Subaltern intervention in Maratha historiography represents a radical departure from the teleological "Great Man" narratives, pivoting instead toward the visceral experiences of the marginalized—the *atishudras*, the peasantry, and the Dalit military labor market. This perspective, pioneered by the 19th-century polymath Jyotirao Phule, conceptualizes the Maratha state not as a monolith of "Hindu Swarajya," but as a contested social space characterized by shifting alliances and deep-seated caste antagonisms. In his foundational *Shivaji Powada* (1869), Phule systematically deconstructed the Brahmanical appropriation of Chhatrapati Shivaji, reframing the monarch as a Kulwadi-Bhushan (Ornament of the Peasantry). From this vantage point, Shivaji's early administration was a revolutionary rupture from feudal exploitation; by curtailing the absolute power of the *Deshmukhs* and *Kulkarnis*, he initiated a proto-egalitarian agrarian reform that empowered the lower-caste cultivators.

कुळवाडी — भुषण पवाडा गातो भोसल्याचा | छत्रपती शिवाजीचा ||
 लंगोट्यास देई जानवी पोर्षीदा कूनब्यांचा | काळ तो असे यवनांचा ||
 शिवाजीचा पिता शाहाजी पुत्र मालोजीचा | असे तो डौल जाहागिरीचा ||
 पंधराशे एकूणपन्नास साल फळले....

However, the Subaltern school posits a stark dialectical shift with the ascendancy of the Peshwai. Historians like Rosalind O'Hanlon and Gail Omvedt characterize this transition as a "Brahmanical Counter-Revolution," wherein the fluid, military-entrepreneurial identity of the early Maratha movement was ossified into a rigid, caste-stratified orthodoxy. The Peshwa state is scrutinized for its enforcement of Varnashrama Dharma, which institutionalized the ritual humiliation of the Mahar community. The seminal event in this narrative arc is the Battle of Bhima Koregaon (1818). While Nationalist historiography laments this as a tragic collapse of indigenous sovereignty, the Subaltern perspective celebrates it as an act of Dalit Agency. The Mahar soldiers of the British East India Company are viewed not as colonial collaborators, but as subaltern insurgents striking a blow against a domestic regime that had mandated their ritual degradation.

Predictably, these assertions face rigorous counter-arguments from the Nationalist and Marxist traditions. Opponents argue that the Subaltern focus on caste fracture is anachronistic, imposing modern social sensibilities onto an 18th-century "Fiscal-Military" state. Nationalist scholars contend that the Peshwas' administrative decisions were

dictated by the existential exigencies of pan-Indian geopolitics—such as the Maratha-Afghan conflict—rather than a localized caste agenda. Furthermore, Marxist critics argue that the Subaltern school risks romanticizing colonial victory; they assert that the British conquest of 1818 merely replaced one form of feudal-caste oppression with a more systemic, extractive colonial capitalism. Despite these debates, the Subaltern lens remains indispensable, for it retrieves the "silenced" voices of the *watan* records and oral traditions, ensuring that Maratha history is understood not merely as a chronicle of kings, but as a complex theatre of social emancipation and resistance.

New Revisionist

The contemporary historiographical landscape, often categorized under the "New Revisionist" school, has transcended the binary of "predatory anarchy" versus "nationalist liberation." Scholars such as Stewart Gordon and André Wink have reframed the Maratha Empire as a sophisticated, modernizing Fiscal-Military State that functioned with a degree of bureaucratic precision previously ignored by colonial and nationalist historians alike. In his seminal work, *The Marathas 1600–1818* (1993), Gordon argues that the Maratha expansion was not a chaotic spillover of "mountain rats," but a systematic projection of power fueled by an "open" military social base and a rigorous paper-based administration. Central to this thesis is the reinterpretation of Chauth and Sardeshmukhi; rather than mere "protection money," these are viewed as sophisticated instruments of revenue sharing and sovereignty negotiation that allowed the Marathas to integrate themselves into the existing Mughal agrarian framework while simultaneously subverting it.

Furthering this structural analysis, André Wink in *Land and Sovereignty in India* (1986) introduces the concept of *Fitna*—a sophisticated political mechanism of "sedition" and negotiation—as the primary driver of Maratha success. Wink asserts that the Maratha rise was not a total rupture from the Mughal past but a strategic "infiltration" of the Mughal system, utilizing its own administrative and legal vocabularies to establish indigenous sovereignty. This perspective de-emphasizes religious ideology, focusing instead on the Marathas as the premier "successor state" that perfected the "military-tributary" model. By examining the Peshwa Daftar (the state archives), revisionists have highlighted a "meritocratic military market" where social mobility was exceptionally fluid, allowing individuals of humble origin to ascend to the status of *Sardars* based on their capacity to raise troops and manage fiscal contracts.

Stewart Gordon, in his seminal work *The Marathas 1600–1818* (1993), deconstructs the colonial "horde" myth by illustrating the empire's reliance on a highly rationalized "Paper Empire." He posits that the meticulous administrative records of the *Peshwa Daftar*—documenting everything from land tenures (*Sanads*) to intricate military disbursements—reveal a state governed by bureaucratic precision rather than arbitrary whim. Complementing this, André Wink's *Land and Sovereignty in India* (1986) introduces the conceptual framework of *Fitna*, reframing Maratha expansion not as mindless plunder, but as a strategic, legalistic "infiltration" of the Mughal system. Wink argues that the Marathas functioned as the premier

"successor state," utilizing the existing Mughal administrative vocabulary to negotiate sovereignty and redirect agrarian surplus. By synthesizing Gordon's analysis of the meritocratic military labor market with Wink's focus on negotiated sovereignty, the revisionist school demonstrates that the Maratha Confederacy was a technologically adaptive and fiscally robust polity. Consequently, the eventual British conquest is reinterpreted not as a "civilizing mission" into a vacuum of chaos, but as a structural collision between two competing modernizing powers, wherein the British industrial-capitalist apparatus ultimately superseded the Maratha military-tributary model.

In the revisionist re-evaluation of Maratha power, the maritime theater undergoes a radical transformation from a peripheral site of "piracy" to a critical frontier of indigenous maritime sovereignty. Colonial historiography, spearheaded by British naval chroniclers and later codified by James Grant Duff, strategically categorized the Maratha navy-particularly under the command of the Angre family-as a "predatory" or "piratical" enterprise. This label served a specific teleological purpose: it criminalized the Maratha insistence on the *Kartaz* (maritime permit) system, thereby delegitimizing indigenous attempts to regulate trade and justifying the British East India Company's monopolistic naval interventions. However, New Revisionist scholars and maritime historians like Anirudh Deshpande and B.K. Apte argue that the Angrian navy was, in fact, a sophisticated fiscal-military apparatus designed to project "tributary sovereignty" over the Arabian Sea. This perspective highlights that the Angres did not operate as lawless corsairs but as state-authorized admirals (Sarkhels) who institutionalized a rigorous bureaucratic and naval infrastructure. Scholars point to the strategic construction of "sea forts" like Vijaydurg and Khanderi as evidence of a modernizing defensive network that integrated land-based fiscal resources with maritime power.

Furthermore, Stewart Gordon's "Paper Empire" thesis extends to the coast, as the Angrian administration maintained detailed logs of ship construction, timber procurement, and customs collection, mirroring the bureaucratic precision of the Peshwa's land-based *Daftar*. The fleet was technologically adaptive, synthesizing indigenous "Gallivat" and "Grab" designs-characterized by shallow drafts and forward-mounted prow artillery-with European naval patterns to navigate the treacherous inlets of the Konkan, a tactical advantage that consistently frustrated deeper-drafted European Men-of-War. Ultimately, the conflict is reframed as a clash between two competing models of maritime mercantilism. By enforcing the "Chauth of the sea," the Maratha navy sought to integrate the maritime frontier into the broader fiscal-military framework of the *Svarajya*. Revisionists argue that the destruction of the Angrian navy in 1756 was not a victory over piracy, but the elimination of a potent indigenous rival and a vanguard of proto-nationalist maritime resistance that had successfully challenged European "blue-water" hegemony for over half a century.

The maritime dimension of the Maratha power has similarly undergone a revisionist overhaul. Moving away from the colonial label of "piracy," modern scholars like Anirudh Deshpande argue that the Maratha Navy, particularly under the Angres, represented a legitimate indigenous effort to

enforce "maritime sovereignty" against European monopolistic trade practices. This "New Revisionism" thus situates the Maratha Empire within the "Global Eighteenth Century," viewing it as a technologically adaptive and fiscally robust polity that was fundamentally altering the socio-economic fabric of South Asia prior to the British consolidation. By focusing on the "micro-histories" of bankers (*Sahukars*), village clerks, and mercenary captains, this school of thought provides a multidimensional view of a state that was as much an empire of the "pen" as it was an empire of the "sword."

Conclusion

The historiographical odyssey of the Maratha Empire-transitioning from the dismissive "predatory" tropes of the British Raj to the sophisticated "fiscal-military" models of contemporary revisionism-underscores the inherent plasticity of historical inquiry. As this article has interrogated, the Maratha state is not merely an ossified relic of the eighteenth century but a "malleable archive" perpetually recalibrated to validate the ideological zeitgeist of successive epochs.

The Colonial paradigm, epitomized by James Grant Duff, succeeded in its teleological objective of delegitimizing indigenous sovereignty by reducing complex statecraft to "biopolitical" anarchy. This reductionism, however, inadvertently catalyzed the Nationalist counter-offensive. By reclaiming the archive, scholars like Ranade and Rajwade effectively transmuted "freebooters" into the "founding architects" of Indian resistance, utilizing *Hindavi Svarajya* as a psychological blueprint for modern statehood. Yet, the mid-twentieth-century Marxist and Subaltern interventions serve as critical reminders that the Maratha experience cannot be reduced to a monolithic hagiography. The Marxist focus on agrarian systemic crises and the Subaltern interrogation of the "Brahmanical Counter-Revolution" have successfully stripped away the romanticism of the "Great Man" theory. These lenses have revealed a state characterized by profound internal dialectics-where the egalitarian promise of the early *Kulwadi-Bhushan* (Shivaji) eventually collided with the rigid, caste-stratified orthodoxy of the late *Peshwai*.

Finally, the emergence of the New Revisionist school integrates these disparate threads into a global context, reframing the Maratha polity as a technologically adaptive, bureaucratically rigorous, and fiscally innovative successor state. By moving beyond the binary of "plunderer" versus "liberator," revisionism positions the Marathas as a premier example of indigenous modernization interrupted by the consolidating forces of global capital.

Ultimately, the Maratha narrative serves as a diagnostic tool for understanding the evolution of Indian political thought. It illustrates that the act of writing history is never a neutral retrieval of facts but a strategic negotiation of identity. As the legacy of Koregaon or the debates over Maratha social status continue to permeate the contemporary sociopolitical fabric, it becomes evident that the Maratha past remains a living, contested theater of social emancipation and ideological assertion.

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