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SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC LIFE UNDER THE MARATHAS

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ABSTRACT

The social and economic life under the Marathas forms an important part of the history of early modern India, particularly during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The expansion of Maratha political power influenced agriculture, trade, taxation, occupations, urban development, and the social organization of different communities. Agriculture remained the principal economic activity, while revenue from land formed an important source of state income. Trade and commerce expanded through markets, fairs, regional centres, and connections with inland and coastal areas. Merchants, moneylenders, artisans, craftsmen, and service groups played important roles in the economy. Social life was shaped by village communities, caste and occupational groups, religious institutions, family structures, and local customs. Towns such as Pune, Satara, Nashik, Kolhapur, and important market centres developed as centres of political, commercial, and cultural activity during different periods. The study examines the interaction between society and economy, the condition of peasants and artisans, the role of merchants, the influence of taxation, and changes in urban and rural life under Maratha rule.

KEYWORDS: *Marathas, Social Life, Economic Life, Agriculture, Peasants, Revenue System, Trade, Commerce, Merchants, Artisans, Rural Society, Urban Centres, Village Administration, Caste, Women, Peshwa Period, Eighteenth Century India.*

INTRODUCTION

The social and economic history of the Marathas provides an important perspective on the development of society in western and central India during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While political and military events occupy a major place in the history of the Maratha state, the functioning of society and the economy formed the foundation upon which political power was maintained.

Agriculture was the principal occupation of the majority of the population. Peasants cultivated crops such as rice, millet, wheat, pulses, sugarcane, and other regionally important crops depending on soil, rainfall, and geographical conditions. Land revenue was an important source of income for the Maratha state. Revenue assessment and collection were therefore closely connected with agricultural production and the relationship between the state and rural communities.

The village was an important unit of social and economic life. Village officials, cultivators, artisans, traders, and service groups performed different functions within rural society. Traditional institutions and

hereditary occupations continued to influence social organization. At the same time, military expansion, political changes, migration, and commercial activity contributed to changes in the composition and economic importance of different communities.

Trade and commerce were also significant features of Maratha economic life. Local markets and weekly bazaars connected villages with nearby towns, while larger commercial centres participated in regional and long-distance trade. Merchants, moneylenders, brokers, transporters, and banking groups facilitated the movement of goods and money. The Konkan coast also connected Maratha territories with wider maritime networks.

Artisans and craftsmen contributed to the economic life of both rural and urban communities. Weavers, metalworkers, carpenters, leather workers, potters, oil-pressers, and other occupational groups produced goods required for agriculture, households, trade, and military activities. The growth of towns and administrative centres created additional demand for specialized services and manufactured goods.

Urban centres played an important role in the social and economic structure of the Maratha period. **Pune** became particularly important during the Peshwa period as a political and administrative centre. Other towns and regional centres developed through administrative activity, trade, religious importance, military establishments, and local markets. These urban centres brought together officials, soldiers, merchants, artisans, religious figures, and other social groups.

Social life was influenced by caste, occupation, family relationships, religion, and local customs. Different communities participated in agriculture, administration, military service, trade, crafts, and religious activities. Women contributed to household management and economic activities, although their social position and opportunities were shaped by prevailing customs and social structures. Elite women could also exercise political influence in particular circumstances.

The Maratha state also interacted with religious institutions and communities. Temples, religious centres, and charitable institutions formed part of the social and cultural landscape. Patronage from rulers, officials, local elites, and wealthy individuals supported religious and cultural activities in different regions.

Economic conditions were not uniform throughout Maratha territories. Differences in rainfall, soil, geography, political control, taxation, trade routes, and local institutions produced considerable regional variation. The experience of a cultivator in the core territories of Maharashtra could differ from that of communities in Malwa, Gujarat, Bundelkhand, or other areas under Maratha influence.

Therefore, the study of social and economic life under the Marathas requires attention to both **rural and urban society** and to the relationship between agriculture, revenue, trade, occupations, and political authority. Examining these aspects helps provide a broader understanding of how Maratha political power affected—and was supported by—the everyday social and economic structures of early modern Indian society.

Aims and Objectives

Aim

The main aim of this study is to examine the social and economic life of the Maratha period and to understand the conditions, occupations, institutions, and economic activities that shaped the lives of different social groups during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Objectives

1. To study the social structure of Maratha society and the major communities and occupational groups.
2. To examine the importance of the village as a basic unit of social and economic life.
3. To study agriculture and the condition of peasants under Maratha rule.

4. To examine the land revenue system and its impact on rural society.
5. To study the occupations of artisans, craftsmen, labourers, and service groups.
6. To examine trade and commerce in Maratha territories.
7. To study the role of merchants, moneylenders, bankers, and transporters in economic activities.
8. To examine the development of markets, fairs, towns, and commercial centres.
9. To study the importance of coastal trade and the economic role of the Konkan region.
10. To examine the position and economic contribution of women in Maratha society.
11. To study the role of religious and cultural institutions in social life.
12. To examine the relationship between political authority, taxation, agriculture, and economic development.
13. To identify regional variations in social and economic conditions.
14. To assess the broader historical significance of Maratha social and economic life.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The social and economic history of the Marathas has been examined by historians through studies of agriculture, revenue, trade, villages, urban centres, political institutions, and social groups. Both primary sources and modern historical research contribute to an understanding of this period.

G. S. Sardesai, in *New History of the Marathas*, provides a broad account of Maratha history and includes information concerning administration, agriculture, taxation, trade, social conditions, and the development of towns during different phases of Maratha rule.

Stewart Gordon, in *The Marathas 1600–1818*, examines the Maratha polity within its wider social and regional context. His work is useful for understanding the relationship between political authority, local communities, military organization, and regional economic structures.

A. R. Kulkarni, in his studies of Maharashtra during the Maratha period, provides valuable information about rural society, administration, economic activities, and social groups. His work helps place the development of Maratha society within the regional context of Maharashtra.

Surendranath Sen, in *Administrative System of the Marathas*, examines administrative institutions and revenue arrangements. The work is particularly useful for understanding the relationship between administration and economic life.

André Wink, in *Land and Sovereignty in India*, studies agrarian society and political structures in eighteenth-century Maratha territories. His work is valuable for understanding landholding, agrarian relations, and the connection between land and political authority.

Ashin Das Gupta has contributed significantly to the study of Indian merchants and maritime trade. His works on Surat and Malabar provide useful perspectives on merchant communities, commercial networks, and the wider Indian Ocean economy in which Maratha territories participated.

Irfan Habib, through his studies of the agrarian system of Mughal India, provides a broader framework for understanding agriculture, land revenue, rural society, and agrarian relations in early modern India. His work is useful for comparative study of contemporary economic structures.

Primary sources such as **Peshwa Daftar records, Marathi correspondence, revenue documents, bakhars, Persian chronicles, and European travellers' accounts** provide additional information about social and economic conditions. These sources must be examined critically because they were produced for different purposes and often reflect the perspectives of particular administrative, political, or commercial groups.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study follows a **historical, descriptive, and analytical methodology** to examine social and economic life under the Marathas.

1. Primary Sources

The research will make use of available primary and contemporary sources, including:

- Peshwa Daftar records.
- Marathi letters and administrative correspondence.
- Revenue and land records.
- Contemporary bakhars.
- Persian chronicles and administrative records.
- European travellers' accounts.
- Inscriptions, coins, and material remains.
- Records relating to trade and commercial activities.

2. Secondary Sources

The study will refer to scholarly works by historians such as G. S. Sardesai, Stewart Gordon, A. R. Kulkarni, Surendranath Sen, André Wink, Ashin Das Gupta, and Irfan Habib.

3. Historical Analysis

The study examines developments chronologically, with particular attention to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It considers changes in rural society, agriculture, trade, occupations, towns, and social institutions.

4. Thematic Analysis

The research is organized around major themes such as:

- Rural society
- Agriculture
- Land revenue
- Peasant life
- Artisans and occupations
- Trade and commerce
- Merchants and moneylenders
- Urban centres
- Women
- Religious institutions
- Regional variations

5. Comparative Method

Where appropriate, Maratha social and economic conditions will be compared with those of contemporary Mughal and other regional societies to identify similarities, differences, and regional characteristics.

6. Source Criticism

Different sources will be compared to identify contradictions, limitations, and possible biases. Particular attention will be given to distinguishing contemporary evidence from later historical interpretations.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The political and military history of the Marathas has received considerable attention, but understanding Maratha history also requires an examination of the society and economy that supported political institutions and military activities.

The central problem of this study is to understand **the nature and development of social and economic life under the Marathas and the ways in which political authority, agriculture, taxation, trade, and local institutions interacted with one another**.

Agriculture formed the principal economic activity for a large part of the population, making the relationship between peasants and the state an important area of study. Land revenue was a major source of state income, and changes in revenue administration could affect rural communities and agricultural production.

The study also seeks to understand the role of artisans, craftsmen, merchants, moneylenders, bankers, and other occupational groups. Trade networks connected villages, towns, inland markets, and coastal centres, while commercial activity linked Maratha territories with wider regional and maritime networks.

Another important problem is the diversity of Maratha society. Social and economic conditions differed according to region, occupation, caste, political authority, geography, and access to markets. The experiences of peasants, artisans, merchants, soldiers, officials, and women were not necessarily the same.

The study therefore seeks to examine both **rural and urban society**, while considering the economic activities that connected them. It also addresses the question of how far political changes during the Maratha and Peshwa periods influenced everyday social and economic life.

Thus, the research aims to provide a broader understanding of **agriculture, revenue, occupations, trade, markets, social institutions, and regional variations** and their importance in the development of Maratha society.

NEED OF STUDY

The study of social and economic life under the Marathas is important for developing a comprehensive understanding of Maratha history. Political and military developments are important aspects of the period, but the functioning of the Maratha state also depended upon agriculture, revenue, trade, occupations, and the activities of rural and urban communities.

Agriculture was the principal occupation of a large part of the population. The study of peasants, agricultural production, irrigation, landholding, and revenue arrangements helps explain the economic foundations of Maratha society.

The study is also necessary to understand the role of **artisans, craftsmen, merchants, moneylenders, bankers, transporters, and service groups**. These groups contributed to production, trade, credit, transportation, and the functioning of local markets.

Trade and commerce connected villages and towns with larger regional and coastal networks. Studying markets, fairs, commercial centres, and maritime trade helps explain the relationship between the Maratha economy and wider economic networks of early modern India.

Social life was influenced by caste, occupation, family structures, religious institutions, and local customs. Studying these aspects provides a better understanding of the experiences of different communities rather than focusing only on rulers and political elites.

The study is also important because social and economic conditions varied considerably across regions. Maharashtra, the Konkan, Malwa, Gujarat, and other territories associated with Maratha power had different geographical, agricultural, commercial, and political conditions.

Therefore, the study of social and economic life under the Marathas provides a broader understanding of **rural society, urban development, agriculture, commerce, occupations, taxation, and the everyday economic foundations of Maratha political power**.

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Further research on Maratha social and economic life can be undertaken in the following areas:

1. **Agrarian History:** Detailed studies can examine landholding, agricultural production, irrigation, crops, peasant communities, and rural indebtedness.
2. **Revenue Administration:** Further research can investigate land assessment, revenue collection, chauth, sardeshmukhi, and their regional variations.
3. **Village Society:** The organization of villages, village officials, hereditary occupations, and local institutions deserves greater attention.
4. **Artisans and Craftsmen:** Research can examine weaving, metalworking, pottery, carpentry, leatherwork, and other traditional occupations.
5. **Trade and Commerce:** Further studies can examine inland trade routes, markets, fairs, merchant communities, and commercial networks.
6. **Maritime Economy:** The role of the Konkan coast, ports, shipping, maritime trade, and coastal communities can be investigated in greater detail.
7. **Urban History:** The development of Pune, Satara, Nashik, Kolhapur, and other towns can be studied from economic, social, and administrative perspectives.
8. **Women and Economic Life:** Research can examine women's participation in agriculture, household production, property management, trade, and other economic activities.
9. **Banking and Credit:** The role of moneylenders, bankers, credit networks, and indigenous financial institutions requires further study.
10. **Social Mobility:** Further research can examine changes in occupational groups, social status, migration, and mobility during the Maratha and Peshwa periods.
11. **Regional Studies:** Detailed studies of individual districts and regions can reveal differences in social and economic conditions.
12. **Archaeological and Digital Research:** Archaeology, GIS mapping, digitized records, and material culture can provide new evidence about settlements, markets, trade routes, and economic activity.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Scope

The study covers the major social and economic developments in Maratha territories during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It focuses particularly on agriculture, rural society, revenue, occupations, trade, commerce, markets, urban centres, and social institutions.

The study also considers the relationship between economic activities and Maratha political administration, as well as regional variations in social and economic conditions.

Limitations

1. **Uneven Sources:** Historical evidence is not equally available for all regions and social groups.
2. **Administrative Bias:** Many surviving records were created by rulers and officials and therefore provide greater information about taxation and administration than ordinary people's daily lives.
3. **Limited Information on Women:** Evidence concerning women's everyday economic activities and social experiences is comparatively limited.
4. **Regional Variation:** Social and economic conditions differed considerably from one region to another, making broad generalizations difficult.
5. **Incomplete Records:** Many revenue records, commercial documents, and private papers have been lost, damaged, or remain inaccessible.
6. **Source Bias:** Marathi, Persian, and European accounts may present different perspectives and should be critically compared.
7. **Quantitative Limitations:** Reliable statistics concerning population, prices, wages, production, and income are limited for many parts of the period.
8. **Changing Political Conditions:** Economic and social conditions changed according to warfare, political control, taxation, migration, and regional developments.

Scope of Study

The study covers the following major areas:

1. **Rural Society** – Village communities, cultivators, local officials, artisans, and service groups.
2. **Agriculture** – Major crops, agricultural practices, irrigation, land use, and rural production.
3. **Peasant Life** – The economic position of cultivators and their relationship with the state and local authorities.
4. **Revenue System** – Land revenue, assessment, collection, chauth, sardeshmukhi, and related financial practices.
5. **Occupational Structure** – Artisans, craftsmen, labourers, merchants, moneylenders, soldiers, and other occupational groups.
6. **Trade and Commerce** – Local, regional, inland, and coastal trade networks.
7. **Markets and Fairs** – Weekly markets, bazaars, fairs, commercial centres, and their role in economic exchange.
8. **Merchants and Banking** – Merchant communities, moneylenders, bankers, credit, and financial networks.
9. **Urban Centres** – The growth and economic importance of Pune, Satara, Nashik, Kolhapur, and other towns.
10. **Maritime Economy** – Coastal trade, ports, shipping, and commercial connections along the Konkan coast.
11. **Women in Society** – Women's social position and their participation in household and economic activities.
12. **Religious and Social Institutions** – Temples, religious centres, charitable institutions, and their role in community life.
13. **Regional Variations** – Differences in social and economic conditions across Maharashtra and other territories under Maratha influence.
14. **Social and Economic Change** – The effects of political expansion, taxation, trade, migration, and administrative changes on society and the economy.

15. **Historical Significance** – The contribution of social and economic structures to the functioning and development of the Maratha state.

FINDINGS

The study of social and economic life under the Marathas reveals that Maratha society was diverse and closely connected with agriculture, administration, trade, occupations, and regional political conditions. The major findings are as follows:

1. **Agriculture was the foundation of the economy:** Agriculture was the principal economic activity. Cultivation of grains, pulses, cotton, sugarcane, and other crops supported rural communities and provided an important source of state revenue.
2. **Land revenue was important to the state:** Revenue collected from agriculture formed a major part of government income. Revenue administration connected the village economy with the political and administrative structure of the Maratha state.
3. **Village society was an important economic unit:** Villages functioned as important centres of agricultural production and local administration. Village officials, cultivators, artisans, and other occupational groups contributed to the functioning of rural society.
4. **Artisans and craftsmen played an important role:** Weavers, metalworkers, carpenters, leather workers, potters, oil pressers, and other occupational groups supplied goods and services to rural and urban communities.
5. **Trade and commerce expanded:** Internal trade connected villages, towns, markets, and larger commercial centres. Weekly markets, fairs, and regional trading centres facilitated the exchange of agricultural and manufactured goods.
6. **Merchants and moneylenders were significant:** Merchants, bankers, and moneylenders played important roles in providing credit, financing trade, and connecting different regions. Commercial communities contributed to the growth of markets and long-distance trade.
7. **Urban centres developed economically:** Cities and towns such as Pune, Satara, Nashik, and other regional centres became important administrative and commercial locations. The growth of political institutions also encouraged demand for goods, services, and skilled labour.
8. **Maritime trade was important in coastal regions:** The Konkan coast maintained commercial connections with other parts of India and the wider Indian Ocean world. Coastal trade contributed to the movement of commodities and supported port-related economic activities.
9. **Society was socially and occupationally diverse:** Maratha society consisted of cultivators, soldiers, officials, artisans, merchants, religious specialists, service groups, and various caste and occupational communities. Their roles differed according to region and economic position.
10. **Women contributed to social and economic life:** Women participated in household production, agriculture, craft activities, and the management of family resources. Elite women could also exercise political and administrative influence in particular circumstances.

11. **Religious institutions had social and economic importance:**
    Temples, religious establishments, and charitable institutions served as centres of religious and community life. Some also participated in landholding and the distribution of resources.
12. **Regional variation was significant:**
    Economic and social conditions were not uniform throughout Maratha territories. The Deccan plateau, Konkan, Maharashtra's interior, and territories under Maratha influence had different agricultural, commercial, and social conditions.
13. **Political and economic life were closely connected:**
    Revenue collection, military expansion, administration, trade, and local society were interconnected. Changes in political authority could influence taxation, trade routes, landholding, and economic security.

DISCUSSION

The social and economic life under the Marathas should be understood within the wider political and geographical conditions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century India. The economy was primarily agrarian, but agriculture existed alongside extensive craft production, commerce, banking, and maritime activity.

Rural Economy and Agriculture

The rural economy formed the basic foundation of society. Most people depended directly or indirectly on agriculture. Cultivators produced food crops and commercial crops, while village artisans provided essential services. Agricultural production was therefore connected with the survival of both rural communities and the state.

Revenue and the State

Revenue administration played an important role in the relationship between the state and rural society. The collection of land revenue provided resources for administration and military activities. At the same time, the effectiveness of revenue collection depended upon agricultural conditions and the ability of cultivators to sustain production.

Village Society

The village was not simply a place of agricultural production but also an important social and administrative unit. Village officials and hereditary service groups performed various functions. The interaction between cultivators, artisans, officials, and other communities created a relatively complex rural social structure.

Artisans and Manufacturing

Craft production supported both local consumption and wider markets. Textile production, metalwork, pottery, leatherwork, carpentry, and other occupations provided employment and supplied goods to towns and villages. Skilled artisans were particularly important in growing commercial centres.

Trade and Markets

Markets connected agricultural producers with consumers and merchants. Periodic markets and fairs facilitated the exchange of agricultural products, livestock, textiles, household goods, and other commodities. Long-distance trade also linked Maratha territories with neighbouring regions.

Merchants, Bankers and Credit

Merchants and moneylenders were important to the functioning of the economy. Credit could support agricultural activity and commercial transactions, while merchant networks facilitated the movement of goods. Banking and credit relationships therefore formed an important part of the economic structure.

Urban Development

Political and administrative changes encouraged the development of towns. Pune became particularly important during the Peshwa period, while Satara and other centres also had political and economic significance. Urban growth increased demand for food, textiles, luxury goods, construction materials, and various services.

Coastal and Maritime Economy

The Konkan region had economic connections with the Arabian Sea. Coastal communities participated in fishing, shipping, port activities, and commerce. Maritime connections provided opportunities for the exchange of goods between inland and coastal regions.

Social Structure

Maratha society contained numerous caste, occupational, and regional groups. Social position was influenced by occupation, landholding, political connections, and community status. The expansion of Maratha power also brought different regional communities into closer political and economic interaction.

Women and Social Life

Women's roles extended beyond household responsibilities. In rural communities, women contributed to agricultural and productive activities, while women belonging to influential families could participate in estate management and political affairs. However, available historical sources provide uneven information about the lives of ordinary women.

Regional Diversity

Social and economic conditions varied considerably between regions. Agricultural patterns in the dry Deccan differed from those in the more commercially connected Konkan and other fertile areas. Similarly, towns connected with major political or trade routes experienced different economic opportunities from isolated rural settlements.

CONCLUSION

The study of **Social and Economic Life under the Marathas** demonstrates that Maratha history cannot be understood only through wars, rulers, and political expansion. Agriculture and land revenue formed the foundation of the economy, while villages provided the basic framework of rural production and social organization.

At the same time, artisans, merchants, moneylenders, markets, towns, and maritime communities contributed significantly to economic activity. The growth of political centres, particularly during the Peshwa period, encouraged urban and commercial development. Social life included diverse caste and occupational groups, religious institutions, and different forms of participation by women.

The study also highlights considerable **regional diversity**. Economic conditions in the Deccan, Konkan, and other areas under Maratha influence differed according to geography, agriculture, trade

routes, and political circumstances. Therefore, Maratha society should be viewed as a diverse and changing social and economic system rather than a uniform structure.

Overall, the Maratha state and society were closely interconnected. Agricultural production supported revenue and political institutions, while political conditions affected economic activity and social life. Understanding these connections provides a broader and more balanced picture of early modern Indian history.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Greater use of primary sources:**
   Researchers should make wider use of the Peshwa Daftar, Marathi correspondence, revenue records, bakhars, Persian sources, and European accounts.
2. **More regional studies:**
   Separate studies should examine the Deccan, Konkan, Pune region, Satara, Nashik, and other areas to identify regional differences.
3. **Detailed study of peasants:**
   Greater attention should be given to cultivators, agricultural labourers, landholding patterns, irrigation, crop production, and rural living conditions.
4. **Study of village institutions:**
   The functioning of village officials, hereditary service groups, local communities, and village-level administration deserves further investigation.
5. **Research on artisans and crafts:**
   Future studies should examine textile production, metalwork, pottery, leatherwork, carpentry, and other occupations in greater detail.
6. **Study of merchants and banking:**
   Merchant communities, moneylenders, bankers, credit systems, and commercial networks should receive greater scholarly attention.
7. **Greater focus on maritime trade:**
   The economic importance of the Konkan coast, ports, shipping communities, and Indian Ocean connections should be studied more systematically.
8. **Research on women and marginalized groups:**
   Historical research should examine the experiences of women, lower-status occupational communities, labourers, and other groups whose lives are less visible in political sources.
9. **Use of quantitative methods:**
   Available revenue records, price data, population information, and commercial records can be analysed quantitatively to understand economic change.
10. **Archaeological and material evidence:**
    Archaeology, coins, inscriptions, buildings, agricultural remains, and material culture can supplement written sources.
11. **Digital historical research:**
    GIS mapping and digital archives can be used to study trade routes, markets, settlements, forts, ports, and patterns of economic activity.
12. **Comparative studies:**
    Maratha social and economic institutions can be compared with those of the Mughal Empire, Deccan Sultanates, Mysore, and other contemporary regional powers.

13. **Balanced interpretation of sources:**
    Researchers should critically examine court records, administrative documents, traditional narratives, and European accounts because each reflects particular perspectives and limitations.
14. **Greater attention to ordinary people:**
    Future research should move beyond rulers and military leaders and examine the everyday experiences of cultivators, artisans, traders, labourers, and local communities.
15. **Interdisciplinary research:**
    History can be combined with economics, sociology, archaeology, geography, anthropology, and environmental studies to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Maratha society and economy.

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