



The Politics of Symbolism and Contemporary Critique: A Comparative Study of Chhatrapati Shivaji and Ahilyabai Holkar

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Abstract- This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of the concepts of 'Swarajya and welfare administration associated with Chhatrapati Shivaji and Ahilyabai Holkar. Shivaji is regarded as the founder of Swarajya and a pioneer of people-centric governance. As a male figure, the socio-political space and societal acceptance he received were shaped by intersecting factors of caste, religion, feudalism, watandari (hereditary rights), power struggles, protective mechanisms, and violence. In contrast, Ahilyabai a woman from the nomadic Dhangar community, positioned as "mother" and benevolent ruler-administrator is examined within 18th–19th century contexts. Her popular image as "Punyashloka" (virtuous) or "Lokmata" (mother of the people) extends beyond mere public perception to define societal psychological boundaries. Feudal Indian societal consciousness does not fully accept her as a warrior, capable administrator, diplomat, or welfare-oriented ruler.

Aspects such as the reasons for Shivaji's two coronations, the contemporaneous socio-political realities of Jat-feudal-religious norms embedded therein, and the welfare concept of "Kulwadi Bhushan" remain underexplored. Likewise, Ahilyabai's contributions her performance as a welfare administrator, the challenges faced by a nomadic woman within feudal and priest-centric governance, and the resulting constraints on her administrative space have been overlooked. No comprehensive comparative study has yet addressed these figures across caste-feudal transitions from the medieval to late medieval periods, gender dynamics, geography, or the social factors influencing welfare policies.

This article comparatively examines the *swarajya* concepts, public images, and contemporary political symbolism of Chhatrapati Shivaji and the exemplary administrator Ahilyabai Holkar, while articulating the contemporary relevance of such research. These two figures warrant symbolic study because they occupy foundational, primary, and distinctly gendered positions in historical and ongoing symbolic discourses.

Key Words: Swarajya, Welfare State, Relevance of feudalism, Reservation Policy

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary policy dilemmas within the state apparatus have mobilized fundamental questions concerning citizenship, public opinion, constitutional rights of the people, reservations, the duties and limitations of the welfare state, and the politics of symbols associated with these issues. This phenomenon is evident not only in India but globally, where state-sponsored polarization based on ethnic-cultural and religious identities is intensifying. Scholars and researchers in the social sciences worldwide are revisiting the concepts of *swarajya* (self-rule) and welfare-oriented administration with renewed interest. As the world's largest democracy continues to evolve, sociologists and students increasingly turn with optimism toward Maharashtra and its socio-political ideal symbols.

In the Maharashtrian context, the notions of *swarajya* and welfare administration represent foundational origins and historical benchmarks. However, the polarization of public opinion, narrow communal interpretations of *swarajya*, and the transformation of welfare administration into disruptive models of development have rendered the study of these ideal symbols, their functions, and their contemporary symbolic significance even more imperative. To fulfill the core objectives of the social sciences—which involve proposing solutions to social problems that can guide state policy—it is essential to examine *swarajya* and welfare administration. These concepts provide a precise framework for delineating the fundamental duties of the state apparatus. A comparative analysis of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's *swarajya* in Maharashtra and western India, alongside the welfare administration promoted by Ahilyabai Holkar, thus becomes necessary.

When the politics of symbols and their interpretive meanings are deployed for violent, patriarchal, communal, and



caste-based animosity, presenting these ideal symbols in a contemporary light assumes critical importance. For instance, a ghat constructed by Ahilyabai in Varanasi was reportedly demolished by local administration under the pretext of expansion. Similarly, a statue of Chhatrapati Shivaji in Maharashtra collapsed due to substandard construction. Issues such as Maratha reservations and the authenticity of documents related to certain policies continue to fuel public discourse and are deliberately exacerbated. Consequently, there is an urgent need for fresh interpretive presentations of symbolic actions and history.

Numerous prior studies have explored Chhatrapati Shivaji's *swarajya* and Ahilyabai Holkar's welfare administration. However, a dedicated comparative study remains absent. Such a comparison is required not merely in terms of spatio-temporal relativity but also through the lenses of gender, feudal/semi-feudal socio-political conditions, evolving caste-feudal gender spaces, the state's role in projecting contemporary ideals, and the projective responsibilities of social researchers. Recent scholarship on Shivaji's *swarajya* and welfare aspects includes works by Uday Kulkarni (*The Maratha Century: Vignettes & Anecdotes of the Maratha Empire*), Anil Athale (*The Legacy of Shivaji*), and Anand Adish (*Swarajya Sansthapak Shivaji*, Vol. 2), which emphasize the inclusive and Hindavi dimensions of *swarajya*. Foundational texts such as Sir Jadunath Sarkar's *Shivaji and His Times*, A.R. Kulkarni's *Shivakalin Rajyavyavastha*, and Sharad Patil's *Shivajichya Hindavi Swarajyache Khare Shatru Kon? Mohammadi ki Brahman?* have largely overlooked the gendered dimensions of *swarajya*.

Studies on Ahilyabai Holkar's administration and welfare policies draw upon works by Arvind Javalekar (*Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar: Queen of Maratha Malwa Kingdom*), Vinay Khaparde kar (*Ahilyabai Holkar*), Vijaya Jahagirdar (*Karmayogini Ahilyabai Holkar*), Dipali Patwardhan (*Ahilyabai Holkar: The Guardian of Indic Civilization*), and Rajendra Pandey (*Veerangana: Ahilyabai Holkar*). A significant contribution appears in Eleanor Zelliot's *Ahilyabai Holkar: Magnificent Ruler, Saintly Administrator*, alongside Vasudev Thakur's *Life and Life's Work of Shree Devi Ahilya Bai Holkar*. While these analyses address Ahilyabai's political and administrative career, they do not engage in comparative examination with other symbols, political figures, influencing factors, or state structures. Moreover, they lack a rigorous scholarly integration of gender perspectives.

This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of the concepts of *swarajya* and welfare administration associated with Chhatrapati Shivaji and Ahilyabai Holkar. Shivaji is regarded as the founder of *swarajya* and a pioneer of people-centric governance. As a male figure, the socio-political space and societal acceptance he received were shaped by intersecting factors of caste, religion, feudalism, watandari (hereditary rights), power struggles, protective mechanisms, and violence. In contrast, Ahilyabai—a woman from the nomadic Dhangar community, positioned as "mother" and benevolent ruler-administrator—is examined within 18th–19th century contexts. Her popular image as "Punyashloka" (virtuous) or "Lokmata" (mother of the people) extends beyond mere public perception to define societal psychological boundaries. Feudal Indian societal consciousness does not fully accept her as a warrior, capable administrator, diplomat, or welfare-oriented ruler. Similarly, Chhatrapati Shivaji and Sambhaji are increasingly invoked as "Kshatriya Kulavatansa" (crest of the Kshatriya lineage) or "Dharmaveer" (champion of faith), while earlier epithets such as "Janata Raja" (enlightened king), "Kulwadi Bhushan" (ornament of the peasantry), "Prajahit Daksha" (attentive to public welfare), "Stree Dakshinya Darshak" (respectful toward women), and "Vidvan Raja" (scholarly king) have receded in public imagination.

Aspects such as the reasons for Shivaji's two coronations, the contemporaneous socio-political realities of Jat-feudal-religious norms embedded therein, and the welfare concept of "Kulwadi Bhushan" remain underexplored. Likewise, Ahilyabai's contributions—her performance as a welfare administrator, the challenges faced by a nomadic woman within feudal and priest-centric governance, and the resulting constraints on her administrative space—have been overlooked. No comprehensive comparative study has yet addressed these figures across caste-feudal transitions from the medieval to late medieval periods, gender dynamics, geography, or the social factors influencing welfare policies. This article comparatively examines the *swarajya* concepts, public images, and contemporary political symbolism of Chhatrapati Shivaji and the exemplary administrator Ahilyabai Holkar, while articulating the contemporary relevance of such research. These two figures warrant symbolic study because they occupy foundational, primary, and distinctly gendered positions in historical and ongoing symbolic discourses. Administratively, Shivaji holds an unparalleled chronological primacy as an inspirational archetype. Ahilyabai's position as a non-Maratha, non-Peshwa, non-Brahmin woman administrator and welfare ruler from a non-Marathi region is historically unique. Both exemplify ideal models of welfare governance. In the present and foreseeable future, issues of reservations, state policies on backwardness, demands from historically marginalized communities, and symbols idealized by such groups—alongside questions raised against dominant castes over recent decades—continue to profoundly unsettle the domain of social sciences.



2. THE NECESSITY, INEVITABILITY, AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF SYMBOLS

Intersectionality is inherently relative. Individuals or groups may simultaneously experience multiple axes of oppression across domains, with varying intensities of exploitation. Hierarchies of domination and exploitation are likewise relative, featuring multiple layers while offering opportunities for socio-economic and political mobility amid changing conditions. Such mobility can catalyze economic advancement through socio-political processes. Opportunities for mobility depend on political and social competitions, including elections, reservations, power struggles, sports, and performing arts—domains presumed to foster healthy competition within a welfare state framework. These processes generate caste or class ascent/descent and existential questions. At times, however, competition engenders relative intersectionality, whereby oppressed groups may exploit those perceived as dominant. Historical examples include sexual violence against upper-caste/upper-class women and the murder/looting of their male relatives during Partition and the 1984 anti-Sikh riots by lower-caste/poor men, or Maratha landowners compelled to sell agricultural land at nominal prices to outsiders, forced to support non-farmer or non-community candidates in elections due to market committee decisions, and heightened competition with OBC and Scheduled Caste groups amid the politicization of Maratha reservations.

The relativity of domination, exploitation, and intersectionality similarly renders the politics of symbols relative. Symbols are often foregrounded as emblematic of specific castes or religions. Although their historical policies operated within contemporaneous contexts, in the present they are operationalized through processes of communalism, caste animosity, gender dynamics, regionalism, inter-symbolic differences, competitions, animosities, political roles, and violence. For example, Dr. Ambedkar's positions can be instrumentally deployed by opponents of reservations against the stances symbolized by Shivaji or Ahilyabai. Conversely, constructive social science researchers and administrators can mobilize these symbols cohesively to promote social unity, expanded governmental reservation policies, and redressal of historical deficits. Thus, exploitation, its analysis, intersectionality and its relativity, along with their interpretive meanings, hold significance for social scientists. Symbols, their policies, the intensity of exploitation, and their escalating contemporary gravity prove more complementary at the level of mass organization. Renewed framing of historical symbols within fresh socio-political contexts is therefore essential.

Shivaji's second coronation and Ahilyabai Holkar's administrative contributions were protracted and crisis-ridden due to contemporaneous caste-feudal obstacles. Shivaji's *swarajya* concept incorporated strategies to overcome these, envisioning an exploitation-free self-rule grounded in caste and religious unity—a "Kulwadi" (peasant-laborer) state that respected women. These ideals later manifest visibly in Ahilyabai's context as well. Her administration reflected Shivaji-inspired secular security policies featuring non-communal defense mechanisms and inclusive armed forces. Contemporary public images of both figures predominantly cast them as nation-builders, royal mothers, faith protectors, Kshatriya exemplars, or virtuous icons, rather than as administrators, secular rulers, warriors emerging from lower-caste groups, or diplomats. Social scientists must therefore pursue this comparative inquiry to address socio-political challenges.

This paper re-examines the caste-feudal-exploitative-hierarchical state apparatus of medieval Indian history through the lens of Shivaji and Ahilyabai's *swarajya* concept. It foregrounds its contemporary symbolic relevance vis-à-vis issues such as communalism, religious fundamentalism, and reservations, drawing on historical evidence. The article offers comparative analysis of military and security discipline, ethical norms, gender dynamics, secular resistance to imperialism in the Shivaji and Ahilyabai eras, and present-day security-communal realities. Central to the paper is the need to clarify gender dimensions in the symbolic dissemination (*symbol broadcasting*) of these figures. It highlights symbols, their contributions, underlying social realities, and the political/gender-centric constraints arising therefrom. In the current context of finely calibrated caste-communal political polarization, nuanced comparative research and clear dissemination of these symbols are urgently required.

Marginalized and hyper-exploited social segments currently confront mutual conflicts over reservation disputes and public infrastructure controversies (e.g., Waqf Board issues). Underlying factors include depleting natural resources, state retreat from employment generation and welfare roles, and the concentration of economic and political resources among a few families. Against this backdrop, the paper aims to elucidate the principles and facts of welfare governance propounded by Shivaji and Ahilyabai as guiding and inspirational frameworks. Researchers should prioritize the following historical themes:

2.1 *Swarajya (Self-Rule)*

Contemporary political usage frequently narrows Shivaji's *swarajya* to "Hindavi Swarajya," infusing it with statist, linguistic, or Hindutva interpretations. Ahilyabai's *swarajya* concept similarly risks mobilization in reservation



debates. Shivaji's **swarajya** was inclusive, exploitation-free, and agriculture-centric, challenging imperialist powers while curbing local feudal-caste exploitation. It represented the self-rule of the people—**Kulwadi** (peasants and the eighteen occupational castes of the **rayat*/ryots**). It eschewed religious differentiation or polarization. In Ahilyabai's Indore state, **swarajya** manifested as welfare-oriented, administratively modernized, and equitable toward local and non-local (inter-provincial) residents.

Illustrative comparative-historical examples include:

- Shivaji's awareness of **watandar** (feudal lord) oppression upon peasants and **kunbis** (cultivators). In the **Ajnapatra**, Ramchandra Pant Amatya records Shivaji's directive: "Kunbiya kunbyachi khabar gheun tyala tavangi yeti karun kird karavi" (monitor the cultivators, provide them wages/salaries, and maintain records). Orders prohibited military or **watandar** forces from looting or extorting peasants; government grain collection from farmers required fair compensation and proper documentation.

- In a 13 May 1671 order concerning Hambirrao Mohite's camp at Chiplun, Shivaji cautioned officers against harassing **kunbi** folk, warning that such actions would drive people to starvation, equate Maratha forces with Mughal raids in public perception, and damage both **rayat** and cavalry—resulting in discredit falling upon the officers. Soldiers and infantry were to act with utmost caution.

- Import-export trade and **jakat** (customs) policies formed pillars of **swarajya**'s economy. Salt, a vital and sensitive commodity, featured prominently. A well-known maxim underscores its importance: "Mithacha mamla lakh maulacha" (the salt affair is worth a lakh). In 1671, Shivaji instructed Narhari Anandrao, Sarasubhedar of Kudal, on salt taxation from Panhala to Kalyan-Bhiwandi, critiquing excessive **ghat** duties that diverted traders to Portuguese Goa, depressing local demand. He advocated calibrated duties to balance revenues without harming coastal trade.

The **Ajnapatra** further codified protective policies for trade boundaries, maritime commerce, essential goods (prioritizing exports over imports in valuation), and safeguards against harassment by local officials.

Ahilyabai, daughter-in-law of Malharrao Holkar (a Dhangar chieftain who rose to found the Indore principality), is renowned for temple restorations and constructing ghats along the Narmada and Tapti rivers, earning epithets like "Punyashloka" and "Rajmata." Post the deaths of her husband and father-in-law, her administrative and religious initiatives must be contextualized within the constrained social space available to a dominant-yet-non-Brahmin, non-Maratha woman in a patriarchal feudal order. In Indore, she enacted a progressive law granting widows the legal right to adopt a son—revolutionary within feudal institutions—to address inheritance and protection vulnerabilities for childless widows. She also established textile factories in Maheshwar, generating employment. Her **swarajya** concept, while chronologically later and shaped by transitional political-economic shifts, reveals greater complexity through an intersectional lens (involving gender, caste, and power). Despite limitations in martial exploits or overt Hindu-Muslim communal framing, her welfare schemes, legal empowerment of women via adoption rights (strengthening inheritance claims), and construction of temples/ghats without inciting religious disputes offer rich material for feminist historians and researchers.

2.2 Welfare State Administration

Scholars have extensively documented welfare elements in Shivaji's administration: the **Ashtapradhan** council, ethical codes for the military, inclusive appointments across castes and religions, women's security, peasant protections, and fair pricing for agricultural produce. Mahatma Phule's **powada** (ballad) praises Shivaji as "Kulwadi Bhushan" (ornament of the peasantry), emphasizing people-centric rule rather than narrow "Gobrahmin Pratipalak" (protector of cows and Brahmins). Phule cites Shivaji's letter to his brother Vyankoji, urging devotion to public welfare, rejection of hypocrisy, maintenance of military discipline and honor, and consultation with advisors if shortcomings arose. Ahilyabai's welfare model focused on industrial promotion, protection of women's property rights, pilgrim security, and construction of religious sites and rest houses (**dharmashalas**). Within her constrained transitional context, her tenure appears more limited in scope yet comparatively robust and reformist in gendered legal and administrative terms.

2.3 Mass Image (Janpratima)

Shivaji's contemporaneous image evolved from **watandar**'s son ("Shivba") to sardar, rebel king, and Chhatrapati. Mughal and Adilshahi sources labeled him a "rebel" or "Dakkhan ka chuha" (rat of the Deccan), though later nationalist historiography reframed him as a Hindu-centric defender. Popular and oral traditions (ballads, folk songs) portray him as "Kulwadi Bhushan," "Rayateche Raja" (king of the subjects), and founder of **swarajya**—not as a destroyer of Muslims or protector of Hinduism. British-era documentation and nationalist responses further shaped images,



sometimes narrowing *swarajya* to "Hindavi." Progressive reinterpretations (e.g., by Phule, V.S. Bendrey, Kamal Gokhale, Sharad Patil) highlight secular, anti-imperial, pro-peasant dimensions. Ahilyabai's image remains largely saintly, maternal ("Rajmata," "Devi," "Punyashloka," "Ahilya Aai"), and architectural, rather than emphasizing her administrative assertiveness, gender-progressive decisions (e.g., widow adoption rights—still underrepresented in feminist agendas), or entrepreneurial welfare initiatives within patriarchal constraints. Comparative figures like Jijabai, Chand Bibi, Mastani, or Tarabai often receive similarly motherhood-centric or entertainment-oriented portrayals, diminishing revolutionary potential.

2.4. Contemporary Political Symbolism

Current symbolism linked to Shivaji and associated figures has historically emphasized anti-Muslim or communal tones, later intersecting with caste-based identity assertions amid economic crises, neglect of reservations, resource depletion, and dominant-caste monopolies on power and wealth. This has produced internal contradictions and polarized representations within Hindutva itself (e.g., Lingayat vs. other symbols in Karnataka/Maharashtra; Tipu Sultan debates). Ahilyabai's symbolism has not yet fractured along similar reservation/identity lines, nor has it been strongly linked to nomadic/Dhangar or Vimukta community assertions despite her background. Shivaji's potential as "Kulwadi Bhushan," originator of *swarajya*, or welfare ruler remains underutilized in progressive or welfare movements, despite linkages to Ambedkarite values, constitutionalism, agriculture, and secular contributions (including lower-caste and Muslim participants in his forces).

2.5 Political Contexts of Symbolism

Indian symbols have globally circulated through lenses of spirituality, yoga, Sufi traditions, and warfare as East-West binaries. Globalization and Bollywood introduced partial shifts, but in the post-truth era, communal identities have acquired new, competitive, constricted, and violent interpretations. Symbols are fragmented by caste-communal interests, sidelining inclusive elements (e.g., Dalit soldiers, Madari Mehtar, Sant Tukaram, or Jiva Mahala in Shivaji narratives). Ambedkar's symbol faces disproportionate targeting in reservation conflicts. Broader patterns—Maharana Pratap (anti-Akbar/Hindu unity), Guru Gobind Singh (linked to Khalistan demands amid unresolved farmer issues)—illustrate how resource scarcity, centralization, and hegemonic forces weaponize symbols, often undermining constitutional values like inter-caste marriage or resistance to injustice. Incidents such as the reported damage to Ahilyabai's ghat in Varanasi during redevelopment or the collapse of Shivaji's coastal statue due to poor construction underscore the sensitivity of symbolic politics. Development projects, employment crises, and welfare ideals demand comparative scholarly engagement. Amid rising name-changing controversies and state-driven symbolic impositions, these welfare-oriented, secular symbols face instrumentalization or marginalization. Researchers, administrators, and social movement scholars must foreground their administrative principles, secularism, inclusivity, and relevance to counter polarization and resource inequities.

In an era of intensifying identity politics, rigorous comparative study and dissemination of these historical male and female symbols—emphasizing their appropriate socio-political content—constitute an ethical imperative for scholars.

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