

Original Article

Religious Tolerance and 'Inams': Sanads and Inams Granted by Maratha Chhatrapatis and Peshwas to Non-Hindu Shrines

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the institutional framework of state patronage, religious tolerance, and land-revenue endowments (Inams and Sanads) granted by the Maratha Chhatrapatis and the subsequent Peshwa administration to non-Hindu religious institutions, specifically Sufi dargahs, mosques, and Christian churches. Moving beyond the conventional historiographical view that portrays the Maratha state as an exclusively majoritarian entity, this study examines the bureaucratic and legal mechanisms used to maintain multi-religious social stability. Utilizing primary historical sources—including the Sanads and Letters registries, provincial land audit documents (Tarfs), and contemporary ecclesiastical records—this paper demonstrates how the Maratha court institutionalized secular statecraft through hereditary financial endowments, ensuring the continuous protection and maintenance of minority sacred spaces across the Indian subcontinent.

Keywords: Maratha Chhatrapatis, Peshwa Administration, Religious Tolerance, Sanads, Inams, Devasthan Inam, Madad-i-Maash, Sufi Dargahs, Mosques, Christian Churches, Raja-Dharma, Maratha Statecraft.

Introduction: The Concept of Raja-Dharma and Multi-Religious Patronage

The consolidation of Maratha sovereignty over vast, multi-ethnic and multi-religious territories in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries required an administrative policy anchored in pragmatic secularism and social equilibrium. The foundation of Maratha statecraft was guided by the broader political philosophy of **Raja-Dharma** (the righteous duty of the sovereign), which mandated that a legitimate king must protect and sustain all productive and peaceful communities within his domain, irrespective of their theological affiliations [1].

Rather than dismantling the pre-existing religious endowments established by the preceding Deccani Sultanates or the Mughal Empire, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and his administrative successors institutionalized a systematic policy of continuity and expansion.

The Maratha secretariat (*Daftarkhana*) operated on the principle that state legitimacy was reinforced by safeguarding the sacred spaces of minority populations. Consequently, the state utilized its highest legal instruments—**Sanads** (royal charters/decrees) and **Inams** (alienated, tax-free land revenues)—to provide permanent financial security to Sufi shrines, Islamic mosques, and Christian institutions, creating a resilient framework of inter-community coexistence [2].

Diplomatic and Legal Instruments: Sanads, Inams, and Madad-i-Maash

The administrative machinery of the Maratha court categorized religious and charitable endowments under specific legal classifications to ensure long-term auditing and protection against local bureaucratic interference.

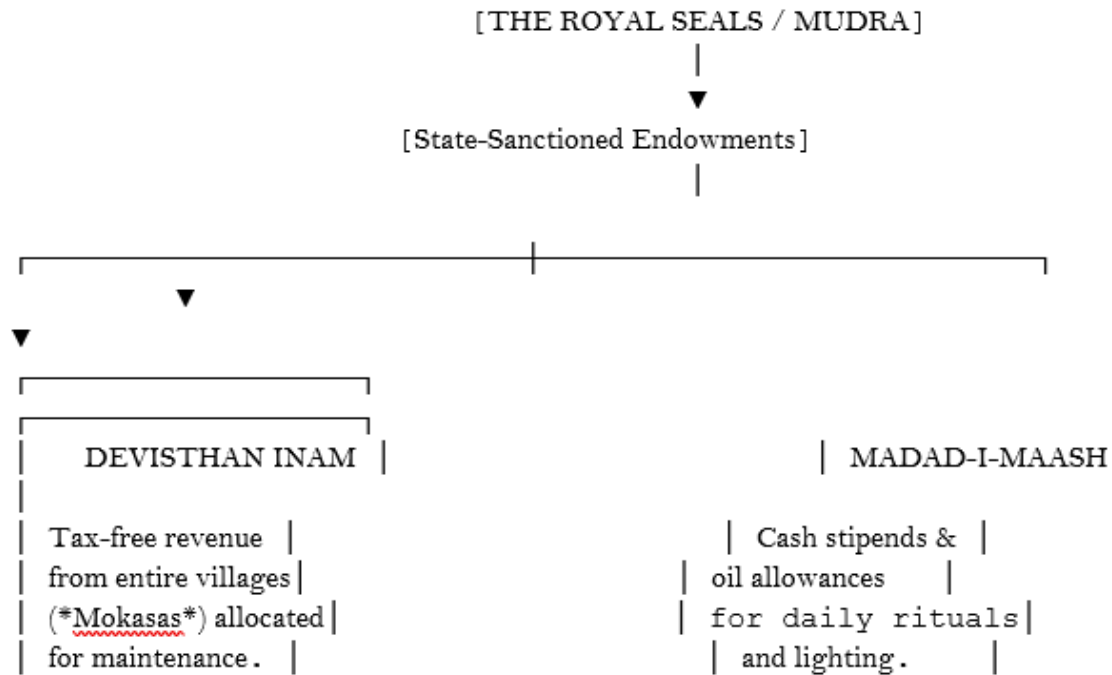
The core legal instruments utilized for non-Hindu institutions included [3]:

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1. Devasthan Inam and Mokasa Allocations

When an entire village or a specific portion of agrarian land was designated tax-free for a shrine, it was entered into the land records as *Devasthan Inam* or *Dharmadaya*. In many instances, the Peshwa secretariat assigned *Mokasa* rights (the state's share of land revenue) from specific sub-divisions directly to the trustees of Sufi *dargahs* or mosques, legally preventing local tax collectors (*Kamavisdars*) from entering or demanding levies from those properties [3].

2. Madad-i-Maash and Varshashans

For smaller urban shrines or localized institutions, the state issued *Madad-i-Maash* (charitable assistance) charters or fixed annual cash allowances known as *Varshashans*. These grants were specifically earmarked for purchasing essential materials, such as oil for evening lamps (*Divo-Batti*), repairs to structural domes, and providing free meals to traveling pilgrims and dervishes [4].

Maratha Patronage to Sufi Dargahs and Mosques

Sufi shrines played a vital role in the socio-cultural fabric of the medieval Deccan, drawing veneration from both Muslim and Hindu populations. The Maratha Chhatrapatis and Peshwas recognized this shared cultural space and provided extensive, documented patronage to several major Sufi centers.

1. The Shrines of Shaikh Muinuddin Chishti and Local Pirs

The records of the Maratha chancery show that even during active military campaigns, the state protected Islamic sacred properties. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj famously confirmed and expanded the old hereditary land grants attached to the *dargah* of **Shaikh Muhammad Atish** at Charminar and various local Pirs in the Konkan and Carnatic regions [5].

The state issued explicit strict warnings to its military commanders to ensure that no mosques or tombs were defaced, and that any copy of the Holy Quran recovered during operations was respectfully handed over to local Muslim leadership [6].

2. Peshwa Endowments to the Dargah of Shah Ramzan Alagand

During the eighteenth-century expansion under the Peshwas, this policy of tolerance was systematically scaled up. The administrative records of Peshwa Madhavrao I detail substantial financial grants and land confirmations made to the famous Sufi saint **Shah Ramzan Alagand** at Miraj [7].

The state treasury regularly cleared specific bills for the carpets, rosewater, and illumination costs required for the annual *Urs* (festival) of the *dargah*, treating these expenses as legitimate public charges on the state [8]. Similarly, the historic **Jama Masjid of Pune** received continuous state patronage, and nearby land was granted tax-free to the resident *Muzawar* (custodian) to secure his livelihood [7].

Institutional Relations with Christian Churches

The expansion of Maratha authority into the northern Konkan (Vasai, Salsette) and the southern borders near Goa brought the state into direct administrative contact with Christian populations and European ecclesiastical hierarchies, including Portuguese Catholic missions and British Protestant chapels.

1. Post-Conquest Protection of Catholic Churches in Vasai (1739)

Following the celebrated Maratha victory over the Portuguese at the **Siege of Vasai in 1739**, Chimaji Appa, the Maratha military commander and brother of Peshwa Baji Rao I, implemented a far-sighted policy of cultural protection. Rejecting vindictive religious destruction, Chimaji Appa issued formal *Sanads* guaranteeing absolute freedom of worship to the local Christian population [9].

The Maratha state confirmed the structural safety and property rights of several prominent Catholic churches, including the **Church of Our Lady of Remedies** at Vasai. Scribes recorded explicit instructions in the provincial registries stating that the timber and lands owned by the churches were exempt from state confiscation, and that the Christian priests (*Padres*) retained their traditional judicial autonomy over their congregations in civil matters [10].

2. Patronage to the Jesuit and Franciscan Missions

The Peshwa archives contain records of cash allowances and oil allocations granted to Christian missions located in the port towns of Chaul and Kalyan [11]. These state-issued *Sanads* reveal a highly pragmatic approach: by ensuring that Christian merchants and agriculturalists could practice their faith without state interference or discriminatory taxation, the Maratha court successfully maintained the commercial prosperity of vital coastal ports and international trade channels [12].

Judicial Protection and Dispute Resolution for Minority Shrines

The Maratha state's commitment to religious tolerance was reinforced by its active legal protection of minority institutions. When internal property disputes or leadership conflicts arose within mosques or *dargahs*, the state did not dismiss them as external matters. Instead, they were adjudicated through the state's formal judicial system, the **Majlis** or **Gotasabha** (judicial assembly) [13].

The official legal decrees (*Mahzars*) document numerous cases where Muslim custodians (*Mutawallis*) petitioned the Maratha courts to resolve internal succession disputes regarding shrine management. The Maratha judges analyzed the traditional Islamic laws of succession, examined historical signatures and imperial seals from old Mughal or Adil Shahi *firman*s, and issued binding, enforceable decrees to restore rightful ownership [13].

Furthermore, if any local landlord or dominant caste official attempted to illegally encroach upon the agricultural lands assigned to a mosque or church, the central administration in Pune issued strict reprimands, ordering the immediate restoration of the property and reinforcing the absolute validity of the original royal *Sanad* [4].

Comparative Assessment: Maratha Policy vs. Contemporary Regimes

To evaluate the historical positioning of Maratha religious policy, its institutional framework can be compared with contemporary regional powers:

Dimension of Statecraft	Later Mughal Empire (Aurangzeb Era)	European East India Companies (Early Phase)	Maratha Swarajya & Peshwa Administration
Taxation Policy	Imposition of <i>Jizya</i> (religious tax) on non-Muslim subjects.	Heavy restrictions on native religious expressions within garrison limits.	Complete abolition of discriminatory faith-based taxes; universal commercial parity.
Institutional Patronage	Heavily focused on Islamic institutions; systematic withdrawal of Hindu grants.	Exclusive financial and legal backing for state-approved Christian chaplains.	Pluralistic allocation of <i>Devasthan Inams</i> to temples, <i>dargahs</i> , and churches.
Property Adjudication	Subordinated entirely to orthodox theological <i>Qazis</i> and religious edicts.	Governed strictly by early mercantile boards and charter requirements.	Secular execution of <i>Mahzars</i> using traditional documents and community consensus.

While neighboring empires frequently utilized religious stratification or forced conversions to enforce political authority, the Maratha court leveraged inclusive patronage to build a multi-religious consensus, transforming minority institutions into stakeholders in the empire's stability [2].

Conclusion: The Pragmatic Secularism of Maratha Governance

The critical technical analysis of *Sanads* and *Inams* granted to Sufi *dargahs*, mosques, and Christian churches demonstrates that the Maratha Empire operated as a highly adaptive, multi-religious state. Far from being a loose, reactionary military movement, the Maratha state systematically institutionalized a sophisticated model of religious tolerance backed by durable financial and legal mechanisms.

By utilizing the *Devasthan Inam* system to secure the livelihoods of minority custodians, honoring historical pre-Maratha land titles, and actively defending Catholic churches post-conquest, the Chhatrapatis and Peshwas ensured that minority sacred spaces were fully protected under the umbrella of state law.

The extensive collection of these multi-ethnic, multi-lingual administrative decrees preserved in historical archives stands as clear historical proof of the efficiency, inclusion, and maturity of pre-colonial Maratha statecraft.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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