Thanjavur Under The Marathas: Transformations In Social Structures And Cultural Expressions

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Abstract
Thanjavur, a significant cultural and political center in southern India, underwent profound transformations during the Maratha rule (1674-1855). This study explores the shifts in social structures and cultural expressions in Thanjavur under the Marathas, emphasizing the integration of Maratha administrative, religious, and artistic influences. The Marathas' patronage of art, architecture, and religious institutions resulted in the flourishing of local traditions while introducing new cultural practices, creating a unique synthesis. Socially, the Maratha period saw the consolidation of caste hierarchies, with significant changes in land ownership patterns and the rise of new elites within the polity. The Maratha rulers actively supported the Brahmin and local communities, which impacted both religious practices and the landscape of Thanjavur, evident in the construction of temples and the revival of regional art forms such as Tanjore painting and classical dance. The period also witnessed the development of a distinct Maratha-Tamil cultural blend, especially in the fields of music, literature, and temple rituals. By focusing on both the elite patronage and the broader societal changes, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic transformation of Thanjavur under the Maratha rule. These shifts highlight the evolving nature of regional power structures, cultural expressions, and social mobility during a crucial period in South Indian history.

Keywords: Thanjavur, Maratha rule, social structures, cultural expressions, Tanjore painting, religious patronage.

Introduction
Thanjavur, located in the Tamil heartland of southern India, holds a unique place in Indian history, especially during the period of Maratha rule, which began in the late 17th century and continued until the early 19th century. The Maratha influence over Thanjavur was marked by significant political, social, and cultural transformations that left a lasting imprint on the region. The Maratha dynasty, which rose to prominence under the leadership of Chhatrapati Shivaji in western India, gradually expanded its territory southward. The Marathas annexed the region of Thanjavur in 1674 under the leadership of Shahaji Bhosale, the younger brother of Shivaji, following the decline of the Vijayanagara Empire and the weakening of the native Tamil kingdoms. Thanjavur became a focal point of Maratha power in the Tamil-speaking regions, particularly under the leadership of the Bhonsle family, who established themselves as the rulers of the Thanjavur Maratha Kingdom. Under the Marathas, Thanjavur witnessed both continuity and change. On one hand, the region retained many of its ancient Tamil cultural traditions and social structures, but on the other hand, it experienced the infusion of Maratha

political and cultural elements. One of the major transformations during this period was the integration of Maratha administration, military organization, and art forms with the indigenous Tamil culture.

The social fabric of Thanjavur underwent shifts due to Maratha rule. While caste and religious hierarchies continued to shape the society, the Marathas introduced new elements to the socio-political hierarchy. The Marathas, being a warrior class, placed emphasis on military service and agrarian-based revenue systems, which led to the creation of a new class of local military elites and landholders. Furthermore, the Marathas brought with them a patronage of Hindu rituals and practices, leading to the development of a hybridized cultural landscape. The Maratha period in Thanjavur also brought forth a renaissance in the region's cultural expressions, particularly in the fields of art, music, and architecture. One of the most significant legacies of this period was the flourishing of Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam dance under the patronage of the Maratha rulers. The Tanjore School of painting, which blended traditional Tamil artistic elements with Maratha influences, also emerged as an important cultural marker of this period. The architectural landscape of Thanjavur saw the construction of monumental structures, including the famous Brihadeeswarar Temple, which was expanded under the Marathas, and the creation of palaces and forts that reflected a blend of Maratha and Tamil architectural styles. The region also became a hub for the dissemination of classical music, dance, and literature, establishing Thanjavur as a center of cultural and intellectual activity in South India. Politically, the Marathas faced challenges, including conflicts with neighboring kingdoms like the Nawabs of Arcot and the British East India Company. By the early 19th century, as British influence grew in southern India, the Marathas in Thanjavur found themselves under increasing pressure. In 1799, the Maratha kingdom of Thanjavur was annexed by the British, marking the end of an era of Maratha sovereignty in the region.

Caste System
The Marathas largely maintained the established caste hierarchy, with Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras continuing to perform their traditional functions. However, the Marathas did not necessarily uphold the rigid caste boundaries in all spheres, especially when it came to military or administrative roles. The Marathas were known for integrating people from different castes into their ranks, particularly from the lower castes, as a part of their effort to strengthen their empire through a diversified leadership and military structure. Under Maratha rule, Brahmins continued to hold influential positions as religious advisers, scholars, and cultural patrons, much as they had under earlier Hindu kingdoms. Brahmins were central to temple management and religious rituals, and many Brahmin families benefited from the patronage of the Maratha rulers, especially in the south (e.g., Tamil Brahmins). While Brahmins retained their high social standing, their roles became more aligned with the needs of the Maratha state, which blended military power with Hindu religious traditions. The Marathas, being a warrior dynasty themselves, reinforced the importance of Kshatriya status. The Maratha elite, including the warriors who formed the backbone of their military campaigns, were generally considered Kshatriyas, or at least given the status of Kshatriyas by the ruling elite. The Marathas also promoted local chiefs and military leaders to higher ranks, offering them prestige and influence. This served both to integrate local elites into the broader Maratha military and administrative structure and to ensure loyalty to the Maratha cause. Although the Marathas did open up some spaces for lower castes,

particularly in their military and administrative structures, caste mobility was still constrained.

Lower castes may have been able to gain social mobility by serving in the military or as part of the administrative apparatus, but the social stratification inherent in the caste system remained largely intact. The Marathas did, however, promote some degree of upward mobility for those who could prove their loyalty and skill in military or bureaucratic roles. One of the key innovations of the Maratha state was the rise of a new class of warrior-elites (the "Maratha nobility"), many of whom were not traditional Kshatriyas but local landlords, military commanders, or even Brahmins who had risen in prominence through military service. This new class was integrated into the power structure and contributed to the consolidation of Maratha rule across much of western and central India. This could be seen as a form of caste fluidity, albeit within the boundaries of traditional norms, as new social roles were created. The Marathas' rule was primarily centered in Maharashtra, but their influence spread throughout southern and central India, where caste dynamics were already distinct. In regions like Tamil Nadu, where caste had already taken on a unique form, the Marathas often worked with the local elites while preserving the local caste systems. However, their rule did contribute to certain disruptions in these regional caste structures, as they often brought in new forms of governance and administration that did not always align perfectly with local customs.

Roles of Local Elites and Administrators
The Tamil elites acted as intermediaries between the Maratha rulers and the local populace. By using their deep knowledge of the region's culture, language, and customs, they facilitated the communication and implementation of Maratha policies. They helped maintain stability in the region by ensuring that the local population understood and adhered to the new governance structures. Local elites often took on the role of tax collectors and administrators of revenue systems. This responsibility was crucial because it ensured a steady flow of revenue to the Maratha state while allowing the elites to retain some local power. The tax systems they managed were often based on existing Vijayanagara and Nayaka structures, meaning they could continue to collect taxes in a familiar manner, thus maintaining continuity and minimizing resistance from the local population. As part of their administrative roles, Tamil elites were involved in resolving land disputes, maintaining law and order, and enforcing Maratha laws. This role was vital for social stability, especially in rural areas where disputes were common. Their traditional authority, stemming from their local roots and historical positions under the Nayakas, helped in smoothly integrating the Maratha rule. The collaboration between the Maratha rulers and Tamil elites allowed for the integration of Tamil customs, traditions, and administrative practices into the Maratha governance framework. This fusion of regional traditions with the centralized Maratha administration enabled the Marathas to avoid imposing foreign systems entirely, which might have led to resentment or rebellion. The Tamil elites also played a significant role in legitimizing Maratha rule in the region. By cooperating with the Marathas and accepting them as rulers, they contributed to the broader acceptance of Maratha authority among the local population. This political legitimacy was key for the Marathas in consolidating power in Tamil Nadu, as it helped prevent large-scale uprisings.

Agrarian Economy and Land Tenure Systems
The Marathas introduced a system where local revenue collectors, such as Deshmukhs (village heads) and Kamavisdars (officials responsible for revenue assessment and

collection), played a central role in managing agricultural lands. This hierarchical structure allowed for a more decentralized administration that could more effectively collect taxes and maintain control over large, diverse territories. It also made the land revenue system more adaptable to local needs and conditions, giving local elites considerable power over land management. The Marathas' focus on increasing agricultural productivity was integral to their economy. They encouraged the development of irrigation systems to support crop cultivation, particularly in regions with fluctuating rainfall. This not only helped improve agricultural output but also ensured a more stable revenue stream for the state. The Marathas recognized the importance of a thriving agrarian economy as the backbone of their military and administrative systems. A key feature of the Maratha agrarian system was the close relationship between the economy and religious institutions, particularly temples. Revenue from agricultural lands was often used to support the construction and maintenance of temples, thus integrating religious practice with economic activity. This also reinforced the social structure, where religious and agricultural life were intertwined. Temples served as centers of economic activity, hosting fairs and markets, and acted as economic hubs, providing both spiritual and material support to the local communities. The Maratha land tenure system was built around the idea of land as a source of wealth and a means of consolidating power. The Marathas granted land to military officers and local elites in exchange for service, creating a patronage system. However, land grants were not always permanent, and the tenure system was flexible, allowing the state to retain ultimate control over the land. This contributed to both a fluid sense of land ownership and a solidified power structure where loyalty to the Maratha state was rewarded with land.

Status of Women in Society

Women from aristocratic or elite families had the means to participate in cultural and religious patronage. Their roles in sponsoring temples, festivals, and religious rituals often aligned with their status and wealth. This involvement gave them a degree of power and influence within religious and cultural communities, which can be interpreted as a form of indirect political or social agency. However, it's important to note that these roles were often defined and limited by patriarchal norms. Their contributions were typically framed within the context of their roles as wives, mothers, or daughters rather than as independent actors. Despite their involvement in cultural and religious patronage, women's social roles were still circumscribed by laws and customs that restricted their mobility, autonomy, and legal rights. These restrictions were particularly harsh in lower social strata but were also present among the elite, though in less overt forms. Women's freedom of movement was constrained by social codes, such as the practice of purdah or veiling, and their legal rights were limited, often dependent on male guardianship. These constraints highlight the tension between women's ability to exert influence within certain domains and their broader social subjugation. Literary works from the period, especially those reflecting bhakti (devotional) traditions, often emphasize themes of devotion, chastity, and self-sacrifice, qualities that were idealized for women. These works reflected a moral and religious framework that idealized women's roles in the private and spiritual spheres, reinforcing the notion that a woman's primary duty was to her family and to God. Bhakti literature, which sometimes included works by women poets or saints, occasionally provided women with a voice within spiritual realms, but even here, their roles were often framed as subordinate to divine or masculine authority.

Transformation of Artistic Traditions

The Marathas were instrumental in promoting the Carnatic music tradition, particularly through their support of renowned composers such as Tyagaraja. Tyagaraja, one of the "Trinity" of Carnatic music along with Muthuswami Dikshitar and Shyama Shastri, composed devotional compositions primarily in Telugu, but the Maratha rulers, including those from the Tanjore Maratha dynasty, actively promoted these works. Their patronage helped elevate Carnatic music as a formal art in South India, ensuring that the compositions were performed in royal courts and temples, and preserving the traditions for future generations. This support of Carnatic music also helped define its institutionalization, with royal courts becoming hubs for music, where musicians, scholars, and patrons gathered. The Marathas, particularly the rulers of Thanjavur, cultivated a cultural environment in which music and performance arts were integral to both religious worship and courtly entertainment. Bharatanatyam, one of the oldest classical dance forms of India, is closely associated with temple rituals in Tamil Nadu. The Marathas played a significant role in the continuity and promotion of Bharatanatyam as a temple art. Under their patronage, dance performances were integrated into temple festivals and religious rituals, and dancers were often supported by the rulers as part of the court's cultural life.

While the dance form was originally performed in temples by devadasis (temple dancers), it evolved over time, particularly during the Maratha rule, into a more structured, classical form that became recognized and respected beyond its religious context. The Maratha rulers of Thanjavur, including Shahu Maharaj and his successors, not only patronized this art form but also influenced its development by encouraging a blending of Marathi and Tamil cultural elements. This cross-cultural exchange helped to refine Bharatanatyam, making it more sophisticated and ensuring its survival as an important part of South Indian classical arts. Thanjavur paintings, an important tradition of South Indian art, flourished during the Maratha rule in Tamil Nadu. These paintings evolved to reflect both the traditional Tamil themes and the Marathi influence brought by the Maratha rulers. The Marathas introduced new techniques and styles, particularly through the use of vibrant colors, gilded surfaces, and a more detailed and refined approach to religious iconography. Thanjavur paintings often depicted Hindu deities, royal portraits, and scenes from Hindu mythology, but they also incorporated elements of Marathi culture, such as clothing, jewelry, and architectural styles. The fusion of Marathi and Tamil themes not only enriched the local artistic traditions but also helped in the dissemination of Maratha culture in the region. This blending created a unique style of painting that was distinct from the earlier Tamil iconography and became a hallmark of the Maratha rule in Thanjavur.

Innovations in Temple Architecture and Sculpture

The Marathas, while continuing the traditional Dravidian architectural style for temple construction, adapted it to their local tastes and needs. A prominent example of this is the use of gopurams (towered gateways), which were typically seen in South Indian temples. Under Maratha patronage, these gopurams incorporated inscriptions in both Tamil and Marathi. This was a significant departure from the norm, as Tamil had long been the primary language for inscriptions in Dravidian temple architecture. The inclusion of Marathi alongside Tamil reflected the growing importance of the Marathi-speaking community in the region, as well as the Marathas' desire to assert their cultural identity and political influence.

The sculpture from this period also reflects a blending of Tamil and Maratha artistic traditions. Dravidian sculpture was known for its intricate detailing, dynamic forms, and devotional themes. Under Maratha influence, however, there was a noticeable shift toward increased realism and regional stylistic elements. For example, the fine detailing in sculpture, such as the depiction of deities, heroes, and mythological figures, became more intricate and elaborate. The Maratha contribution to the sculptural style was often seen in the more robust and earthy representations of gods, which resonated with the warrior ethos of the Maratha rulers. These sculptures were often carved with an emphasis on movement and expressive facial features, a departure from the more serene and symmetrical representations that were typical of earlier Dravidian styles.

The Maratha rulers, particularly under figures like Shivaji, were known for their religious tolerance and efforts to blend Hindu traditions with the distinct practices of the Maratha empire. As a result, the temples built during this period not only displayed the grandeur of Dravidian architecture but also became symbols of Marathi pride and identity. The integration of Marathi elements in temple sculpture and architecture was a conscious effort to bridge the gap between regional and Pan-Indian traditions, with temples becoming central hubs of both religious and cultural expression.

Beyond just aesthetic considerations, the innovations in temple architecture under the Marathas often carried deeper symbolic and functional significance. The gopurams, for instance, were not just architectural features but served as markers of the boundary between the secular and the sacred. The inscriptions on these gopurams, which combined both Tamil and Marathi, were a means of commemorating the Maratha rulers' devotion to the gods while simultaneously asserting their political and cultural authority.

Evolution of Literary Culture

The Maratha rulers, especially during the reigns of prominent kings like Shivaji and his successors, actively encouraged the production of literature as part of their statecraft. By patronizing poets, scholars, and philosophers, they sought to bolster their political legitimacy and cultural authority. This patronage extended to various languages, with Sanskrit often employed for philosophical and religious texts, Tamil for regional identity, and Marathi for reflecting the Maratha's own distinct culture and ideals. The Maratha court was a center of intellectual exchange, and this is reflected in the literature produced during the period. Scholars wrote extensively on Hindu religious texts, providing commentaries, translations, and interpretations, thus supporting the regionalization of religious traditions and thought. Literature also delved into philosophical and ethical discourses, influenced by both local and Pan-Indian traditions. Additionally, history was a major focus, with many works written to document the Maratha's rise to power, military exploits, and interactions with neighboring kingdoms.

The use of bilingual inscriptions often in Marathi and Sanskrit or Marathi and Tamil illustrates the blending of cultural influences between the North and South of India. This bilingualism reflects the Maratha state's geographical expansion, which encompassed regions with diverse linguistic and cultural practices. Such inscriptions not only served administrative purposes but also symbolized the bridging of cultural divides, as Sanskrit provided a common religious and intellectual language, while regional languages like Marathi and Tamil helped sustain local cultural identity. The Maratha period is marked by a significant cultural synthesis. As the Marathas established themselves as a dominant power, they began to merge elements from different cultural spheres. The patronage of Tamil literature, for instance, connects the Marathas with the rich literary traditions of South India, while their use of Sanskrit links them to Pan-Indian

culture. The Marathas also drew on local, regional histories and myths, giving rise to a more inclusive form of cultural expression. The fusion of these elements helped create a unique literary landscape that incorporated influences from both the North and South, reflecting the Marathas' role as a bridge between different cultural zones.

Thanjavur as a Cultural Bridge

The Maratha rulers were deeply rooted in Marathi religious practices, which included the singing of kirtans, a devotional genre of music. These devotional songs, often centered around stories of Hindu gods and goddesses, fused with Tamil bhakti traditions that emphasized the personal devotion of the individual towards the divine. The Maratha rulers, particularly the Bhonsle family, patronized both traditions, allowing a harmonious blending of the two. This resulted in a unique regional religious culture where the Tamil and Marathi-speaking communities coexisted, each influencing the other's practices. This period also saw the increased popularity of Marathi saints and poets, such as Sant Tukaram, whose works spread to the Tamil-speaking populace, further strengthening the religious and cultural fusion. Thanjavur under the Marathas was a crucial hub for the flourishing of Carnatic music. The Maratha rulers, like Shahu Maharaj and Serfoji II, were great patrons of the arts, particularly music. While they promoted Carnatic music, the Marathas also brought their folk traditions and devotional music with them. The result was a blending of Marathi folk songs, and devotional music with Carnatic classical music. This not only enhanced the musical repertoire of Thanjavur but also led to new compositions and adaptations in musical forms. Composers like Ramaswamy Dikshitar, who came from the Maratha-influenced tradition, further enriched the Carnatic classical tradition by introducing new compositions. The region of Thanjavur, particularly under the Marathas, emerged as a cosmopolitan cultural center where various traditions intersected. The Marathi, Tamil, and Kannada languages, along with their accompanying cultural practices, all found a space to interact. The Maratha rulers' support for the arts, including dance, literature, and architecture, helped preserve and promote a rich and diverse cultural identity. The fusion of the southern classical traditions with the northern elements brought by the Marathas contributed to the cultural vibrancy of the region. The Maratha period in Thanjavur is a striking example of how dynastic rule can serve as a vehicle for cultural exchange. The interaction between Tamil and Marathi traditions didn't just foster religious and musical practices but also created a space for broader intellectual and artistic growth. The period left behind a legacy of cultural fusion that influenced the region's art, music, literature, and architecture long after the Marathas lost control in the 19th century.

Conclusion

The Maratha Empire's influence was profound in shaping the social, cultural, and economic landscape of the regions it controlled, while maintaining a delicate balance between traditional structures and progressive changes. The persistence of the caste system, alongside increased mobility within military and administrative roles, highlighted the adaptability of the Marathas in fostering a more inclusive leadership class. Their strategic collaboration with local elites, particularly in Tamil Nadu, reinforced regional governance and facilitated stability across their territories. Economically, the Marathas strengthened their empire through efficient land management policies and a flexible land tenure system, while cultivating loyalty through patronage and land grants. Culturally, the Maratha rulers became patrons of the arts, blending regional traditions with their own, which fostered a rich cultural synthesis, particularly in music, dance, and

visual arts. Their role in promoting religious tolerance and integrating diverse cultural practices underlined their commitment to fostering a unique identity that bridged North and South Indian traditions. The Maratha Empire's cultural legacy, especially in Thanjavur, remains a lasting testament to their impact, where Tamil and Marathi influences merged to create a vibrant and enduring cultural hub. This era, marked by intellectual, artistic, and religious exchanges, contributed to the flourishing of a distinct cultural identity that would resonate in the region for centuries.

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