



From Chhatrapati Shivaji to Guru Gobind Singh to: Analysis of the battles against the brutality of Mughal Rulers

Dr. Rajendra Kumar M.A., M.Phil.,NET,Ph.D. LLB, LLM Professor, Faculty of Legal Studies HRIT University,Ghaziabad	Citation Kumar, R. (2026). From Chhatrapati Shivaji to Guru Gobind Singh to: Analysis of the battles against the brutality of Mughal Rulers. Innovative Research Thoughts in Social Sciences, 2(2), 192–199. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21331513
---	--

Abstract

In the late 17th century, the Mughal empire faced a crisis of its structures. Emperor Aurangzeb resorted to heavy taxation and overt violence by the state to centralize power politically. The coercive policies antagonized the peasantry who paid the imperial treasury. This paper investigates the issue of converting localized rural distress into structured military resistance by conducting a comparative historical case study of two villages, one from Maharashtra and the other from Punjab. The study, based on secondary historical sources, assesses three key variables: the imperial catalyst, demographic changes and ideological unification. The research is based on the comparison of the administrative and military measures of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and Guru Gobind Singh. The study reveals the ways in which both leaders managed to avoid traditional aristocracies, analysing the victory of the Maratha at the Battle of Salher in 1672 and the defence of the fort at Anandapur by the Sikhs in 1704. They enlisted amongst the nonconforming farmers from the agricultural classes, and organized the farmers of Maval and Jat into disciplined infantry troops. These agrarian communities were institutionalised and both leaders gave them unifying visions and patriotic visions, so they could make a permanent military order that could fight the heavy cavalry from the imperials. The paper ends by pointing to a structural counterbalance to the Mughal central government: too much state extraction provided a source of highly motivated recruits for regional revolts.

Keywords: Mughal Empire, agrarian crisis, peasant militarization, Marathas, Sikh Khalsa

Introduction

The late seventeenth century was a pivotal time for the Mughal Empire, marked by significant structural changes. Under Emperor Aurangzeb's rule, the empire shifted away from its earlier approach of regional accommodation and moved towards a more centralized and aggressive method of revenue collection. This change put a tremendous strain on the agrarian economy. The empire heavily depended on the jagirdari system, where nobles collected land revenue to support their military forces. As the empire expanded its territories through ongoing warfare, the need for revenue skyrocketed. The burden of heavy taxes, along with harsh state policies and the reinstatement of the Jizya tax, created a rift with the peasant class. As a result, peaceful farming communities, who had traditionally shouldered the economic responsibilities of the state, began to rise up in armed resistance.

This paper delves into this transformation by examining two notable regional uprisings. It highlights the Maratha mobilization in Maharashtra and the establishment of the Khalsa in Punjab. To ensure an unbiased analysis, this study employs a comparative historical case study approach, relying solely on secondary historical research. By weaving together insights and data from respected historians like Irfan Habib, Jadunath Sarkar, Stewart Gordon, and J.S. Grewal, the research builds a solid, evidence-based foundation. The secondary literature offers the essential economic and political backdrop needed to accurately evaluate the triggers and military tactics of the time, steering clear of the biases often found in seventeenth-century court records.

This research hones in on the organizational strategies of two remarkable leaders: Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and Guru Gobind Singh. Both of these influential figures operated during the reign of Aurangzeb, facing the same imperial military machine. The analysis delves into how they transformed local agrarian struggles into sustained, institutionalized military campaigns. It

evaluates three key variables across both regions. First, it pinpoints the specific imperial policies that sparked the peasant uprisings. Next, it looks at the demographic changes, detailing how civilian farmers—specifically the Mavals in Maharashtra and the Jats in Punjab—were turned into disciplined standing armies. Finally, it explores the ideological unity both leaders fostered to maintain long-term resistance against a numerically superior and heavily armed empire.

By studying these two leaders side by side, we uncover a broader pattern related to state failure. When an agrarian empire depletes its primary producers, the resulting rebellion only needs visionary leadership to become a serious threat. The central argument of this paper is that the uprisings in Maharashtra and Punjab were not mere random acts of localized violence. Instead, they were highly organized, structural responses to intense state coercion. Aurangzeb's inflexible policies alienated the very agrarian base of his empire. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and Guru Gobind Singh recognized this critical weakness and employed remarkably similar strategies to channel peasant unrest. By establishing permanent, ideologically unified military orders, these leaders created a structural counterbalance to centralized Mughal authority, ultimately contributing to the empire's decline.

Review of literature

Scholarly discussions about the decline of the late seventeenth-century Mughal Empire often point to issues like administrative overreach and agricultural economic troubles. However, a look at recent secondary literature shows a noticeable gap in research on how regional leaders turned this economic turmoil into organized military resistance.

Richards (1976) dives into the economic crisis in the Deccan during the latter part of Aurangzeb's rule. His study employs an empirical approach, scrutinizing imperial revenue records and administrative communications from the Hyderabad subah. He discovers that Aurangzeb's relentless territorial expansion put immense pressure on

the jagirdari system. The state's demand for unsustainable revenue from newly acquired lands quickly alienated local farmers and created a significant shortage of salary assignments for Mughal nobles. The main takeaway here is that imperial policies directly caused localized economic distress. While this research effectively identifies the spark for rebellion, it focuses solely on the imperial structure and overlooks how peasants responded to these pressures.

Ali (1975) takes a broader look at the structural failures within the Mughal state. His approach involves a macro-level analysis of the imperial bureaucracy and the mansabdari system. His findings reveal that over-centralization, coupled with heavy taxation to support ongoing warfare, weakened the loyalty of the agrarian base. Ali posits that the empire crumbled from within due to its inability to handle its own economic burdens and to incorporate new regional elites. Although this paper provides crucial context about the Mughal state's fragility, it tends to view the rebelling peasants as mere passive indicators of economic distress rather than recognizing them as an active military force.

Singh (1988) hones in on the Punjab region, delving into the relationship between the imperial center and its provincial outskirts. His approach involves a comparative analysis of regional administrative records alongside Mughal court documents to evaluate both agrarian compliance and conflict. Singh discovers that the Mughal state consistently alienated local agrarian classes—particularly tribal and pastoral groups—through rigid taxation policies that overlooked the economic realities of the region. His research reveals that agricultural communities endured significant economic pressure long before they resorted to armed resistance. However, the study doesn't delve into how religious and political leaders transformed this discontent into a standing army.

Perlin (1985) takes a closer look at how the state formed in the Maratha Deccan. His methodology includes a thorough examination of local administrative documents, tax receipts, and regional correspondence (bakhars). Perlin

concludes that peasant involvement was crucial in dismantling Mughal imperial structures. The Maratha state didn't just spring from the aristocracy; it was built from the grassroots by rallying rural agricultural communities into a sophisticated military-fiscal system. This research is vital for understanding the demographic changes in Maharashtra, but it tends to analyze the Marathas in a vacuum, missing out on similar movements in other provinces.

Fenech (1997) explores the development of martial resistance within the Sikh tradition. His methodology is grounded in a close textual analysis of regional historical documents and Sikh religious texts to trace the idea of martyrdom. Fenech finds that state-sanctioned violence, particularly the execution of Sikh leaders by the Mughal court, sparked a robust martial tradition among the peasantry. His findings illustrate how ideology and historical trauma brought the agrarian base together against the state. However, the study's focus on religious identity limits its scope, overshadowing the shared logistical challenges faced by different groups.

These five sources together paint a vivid picture of history: Aurangzeb's heavy taxation and harsh administrative policies devastated the agrarian economy. However, there's a noticeable gap in the research stemming from this literature. Historians often separate the economic factors behind the Mughal decline from the specific strategies employed by regional leaders. Most scholarship either examines the empire's financial troubles from a central perspective or zooms in on the social history of a single region. What's missing is a direct comparative analysis of the military frameworks established by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and Guru Gobind Singh. This paper aims to fill that void by exploring how both leaders effectively turned imperial economic pressure into a solid foundation of military strength.

Methodology

Research Design

This study takes a deep dive into the mechanics of peasant militarization during the late seventeenth century through a comparative historical case study. We'll be looking closely at two significant regional uprisings that took place under Emperor Aurangzeb's rule. The first is the Maratha mobilization in Maharashtra, led by the legendary Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. The second focuses on the establishment of the Sikh Khalsa in Punjab under the guidance of Guru Gobind Singh.

Sources for case study

Instead of relying on primary court documents, this research leans entirely on secondary historical scholarship. Using seventeenth-century primary texts can be quite risky from a methodological standpoint. For instance, Mughal court chronicles like the *Ma'asir-i-Alamgiri* are often steeped in imperial bias, labeling political resistance as mere banditry and glossing over the economic roots of peasant suffering. On the flip side, regional texts and later *bakhars* can veer into hagiography, turning leaders into larger-than-life figures while neglecting the tough realities of financing an insurgency. By tapping into the synthesized insights of established modern historians, this research sidesteps those contemporary biases. It draws on reliable economic records and structural analyses from secondary literature to ensure a rigorous and objective approach.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Battle of Salher

The Battle of Salher stands out as a key example of how Maratha peasants took up arms. Before 1672, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj mainly relied on guerrilla warfare and quick raids to disrupt Mughal control in the Deccan. However, Salher marked a significant turning point. It was the first instance where a peasant-led army managed to confront and defeat a large, traditionally trained Mughal army in a direct battle.

The conflict was sparked by Aurangzeb's relentless tax collection in the Deccan, which pushed the rural populace away. Shivaji turned to the Maval region for recruits. These weren't just hired guns or noble warriors; they were everyday farmers who knew the rugged terrain of the Western Ghats like the back of their hands. In February 1672, Aurangzeb sent a formidable imperial force led by Ikhlas Khan and Bahlol Khan to reclaim the Salher fort from the Marathas. The Mughal army relied on their heavy cavalry, the go-to military unit for enforcing imperial taxes.

Shivaji sent two of his commanders, Moropant Pingle and Prataprao Gujar, to confront the Mughal troops. The battle that ensued showcased the effectiveness of this demographic shift. The Maratha light infantry, made up of armed Maval peasants, executed well-coordinated tactics that effectively countered the Mughal heavy cavalry. Notably, historian Stewart Gordon points out that the Marathas didn't just hit and run at Salher; they stood their ground, leading to a complete rout of the Mughal forces and the capture of their siege equipment.

This case study highlights the inherent weaknesses of the Mughal Empire. Their military was designed for conventional warfare against rival dynasties, relying on costly cavalry funded by agrarian taxes. But when the very taxpayers became militarized and adopted swift infantry tactics, the imperial military structure crumbled. The Battle of Salher demonstrated that a united peasant infantry could take down even the most expensive military forces.

Case Study 2: The Siege of Anandpur

The Siege of Anandpur serves as a striking example in the Punjab region, showcasing how Guru Gobind Singh harnessed the frustrations of the peasantry to stand up against direct state oppression. By the early 1700s, Aurangzeb saw the increasing militarization of the Sikh community as a serious threat to his imperial power and the collection of taxes in the north. In response, the Mughal state, teaming up with local hill rajas, launched a lengthy military campaign aimed at dismantling the Khalsa.

The pivotal moment came in 1704 when Wazir Khan, the Mughal governor of Sirhind, commanded a large coalition force to lay siege to the fortified city of Anandpur. The defenders were made up of the newly established Khalsa, and the makeup of this group was crucial. The Khalsa was predominantly composed of Jat agriculturalists—rural farmers who had become radicalized due to the harsh taxation policies imposed by the Mughal authorities and the execution of the previous Guru.

The siege dragged on for several months, with the Mughal forces cutting off all food and water supplies to the city. This situation really tested the idea of ideological unity. While a mercenary army might fight for pay and abandon their posts when faced with starvation, the Khalsa was driven by the principle of Dharam Yudh, or righteous war against oppression. Even in the face of severe hunger and being outnumbered, these peasant warriors managed to hold their ground for months, inflicting significant losses on the imperial coalition.

Historians like J.S. Grewal note that the Mughal commanders eventually had to negotiate a safe passage treaty because they couldn't break through the defenses by force. This case study illustrates how the empowerment of the peasantry created a lasting military counterbalance to the state. Guru Gobind Singh transformed civilian farmers into a disciplined force, instilling in them a strict code of conduct that enabled them to withstand a concentrated imperial siege.

Findings and Analysis

The secondary literature has proved that the Mughal Empire during Aurangzeb's reign faced a grave internal crisis. The state needed money for its geographic expansion and thus imposed an unsustainable burden on the agrarian economy. This chapter uses the comparative approach to situate this imperial pressure as a stimulant for organised resistance in two regions, Maharashtra and Punjab. The analysis charted out the exact logistical and ideological strategies used by Guru Gobind

Singh and Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj for the militarisation of peasants.

The results of this comparative evaluation are summarized below.

The Imperial Catalyst

Rebellions in the late seventeenth-century were not a phenomenon of isolation. They were direct as a result of extreme administrative coercion from the Mughal centre. Aurangzeb had abandoned the policies of the Pragmatic rulers. He engaged in a policy of conquest, especially in the Deccan. It was a constant state of war, and vast amounts of capital were needed. This capital was directly taken from the farming classes by the empire.

This pressure resulted in the demise of the jagirdari system, the most important form of Mughal administration. The state regulated land revenue to commanders of military forces to support heavy cavalry. As the empire grew, there was less and less productive land available to be allotted. There were serious budget deficits for commanders. To keep their military quotas these nobles ruthlessly raised taxes from the peasantry. The surplus of cultivators was destroyed. With no other means of livelihood, the threat of rebellion was greater than certain death by starvation.

This economic hardship was compounded by rigid policies of Aurangzeb on social and religious matters. He reimposed the Jizya or poll tax in 1679 on the non-Muslim subjects. This policy had an adverse effect on the majority of the agrarian population. The state of Punjab in Pakistan used violence to curb regional autonomy. The final straw came when Guru Tegh Bahadur was executed by the Mughal court in 1675. The imperial state proved that religious and political opposition, even peaceful opposition, would not be tolerated and would be put to death. Aurangzeb destroyed the economic security of the peasantry and took away their supremacy as leaders in the region, thus creating the very circumstances in which they could rebel.

The demographic transformation

With the overwhelming numbers and technology of Mughal, the regional chiefs had to think out of the box. They had no support from the traditional aristocracy which was well entrenched in the Mughal system. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and Guru Gobind Singh both ignored the nobility. From the agrarian base, they developed their military strength directly, making a great population change.

Shivaji recruited people from maval area in Maharashtra. The Mavals were hard labourers, tough and acquainted with the rough topography of Western Ghats. Shivaji understood that the Mughals were too heavy for the thick hills. He made these civilian farmers into a disciplined and fast-move light infantry. Shivaji generated an alternate revenue model to maintain his new army, where there was no imperial treasury. He introduced collection of Chauth and Sardeshmukhi wherein a percentage of land revenue was collected from areas nominally under Mughal control. This arrangement was a way for him to finance his rebellion and at the same time deprive the imperial treasury. His use of 'Ganimi Kava', guerrilla tactics, enabled his peasant infantry to tire out the imperial armies by swift attacks and cunning escapes.

In Punjab, Guru Gobind Singh had to deal with a similar logistical problem. State policies were alienating the agrarian base of the Sikhs and the traditional Sikh administrative system, the masand system, had become corrupt and inefficient. The Guru did a complete reorientation of the institution in 1699. He got rid of the masands and set up the Khalsa. This act officially sanctioned the militarisation of the Sikh community. It established a direct link between the leader and the peasant warrior, without the intermediary of the army. This new military order was the agricultural community of the Jats who formed the backbone of the population. The Jats were also rural cultivators, similar to the Mavals of the Deccan. In the organisation of the Khalsa they converted to a disciplined standing army. Guru Gobind Singh fortified Anandpur and laid down the rules of conduct; he made the civilian agriculturalists into valiant warriors

who could defend their region from imperial attacks.

An ideological unification - creating a patriotic vision

Wages must be paid to turn a desperate farmer into a soldier, but a doctrine of unification must be provided to keep an insurgency going for decades. If it is only a matter of local needs being met, a purely economic rebellion arises. They both realized they had to have a powerful vision of patriotism to keep them disciplined and morale high in the face of a formidable adversary. They justified their wars as moral, not as a regional war over taxation.

Shivaji brought together the Maratha peasants and instilled in them the idea of self-governance called Swarajya. He denied his military conquests this title. He described them as a justifiable attack on an alien, extractive administration and the land of the natives. This system of ideas raised the struggle to a higher level. Safeguarding the cultivators was a sacred duty. Unlike the Mughals, Shivaji did not encourage the extraction of violence from his army, as he made it strictly adhere to military discipline in that respect. This moral vision was the glue that held together all castes and agrarian communities into one political unit. The Marathas struggled for a homeland which was both geographically and culturally delineated.

Guru Gobind Singh used almost the same kind of ideologies. He codified the idea of Dharam Yudh (the just war against tyrants). The Khalsa was not a military group. It was a group with a strong sense of community and different physical markers, who lived under a strong egalitarianism. This was a unique identity which kept the peasant warriors away from being absorbed back into the civilian population. When it was decided to handle the matter peacefully, through political negotiation, the Guru unequivocally upheld the ethical principles of armed resistance. Guru Gobind Singh gave a clear message in his Epistle (Zafarnama) to Aurangzeb that once all other remedies are futile in the realm of justice, it is just to use the sword. This is a

potent political and religious defense which helped the Khalsa endure through tough times of state repression.

Leadership Mechanics

The comparative data highlights some fascinating structural similarities between the two leaders. Even though they operated in completely different parts of the world, they reached the same strategic conclusions. They both understood that the Mughal Empire relied heavily on agriculture for its economy but depended on heavy cavalry for its military strength.

Shivaji and Guru Gobind Singh took advantage of this vulnerability. By empowering the peasantry to take up arms, they struck at the very heart of the empire's economic stability. When farmers put down their plows and picked up weapons, the empire lost not just its revenue but also its grip on local authority. Both leaders established military orders that ensured their forces would endure over time. They transformed the scattered loyalties of local chieftains into a unified commitment to a larger cause. The armies that emerged were not only highly motivated and incredibly mobile but also had an intimate knowledge of the local landscape. The Mughal state, built to engage in traditional warfare against rival empires, found itself utterly unprepared to combat its own armed populace.

Conclusion

It is evident that the administration of Mughal emperors had a fatal flaw that was exposed in the late seventeenth century when Emperor Aurangzeb, through oppressive taxes and military coercion, tried to consolidate the empire in his own right. It is a known fact that this attempt alienated the countryside whose support was absolutely essential for the financial well-being of the imperial centre. It is not that the countryside responded to such alienation in an aimless manner. It responded to it through disciplined military campaigns in Maharashtra under the leadership of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and in Punjab

under the leadership of Guru Gobind Singh, as is attested by secondary literature.

The Battle of Salher and Siege of Anandpur are compared in order to illustrate the very mechanisms of this agrarian militarization. Neither leader used the old-style, high-priced aristocratic cavalry. They enlisted among the disenfranchised agricultural population, enlisting farmers from Maval and Jat cultivators into disciplined infantry regiments. This change in the population made it possible for the Marathas to defeat the large imperial cavalry force in an open field, at Salher. A grave Mughal siege at the hands of the Khalsa's peasant warriors was saved by the ideological unity of the Khalsa at Anandpur. The ideological unity of the Khalsa at Anandpur saved the Khalsa's peasant warriors from a severe and long siege by the Mughals. In both cases, the imperial military machine was unable to quell the very taxes that it needed to survive.

A limitation in this study is that it is based on secondary works of historical analyses. It is not a primary court chronicle or a regional text, which means it will not be laced with some modern economic and military historians' biases and will allow the researcher to move beyond the paraphernalia of the contemporary court. In addition, the analysis is limited to administrative and logistic aspects of mechanics. It is not meant to make judgments on the moral nature of the actors involved in military architecture, but rather to assess it.

In conclusion, the parallel tactics undertaken by both states in Maharashtra and Punjab show a common fragility of agrarian empires. As more and more wealth is taken by a centralized state from its primary producers, it is also providing a highly recruited base of dissidents for the region. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and Guru Gobind Singh realized this structural problem. They brought the logistical organization and unity of a patriotic vision which converted peaceful cultivators into standing armies. These regional leaders didn't simply win single fights. They established a permanent military structure which systematically undermined Mughal central rule.

References

- Ali, M. A. (1975). *The Passing of Empire: The Mughal Case*. *Modern Asian Studies*, 9(3), 385–396. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/311728>
- Fenech, L. E. (1997). Martyrdom and the Sikh tradition. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 117(4), 623–642. <https://doi.org/10.2307/606445>
- Gordon, S. (1993). *The Marathas 1600-1818 (The New Cambridge History of India)*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521268837>
- Grewal, J. S. (1990). *The Sikhs of the Punjab (The New Cambridge History of India)*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2759639>
- Kulkarni, A. R. (1969). *Maharashtra in the age of Shivaji*. Deshmukh & Co.
- McLeod, W. H. (1989). *The Sikhs: History, religion, and society*. Columbia University Press. <https://archive.org/details/sikhshistoryreli00mcle/mode/1up>
- Perlin, F. (1985). *State Formation Reconsidered*. *Modern Asian Studies*, 19(3), 415–480. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X0000768X>
- Richards, J. F. (1976). The imperial crisis in the Deccan. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 35(2), 237–256. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2053981>
- Sen, S. N. (1928). The military system of the Marathas. *Orient Longmans*. <http://bit.ly/31CIO8I>
- Singh, C. (1988). Centre and periphery in the Mughal state: The case of seventeenth-century Panjab. *Modern Asian Studies*, 22(2), 299–318. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00000986>
- Syan, H. S. (2013). *Sikh militancy in the seventeenth century: Religious violence in Mughal and early modern India*. I.B. Tauris.