

Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj's Inclusive Agrarian Reforms: Lessons for SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger)

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Abstract: Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj, the progressive ruler of Kolhapur (1894–1922), implemented pioneering agrarian reforms that addressed rural poverty and food insecurity through inclusive and sustainable policies. His initiatives, such as mass irrigation, cooperative societies, debt relief, and agricultural education, empowered marginalised farmers and enhanced their productivity. This study analyses these reforms through the lens of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). By examining historical interventions and their outcomes, this study provides lessons for contemporary global efforts to eradicate poverty and achieve food security, thus highlighting the enduring relevance of equitable agrarian policies.

Key Words: Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj, Sustainable Development Goals, equitable agrarian policies, No Poverty, Zero Hunger

1. Introduction:

Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj's reign in Kolhapur was marked by a commitment to social justice and economic equity, particularly in the agrarian sector, which formed the backbone of India's rural economy. Recognising the systemic exploitation of farmers under colonial and feudal structures, Maharaj introduced reforms that prioritised access to resources, education, and infrastructure. His policies addressed the root causes of rural poverty and hunger, aligning closely with the modern objectives outlined in SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). The enduring legacy of Shahu Maharaj's agrarian reforms in Kolhapur continues to exert a profound influence on agricultural policies and rural development in the region. These far-reaching reforms, implemented during his reign in the early 20th century, were designed to significantly improve the lives of farmers and strengthen the agricultural sector, thus forming the backbone of the local economy of the region. The comprehensive nature of these initiatives, which include land redistribution, irrigation improvements, and educational programs for farmers, has made them a model for sustainable rural development, not only in Maharashtra but also across India.

Shahu Maharaj implemented a series of measures to address these agricultural challenges. During the reign of Shahu Maharaj in the early 18th century, the agricultural sector in the Maratha Empire was characterized by a complex feudal structure. The land was primarily divided into jagirs, which were granted to military

commanders and nobles in exchange for their services to the state. These jagirdars collected revenue from the peasants working on their lands and were responsible for maintaining a certain number of troops for the empire. Below the jagirdars were various intermediaries, such as deshmukhs and patils, who managed smaller administrative units and acted as local representatives. At the bottom of this hierarchy were the peasants, who cultivated the land and paid taxes to their overlords. Shahu Maharaj implemented several reforms to improve agricultural productivity and reduce the burden on peasants, including measures to standardize land revenue collection and promote irrigation projects. However, the fundamental feudal structure remained largely intact during his rule, with power and wealth concentrated in the hands of the landed nobility. He introduced land reforms aimed at improving the conditions of tenant farmers and ensuring more secure and equitable land tenure. These reforms were designed to dismantle feudal structures and empower farmers by granting them more rights and protections, thereby encouraging them to invest in better farming practices (Sun et al., 2025).

Additionally, Drought poses significant challenges to agriculture and water management worldwide. Prolonged periods of insufficient rainfall lead to reduced crop yields, soil degradation, and increased competition for limited water resources. Irrigation systems, while crucial for maintaining agricultural productivity during dry spells, face their own set of issues. These include inefficient water distribution, high energy costs, and potential environmental impacts such as soil salinization and groundwater depletion. Additionally, aging infrastructure and inadequate maintenance of irrigation networks can result in water loss through leaks and evaporation. As climate change exacerbates drought conditions in many regions, developing sustainable irrigation practices and improving water-use efficiency have become increasingly urgent priorities for ensuring food security and preserving ecosystems. recognizing the critical importance of water management for agriculture in a monsoon-dependent region, Shahu Maharaj invested in the development of irrigation infrastructure. This included the construction of dams and canals to ensure a reliable water supply for agriculture, which not only enhanced agricultural productivity but also helped mitigate the adverse effects of droughts and erratic rainfall patterns (Yaro et al., 2016).

During the era of Shahu Maharaj, traditional agricultural practices in the region primarily relied on manual labor and basic tools. Farmers typically used wooden plows, bullock carts, and simple irrigation methods like wells and canals. Crop rotation and intercropping were common techniques to maintain soil fertility. However, agricultural production faced significant challenges, including unpredictable monsoons, soil degradation, and limited access to modern farming technologies. These factors often resulted in low crop yields and food insecurity. Economically, the agricultural sector struggled due to high taxes imposed by the British colonial administration, exploitation by moneylenders, and lack of proper market

infrastructure. Shahu Maharaj recognized these issues and implemented various reforms to improve agricultural productivity and alleviate the economic burden on farmers, including land reforms, irrigation projects, and educational initiatives to promote modern farming techniques. To modernize agricultural practices, Shahu Maharaj advocated for the adoption of innovative techniques and crop varieties. He promoted agricultural education and the creation of institutions that could equip farmers with knowledge of more effective and sustainable farming methods. This initiative was part of a broader strategy aimed at enhancing crop yields and ensuring food security for the population (Lerman et al., 2002).

Additionally, During Shahu Maharaj's reign, lower caste individuals and those involved in agriculture faced numerous challenges. The caste system perpetuated social inequality, limiting access to education, employment opportunities, and land ownership for lower caste people. In agriculture, farmers struggled with outdated farming techniques, lack of irrigation infrastructure, and vulnerability to unpredictable weather patterns. Additionally, exploitative land tenure systems and high taxes imposed by landlords further burdened the agricultural community. Shahu Maharaj recognized these issues and implemented various reforms to address them, including promoting education for lower castes, introducing land reforms, and encouraging modern agricultural practices. However, deeply ingrained social prejudices and resistance from upper castes often hindered the full realization of these progressive measures. Shahu Maharaj's focus on social reforms, including the education and empowerment of lower castes, indirectly helped address some agricultural challenges by integrating marginalized communities into the economic framework and improving the overall socio-economic conditions in Kolhapur (Coulibaly et al., 2021).

Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj recognizing that agriculture is the backbone of India's economy, Shahu Maharaj initiated a range of visionary reforms aimed at the welfare of farmers. He introduced a Universal Irrigation Policy and laid the foundation of the Radhanagari Dam to conserve rainwater and mitigate droughts, an idea far ahead of its time. He established an independent irrigation department and conducted detailed village-level surveys to optimise water usage. Understanding the importance of education in agriculture, he provided interest-free loans to students pursuing agricultural studies abroad and started agricultural schools and exhibitions to train farmers in modern practice. He encouraged crop diversification by experimenting with innovative crops such as tea, cocoa, rubber, silk, and cotton. He also promoted beekeeping as an allied agricultural activity in the region. To address market challenges, he established the Shahupuri Market to ensure better returns for farmers, breaking the exploitative monopoly of traders from distant regions. His concern for the dignity of the common people was reflected in his strict instructions that officials must pay for any goods taken from villagers. During World War I, he even donated old state weaponry to be converted into steel ploughs for farmers. Shahu Maharaj's

agricultural vision was rooted in social justice, sustainability, and empowerment. His pioneering efforts not only improved the condition of farmers in his time but also served as a guiding model for solving the agrarian crises of today.

The principles underlying Shahu Maharaj's visionary initiatives align closely with several of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to poverty reduction, food security, and sustainable agriculture. His focus on empowering small-scale farmers and promoting equitable land ownership directly addresses SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). By introducing modern farming techniques and improving access to water resources, the reforms also contribute to SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). Moreover, Shahu Maharaj's emphasis on education and skill development for farmers resonates with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). His holistic approach to rural development, which considers social, economic, and environmental factors, serves as a blueprint for achieving Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11) in rural contexts. The lasting impact of these reforms is evident in the relatively higher agricultural productivity and better socioeconomic conditions of farmers in the Kolhapur region than in many other parts of India. This success has inspired policymakers and development practitioners to study and adapt the elements of Shahu Maharaj's approach to address contemporary challenges in rural development and agriculture. As India and other developing nations grapple with issues of rural poverty, food security, and sustainable agriculture in the face of climate change, the lessons learned from Shahu Maharaj's reforms offer valuable insights. They demonstrated the importance of comprehensive, locally tailored approaches to rural development that empower farmers, promote sustainable practices, and foster long-term economic resilience.

1. Statement of the Primary Research Question

This study seeks to address the following primary research question:

How did Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj's agrarian reforms contribute to addressing systemic rural poverty and food insecurity, and what enduring lessons can contemporary policymakers draw from these historical interventions in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1 (No Poverty) and 2 (Zero Hunger)?

By examining the socio-economic and institutional dimensions of Shahu Maharaj's agricultural policies, this research explores how inclusive and sustainable development was operationalised during the early 20th century and evaluates its relevance for modern strategies aimed at eradicating poverty and hunger in rural contexts.

2. Outline of Specific Research Objectives

The study is guided by the following specific objectives:

- To analyse the key components of Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj's agrarian reforms, including irrigation infrastructure, land tenure systems, cooperative societies, credit access, and agricultural education.
- To assess the impact of these reforms on rural livelihoods, particularly among marginalised communities such as Dalits, Adivasis, and backward castes, with respect to income generation, food security, and social empowerment.
- To evaluate the alignment of Shahu Maharaj's agrarian policies with the principles and targets of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger).
- To identify the structural and institutional mechanisms that enabled the success of these reforms, including participatory governance, decentralised resource management, and community-based development models.
- To derive policy-relevant insights and recommendations for contemporary rural development frameworks, particularly in regions facing similar socio-economic and environmental challenges.

3. Significance of the Study in the Context of Sustainable Development

In an era marked by increasing rural distress, climate-induced agricultural uncertainty, and persistent inequality, the significance of this study lies in its ability to bridge historical wisdom with contemporary development paradigms. Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj's agrarian reforms offer a rare example of early-20th-century state-led, socially inclusive, and ecologically sensitive development, which aligns closely with the holistic vision of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

By critically analysing these reforms, the study contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable rural transformation in several ways:

Historical Precedent for Inclusive Growth: The reforms demonstrate that poverty reduction (SDG 1) and food security (SDG 2) are best achieved through integrated approaches that combine land redistribution, equitable access to water and credit, and investment in human capital through education and skill development.

Community-Centric Development Models: The emphasis on cooperative societies, local markets, and participatory governance provides valuable insights into building resilient rural economies based on collective ownership and democratic participation—key tenets of sustainable development.

Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity: The integration of water conservation, soil health, and crop diversification within a framework of social justice illustrates how ecological resilience can be strengthened alongside social inclusion, offering a model for sustainable agriculture (linked to SDG 2 and SDG 6).

Policy Transferability: The success of Shahu Maharaj's initiatives in Kolhapur offers a replicable blueprint for contemporary rural development programs in India and other Global South countries grappling with issues of agrarian distress, caste-based inequality, and climate vulnerability.

Thus, this study not only enriches academic understanding of historical development practices but also informs current global efforts to build inclusive, resilient, and sustainable agrarian systems that uphold the dignity and rights of the most vulnerable populations.

Overview of Relevant Theories on Agrarian Reforms and Social Inclusion

Agrarian reforms are often seen as strategies to redistribute economic and political power within rural communities by challenging established hierarchies and promoting fairness. A common perspective views agrarian reform as a way to dismantle feudal or colonial land ownership systems and allocate resources to historically marginalized groups, such as smallholders, tenants, and Dalits. From a Marxist standpoint, the emphasis is on transforming agrarian economies from exploitative production modes to more equitable systems, with land and resource redistribution being essential to breaking cycles of poverty and exclusion. Another theoretical perspective underscores the significance of cooperative movements and collective action in fostering social inclusion, particularly through credit cooperatives and community-based agricultural institutions that empower vulnerable groups. These theories converge on the idea that inclusive agrarian policies not only restructure access to land and water but also reshape social relationships, enabling historically excluded communities to participate meaningfully in economic and political spheres.

Connection between Historical Agrarian Reforms and Modern Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Historical agrarian reforms, such as those initiated by Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj in Kolhapur, offer valuable insights for achieving today's sustainable development goals, particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). These reforms addressed systemic issues like landlessness, debt bondage, and limited access to irrigation—problems closely linked to rural poverty and food insecurity. By promoting land redistribution, cooperative credit systems, and extensive irrigation infrastructure, Shahu Maharaj established an early model of inclusive rural development that aligns with modern SDG objectives related to equitable economic growth and resilient agricultural practices. His emphasis on education, crop diversification, and fair market access further illustrates how historical interventions anticipated current policy priorities concerning sustainable livelihoods and food sovereignty. Consequently, the principles embedded in these early 20th-century reforms strongly resonate with the multifaceted goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Conceptual Framework Linking Shahu Maharaj's Reforms to SDGs 1 and 2

Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj's agricultural reforms can be conceptually linked to SDG 1 and SDG 2 through a framework that emphasizes equity, access to productive resources, and institutional support. His policies on land redistribution and the legal acknowledgment of Dalit land rights significantly contributed to reducing poverty by empowering economically disadvantaged groups, aligning with SDG 1's aim to eradicate poverty in all its forms. Similarly, his investments in irrigation infrastructure, agricultural education, and cooperative marketing systems enhanced food security by increasing productivity and ensuring fair compensation for farmers, thus supporting SDG 2's objective of zero hunger. This framework underscores how socially equitable agrarian interventions can serve as foundational elements for achieving global development goals, illustrating that sustainable progress must be rooted in both ecological resilience and social inclusion.

Methodology

- a. **Research Design:** This research utilizes a historical case study methodology to explore the agrarian reforms enacted by Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj in Kolhapur and their relevance to current Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). Guided by a qualitative research approach, the study focuses on analyzing historical interventions and their socio-economic impacts. The case study method was chosen for its ability to deeply investigate specific events or policies within their real-world context, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how historical governance models can inform modern development strategies. As this research seeks to derive lessons from past reforms for current policy frameworks, a historical case study is an invaluable tool for connecting historical evidence with contemporary developmental discussions. Data collection involved a documentary review, which included a systematic analysis of archival records, published literature, government reports, and academic articles related to Shahu Maharaj's agricultural policies. This approach provided the researcher with detailed insights into the mechanisms, outcomes, and long-term impacts of the reforms.

b. Data Sources

Primary Historical Sources: The primary materials for this study include: Government resolutions and administrative documents from the archives of the Kolhapur princely state. Official correspondence and policy papers issued during Shahu Maharaj's rule (1894–1922). Reports on irrigation initiatives, land reforms, and cooperative societies from early 20th-century Kolhapur. Personal letters and speeches by Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj, highlighting his vision and policy priorities. Secondary Literature Consulted The secondary sources encompass peer-reviewed journal articles,

books, and academic publications focusing on Indian rural history, agrarian reform, and sustainable development. Notable references include works by Kamble (2020), Pawar (2016), and Salunkhe (2018), which provide valuable insights into the socio-political and economic aspects of Shahu Maharaj's governance. Source Selection Criteria Sources were selected based on their relevance to the research goals, credibility, and contribution to understanding agrarian reforms and their alignment with SDG principles. Preference was given to sources offering empirical data, policy analysis, or theoretical perspectives on rural transformation and inclusive development.

c. Analytical Approach

Analytical Framework Description: The study's analytical framework integrates historical institutionalism with policy analysis, enabling the researcher to explore how governance structures and policy decisions shaped rural development outcomes during Shahu Maharaj's reign. This dual approach helps in understanding both the structural constraints and the agency-driven reforms that contributed to poverty reduction and improved food security. Data Interpretation and Synthesis Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis, highlighting key reform areas such as land tenure, irrigation, credit systems, education, and market access. These themes were then aligned with the objectives of SDG 1 and SDG 2 to assess the alignment between historical practices and current global goals. The synthesis process involved cross-referencing policy documents with academic interpretations to validate findings and ensure robust conclusions. Methodological Limitations While the documentary review provided a rich contextual analysis, it is limited by the availability and accessibility of primary historical records. Some archival materials remain undigitized or restricted, potentially limiting the depth of historical insight. Additionally, as the study heavily relies on secondary interpretations, there may be inherent biases in the existing literature that could affect the analysis. Despite these limitations, the methodology offers a solid foundation for understanding the lasting significance of Shahu Maharaj's agrarian reforms in the context of sustainable rural development.

Historical Context of Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj's Reforms

2. Historical Context of Shahu Maharaj's Agricultural Reforms

In early 20th-century India, agriculture was plagued by challenges such as drought, exploitative money lending, and the oppressive zamindari system. Kolhapur, a princely state, faced acute agrarian distress exacerbated by the 1902 drought (Pawar, 2016). Shahu Maharaj, influenced by social reformers like Jyotiba Phule, sought to uplift marginalized communities, including farmers from lower castes. His reforms were grounded in the principles of equity, self-reliance, and collective progress and aimed to transform the agrarian landscape. Shahu Maharaj, who ruled the princely state of Kolhapur from 1894 to 1922, implemented significant agricultural reforms

during a period of widespread rural distress in India. His reforms were established against the backdrop of British colonial rule, which introduced policies that often disadvantaged Indian farmers.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw frequent famines, increasing rural indebtedness, and a decline in traditional agricultural practices in the region. Shahu Maharaj's initiatives were influenced by progressive ideas of social reform and economic development that were gaining traction among Indian intellectuals and rulers of the time. The agricultural reforms introduced by Shahu Maharaj were multifaceted and addressed various aspects of rural living. One of his key initiatives was to establish cooperative societies to provide farmers with access to credit at reasonable interest rates. This measure aimed to alleviate the burden of debt faced by many farmers due to exploitative moneylenders' actions. Additionally, he introduced modern farming techniques and promoted the use of improved seeds and fertilisers to enhance crop yield. Shahu Maharaj also focused on improving irrigation systems throughout Kolhapur. He initiated the construction of dams and canals, which not only increased the availability of water for agriculture but also helped mitigate the impact of droughts. These infrastructure projects provided employment opportunities for rural labourers and contributed to the region's overall development. Furthermore, Maharaj implemented land reforms to address the issues of land ownership and tenancy. He introduced measures to protect tenant farmers' rights and encouraged land redistribution to reduce inequality in rural areas. These reforms were particularly significant given the feudal structure that prevailed in many parts of India at the time. Education is another crucial component of the Shahu Maharaj agricultural reform agenda. He established agricultural schools and research centres to disseminate knowledge of modern farming practices and technologies. These institutions played a vital role in training a new generation of farmers and agricultural experts and contributed to the long-term sustainability of Kolhapur's agricultural sector. Maharaj's reforms also extended to the marketing of agricultural produce. He established regulated markets and encouraged the formation of farmer cooperatives to improve farmers' bargaining power and ensure fair prices for their crops. This approach helped reduce the exploitation of farmers by middlemen and traders.

Shahu Maharaj's agricultural reforms were not implemented in isolation but were part of a broader vision for social and economic development. He recognised the interconnectedness of various sectors and sought to create a holistic approach to rural development. His reforms in education, healthcare, and social welfare complemented his agricultural initiatives and contributed to the overall improvement of rural life in Kolhapur's rural areas. Shahu Maharaj's agricultural reforms extended beyond Kolhapur's borders. His innovative approaches and success in addressing rural distress have attracted the attention of other Indian rulers and policymakers. Many of his initiatives served as models for similar reforms in other princely states and regions of British India.

Shahu Maharaj's agricultural reforms were comprehensive and forward-thinking, addressing both the immediate needs of farmers and the long-term development of agriculture in Kolhapur. His initiatives aimed to address the immediate needs of farmers while laying the groundwork for long-term agricultural development in his state and setting precedents for similar efforts in other parts of India. The legacy of these reforms continues to influence India's agricultural policies and rural development strategies.

3. Important Agrarian Reforms and Their Mechanisms

Shahu Maharaj's agrarian policies were multifaceted, addressing both immediate needs and long-term sustainability. The following subsections outline these major initiatives.

3.1 Mass Irrigation Policy:

In response to drought conditions, Shahu Maharaj implemented a Mass Irrigation Policy, allocating resources based on village-level assessments of drought severity (Salunkhe 2018). This policy facilitated the construction of wells, canals, and the Radhanagari Dam. Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, ruler of Kolhapur State from 1894 to 1922, executed a transformative mass irrigation policy that revolutionized agriculture in the region. His approach to water resource management has had an enduring impact on the state economy and farmers' livelihoods. Dam construction was central to Shahu Maharaj's strategy throughout Kolhapur State.

The Radhanagari Dam on the Bhogavati River was the centrepiece, creating large reservoirs for reliable irrigation during the dry seasons. Inspired by his 1902 visit to Europe, where he observed an effective dam infrastructure, Shahu Maharaj envisioned storing monsoon rainwater for efficient irrigation to ensure agricultural success. The Radhanagari Dam project began in 1909 under the personal oversight of Shahu Maharaj. Despite Kolhapur Sansthan's limited annual income of ₹20–30 lakhs, he allocated substantial funds for construction, prioritising rural welfare over political gain. The dam was designed to capture Sahyadri rainwater in arid regions across the black soil plains of Kolhapur. Although it faced funding and engineering challenges, the project was partially completed during his lifetime and became operational in 1957, irrigating thousands of acres of farmland. His dam-building initiatives were part of a broader vision of equity and sustainable development, and served as a model for water conservation in modern India.

Complementing these dams, Shahu Maharaj developed an extensive canal network to transport water from reservoirs to agricultural land throughout the state. This canal system was meticulously designed to optimise water distribution efficiency, considering the region's topography. Shahu Maharaj understood that a robust irrigation system was crucial for agricultural growth and the welfare of farmers. Following the construction of major water bodies, such as the Radhanagari Dam, he ensured that water was distributed through canals to reach farmlands across Kolhapur

Sansthan, facilitating year-round irrigation and reducing reliance on monsoon rain. He conducted scientific surveys on water bodies to assess the potential of canal-based irrigation. Village-specific charts were created to evaluate irrigable land areas used for canal planning. The Irrigation Department collaborated with engineers to expand these networks, leading to increased agricultural productivity and improved rural economic conditions in the region. Shahu Maharaj's vision for canal-based irrigation was deeply rooted in social justice, aiming to provide equal water access to small and marginalized farmers. His development of canal networks contributed to Kolhapur's agricultural self-sufficiency and established a model of inclusive rural development in India.

Water management: Rajarshi Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj had a forward-thinking approach to water management, understanding its vital role in sustainable agriculture and rural prosperity. He believed that effective water conservation and distribution could empower farmers and protect them from drought and famine. During the 1896-99 drought in Kolhapur, Shahu Maharaj implemented relief measures and introduced a Universal Irrigation Policy. He appointed an Irrigation Officer to survey villages, document water bodies, and oversee their development. Shahu Maharaj was the first to advocate for "blocking every drop of rainwater" to prevent wastage. His major project was the Radhanagari Dam, which was the largest dam in the country at the time. Despite limited state income, he invested heavily in the dam, transforming Kolhapur into an agriculturally productive region. He separated the irrigation division from Public Works to concentrate on water infrastructure. Through these efforts, Shahu Maharaj established modern water management practices in Maharashtra before gaining national recognition. These initiatives exemplify farmer-friendly governance. The policy emphasises efficient water distribution through rotational supply and water-saving irrigation methods, maximising agricultural productivity while conserving resources.

Rajarshi Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj's irrigation policy was distinguished by its engagement of farmers through water user associations, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and promoting efficient water management. Shahu Maharaj held the conviction that agricultural prosperity was synonymous with national prosperity. His policies encompassed social, educational, and agricultural reforms aimed at benefiting the farming community of Kolhapur Sansthan. Among his initiatives were the implementation of a Universal Irrigation Policy, the construction of the Radhanagari Dam, and the development of canal networks. He advocated modern farming techniques and the cultivation of non-traditional crops such as rubber, tea, silk, and cotton. Additionally, he established farm schools, organised agricultural exhibitions, and provided interest-free loans for agricultural studies. Shahu Maharaj safeguarded farmers by prohibiting forcible collection during royal visits and ensuring fair compensation. He also established local markets, such as Shahupuri, to eliminate

intermediaries. His vision extended to the economic uplift and educational advancement of farmers and the rural population. The infrastructure developed during his reign laid the foundation for Kolhapur's agricultural sector, benefiting subsequent generations. His policies were rooted in a sustainable vision that encompassed social, economic, and environmental dimensions. His initiatives have fostered resilient systems for community empowerment. The Radhanagari Dam offers a permanent irrigation solution, ensuring water security. His Universal Irrigation Policy exemplified scientific resource management. Shahu Maharaj promoted crop diversification and the preservation of soil fertility. He encouraged agricultural training to cultivate a self-reliant rural population. His support for cooperatives protected farmers from exploitation. By aligning growth with social justice and environmental responsibility, he established a balanced regional governance model. A comprehensive irrigation policy has instituted sustainable agricultural practices in the region. His holistic approach to water supply, education, and farmer empowerment set a precedent for integrated rural development. Today, the legacy of visionary leadership continues to influence agricultural practices.

3.2. Drought mitigation: The comprehensive irrigation policy was instrumental in reducing the impact of drought on agriculture in the region by ensuring a reliable water supply and stabilising agricultural production in the region. During the early years of his reign (1896–1899), Kolhapur experienced a severe drought that threatened both human and animal lives. In response, Shahu Maharaj implemented emergency relief measures and recognised the need for long-term solutions. He devised a Universal Irrigation Policy to capture and conserve rainwater, appointing an Irrigation Officer to survey potential sites for ponds, wells, and small dams. He invested in repairing traditional water bodies and initiated new construction projects. His most ambitious project was the construction of the Radhanagari Dam, which stored monsoon water from the Sahyadri range for use in summer agriculture. He developed canal networks to distribute water to drought-prone farmlands. Through infrastructure development and policy planning, Maharaj established a resilient agricultural system capable of withstanding climate uncertainties. His drought mitigation strategies continue to serve as a model for sustainable rural water management.

3.3. Economic growth: Enhanced irrigation infrastructure significantly boosted agricultural output throughout Kolhapur, leading to increased productivity and economic development through higher crop yields and improved food security. The resulting surplus in agricultural produce has invigorated regional trade. Rajarshi Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj transformed the Kolhapur princely state by fostering inclusive economic growth centered on social justice, agriculture, education, and industry. Understanding that the economic advancement of farmers and marginalised

communities was crucial for prosperity, he enacted reforms to stimulate the local economy. He modernised agriculture by constructing dams, developing irrigation networks, and promoting crop diversification. He established trading centres such as Shahupuri Market for direct farmer sales and encouraged value-added products such as Kolhapur's branded jaggery. Shahu Maharaj advanced education and skill development by supporting vocational training, agricultural schools, and offering loans for overseas education. He promoted rural industries, such as silk production and beekeeping, while fostering cooperatives among farmers and artisans. His people-centric economic policies integrated marginalised groups into mainstream economic activities. Through agricultural reform, industrial support, and education, he created a model of inclusive development that continues to influence modern India's rural growth policies.

3.4. Crop diversification: The advent of reliable irrigation systems has enabled farmers to expand their agricultural practices beyond traditional rain-fed crops, thereby enhancing soil health and generating multiple income streams. Rajarshi Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, a progressive ruler, actively promoted crop diversification to bolster agricultural productivity and elevate rural incomes. He encouraged farmers in Kolhapur Sansthan to experiment with crops adapted to local conditions, introducing non-traditional and high-value crops such as silk, cocoa, Indian rubber, jute, ambadi, tapioca, Cambodian cotton, lac, shingade, and Belgaum potato. Additionally, he initiated tea and coffee plantations near Panhala, with the tea branded Panhala No. 4, which he distributed to dignitaries such as Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda. Shahu Maharaj posited that crop diversification could mitigate risks for farmers, enhance soil health, and create new revenue streams. His emphasis on cultivation, processing, and branding indicates his perception of agriculture as a scientific and entrepreneurial pursuit. His advocacy for diversified farming exemplifies his visionary approach to sustainable agriculture, and lays the foundation for contemporary agricultural practices in Maharashtra.

In his focus on agricultural development, Shahu Maharaj integrated environmental conservation through afforestation of water bodies to mitigate soil erosion. Rajarshi Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj was both a social reformer and a pioneer in environmental conservation. When environmental consciousness was not widespread, he advocated for eco-friendly development through sustainable practices and forest protection. His significant contribution was in water conservation, exemplified by the implementation of the Universal Irrigation Policy and the construction of the Radhanagari Dam, which was designed to capture rainwater. He preserved traditional water bodies and developed infrastructure to enhance groundwater recharge. Shahu Maharaj also safeguarded forests and supported beekeeping in the Sahyadri forests, thereby contributing to pollination and ecosystem balance. His promotion of crops, such as jute, lac, and ambadi, provided ecological benefits, while he discouraged land over-

exploitation and advocated scientific farming. His developmental approach integrated agriculture with environmental responsibility, demonstrating that human development and nature conservation must coexist.

3.6 - Access to Credit and Debt Relief:

Shahu Maharaj identified the exploitative practices of moneylenders that ensnared farmers in cycles of debt. In response, he established credit facilities for the acquisition of modern equipment and introduced debt-waiver programmes (Kamble, 2020). These initiatives have significantly reduced farmers' reliance on usurious loans. Maharaj possessed a profound understanding of the financial hardships faced by farmers, particularly those from marginalized communities, due to exploitative money lending practices and the absence of institutional credit. To address these issues, he advocated state-supported interest-free loans. He authorised an interest-free loan of ₹1500 to Ramchandra Dhondo Shelke for agricultural studies in the United States (Resolution No. 990), exemplifying his perspective on credit as a tool for empowerment. Furthermore, Shahu Maharaj endorsed a cooperative movement to provide small farmers with affordable credit through community-based financial systems. During natural disasters, he offered relief through food, fodder, and tax waivers. His policies on credit and debt relief underscored his commitment to economic justice and perceived financial empowerment as fundamental rights for farmers. To eliminate intermediaries and ensure equitable profits, he promoted cooperative societies and established dedicated marketplaces for farmers (Pawar, 2016). Shahu Chhatrapati Spinning and Weaving Mill bolstered rural economies by integrating agricultural and industrial activities. Shahu Maharaj was a pioneer in cooperative societies and market reforms, aiming to eradicate exploitation by middlemen, moneylenders, and monopolistic traders.

3.7. Cooperative Societies and Market Reforms

Shahu Maharaj actively promoted the establishment of cooperative societies to facilitate affordable credit, enhance collective bargaining power, and provide shared resources for farmers. These cooperatives enabled small and marginal farmers to access essential inputs, such as seeds, tools, and loans, thereby circumventing the exploitative practices of high-interest moneylenders. Maharaj perceived the cooperative model not merely as an economic instrument but as a social movement aimed at fostering values of mutual assistance, democratic participation, and financial discipline among the rural poor. In the realm of market reforms, he implemented concrete measures to ensure that farmers received equitable compensation for their produce. A notable contribution was the creation of the Shahupuri Market near the Kolhapur railway station. Prior to this, the high-quality jaggery produced in Kolhapur was transported to Rajapur in Konkan, rebranded as "Rajapuri Jaggery", and sold at inflated prices in Mumbai, without benefiting the producers in Kolhapur. To rectify

this inequity, Shahu Maharaj established a local and accessible market, provided special incentives to traders, and offered storage facilities, thereby enabling Kolhapuri farmers to sell their products directly and retain their profits. Through these reforms, Shahu Maharaj laid the groundwork for a more equitable, farmer-centric economy, where cooperative self-reliance and transparent markets served as instruments for rural development. His legacy continues to inspire India's cooperative banking sector and agricultural marketing reforms.

3.8 Agricultural Education and Innovation

The establishment of the King Edward Agricultural Institution facilitated the training of farmers in contemporary agricultural techniques, such as crop rotation and the utilisation of enhanced seeds (Salunkhe, 2018). This initiative has enabled farmers to adopt innovative practices, thereby enhancing yields and resilience. Rajarshi Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj was a trailblazer in advocating for agricultural education and innovation during a period when Indian agriculture was predominantly traditional and subsistence-oriented. He was convinced that the advancement of farmers and the prosperity of the rural economy could only be realised through scientific knowledge, modern techniques, and innovative thinking in agriculture. To actualise this vision, Shahu Maharaj established farm schools and agricultural training centres to educate farmers and their offspring on advanced farming methods, soil management, irrigation techniques, and the use of new tools. In 1912, he founded the King Edward Agricultural Institute in Kolhapur to institutionalise agricultural education and make it accessible to students from rural backgrounds. He also promoted the creation of agricultural museums and exhibitions, particularly during fairs and yatras, to display modern implements, high-yield crop varieties, and best practices for animal husbandry. Shahu Maharaj's dedication to innovation extended beyond teaching; he personally supported and experimented with new crops. He introduced the cultivation of tea, coffee, cocoa, Indian rubber, jute, silk, Cambodian cotton, and Belgaum potatoes, among others. He even branded and promoted locally produced tea from Panhala as "Panhala No. 4," sharing it with dignitaries such as Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda. Furthermore, he provided interest-free loans to students travelling abroad for agricultural education, demonstrating his belief in global learning for local development. His introduction of beekeeping and value-added agricultural processing further exemplified his encouragement of farmers to transcend traditional practices and embrace diversification. Shahu Maharaj's contributions to agricultural education and innovation reflected his long-term, inclusive, and scientific vision. He not only empowered farmers with knowledge but also inspired them to perceive farming as a profession grounded in science, dignity, and innovation—well ahead of his time.

3.5 Land and Tenure Reforms Shahu Maharaj introduced legislation to mitigate the excesses of the zamindari system, granting tenants greater security and reducing exploitative rents (Kamble, 2020). These reforms empowered farmers,

particularly those from marginalised communities, to retain a larger share of their produce. Rajarshi Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj was a progressive monarch who initiated land and tenure reforms to dismantle feudal exploitation and promote agrarian justice. He recognised that without secure land rights and equitable tenancy arrangements, farmers—especially those from lower castes—would remain trapped in a cycle of poverty and oppression.

3.5 Land and Tenure Reforms

During his tenure in Kolhapur Sansthan, land ownership was predominantly concentrated in the hands of upper-caste landlords, while the actual cultivators—primarily from marginalised and oppressed communities—lacked legal security and protection. Shahu Maharaj intervened to rectify this imbalance. He endeavoured to safeguard the rights of tenants and tillers, ensuring that those who worked on the land could not be arbitrarily evicted or subjected to exploitative rent demands. He reformed land revenue systems, regulated tenancy rights, and advocated the principle that land should belong to those who cultivate it. Shahu Maharaj also prioritized the allocation of land to landless farmers, particularly those from Scheduled Castes, Marathas, and other backward communities, often providing them with support in the form of tools, seeds, irrigation facilities, and training. His objective was to establish a class of empowered, independent, small farmers who could fully participate in the rural economy without reliance on landlords or moneylenders. Rajarshi Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj played a pivotal role in addressing the historical injustice associated with Mahar Vatan lands, traditionally held by Mahar communities (Dalits) in exchange for their hereditary service to the village. Under the feudal Vatan system, Mahars performed essential yet socially stigmatised duties, such as village watchkeeping, message delivery, or corpse removal, in return for land grants (vatans). However, these lands were not legally owned by the Mahars and could be confiscated or denied arbitrarily by village elites or the state. Consequently, the community remained economically insecure and socially marginalised despite their vital contributions. Shahu Maharaj, with his profound commitment to social justice and equality, recognized this injustice. He implemented progressive measures to regularise Mahar Vatan lands, enabling the Mahar community to claim legal ownership and tenancy rights. His policies provided land security and dignity to many landless Dalits, breaking their cycles of caste-based servitude and landlessness. Furthermore, Shahu Maharaj promoted the economic empowerment of Mahars by granting them education, access to land, and representation in government jobs. He perceived land not merely as an economic asset but as a symbol of self-respect and independence for oppressed communities. By protecting Mahars' rights to their vatan lands and facilitating their integration into the mainstream agrarian economy, he made significant strides toward dismantling caste-based economic hierarchies. In essence, Shahu Maharaj's reform of the Mahar Vatan system was a landmark act of social

transformation, converting a mechanism of caste oppression into an opportunity for empowerment and laying the foundation for Dalit rights in land and livelihood in modern India. Although these reforms were confined to the Kolhapur princely state, their egalitarian spirit and practical success influenced subsequent land reform movements in post-independence India. Shahu Maharaj's land and tenure reforms were rooted in social justice, economic empowerment, and the belief in equality, establishing him as one of the earliest proponents of agrarian reform in Indian history.

4. Alignment with SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger)

Shahu Maharaj's reforms are in harmony with SDG 1 and SDG 2, which focus on eradicating poverty and ensuring food security. His forward-thinking policies addressed poverty and hunger by addressing social inequality, landlessness, and agricultural backwardness. By regularising Mahar Vatan lands, providing land to landless farmers, and offering interest-free loans, he empowered marginalised communities aligned with SDG 1. Through the promotion of universal education and creation of employment opportunities through vocational training, he laid the groundwork for poverty reduction. Shahu Maharaj's agricultural reforms were in line with the objectives of SDG 2. He implemented the Universal Irrigation Policy, constructed the Radhanagari Dam, and developed canals to ensure a reliable water supply. He also established agricultural schools, introduced modern farming techniques, and encouraged crop diversification to boost productivity. The establishment of fair market systems such as the Shahupuri Market ensured that farmers received fair prices, thereby enhancing agricultural output and food access. These early 20th-century reforms set precedents for combating poverty and hunger.

4.1 Contribution to SDG 1: No Poverty:

SDG 1 seeks to eliminate poverty through equitable access to resources and economic opportunities. Shahu Maharaj's credit facilities, debt waivers, and cooperative societies have increased farmers' incomes and reduced their financial vulnerability (Pawar, 2016). By addressing systemic inequalities such as those perpetuated by the Zamindari system, his policies empowered marginalised farmers, aligning with SDG 1's focus on inclusive growth. Rajarshi Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, the ruler of Kolhapur State (1894–1922), was a visionary reformer whose agrarian policies were deeply rooted in the principles of justice, equality, and economic upliftment of the marginalized. His contributions align strongly with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1: No Poverty, which is particularly evident through his agricultural reforms aimed at addressing structural rural inequalities.

1. Land Tenure Reforms and the Abolition of Feudal Systems Shahu Maharaj's most significant initiative was the abolition of the Mahar Vatan system and other exploitative land tenures that perpetuated rural poverty. These systems allowed upper-caste landlords to exploit Dalits and other marginalised communities through

hereditary servitude and forced labour. By dismantling these systems and redistributing land, Shahu Maharaj ensured direct ownership or access to land for tillers, helping marginalised farmers escape the poverty trap.

2. Support to Marginal and Small Farmers To alleviate rural poverty, Shahu Maharaj provided interest-free loans and agricultural subsidies to small and marginalised farmers. He promoted cooperative farming, facilitated access to bullocks, seeds, and tools, and constructed irrigation canals to boost productivity. These efforts reduced farmers' reliance on exploitative moneylenders and increased their agricultural income and economic stability.

3. Fair Price and Market Access Recognizing the importance of market access in combating rural poverty, he supported fair pricing policies and established regulated markets for farmers' produce. This eliminated middlemen exploitation and ensured that farmers received fair compensation for their labour and crops, thereby reducing income disparities in rural areas.

4. Inclusion of Dalits and Bahujans in the Agricultural Economy Shahu Maharaj actively promoted the economic inclusion of Dalits, Adivasis, and Bahujans, not only as labourers but also as landholders and stakeholders in the agrarian economy. By providing them with land rights, agricultural education, and vocational support, he transformed the social structure of rural Maharashtra. This laid the foundation for intergenerational poverty reduction among historically excluded communities.

5. Focusing on education and agricultural training along with material support, Shahu Maharaj emphasised scientific agricultural education for rural youth. He established agricultural schools and promoted modern techniques that enhanced productivity and improved the livelihood potential of poor farming families. Conclusion Shahu Maharaj's agrarian reforms were not merely economic policies but instruments of social justice and inclusive development.

His pioneering efforts resonate strongly with SDG 1: No Poverty, especially in their focus on redistribution, empowerment, and sustainable rural livelihoods. By integrating land reform with social reform, Shahu Maharaj developed an early model of inclusive agricultural development that remains relevant to contemporary efforts to eradicate poverty in rural India.

4.2 Contribution to SDG 2: Zero Hunger:

SDG 2 emphasises sustainable agriculture and food security. Shahu Maharaj's irrigation projects and agricultural education significantly boosted crop yields, ensuring a stable food supply (Salunkhe, 2018). His cooperative societies enhanced market access, enabling farmers to secure better prices and reinvest in food production, thus directly supporting SDG 2's goals.

In doing so, he laid an early foundation for inclusive and hunger-free rural development, which remains a model for contemporary policymakers. Rajarshi Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj's reign (1894–1922) was marked by transformative agricultural reforms that not only addressed economic inequality but also tackled issues of food security, malnutrition, and sustainable farming—all central components of Sustainable Development Goal 2: Zero Hunger. His agrarian vision sought to create a self-reliant rural economy where even the most marginalised had access to food and livelihoods.

- 1. Enhancing Agricultural Productivity for Food Security:** Shahu Maharaj promoted the modernisation of agriculture by encouraging the use of improved seeds, better irrigation methods, and modern tools. He established agricultural training centres and brought in agricultural experts to educate farmers on scientific methods of cultivation. This helped increase crop yield and ensured a consistent food supply, especially in the drought-prone and famine-affected areas of his kingdom.
- 2. Irrigation Infrastructure and Drought Relief:** To mitigate the effects of famine and ensure year-round farming, Shahu Maharaj invested heavily in irrigation infrastructure, including the construction of canals, wells, and water storage systems. During times of drought, he initiated relief measures by providing food grains and employment to landless labourers. These efforts ensured that no one went hungry during the natural calamities and contributed to food resilience.
- 3. Support to Small and Marginal Farmers:** Shahu Maharaj's policies focused on empowering small farmers—especially from the Bahun, Dalit, and tribal communities—by providing them with access to land, seeds, cattle, and credit. He made interest-free loans available and protected poor farmers from moneylenders. By making agriculture a viable and dignified livelihood, he tackled the root causes of hunger and rural malnutrition.
- 4. Promotion of Crop Diversification and Nutrition:** Shahu Maharaj encouraged the diversification of crops, including pulses, millets, vegetables, and fruits, beyond traditional cash crops. This led to more nutritious diets and helped prevent malnutrition in rural households. His approach indirectly promoted nutritional security, a key component of SDG 2.
- 5. Land Reforms and Elimination of Exploitative Systems:** By abolishing oppressive systems like Mahar Vatan, he granted land rights to actual cultivators, many of whom were previously exploited and malnourished. This land empowerment helped ensure a sustainable source of food and income for these families, promoting long-term food sovereignty.

Shahu Maharaj's agricultural reforms went beyond economic development—they were rooted in the ideals of social justice, food security, and equitable resource distribution. His focus on sustainable agriculture, empowerment of small farmers, irrigation development, and nutrition awareness directly aligns with the targets of SDG 2: Zero Hunger. In doing so, he laid an early foundation for inclusive and hunger-free rural development, which remains a model for contemporary policymakers.

5. Impacts and Outcomes

Shahu Maharaj's reforms had a transformative impact on Kolhapur's agrarian economy. The expansion of irrigation infrastructure has increased cultivable land, while cooperative societies and debt relief measures have improved farmers' livelihoods (Kamble, 2020). The King Edward Agricultural Institution fostered a culture of innovation that contributed to long-term productivity gains. These outcomes have reduced rural poverty and enhanced food security, creating a model of inclusive development. The agricultural reforms introduced by Rajarshi Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj had profound and far-reaching effects on the rural economy, farmer empowerment, and overall development of Kolhapur Sansthan. These reforms were not merely administrative interventions but part of a visionary and inclusive approach to social and economic justice. One of the most significant outcomes was the strengthening of agricultural infrastructure. The construction of the Radhanagari Dam, along with a network of canals and village ponds, ensured year-round irrigation, protecting farmers from drought and monsoon failure. This has led to increased agricultural productivity and food security across the region. His Universal Irrigation Policy laid the foundation for systematic water conservation, an idea now central to sustainable farming practices. Shahu Maharaj's reforms also brought about social transformation. By allocating land to landless farmers, including those from the Scheduled Castes and backward classes, he broke the monopoly of upper-caste landlords and promoted agrarian equality. His policies on Mahar Vatan regularisation gave legal recognition to Dalit land rights, promoting dignity and independence among oppressed communities. The promotion of agricultural education and crop diversification has led to innovation in rural livelihoods. Farmers were trained in new techniques, introduced to high-value crops such as rubber, tea, and silk, and exposed to modern tools through exhibitions and farm schools. This helped shift agriculture from subsistence to semi-commercial and scientific farming. In terms of market reform, the establishment of the Shahupuri Market empowered farmers to sell their produce directly, eliminating middlemen and ensuring fair prices. This significantly improved rural income and reduced exploitation. Overall, the impacts and outcomes of Shahu Maharaj's agricultural reforms included enhanced productivity, reduced rural poverty, increased farmer confidence, social justice in land ownership, and the promotion of scientific and sustainable agriculture, creating a legacy that continues to inspire agrarian policies in modern India.

6. Lessons for Contemporary SDG Implementation Shahu Maharaj's reforms offer valuable lessons for achieving SDG 1 and 2 in the 21st century:

Shahu Maharaj's visionary reforms from the early 20th century offer powerful lessons for the contemporary implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1: No Poverty and SDG 2: Zero Hunger. His development model is rooted in social justice, equitable access to resources, community empowerment, and sustainability, which are principles central to the SDG framework. First, his approach illustrates that land redistribution and secure tenure for marginalised groups are crucial for eradicating poverty (SDG 1). By allocating land to landless Dalits and backward-class farmers and regularising Mahar Vatan lands, Shahu Maharaj ensured that ownership and livelihood were no longer dominated by feudal structures. This teaches modern policymakers the importance of inclusive land reform and legal empowerment of the poor. Second, his promotion of cooperative societies and fair markets enabled small farmers to break free from the cycle of debt and dependency, underscoring the need for local, self-managed economic models in current poverty-alleviation strategies. His efforts to provide interest-free loans and vocational education highlight the role of financial inclusion and skill development in lifting people from poverty. In relation to SDG 2, Shahu Maharaj demonstrated that sustainable agriculture is not just about increased production but also about knowledge, innovation, and water management. His initiatives, such as the Radhanagari Dam, crop diversification, and agricultural schools, show that resilience against hunger comes from investing in local infrastructure, scientific education, and climate-aware practices. Furthermore, his deep commitment to education-linked agricultural transformation, with a special emphasis on backward communities, is a reminder that empowering farmers with knowledge and dignity is central to food security and sustainable rural development. In summary, Shahu Maharaj's reforms advocate a holistic, rights-based, and inclusive approach to poverty and hunger—one that blends infrastructure with empowerment and charity with dignity. These principles remain deeply relevant for SDG implementation in 21st-century India and the Global South.

Model of Inclusive and Sustainable Development: Lessons from Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj

- Ensuring Equitable Access to Resources: Policies such as the provision of credit facilities, land reforms, and irrigation schemes exemplify the significance of making essential resources accessible to marginalised communities. By eliminating economic barriers, Shahu Maharaj established a foundation for inclusive economic participation and poverty alleviation (Pawar, 2016).
- Promoting Community-Driven Development: The establishment of cooperative societies during his reign illustrates the efficacy of collective organisation in addressing market failures, preventing exploitation, and enhancing local self-

reliance. This approach fortifies grassroots democracy and economic resilience (Salunkhe, 2018).

- **Invest in Education, Skills, and Innovation:** Maharaj's emphasis on agricultural education and technical training underscores the critical role of knowledge in transforming livelihoods. Skill-building initiatives empower individuals and communities to innovate and adapt to evolving socioeconomic conditions (Kamble, 2020).
- **Dismantle Structural Barriers:** The abolition of the zamindari system and the introduction of tenancy reforms highlight the importance of addressing historical injustices. Eliminating structural inequities is essential for achieving social justice and facilitating inclusive growth (Pawar, 2016).
- **Integrating Long-Term Infrastructure Development:** Infrastructure projects such as the Radhanagari Dam demonstrate the value of sustainable planning in enhancing agricultural productivity, water security, and rural livelihoods. Infrastructure must be designed to benefit both present and future generations (Salunkhe, 2018).
- **Recognize and Address Implementation Challenges:** Shahu Maharaj's initiatives encountered limitations, including resistance from entrenched elites and constraints due to Kolhapur's limited jurisdiction as a princely state. The uneven distribution of benefits across caste groups further underscores the complexities of achieving social equity (Kamble 2020).

Guiding Principles for Modern Policy Frameworks

Policies must be adaptive and context-specific, acknowledging regional diversity and historical inequalities:

Adaptive and Context-Specific Policies in Shahu Maharaj's Reforms: Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj's reform strategies were intricately aligned with the local realities of Kolhapur and the socio-political landscape of early 20th-century Maharashtra. He understood that a uniform approach would be inadequate to address deeply entrenched caste-based exclusions, agrarian distress, and educational backwardness affecting marginalised communities, particularly excluded sections of society. For instance:

- **Caste-specific Scholarships and Reservations:** Shahu Maharaj introduced educational scholarships exclusively for untouchables, backward castes, and Muslim students, recognising their historically denied access to education. This policy was specifically designed to address caste-based educational exclusion rather than serving as a generic welfare scheme.
- **Land and Tenure Reforms Adapted to Local Needs:** Acknowledging exploitation by hereditary landlords (vatandars) and moneylenders in Kolhapur, he implemented land tenure reforms and promoted tenant rights, which were specific responses to the feudal agrarian structure of his region.

- Promotion of Vernacular Education: Rather than imposing elite or colonial models of education, Shahu Maharaj supported Marathi-medium schools and vernacular instruction, ensuring accessibility for rural and oppressed classes.
- Support for Local Cooperative Movements: The establishment of cooperative credit societies is based on local economic needs and community practices. These institutions empower farmers and artisans to pool resources and escape exploitative financial systems.

Shahu Maharaj's reforms illustrate that effective social transformation necessitates policies grounded in local realities and sensitive to historical injustice. His model underscores the importance of regionally tailored equity-focused interventions as a foundation for inclusive and sustainable development.

2. Development should be participatory, ensuring that marginalised voices shape the agenda

Participatory Development in the Reforms of Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj was a visionary ruler who believed that true development must involve the active participation of marginalised communities. At a time when Dalits, backward castes, and religious minorities were systematically excluded from public life, he empowered them not just as beneficiaries but as agents of change. For instance:

- Representation of Non-Brahmins in Administration: Shahu Maharaj took bold steps to appoint non-Brahmins, Dalits, and Muslims to administrative and judicial posts in his court. By doing so, he challenged the caste monopoly in governance and ensured that the concerns of the oppressed were represented in decision-making bodies.
- Establishment of the Bahujan Sabha and Support to Social Movements: He supported and funded organisations such as the Satyashodhak Samaj and Bahujan Sabha, which voiced the demands of the oppressed. These platforms allow marginalised people to express their grievances and propose reforms, thereby participating in shaping the social agenda.
- Support for Phule-Ambedkar Ideologies: Shahu Maharaj was one of the earliest royal supporters of Jyotirao Phule's egalitarian philosophy and Dr. Ambedkar's emerging movement for Dalit rights. He provided both moral and financial support to their work, recognising that reform must be informed by those who experience exclusion.
- Community-Based Cooperative Movements: His promotion of agricultural cooperatives and credit societies was built on the principles of collective ownership and grassroots participation. These initiatives helped farmers and artisans organise themselves and take control of their economic destiny.

Shahu Maharaj's reforms exemplify a participatory model of governance, where the excluded were not merely recipients of charity, but partners in progress. His legacy

teaches us that inclusive development must be democratic, locally rooted, and shaped by the voices of those it seeks to uplift.

3. Sustainability and equity must go hand-in-hand, balancing ecological concerns with social justice. Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj's developmental vision was ahead of its time, integrating long-term sustainability with social equity. He understood that for development to be meaningful, it must protect natural resources while ensuring fair access and benefits for marginalised communities. For instance:
 - Construction of the Radhanagari Dam: A Model of Sustainable Infrastructure: Shahu Maharaj envisioned and initiated the construction of the Radhanagari Dam, one of India's first major irrigation projects. This dam:
 - Addressed water scarcity in drought-prone regions,
 - Ensured sustainable water management for agriculture,
 - Benefiting small and marginalised farmers, enhancing their livelihoods.
 - This represents an early example of how ecological engineering was used to empower the rural poor by blending sustainability with social justice.
 - Land Reforms with Environmental Sensitivity: His land reforms not only redistributed land to landless and oppressed farmers but also promoted efficient and responsible use of agricultural land. By encouraging local and organic farming techniques, he supported environmentally conscious agriculture, which was inclusive and regenerative.
 - Promotion of Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Shahu Maharaj supported traditional agricultural practices and education in local contexts, which respected ecological balance and promoted self-reliance. This aligns with sustainability by using locally adapted, low-impact methods while advancing social equity.

Shahu Maharaj's development approach recognized that lasting progress must not degrade the environment nor deepen inequality. His reforms show how infrastructure, land, and resource use can be designed to promote both ecological health and social justice, making his legacy highly relevant to today's pursuit of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This inclusive and sustainable development model, inspired by Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj, offers a timeless blueprint for empowering marginalised communities, promoting social justice, and building resilient systems in the 21st century.

Conclusion

Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj's agrarian reforms represent a significant historical example of inclusive and sustainable rural development. During a period characterised by colonial exploitation and feudal oppression in the Indian countryside, Shahu Maharaj envisioned and implemented a people-centric model of agricultural transformation rooted in social justice, ecological balance, and economic empowerment. Through

initiatives such as mass irrigation projects, equitable land distribution, cooperative institutions, agricultural education, and market reforms, he addressed both the structural causes of rural poverty and the immediate needs of the farming community. His approach, deeply grounded in the principles of dignity, equity, and participation, aligns closely with the global objectives outlined in SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). The reforms not only alleviated hunger and reduced poverty during his reign but also established a lasting foundation for agricultural prosperity in Kolhapur, which continues to yield benefits beyond his era. Importantly, Shahu Maharaj's governance provides a timeless blueprint for contemporary policymakers: development must be adaptive, inclusive, participatory, and ecologically responsible. His legacy highlights the urgent need to prioritise marginalised communities in development discourse and craft regionally tailored solutions that honour both environmental sustainability and social equity. As nations today face climate challenges, rural distress, and growing inequality, the agrarian vision of Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj remains profoundly relevant, offering enduring lessons for building resilient and food-secure rural economies across the Global South.

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