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Original Article

The 'Daftarkhana' System in Maratha Administration: Document Classification, Preservation, and Secretarial Management

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the institutional framework, administrative taxonomy, and secretarial management of the Daftarkhana (Central Record Secretariat) within the Maratha Empire during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Moving past traditional military histories, this study examines the bureaucratic infrastructure that allowed a major subcontinental state to function. Utilizing primary sources—including the Peshwa Daftar records, the Adnyapatra, and contemporary colonial factory diaries—this paper reconstructs the classification of administrative documents, the indigenous methods used for archival preservation, and the distinct operational jurisdictions of the offices of the Chitnis (Chief Secretary) and the Phadnis (Chief Accountant).

Keywords: *Daftarkhana, Maratha Administration, Huzur Daftarkhana, Document Classification, Archival Preservation, Modi Script, Chitnis, Phadnis, Rumal System, Maratha Bureaucracy*

Introduction: The Centrality of Document Governance

In the evolution of early modern statecraft, the institutional capacity to record, classify, and preserve administrative data was a core requirement for imperial stability. The Maratha state developed a sophisticated, highly centralized archival system known as the Daftarkhana. Initially organized during the reign of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj to manage state correspondence, this record secretariat was thoroughly expanded into a massive bureaucratic apparatus under the Peshwa administration at the *Huzur Daftarkhana* in Pune [1].

The Maratha state operated on the strict principle that every administrative oral command had to be converted into a written, verified document before achieving legal validity. This systematic reliance on written records required clear document classification methods, specialized preservation techniques, and a disciplined secretarial hierarchy to protect the financial and political integrity of the empire [2].

Classification of Documents within the Huzur Daftarkhana

The *Huzur Daftarkhana* maintained a comprehensive taxonomy for documents, dividing incoming and outgoing records into distinct registers based on their legal, financial, or political functions. Scribes utilized the rapid, cursive **Modi Script** to maintain these sprawling archives [3].

The central archives were structurally categorized into several primary record groups [4]:

1. **The Rozkird (Daily Diaries and Ledgers)**

The *Rozkird* formed the backbone of the state's financial accounting. These records were comprehensive daily diaries that logged every financial transaction executed by the state, including tax collections, military expenditures, public works financing, and royal stipends. The *Rozkirds* were sub-divided into *Kacha* (rough daily drafts) and *Pucca* (final, audited ledger entries) [4].

2. **Sanads and Tarfs (Charters and Land Titles)**

All royal decrees, land endowments (*Inams*), tax exemptions, and appointments of regional officials were recorded as *Sanads*.

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A duplicate copy of every issued *Sanad* was meticulously entered into a central register within the *Daftarkhana*, allowing state auditors to verify local land claims and prevent unauthorized tax avoidance by regional intermediaries [5].

3. **Yadis, Patras, and Bakhars (Diplomatic Papers and Chronicles)**

Political and diplomatic papers were categorized as *Yadis* (memoranda) and *Patras* (letters). This section included classified dispatches from embedded *Vakils* (diplomats) at foreign courts, strategic military plans, and historical narratives (*Bakhars*) preserved to maintain institutional memory [3].

Indigenous Methods of Document Preservation and Archival Security

The tropical climate of the Deccan, alongside the constant threat of seasonal monsoons, humidity, and pests, required the development of highly effective, indigenous methods for physical document preservation.

The *Daftarkhana* records and contemporary European observations document several standardized preservation protocols [6]:

1. **Chemical Treatment and Insect Repellents**

Before bundles were archived, scribes regularly applied a specialized solution containing natural pest-repellents like turmeric powder, neem leaf extracts, and crushed sweet flag (*Vekhand* / Acorus calamus). This chemical layer protected the hand-made paper from termites, silverfish, and paper-eating larvae [7].

2. **Rumals: The System of Fabric Wrapping**

Documents were rarely stored loose on open shelves. Instead, related papers were grouped together and wrapped tightly in square pieces of coarse, dyed cotton cloth known as **Rumals** [5].

These *Rumals* were color-coded based on their department or geographical province (e.g., red for military accounts, yellow for territorial land revenue). The fabric wrap provided an effective, flexible barrier against dust, moisture during the monsoon season, and accidental water spills, allowing thousands of documents to remain legible over centuries [8].

3. **Structural Protection of Archive Vaults**

The physical buildings housing the *Daftarkhana* were constructed with thick stone walls and elevated wooden platforms to isolate the paper records from ground dampness. Specialized guards (*Rakhwaldars*) were stationed around the clock, and strict regulations prohibited the entry of open flames or oil lamps into the core archive vaults, minimizing the risk of catastrophic fires [2].

Secretarial Management: The Chitnis and the Phadnis

The efficient operation of the *Daftarkhana* depended on a clear institutional division of labor between two distinct secretarial offices: the **Chitnis** (Secretariat of State Correspondence) and the **Phadnis** (Secretariat of Finance and Audit).

1. **The Office of the Chitnis (Chief Secretary)**

The *Chitnis* was the chief diplomatic and administrative secretary of the court. This office was responsible for drafting all royal correspondence, writing out official treaties, and formulating the initial text of state decrees [1].

The *Chitnis* held absolute control over the phrasing of diplomatic letters, ensuring that political dispatches aligned perfectly with the strategic objectives of the state. Once a decree was drafted and approved, the *Chitnis* supervised the application of the royal seal (*Mudra*) before forwarding the document to the record rooms [9].

2. **The Office of the Phadnis (Chief Accountant and Auditor)**

While the *Chitnis* managed the political voice of the state, the *Phadnis* controlled its financial apparatus. The *Phadnis* acted as the chief accountant, financial secretary, and auditor-general of the empire.

No state expenditure could be cleared, and no *Sanad* involving revenue allocation could take effect, without the explicit written clearance of the *Phadnis* [10]. This office received, cross-referenced, and audited the detailed financial returns filed by regional governors (*Mamlatdars*) and village accountants, serving as a powerful administrative check against corruption and provincial insubordination [11].

Comparative Assessment: Maratha Secretariat vs. Contemporary Systems

To evaluate the historical sophistication of the Maratha *Daftarkhana* system, its core organizational features can be compared with contemporary administrative systems:

Administrative Dimension	Mughal Daftar Framework	British EIC Record Rooms	Maratha Daftarkhana System
Primary Script & Medium	Formal court Persian written on imported or premium paper.	English script recorded in bound, ink-written paper volumes.	Cursive Modi script written rapidly on processed local paper.
Preservation Strategy	Bound leather volumes stored in centralized imperial library chambers.	Bound ledgers kept in wooden cabinets within coastal fortresses.	Loose sheets grouped inside color-coded, chemically treated fabric *Rumals*.
Secretarial Division	Managed by the *Wazir* and *Diwan*; fluid, less defined office boundaries.	Divided strictly into separate Civil, Military, and Marine departments.	Institutional split between political text (*Chitnis*) and financial audit (*Phadnis*).

While the Mughal system relied on formal court volumes that became increasingly rigid over time, and the early British system was confined to coastal commercial enclaves, the Maratha *Daftarkhana* combined rapid data collection with a unique fabric-wrapping system, allowing it to remain highly secure and functional even during active military campaigns [2].

Conclusion: The Legacy of Bureaucratic Documentation

The *Daftarkhana* system reveals that the Maratha administration was backed by a highly organized, literate, and sophisticated civil bureaucracy. Far from operating as a fluid, loose military alliance, the Maratha state constructed a disciplined archive system anchored in precise document classification, specialized pest-repellent preservation techniques, and a clear division of executive power between the political secretariat (*Chitnis*) and the financial auditing office (*Phadnis*).

By ensuring that every state transaction was recorded, cross-verified, and protected against environmental degradation within the *Rumal* system, the *Daftarkhana* provided the administrative and financial stability required to govern a vast empire. The survival of millions of these documents into the modern era stands as clear historical proof of the durability and efficiency of pre-colonial Indian archival governance.

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Conflicts of interest

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