

Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj: A Psychological Profiling of Fearlessness as a Cardinal Trait

Dr. Bodhraj Kumkaria¹, Dr. Himalaya Tiwari²

¹Director, ACCoRD, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Magadh University, Bihar

Abstract

Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, the second ruler of the Maratha Empire, is a historically significant figure whose leadership was defined by fearlessness, a cardinal personality trait that permeated his military, political, and social actions. This study employs Allport's trait theory, historical content analysis, and comparative psychological profiling to examine how fearlessness governed Sambhaji Maharaj's decision-making, strategic warfare, resistance against Mughal subjugation, and social reform initiatives. His refusal to surrender under extreme torture and his relentless defiance against imperial forces exemplify psychological resilience and unwavering moral conviction.

Beyond his military acumen, Sambhaji Maharaj's fearlessness extended to social justice, particularly in his advocacy for caste equality and inclusivity. His association with marginalized communities, particularly the Mahar community, and the legacy of social reforms later implemented by Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj highlight his progressive stance against caste-based discrimination. This research contributes to historical personality psychology by demonstrating how a cardinal trait can shape leadership, governance, and long-term socio-political transformations.

By integrating personality psychology with historical research, this study provides a structured framework for analyzing historical figures through psychological theories. Future research could explore neuropsychological resilience in warrior-leaders, computational sentiment analysis of historical texts, and cross-cultural comparisons of cardinal traits in premodern leadership.

Keywords: Cardinal trait, Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, fearlessness, leadership psychology, personality psychology, social justice.

1. Introduction

Personality psychology seeks to understand the underlying traits that define human behavior across different contexts. Gordon Allport's (1937) trait theory classifies personality traits into cardinal, central, and secondary traits, with cardinal traits being the dominant forces that shape an individual's entire life. This research applies Allport's framework to analyze Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj's personality, emphasizing fearlessness as his defining characteristic.

Historical records and biographical accounts suggest that fearlessness was not merely an aspect of Sambhaji Maharaj's personality but its core essence (Kulkarni, 2019). Unlike his contemporaries, who often engaged in strategic retreats or political compromises, Sambhaji Maharaj exhibited an

uncompromising resistance to Mughal domination. His refusal to convert to Islam under Aurangzeb's captivity, despite excruciating torture, exemplifies a psychological disposition that aligns with cardinal trait theory (Deshpande, 2016).

This study explores his military leadership, diplomatic strategies, and final martyrdom through the lens of personality psychology, demonstrating how his cardinal trait of fearlessness influenced his actions, governance, and historical legacy.

2. Theoretical Framework: Allport's Trait Theory

Gordon Allport (1937) classified personality traits into three categories:

- Cardinal Traits – A singular, dominant trait that shapes nearly all aspects of an individual's life.
- Central Traits – Core personality traits that significantly influence behavior but do not define an individual completely.
- Secondary Traits – Traits that manifest in specific situations or contexts.

For Sambhaji Maharaj, fearlessness was not just a central trait but a cardinal trait, shaping every facet of his leadership and decision-making. His personality profile aligns with high conscientiousness, high openness to experience, and low neuroticism, traits associated with fearless leadership (McCrae & Costa, 2008).

3. Methodology

This study employs a historical-psychological approach, integrating:

- Trait Analysis – Applying Allport's trait theory to Sambhaji Maharaj's life.
- Content Analysis – Examining historical texts, including Sabhasad Bakhar, Mughal court records, and Marathi manuscripts.
- Comparative Personality Profiling – Analyzing Sambhaji Maharaj's psychological traits in comparison to other historical figures like Shivaji Maharaj and Maharana Pratap.
- Primary and Secondary Sources – Using direct historical documents and scholarly interpretations for cross-validation.

4. Cardinal Trait of Fearlessness in Sambhaji Maharaj

4.1 Fearlessness in Leadership and Warfare

Sambhaji Maharaj exhibited extraordinary bravery in military campaigns, leading direct attacks against the Mughal Empire, particularly in the invasions of Burhanpur (1681) and Goa (1683) (Gupta, 2017). Unlike Shivaji Maharaj, who often relied on guerrilla warfare, Sambhaji Maharaj adopted an aggressive offensive strategy, prioritizing face-to-face combat over tactical retreat (Joshi, 2020). His willingness to engage in direct confrontation despite knowing the risks suggests a psychological disposition aligned with high sensation-seeking and low fear response (Zuckerman, 1994).

4.2 Fearlessness in Diplomacy and Decision-Making

His fearlessness extended beyond the battlefield into diplomatic negotiations. Unlike rulers who sought compromise, Sambhaji Maharaj categorically rejected Mughal peace treaties that required submission (Kulkarni, 2019). His refusal to accept Mughal supremacy, even when faced with overwhelming odds, further establishes fearlessness as his cardinal trait.

4.3 Fearlessness in Captivity and Martyrdom

Perhaps the strongest evidence of his cardinal trait was his behavior in 1689, when he was captured by Aurangzeb. He was given an option: convert to Islam and be spared or face brutal execution. Choosing excruciating torture over submission, Sambhaji Maharaj demonstrated an unyielding defiance rooted in his personality (Deshpande, 2016). This is consistent with individuals possessing extremely high conscientiousness and warrior archetype resilience (Jung, 1953).

5. Comparative Analysis

A comparison with other warrior-kings provides deeper insights into the uniqueness of Sambhaji Maharaj's fearlessness:

Leader	Trait Analysis	Approach to Resistance
Shivaji Maharaj	Strategic and diplomatic	Balanced between warfare and diplomacy
Maharana Pratap	Relentless but cautious	Guerrilla warfare, tactical retreat
Sambhaji Maharaj	Uncompromising and fearless	Direct confrontation, refusal to surrender

While all three leaders exhibited bravery, Sambhaji Maharaj's fearlessness was absolute, defining his military, diplomatic, and personal choices, unlike the pragmatic bravery of Shivaji Maharaj or Maharana Pratap (Joshi, 2020).

6. Psychological Interpretation

From a psychological standpoint, Sambhaji Maharaj's personality aligns with:

- High Openness to Experience – Willingness to engage in high-risk, unconventional warfare.
- High Conscientiousness – Strong sense of duty and moral responsibility.
- Low Neuroticism – Ability to endure extreme stress without psychological breakdown.
- Jungian Warrior Archetype – Embodying the ultimate warrior spirit, showing resilience, honor, and defiance (Jung, 1953).

6.1 Fearlessness Beyond Warfare: Caste Equality as a Psychological Trait

Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj's cardinal trait of fearlessness extended beyond military endeavors into the realm of social justice, particularly in challenging the entrenched caste hierarchy of his time. His defiance against the Mughal Empire was mirrored in his rejection of oppressive social structures, marking him as an early advocate of caste equality. His actions and associations

demonstrate a progressive stance on social inclusion, reflecting a fearless commitment to dismantling hierarchical oppression.

- **Association with the Mahar Community and Social Inclusion**

Sambhaji Maharaj's inclusive approach is particularly evident in his association with the Mahar community, a group traditionally marginalized within the rigid caste system. Historical accounts suggest that his interactions with the Mahar community were marked by mutual respect and camaraderie, challenging prevailing Brahminical orthodoxy (Deshpande, 2016). This is most profoundly demonstrated in the retrieval of his martyred body by Ganpatrao Mahar, a member of the Mahar community, who performed his last rites and established a pilgrimage site in his honor.

This act of reverence towards Sambhaji Maharaj by the Mahar community is historically significant, as it underscores his acceptance as a leader beyond caste barriers, a radical notion in the late 17th century. The event is deeply symbolic, illustrating a fearless disregard for caste hierarchies in both life and death.

Moreover, contemporary accounts suggest that the Maratha army under Sambhaji Maharaj was one of the most socially diverse, comprising warriors from various castes, including Mahars, Kolis, and Kunbis (Kulkarni, 2019). This inclusivity contrasted sharply with the rigid social structures of other ruling dynasties of the time, further reinforcing his commitment to a more egalitarian society.

- **Archival Evidence and Government Recognition**

While direct archival evidence from Sambhaji Maharaj's era is limited due to historical erasure, secondary archival sources and government recognitions affirm his legacy in promoting caste equality. This is particularly evident in the later reforms of Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, a descendant of Sambhaji Maharaj, who actively implemented progressive policies for marginalized communities.

Affirmative Action: On 26 July 1902, Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj issued a historic proclamation reserving 50% of government positions for backward castes, marking one of India's earliest affirmative action policies (Firstpost, 2021).

Educational and Social Reforms: His policies ensured free and compulsory primary education for lower-caste communities and promoted inter-caste marriages (Dalit Times, 2024). These policies reflect the Bhonsle dynasty's long-standing commitment to social justice, possibly influenced by the ideals of Sambhaji Maharaj.

Government records from the National Archives of India (NAI) and Maharashtra State Archives indicate that Shahu Maharaj's reforms were directly inspired by his predecessors, particularly Sambhaji Maharaj's inclusive policies (Government of Maharashtra, 2018).

- **Literature Evidence: Scholarly Perspectives on Caste Equality and Fearlessness**

Sambhaji Maharaj's progressive stance on caste has been analyzed by various scholars as an early challenge to Brahminical dominance in politics and social order.

Maratha historian G. S. Sardesai (1957) describes Sambhaji Maharaj as "a fearless defier of convention, unwilling to bow before the supremacy of caste" (Sardesai, 1957, p. 281).

Kulkarni (2019) interprets his acts as a precursor to modern anti-caste movements, drawing parallels with later social reformers like Mahatma Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, both of whom acknowledged the historical role of the Bhonsle dynasty in challenging caste hierarchies.

Additionally, the Bhonsle dynasty's legacy is frequently referenced in Dalit historical narratives, particularly in relation to Shahu Maharaj's patronage of Ambedkar's early education (Ambedkar, 1946). These interconnections highlight the long-term influence of Sambhaji Maharaj's fearless commitment to caste equality.

- **Revival of Satyashodhak Samaj and Anti-Caste Legacy**

The revival of the Satyashodhak Samaj under Shahu Maharaj further exemplifies the Bhonsle dynasty's dedication to dismantling caste oppression. Originally founded by Jyotirao Phule in 1873, the movement aimed to eradicate caste-based discrimination and Brahminical supremacy (Teltumbde, 2020). Under Shahu Maharaj's reign, the Satyashodhak Samaj was revitalized, promoting:

- (A). Non-Brahmin priesthood
- (B). Inter-caste marriages and social mobility
- (C). State-funded education for lower castes

Sambhaji Maharaj's legacy provided a psychological and ideological foundation for these movements, reinforcing the Bhonsle dynasty's historical role in challenging caste orthodoxy.

- **Psychological Interpretation: Fearlessness and Social Reform**

From a psychological perspective, Sambhaji Maharaj's fearlessness against caste oppression can be examined through trait theory and moral courage frameworks:

- (A). Fearlessness as a Cardinal Trait (Allport, 1937)

Sambhaji Maharaj's defiance of caste barriers aligns with the concept of "cardinal traits"—personality traits so dominant that they define an individual's identity (Allport, 1937). His social inclusivity and egalitarian values were manifestations of this overarching trait.

- (B). Moral Courage (Kidder, 2005)

His actions align with Kidder's (2005) model of moral courage, which requires:

Endurance against social backlash (defying caste norms)

Steadfastness in values (his acceptance of marginalized groups)

Sacrificial leadership (his execution as a martyr for his beliefs)

(C). Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985)

His rejection of social dogma can be linked to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), particularly autonomy in moral decision-making (Deci & Ryan, 1985). His leadership displayed high intrinsic motivation to challenge oppressive structures, independent of external influences.

• **Sambhaji Maharaj as a Pioneer of Caste Equality**

Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj's fearless advocacy for caste equality was a direct challenge to Brahminical supremacy, demonstrating a remarkable level of moral courage and social progressiveness. His legacy influenced later social reformers, making him a precursor to anti-caste movements in India.

His actions highlight that fearlessness was not just a martial attribute but a deeply ingrained psychological trait that extended to his commitment to social justice. By embracing marginalized communities, he transcended the rigid hierarchies of his time, shaping the long-term trajectory of caste reform in India.

7. Conclusion

This study establishes fearlessness as the defining cardinal trait of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, shaping his leadership, military strategies, ideological convictions, and commitment to social justice. His psychological profile, examined through Allport's personality theory, historical content analysis, and comparative profiling, underscores a personality governed by unwavering resilience, moral conviction, and defiance against oppression. His resistance to the Mughal Empire, steadfast refusal to convert under extreme torture, and strategic wartime leadership illustrate a profound embodiment of psychological courage.

Beyond warfare, Sambhaji Maharaj's fearlessness extended into the realm of social equality, as seen in his defiance of the rigid caste system. His association with marginalized communities, particularly the Mahar community, and his role in fostering inclusive governance reflect a deep commitment to social reform. The enduring legacy of his actions, later institutionalized through the progressive reforms of Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, demonstrates how his fearless leadership paved the way for structural transformations in caste and social justice policies.

Psychologically, this research positions Sambhaji Maharaj as a historical figure whose leadership was shaped by a singular, dominant personality trait—fearlessness—manifesting across multiple domains. His life serves as a compelling case study in historical personality psychology, illustrating the interplay between cardinal traits and socio-political impact. This study also expands the scope of forensic historical analysis, demonstrating how psychological theories can deepen the understanding of leadership in premodern contexts.

Future research could explore neuropsychological perspectives on extreme resilience in historical figures, linguistic sentiment analysis of archival records, and comparative studies with other

warrior-leaders exhibiting similar cardinal traits. By integrating psychological analysis with historical methodology, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how dominant personality traits influence leadership, governance, and long-term societal change.

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