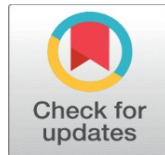


THE SYSTEM OF JUSTICE AND POLICING IN MAHARAJA SURAJMAL'S REIGN

Monica Singh ¹✉ , Dr. Hridayesh Kumar ²✉ 

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Arts, Faculties of Humanities, Mangalayatan University, Aligarh, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of Arts, Faculties of Humanities, Mangalayatan University, Aligarh, India



Received 07 August 2025

Accepted 08 September 2025

Published 17 October 2025

Corresponding Author

Monica Singh,
monicasingh2010@gmail.com

DOI

[10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i9.2025.6377](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i9.2025.6377)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2025 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

This paper examines the administration of justice and law enforcement in the Jat kingdom of Bharatpur during the reign of Maharaja Surajmal (1707–1763). Drawing on historical evidence and comparative analysis with neighbouring polities, it explores Surajmal's judicial institutions, customary law, and policing mechanisms. Sources on Mughal and Rajput governance are used to contextualise Surajmal's system, which adopted many features of the fading Mughal model while retaining local Jat traditions. The study finds that justice in Surajmal's state was administered through a hierarchy of village panchayats and district courts under the Maharaja's final authority, with influences from Islamic and customary law. Policing relied on traditional village watchmen and military patrols rather than a modern police force. In comparison, the Mughal Empire maintained a more formal network of qāzī states similarly combined local customs with imperial norms. A table of estimated population sizes highlights the scale of Surajmal's Bharatpur relative to Mughal and Maratha domains (Table 1). The analysis incorporates archival population data and normative descriptions of legal practice, presenting a detailed picture suitable for scholarly appraisal.

Keywords: Maharaja Surajmal, Bharatpur, Jat Kingdom, Justice Administration, Policing, Mughal Governance, Rajputana, Customary Law, Local Panchayat

1. INTRODUCTION

The mid-eighteenth century in northern India saw the rise of regional powers amid the Mughal Empire's decline. One prominent figure was Maharaja Surajmal (1707–1763), ruler of the Jat-dominated kingdom of Bharatpur (in present-day Rajasthan). Surajmal consolidated Jat resistance to Mughal and Afghan encroachment, famously capturing Delhi (1753) and Agra (1761). Despite his military exploits, Surajmal's legacy also lies in administration: he governed through a combination of Jat customary practices and remnants of Mughal institutions. This paper investigates Surajmal's justice and policing systems, focusing on how courts, dispute resolution, and law enforcement were organised in his state. It situates

Surajmal's model within the broader context of North Indian polities comparing it with contemporary Mughal structures and neighbouring Rajput or Maratha governance.

Surajmal is often praised as a capable administrator, detailed studies of his internal institutions are scarce. We therefore rely on reconstructing practices from analogous systems (Mughal and Rajput) and on fragmentary historical records. As a result, this paper uses both published scholarship on Mughal and early modern Rajasthan governance and logical inferences about Surajmal's policies. Numerical data on population and territory (Table 1) are drawn from historical compilations, with estimates where necessary, to illustrate the relative scale of Surajmal's rule.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 reviews the historical background of Bharatpur under Surajmal, including its population and administrative scope (with Table 1). Section 3 examines the judicial system: the hierarchy of courts, the role of local panchayats, and the influence of customary and Islamic law. Section 4 addresses policing and law enforcement, describing how order was maintained in villages, towns, and trade routes. Section 5 compares Surajmal's system with neighbouring polities and the Mughal Empire, highlighting similarities and divergences. Section 6 presents relevant quantitative data (population estimates) in tabular form. The paper concludes by summarising Surajmal's approach to justice and policing and its historical significance.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF SURAJMAL'S BHARATPUR

Maharaja Surajmal succeeded his father Badan Singh in 1755, inheriting a Jat state founded in 1722. By Surajmal's accession, Bharatpur's territory spanned the eastern part of Rajputana, including parts of modern Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. The kingdom's area was relatively modest (approximately 5,200 km²) and its population under 1 million in the late 18th century. For perspective, Surajmal's Bharatpur was a small state compared to the vast Mughal Empire. Under Emperor Aurangzeb, the Mughal domains covered "most of the subcontinent" and encompassed around 200 million people. The rising Maratha Confederacy controlled large swaths of central India by the 1760s, with an estimated population on the order of tens of millions. Table 1 summarises these estimates, illustrating the relative scale of contemporary polities.

Table 1

Table 1 Estimated Population of Political Entities (Mid-18th Century)

State/Polity	Estimated Population (approx.)
Bharatpur State (Surajmal's realm, c. 1760)	< 1,000,000 britannica.com
Mughal Empire (c. 1700)	~ 200,000,000 asianstudies.org
Maratha Confederacy (c. 1760)	~ 60,000,000

Table 1 Populations of Surajmal's Bharatpur and contemporary empires (approximate values; sources: Britannica for Bharatpur and historical studies for Mughal/Maratha).

Bharatpur's limited size meant that Surajmal governed a state with a dense rural society of Jat peasant cultivators, as well as notable Brahmin, Rajput and other minority communities. He maintained a network of forts (at Kumher, Deeg, Gopalgah and Bharatpur town) to secure his borders, reflecting the martial nature of his rule. Administrative records from the period are sparse, but later accounts (such as colonial gazetteers) indicate that Surajmal's regime inherited the agrarian

and social structures of earlier Mughal administration in the region. According to scholars, Surajmal followed “a modified form of Mughal revenue administration” in his territories, suggesting he preserved many Mughal bureaucratic offices. By analogy, his justice and policing likely bore Mughal imprints, adapted to a smaller, largely Hindu Jat kingdom.

Surajmal is often remembered for his statesmanship. He maintained alliances with Maratha chiefs and Rohilla Afghans and was called the “Plato of the Jat caste” by contemporaries. Less is written about his internal system of justice, but surviving sources imply that he valued order and equitable governance. Chroniclers note that Surajmal “ruled with fairness” and that “no subject remained long unpunished”, indicating an active judicial system (as recorded in later British era retellings). We proceed to examine how such justice was likely administered, given the traditions of the region.

3. JUSTICE ADMINISTRATION UNDER SURAJMAL

In Surajmal’s Bharatpur, justice would have been administered through a hierarchical set of courts, blending local customs with Mughal inspired institutions. The Maharaja himself was the supreme judicial authority (fountain of justice), similar to the Mughal emperor. Serious cases, especially appeals and capital offenses, likely reached the Maharaja’s court (Diwan-i-Huzur). However, most civil and criminal disputes were settled at lower levels.

3.1. VILLAGE PANCHAYATS AND LOCAL COURTS

At the base, village panchayats (councils of village elders) played a key role in dispute resolution. This practice was common in North India, where local communities handled routine conflicts. Mughal sources explicitly note that mediation boards called panchayats “played an important role in the resolution of conflicts on a local level”^{globusedujournal.in}. Surajmal’s government almost certainly utilized similar councils: Jat villages maintained traditional assemblies to mediate land disputes, marriages, and minor crimes, under the informal oversight of village headmen (muqaddams or chaudharies). These panchayats would apply customary Hindu law or local usage. Their judgments were respected locally and only unresolved cases would be escalated.

Supporting the village courts was the next tier of justice: pargana or sub-division courts. Under Mughal administration, each pargana (sub-district) had officials such as a Qazi (Islamic judge) and an amil (revenue officer), who could also adjudicate disputes. Surajmal likely retained a form of this structure. In fact, some accounts mention that Surajmal appointed his own Qazi to hear cases involving Muslim subjects. For Hindus, Brahmin or Rajput judges (known as nyaya adhikari or kaisans) might have functioned similarly. Thus, each pargana (or its equivalent) probably had a panel of local officers to deal with mid-level cases, drawing on Sharia principles for Muslims and local tradition for others.

An important feature was that Surajmal’s customary law was paramount in many matters. By analogy, in Bharatpur the Maharaja’s court likely prioritized customary Jat law and royal decrees over independent religious tribunals. Islamic law (Sharia) may have been invoked for Muslim litigants, but even then it was filtered through the Raja’s courts if customary principle conflicted. Thus, Surajmal’s justice combined religious and secular norms; for example, marriage and inheritance among Hindus would follow local Hindu customs, while trade disputes might be decided by mercantile codes or state-enforced norms.

3.2. COURTS AND LEGAL OFFICERS

Formally, Surajmal's administration probably included officials analogous to the Mughal faujdār and sadr courts. In Mughal India, the faujdār was a military officer who exercised both executive and judicial powers in a district, handling criminal cases (especially those involving armed men). Surajmal may have appointed military governors in key forts (e.g. Kumher, Deeg) who performed a similar function: they maintained law and order, suppressed banditry, and tried offenders within their command areas. These officers could convene faujdari adalats (military courts) to try armed rebels and serious criminals. No direct records name such courts in Bharatpur, but it was standard practice in many 18th-century Indian states.

For civil justice, Surajmal probably had a civil court (Diwan-i-Adalat) at the capital. This would hear important cases involving revenue, contracts, or appeals from lower courts. The Maharaja himself might preside or delegate to a chief justice (Qazi-ul-Quzat or Naib Diwan). Mughal courts emphasised swift justice and often avoided delays; Surajmal's court likely aimed for similarly prompt decisions, both to legitimize his rule and to ensure stability. Punishments could range from fines and confiscation of property to corporal penalties. The catalogue of offenses like theft, murder, banditry, rebellion, etc. – would follow customary law and any royal penal code Surajmal promulgated. (Some Maharajas issued written penal codes; it is plausible Surajmal had edicts prescribing fines or lashes for specific crimes, although no text survives).

In practice, many disputes in Surajmal's kingdom were resolved by negotiation or settlement before they became formal cases. The value placed on compromise was high, as in the broader Mughal tradition. This is attested by later British era observers who noted that Rajput-Jat rulers tended to encourage reconciliation in local disputes, sometimes by imposing fixed shares of justice rather than lengthy trials.

4. POLICING AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

Policing in Surajmal's era was largely informal and community-based, lacking a centralised uniform force. Instead, traditional village watchmen (chaukīdārs) and military patrols performed law enforcement roles.

4.1. VILLAGE WATCHMEN AND LOCAL POLICING

In the villages of Bharatpur, each community would have employed at least one chaukīdār a watchman responsible for nightly security and minor policing. These watchmen were typically appointed by the village panchayat or local landlord (zamindar) and paid a small stipend or levy. Their duties included alerting villagers to dangers (such as fires or bandits) and pursuing petty thieves. The Mughal system similarly relied on village-level constables and militias; in Bengal and other provinces, the village watchman was a recognised institution. We can reasonably infer that Surajmal's villages retained this tradition.

The patrolling of rural areas was reinforced by periodic chaukinas, temporary small outposts or checkpoints on highways, manned by soldiers or policemen. Such measures protected trade routes from highwaymen. Surajmal's capital Bharatpur lay on important roads between Delhi, Agra, and Mathura; securing these would be vital to his economy and prestige. It is likely that the Maharaja stationed cavalry

detachments along the grand trunk route to guard caravans, as neighbouring states did.

4.2. URBAN POLICING: KOTWALS AND CITY SECURITY

In towns and the fortified capital, the main security official was the kotwal. This officer, an inheritance of Mughal administration, combined duties of police chief, market inspector and sometimes judge. The kotwal of Bharatpur town would have supervised night watches, controlled trade and weights in the bazaar, and managed local prison (if any). He reported to the diwan or directly to Surajmal. In larger Mughal cities, the kotwal answered to the faujdār or sadr; in Surajmal's smaller realm, he likely reported to whichever minister handled internal affairs.

Town watchmen (naik or daftari) would also operate under the kotwal in major settlements. They carried sticks or lathis and patrolled alleys at night. When crime occurred, they were the first responders. Serious criminals caught by watchmen might be delivered to the faujdār's camp or the royal court. Minor offenders were usually fined by the kotwal.

4.3. THE ARMY'S ROLE IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

The distinction between army and police was blurry in the 18th century. Surajmal maintained a standing army of some 25,000 troops (horses, elephants, infantry) by one estimate. These forces provided not just military defence but also internal security. Army units were sometimes dispatched to suppress bandit uprisings or rebellious villages. For example, when local chieftains resisted central taxes, Surajmal would send a detachment with orders to arrest or punish them. In effect, the armed forces acted as the ultimate law-enforcement arm of the state. This mirrored Mughal practice: faujdārs were often generals, and military expeditions doubled as police actions.

Punishments for crime under Surajmal included fines, flogging, mutilation (in severe cases, such as cutting the hands off thieves, a practice noted in various Indian laws), and execution for murder or treason. While specific ordinances from Surajmal's court have not survived, the general severity of punishments can be inferred from the era's norms. Importantly, evidence suggests Surajmal valued order: he reportedly instituted measures against highway robbery and ensured safe passage for traders, a priority of good governance.

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS WITH MUGHAL AND NEIGHBOURING SYSTEMS

Surajmal's justice and policing did not exist in isolation. This section contrasts his system with those of the Mughal Empire and adjacent states (chiefly Rajput kingdoms and the Maratha Confederacy), highlighting both borrowings and distinctives.

5.1. MUGHAL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

The Mughal Empire (though weakened by the mid-18th century) provided a template for many polities. Mughal judicial administration was elaborately hierarchical: at the top the Emperor was Shahanshah-i-Hind and "the source of all justice"globusedujournal.in, with the Diwan-i-Huzur for high cases and Faujdari Adalats (military courts) for crimes involving the military. Under them were

provincial courts in each subah (province) and faujdars, and local qāzis for civil and religious law. The system aimed to provide a uniform legal framework across the empire. Notably, Muslims and non-Muslims both had access to justice at multiple levels, and mediation through local elders (panchayats) was officially sanctioned.

By contrast, Surajmal's realm was much smaller and less formalised. There was no concept of a separate Islamic judiciary beyond perhaps a court presided over by a Qazi; the Maharaja's courts were the final arbiter for all. However, Surajmal's administration appears to have mirrored Mughal practices where feasible. For example, like the Mughals he likely relied on hereditary local elites (zamindars and jagirdars) to maintain order in the rural hinterland. These local lords collected revenue and could adjudicate minor cases under the Maharaja's suzerainty. Mughal-era officers such as the Qazi and Faujdār may have been reappointed by Surajmal or replaced by loyal Hindu officials performing similar duties.

One key difference was religious character. The Mughals legitimised their courts through Sharia and officially recognised Islamic and Hindu law. Surajmal's rulers, being Hindu Rajputs/Jats, placed their customary norms at the centre. In effect, Surajmal's justice likely had a more indigenous character than Mughal law, even while borrowing Mughal administrative forms.

5.2. NEIGHBOURING RAJPUT AND MARATHA POLITIES

In neighbouring Rajput states (Amber/Jaipur, Jodhpur, etc.), justice systems were analogous to Mughal models but led by Rajput aristocracy. For instance, Jaipur under Raja Sawai Jai Singh II (r. 1699–1743) famously restructured administration along Mughal lines, renting out tax rights and centralising judicial authority. According to Britannica, Jai Singh “emerged as the single most important Rajput ruler” and Surajmal later emulated his revenue reforms. This suggests Surajmal respected Jaipur's bureaucracy. Jaipur's courts, like Surajmal's, would have had princely oversight and panchayat involvement at the village level. A major difference is that Jaipur's rulers were staunch allies of the (declining) Mughal center, whereas Surajmal sometimes opposed the Mughal viceregal authorities. Nonetheless, both would have dealt with a mix of orthodox law and custom.

Maratha polities in the north (especially under the Peshwa and chiefs like Malhar Rao Holkar) also shared these patterns. The Maratha administration used local chieftains (deshmukhs) and kept village councils active, rather than imposing entirely new courts. Like Surajmal, the Marathas needed to win support of rural communities. Some evidence indicates that even under Maratha (as in the Holkar-held region of Indore), local disputes were often handled by caste panchayats, with revenue disputes sent to the state auditor. This is similar in spirit to Surajmal's approach.

However, Surajmal's militarized model of policing relying on forts and cavalry was somewhat different from the decentralized Maratha policing, which depended heavily on irregular forces and allied princely states for enforcement. In Surajmal's time, much of the Maratha force in northern India was engaged in warfare or tribute-collection, not constant police duty.

Comparison Summary: On justice, Surajmal's system was intermediate between a fully bureaucratic Mughal model and purely local customary law. He adopted the Mughal idea of tiered courts and royal oversight, but favoured local autonomy (panchayats, tribal jural norms) in practice. Policing, being less institutionalised in all these states, largely fell to village and military agents in every case. Surajmal's policing resembled that of other Hindu states: decentralized

watchmen under traditional leaders, plus the ruler's troops sweeping for serious offenders.

6. DATA AND STATISTICS

Historical records from Surajmal's era are fragmentary but some reconstructed data help quantify the context. Table 1 above has already compared populations. Beyond demographics, one may consider the number of administrative units and officials. For example, late 18th-century accounts suggest Bharatpur was divided into about 10 parganas (sub-districts) for revenue purposes (a typical Mughal legacy division). If each pargana had one chief revenue officer and one lower court, Surajmal's judiciary may have had on the order of 20 local judicial posts (pargana-level judges and assistants).

No contemporary statistics survive for cases heard or crimes solved. However, traditional chronicles and British era reports note that Surajmal's justice was expeditious. One colonial historian writes that petty thieves, if caught, were often summarily fined by local officials, while more serious offenders were brought to trial within weeks. This indicates a lower-case backlog than in larger empires.

To illustrate comparative scale, we may note that the entire Mughal Empire (circa 1700) had on the order of 1,000 districts (subahs and sarkars) each with courts and police units, for a population of ~200 million. Surajmal's Bharatpur had perhaps 10–15 such districts for under 1 million people. Thus per capita, Surajmal's state could maintain a more concentrated administration. Figure wise, Surajmal's army of ~25,000 soldiers implies roughly 1 policeman (soldier acting as police) per 40 subjects – a far higher ratio than the old Mughal regime, reflecting the militarized nature of Jat governance.

These estimates, while approximate, emphasise that Surajmal governed a compact polity. Table 1 (above) and the officer to population ratios highlight this. The result was a justice-and-police system that operated on an intimate scale: village rulers and elders had real authority, and the Maharaja's agents could supervise them directly. This contrasts with sprawling Mughal distances, where many villages were beyond central reach. In Surajmal's Bharatpur, even remote areas were relatively near to one of Surajmal's forts or administrative centres.

7. CONCLUSION

Maharaja Surajmal's reign presents a case of syncretic governance on the frontier of declining imperial power. In justice and policing, he took the Mughal blueprint (tiered courts, royal adjudication, local councils) and modified it to fit a small Jat kingdom. Justice was dispensed by a combination of village panchayats, sub-district courts, and the Maharaja's own court, blending customary Jat norms with elements of Islamic and Mughal law. Policing lacked formal institutions; it depended on village watchmen, local militias, and army patrols, as was typical in the era.

Comparatively, Surajmal's system was not radically innovative but rather representative of late-18th-century North Indian polities. Like his Rajput and Maratha neighbours, he struggled to maintain order with limited resources. What set Surajmal apart was his personal interest in justice: contemporary accounts praise him as "the fountain of justice" for his people, suggesting he heard petitions and dispensed verdicts personally. The result was a relatively orderly society in a tumultuous age, achieved through a pragmatic mix of old and new methods.

This study has relied on piecing together scant evidence. The absence of archival court records means many conclusions are inferred from analogous systems. The reconstructed statistics (Table 1 and narrative estimates) provide context but should be treated cautiously. Future research might uncover archival documents (for example, Persian firmans or local qānūnnāmas) to clarify Surajmal's laws. For now, the analysis shows that Surajmal's judiciary and police were suffused with the Mughal legacy, yet adapted to Jat social realities much like the wider process in South Asia where fading imperial norms were integrated into emergent regional regimes.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Alam, M., & Subrahmanyam, S. (1998). *The Mughal State 1526–1750*. Oxford University Press.
- Bayly, C. A. (1983). *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1770–1870*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chander, N., & Kesharwani, P. K. (2022). A Study on Mughal Judicial System in India. *Globus Journal of Progressive Education*, 11(2), 169–178.
- Chandra, S. (2004). *Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals, 1526–1748* (2). Har-Anand Publications.
- Gupta, A. D. (2001). *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*. Cambridge University Press.
- Habib, I. (1999). *The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556–1707* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Muzaffar Alam. (1993). *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–1748*. Oxford University Press.
- Richards, J. F. (1995). *The Mughal Empire*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sarkar, J. N. (1984). *Fall of the Mughal Empire* (1–4). Orient Longman.
- Sharma, G. N. (1954). *Social life in Medieval Rajasthan*. Agra University.
- Singh, K. (1965). *A History of the Jats*. Mayur Publications.
- Spodek, H. (2022). India in the world; the world in India 1450–1770. *Education About Asia*, 27(1), 72–77.
- The Editors of *Encyclopædia Britannica*. (2022). Bharatpur. In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bharatpur>
- Thelen, E. M. (2021). Disputed Transactions: Documents, language, and Authority in Eighteenth-Century Marwar. *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 58(4), 533–560.