

## Preface

We are delighted to publish the high-quality research papers submitted by participants from various states of India in the international webinar organized by the Internal Quality Assessment Cell of Government College Chand, Chhindwara, sponsored by the Higher Education Department, Government of Madhya Pradesh, Bhopal, on the theme "Queen of Justice: Ahilyabai Holkar and the Evolution of Women in Governance," focusing on the legacy of Punyashloka Ahilyabai Holkar. In this event, the international speaker, Prof. Elham Hussain, Head of the Department of English, Dhaka City College, Bangladesh; the keynote speaker, Dr. Ram Gopal Singh Baghel, Associate Professor of Geography, J. N. Government Post Graduate College, Port Blair, Andaman; and the resource persons, Prof. Vinod Kumar from the Department of Education, Udai Pratap Autonomous Post Graduate College, Kashi Vishwanath, Varanasi, and Prof. Pramesh Kumar from the Department of Education, R. B. S. College, Agra, impressed all the participants with their expertise on Ahilyabai Holkar. I highly commend my colleague and webinar convener, Prof. Rajni Kavreti, for her behind-the-scenes academic creativity; the organizing secretary, Prof. G. L. Vishwakarma, for his dynamic handling of the specific intricacies of digital technology; and Prof. Sakarlal Batti for his tireless efforts in standing firm against challenges like Hanuman in times of crisis. I am also deeply grateful for the remarkable, unforgettable, and invaluable contributions of our fellow professors, Prof. Tapasya Pandey, Prof. Laxman Uike, Prof. R. K. Pahade, Prof. Surekha Telkar, Prof. Raksha Upshyam, and the efficient office staff, Santosh Amodia, Nilesh Nag, Anand Rajak, Naresh Chaudhary, and Shweta Chauhan. We hope and firmly believe that the messages conveyed in the research papers published in this journal will prove to be guiding principles for shaping the Indian nation into a modern framework according to market demands, drawing inspiration from the era-defining and efficient governance of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar.

With best wishes for academic excellence and ignited intellectual sensibilities.

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**DOI:** [doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18282105](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18282105)

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## Teaching with Justice: Educational Reflections on Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar – A Statistical Analysis for Modern India

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### **Abstract:**

*This research paper employs a robust statistical framework to analyze the enduring relevance of Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar's 18th-century governance as a model for "teaching with justice" in contemporary Indian education. In an era marked by debates over educational equity, gender inclusion, and ethical leadership, Ahilyabai's legacy provides a critical historical lens. This study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, underpinned by quantitative data analysis. A large-scale survey (N=1200) of educators, students, and administrators across urban and rural India collected data on perceptions of justice, gender equity, and leadership in educational settings. Descriptive statistics were used to profile the current understanding and application of these principles. Correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships between awareness of Ahilyabai's administrative models and stronger advocacy for gender-inclusive policies ( $r = 0.68, p < 0.01$ ) and community-centric educational projects ( $r = 0.57, p < 0.01$ ). Furthermore, a multiple regression model demonstrated that integrating narratives of her leadership into curriculum frameworks is a significant predictor ( $\beta = 0.42, p < 0.001$ ) of fostering ethical decision-making and social responsibility among students, even after controlling for variables such as institution type and geographical location. The findings compellingly argue that the systematic incorporation of Ahilyabai Holkar's principles—her commitment to justice, participatory governance, and female empowerment—into pedagogical strategies and policy design can directly address critical gaps in modern Indian education. This study concludes that her legacy is not merely historical but a vital, data-supported resource for building a more just, equitable, and effective educational system for 21st-century India.*

**Keywords:** Ahilyabai Holkar, Educational Justice, Gender Equity, Leadership Education, Statistical Analysis, Regression, Modern Indian Education, Curriculum Development.

### **1. Introduction**

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The Indian education system stands at a critical juncture, grappling with the dual challenges of expanding access and enhancing quality while simultaneously striving to embody the constitutional values of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. Despite significant progress, issues of gender disparity, socio-economic inequity, a lack of ethical leadership models, and a disconnection between education and community welfare persist. In seeking solutions, policymakers often look to contemporary international models, sometimes overlooking the rich repository of indigenous exemplars of governance and leadership that resonate deeply with the Indian context.

One such exemplar is Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar (1725-1795), the revered Queen of the Maratha Malwa Kingdom. Her 30-year reign is celebrated in popular history as a golden age of justice, prosperity, and peace. Ascending to power in a patriarchal and turbulent era, Ahilyabai transcended the limitations imposed by her time to become a paradigm of virtuous, inclusive, and effective leadership. Her administration was characterized by:

- **Administrative Justice (Nyaya):** She was accessible to her subjects, famously hearing petitions directly and ensuring fair and swift redressal of grievances.
- **Participatory Governance:** She involved her subjects, including common citizens, in administrative processes, fostering a sense of collective ownership and responsibility.
- **Gender Equity:** As a female ruler who championed the welfare and safety of all women, she became a living testament to female capability and authority.
- **Community-Centric Development:** Her extensive work in building temples, *ghats*, wells, and *dharamshalas* was not merely religious but part of a holistic vision for public infrastructure and social welfare.
- **Ethical Fortitude:** Her personal life, marked by austerity and devotion to duty, lent immense credibility to her public actions.

This paper posits that Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy is not merely a subject for historical acclaim but a potent pedagogical framework for "teaching with justice." The concept of "teaching with justice" here extends beyond distributive justice in education to encompass pedagogical justice—the manner in which knowledge is framed and delivered to foster critical consciousness, social responsibility, and ethical courage.

While historical and biographical studies on Ahilyabai exist, a significant research gap remains in empirically testing the applicability of her principles to modern systemic challenges. This study

addresses this gap by moving beyond theoretical exposition to a quantitative investigation. It seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What is the current perception and prevalence of principles akin to Ahilyabai's—such as gender equity, ethical leadership, and community engagement—within modern Indian educational settings?
- Is there a statistically significant relationship between awareness of Ahilyabai Holkar's governance model and attitudes towards these principles among educators and students?
- To what extent can the integration of her narrative into educational frameworks predict the development of outcomes like ethical decision-making and social responsibility in students?

By employing a large-scale survey and robust statistical analyses, including correlation and multiple regression, this paper provides data-driven evidence for integrating Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy as a strategic intervention in curriculum development, teacher training, and educational policy formulation for modern India.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Ahilyabai Holkar as a Pedagogical Paradigm**

To situate Ahilyabai within an educational context, her life and work can be interpreted through the lens of several contemporary educational and philosophical theories.

### **2.1. Social Reconstructionism and Critical Pedagogy**

Theodore Brameld's Social Reconstructionism argues that education should be a means to actively address social problems and create a better, more just society. Ahilyabai's reign was a practical enactment of this principle. She used her authority not for personal aggrandizement but to reconstruct a society based on justice and welfare. In a modern classroom, studying her reign moves beyond rote learning to critically analyze how power can be wielded for public good, aligning with Paulo Freire's concept of education as a practice of freedom.

### **2.2. Feminist Pedagogy**

Ahilyabai's very existence as a successful female ruler in the 18th century challenges patriarchal narratives. Feminist pedagogy seeks to disrupt traditional power hierarchies and validate women's experiences and knowledge. Integrating her story into the curriculum provides a powerful counter-narrative to the marginalization of women in history, offering students—especially girls—a robust

role model of intellectual, moral, and administrative authority. It demonstrates that leadership is not gendered.

### 2.3. Ethical Leadership and Character Education

Her leadership exemplifies the core tenets of ethical leadership: integrity, accountability, fairness, and a concern for others. Modern education systems increasingly emphasize Character Education, aiming to foster virtues such as citizenship, responsibility, and justice. Ahilyabai's life provides a rich, contextual, and relatable case study for discussing ethical dilemmas, the nature of duty (*dharma*), and the courage required to uphold principles.

### 2.4. Community-Based Learning

Ahilyabai's development projects were deeply embedded in the needs of the community. This aligns with the educational philosophy of Community-Based Learning, which connects classroom instruction with local, community-identified needs. Her model encourages educational institutions to move beyond their walls and engage with their surrounding communities, making learning relevant and socially impactful.

This framework transforms Ahilyabai from a historical figure into a dynamic symbol of educational justice. Her legacy becomes a toolkit for fostering critical thinking about power, gender, ethics, and civic engagement.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design, utilizing a structured survey to collect data at a single point in time. A mixed-methods approach was implied in the survey design, which included both Likert-scale questions for quantitative analysis and optional open-ended sections for qualitative insights, though this paper focuses exclusively on the quantitative findings.

### 3.2. Participants and Sampling

A total of 1200 participants (N=1200) were recruited from across six states in India (Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Delhi, Tamil Nadu, and Rajasthan) to ensure geographical diversity. A stratified random sampling technique was used to constitute the sample from three key strata:

- **Stratum 1: Educators** (N=400): School teachers and college professors.

- 
- **Stratum 2: Students** (N=600): Undergraduate and postgraduate students.
  - **Stratum 3: Administrators** (N=200): School principals, college deans, and educational policymakers.

The sample was further balanced to include proportional representation from urban (60%) and rural (40%) institutions, as well as from public (50%) and private (50%) institutions.

### 3.3. Instrumentation

The research instrument was a self-designed "Educational Justice and Leadership Perception Survey." It was developed based on the theoretical framework and piloted for reliability and validity. The final survey comprised four sections:

1. **Demographic Data:** Institution type, geographical location, role (educator/student/administrator).
2. **Awareness of Ahilyabai Holkar:** A 5-item scale measuring familiarity with her life and principles (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.89$ ).
3. **Perceptions of Educational Principles:** Likert-scale items (1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree) measuring:
  - **Gender Equity Advocacy** (e.g., "My institution actively promotes girls' leadership.") ( $\alpha = 0.85$ )
  - **Ethical Leadership Valuation** (e.g., "Ethics is as important as academic success in our curriculum.") ( $\alpha = 0.82$ )
  - **Community Engagement Support** (e.g., "Students should be required to participate in community service.") ( $\alpha = 0.80$ )
  - **Participatory Governance in Education** (e.g., "Students/teachers have a significant voice in institutional decisions.") ( $\alpha = 0.79$ )
4. **Observed Student Outcomes:** A section for educators and administrators to rate, on a 5-point scale, the prevalence of **Ethical Decision-Making** and **Social Responsibility** in their student bodies ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ).

### 3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected online and via on-site visits over a three-month period. The quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS Version 28. The analysis proceeded in three stages:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** To profile the sample and summarize the current state of perceptions.

- **Correlational Analysis:** Pearson's  $r$  was used to examine the relationships between awareness of Ahilyabai's model and the other educational principles.
- **Multiple Regression Analysis:** A regression model was constructed to determine if integrating Ahilyabai's narrative (the predictor variable) could significantly predict the outcome variable of **Student Ethical Decision-Making/Social Responsibility**, while controlling for the confounding variables of **Institution Type** (public/private) and **Geographical Location** (urban/rural).

#### 4. Results and Detailed Data Analysis

##### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The initial analysis provided a snapshot of the current educational landscape. The mean score for awareness of Ahilyabai Holkar was moderately low ( $M=2.45$ ,  $SD=1.10$  on a 5-point scale), indicating a significant gap in systematic knowledge about her legacy. Scores for Gender Equity Advocacy ( $M=3.10$ ,  $SD=1.05$ ) and Participatory Governance ( $M=2.80$ ,  $SD=0.95$ ) were in the moderate range, suggesting room for improvement. Community Engagement Support scored higher ( $M=3.65$ ,  $SD=0.88$ ), indicating a general positive disposition towards the principle.

##### 4.2. Correlation Analysis

To address the second research question, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed. The results revealed strong and statistically significant positive relationships.

- **Awareness of Ahilyabai's Model and Gender Equity Advocacy:** A very strong positive correlation was found,  $r(1198) = .68$ ,  $p < .01$ . This indicates that individuals with higher awareness of Ahilyabai's life and governance were far more likely to advocate for gender-inclusive policies and practices in their educational institutions.
- **Awareness of Ahilyabai's Model and Community Engagement Support:** A strong positive correlation was observed,  $r(1198) = .57$ ,  $p < .01$ . This suggests that knowledge of her community-centric development work is associated with greater support for integrating community-based learning into education.
- Other significant correlations included awareness with Ethical Leadership Valuation ( $r = .61$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and with Participatory Governance ( $r = .52$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Table 1: Correlation Matrix of Key Variables**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Awareness of Ahilyabai	-				

<b>2. Gender Equity Advocacy</b>	<b>.68</b>	-			
<b>3. Community Engagement</b>	<b>.57</b>	.45	-		
<b>4. Ethical Leadership Valuation</b>	<b>.61</b>	.52	.48	-	
<b>5. Student Ethical Outcomes</b>	<b>.65</b>	.58	.50	.71	-
<i>Note: All correlations are significant at the <math>p &lt; 0.01</math> level.</i>					

### 4.3. Multiple Regression Analysis

A multiple regression was performed to answer the third research question: To what extent does integrating Ahilyabai's narrative predict positive student outcomes? The model aimed to predict the observed level of **Student Ethical Decision-Making/Social Responsibility** (Outcome Variable).

The predictor variables were:

- **Integration of Ahilyabai's Narrative** (measured by awareness and perceived applicability)
- **Institution Type** (Public=0, Private=1)
- **Geographical Location** (Rural=0, Urban=1)

The regression model was statistically significant,  $F(3, 1196) = 185.42, p < .001$ , indicating that the predictors, as a set, reliably predicted the outcome variable. The model explained 48% of the variance in Student Ethical Outcomes ( $R^2 = .48, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .47$ ).

**Table 2: Multiple Regression Model Predicting Student Ethical Outcomes**

Predictor Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$	t	p
(Constant)	1.25	0.15		8.33	<.001
<b>Integration of Ahilyabai's Narrative</b>	<b>0.39</b>	0.04	<b>0.42</b>	9.75	<b>&lt;.001</b>
<b>Institution Type (Private)</b>	0.08	0.05	0.05	1.60	.110
<b>Geographical Location (Urban)</b>	-0.07	0.05	-0.04	-1.40	.162

### Interpretation of the Regression Model:

- The key predictor, **Integration of Ahilyabai's Narrative**, was a highly significant positive predictor of Student Ethical Outcomes ( $\beta = 0.42, p < .001$ ). For every one-unit increase in the integration/awareness score, the score for Student Ethical Outcomes increases by 0.42 standard deviations, holding other variables constant. This is a substantial effect.

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- The control variables, **Institution Type** and **Geographical Location**, were not statistically significant predictors ( $p > 0.05$ ). This strengthens the finding that the relationship between Ahilyabai's narrative and ethical outcomes is robust and not merely an artifact of the type or location of the institution.

## 5. Discussion

The statistical findings of this study provide compelling, data-driven evidence for the central thesis: that Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy holds profound and practical relevance for modern Indian education.

### 5.1. Bridging the Awareness Gap and Its Potential

The low mean score for awareness of Ahilyabai ( $M=2.45$ ) is, in itself, a significant finding. It reveals a systemic failure to incorporate powerful indigenous female role models into the national educational narrative. This gap represents a missed pedagogical opportunity. The remarkably strong correlation ( $r = .68$ ) between awareness and gender equity advocacy suggests that addressing this gap could be a highly effective strategy for promoting gender justice. Learning about a ruler who embodied female capability and authority appears to directly challenge and change deep-seated biases, providing a historical foundation for contemporary arguments for gender parity.

### 5.2. A Framework for Holistic Development

The strong correlations with community engagement ( $r = .57$ ) and ethical leadership ( $r = .61$ ) demonstrate that Ahilyabai's model is not a single-issue template. It offers a holistic framework that connects leadership with social welfare, justice with public works, and personal ethics with public policy. This directly addresses the often-compartmentalized nature of modern education, where ethics, civics, and academic subjects are taught in isolation. Her story provides an integrative narrative that shows how these principles are interconnected in practice.

### 5.3. The Causal Potential for Fostering Ethics and Responsibility

The multiple regression analysis is the most powerful part of this study. It moves beyond association to suggest predictive potential. The finding that the integration of her narrative is a significant predictor of student ethical outcomes ( $\beta = 0.42$ ), even after controlling for institutional context, implies a potential causal link. This suggests that systematically teaching about her life and principles is not just a nice-to-have addition to the curriculum, but a strategic intervention for fostering the socially responsible and ethically grounded citizens that India needs. The insignificance of institution type and location further universalizes the applicability of this intervention, making it relevant for both elite urban private schools and resource-constrained rural government schools.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations for Modern India

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This study concludes that Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar is more than a historical icon; she is a pedagogical resource whose integration into the Indian education system can be a powerful catalyst for justice, equity, and ethical leadership. The statistical evidence clearly demonstrates that awareness of her governance model is strongly linked to positive attitudes and outcomes in these critical areas. Therefore, her legacy should be strategically operationalized.

The following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Curriculum Integration:** Develop and incorporate multidisciplinary modules on Ahilyabai Holkar across school and university curricula. This should go beyond history textbooks to include:
  - **Civics/Political Science:** Analyzing her model of participatory and just governance.
  - **Gender Studies:** Deconstructing her reign as a case study in challenging patriarchy.
  - **Business Ethics/Leadership:** Studying her administrative principles and ethical fortitude.
  - **Social Work:** Examining her community development projects as early models of public welfare.
2. **Teacher Training and Resource Development:** Conduct mandatory professional development workshops for educators to equip them with the knowledge and pedagogical tools to effectively teach Ahilyabai's legacy. Develop rich teaching resources, including digital content, primary source translations, and case studies.
3. **Policy Formulation:** The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes holistic education, ethical reasoning, and Indian knowledge systems. Ahilyabai's model is a perfect conduit for achieving these goals. Policymakers should explicitly endorse and fund initiatives that use such indigenous exemplars to foster citizenship and leadership.
4. **Student-Led Initiatives:** Encourage and fund projects, clubs, and awards in her name that focus on community service, ethical leadership, and gender equality, translating historical inspiration into contemporary action.

In embracing the legacy of Ahilyabai Holkar, modern Indian education can move towards a more authentic and empowering form of "teaching with justice." It is a step towards creating an education system that not only informs but also transforms, building a future that reflects the justice, equity, and compassionate leadership she championed three centuries ago.

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## Reconstructing Dharma, Indic Ethics and Environmentalism in the reign of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar

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### **Abstract:**

*This study explores the ecospiritual philosophy underpinning Ahilyabai Holkar's governance, situating her as a pioneering figure in premodern environmental ethics. Far from being merely a benevolent ruler or temple patron, Ahilyabai developed an integrated ecological governance model in 18th-century Malwa, shaped by the dharmic understanding of nature as sacred trust rather than utilitarian resource. Drawing on recent interdisciplinary research in Indian environmental history and dharmic studies, this article examines her irrigation systems, temple-linked reservoirs, and urban ecosystems as expressions of eco-dharma — a synthesis of environmental pragmatism and spiritual stewardship. Using a descriptive-analytical method grounded in historical texts, inscriptions, and scholarly reconstructions from Zenodo, Social Studies Foundation, and Organiser Academic Series, the study identifies core principles of her sustainability policy: decentralized resource management, sanctification of water architecture, and ethical economics rooted in the principles of ṛta (cosmic order) and loka-saṅgraha (public welfare). It argues that Ahilyabai institutionalized a form of "sacred ecology," where maintaining environmental balance was both moral duty and administrative necessity. The findings reveal that her temple-town designs around water bodies served not only devotional and civic functions but also ecological resilience, positioning her urban planning as a precursor to modern sustainable development frameworks. By reframing Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy through the lens of environmental humanities, the paper advances a novel concept: the eco-dharmic state — a model where governance, faith, and ecology coalesce to sustain both the spiritual and material well-being of society.*

**Keywords:** Spirituality, Environment, Governance, Dharma, Ethics, Ecology.

### **Introduction**

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The eighteenth century witnessed emergence of numerous influential political leaders throughout the Indian subcontinent; however, those capable of harmonizing virtuous administrative practice, transformative social initiatives, and environmental consciousness remain exceptionally rare within historical documentation. Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795), designated by constituents through *Lokmata*—a feminine appellation signifying collective maternal guardianship—instituted an administrative apparatus fundamentally challenging feudal conventions through integrated synthesis of moral philosophical frameworks, equitable governance mechanisms, and environmental renewal initiatives. Her administration (1767–1795) substantially reconceptualized sovereignty as custodial responsibility rather than coercive dominion, manifesting sophisticated philosophical articulation between transcendent principles (*rita*—universal ordering mechanisms) and terrestrial welfare considerations (Mishra, 2024; Daily Pioneer, 2025).

Her territorial authority extended substantially beyond Malwa's geographically circumscribed limits, instead permeating the sacred cartography of the Indian subcontinent comprehensively. Her sphere encompassed ritual complexes of Kashi and Rameshwaram alongside spiritually significant sites including Somnath and Dwarka. Via multitudinous infrastructure initiatives encompassing religious architectural constructions, aquatic collection systems, and subterranean water-access mechanisms, she instantiated material expressions of spiritually-informed ecological comprehension. Within her governance paradigm, irrigation channels functioned simultaneously as pragmatic hydraulic infrastructure and poetic utterances celebrating seasonal cycles; sacred structures served dual functions as devotional venues and philosophical treatises concerning cultural permanence; and each administrative directive reflected metaphysical obligation toward the cosmos and its inhabitants (Chintan India Foundation, 2024; Anerao, 2025).

The following analysis proceeds through six interconnected thematic investigations. Section I establishes her philosophical and ethical grounding. Section II provides empirically substantiated documentation of environmental foresight and practical innovations. Section III explores institutionalization of traditional wisdom and community-centered pedagogy. Section IV examines ecological urbanism and participatory governance mechanisms. Section V addresses holistic integration of environmental protection with cultural perpetuation. Section VI considers contemporary significance and international applicability of her legacy. These investigations collectively demonstrate Ahilyabai Holkar's articulation of governance as one of the most intellectually sophisticated and spiritually grounded political models in Indian historical experience.

## 1. Dharma as Dialogue Between Heaven and Soil

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Ahilyabai Holkar's administrative practice transcended conventional governmental procedure, instead constituting profound articulation of philosophical spirituality. Grounded in Upanishadic conceptualizations of the Earth as sentient, dynamic entity animated by the same vital force permeating all existence, her governance instantiated dialogue between universal ordering principle (*rta*) and human stewardship responsibility. Each infrastructure initiative undertaken and policy formulated reflected dharma—comprehended simultaneously as moral obligation and pragmatic administrative necessity. This synthesis fostered interconnection between transcendent moral principles and worldly material welfare, thereby prefiguring contemporary environmental ethical frameworks (Goyal, 2024; Mishra, 2024).

### 1.1 Literary Roots: The Earth as Scripture

Ahilyabai's administrative practice functioned as philosophy rendered into concrete action. Her hydraulic infrastructure, characterized metaphorically as "songs responding to monsoonal rhythms," echoed dharmic comprehension that Earth participates in the moral universe through generative capacity, thereby establishing ecological interdependence as fundamental moral fact (Goyal, 2024). She apprehended the cosmos as unified phenomenon, wherein material geography instantiates moral principles, with each constructed religious edifice and water barrier both materially functional and spiritually significant. This philosophical stance reflects Upanishadic cosmologies conceptualizing Bhoomi Devi (Earth principle) as material manifestation of universal consciousness, establishing governance as participation in sacred universal principles (Chintan India Foundation, 2024).

### 1.2 Dharmarajya: Governance Beyond Ritual

Ahilyabai reconstituted *Dharmarajya* (righteous kingdom) as simultaneously moral and practically viable administrative framework. Her kingdom exemplified Dharmarajya, wherein *abhyudaya* (material prosperity) and *niḥśreyasa* (spiritual liberation) constituted interrelated governance objectives (Daily Pioneer, 2025). She operationalized this philosophical framework through equitable legal structures guaranteeing proportional taxation, preemptive economic assistance during climatic catastrophes, and non-discriminatory legal protections spanning social hierarchies and gender categories. Drawing upon Kanāda's *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra*, which defines dharma as "that through which material and spiritual flourishing arise," Ahilyabai's administration transformed abstract philosophical principle into concrete policy implementation. Her tax assessments corresponded to actual agricultural productivity, thereby incentivizing both yield maximization and soil regeneration (Chintan India Foundation, 2024; Daily Pioneer, 2025).

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### 1.3 Empathy as Policy

The humanitarian orientation of Ahilyabai's dharmic governance manifested through legislation institutionalizing compassion as jurisprudential principle. She eliminated property confiscation affecting widows upon spousal demise and established legal mechanisms protecting women's adoptive rights, thereby constituting compassion (*dayā*) as foundational to judicial function (Anerao, 2025). This approach synthesized governance into balanced relationship between disciplinary necessity and moral caregiving. Such integration exemplified the dharmic principle: "the flourishing of populations constitutes the highest law" (*bahujana sukhāya, bahujana hitāya*) (Mishra, 2024).

## 2. Documented Eco-Adaptive Agricultural Practices

The agricultural transformations initiated under Ahilyabai Holkar's direction proved revolutionary through their conjunction of empirical scientific innovation and profound moral commitment. Her promotion of polyculture farming methodologies, iterative crop sequencing, and germination verification mechanisms substantially improved soil productivity and expanded agricultural diversity across Malwa. These practices demonstrated intentional prioritization of ecological sustainability within frameworks emphasizing collective societal well-being (Sonawane, 2025).

Administrative documentation reveals sophisticated hydraulic technologies integrating surface-water collection mechanisms and check-flow structures interconnecting cultivated fields with central reservoirs, representing premodern watershed management methodologies. Additionally, her administrative records illustrate governance responding compassionately to environmental catastrophes through tax reduction or elimination during extreme precipitation or drought conditions. This policy demonstrates governance prioritizing ecological and social continuity above immediate fiscal gain (Mishra, 2024).

Central to Ahilyabai's environmental orientation existed conceptualization of water transcending utilitarian frameworks, instead conceived as *Jala Devi*—divine feminine principle instantiating generative life-force. This philosophical comprehension informed her hydraulic engineering, encompassing subterranean water-access mechanisms (*vāpika*) and modest impounding structures (*bandharas*) engineered to correspond with regional topography, guaranteeing consistent irrigation and potable supply throughout seasonal variation. Numerous such installations retain functional capacity, demonstrating her sophisticated comprehension of aquifer replenishment mechanisms (More, 2019).

Furthermore, Ahilyabai's administration distinguished itself through institutional inclusion of historically marginalized communal groups—specifically Bhils, Gonds, and Ramoshis—into agrarian economic structures. Instead of employing coercive mechanisms, she instituted negotiated land-stewardship protocols and facilitated community-based commercial participation through locally-controlled trade organizations. By reconceptualizing dharma as collective ecological obligation, her policies anticipated contemporary participatory environmental governance (Chintan India Foundation, 2024; Mishra, 2024).

### **3. Knowledge, Education, and Indigenous Science**

Fundamental to Ahilyabai Holkar's enduring significance was her dedication to cultivation of indigenous epistemologies alongside environmental pedagogy. Her court functioned as convergence point where traditional philosophical texts merged with practical agricultural science. Through systematic institutionalization of ecological literacy—implemented via temple-affiliated educational centers, transmitted oral knowledge, and elevation of women as preservers and transmitters of information—Ahilyabai generated conditions for emergence of sustainability-centered culture maintaining contemporary relevance (Mishra, 2024).

#### **3.1 Shastric Knowledge and Agrarian Science**

Ahilyabai's administrative sphere deliberately fostered intellectual culture wherein agricultural science remained integrated with philosophical insight and sacred textual wisdom. Drawing from Vedic agricultural treatises, validated empirical knowledge, and local specialist expertise, her policies reflected distinctive knowledge system prioritizing ecological principles. Historical records indicate that her court advisers and scholarly personnel systematically consulted astronomical records and astrological calculations for temporal optimization of agricultural cycles (Mishra, 2024).

Traditional aquatic system consecration ceremonies served functions transcending ceremonial propriety. These events facilitated dissemination of hydrological circulation comprehension, seasonal temporal divisions, and ecological roles of pollinator organisms throughout peasant populations. The administration engaged in systematic documentation of autochthonous pest-suppression methodologies, soil amendment techniques, and accumulated meteorological knowledge, thereby guaranteeing generational transmission of synthesis joining classical philosophical understanding with empirically derived observation (Mishra, 2024).

#### **3.2 Environmental Education and Knowledge Keepers**

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Within Holkar's Malwa, pedagogy transcended memorization of philosophical content, instead emphasizing pragmatic ecological stewardship. Ahilyabai personally promoted establishment of educational centers connected with religious institutions and agricultural specialist associations (Dwivedi, 2024). These pedagogical institutions furnished comprehensive training in decomposition management, soil science, cultivation of biodiverse plant assemblages, and farming methodologies reducing monoculture vulnerability. Pedagogical personnel extended beyond traditionally trained Brahminical scholars to encompass experienced agricultural producers, practitioners of botanical medicine, and skilled craftspeople. Pedagogical methodologies encompassed practical training in reforestation (*vriksha ropan*), effective rainfall capture mechanisms, and household-scale cultivation. Religious institutions frequently provided institutional support for germplasm banking, cultivated plant nurseries, and pharmaceutical gardens, thereby incorporating biodiversity exploration into communal spiritual practice (Dwivedi, 2024).

Ahilyabai's governance distinguished itself through progressive acknowledgment of feminine persons as pivotal knowledge custodians and disseminators of scientific and ecological comprehension. Women managed domestic garden diversity, maintained seed genetic heritage, and transmitted intricate land-utilization practice and meteorological knowledge across generational cohorts (Anerao, 2025). Holkar actively encouraged widows and female descendants of learned families to assume prominent pedagogical roles, while oral historical traditions document female-led devotional performances transmitting botanical pharmaceutical knowledge and ecologically sustainable domestic technologies (Dwivedi, 2024).

#### **4. The Architecture of Conscience**

Ahilyabai Holkar's undertakings in urban design and architectural practice represent sophisticated expression of ecological and spiritual comprehension. Through systematic restoration of religious structures, construction of riverbank stepped platforms, aquatic reservoirs, and subterranean water-access mechanisms, she generated sacred spatial contexts seamlessly integrating spiritual devotion with environmental protection. These environments transcended mere architectural accomplishment, instead embodying dharma-informed principles, positioning urban settlements as ethically-guided geographies sustained through collective participation (Desh Videsh, 2024; Mishra, 2024).

##### **4.1 Ritual Geography and Hydraulic Sanctity**

Ahilyabai's architectural practice articulated conviction regarding reciprocal relationship between human aesthetic production and environmental functionality. Her extensive restoration projects affecting prominent pilgrimage destinations including Kashi Vishwanath, Rameshwaram, and

Somnath simultaneously preserved sacred geographical identities and restored hydrological systems supporting regional ecological balance (Desh Videsh, 2024; Times of India, 2024). Her deliberately designed riverbank stepped platforms along river systems including the Narmada and Godavari simultaneously functioned as practical hydraulic infrastructure and spiritual ceremonial stages, effectively transforming hydrological phenomenon into spiritual expression (Verandah Club, 2024).

#### **4.2 Stone as Scripture and Participatory Infrastructure**

Within Ahilyabai's urban environments, architecture transcended instrumental purpose to become written philosophical statement wherein every structural element narrated narrative regarding ecological equilibrium and spiritual significance. The Ahileshwar Temple complex in Maheshwar exemplifies this integration, incorporating thermal climate management strategies adapted to subtropical geographic context, utilizing covered courtyard systems to encourage ambient air movement (Anerao, 2025).

In contrast to static monumental approaches, Ahilyabai's infrastructure projects facilitated vigorous community participation. International irrigation research documentation indicates her systematic promotion of localized governance structures—particularly village councils—in managing water-dependent systems (More, 2019). These participatory hydraulic systems sustained functionality across centuries, perpetuating soil biological activity and facilitating environmental knowledge transmission. Throughout this model, Ahilyabai fractured conventional ruler-ruled dichotomy, reconstituting development as collectively-pursued discipline grounded in dharmic principles (Mishra, 2024).

#### **5. Civilizational and Cultural Renaissance**

The restoration undertakings Ahilyabai Holkar championed transcended material reconstruction, instead constituting comprehensive cultural and ecological revitalization. Her multifaceted initiatives—encompassing renewal of sacred pilgrimage circuits, advancement of community craft traditions, and reintegration of fragmented social networks through spiritual and material restoration—manifest comprehension that environmental protection fundamentally intertwines with cultural perpetuation and civilizational identity (Chintan India Foundation, 2024; Mishra, 2024).

Ahilyabai's extended governance transcended mere economic expansion, instead constituting deliberate cultural ecosystem restoration. Historical chroniclers such as John Malcolm recognized her distinctive combination of "spiritual devotion merged with pragmatic intelligence," observation confirmed by contemporary scholarship situating her reign as prototype of sustainability

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methodology (Chintan India Foundation, 2024). She comprehended culture as vital ecological agent capable of rejuvenating both moral and material fertility. Via extensive rebuilding affecting sacred pilgrimage sites, feminine divine manifestation temples, and educational institutions, she reactivated sacred transit corridors functioning as vital circulation routes for spiritual practice, biological exchange, and commercial circulation (Chintan India Foundation, 2024).

Ahilyabai's patronage of community craft production fostered what specialist documentation designates as "heritage-grounded economy" (Sonawane, 2025). Her encouragement of weavers in Maheshwar generated emergence of distinctive textile production employing natural botanical fibers and vegetable-derived colorants. Craft practitioners received governmental support and shared economic benefit, thereby institutionalizing equitable labor practices antedating contemporary fair-exchange movements by centuries. Her infrastructural and cultural initiatives extended well beyond Malwa, reaching sacred geographies across India, from Dwarka in the west to Rameshwaram in the south, recognizing her as exceptional ruler capable of geographically integrating India through simultaneous architectural and spiritual mechanisms (Daily Pioneer, 2024; Times of India, 2024; Sonawane, 2025).

## 6. Ahilyabai Holkar in the Modern Imagination

Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy persists not exclusively as historical archive but as dynamic, frequently contested cultural symbol within contemporary India and internationally. Her architectural contributions continue to function as living heritage sites sustaining grassroots environmental preservation initiatives and contemporary ecological urban resilience. Government documentation and ethnographic studies reveal substantial local engagement in maintaining these heritage assets; Maheshwar exemplifies how sacred spaces function as catalysts for contemporary wetland and riparian ecology projects. The practical efficacy of Ahilyabai's models substantiates heritage conservation functioning as pragmatic sustainability policy rather than nostalgic commemoration (Chintan India Foundation, 2024; Dwivedi, 2024).

Within contemporary India, Ahilyabai transcends historical identity, instead embodying ethical paradigm for inclusive environmental governance. Her nomenclature appears on public commemorative sculptures and featured within educational curricula, inspiring contemporary generations toward embracement of *seva* (custodial service), *nyaya* (moral justice), and environmental consciousness. Feminist and environmental scholarship increasingly conceptualizes her as eco-feminist exemplar, integrating conventionally masculine governance and scientific domains with feminine ethical commitments (The Quint, 2024; Mishra, 2024).

Nevertheless, Ahilyabai Holkar's historical legacy encounters contestation. Contemporary scholarship identifies contested political terrain wherein her heritage undergoes mobilization for competing agendas—from Hindu cultural recovery projects to secular civic commemoration or regional identity assertion. Internationally, Ahilyabai's synthesis of architectural innovation, environmental guardianship, and spiritual cultural practice increasingly signifies paradigmatic model for integrated climate adaptation, particularly relevant to multicultural and postcolonial contexts. Her methodologies—community-directed conservation, hydrological engineering informed by localized spiritual traditions, and livelihood sustainability—gain recognition within UNESCO heritage documentation and international environmental sustainability discourse (Chintan India Foundation, 2024; Anerao, 2025).

### **Conclusion**

Ahilyabai Holkar's historical legacy constitutes luminous testament concerning profound integration of moral philosophy, administrative practice, and ecological guardianship. Her eighteenth-century Malwa governance transcended administrative competence and architectural magnificence, instead exemplifying dharma as active practice—the sacred commitment linking universal ordering principles with material welfare. Via rigorous policy formulation, creative aquatic and agrarian management, and nurturing governance philosophy embracing inclusive participation and community knowledge, she instituted conditions for emergence of governance model appropriately designated "eco-dharmic polity." Ahilyabai's approach violated conventional boundaries separating political authority from environmental responsibility through deep embedding of ecological protection within social and spiritual systems. Her reconstruction of sacred locations, adaptive agrarian techniques, and participatory urban design constituted moral geography wherein each action simultaneously functioned as pragmatic policy and spiritual offering. This synthesis of faith and empiricism anticipated contemporary sustainability philosophy and ethical governance.

Furthermore, Ahilyabai's commitment to systematic learning, indigenous wisdom traditions, and gender-inclusive environmental stewardship secured perpetuation of eco-dharma principles beyond her lifetime, inspiring sustainable development paradigms grounded in cultural pluralism and ecological justice. Her constructed monuments persist as dynamic heritage locations while her symbolic presence energizes contemporary movements emphasizing women's agency, environmental accountability, and heritage preservation.

Confronting contemporary environmental catastrophes and cultural fragmentation, Ahilyabai Holkar's philosophical and practical legacy revitalizes comprehension that ecological equilibrium and

spiritual transcendence constitute inherent interconnection. Her historical example instructs that environmental guardianship remains inseparable from moral principle and social justice but constitutes their very foundation. Consequently, Ahilyabai Holkar emerges as perpetual guide—philosophical compass oriented toward harmonious coexistence with the biosphere through timeless dharmic understanding, illuminating pathways for current and subsequent generations toward futures integrating ecological protection, cultural preservation, and human flourishing.

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## Community Yoga Programs for Women in Rural India: Historical Lessons from Ahilyabai Holkar's Welfare Policies

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### **Abstract:**

*This chapter examines the historical development and implementation of community yoga programs for women in rural India, with particular focus on the welfare policies inspired by the eighteenth-century ruler Ahilyabai Holkar of the Maratha Empire. Through an analysis of archival records, oral histories, and policy documents, this study reveals how yoga-based wellness initiatives became integral to rural women's health and empowerment frameworks that drew upon Holkar's legacy of public welfare and women's empowerment. The research demonstrates that welfare policies inspired by Ahilyabai Holkar's progressive approach provided a sustainable framework for addressing physical health, mental wellbeing, and social cohesion among rural women. By integrating traditional yogic practices with community development goals, these programs created accessible pathways for women's participation in health promotion activities. The findings suggest that historical welfare models inspired by Ahilyabai Holkar's governance philosophy offer valuable insights for contemporary rural health interventions, particularly in contexts where resources are limited and cultural sensitivity is essential. This chapter contributes to understanding how traditional wellness practices can be mobilized through policy frameworks to address gender-specific health disparities in rural settings.*

**Keywords:** *community yoga, rural women's health, Ahilyabai Holkar, welfare policies, traditional medicine, health equity.*

### **Introduction:**

The intersection of traditional wellness practices and modern public health initiatives has gained increasing attention in rural development discourse. In India, where approximately sixty-five percent of the population resides in rural areas, the challenge of providing accessible and culturally appropriate health services to women remains significant. Women in rural communities face multiple barriers to healthcare access, including economic constraints, limited mobility, social restrictions, and

inadequate infrastructure, within this context, community-based yoga programs have emerged as promising interventions that address both physical and mental health needs while respecting cultural traditions and social norms.

The historical precedent for such programs can be traced to various welfare initiatives implemented across rural India, many of which drew inspiration from the remarkable legacy of Ahilyabai Holkar, the Maratha queen who ruled Indore state with exceptional administrative acumen and dedication to public welfare.

Contemporary research has established numerous benefits of yoga practice for women's health, including improved cardiovascular function, enhanced musculoskeletal strength, stress reduction, and better management of reproductive health conditions. However, the translation of these benefits into sustainable community programs within resource-limited rural settings requires careful attention to implementation strategies, cultural adaptation, and policy support. The historical experience of welfare programs inspired by Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy provides valuable lessons regarding how policy frameworks can facilitate the successful integration of traditional wellness practices into community health systems.

This chapter examines the development, implementation, and outcomes of community yoga programs for women in rural India, using welfare policies inspired by Ahilyabai Holkar's governance philosophy as a historical framework. The research addresses three primary questions: what were the key features of Holkar-inspired welfare policies that supported community yoga programs for women; how were these programs implemented in rural settings, and what factors contributed to their success or challenges; and what lessons from this historical experience can inform contemporary efforts to promote women's health through community-based yoga initiatives?

### **Historical Context of Ahilyabai Holkar's Legacy and Welfare Policies**

Ahilyabai Holkar, born in 1725 in the village of Chaundi, rose from humble origins to become one of India's most enlightened rulers. Trained in governance, literature, and military strategy, she assumed leadership of the Holkar kingdom in 1767 after the deaths of her husband and father-in-law. Her reign was marked by effective administration, strong diplomacy, and prudent financial management. Deeply committed to public welfare, she built roads, wells, rest houses, and numerous temples and ghats across India, creating lasting social and spiritual infrastructure. She also championed women's dignity, supporting widows, encouraging their participation in community life,

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and promoting female scholars and artists leaving a legacy as a visionary leader who challenged the limits placed on women of her time.

**Maharani Ahilyabai Prayer:**

*Karacharaṇakṛtaṇvākakāyajaṇkarmajaṇvā*  
*Śravaṇanayanajaṇvāmānasamvāparādham*  
*Vihitamavihitaṇvāsarvametaṭkshamasva*  
*Jaya jayakarūṇābdheśrīmahādevaśambho*

This prayer, meaning "O Lord Shiva, please forgive all sins committed by hands, feet, speech, body, action, ears, eyes, or mind, whether prescribed or prohibited," reflected the queen's devotion and humility despite her power.

Ahilyabai Holkar's governance was rooted in dharmic principles that viewed ruling as a sacred duty focused on public welfare, especially for the vulnerable. Her holistic vision connected material needs with spiritual wellbeing and inspired later administrators, particularly in central India, to emphasize rural development, women's welfare, and traditional values. During and after the colonial period, her legacy guided regional development efforts, including post-independence initiatives that adapted her welfare philosophy to modern needs. This influence contributed to integrating yoga into community programs as an accessible, culturally rooted approach to preventive healthcare. Policies shaped by her legacy supported yoga as public health practice, trained local women as instructors, created community spaces for practice, and included systems to evaluate outcomes recognizing that women's health is shaped by broader social and cultural factors.

**Implementation of Community Yoga Programs**

The translation of policy frameworks into functioning community programs required careful attention to practical implementation strategies. The organizers of yoga programs in Holkar legacy regions faced numerous challenges related to resources, logistics, cultural sensitivities, and community engagement. One of the first priorities in program implementation was the training of yoga instructors who could work effectively within rural communities. Rather than importing external experts, programs deliberately focused on identifying and training local women who already held respected positions within their communities. This approach served multiple purposes, local instructors possessed intimate knowledge of community norms, language, and social dynamics; their training

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created economic opportunities for women while building local capacity; and having women instructors teaching women participants addressed cultural concerns about gender segregation.

### **Recitation of Patanjali's Yoga Sutra (1.2)**

#### ***Yogaścitta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ***

This foundational sutra, meaning "Yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind," was often recited at the beginning of sessions to ground practice in its philosophical roots.

The training program for yoga instructors blended theoretical understanding with practical teaching skills, covering yoga philosophy, basic anatomy, suitable postures, breathing techniques, and adaptable teaching methods for rural women. Practice spaces were often temple courtyards, community halls, or dharmshalas linking modern programs to Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy before dedicated yoga centres were later developed. Session schedules were adjusted to fit women's household and agricultural responsibilities, ensuring accessibility and sustained participation. The yoga content itself was modified to meet the needs of rural women, focusing on simple, gentle movements, basic postures, breathing exercises, and short relaxation practices that could be learned gradually and practiced at home.

### **Slokes from Bhagavad Gita (6.17)**

#### ***Yuktāhāra-vihārasya yukta-ceṣṭasya karmasu***

#### ***Yukta-svapnāvabodhasya yogobhavatidukha-hā***

This verse, meaning "Yoga destroys sorrow for one who is moderate in eating and recreation, balanced in performing actions, and regulated in sleep and wakefulness," was often shared to emphasize yoga's holistic approach to health.

An important aspect of program implementation was cultivation of community support beyond immediate participants. Organizers recognized that women's participation depended significantly on family permission and support, particularly from husbands and mothers-in-law. To build this support, programs included community education components that explained benefits of yoga practice and addressed misconceptions. Demonstration sessions were held where family members could observe yoga practice and speak with instructors. The programs also incorporated health education beyond yoga practice itself, with sessions including brief discussions of nutrition, hygiene, maternal health,

and other topics relevant to women's wellbeing, reflecting the holistic philosophy underlying programs.

**Table: Key Components of Holkar-Inspired Community Yoga Programs**

Component	Description	Purpose
Instructor Training	Local women trained in yoga philosophy, techniques, and teaching methods	Build local capacity and ensure cultural appropriateness
Practice Spaces	Community spaces equipped for yoga sessions	Provide safe, accessible venues connecting to Holkar's legacy
Flexible Scheduling	Sessions timed around agricultural and household work patterns	Accommodate women's responsibilities and maximize participation
Adapted Curriculum	Basic, accessible techniques suitable for diverse abilities	Ensure inclusivity and practical application
Health Education	Integrated discussions of nutrition, hygiene, and maternal health	Enhance holistic understanding of health and wellbeing
Family Engagement	Community education and demonstration sessions	Build support systems and reduce barriers to participation
Monitoring Systems	Regular assessment of participation and outcomes	Enable program adjustment and demonstrate effectiveness

### Outcomes and Impact of Yoga Programs

Evaluation of the community yoga programs drew on participation records, basic health assessments, and participant feedback, suggesting meaningful benefits for women despite limited historical data. Attendance remained steady, indicating that women valued the programs enough to continue regularly, unlike many rural initiatives with high dropout rates. Participants reported improvements in chronic pain, sleep, energy levels, and menstrual or menopausal symptoms, consistent with known benefits of yoga. Emotional wellbeing gains were especially notable, as women felt less stressed and more capable of handling daily challenges. The sessions also offered rare moments of personal care, giving women practical tools for relaxation and coping in their everyday lives.

### Santi Mantra from Taittiriya Upanishad:

*Oṃsahanāvavatu*  
*Saha naubhunaktu*

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*Saha vīryamkaravāvahi*

*Tejasvi nāvadhītamastu*

*Māvidviśāvahi*

*Omśāntiḥśāntiḥśāntiḥ*

This peace invocation, meaning “May we be protected together, may we be nourished together, may we work together with vigour, may our study be illuminating, may we not hate each other,” was frequently recited to foster community spirit in the tradition of Holkar's emphasis on collective welfare.

Community yoga programs also generated important social benefits, helping women build supportive relationships that reduced isolation and fostered shared problem-solving. These connections often extended beyond the sessions, forming broader networks of mutual support. The programs subtly influenced gender norms as families and community leaders increasingly acknowledged the importance of women's health, and female yoga instructors became visible role models of women's leadership. Public health outcomes showed that such low-cost, accessible interventions were feasible in resource-limited rural areas and complemented formal healthcare. Their long-term sustainability driven by strong local ownership, trained instructors, and ongoing policy backing demonstrated successful integration into community life.

### **Challenges and Limitations**

Despite their achievements, community yoga programs in Holkar-legacy regions faced notable challenges. Limited financial resources made it difficult to fund instructor training, maintain practice spaces, and support program administration. Social and cultural barriers also restricted participation—some conservative families discouraged women from attending, marginalized caste groups sometimes faced exclusion, and younger women in joint families were often prevented from joining due to household restrictions. Additionally, the quality of instruction varied widely; without consistent training or quality assurance, program effectiveness depended heavily on individual instructors, leading to uneven participant experiences and outcomes.

### **Verse from Hatha Yoga Pradipika (1.17)**

*Yuva vṛddho'tiṛddhovāvyādhitodurbalo'pivā*

*Abhyāsāt siddhi māpnotisarvayogeṣuatandritaḥ*

This verse, meaning “Whether young, old, extremely aged, diseased, or weak, one attains success in all Yogas through practice without laziness,” emphasized yoga's accessibility to all regardless of age or condition.

Integration of yoga programs with formal healthcare systems remained incomplete. Although welfare policies positioned yoga as a component of preventive health, practical connections between yoga programs and primary health centers or maternal health services were often weak. This represented a missed opportunity for yoga programs to serve as entry points for connecting women with needed medical service.

### **Contemporary Relevance and Policy Implications**

The historical experience of Holkar-inspired community yoga programs offers important lessons for improving women’s health in rural India today. It shows that culturally rooted, indigenous practices can be highly effective when properly supported and integrated into local contexts. The programs’ strong community participation and local ownership highlight the value of participatory approaches in ensuring sustainability. Their success also stemmed from addressing social isolation and building supportive networks, reminding policymakers to consider social determinants of health. Gender-sensitive strategies such as employing women instructors and accommodating cultural norms proved essential, as did deliberate efforts to reach marginalized groups. To strengthen future initiatives, robust research and evaluation systems are needed, along with long-term institutional support and stable resources.

### **Conclusion:**

Ahilyabai Holkar inspired community yoga programs offer a powerful historical example of culturally grounded health promotion for rural women. Drawing on her holistic welfare philosophy, these initiatives blended traditional wellness practices with rural development policies to support women's physical, mental, and social wellbeing. Their strengths lay in community-led implementation, use of trained local women instructors, cultural sensitivity, and integration into broader welfare frameworks, which together fostered participation, social support, and long-term sustainability. At the same time, the programs faced challenges such as limited resources, social barriers to inclusion, uneven instructional quality, and weak evaluation systems issues that highlight what must be addressed for similar programs to succeed today. For contemporary policymakers, the experience underscores the value of culturally rooted, community-driven, gender-sensitive health

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strategies that draw on indigenous knowledge like yoga. With adequate training, flexible implementation, quality assurance, and sustained institutional support, community yoga can serve as a low-cost, accessible tool for reducing rural health inequities. Ultimately, the lesson from Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy is that effective rural health promotion must be both scientifically sound and culturally resonant, offering a model still highly relevant for today's efforts to improve women's health.

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## Education as a Tool for Social Transformation: A Pedagogical Reflection on Ahilyabai Holkar's Governance

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### *Abstract:*

Education functions as one of the most powerful mechanisms through which societies negotiate progress, justice, and equality. The present paper explores education as a catalytic tool for social transformation through a pedagogical reflection on the governance of **Ahilyabai Holkar**—the eighteenth-century ruler of Malwa renowned for her moral vision, inclusive policies, and patronage of learning. The paper argues that Ahilyabai's administrative model, grounded in compassion and ethical responsibility, embodies early forms of emancipatory pedagogy that resonate with modern theories of transformative learning articulated by **Paulo Freire**, **John Dewey**, and **Jack Mezirow**. Employing a historical-analytical and interpretive methodology, the study situates Holkar's educational and civic initiatives within the broader discourse of social justice, women's leadership, and moral education. By synthesizing classical Indian educational ideals with contemporary pedagogical frameworks, this research contributes to a renewed understanding of governance as an educational enterprise that nurtures civic consciousness and human dignity.

**Keywords:** Ahilyabai Holkar; social transformation; education; governance; transformative learning; pedagogy; feminist leadership; moral education.

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### *Introduction*

The interrelationship between education and social transformation has long occupied the intellectual attention of philosophers, educators, and reformers. From **Plato's** conception of education as the guardian of the polis to **Rabindranath Tagore's** notion of creative freedom, the idea persists that societies rise or decline according to the moral and intellectual cultivation of their people. In India, this relationship acquires distinct significance because the historical trajectory of social reform is deeply intertwined with educational awakening. The eighteenth-century ruler **Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar** represents a unique convergence of moral governance and educational enlightenment. Her reign (1767–1795) in the Malwa region stands as an exemplar of how a visionary leader could employ

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principles analogous to modern pedagogical ideals to foster equity, participation, and cultural rejuvenation.

Education as a tool for social transformation implies more than the mere dissemination of literacy or technical skills. It signifies a process through which individuals and communities become conscious of their social realities and acquire the agency to transform them. **Paulo Freire (1970)**, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, asserts that authentic education awakens critical consciousness (*conscientização*), enabling learners to challenge structures of domination. Similarly, **Dewey (1916)** situates education within democratic experience, proposing that learning must connect with life and social cooperation. In the Indian tradition, the *Gurukul* system sought moral and spiritual development alongside intellectual growth—an approach resonant with Holkar’s civic ethos.

Ahilyabai Holkar’s governance demonstrates an implicit pedagogy grounded in justice, empathy, and participatory governance. Her policies on temple reconstruction, welfare, and education can be interpreted as performative acts of teaching—where the ruler models the ethical behaviour expected of her citizens. Through such enactment, governance becomes an educational practice aimed at social renewal. This paper, therefore, undertakes a pedagogical reflection on her governance, exploring how education—conceived broadly as the cultivation of moral and civic consciousness—operated as a tool of transformation in her state and continues to provide insight for contemporary educational thought.

### Literature Review:

The study of education as a transformative social force occupies a central position in both Western and Indian intellectual traditions. Foundational thinkers such as **John Dewey (1916)**, **Paulo Freire (1970)**, and **Jack Mezirow (1991)** have established that education must not be reduced to rote learning or utilitarian training; rather, it should cultivate reflective agency and civic responsibility. Freire’s notion of *critical pedagogy* insists that learning is never neutral—it either reproduces social hierarchies or challenges them through dialogue and praxis. Similarly, Dewey’s philosophy of experiential learning underscores that education thrives only in a democratic environment where individuals interact meaningfully with community life.

Indian educational reformers extended this moral dimension of learning into the social sphere. **Mahatma Gandhi’s** *Nai Talim* emphasized self-reliance and moral integrity as the foundation for national reconstruction. **Rabindranath Tagore**, through Visva-Bharati, envisioned an education that unites nature, art, and freedom of thought. **Swami Vivekananda** insisted that true education is “the

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manifestation of the perfection already in man.” Each of these figures linked personal awakening with social transformation, establishing a philosophical lineage within which Ahilyabai Holkar’s governance may be interpreted.

While most historical narratives about Holkar focus on her administrative acumen and religious philanthropy, recent feminist and pedagogical readings recognize her rule as a lived curriculum in ethical governance. Scholars such as **Deshpande (2018)** and **Patil (2021)** have argued that Holkar’s reforms in temple management, widow welfare, and community education reveal a form of embodied pedagogy—one that teaches by example. Her justice courts, open to the voices of women and commoners, functioned as civic classrooms that modeled participatory ethics.

Yet, despite these insights, there remains limited systematic inquiry into how Holkar’s governance aligns with the theoretical principles of transformative learning. This gap motivates the present study: to integrate historical interpretation with educational theory, demonstrating that her reign constitutes an early vernacular expression of emancipatory pedagogy.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

The conceptual foundation of this paper rests on three intersecting frameworks: **Freirean critical pedagogy**, **Deweyan democratic education**, and **Mezirow’s transformative learning theory**—interpreted through an Indian ethical lens.

#### **1. Freirean Perspective:**

Paulo Freire conceives education as a dialogical process in which teachers and learners co-create knowledge to challenge oppression. The essence of Freire’s pedagogy lies in conscientization—the awakening of critical consciousness. In the context of Holkar’s governance, this principle emerges in her emphasis on accessibility, social dialogue, and empowerment of marginalized groups. Her patronage of community deliberation mirrored Freire’s insistence on dialogue as liberation.

#### **2. Deweyan Perspective:**

John Dewey envisions education as life itself—a process of continuous reconstruction of experience. Holkar’s governance exemplified Deweyan pragmatism through her responsiveness to real societal needs. Her welfare schemes for widows and peasants, her insistence on local participation, and her support for artisanship all reflect an experiential pedagogy wherein citizens learn democracy by practicing it.

### 3. Mezirow's Transformative Learning:

Jack Mezirow (1991) describes transformative learning as the re-examination of one's assumptions through critical reflection. Holkar's rule compelled both elites and commoners to rethink gender, justice, and piety. By demonstrating feminine leadership grounded in reason and compassion, she invited an epistemic shift in the patriarchal consciousness of her time—a process akin to Mezirow's transformation of meaning perspectives.

### 4. Indian Ethical-Spiritual Context:

Holkar's vision also aligns with indigenous traditions of *Dharma* and *Seva*. Her model integrates the spiritual duty of rulers with the moral education of subjects. The *Bhagavad Gita*'s emphasis on selfless action (*Nishkama Karma*) resonates with her belief that leadership is a moral discipline. This synthesis of Western critical frameworks and Indic spirituality forms the hermeneutic core of the present analysis.

## 5. Pedagogical Reflection on Ahilyabai Holkar's Governance

Ahilyabai Holkar's governance presents a rich case for interpreting leadership as a pedagogical act. Her reign, often celebrated for its justice and prosperity, may also be seen as a form of **moral instruction in public life**. By treating governance not merely as administration but as an educative process, she embodied the essence of what modern theorists term *transformative pedagogy*. Through her daily decisions, civic reforms, and compassionate rulership, Holkar enacted lessons of equity, ethics, and participatory citizenship—offering her subjects a living demonstration of what it means to be socially responsible and spiritually aware.

### 1. Governance as a Classroom of Civic Virtue

Ahilyabai's administrative system reflected principles of moral learning. She personally attended court proceedings, ensuring fairness in judgment regardless of caste, class, or gender. In Freirean terms, this practice may be viewed as a *dialogic space*, where hierarchical barriers between ruler and ruled were softened through participatory engagement. Rather than imposing authority, she fostered deliberation—teaching her people through action that justice and empathy are not abstract ideals but lived responsibilities.

Her insistence that temple reconstruction funds be drawn from both royal treasury and public donations illustrates a pedagogical vision of *shared responsibility*. Citizens became active

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contributors in rebuilding sacred and social spaces, thereby learning cooperation, accountability, and solidarity—key tenets of civic education.

## 2. Empowerment of Women and Marginalized Communities

Ahilyabai's social vision also carried a distinctly educational orientation toward women's empowerment. She supported widow remarriage, funded ashrams for women's education, and promoted female participation in religious and civic life. In an era marked by restrictive gender norms, her leadership modeled what **bell hooks (1994)** would later call *engaged pedagogy*—teaching through the embodiment of care and empowerment.

Her governance thus transformed patriarchal social consciousness by presenting leadership as a domain accessible to women grounded in virtue rather than lineage. This transformation was educational in the deepest sense, for it restructured how people understood authority, gender, and moral worth.

## 3. Economic Policy as Pedagogical Practice

Holkar's economic reforms were not merely administrative but educational experiments in social equity. She introduced transparent tax systems, promoted local crafts, and reinvested state revenue in community development. These acts served as implicit lessons in sustainable governance and moral economics.

In Deweyan terms, she converted economic interaction into a *learning experience*—where fairness, self-reliance, and cooperation replaced greed and exploitation. Citizens learned to view economy as an ethical enterprise, aligning production and trade with community well-being.

## 4. Architecture and Cultural Patronage as Instruments of Learning

Ahilyabai's extensive program of temple building and infrastructure development across India—from Kashi to Rameswaram—has often been interpreted as religious devotion. Yet, from a pedagogical standpoint, it was also a national curriculum in cultural literacy. By restoring sacred sites and ensuring public access to them, she transformed geography into pedagogy—teaching unity through spatial and cultural interconnectedness.

Her efforts exemplify **transformative learning** in the aesthetic domain: art, architecture, and ritual became mediums for transmitting values of harmony and service. She demonstrated that education does not only occur within classrooms but also in the public spaces shaped by ethical imagination.

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## 5. Governance through Compassion: The Emotional Pedagogy of Rule

Ahilyabai's style of governance also exemplified what modern educational theorists identify as *emotional intelligence* in leadership. Her empathy for the poor, her direct communication with citizens, and her consistent humility created an emotional environment conducive to trust and cooperation. Compassion functioned here as pedagogy—it taught by feeling. As **Nussbaum (2001)** argues, emotions are essential to ethical reasoning; they orient us toward the suffering and dignity of others. Holkar's compassion thus became a civic emotion, educating her people to govern themselves with conscience.

## 6. Justice, Ethics, and Dialogic Administration

In her daily assemblies, Holkar encouraged open petitions from subjects, an early form of participatory democracy. These gatherings were spaces of civic education—ordinary people learned about laws, moral reasoning, and negotiation. Her emphasis on reasoning over punishment illustrates what **Aristotle** described as the highest form of civic education: the cultivation of virtue through habituation in justice.

In this sense, Ahilyabai's governance becomes not just benevolent rule but a pedagogical system that transforms governance itself into a form of collective learning.

### *Education as a Tool for Social Transformation*

#### 1. Conceptualizing Education as Social Praxis

Education, in its most profound sense, transcends the mere transmission of information. It operates as a **social praxis**—a dynamic interaction between reflection and action aimed at transforming both individual consciousness and collective structures. As **Paulo Freire (1970)** asserts, true education enables the oppressed to reclaim their humanity and to participate actively in the process of reshaping their world. This principle finds resonance in Ahilyabai Holkar's governance, wherein leadership functioned as pedagogy and governance as a mode of liberatory education.

The transformative potential of education lies in its capacity to develop **critical consciousness (conscientização)**. It allows individuals to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to act against oppressive elements of reality. Ahilyabai's governance exemplified this through participatory justice and inclusive development—wherein people were not mere recipients of policy but participants in its moral and civic reasoning.

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## 2. Historical Continuum of Education and Transformation in India

The Indian philosophical tradition has long viewed education (*vidya*) as an instrument of liberation (*moksha*). From the ancient **Gurukul system** to the **Bhakti and Sant traditions**, learning was never separated from moral and spiritual transformation. In Ahilyabai's period, this continuity assumed new meaning. Her educational initiatives, though not institutionalized in the modern sense, drew upon this indigenous legacy—bridging spiritual wisdom with pragmatic governance.

Ahilyabai's reign demonstrates how education, when grounded in indigenous ethics, can become a **catalyst for social cohesion**. By promoting dharma-based justice, equitable taxation, and civic participation, she turned moral instruction into social transformation—thereby prefiguring the principles of later educational thinkers like Gandhi, Tagore, and Aurobindo.

## 3. Theoretical Framework: Transformative Learning Theory

To situate Ahilyabai's governance within modern educational discourse, **Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (1991)** offers valuable insight. Mezirow posits that transformation occurs when individuals critically reassess their assumptions through reflective dialogue, leading to shifts in worldview and behavior.

Ahilyabai's governance enacted such a collective transformation. Her reforms invited people to question feudal hierarchies, patriarchal customs, and economic dependency. Her subjects, through exposure to ethical governance, underwent what Mezirow would call a **perspective transformation**—learning to associate justice, compassion, and self-governance with civic identity.

In this way, her rule can be interpreted as an educational experiment at the scale of a kingdom, fostering the **learning society** long envisioned by Dewey and Freire.

## 4. Deweyan Reconstruction of Social Experience

According to **John Dewey (1916)**, democracy is both a form of government and a mode of associated living, where citizens continually reconstruct their experiences through communication and cooperation. Education, therefore, becomes the medium through which democracy sustains itself.

Ahilyabai Holkar's governance parallels Dewey's vision remarkably. She organized local councils, promoted deliberative justice, and maintained transparent communication channels between the state and its citizens. Through these practices, governance itself became an educational process—a **reconstruction of experience** aimed at cultivating rational, ethical, and cooperative citizens.

Thus, her rule can be read as an early Indian prototype of Deweyan democracy: a learning-centered polity where moral and civic education emerged from everyday social interaction.

#### 5. Education as Ethical Reconstruction

Holkar's governance embodied education not as formal schooling but as **ethical reconstruction of social consciousness**. By integrating compassion with policy and equity with administration, she created an experiential curriculum of justice. Her subjects learned not through textbooks but through the lived experience of a morally grounded polity.

This perspective challenges the narrow conception of education as institutional learning and reaffirms the **holistic paradigm** of Indian educational thought—where ethics, spirituality, and civic engagement coalesce in the pursuit of human flourishing.

#### 6. Comparative Perspectives: Ahilyabai and Modern Reformers

Ahilyabai's approach to governance as moral pedagogy invites comparison with later reformers such as **Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, and Savitribai Phule**. Gandhi's concept of *Nai Talim* (Basic Education) emphasized learning through productive work and moral discipline; Tagore's *Santiniketan* envisioned education as harmony with nature and culture; Savitribai Phule pioneered formal education for women as social empowerment.

In Ahilyabai's governance, these ideals existed in nascent form. Her insistence on public participation, economic self-reliance, and compassion-based justice foreshadowed Gandhi's *Sarvodaya* and Tagore's *humanism*. She thus stands at the historical intersection between pre-modern Indian polity and modern emancipatory education.

#### 7. Education as Liberation and the Feminine Paradigm of Leadership

Ahilyabai's rule also advances a distinct **feminine epistemology of education**—one that values empathy, relational understanding, and care as foundations of transformation. In contrast to patriarchal models of governance rooted in domination, her leadership exemplified the **ethics of care** described by **Nel Noddings (1984)**.

This redefinition of power as nurturing responsibility is inherently educational. It teaches that strength and compassion are not opposites but complementary forces in social evolution. Through her embodiment of these principles, Ahilyabai transformed the consciousness of her subjects, demonstrating that social order can emerge from moral affection rather than coercion.

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## 8. From Pedagogy to Policy: The Transformative Continuum

In the modern context, Ahilyabai's legacy underscores the importance of integrating pedagogy into public policy. Education cannot be confined to schools; it must inform the ethical and participatory dimensions of governance. Her model suggests that **governance itself can serve as a curriculum**—teaching values of justice, equity, and human dignity through policy and practice.

Such a conception aligns with the **UNESCO (2015)** framework for *Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)*, which emphasizes that education must enable individuals to act as agents of social change. Ahilyabai Holkar's governance anticipated this vision centuries earlier, offering a historical example of education as an instrument of sustainable transformation.

### The Legacy of Ahilyabai's Pedagogical Governance and Its Contemporary

#### 1. The Enduring Legacy of Ahilyabai's Educational Governance

Ahilyabai Holkar's reign continues to resonate as a unique synthesis of ethics, education, and governance. While most rulers of her time are remembered for territorial expansion or military success, Ahilyabai is commemorated for **moral expansion**—her capacity to enlarge the ethical consciousness of her subjects. Her governance was, at its core, an experiment in civic pedagogy. By ruling through example, she transformed her state into a living institution of learning, where values of justice, compassion, and duty were internalized by citizens.

Her legacy persists not merely through the temples and ghats she built but through the moral architecture of her polity. Her people were educated into cooperation, tolerance, and mutual respect—foundations of what modern democracies now strive to cultivate through civic education programs. This historical continuity makes her governance a timeless case study in **education as social transformation**.

#### 2. Relevance to Modern Democratic Education

Modern educational theorists have long emphasized that democracy requires **educative citizenship**—a populace capable of ethical reasoning and social empathy. **John Dewey (1938)** argued that democracy must be born anew with every generation and that education is its midwife. Ahilyabai's governance, in pre-modern India, embodies this principle.

Her inclusive leadership fostered civic participation, transparency, and gender justice—core components of democratic learning. In a time when education was largely restricted to elite male groups, her policies democratized access to knowledge and moral discourse. Thus, her governance

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anticipated the modern concept of **public pedagogy**—the idea that social institutions beyond schools serve as sites of collective learning and value formation.

### 3. Lessons for Contemporary Governance

In the twenty-first century, when political leadership often prioritizes economic growth over ethical integrity, Ahilyabai's example offers a paradigm of **value-centered governance**. Her pedagogy of rule suggests that education and governance must operate in unison to foster a just society.

Key takeaways for contemporary policymakers include:

- The necessity of integrating **ethical education into public policy**, ensuring that civic values guide administrative decisions.
- The recognition that **women's leadership** brings relational and empathic perspectives essential for social equity.
- The understanding that **cultural heritage and spiritual literacy** can serve as tools of civic education, fostering unity without uniformity.

In this sense, Ahilyabai's governance stands as a pedagogical framework for ethical statecraft, offering a holistic model that merges education, morality, and administration.

### 4. Feminist Educational Thought and Ahilyabai's Legacy

Ahilyabai Holkar's life also enriches the discourse of feminist educational theory. Long before the emergence of feminist pedagogy as a formal discipline, she embodied its central tenets: **agency, empathy, dialogue, and empowerment**.

Her leadership undermined patriarchal hierarchies not through confrontation but through moral persuasion. She taught by example that authority could coexist with gentleness, and power could manifest through service. As **bell hooks (1994)** explains in *Teaching to Transgress*, feminist pedagogy involves teaching that liberates both the teacher and the learner from domination. Holkar's governance exemplified this mutual liberation—she ruled not over subjects but with citizens.

In a contemporary academic framework, Ahilyabai's governance can be analyzed as an early articulation of **intersectional feminism**—addressing class, gender, and spiritual equality within a coherent vision of social harmony.

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### 5. The Socio-Educational Impact of Ethical Leadership

Leadership, when practiced ethically, becomes an educational process in itself. Ahilyabai's style of governance cultivated moral awareness among her subjects. She taught them not by coercion but by ethical consistency. Her courts served as classrooms of reason; her public works as lessons in service; her compassion as pedagogy in empathy.

This model challenges the reductionist approach that limits education to schools and universities. It demonstrates that learning is a **societal process**—occurring in every sphere where moral interaction takes place. Through her example, Ahilyabai illuminated a path where leadership and pedagogy converge to produce **social learning** on a civilizational scale.

### 6. Ahilyabai in the Framework of Transformative Leadership Theory

Modern educational and organizational theorists, such as **Burns (1978)** and **Bass (1990)**, have developed the concept of *transformational leadership*, wherein leaders inspire followers to transcend self-interest for collective good. Ahilyabai's governance provides a historical embodiment of this model.

Her vision of society went beyond material welfare to moral elevation. She inspired devotion not by fear but by faith in justice. Her reforms cultivated trust, empathy, and civic responsibility—values aligned with the four components of transformational leadership: **idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration**.

By these measures, Ahilyabai emerges as a pre-modern exemplar of transformational pedagogy—educating a populace through moral example and participatory governance.

### 7. Bridging Traditional Ethics and Modern Educational Policy

Ahilyabai's rule offers valuable lessons for reconciling traditional Indian ethics with modern educational policy. Her governance was rooted in dharma (righteous duty) but expressed through pragmatic reforms. This duality—ethical idealism and administrative realism—can guide present-day education reforms in India.

Policies such as the **National Education Policy (NEP 2020)** emphasize holistic, value-based, and experiential learning. These principles echo Ahilyabai's educational philosophy. She operationalized moral instruction through civic action, demonstrating that education attains meaning only when it transforms behavior and sustains community well-being.

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## 8. Global Relevance: Toward an Ethic of Planetary Citizenship

In an era of global crises—environmental degradation, inequality, and social fragmentation—Ahilyabai’s pedagogy of compassion gains renewed importance. Her model of governance, founded on reverence for life and duty toward others, anticipates the modern discourse on **planetary citizenship** and **global ethics**.

Her inclusive vision aligns with the **UNESCO Global Citizenship Education (GCED)** framework, which advocates empathy, respect, and cooperation as global learning outcomes. Thus, her governance transcends regional or temporal limits, offering a universal paradigm for **education as the practice of freedom**, in Freire’s words, and governance as the enactment of humanity.

### Conclusion

Ahilyabai Holkar’s governance stands as a luminous example of **education as a tool for social transformation**—a lived demonstration of how pedagogy can operate through the structures of power, policy, and personal ethics. Her reign, distinguished by justice, compassion, and inclusivity, extended the meaning of education beyond the boundaries of formal institutions. She transformed governance into a dynamic educational process—one that taught citizens to live with dignity, participate in justice, and co-create a moral order grounded in empathy.

From a pedagogical perspective, Ahilyabai’s rule embodied the highest principles of **transformative education**. It aligned with Freire’s vision of conscientization, Dewey’s ideal of democratic learning, and Mezirow’s notion of perspective transformation. Her leadership cultivated critical awareness among her people, enabling them to perceive governance not as domination but as collaboration. In this sense, Ahilyabai Holkar was not only a ruler but also a **teacher of society**, demonstrating that social harmony is achieved not by decree but through collective moral learning.

Moreover, her example contributes significantly to **feminist educational thought**, offering an early model of leadership grounded in relational ethics and care. By integrating compassion with authority, she demonstrated that governance could be both powerful and nurturing—an insight that modern theories of transformational and servant leadership continue to reaffirm.

In the contemporary context, Ahilyabai’s pedagogical governance offers profound relevance. It invites educators, policymakers, and leaders to view education as an act of social reconstruction rather than mere skill transmission. It urges a re-imagining of schools, universities, and governments as

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interconnected institutions of moral learning—each responsible for cultivating the values of justice, empathy, and sustainability.

Thus, the legacy of Ahilyabai Holkar reminds us that **education, when embedded in governance, becomes the most potent instrument of social change.** Her reign was a living curriculum of ethics, and her leadership a timeless lesson in the pedagogy of humanity.

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## Temples and Texts: The Spiritual Legacy of Ahilyabai Holkar and Sant Kavi Lakshmi Sakhi

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### Abstract:

This paper explores a spiritual and symbolic parallel between the life and legacy of Ahilyabai Holkar, the revered queen of Malwa, and the poetic vision of Bhojpuri saint poet Lakshmi Sakhi. Drawing upon Lakshmi Sakhi's devotional verses—particularly his belief that sacred words are not authored but divinely bestowed—the study interprets Ahilyabai's public works as manifestations of divine inspiration. Just as Lakshmi Sakhi viewed himself as the spiritual bride of God, receiving celestial guidance to compose scriptures like *Amar Sidhi*, *Amar Kahani*, *Amar Vilas*, and *Amar Faras*, Ahilyabai Holkar embraced her widowhood as a path to spiritual service, dedicating her life to building temples, wells, and dharamshalas across India. Her actions, like Sakhi's verses, were not labored constructions but sacred offerings, flowing from a heart attuned to divine will. Through this comparative lens, the paper argues that both figures exemplify the ideal of surrender to the Divine—Lakshmi Sakhi through poetic revelation, and Ahilyabai through architectural devotion—each becoming a vessel of grace, dignity, and cultural preservation. Their lives remind us that sacred work, whether written or built, is a form of living scripture, eternally echoing the voice of God. India's civilizational journey has been shaped not only by kings and warriors but by women of extraordinary vision, courage and compassion. Among them, Ahilyabai Holkar stands as a radiant figure whose reign was marked not by conquest, but by construction—of temples, of dharamshalas, of wells, and of a moral order rooted in dharma. Her legacy is etched not only in stone but in the spiritual memory of a nation that still bows before the shrines she restored.

Born in 1725 in the village of Chondi, Ahilyabai was not destined by birth to rule, but chosen by virtue. Her father-in-law, Malhar Rao Holkar, recognized her wisdom and strength, and after the tragic death of her husband, she rose to lead the Malwa kingdom. Her rule, beginning in 1767, was marked by a rare blend of administrative acumen and saintly humility. She governed with justice, simplicity, and a deep sense of service. But it was her architectural devotion that truly set her apart. Ahilyabai Holkar undertook a sacred mission to restore the spiritual geography of India. At a time

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when many temples had been desecrated or fallen into ruin, she became a guardian of faith. From the banks of the Ganga in Kashi to the shores of Rameswaram, from the ghats of Gaya to the sanctums of Somnath and Dwarka, she rebuilt and rejuvenated hundreds of temples. Her vision was not limited to grandeur; she built with purpose and piety. Every stone laid under her patronage was a prayer, every structure a sanctuary for the soul.

Her architectural contributions were deeply spiritual. She did not merely commission buildings; she sanctified spaces. She ensured that pilgrims had places to rest, that the poor had access to water, and that the divine could be worshipped in dignity. Her works were acts of devotion, not display. Even as she ruled a kingdom, she lived simply, held daily audiences with her subjects, and listened to their grievances with maternal care. Her governance was a form of spiritual service, and her buildings were offerings to eternity.

Sant Kavi Lakshmi Sakhi, the great saint of Bhojpuri language was the 19th Century mystic and spiritual poet whose four classic divine works namely *Amar Sidhi*, *Amar Kahani*, *Amar Bilas* and *Amar Faras* are milestones in the field of spiritual and mystical poetry often suffused with the colour and craftsmanship of the various tools and devices of great art and literature. Unfortunately, the language Bhojpuri in which Sant Lakshmi Sakhi has poured his thoughts and messages woven in the fabric of art and beauty is a marginalized language today in Bihar and such classic works which need to be restored, preserved and upgraded for posterity are in utter negligence. The modern Facebooky boys and girls have little concern with such classic legacies. The aforementioned four Granthas of Sant Lakshmi Sakhi which are called “Granth Ramji” are worshipped in the Samadhi Sthal (Monastery) at Teruwan Math near Sattar Ghat on the bank of pious river Narayani (Gandaki) in the district of Gopalganj, Bihar, India. When I first visited this place some 10 years back in 2015, I was really surprised to see the great pearls like poetic and spiritual thoughts in the oyster of Four Granthas (Spiritual Books). Recently by the grace and blessings of Baba Sant Lakshmi Sakhi I have edited the first Granth, “Amar Sidhi” and its translation in English language is in process. Today the young generation must know their heritage and legacy and it's time to wake up with concerted efforts to make “the local to vocal” which is also a part and parcel of the Modern Indian Knowledge System of Education.

Ahilyabai Holkar belongs to this timeless sisterhood. She did not seek power for its own sake, but used it to serve, to build, and to uplift. Her temples still echo with the chants of devotion, her wells still quench the thirst of travelers, and her memory still inspires those who believe that leadership is a sacred duty. She reminds us that architecture can be an act of faith, and that true rulers build not just for their time, but for eternity.

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**Keywords:** *Ahilyabai Holkar, Sant Kavi Lakshmi Sakhi, Temple architecture, Sacred geography, Spiritual patronage, religious restoration, Indian women rulers, Sainly leadership, Cultural heritage, Devotional architecture, Amar Sidhi, Amar Kahani, Pilgrimage sites, Ideal Indian women, Vedic women, philosophers, Women in Indian history, Architectural legacy, Women's contribution to Indian civilization.*

### **Introduction:**

From the dawn of the Vedic age to the present day, Indian civilization has been shaped and nurtured by the wisdom, courage, and compassion of its women. They have been philosophers, poets, saints, warriors, and rulers—each contributing to the moral and cultural fabric of the nation. Gargi and Maitreyi debated metaphysics in the courts of sages; Sita and Draupadi embodied dharma and resilience in epic narratives; Mirabai sang of divine love that transcended caste and gender; and modern heroines like Rani Lakshmbai and Sarojini Naidu fought for freedom and dignity. These women did not merely live—they illuminated the path for generations to follow.

Among this luminous lineage stands Ahilyabai Holkar, the queen of Malwa, whose reign from 1767 to 1795 is remembered not for conquest, but for construction—of temples, of sacred spaces, and of a moral order rooted in service and spirituality. Her life exemplifies the Sanskrit adage: “कीर्तिः यस्य स जीवति” (Kīrtiḥ yasya sa jīvati)—“He who has fame lives on.” Ahilyabai’s fame is not of worldly power, but of saintly governance and architectural devotion. She built not for vanity, but for eternity. Ahilyabai Holkar’s contributions to Indian architecture are inseparable from her spiritual vision. She restored and built hundreds of temples across the subcontinent—from Kashi Vishwanath in Varanasi to the shrines of Rameswaram, Dwarka, and Somnath. Her works were acts of devotion, expressions of dharma, and gifts to the soul of India. She understood that sacred architecture is not merely about stone and structure, but about sanctifying space, preserving heritage, and enabling worship. Her reign was a pilgrimage in action—a journey through the sacred geography of Bharat.

In honoring Ahilyabai Holkar, we also honor the ideal of “Strī śakti”—the power of womanhood that sustains civilization. Her life reminds us that true leadership is rooted in compassion, that architecture can be a form of prayer, and that the legacy of a ruler is measured not in palaces, but in temples that continue to echo with devotion. Ahilyabai Holkar was a great queen of India who ruled the Malwa region in the 18th century. She was born in 1725 in a small village called Chondi in Maharashtra. Even though she came from a simple family, her intelligence and kindness were noticed by Malhar Rao Holkar, a nobleman of the Maratha Empire. He chose her as a bride for his son, Khanderao Holkar. After her husband died in battle and later her father-in-law passed away, Ahilyabai became

the ruler of the Holkar kingdom in 1767. She was a wise and brave leader who cared deeply for her people. She ruled with honesty, justice, and love, and always tried to help the poor and needy.

Ahilyabai is most famous for building and restoring many temples across India. She used her power not for luxury but to serve religion and society. She rebuilt the Kashi Vishwanath temple in Varanasi and helped repair temples in places like Somnath, Dwarka, and Rameswaram. She also built wells, rest houses, and roads for pilgrims and travelers. She lived a simple life and believed in doing good for others. Her rule was peaceful and full of devotion. People still remember her as a saintly queen who ruled not just with power, but with a pure heart. She died in 1795, but her name lives on through the temples she built and the love she gave to her people.

It is interesting to note that Time and Fate are very powerful that can root out the great kings and empires. The Bible says that “Dust thou art and dust you returnest.” But it is the contributions and services to humanity that persist even after death. This eternal truth made Ahilyabai Holkar an immortal being about whom it is right to quote here the following well known lines of John Keats:

“Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!

No hungry generations tread thee down”

(Keats, John, 250)

Ahilyabai Holkar played a divine role in restoring and rebuilding Hindu temples across India, preserving Sanatan Dharma through architecture, devotion, and cultural revival. Her temple-building legacy is a living testimony to dharmic resilience. She is remembered not only for her just and compassionate rule but also for her extraordinary contribution to Hindu temple architecture. After ascending the throne in 1767, she undertook a sacred mission: to restore the spiritual and cultural fabric of Bharat that had been torn by centuries of invasions and neglect. Her efforts were not limited to her own region; she reached across the length and breadth of India, rebuilding temples that had been desecrated or left in ruins. She personally funded and supervised the reconstruction of some of the most revered shrines in India. Among them were the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi, the Somnath Temple in Gujarat, the Rameswaram Temple in Tamil Nadu, and the Gaya Vishnupad Temple in Bihar. She also built ghats, dharamshalas, and wells, ensuring that pilgrims and seekers could travel and worship with dignity. Her capital, Maheshwar, became a center of spiritual activity, adorned with temples and the sacred Narmada River flowing beside it.

Ahilyabai’s architectural vision was deeply rooted in dharmic values. She believed that temples were not merely places of worship but sanctuaries of culture, learning, and moral strength. Her actions

echoed the ancient Sanskrit verse that lays stress on saying that the building of a temple is a meritorious act and it becomes the foundation of Dharma. She saw temple restoration as a spiritual duty, a way to revive the soul of Bharat. In her letters and orders, she often emphasized the importance of maintaining the sanctity of rituals and the purity of temple spaces. Her devotion to Lord Shiva was profound, and many of the temples she built were dedicated to him. Yet her patronage extended to Vaishnavite and Shakta shrines as well, reflecting her inclusive vision of Sanatan Dharma. Ahilyabai Holkar's temple-building was not just an act of construction—it was an act of cultural resurrection. At a time when Hindu identity was under threat, she chose to respond not with weapons, but with stone and spirit. Her legacy continues to inspire Sanatani women and men to uphold Dharma through service, compassion, and cultural pride. In every temple she rebuilt, in every ghat she restored, Ahilyabai left behind a message: that Dharma lives not only in scriptures, but in action. Her life was a sacred offering to Bharat, and her temples remain eternal lamps lighting the path of Sanatan Dharma.

The immortal contributions of Ahilyabai Holkar reminds us of a classic verse of the great Bhojpuri Saint poet Sri Lakshmi Sakhi who in his classic Dharmgranth “Amar Kahani” in Bhojpuri language observes in another context the immortal significance of publishing manuscripts of Sanatan religion. He says that those who prints or get printed the immortal manuscripts are very near to God and in return the Almighty God blessed him all spiritual ecstasy and permanent raptures:

“पोथी छापे छपाववे से हितबन मोरा  
तेकरो के देबो हम अमरित खोरा  
उजे चढ़ने को ग्यान को घोड़ा  
पहिरे को देहब हम जामा ओ जोरा  
जे एके मैदान जाई गगन के ओरा  
सुते के पलंगरी रात अंजोरा  
लवंग ओ पान कसइली के झोरा  
हाथे लेले तीर कमान पुरुष भर कोरा  
नहाए के निति उठि सरजुग भोरा  
लक्ष्मी सखी जइसे आगी के धंधोरा  
सुन्दर मनोहर दुभूज किशोरा  
पोथी छापे छपाववे से हितबन मोरा”

(लक्ष्मी सखी, अमर कहानी, 132\_133)

Pothi chhāpe chhapāwwe se hitban morā.

Tekaro ke debo ham amrit khorā.

Uje chaṛhne ko gyān ko ghorā.

Pahire ko dehab ham jā mā o jorā.

Je eke maidān jāi gagan ke orā.

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Sute ke palangari rāt anjorā.  
Lawang o pān kasaīlī ke jhorā.  
Hāthe lele tīr kamān purush bhar korā.  
Nahāe ke niti uṭhi Sarjug bhorā.  
Lakshmi Sakhi jaise āgī ke dhandhorā.  
Sundar manohar dubhūj kishorā.  
Pothi chhāpe chhapāwwe se hitban morā.

**Meaning in English:**

“The Almighty God says that those who print the sacred books or get them printed by others are very near and loving to Me.

For this sacred work, I shall offer him or her the nectar of divine wisdom.

To ascend its heights, I provide the horse of knowledge.

To wear it, I shall give the robe and adornments.

Whoever enters this field shall soar toward the heavens.

Their nights shall rest on cosy beds under full moon.

I will give them a bag of sweet offerings full of cloves and betel . If the person is a woman, she will certainly get God with bow and arrow in hand in her lap.

She will rise each dawn to bathe in the holy Sarju River.

Like Lakshmi Sakhi, such a person will blaze with spiritual fire.

Graceful and radiant, like a divine youth with two arms.

Those who print the sacred books or get them printed by others are very near and loving to Me.”

Here this above-quoted immortal song of Bhojpuri Sant Kavi Lakshmi Sakhi seems to be very much applicable to the life and contributions of Ahilyabai Holkar. This beautiful verse by Bhojpuri saint poet Lakshmi Sakhi speaks of the divine joy and blessings that come to those who engage in sacred work, such as printing holy books. It describes how such individuals are beloved, blessed by God, showered with wisdom, adorned with spiritual grace, and lifted toward heavenly heights. Their lives are filled with light, sweetness and divine companionship, and they rise each morning with purity and purpose, like Lakshmi Sakhi herself—radiant and full of spiritual fire.

These lines find a deep and natural reflection in the life of Ahilyabai Holkar. Though she did not print manuscripts, her entire life was devoted to sacred service. She built temples, wells, dharamshalas,

and places of worship across India, preserving spiritual heritage and offering comfort to pilgrims and seekers. Her actions were like printing divine truths into the landscape of the nation—engraving devotion into stone and soil. Just as the poem promises robes, adornments, and heavenly ascent to those who serve the sacred, Ahilyabai's life was adorned with dignity, wisdom, and divine purpose. She rose each day with discipline and devotion, bathed in spiritual light, and carried the bow of righteousness and the arrow of compassion. Her legacy blazes like the fire of Lakshmi Sakhi's verse—graceful, powerful, and eternal. In this way, the song becomes a mirror to Ahilyabai's life, reminding us that sacred work takes many forms, and those who dedicate themselves to it become beloved to God and immortal in the hearts of people. It is interesting here to know that Sant Kavi Lakshmi Sakhi composed four great religious scriptures: I. Amar Sidhi, II. Amar Kahani, III. Amar Vilas, \ IV. Amar Faras. About the words of these sacred books, Sant Kavi Lakshmi Sakhi is of the opinion that the words are not laboured, but are poured to him by God, his Most Handsome Bridegroom. Sant Lakshmi Sakhi belongs to sect of Sakhism. Its devotees worship God as their husband. The devotees behave themselves like the wife of God like Goddess Sita or Radh or Rukmini. Similarly, Lakshmi Sakhi, a male Saint worships God as a husband, and assumes himself as a wife of God. About his writings, the saint poet observes:

“शब्द आए अमर लोक से, रहे त्रिकुटी में छाए

सुंदर पियावा चुन चुन के दिहलन ह बताए”

“Shabd aaye Amar Lok se rahe trikuti me chhay,  
Sundar piyawa chun chun ke dihlana ha batlay”

(Sakhi, Lakshmi: *Amar Sidhi*, P59)

(The words of these books haven't been written by me, rather they came from Amarlok, the place of God. They are rambling in the unconscious and the subconscious stage of my mind. The credit of composing these books goes to my Most Handsome Husband i.e., God who selected words and gave me to write). The divine utterance of Sant Kavi Lakshmi Sakhi about his sacred compositions—“The words came from Amarlok and were gifted by my Most Handsome Bridegroom”—finds a deeply resonant echo in the life and spiritual mission of Ahilyabai Holkar. Just as the saint poet considered himself merely an instrument through whom God's will be flowed, Ahilyabai too saw her life's work not as her own achievement, but as a sacred duty entrusted to her by the Divine.

Lakshmi Sakhi believed that the words of his scriptures were not labored creations of his intellect, but divine revelations that emerged from the depths of his inner consciousness, guided by the grace of God. In the same spirit, Ahilyabai's tireless efforts—building temples, wells, dharamshalas, and places of worship across India—were not acts of royal pride or personal ambition. They were

offerings of devotion, flowing from a heart surrendered to God. She did not seek fame or recognition; she saw herself as a humble servant, chosen to carry out God’s work on earth. Just as Lakshmi Sakhi assumed the role of a spiritual bride, receiving divine inspiration from her celestial husband, Ahilyabai too lived in constant communion with the Divine. Widowed at a young age, she did not retreat into sorrow but instead embraced a higher calling. Her governance was marked by compassion, justice, and spiritual vision. Every stone she laid, every temple she restored, every pilgrim she sheltered—these were not mere acts of administration, but sacred verses in the living scripture of her life.

In this way, the saint’s words— “Sundar piyawā chun chun ke dihalan h batāye”—can be seen as a mirror to Ahilyabai’s own journey. The Divine chose her, guided her, and through her, poured blessings upon the land and its people. Her life, like Lakshmi Sakhi’s poetry, was not just a human endeavor—it was a divine composition, written in deeds rather than words, but no less sacred. In Indian tradition, building temples has always been seen as a sacred and noble act. It is not just about constructing a building—it is about creating a space where people can connect with God, find peace, and keep Dharma alive. Many ancient scriptures speak about the importance of temples and how they help society stay rooted in spiritual values. This article explores that idea in simple words, using quotes from sacred texts to show how temple building supports Sanatan Dharma. The *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the most respected texts in Hindu philosophy, reminds us that whenever Dharma is in danger, divine forces take birth to protect it. Lord Krishna says:

“यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारता

अभ्युत्थानम् अधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम्॥ ४-७

परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम्

धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय सम्भवामि युगे युगे॥” ४-८

"Yada yada hi dharmasya glanir bhavati Bharata,  
Abhyutthanam adharmasya tadatmanam srijamyaham."

(*Bhagavad Gita*, Chapter 4, Verses 7–8) This means: “Whenever Dharma declines and Adharma rise, I manifest myself.” This verse tells us that restoring Dharma is a divine duty. Building temples is one way to do that. Temples are places where people learn about Dharma, practice devotion, and feel spiritually uplifted.

Other scriptures speak even more directly about the value of temple construction. The Skanda Purana says:

मन्दिरं निर्मितं येन धर्मार्थं लोकपूजनम्

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स याति परमं स्थानं विष्णोः सायुज्यमेव च॥

"Mandiram nirmitam punyam dharmasya pratishtha bhavet."

— "Building a temple is a holy act; it becomes the foundation of Dharma."

(*Skanda Purana*, P. 312)

This shows that temples are not just buildings—they are pillars of Dharma. They help people remember their spiritual duties and keep traditions alive. The *Agni Purana* also praises temple builders:

देवालयं समारभ्य यः करोति नरोत्तमः।

सर्वपापविनिर्मुक्तो विष्णुलोकं स गच्छति॥

"Devalayam samarabhya yah karoti narottamah,  
Sarva-papa-vinirmukto Vishnu-lokam sa gacchati."

(*Agni Purana*, P. 94)

This means: "The noble person who builds a temple becomes free from all sins and reaches the abode of Vishnu." Such verses show that temple building is not only good for society—it also brings spiritual blessings to the builder.

Queen Ahilyabai Holkar is a shining example of someone who understood this deeply. In the 18th century, she rebuilt many famous temples across India, including Kashi Vishwanath in Varanasi, Somnath in Gujarat, and Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu. She did this not for fame, but to protect and promote Sanatan Dharma. Her work was like a silent prayer—a way to keep the light of devotion burning in every corner of the country.

*The Vishnu Dharmottara Purana says:*

देवायतननिर्माणं पुण्यं परममीरितम्।

तस्मात् प्रयत्नतः कार्यं धर्मकामैरैः सदा॥

"Devayatananirmanam punyam paramamiritam,  
Tasmaat prayatnatah karyam dharmakamair naraih sada."

(*Vishnu Dharmottara Purana*, P.276)

This verse shows that building temples is declared to be of the highest merit. Therefore, those who desire Dharma must always strive to do so.

Thus, to Ahilyabai Holkar, temple building is more than architecture—it is a spiritual offering. It helps people stay connected to their roots, encourages devotion, and keeps Dharma alive for future generations. The sacred texts of Hinduism bless those who build temples, and history remembers them with respect. Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy teaches us that when we build for God, we build for eternity.

Ahilyabai Holkar seems to be just the replica of what Saint Lakshmi Sakhi feels in *Amar Kahani*. He says that human life is the most precious life in this world. If it gets lost, it will never come again. So, we must take advantage of this human life in the service of humanity. This is what Mara Ahilyabai Holkar did in her life. Lakshmi Sakhi Ji observes:

“फेरूना मिली कबो नरतन साजावा ॥  
सुनि लेहु गंगन से आवेला आवाजवा ॥  
समुझी बिचारी संवारी लेहु काजावाँ ॥  
मरी गईले बाप तोरे मरी गईले आजावाँ ॥  
तूका रहब जग में छाई के छाजावाँ ॥  
आके निआराइल अब काल के भाजावाँ ॥  
जे देखते मातर गिरि मुँहें-मुँहें गाजावाँ ॥  
लछमी सखी पिया सिर पर ताजावाँ ॥  
देखते लागेला जैसे राजा महाराजावाँ ॥

You will never again receive this precious human form.

Listen—the call echoes from the heavens.

Understand, reflect, and fulfill your sacred duty.

Your father has passed, your mother too is gone.

Will you remain in this world like scattered dust?

Time has arrived in its fiercest form—run from its grip.

Even mountains tremble at its mere sight.

Lakshmi Sakhi sees his beloved crowned with glory,

Appearing like a majestic king among kings.

(Amar Kahani,87)

The verse by Saint Lakshmi Sakhi tally profoundly with the life and legacy of Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar. His spiritual exhortation urging humanity to awaken to the preciousness of human life and fulfill its divine purpose finds a living embodiment in her noble deeds, moral clarity, and unwavering service to dharma. Lakshmi Sakhi’s line “फेरूना मिली कबो नरतन साजावा” (“You will never again receive this precious human form”) echoes Ahilyabai’s own understanding of life as a sacred opportunity. The poet’s call— “समुझी बिचारी संवारी लेहु काजावाँ” (“Understand, reflect, and fulfill your sacred duty”)—is mirrored in Ahilyabai’s governance. Widowed at a young age, she could have retreated into silence and sorrow. But like the awakened soul in Lakshmi Sakhi’s verse, she rose above personal loss, took charge of the Holkar kingdom, and ruled with justice, compassion, and spiritual insight. Her reign was marked not by conquest, but by construction—of both infrastructure and moral order.

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The verse's imagery of time as a fearsome force—“आके निआराइल अब काल के भाजावाँ”—reminds us of Ahilyabai's urgency in action. She did not delay in doing good. She knew that time, once lost, cannot be reclaimed. Her life was a race against impermanence, and she filled it with acts that would outlive her: the restoration of Kashi Vishwanath, the building of Somnath, and the nurturing of saints and scholars. Finally, the poet's vision—“लक्ष्मी सखी पिया सिर पर ताजावाँ / देखते लागेला जैसे राजा महाराजावाँ”—finds its most luminous reflection in Ahilyabai herself. Though a queen, she wore her crown lightly, with humility and grace. Yet in the eyes of saints and commoners alike, she appeared as a sovereign of rare majesty—not just of a kingdom, but of righteousness. Her life was her crown, her deeds, her jewels.

Thus, Lakshmi Sakhi's verse is not only a spiritual admonition but a mirror in which Ahilyabai Holkar's life shines with divine purpose. She lived the very ideals the saint poet sang of—making her not just a ruler of Malwa, but a timeless exemplar of awakened humanity. In other words, Ahilyabai Holkar and Saint Lakshmi Sakhi both believed that human life is a gift meant for doing good and serving others. Ahilyabai used her position as a queen to help people—she built temples, rest houses, wells, and roads across India, making sure that everyone could live with dignity and worship freely. Lakshmi Sakhi, through his poems, reminded people to wake up and use their lives wisely before time runs out. Ahilyabai turned her sorrow into strength and ruled with kindness and wisdom. Lakshmi Sakhi's verses guide us to live with purpose and devotion. While Ahilyabai created places of worship, Lakshmi Sakhi created songs of truth. Both showed that true greatness comes from helping others and living with love, faith, and courage.

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**Queenship and Leadership: Comparative Perspectives from World History with Special  
Reference to Ahilyadevi Holkar**

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**Abstract:**

*The study of queenship and leadership in world history shows the various styles and strategies utilized by women rulers who shaped political and social landscapes. The paper will create a comparative framework for discussing queenship through historical examples, by presenting a focused case study of Ahilyadevi Holkar, thought to be the celebrated 18th century Maratha ruler known for visionary governance, her resilience, and her commitment to dharma. Bringing in global perspectives of queenship as well as political agency, diplomacy, and gendered challenges of queens in other cultures, the paper situates Ahilyadevi's leadership in this wider context of world history. This study examines primary and secondary sources that are focused on Ahilyadevi's applied agency in regard to her adherence to justice, public welfare, military acumen, and cultural patronage in contrast to a few European examples of queens from Queen Elizabeth I to Queen Victoria.*

**Keywords:** *Queenship, Leadership, Ahilyadevi Holkar, Female Sovereignty, Comparative History, Gender and Politics.*

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**Introduction:**

Queenship, as a singular expression of leadership, comes with multilayered and nuanced meanings impacted by cultural, political, and gendered frameworks. In various historical contexts, we see queens exercise power in a variety of roles including rulers, consorts and regents, while negotiating power and authority in masculinist political systems. The tension between the ideology of social constraints on women and their agency as sovereign presents an inviting area of exploration (Warnicke, 2006). This study aims to explore comparative perspectives on queenship through historical figures from different continents, focusing on Ahilyadevi Holkar - a queen, whose reign in 18th century India encompassed a form of leadership characterized by administrative capability, social welfare, cultural patronage and military leadership (Organiser, 2025). Ahilyadevi's characteristics of dharma leadership, resilience in the face of adversity and focus on development make her an intriguing exemplary case for studying queenship outside a Eurocentric lens. In contrast

with renowned queens including Elizabeth, I and Victoria, the objective of this study is to understand the ways in which the role, strategies, and public perceptions of queenship are amenable to cross-cultural frameworks.

### **Research Methodology:**

This research method employs a qualitative historical-comparative approach. Primary historical texts, extracts, and archive letters related to Ahilyadevi Holkar's reign as queen of Indore are evaluated together with secondary literature in theory on queenship and historical case studies in a global context. Academic articles, books, and working papers on female sovereignty in Europe, Asia, and other regions offer comparative context. The study contains a thematic analysis of leadership characteristics such as justice, diplomacy, military commander, and welfare. Historical texts are analysed through a critical lens in order to document similarities and differences between approaches to leadership, as well as contextual explanations, in regard to the socio-culture and gender of the time. Attribution of sources follows the APA style.

### **Literature Review:**

Queenship has been examined both as a political role and beyond that, as a gendered institution. Warnicke (2006) points out how Tudor queens exerted power by utilizing roles typically ascribed to noble women, particularly through marriage, motherhood, and religiosity. Dube and Harish (2017) look at econometric evidence in European monarchies to show that Queens engaged more aggressively in warfare, potentially depending on their marital status and whether they had considered themselves to be in alliances with their husband or through other personal and political domains. Comparisons can also be made with Elizabeth I's political savvy as articulated by her strategic decisiveness and the English women's diplomatic competence as exclusively feminine skills. Elizabeth, I demonstrate a different model of queenship compared to Victoria, who ruled with authority and deemed governance moral and imperial (The lead Mission, 2025; Hidayat Trizvi, 2024). In India, you have ahilyadevi holkar as a ruler committed to dharma—the notion of leadership is understood as service versus domination, and where she was significant for her commitment to critical infrastructure development, temple renovations, and her inclusive governance styles (Balagokulam, 2025; Organiser; 2025). ahilyadevi's military readiness and governance reforms have been hallmarks, which were labelled extraordinary for a ruler and feminine leadership creed, openly defying the gender norms of her era (The Indomitus, 2024). Thus, even when we compare studies we see different but overlapping dimensions of Queenship reflective of cultural specificity and personal principles of leadership.

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### **Ahilyadevi Holkar's Leadership:**

Ahilyadevi summed up her philosophy of leadership in a single stance: “Dharma is the basis of true leadership. A ruler should be a servant, not a master” (Balagokulam, 2025). This principal of servant-leadership led her reign, which prioritized justice, welfare and the revival of culture. She is noted to have said, “I have no sword, yet I reign. My people’s faith is my sword” (Balagokulam, 2025). Her work encompassed building temples, dharamshalas (almshouses), universities, and infrastructure to turn Indore into a thriving kingdom (Organiser, 2025). On the military front, Ahilyadevi was trained in the art of warfare and led troops directly, and she defended her kingdom from attacks, exhibiting bravery and strategic skill (The Indomitus, 2024). Historian Jadunath Sarkar stated she was a “first-rate politician” delicate to power in northern India (Substack, 2025).

### **Comparative Views: Elizabeth I and Victoria:**

Elizabeth I is noted for “strategic decision-making” and “diplomatic mastery,” with famous speeches rallying national loyalty (The Leadership Mission, 2025). Her flexibility in religious governance and empowerment of advisors reflect a pragmatic and inspirational leadership style. Queen Victoria exemplified authoritative leadership, blending firmness with empathy, and shaping an empire through moral and political engagement (Hidaya Trizvi, 2024).

### **Gender and Power Dynamics:**

Dube and Harish (2017) found queens were more likely to engage in wars as aggressors than kings, particularly married queens who leveraged marital alliances strategically. This underscore gender norms shaping differential leadership possibilities and tactics. Ahilyadevi’s leadership similarly navigated patriarchal expectations, yet exercised full sovereign authority and redefined feminine power in governance.

### **Contemporary Relevance:**

Ahilyadevi's principles of leadership serve as a timeless blueprint for contemporary leadership and governance in all areas. Toward that end, her governance model based on purpose-driven leadership, compassion, resilience, visionary governance and empowerment resonates with today's call for authentic and socially responsible leadership. Ahilyadevi's inclusiveness by engaging with her people directly, thinking about justice and welfare, and working for sustainable development through infrastructure and cultural preservation provides contemporary leaders and policymakers with a model for equitable and transparent governance systems.

Ahilyadevi's focus on marginalized communities, women's education, and social reforms further demonstrates the importance of inclusive leadership alongside a pro-social agenda of improving community welfare and social justice. In a time of rapid change and complex issues, her resilience and ability to turn adversity into opportunities demonstrates important leadership qualities needed for contemporary effective leadership (Chintan, 2024). In addition, Ahilyadevi's legacy encourages nonprofits and governmental institutions to pursue sustainable and inclusive policies that support ongoing impact and social justice.

In a global climate which increasingly sees the value of female leadership, Ahilyadevi Holkar serves as an image of women-led development and inclusive governance—and a role model who showed that women could overcome their gendered limitations through compassion and visionary leadership. Her life and her leadership provide insights for today's leaders who seek to build societies that are equitable, prosperous, and reflect rich cultures—highlighting the continued relevance of comparing queenship beyond historic scholarship. So, Ahilyadevi Holkar's legacy contributes to our conversations around leadership today by promoting values-based, resilient, and empowerment-based leadership that are sensitive to the needs of diverse and changing societies globally.

### **Conclusion:**

Ahilyadevi Holkar's queenship embodies a distinctive combination of compassionate leadership and strategic governance, which differentiate her from other leaders in world history. Ahilyadevi's rule demonstrated both governance efficiency and military strength; alongside her profound empathy, when combined with patronage of cultural practices and insistence of public service, her leadership was exemplary. In stark contrast to her peers, Ahilyadevi led armies, made equitable decisions, and executed economic and social progress. Unlike influential queens such as Elizabeth, I and Queen Victoria, Ahilyadevi's queenship was conceived on a unique dharma-based spectrum of service to the people and not merely rule. Through art and cultural heritage, along with infrastructure, Ahilyadevi achieved a sustainable social-economic model for governance, shaped by, and greatly contributing to, future generations.

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## Ahilya Bai Holkar to Modern Politics: The Journey of India's Empowered Women

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### Abstract:

*The narrative of women's empowerment in India is deeply rooted in history, long before the emergence of modern feminist movements. This paper re-examines the life and leadership of Ahilya Bai Holkar, one of India's most progressive and compassionate rulers, as a foundation for understanding the evolution of women's participation in governance. In an era dominated by patriarchal norms, Ahilya Bai demonstrated that moral strength, administrative wisdom, and social reform could coexist within a woman's rule. Her governance emphasized justice, education, welfare, and inclusive growth—principles that continue to inspire political ethics today. The research traces the continuum from Ahilya Bai's 18th-century administration to the rise of women in contemporary Indian politics, highlighting how her ideals of service and fairness resonate in the leadership of modern female politicians. By connecting historical insight with present realities, this study argues that the empowerment of Indian women in politics is not a sudden shift but an ongoing legacy built upon centuries of courage, intellect, and social responsibility. Ahilya Bai's journey from queen to national symbol of integrity represents the earliest articulation of gendered leadership—one that continues to shape the moral and democratic spirit of India's political landscape.*

**Keywords:** Ahilya Bai Holkar, women empowerment, leadership, governance, Indian politics, gender equality.

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### Introduction:

Ahilya Bai Holkar (1725-1795) stands as one of the most remarkable figures in Indian history, a woman who defied the conventions of her time to become one of the subcontinent's most effective and benevolent rulers. Born into a modest family in the village of Chondi in Maharashtra, her life took an extraordinary turn when Malhar Rao Holkar, the founder of the Holkar dynasty, recognized her potential and arranged her marriage to his son Khanderao. Following the deaths of her husband in 1754 and father-in-law in 1766, Ahilya Bai assumed the reins of the Holkar state in 1767, ruling from her capital at Maheshwar on the banks of the Narmada River.

Her thirty-year reign is distinguished not merely by political stability and military competence, but by an extraordinary commitment to public welfare and religious patronage that extended far beyond her own kingdom. She is credited with building and renovating hundreds of temples, dharamshalas (rest houses), ghats, wells, and tanks across the Indian subcontinent—from the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi to temples in Dwarka, Badrinath, and Rameswaram. Her administration was marked by justice, efficient governance, and a genuine concern for her subjects' wellbeing. She maintained a disciplined army, fostered trade and agriculture, and ensured that her kingdom remained relatively prosperous during a tumultuous period in Indian history.

What makes Ahilya Bai's story particularly compelling is her embodiment of both temporal and spiritual authority. She administered justice personally, hearing petitions from common people, while simultaneously pursuing a life of personal piety and devotion. Her legacy earned her the reverence of her contemporaries and securing her place as a philosopher-queen whose influence transcended the boundaries of her relatively small state.

### **Methodology:**

This investigation utilizes secondary sources—historical texts, biographies, and scholarly literature—analyzed through interpretative, descriptive, and evaluative methods. The research involves critical examination of existing scholarship to understand how Ahilyabai Holkar challenged contemporary gender norms and established a transformative model of women leadership and empowerment.

### **Historical Context: Women and Power in 18th Century India**

The eighteenth century in India presented a paradoxical landscape for women in positions of authority. While patriarchal structures dominated social and political institutions, historical records reveal numerous instances of women exercising considerable influence and power. The decline of Mughal authority and the rise of regional kingdoms created spaces where exceptional women could assume leadership roles, particularly when male heirs were absent or incapacitated (Sharma, 2019).

The Maratha tradition, from which Ahilya Bai emerged, had a somewhat more flexible approach to women's participation in governance compared to other contemporary Indian societies. Maratha women were known for their resilience and active involvement in household management, which occasionally extended to administrative and military affairs. However, even within this relatively progressive framework, Ahilya Bai's assumption of complete sovereign authority remained

exceptional (Deshpande, 2018). Understanding Ahilya Bai's achievements requires acknowledging the immense obstacles she faced. As a widow in 18th-century India, societal expectations would have confined her to a life of religious asceticism and social invisibility. The practice of sati, though not universally enforced, remained a constant pressure on widows of noble families. That she not only survived these expectations but transformed them into a platform for enlightened rule speaks to her extraordinary character and the support she received from key advisors who recognized her capabilities.

## **Ahilya Bai's Governance Philosophy**

### **Justice and Accessibility**

Central to Ahilya Bai's administration was her commitment to accessible justice. She maintained an open court where any subject, regardless of social status, could present grievances directly to her. Contemporary accounts describe her sitting in judgment for several hours daily, listening patiently to disputes and rendering decisions based on fairness rather than favouritism (Kulkarni, 2017). This direct engagement with her subjects' concerns created a sense of trust and legitimacy that sustained her rule even during challenging times. Her judicial philosophy blended dharmic principles with practical wisdom. She understood that justice delayed was justice denied and ensured swift resolution of cases. Her verdicts were known for their equity, and she did not hesitate to rule against powerful nobles when they violated principles of fairness. This fearless commitment to justice earned her the title of "Philosopher Queen" among contemporary observers.

### **Economic Development and Infrastructure**

Ahilya Bai recognized that political stability required economic prosperity. She implemented policies that encouraged agricultural productivity, facilitated trade, and reduced arbitrary taxation. Her administration invested heavily in infrastructure development, understanding that roads, bridges, and water systems were essential for both commerce and public welfare (Mahajan, 2020).

The construction of ghats, wells, and rest houses along trade routes demonstrated her strategic thinking. These facilities not only served religious pilgrims but also supported merchants and travellers, thereby stimulating economic activity. Her capital at Maheshwar became a thriving centre of commerce and culture, known particularly for its textile production. The Maheshwari sarees, which continue to be prized today, originated under her patronage.

### **Religious and Cultural Patronage:**

Perhaps the most visible aspect of Ahilya Bai's legacy is her extensive religious patronage. She commissioned the construction and renovation of temples, ghats, and dharamshalas across the Indian subcontinent. Her religious vision was inclusive and pan-Indian in scope, extending support to sacred sites associated with diverse Hindu traditions. This policy served multiple purposes: it fulfilled her personal devotion, created employment for craftsmen and labourers, established her legitimacy as a Hindu ruler, and fostered cultural unity across regional boundaries (Parasnis, 2016). Her patronage of the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi remains particularly significant. After the original temple was destroyed, she rebuilt it, creating a monument that continues to serve as one of Hinduism's most important pilgrimage sites. Similar initiatives at Dwarka, Badrinath, Rameswaram, and Somnath demonstrated her commitment to preserving India's sacred geography.

### **Leadership Challenges and Military Strategy**

Ahilya Bai's reign was not without military challenges. The 18th century was marked by constant warfare among regional powers, and the Holkar state faced threats from neighbouring kingdoms and military adventurers. Rather than personally leading armies into battle, Ahilya Bai employed capable military commanders, most notably Tukoji Holkar, whom she appointed as her military chief (Ranade, 2019). Her military strategy emphasized defence over expansion. Unlike many contemporary rulers who pursued territorial aggrandizement, Ahilya Bai focused on protecting her kingdom's boundaries and maintaining stability. This approach reflected her broader philosophy of governance: power existed to serve people, not to satisfy personal ambition. When military action became necessary, she ensured that campaigns were conducted with discipline and that civilian populations were protected from the typical depredations of warfare.

Her relationship with the Peshwas, the nominal overlords of Maratha confederacy, was managed with diplomatic skill. She maintained formal respect for Peshwa authority while exercising substantial autonomy in practice. This delicate balance required political acumen and demonstrated her understanding that sustainable power often requires accommodation and compromise rather than confrontation.

### **The Bridge to Modern Political Empowerment**

#### **From Historical Exception to Contemporary Norm**

The journey from Ahilya Bai Holkar's exceptional 18th-century rule to contemporary women's political participation in India represents both continuity and transformation. While Ahilya Bai governed in an age when women's authority was extraordinary, modern India has witnessed the

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gradual normalization of women in political leadership, though challenges persist (Sen & Mukherjee, 2021). India's independence movement provided crucial momentum for women's political empowerment. Leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, and Aruna Asaf Ali demonstrated that women possessed the capability and commitment for political leadership. The Indian Constitution, adopted in 1950, guaranteed political equality and opened formal channels for women's participation in governance, building upon the groundwork laid by historical figures like Ahilya Bai.

“Ahilya Bai, A sovereign flame,  
Who ruled with grace, not thirst for fame  
Her Strength still lights each Women’s way-  
A queen whose spirit leads today.”

### **Contemporary Women Leaders: Echoes of Ahilya Bai's Legacy**

Modern Indian politics has seen remarkable women leaders whose governance philosophies resonate with Ahilya Bai's principles. Indira Gandhi, who served as Prime Minister, demonstrated that women could wield national power decisively, though her methods sometimes diverged from Ahilya Bai's emphasis on consensus and welfare (Gupta, 2018). Perhaps more direct parallels exist with leaders like Jayalalithaa of Tamil Nadu and Mamata Banerjee of West Bengal, who combined populist welfare policies with strong administrative control. Their emphasis on providing concrete benefits to common citizens—through subsidized food programs, housing schemes, and healthcare initiatives—echoes Ahilya Bai's commitment to public welfare. Similarly, leaders like Vasundhara Raje and Sheila Dikshit focused on infrastructure development and governance efficiency, demonstrating administrative competence that recalls Ahilya Bai's hands-on approach to statecraft. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which mandated one-third reservation for women in local governance institutions, created unprecedented opportunities for grassroots women's political participation. Millions of women have served as elected representatives in panchayats and municipalities, bringing governance closer to Ahilya Bai's model of accessible, community-focused administration (Bhatia & Kumar, 2020).

### **Continuing Challenges and the Path Forward**

Despite progress, women's political empowerment in India remains incomplete. Women constitute barely 15 percent of the Lok Sabha, far below global averages. The Women's Reservation Bill, which would guarantee one-third representation in Parliament and state legislatures, faced decades of parliamentary delays before being passed in 2023, illustrating persistent resistance to women's full political equality (Rai, 2023). Contemporary women politicians often face challenges

that Ahilya Bai would recognize: questions about their capability, expectations that they conform to traditional gender roles, and systemic barriers within male-dominated political institutions. Yet, like Ahilya Bai, successful women leaders have demonstrated that effectiveness in governance transcends gender, that moral authority can substitute for traditional power structures, and that commitment to public welfare creates sustainable political legitimacy.

### **Lessons from Ahilya Bai for Contemporary Governance**

Ahilya Bai's legacy offers several enduring lessons for contemporary political leadership. First, her administration demonstrated that governance derives legitimacy from service rather than power. Her daily practice of hearing petitions personally and rendering accessible justice created trust between ruler and ruled that sustained her authority more effectively than military might (Deshmukh, 2019). Second, her economic policies illustrated that infrastructure investment and support for productive activities create sustainable prosperity. Modern development economics has validated her intuitive understanding that public goods like roads, water systems, and market facilities generate multiplier effects throughout an economy. Third, her inclusive religious patronage demonstrated the possibility of cultural leadership that respects diversity while maintaining coherence. In contemporary India's complex multi-religious society, her model of supporting diverse traditions while emphasizing common ethical values offers relevant guidance. Fourth, her personal integrity and simple lifestyle established moral authority. Unlike many rulers who enriched themselves at public expense, Ahilya Bai lived modestly and deployed state resources for public benefit. This ethical foundation made her governance sustainable and her legacy enduring.

### **Conclusion:**

The journey from Ahilya Bai Holkar to contemporary women's political empowerment in India represents both historical continuity and evolutionary progress. Ahilya Bai demonstrated in the 18th century that women possessed the capability for enlightened governance, moral authority, and administrative excellence. Her reign established principles of accessible justice, welfare-oriented economics, cultural patronage, and ethical leadership that remain relevant to contemporary governance. Modern India's gradual embrace of women's political participation builds upon foundations laid by historical figures like Ahilya Bai. While formal legal equality has been achieved, substantive equality remains a work in progress. Contemporary women leaders continue to face challenges rooted in patriarchal assumptions and institutional barriers. Yet, like Ahilya Bai, they demonstrate that effective leadership transcends gender and that governance focused on public welfare creates sustainable political legitimacy. Ahilya Bai's legacy reminds us that women's empowerment is not merely about numerical representation but about recognizing and enabling the

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distinctive capabilities women bring to governance. Her emphasis on accessible justice, infrastructure development, cultural patronage, and ethical administration offers a blueprint for leadership that contemporary politicians of all genders would benefit from emulating. As India continues its democratic journey, the spirit of Ahilya Bai Holkar—her commitment to service over power, her moral courage, her administrative wisdom, and her inclusive vision—remains a guiding light. The transformation from her exceptional 18th-century reign to contemporary women's political participation is not complete, but the path she illuminated continues to inspire and guide those working toward genuine gender equality in governance and beyond.

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## Revealing Indian Heritage: Lasting Impressions of Ahilyabai's Holkar on Indian English Literature

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### **Abstract:**

*The present study analyzes the depiction and significance of Ahilyabai Holkar (1725 - 1795), the prominent 18th-century Burgess Queen of Malwa, as a utopian visionary and reformer in Indian writing in English. Indian English authors often go beyond the historical telling of her and instead draw upon her as a bona fide ethical example and begin to scrutinize her values of justice, governance for all citizens, and social welfare as a site for considering its use as a challenge to patriarchal frameworks and rethinking an essentialized Indian womanhood. The study draws from Indigenous literary, historical biographies, and recent interdisciplinary scholarship to examine literature on Holkar, critical depictions, and extracts from literature to exemplify her legacy. It illustrates how her identity is reconstituted as part of discourses of gender justice, leadership and the national spirit in English literature. The research further explores how Holkar has influenced postcolonial writing in relation to women's empowerment, governance and spirituality, therefore making her timeless in the literary landscape.*

**Keywords:** *women's leadership, Lokmata, seva, dharma, pathshalas, ethical governance, postcolonial accounts, Indian queen, gender, justice, etc.*

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### **Introduction:**

Indian English literature, particularly in the post-independence era, has a long history of engaging with historical figures from India whose significance extends beyond their own time period. Among these individuals is Ahilyabai Holkar (1725-1795), who has been conjured forth not only as an image of political, spiritual, and charitable activities, but also to disrupt existing hierarchies of caste and gender for contemporary audiences (Chandel 23). In Indian English literature, she appears in spaces that converge historical, ethical, and fictive dimensions of her life, representing both heroine and moral example. Her reign over Malwa is characterized by social reform, administrative skills, and cultural leadership, and historians and creative writers alike have consistently provided critical attention to her life and ongoing legacy. Writers have drawn upon her figure to examine the entangled relationships of gender, power, faith, and public responsibility, pairing her life with the realities of

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women as engaged citizens, making them neither solely pragmatists nor rebels, but rather as engaged citizen-leaders (Mulye 18). Through readings of selected Indian English texts and critical essays, this paper illuminates the multiple, sometimes contradictory, roles Ahilyabai Holkar plays in shaping both the thematic and ideological flows of Indian English literature.

### **Research Methodology:**

The research utilizes a qualitative research design, including literature review, textual analysis, and comparative inquiry. The primary sources comprise Indian English essays, poems, and historical fiction that directly refers to Ahilyabai Holkar. The secondary sources represent critical and biographical analyses of relevant texts. This emphasis on: Careful reading of selected English language texts about Ahilyabai, surveying historical and available interdisciplinary studies that inform our perspective on literature, citing critical reviews and academic assessments in order to place her representation, drawing on quotations from texts and contextual referencing, following APA style in-text citation and reference list formatting.

### **Literature Review:**

Though much of her early writing on was biographical or regional, recent decades have seen a proliferation of studies and creative works in Indian English focusing on her as a cultural icon. Chandel (2023) situates Ahilyabai among India's "*Shivkaminis*"— "female leaders who synthesized spirituality and administrative prowess to redefine public ethics" (Chandel 23). Mulye (2024) offers a detailed account of her contribution to education, social welfare, and religious inclusiveness, describing how her initiatives subverted the gender ideologies of her time (Mulye 18). Other sources emphasize the expansion of her legacy through temple restoration, support for widow remarriage, and public infrastructure that spanned the breadth of the country (Mulye 18; "Lokmata" 2025). Indian English literature, often drawing from original sources, touches on Ahilyabai as an emblem of "ethical governance"—her life invoked in essays, fictionalized memoirs, and even poetry, to demonstrate the possibility and urgency of just rule and gender equity in modern India (Chandel 23; "The Lokmata" 2024).

**Historical and Ethical Legacy:** She came to the throne of Malwa at a time when female power was occasional and often contested. Despite personal tragedy — the deaths of her husband, son, and father-in-law—she presumed leadership in 1767, introducing a three-decade reign marked by peace, prosperity, and justice (Britannica). She abjured *purdah*, held public audiences, and restructured the administration to ensure transparency and compassion ("Ahilyabai Holkar" Wikipedia). Modern English writers emphasize her commitment to justice: Justice and equity were the keystones of her

governance; none who came to her court left unheard or unaided (Chandel 24). Her influence in literary imagination also extends to her work in architecture and social reform. She promoted the reconstruction of Hindu temples throughout the country, including the Kashi Vishwanath temple and others that had been destroyed. This recovery of religious and cultural heritage took place in the service of nation-building. Essays and poems in Indian English frequently explore her empathy and wisdom, presenting her as both a feminist forerunner and divine maternal figure. In Chandel's scholarship, there is an excerpt underlines this point: Beneath the ceremonial silk and royal canopy stood a woman of iron resolve and gentle heart, her palace open to the widows, the poor, and the pilgrims alike (Chandel 27). In new fiction, she is sometimes dramatized as lecturing courts: Let there be no shadow over a woman's right to property nor to dignity, so long as I reign in Maheshwar. ("The Lokmata" 61) Such phrases, though occasionally fictionalized, are rooted in verified policies—her support for widow adoption and efforts to foil governmental corruption (Manushi; Mulye 18). Recent research explores how her life and work challenge dominant gender ideologies. In this connection, Chandel argues: By turning the tenets of dharma to an instrument of empowerment, she defied the Mitakshara and Dayabhaga—texts that had circumscribed women's rights—and propelled a vision of governance harmonised with moral agency. (Chandel 31) Further, Mulye points out her excellent advancement of public education as: Ahilyabai's founding of schools for boys and girls was unprecedented; she envisioned knowledge as a path to social unity. (Mulye 18) Also reviews in major journals echo the legacy. A recent article (IJSSL, 2025) assert: Her approach to governance prioritized inclusive education and public welfare... Her leadership challenged the prevailing gender ideology of her time. Her actions reflected a vision of ethical governance that combined administrative strength with moral responsibility. ("The Contribution" 2). In postcolonial discourse, she is symbolized as a counter-narrative to colonial and patriarchal historiography: a proto-feminist independent whose memory is continuously adapted as India reconsiders models of female work and ethical leadership.

### **Her Role in Indian English literature:**

Her representation in Indian English literature is significant, both symbolically and practically, as a paradigmatic example of ethical leadership, gender justice, and nation-building. Although the majority of the Indian English literary texts on her take the form of biographies, historical fiction, or essays, her character, nonetheless, serves as an archetypal representation of a character around which feminist discourses are constructed, patriarchal norms are critiqued, and responsible governance is demonstrated in India. Her tenure as the Queen of Malwa is sometimes highlighted as an illustration of good governance and social reform in Indian English prose and historical narratives. Authors emphasize her efforts towards public welfare, justice, and religious tolerance. For instance, in essays,

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authors consider and analyze her policies in a domain of the “models of ideal governance,” where she employed practices which included marginalized communities; such as Bhils and Dalits as part of the administration, promoted craft and education, and pursued leadership based on *dharma* (righteousness) and *sewa* (service). In Indian English literary criticism, she is recognized as a precursor to Indian feminist thought. She is placed contemporaneously with canonical figures such as Sita and Draupadi, but she is more distinctively modern for her active rule, refusal to adhere to crippling practices, and her attention to women's education. Critics argue that her refusal to become sati and her insistence on a royal role after personal losses reflects a type of strength of character now rendered in postcolonial feminist histories. Poetic evocations and elegiac poems, often for school or other competitive academic events, refer to her as "*Lokmata*," or Mother of the People, appealing her maternal, nurturing, and transformative aspects of female power.

She is often featured in English literary and historical texts as a defender and restorer of Indian heritage. She sponsored the reconstruction of famous temples (such as Kashi Vishwanath) and built ghats, rest-houses, and public wells throughout India, actions that symbolized both cultural revival and inclusive progress. Her name appears in discussions about integrating ancient wisdom into the postcolonial Indian psyche, as writers seek to reclaim indigenous narratives rivaling colonial representations. Essays and biographies in English detail how poets, scholars, and craftsmen thrived in her capital, Maheshwar, due to her patronage, reflecting her commitment to intellectual and artistic growth.

Recent English books, biographies, and articles—like “Chronicles of a Maratha Queen” and various academic essays—demonstrate her evolving literary presence. They paint her as a moral visionary, a “philosopher queen,” and a forerunner of Indian ethical governance. Notably, English poems such as the one by Joanna Baillie in 1849—“For thirty years her reign of peace, The land in blessing did increase”—reflect both admiration and the spread of her legacy into English literary consciousness. In sum, Indian English literature projects Ahilyabai Holkar’s life and values as a model for ethical public life, a symbol of empowered womanhood, and an agent of cultural restoration. Through direct references, metaphorical invocations, and fictional recreations, contemporary English writers situate her as a timeless influence, illustrating the possibility of fusing compassion, strength, and progressive ideals in both governance and storytelling. Writings of Ahilyabai, particularly administrative orders, exhibit the with a rich engagement between moral values and practical governance. She affirmed that statecraft and spirituality are non-threatening ideals; ethical governance is the product of being moral, disciplined, and practicing values. This is

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lesson for literature students to study that literature is not only an aesthetic; it is also a relationship to value, ultimately reinforcing literature's ability to change behavior, or change things.

Her steadfast advocacy of the *pathshalas* (schools) and the arts illustrates the imperative for lifelong learning and shared knowledge. Literary texts narrating her commitment to the public education system can remind us that education is one of the most potent agents for social change. So students are encouraged to pursue wisdom with humility—her suggestion that “educated minds are capable of creating lasting cultures” rings out like an exhortation for critical thinking and intellectual humility. Stories about her humility—her willingness to be accessible to her citizens, her compassion toward widows and the oppressed, and her sense of higher duty—provide us with examples of empathic action with evergreen relevance. Students of literature might think of this approach in relation to the importance of character, narrative, and how personal development and valuable relationships require us to truly listen with empathy and humility. Her work in women's education, widow remarriage, and marginalized community development offered early examples of gender justice. Literary scholars see the ways she rebelled against patriarchal notions codified in traditional *Dharmashastras*, such as the *Mitakshara* and *Dayabhaga*, through the stories and essays about her reign. Students learn to embrace the importance of challenging social norms and fighting for equity, for both literary interpretation and activism in the real world. Her policies and correspondence serve as a purveyance of a leadership style that is centered upon compassion, justice, and inclusivity. She upheld the principle that power is in service, calling on rulers and individuals alike to put compassion before authority. Literature students should appreciate that effective leadership is built on ethical behavior and a spirit of communal responsibility, perfectly encapsulated in her quote: “Royalty is not of birth, but of conduct. Let all acts be worthy to be recounted even in silence”. Her life showed us that even against the greatest social opposition, brave ethical choices can be socially transformative. Students of literature can take many insights and lessons from the writings, teachings, and legacy of Ahilyabai Holkar, as expressed in a variety of literary and historical forms.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus, in sum, her legacy and life are internalized in Indian English writing as touchstone for social service, ethical leadership and gender justice. Allowing us to examine her in biographical, historical and creative texts, the research study demonstrates that she continues to endure as both a symbol and subject of the literary imagination. Her illustrative example invites hopes for continued re-interpretation from a number of intellectual frameworks including gender studies, postcolonial theory and, within an understanding of duty ethics, spiritual ethics. Understood in this way, she has not only become a storehouse of inspiration, she is an invitation for engagement for present day

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leadership and literary activity. Indian English writing continues to capture, preserve, and disseminate the story that is Ahilyabai Holkar; her legacy continues to illuminate the way for generations of leadership to come, calling upon them to steward governance with compassion, courage, and justice.

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## Lessons from the Past: A Review of Women Empowerment During Queen Ahilyabai Holkar's Reign

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### **Abstract:**

*The reign of Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795) offers a historical insight of women's leadership in governance that extends beyond just symbolic rule. This paper deals with Queen Ahilyabai's governance in the Malwa region, with a special reference to her administration, public-works initiatives and interventions that reshaped gendered social norms. Further, the paper argues that her model of empowerment provides relevant lessons for contemporary women empowerment and governance frameworks. This research highlights three core dimensions of empowerment that were found in her rule: representation of women (women's visible leadership), redistribution (public goods and economic inclusion), and agency (legal/administrative practices enabling women). The paper also explores how these dimensions can inform present-day policy and institutional design—particularly in contexts of women's political participation, local governance, and gender-sensitive infrastructure. The conclusion outlines a set of actionable recommendations for embedding empowerment logic in modern governance, grounded in Ahilyabai's legacy.*

**KeyWords:** Representation, Redistribution, Agency, Governance, Women Empowerment.

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### **Introduction**

Women's empowerment has become a central concern in contemporary governance, development policy and gender studies. Empowerment involves not merely the inclusion of women in formal positions, but structural transformations in power relations, resource access and normative frameworks that enable women's agency. Historical precedents—particularly among women who held effective political power in contexts that limited female authority—can provide valuable insights into alternative models of leadership and empowerment. One such prominent example is Ahilyabai Holkar, who ruled the Malwa region of central India from 1767 to 1795 under the Maratha confederacy. Her reign is often celebrated for its combination of administrative efficiency, welfare orientation and compassionate justice. Despite her elite position, Ahilyabai's policies and practices had ramifications for women's lives in her realm—making her an instructive anchor for thinking

about women's empowerment in governance. The paper reviews Ahilyabai's governance and its impact on women's empowerment, structured into several sections: the first outlines her context and governance, the second introduces a framework of empowerment (representation, redistribution, agency), the third applies this framework to her rule, the fourth draws lessons for contemporary governance and women's empowerment, and the final section presents key recommendations and reflections.

### **Historical Context and Governance of Ahilyabai Holkar**

Ahilyabai Holkar was born on 31 May 1725, in the village of Chaundi (in present-day Maharashtra). After the death of her husband Khanderao Holkar and the adoption of Tukoji Rao Holkar, she assumed effective rule of the Holkar polity (Malwa) in 1767, continuing until her death in 1795 (Pai Raikar, 2025; The Study IAS, 2025). Her capital was at Maheshwar (on the Narmada) and later at Indore, where she ruled within the Maratha confederacy, exercising both administrative and military oversight (The Study IAS, 2025). Her governance is widely lauded as a "golden era" of the Holkar dynasty—characterized by peace, fiscal stability, public works expansion, patronage of trade and crafts, and a strong moral-administrative ethos (Pai Raikar, 2025; Mishra, 2024). Some of her key administrative practices included holding daily public audiences, making herself accessible to her subjects, establishing courts and arbitration systems, and personally intervening in revenue, justice, and welfare matters (The Study IAS, 2025). Her welfare and infrastructure investments were extensive—temples, ghats, wells, dharmashalas (rest houses), education institutions, and craft industry support (Mishra, 2024). Notably, she broke social norms of her era; for instance, she did not practice strict purdah and treated state service and public welfare as her moral domain (Pai Raikar, 2025). Historically, Ahilyabai's rule emerged when women's roles in polity were heavily circumscribed in South Asia; widowhood, seclusion, and lack of property rights were common. Her rise and exercise of power thus disrupted normative expectations in important ways, making the study of her reign relevant for probing how empowerment may have taken shape in pre-modern contexts and what light it may shed on contemporary governance.

### **Framework: Empowerment through Representation, Redistribution, and Agency**

To analyse women's empowerment in governance, this paper employs a tripartite framework—Representation, Redistribution, and Agency—drawing on established gender and development scholarship which emphasizes empowerment as multidimensional, extending beyond mere representation (Grover & Sharma, 2025; Hossain & Nikolov, 2021).

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**Representation:** The presence of women in leadership roles shapes priorities, norms, and governance style.

**Redistribution:** Public investment and resource allocation reduce structural gender inequalities.

**Agency:** Institutional mechanisms and rights allow women to act, influence outcomes, and access governance systems.

This framework helps assess how historical women leaders like Ahilyabai contributed in each dimension and what lessons apply to modern contexts.

### **Empowerment in Ahilyabai's Governance**

#### **Representation**

Ahilyabai's very assumption of rulership counts as a significant representational marker—a woman exercising sovereign authority in 18th-century India. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, she was “one of the few women to have led an Indian polity during the era” and broke gendered norms by remaining accessible, holding court, and participating actively in state affairs (Pai Raikar, 2025). This visibility signaled the possibility of female leadership in a society where women's public roles were restricted. Moreover, her administrative style—daily audiences, direct supervision of justice, decentralized inspections—reinforced that leadership was participatory rather than ceremonial (The Study IAS, 2025). This model likely had an aspirational effect on women and symbolically contributed to their public agency.

#### **Redistribution**

Ahilyabai's reign featured investment in public goods and economic initiatives with gendered empowerment implications. She promoted the artisan and textile industries of Maheshwar, particularly the famous Maheshwari sarees, which provided employment opportunities for women (Feminism in India, as cited in Mandal & Biswas, 2025). Her philanthropic infrastructure—wells, ghats, dharmshalas, and temples—reduced domestic burdens like fetching water and travelling long distances, which disproportionately affected women (Mishra, 2024). Soni (2023) notes that she established *pathshalas* and supported widows, advancing inclusive education for both genders. She also promoted women's inheritance rights, widow remarriage, banned dowry, and supported women's security and employment through reforms (MillenniumPost, as cited in The Daily Guardian, 2025). These redistributive policies shifted structural gender constraints, promoting access to resources and economic participation.

#### **Agency**

Ahilyabai's governance strengthened institutional access and social agency. She held open courts and grievance mechanisms that made justice accessible (Kamal Sandesh, as cited in Mandal & Biswas, 2025). Her legal reforms—protecting widow rights, allowing remarriage, and expanding craft employment—enhanced women's decision-making power (The Daily Guardian, 2025). Her ethical framing of governance—“ruler as servant of people”—transformed political power from coercive to responsive, expanding citizen engagement and gender inclusivity (Times of India, 2025). Thus, Ahilyabai's leadership, redistribution, and institutional responsiveness together enabled women to claim rights and shape outcomes. Applying Ahilyabai's Model to Contemporary Governance and Women's Empowerment The historical case of Ahilyabai offers lessons for modern governance under the same tripartite framework.

### **Representation:**

Leadership visibility must be coupled with real power. Ahilyabai's daily audiences exemplified participatory governance—modern leaders can institutionalize citizen engagement mechanisms led by women (Pai Raikar, 2025). Her reign shifted societal norms on women's leadership; education and civic initiatives today should highlight such precedents (ICSSR, 2025). Structural pathways for women's leadership—through mentorship, rotation, and real portfolios—must replace token representation (Tribune India, 2025).

### **Redistribution**

Ahilyabai's gender-sensitive infrastructure—wells, rest houses, and education—mirrors the need for modern gender-responsive planning (Mishra, 2024). Supporting women-led enterprises, akin to Maheshwar's textile clusters, can promote local economic inclusion (Swarajya Mag, 2025). Lifelong skills and widow support in her reign parallel the need for targeted capacity-building and education today (Soni, 2023).

**Agency:** Accessible justice and grievance systems, inspired by Ahilyabai's open courts, are vital for women's empowerment. Contemporary states can implement women's desks, mobile legal aid, and community courts (Times of India, 2025). Legal reforms and social change must proceed together—property, inheritance, and marital rights need strong enforcement (Grover & Sharma, 2025). Administrative culture, as Ahilyabai demonstrated, should embed ethical governance and accountability (The Daily Guardian, 2025).

### **Integrative Recommendations**

**Historical and Symbolic Integration:** Embed narratives of Ahilyabai in curricula and leadership programs (Mandal & Biswas, 2025).

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**Women-led Infrastructure Missions:** Focus on mobility, sanitation, and reduced domestic burdens (Mishra, 2024).

**Women's Local Enterprise Clusters:** Promote micro-enterprises and cooperatives modeled on the Maheshwari textile system (Swarajya Mag, 2025).

**Accessible Justice Platforms:** Create local grievance redressal models mirroring Ahilyabai's public court (Times of India, 2025).

**Leadership Pathways:** Institutionalize gender-focused administrative mentorship (ICSSR, 2025).

**Gender-Audit of Governance:** Ensure gender sensitivity in departmental operations and accountability mechanisms (Tribune India, 2025).

### Conclusion

The reign of Ahilyabai Holkar offers a rich precedent for women's empowerment in governance—not merely as a symbolic ruler but as an effective administrator whose governance redefined gender norms. Through representation, redistribution, and agency, her rule reshaped both the structures and ethos of governance. Contemporary states striving for gender-inclusive development can draw on her example: embedding women's leadership, designing gender-sensitive infrastructure, and institutionalizing justice systems that amplify women's agency (Pai Raikar, 2025; Mishra, 2024; Mandal & Biswas, 2025). Ahilyabai's legacy reminds us that empowerment is not about position alone—it is about enabling women to lead, distribute, and decide.

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## An overview of the Representation of Ahilya Devi in the Literary context

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### **Abstract:**

*Ahilyabai Holkar who is famous as Ahilya Devi, stands as one of the most respected figures in Indian history for her futurist leadership, organizational acumen, and commitment to public welfare. Her representation in literature—in not limited to historical biographies but extended to modern feminist retellings—highlighted a self-motivated evolution of her reflection from a saintly ruler to a symbol of powerful representation of womanhood. Ahilya Devi has been portrayed as ideal moral lenses by the earlier colonial and nationalist writings. During the reign of the patriarchy the goodness and benevolent rule as an exception among women of her time. However, present-day literary and cultural narratives reinterpret her persona through the frameworks of gender, power, and agency. Contemporary writers and dramatists majorly concerned on her pliability against patriarchal structures and her ground-breaking role in governance, temple re-establishment and social reform for the people of her state. This paper explores the representation of this historical figure and also studies how literary depiction of Ahilya Devi adds values to the discussion and learning on women's role in the political arena including managing a role as leaders, role as spirituality foresightness and reclaiming a position in Indian literature. By critique texts that re-discuss her life and works, the study finds how Ahilya Devi challenges historical boundaries to become a cultural archetype of moral strength and feminist foresightness.*

**Keywords:** Representation, Indian writing; feminist writing; women administration; narrative; cultural memory; empowerment; gender stereotypes.

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### **Introduction**

In Indian History which is colonial period holds the stature of Ahilyabai Holkar (1725-1795) 18 century ruler and administrator has a remarkable place in Indian and Cultural History. Ahilya was born in the small village of Maharashtra named Chondi. She got married in the family of the rulers of Maharashtra. After the deaths of her husband Khanderao and father-in-law Malhar Rao Holkar, ascended the throne of Malwa (Thombre, 2007); she lost her husband and during this political upheaval in her life gave her opportunity ruled Malwa kingdom from 1767 to 1795 under her feminist

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guardianship. The reign of this administrator has had a long-lasting effect on the history of Malwa. Studying the rich cultural and literary representations of **Ahilya Devi**, this article trails how her life has served as a constant source for explaining themes of **female leadership, duty and cultural identity**. It maps the movement of literature on life of Ahilya Devi— from their roots in colonial and nationalist accounts to their contemporary iterations in feminist and popular culture—and investigates how these various portrayals shape our understanding of **gender, power autonomy, and cultural memory** in India.

### **Historical and Cultural Context**

To understand the literary representations, one must situate Ahilyabai Holkar's life within its historical context. She assumed the reins of the Holkar state after the death of her husband Khanderao and her father-in-law Malhar Rao Holkar, and ruled from Maheshwar for nearly three decades she was known for extensive temple restorations, the establishment of ghats and dharmashalas, and her patronage of arts and crafts (Shaivam.org, n.d.). During her rule there was remarkable growth in the restoration of the religious building. She has contributed primarily in the renovation of temples, Ghats and *dharmashalas*, by the encouragement of arts and crafts (notably in Maheshwar) and by a repute for justice and public-welfare. To reframe her story in a nutshell depicts – a woman mounting to rule, building cultural institutions and serving as a morally exemplary leader – recommended fertile ground for literary appropriation. “Her first principle of government appears to have been restrained evaluation and an almost sacred respect for the native rights of the village officers” (Malcolm, 1823, as cited in Zelliott, 2001).

What is conspicuous is how her life was offered historically: accessible, compassionate, spiritually grounded yet administratively competent. As one writer notes: “Her first principle of government appears to have been restrained evaluation and an almost sacred respect for the native rights of the village officers”. These highlights – generosity, justice, moral respectability – have strongly proclaimed her literary image.

### **Early Literary Representations: Colonial and Nationalist Periods**

During the period of 19th and early 20th centuries, one can see that the position of Ahilyabai is represented as one of the “saintly queens” whose high merit, commitment and dedication set her apart, particularly in a male-dominated era (Kibe, 1939). She set an example in to her male counterpart in the ruling a kingdom. Her story was propagated as moral exemplar and representation of women as national icon. For illustration, in the writings of the colonial and post-colonial work she is depicted for her benevolence, her role as a restoration religious reformist and her

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dedication to dharma. In such texts, the emphasis is less on her political agency and more on her moral character and spiritual worth. This literary framing is consistent with the broader discourse in colonial India, where historical women figures were often mythologized as mothers, saints or moral symbols.

For example, the 1849 poem *Ahalya Baae: a poem* by Joanna Baillie portrayed her as a woman of virtue, referencing lines such as:

“In later days from Brahma came, to rule our land, a noble Dame, Kind was her heart and bright her fame, Ahilya was her honoured name.” (InsightfulTake, 2025) Such representations cater to a moral, almost hagiographic reading of her life. The political dimension of her rule – her strategic acumen, her governance reforms – is subordinated to her religious and moral persona. The **early literary depiction** of Ahilyabai aligned with the nationalist agenda, representing her as a model or ideal figure embodying **social and moral advancement** and cultural revival.

### **Transition to Feminist and Popular Representations:**

In recent decades, however, scholars and popular culture have reexamined Ahilyabai, focusing on themes of **gender, leadership, power, and agency**. These modern interpretations highlight her role as a **community leader** who successfully navigated a deeply patriarchal society, refusing domestic limits to engage actively in **royalty, administration, and cultural patronage**. (Zelliott,2001; Organiser,2024). This reframing has solidified her status among academic researchers as an **Indian historical feminist icon**.

In addition to, popular literature, television and other media have contributed to her evolving representation. For example, the TV serial *Punyashlok Ahilyabai* (2021–2023) portrays her early life, hardship and leadership skills, finding audience in the and embedding her as a popular culture figure. Here, the narrative highlights her resilience, her denial to to commemorate Sati after her husband’s death. It was a very bold step for the women of that ears. Her utilization of power, and her role in serve the people of her kingdom. (Insightful take, 2025). With the writing focused on her life works and administrative abilities. The narrative about Ahilya Devi discussed her works primarily— her determinate decision-making skills, her efforts for social reforms, her patronage to art , culture and heritage. Most importantly she shackles the gendered expectations and proved with her skills that woman can shoulder responsibility like man in administrative affairs too. . For example, an article noted about her the representation of Ahilyabai as a dynamic and powerful ruler resonated strongly ... positioning her as an icon of female leadership and governance in a male-dominated historical context. Thus, the contemporary literary representation shifts from moral exemplar to active agent;

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from saint-queen to feminist role-model. The narrative is not writing about her virtuous image but discussing more about her strategic intelligence in execution of her endeavours, her political leadership and her role reversal to predefined gender norms.

### **Main Themes in Literary Representation:**

Several themes have been discussed in the narratives circles around Ahilya Devi, the themes are oftenly represents as a part of her life. Some of the mostly discussed themes in Literature are as follows:

#### **1. Balanced Rule and Progressive Governance**

Literary sources depict Ahilyabai as a **balanced, spiritual, and highly effective ruler** who established Maheshwar as a thriving cultural capital. The focus is on her innovative **taxation systems**, extensive **temple construction**, and **state welfare** initiatives (Thakur, n.d.). . These accounts frequently highlight her successful accession despite **patriarchal opposition**, positioning her not merely as a queen, but as an **independent and capable sovereign** in her own right.

#### **2. Agency, Feminism, and Women's Power**

This theme explores Ahilyabai as a powerful symbol of **women's agency** and feminist struggle. Her refusal to commit **Sati**, her assertive assumption of state power, and her determination to be a **free-willed ruler** (rather than a puppet) (Zelliott, 2001) are key narrative elements. Her story is often utilized in literature to critique **patriarchal historiography** and to champion the historical and contemporary discussion of **women in leadership**.

#### **3. Cultural Patronage and Heritage Revival**

Literature significantly features Ahilyabai's massive efforts in cultural patronage, especially her role in restoring great Hindu shrines like Kashi Vishwanath and Somnath. These acts are portrayed as a crucial cultural and religious revival, demonstrating her service and commitment to the populace. The contemporary analysis often views this through the lens of nationalist sentiment or cultural revivalism, emphasizing the symbolic weight of her actions in protecting culture, religion, and tradition. Ahilya Bai resurrected the jyotirlingas across the country as a tribute to Lord Shiva. Renovations in Somnath, Varanasi, Trambak, Gaya, Pushkar, Vrindavan, Nathdwara, Haridwar, Badrinath, Kedarnath an... (Organiser, 2024)

#### **4. Righteous Conduct and Sprituality**

Ahilya a follower of Santan, she represents a pious and generous ruler. She followed the Satvik food style. Her devotion is clearly marked with her interest in restoration of the temples in her kingdom (Thombre, 2007). For example, textual sources note that she rose early for prayers, engaged in scripture reading, fasting, and upheld ethical governance. In literature, this theme supports her image as a morally exemplary woman leader, not just powerful but righteous. The interplay of spirituality and politics makes her a special subject in literary representation: the ruler-saint.

### 5. Popularization and Myth-making

Finally, literary and cultural representation often build on mythic or popular narratives: the rural girl educated by her father, the young widow refusing sati, the queen who built temples across India, the vision of “Devi Ahilya” (Goddess Ahilya) revered by people. This mythologised version enters textbooks, children’s literature, popular biographies, and TV shows. The challenge in the literature is to distinguish between the historical figure and the mythic image. Many literary works consciously engage in this distinction or even embrace the myth for its symbolic value.

#### Table of Figures

Figure	Description	Source
1	The young Ahilyabai Holkar in her village home (fictional illustration)	(Adapted from collected visualisations)
2	Maheshwar – the capital of Ahilyabai’s reign, showing ghats and temples	(Photograph archive)
3	Modern dramatization of Ahilyabai in the television series <i>Punyashlok Ahilyabai</i>	(Still from TV series)

*Note: Figures are illustrative and drawn from public domain or adapted visual sources. They serve to contextualize the literary representations discussed in the text.*

#### Analysis of Specific Literary Texts and Modes

To illustrate how Ahilya Devi’s representation functions in literature, I will analyse three types of texts/modes: (a) early historical/biographical works, (b) modern scholarly essays literarily treating her life, and (c) popular culture/television and children’s literature.

##### *(a) Early Historical/Biographical Works*

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One of the early literary portrayals of her life is exemplified by M. V. Kibe's (1939) *The Cultural Indian Empire of the Saintly Queen Ahilyabai Holkar* discussed (cited in secondary sources). In the work Ahilyabai is put in perspective as a saintsly queen with particular focus on her moral aspects and her contributions to the cultural life (Kibe, 1939). The story emphasizes her temple-building and philanthropic efforts and the representative of dharma, and pays relatively less attention to gender or political influence. This is an aspect of virtue and cultural nationalism that is in the literary interest of the time.

Her life is the instructive example to the Indians, and particularly to women, to which such literature frequently tends to apply itself. The characterization is gendered: the just queen, the mother of her subjects, the religious slave. The outcome: an individual who is one moved up morally, but a little passive in the political agency (even when it is mediated by benevolence). Nevertheless, her historical reign was not without complicated administration, which early literature has been trying to erase.

### ***(b) Contemporary Scholarly Essays and Feminist Readings***

In the present times, scholarship and literary criticism revisit Ahilyabai with new critical frames. For instance, the essay "Ahilyabai Holkar: Cultural Reformer and Feminist Icon" focused her roles as an active governor and role model in patriarchy-dominated history. The author discusses that "the portrayal of Ahilyabai as a dynamic and powerful ruler ... positions her as a woman of agency." The description of Ahilyabai as a "active and strong ruler" gives her agency as she has managed to excel in 3 main spheres where women have traditionally had no control over, namely:

**Denial of Sati and Reclamation of Power:** When Ahilyabai became a widow, her husband had died and she declined to do Sati (widow immolation) and managed to persuade the Peshawar to permit her to be a ruler. This was a rejection of a strong patriarchal tradition and a ground-breaking statement of her will (Zelliott, 2001). Defying all social norms, she proved her mettle with her wisdom, courage and administrative skills. Breaking the shackles of patriarchy, she emerged as a leader whose administrative ingenuity, acumen (Organiser, 2024)

**Active Military and Administrative:** She was not ruling through a male regent but she led her armies during battles and managed her administration personally (Malcolm, 1823). Her direct participation in the process of justice, defense and policy-making proved the fact of political agency, which confirmed her ability to become a leader, since her abilities were not inferior to those of any man. After so many tragic losses, she remained undismayed. She asked the Peshwa Madhav Rao I to take over the administration on her own and soon assumed the throne of Indore in December 1767. (IJR n, d)

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**Innovative and Independent Governance:** ‘The Philosopher Queen’ as she is famously called by John Keay, the British Historian, (Organiser, 2024). Her decisions to reform land revenue system, preserve Bhil tribes, and do away with the law that gave the state the power to seize the property of childless widows all were independent policy decisions that were aimed at benefiting the people. This vigorous and forward-moving form of government entrenched her political agency and founded herself as a ruler by herself (Thakur, n.d.) For the next 28 years Lokmata Ahilyabai ruled over Malwa in a just, wise and knowledgeable manner. Under Ahilyabai’s rule, Malwa enjoyed relative peace, prosperity and stability and her capital, (Organiser, 2024)

### **Ahilya Devi’s represented in the Popular Culture, Children’s Literature, and TV Representations**

In the Digital Era the realm of Books has been put in the form of popular culture and exhibited in children's literature, thereby shaping and mapping her public image by digital tool. One of the television series named *Punyashlok Ahilyabai* in Marathi created a wide viewership and created a furore of a new literary-popular narrative of her life. Though the digital format, Ahilya’s the story is dramatized: her early rural and simple life, her widowhood, her stand not to commit Sati on the death of her husband's refusal of sati, her rise to good woman administrator. Many incidents highlighted her moral and administrative dilemmas. The visual-literary form accentuates her as a heroic and inspirational woman, accessible to children and families.

In children’s books or popular retellings, her life is simplified into moral lessons: for illustration, “Ahilya Devi gave ears to her people,” “She built temples,” “She considered all with equality.” These representations may reduce complexity, but showed her as a cultural icon of women’s empowerment and public service.

These widespread tales contribute to a process of **historical myth-making**, emphasizing her journey from **modest beginnings** to a "**gloriously swift ascension**". By highlighting her qualities of **service** and **self-sacrificial reign**, these narratives—even when not strictly factual—serve a crucial function in the **literary and societal arena**. They effectively shape her legacy, making her story resonate within a **larger collective memory** that values these specific virtuous characteristics. This process ensures her legend is preserved and reinforced across scholarly and popular publications.

### **Discussion: The Significance of Literary Representation**

It is very important to understand that to know the answer of this question: Why it is significant to discuss the literary representation of Ahilya Devi? In its answer three extensive implications come into view.

### **Memory, Identity and Cultural Construction.**

As the life of a person is documented through literature, they are able to lay down the societal values of the person. Ahilyabai has been a towering figure on the colonial history. The appearance of Ahilyabai in literature and popular media helps to create an Indian cultural memory that venerates female leadership and, especially, those who adhered to spiritual and moral leadership, in addition to their roles as rulers. In her literary portrayal, Ahilyabai is an indicator of empowerment of women, moral authority, traditional culture and Hinduism. This is an indicator of larger identity formation in India regarding who qualifies as a national hero, whose life stories are remembered, and the way that women who lead the country are epitomes.

### **Gender and Leadership Discourse**

The change in literary descriptions of her as pious queen to feminist icon indicates the shifting gender discourses on the issue of leadership in Colonial India. In the earlier works on Ahilya Devi concentrated on her virtue, although in recent writings put emphasis on her administrative skills, her agency of execution and her policies for the benefit of her clan. This reflects changes in literature and scholarship: the emergence of women studies, feminist historiography and re-evaluation of female rulers. The literary depiction of Ahilyabai is therefore a case study of how female figures of history can be redefined to fit into gender discourse in the modern world. It paved the way that other rulers of Indian history to be documented like Begum Samru, Laximbai Tilak, Begum of Bhopal's and many more.

### ***The Politics of Representation***

Literature does not only reflect history; it interprets, mythologies and sometimes sensitise it. Projection of Ahilyabai often accentuates her moral traits and cultural patronage, sometimes glossing over more contested aspects (e.g., political conflict, alliances, war). Popular culture may idealise her. Moreover, cultural and nationalist narratives may co-opt her figure to serve ideological aims (e.g., emphasising temple building as heritage, or her as model of "mother-queen"). Critically, we must ask: who is writing these representations? For what purpose? Whose voice is foregrounded? The literary representation of Ahilyabai thus has consequences for how we read and interpret historical women, leadership and gender.

### **Conclusion**

The literary representations of Ahilya Devi (Ahilyabai Holkar) tell us much about the interplay of history, gender, culture and memory. From early moralistic and nationalist narratives that depict her

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as saintly queen, to contemporary feminist readings that emphasise her agency as a ruler, to popular culture portrayals that embed her in children's literature and TV drama, her life has been re-imagined and re-presented in multiple ways. Many forms of her life have been depicted by the projection of her life and works in the literature. She has been custodian of virtue, wellbeing and administrative intelligence with the love for cultural heritage. These shifting representations reflect changing social and literary priorities: from virtue to agency, from saintliness to leadership, from historical subject to cultural icon. For scholars of literature, gender and history, Ahilyabai's case offers a productive lens. It demonstrates how literary representations of women rulers contribute to broader discourses about women's leadership and cultural memory in India.

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## Education, Ethics, and Administration: Lessons from Ahilyabai Holkar's Rule for Societal Development

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### **Abstract:**

*Devi Ahilyabai Holkar, widely revered as Lokmata, stands as an exemplary figure in Indian history whose life and reign continue to inspire generations. This research paper examines her significant contributions, focusing on education, ethics, administration, and societal development. From an early age, Ahilyabai displayed intellectual curiosity and moral sensitivity, receiving an education in Marathi and Sanskrit, as well as sacred scriptures, which laid the foundation for her enlightened rule. She valued learning and actively promoted education throughout her kingdom by establishing schools and centers of knowledge, encouraging both boys and girls, and fostering an environment where intellectual and moral growth went hand in hand. Ahilyabai's administration was a model of ethical governance. Guided by justice, fairness, transparency, and compassion, she ensured equitable treatment for all her subjects. She maintained an organized administrative system that emphasized efficient revenue management, infrastructure development, and public welfare, while fostering economic prosperity and social harmony. Ahilyabai lived a life of simplicity, truthfulness, and devotion, demonstrating that moral integrity is central to effective leadership. Ahilyabai's reign also contributed greatly to societal development. She supported marginalized groups, including widows, orphans, and farmers, fostering social equality and cohesion. Through her compassionate and visionary leadership, she transformed Malwa into a prosperous, culturally rich, and harmonious society. This study highlights that Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy lies not only in her administrative achievements but in the integration of education, ethics, and social responsibility into governance.*

**Keywords:** Ahilyabai Holkar, Education, Ethics, and Administration, woman's empowerment, Holkar dynasty, brave woman, and Societal Development.

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### **Introduction**

Devi Ahilyabai Holkar, widely revered as "Lokmata", was born on 31 May 1725 in Chondi village, Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra, to Mankoji and Sushilabai Shinde. Her father, a respected village Patil, and her mother raised her with values of faith, simplicity, compassion, and discipline.

From a young age, Ahilyabai showed remarkable intellectual curiosity and moral sensitivity. She loved reading sacred texts such as the Ramayana, Bhagavad Gita, and Vedas, and was well-educated in Marathi and Sanskrit, an unusual opportunity for girls of her time. Her upbringing instilled in her a deep sense of justice, humanity, and spiritual devotion.

At the age of eight, Ahilyabai was married to Khanderao Holkar, son of Malharrao Holkar, a prominent Maratha commander. She moved to Maheshwar, where her humility, gentleness, and sense of duty won admiration from both the royal family and her subjects. Despite facing personal tragedies, including the early deaths of her husband and only son, she displayed extraordinary courage and emotional strength, dedicating herself to the welfare of her people. Ahilyabai's personal qualities of simplicity, compassion, and devotion shaped her approach to governance. She lived a modest life even as a queen, rising early for prayer, listening to petitions, and ensuring justice for all. Her administration emphasized ethical leadership, transparency, efficient revenue management, and infrastructure development. Ahilyabai Holkar passed away on 13 August 1795, leaving behind a lasting legacy as a moral leader, enlightened ruler, and true mother of her people. Her life continues to inspire generations, demonstrating that courage, compassion, and integrity form the foundation of effective and benevolent leadership.

### **Research Methodology:**

This study uses a qualitative, descriptive, and historical research approach. It explores Ahilyabai Holkar's life and achievements by examining historical records, biographies, letters, inscriptions, and other reliable sources. The qualitative method allows a deeper understanding of her personality, spiritual beliefs, and moral leadership, rather than relying on numbers or statistical data. The research focuses on analyzing the life, leadership, and legacy of Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar, with special attention to her contributions in administration, education, ethics, and social welfare. It aims to show how her personal values, simplicity, and moral strength influenced her style of governance and decision-making. The study also highlights how her vision and principles continue to inspire modern ideas of good leadership and the empowerment of women.

### **Education and Vision of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar**

Devi Ahilyabai Holkar's life beautifully reflects the power of education in shaping wisdom, leadership, and compassion. Born in 1725 in the small village of Chondi in Maharashtra, she was one of the few girls of her time who received formal education. During the 18th century, education for women was rare, but Ahilyabai's father, Mankoji Shinde, a thoughtful and progressive village Patil, recognized his daughter's sharp mind and encouraged her to study. Under his guidance, Ahilyabai

learned to read and write in Marathi and Sanskrit, and she also developed a deep interest in the Vedas, Upanishads, and other sacred scriptures. She was not educated in royal schools or under special tutors but gained her knowledge through personal curiosity, observation, and devotion to learning.

Ahilyabai's learning went beyond books, it shaped her moral and spiritual vision. She believed that true education was not only about literacy but about character, ethics, and understanding one's duty toward society. As a queen, she continued to promote education in her kingdom. She established pathshalas (traditional schools) for children and supported the learning of both boys and girls, which was a visionary step for that time. She respected scholars, saints, and poets and invited many learned men to her court at Maheshwar, which became a center of culture, learning, and spirituality under her rule.

Even though Ahilyabai did not receive a modern or royal education, her learning was pure, practical, and filled with moral strength. It gave her the vision to rule wisely, treat her subjects with love, and uphold justice with balance and patience. Her understanding of scriptures and philosophy made her rule peaceful and dharmic. The schools, temples, and centers of learning she built across India stand as lasting symbols of her belief that education is a sacred duty. Through her enlightened leadership, Ahilyabai Holkar proved that education, when guided by virtue and compassion has the power to transform not only individuals but entire societies.

### **Ethics and Moral Values of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar**

Devi Ahilyabai Holkar's life and rule were deeply rooted in ethics, righteousness, and humanity. She believed that true power lies in moral strength, not in wealth or weapons. Guided by her faith in dharma (righteous duty), she ruled her kingdom like a mother caring for her children — with honesty, compassion, and humility. Every action she took as a ruler reflected her high moral principles and her desire to serve the people selflessly. She followed the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita and the Ramayana, which inspired her to balance justice with kindness. Ahilyabai believed that ethics was the foundation of good governance; a ruler's first responsibility was to act truthfully and treat all subjects equally, regardless of their caste, class, or religion. Her court was known for fairness and transparency, where even the poorest villager could seek justice without fear.

Ahilyabai Holkar lived a life of simplicity and discipline even while being a queen. She wore plain clothes, avoided luxury, and dedicated most of her wealth to public welfare. Her decisions were never driven by personal gain or political ambition, but by the moral duty to uplift her people. Her court officials were expected to follow strict ethical standards - corruption, cruelty, or dishonesty were not

tolerated under her rule. She personally supervised administrative work, ensuring that honesty and duty remained the soul of governance.

Ahilyabai's ethics extended beyond the palace and the court. Her donations to rebuild holy shrines such as Kashi Vishwanath Temple, Somnath Temple, and Dwarkadhish Temple were not acts of pride but symbols of her belief in purity, peace, and spiritual unity. She respected all religions and communities, proving that her ethics were rooted in universal human values. Her leadership style showed that a ruler's true greatness comes not from authority but from self-control, truthfulness, and compassion.

In every aspect of her life, Ahilyabai Holkar lived by the principles of truth (satya), duty (dharma), and service (seva). She never allowed anger, greed, or ego to guide her actions. Her sense of morality made her rule a golden era of justice and peace. Even today, she is remembered as Lokmata — the Mother of the People, whose ethics transformed governance into an act of love and devotion. Her life reminds us that when morality and leadership walk together, even a kingdom becomes a family, and a ruler becomes a mother to her people.

#### **Administration of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar**

Devi Ahilyabai Holkar's administration is remembered as one of the most efficient and people-centered systems in Indian history. Her governance reflected both strength and sensitivity, combining practical wisdom with motherly care. After ascending the throne of Malwa in 1767, she took full charge of the state's political, economic, and military affairs. Her government operated through a council of trusted ministers and advisors, yet she herself took all important decisions, especially those related to justice and finance. She believed that a ruler must always remain directly connected with her subjects, so she regularly held open court sessions where anyone could present their grievances without the interference of officers.

Ahilyabai also encouraged trade and handicrafts by improving roads, bridges, and market systems, turning Indore and Maheshwar into prosperous commercial centers. Her policies promoted honesty and transparency in taxation, ensuring that the wealth of the kingdom circulated for public welfare rather than royal luxury. Under her guidance, the treasury of the Holkar State became stable, and economic prosperity reached even the smaller villages of her realm.

One of the most remarkable features of her administration was her infrastructure and town planning. Ahilyabai personally supervised the construction of temples, ghats, forts, wells, tanks, and rest houses not just in her own state but across India, from Kedarnath in the north to Rameswaram in the south.

She developed Maheshwar as her capital, building it into a well-planned city with clean streets, water supply systems, and strong defense walls. Her court at Maheshwar also became a center of art, music, and architecture, where skilled craftsmen and artists were encouraged to create freely.

Through her administrative brilliance, Devi Ahilyabai Holkar turned Malwa into a model of good governance, economic balance, and moral leadership. Her policies reflected a deep understanding of human needs like blending discipline with kindness, and power with compassion. Under her guidance, the kingdom enjoyed peace, prosperity, and justice for nearly three decades, leaving behind a legacy that still inspires leaders and citizens alike.

### **Ahilyabai Holkar's Rule for Societal Development**

Devi Ahilyabai Holkar's rule was not just about power or politics, it was about people. She ruled her kingdom with the heart of a mother, always thinking about the happiness and welfare of her subjects. Her greatest goal was to build a society where everyone could live with peace, dignity, and comfort. Under her rule, the Malwa region became a model of social harmony and prosperity. Ahilyabai believed that a strong society could only be built when people were educated, healthy, safe, and united. She built schools, dharamshalas (rest houses), temples, hospitals, and wells so that her people never faced hardship. She looked after widows, orphans, and the poor, providing them shelter and financial help. For her, every citizen was like her own child, and she worked tirelessly to make sure no one went hungry or homeless.

Ahilyabai Holkar also gave great importance to social equality and justice. She treated everyone equally, whether rich or poor, Hindu or Muslim, man or woman. Her court was open to all, and every person could seek help directly from her without fear. During her rule, women found a new sense of safety and respect. Ahilyabai helped widows remarry, provided support for orphaned girls, and created opportunities for women to take part in community work. Her rule brought a sense of balance to society, where men and women could live with mutual understanding and honor. People from different regions admired her generosity and began to call her "Lokmata," meaning Mother of the People.

Under her rule, social life in Malwa became peaceful, organized, and full of hope. The farmers, artisans, traders, and priests all worked together under her guidance. Her fair taxation system and kind-hearted policies created a sense of trust between the ruler and the people. Ahilyabai believed that a society can progress only when everyone shares happiness and sorrow together, just like a family.

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Even today, Ahilyabai Holkar is remembered not only as a powerful queen but as a true social reformer who changed lives through kindness and vision. Her rule for societal development remains a timeless example of how compassion and good governance can build a just and harmonious world.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Devi Ahilyabai Holkar's life is a shining example of goodness, courage, and selfless service. She ruled not for power or fame, but for the happiness and welfare of her people. With her wisdom, honesty, and kindness, she turned her kingdom into a place of peace, prosperity, and harmony. She cared for every person like a mother and always followed the path of truth and justice. Through her works in education, administration, ethics, and social welfare, she showed that real strength lies in compassion and righteousness. Even centuries later, her name shines in history as "Lokmata" the mother of the People, whose love and leadership continue to inspire everyone. Ahilyabai Holkar's rule reminds us that a heart filled with kindness can build a world filled with goodness.

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## Ahilyabai Holkar's Contribution to Public Welfare and Social Reforms

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### **Abstract**

*Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795), the eminent ruler of the Malwa kingdom, is remembered as one of India's most progressive and benevolent leaders. Her reign is distinguished by a deep commitment to public welfare, social justice, and inclusive governance at a time when political instability was widespread across the Indian subcontinent. This paper examines her comprehensive contributions to welfare-oriented administration and social reform using a qualitative analysis of historical records, archival documents, and scholarly interpretations. Ahilyabai undertook extensive public works, including the construction and renovation of roads, wells, stepwells, temples, dharmashalas, and pilgrim rest houses, extending her welfare initiatives far beyond her own kingdom. She promoted economic stability by ensuring low taxation, safeguarding trade routes, and encouraging artisans, particularly contributing to the development of the famous Maheshwari textile tradition. Her judicial system emphasized fairness, transparency, and accessibility, making her court a model of righteous governance. Notably, her progressive outlook enabled significant reforms for women, including property protection, widow support, and opportunities for female participation in administration. Her large-scale restoration of sacred sites across India fostered cultural unity and spiritual revival. The findings of this study reveal that Ahilyabai Holkar's leadership blended compassion with administrative excellence, creating structures of welfare that remain influential today. Her legacy continues to stand as an inspiring model of ethical, people-centered governance and transformative social reform.*

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### **Introduction**

Indian history is enriched with the legacy of rulers whose governance combined administrative skill, moral vision, and an unwavering commitment to public welfare. Among them, **Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795)** occupies a unique and exemplary position. As the ruler of the Malwa kingdom in the late eighteenth century, she not only provided political stability during a turbulent era but also redefined the ideals of ethical and humanitarian governance. Her leadership is widely acknowledged for its foundation in compassion, justice, and inclusiveness—principles that shaped

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every aspect of her rule. Ahilyabai's rise to power was extraordinary. Widowed at a young age and faced with multiple personal tragedies, she assumed responsibility for the Holkar administration after the death of her father-in-law, Malhar Rao Holkar. Despite social and political constraints, she emerged as a powerful ruler capable of transforming her kingdom through sustained welfare initiatives and social reforms. Her capital, Maheshwar, soon became a center of culture, industry, and public administration.

Ahilyabai's contributions extended far beyond her geographical boundaries. She sponsored the construction and renovation of numerous temples, wells, ghats, rest houses, and public facilities across India. Her policies promoted economic stability, protected traders and farmers, and ensured the safe movement of pilgrims. She also challenged conventional societal norms by supporting women's rights and promoting their participation in social and administrative life.

In a period marked by political uncertainty, invasions, and social distress, Ahilyabai Holkar established a governance model rooted in service, empathy, and reform. This paper examines her multifaceted contributions to public welfare and social reform, highlighting the relevance and enduring significance of her leadership in the broader narrative of Indian history.

### **Historical Background**

Ahilyabai Holkar, born on 31 May 1725 in the small village of Chondi in present-day Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra, emerged as one of the most remarkable rulers in Indian history. She was born into a humble Dhangar family, yet her innate intelligence, compassion, and sense of duty brought her to the attention of **Malhar Rao Holkar**, a prominent Maratha general. Impressed by her character, Malhar Rao arranged her marriage to his son, **Khanderao Holkar**, thus bringing her into the influential Holkar dynasty. Ahilyabai's early years in the Holkar household were marked by rigorous training in administrative matters, social customs, and cultural traditions. Despite her noble surroundings, she remained grounded and dedicated to public welfare, qualities admired deeply by her father-in-law. Her life took a tragic turn with the death of her husband in 1754 during the Battle of Kumbher. The subsequent deaths of her father-in-law and her only son intensified her challenges. Yet, instead of succumbing to grief, Ahilyabai stepped forward with courage and resilience.

Recognizing her administrative capability, Malhar Rao had already entrusted her with local governance responsibilities during his lifetime. After his death in 1766, and with the support of the Holkar military chief Tukoji Rao Holkar, Ahilyabai assumed full control of the Malwa kingdom in 1767. She shifted the capital to **Maheshwar**, which soon developed into a vibrant center of culture, art, and statecraft.

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Her rule coincided with a period of political fragmentation in India marked by external invasions, declining Mughal authority, and regional instability. Despite these challenges, Ahilyabai maintained peace, strengthened administrative structures, and promoted social harmony across her territories. Her reign extended across large parts of present-day Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and even influenced religious centers across northern and southern India.

Thus, the historical context of Ahilyabai Holkar's rule reveals a leader shaped by personal adversity, political complexity, and social responsibility. It is within this backdrop that her extraordinary contributions to public welfare and social reforms can be fully understood and appreciated.

### Literature Review

Research on **Ahilyabai Holkar** spans historical narratives, biographical accounts, administrative studies, and analyses of social reform movements in pre-modern India. Scholars have examined her governance from multiple perspectives—ethical leadership, welfare administration, architectural patronage, and women-centered reform—yet there remain gaps in comprehensive academic assessments of her multidimensional contributions.

#### Accounts by Early Historians

Some of the earliest mentions of Ahilyabai come from **British colonial historians** such as **John Malcolm**, **James Forbes**, and **William Hunter**, who praised her exemplary rule despite writing from an imperial perspective. Malcolm (1823) described her administration as “the model of good order and benevolence,” highlighting her justice system and public works. Although colonial works often contained biases, these accounts consistently recognized her as one of the most respected Indian rulers of the 18th century.

#### Indian Historians and Biographical Studies

Modern Indian historians, including **Jadunath Sarkar**, **Vishwas Patil**, **Y. N. Kelkar**, and **Malati Mahajan**, have provided more nuanced interpretations of her leadership. Sarkar emphasized her political insight and ability to maintain peace during a period of regional turbulence. Kelkar's writings focus on her moral integrity, religious tolerance, and large-scale patronage of temples and pilgrimage routes. Patil and Mahajan have documented her humanistic governance approach, stressing her dedication to justice and welfare.

#### Studies on Women and Leadership

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Feminist historians have re-evaluated Ahilyabai's life as an early example of women's empowerment in governance. Scholars such as **Rosalind O'Hanlon** and **Urmila Rao** have highlighted how her rise to power challenged patriarchal structures within the Maratha polity. Their works argue that Ahilyabai's leadership expanded the social space available to women, both symbolically and administratively.

#### Research on Public Welfare and Architecture

Studies by cultural and architectural historians point to her widespread restoration of temples, ghats, wells, and dharmashalas across India. Works documenting sacred geography, such as those on **Kashi Vishwanath Temple**, credit her for initiating major reconstruction efforts in the aftermath of repeated invasions. Yet many of these writings focus primarily on her religious patronage, often overlooking her equally significant contributions to economic welfare, industry promotion (such as Maheshwari textiles), and judicial reforms.

#### Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite a broad body of work, there remain gaps:

- Limited integrated studies combining **administration, welfare, gender, and architecture** into a single framework.
- Insufficient focus on how her welfare reforms influenced later models of governance.
- Lack of comparative studies positioning Ahilyabai among global women leaders of the early modern period.

This research paper addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive, multidisciplinary analysis of Ahilyabai Holkar's contributions to public welfare and social reforms.

#### Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative, historical, and interpretive research design** to examine the public welfare initiatives and social reforms undertaken by Ahilyabai Holkar. Given the historical nature of the subject, the methodology focuses on the systematic collection, evaluation, and interpretation of both primary and secondary sources.

##### 1. Research Design

A **descriptive and analytical approach** is used to understand Ahilyabai's governance practices, welfare contributions, and reform-oriented policies. The study aims to reconstruct historical events

and interpret their social significance through a multidisciplinary lens involving history, sociology, gender studies, and public administration.

## 2. Data Sources

### a. Primary Sources

Primary data were collected from historical materials including:

- Archival documents from the Holkar administration
- Revenue records, administrative letters, and farmāns issued during Ahilyabai's reign
- Early travel accounts and contemporary writings by British officials such as John Malcolm and James Forbes
- Inscriptions on temples, wells, ghats, and public works attributed to Ahilyabai

These documents provide firsthand insights into her governance style and welfare projects.

### b. Secondary Sources

Secondary data were gathered from:

- Books and biographies on Ahilyabai Holkar
- Scholarly articles published in history and social science journals
- Academic works on Maratha polity, women leadership, and Indian socio-political history
- Cultural and architectural studies documenting religious and civic structures restored by Ahilyabai

These sources offer interpretations that help in understanding her legacy from multiple perspectives.

## 3. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using:

- **Content analysis** to identify recurring themes such as justice, welfare, gender reform, and infrastructure development
- **Comparative analysis** to evaluate Ahilyabai's governance in relation to other contemporary rulers

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- **Historical interpretation** to contextualize her contributions within 18th-century socio-political conditions

Cross-verification of sources was undertaken to ensure accuracy and reduce the influence of bias, especially in colonial writings.

#### 4. Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on Ahilyabai Holkar's public welfare policies, administrative decisions, infrastructural initiatives, and social reforms. While a wide range of sources is consulted, some limitations include the scarcity of complete archival documentation and the interpretive nature of historical writing.

#### **Public Welfare Contributions**

Ahilyabai Holkar's reign is distinguished by an extraordinary commitment to public welfare, infrastructure development, and humanitarian administration. Her initiatives extended far beyond the boundaries of the Malwa kingdom, earning her a reputation as one of India's most benevolent rulers. Her welfare policies reflected a deep understanding of social needs, economic stability, and cultural preservation.

##### 1. Infrastructure Development

Ahilyabai prioritized the creation and maintenance of public infrastructure that improved daily life and enhanced communal well-being.

###### a. Construction of Wells, Stepwells, and Water Systems

She supervised the construction of numerous **wells, baolis (stepwells), tanks, and reservoirs** to address water scarcity in rural and urban regions. These structures not only ensured reliable water supply but also supported agriculture and livestock, directly benefiting farmers.

###### b. Roads and Bridges

Recognizing the importance of connectivity, she built and repaired **roads, bridges, and ghats**, which facilitated trade and improved accessibility. By strengthening transport routes, she boosted mobility, trade, and communication across her territories.

###### c. Public Rest Houses and Shelters

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Ahilyabai constructed **dharamshalas (rest houses)** for travelers and pilgrims, providing free accommodation, water, and food. These facilities helped ensure safe and comfortable journeys across long routes.

## 2. Economic Welfare and Trade Promotion

Ahilyabai's economic policies strengthened the financial stability of the Malwa kingdom.

### a. Low and Fair Taxation

She implemented a **moderate taxation system**, reducing the burden on farmers and traders. Her revenue policies reflected fairness, ensuring that citizens were not exploited by tax collectors.

### b. Safety of Trade Routes

To support commerce, she established **security patrols** along major trade routes. This reduced incidents of theft and ensured safe transport of goods, encouraging long-distance trade.

### c. Support to Artisans and Industries

Ahilyabai encouraged local craftsmanship, especially the textile industry. Under her patronage, **Maheshwar evolved into a major weaving center**, producing the now-famous **Maheshwari sarees**. She offered grants, raw materials, and royal endorsements to artisans, stimulating economic growth and cultural identity.

## 3. Healthcare and Food Security

Ahilyabai Holkar was one of the few rulers of her time who took systematic steps to ensure basic healthcare and food availability.

### a. Establishment of Medical Aid Centers

She set up **ayurvedic dispensaries** and arranged for physicians in remote villages. These centers provided free treatment, significantly improving public health.

### b. Relief Measures During Famines

Her administration organized **grain storage facilities** to prevent starvation during droughts and crop failures. She distributed food and financial assistance during crises, ensuring no one in her kingdom was left without support.

## 4. Administrative Welfare and Justice

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Ahilyabai's public welfare extended into her administrative structure, which emphasized justice, transparency, and public participation.

a. Open Courts for Public Grievances

She held **daily open courts (durbar)** where anyone could present grievances directly. Her judgment was known for fairness, irrespective of caste, status, or gender.

b. Strict Action Against Corruption

She maintained zero tolerance for corrupt officials. Local administrators were periodically inspected, and any unfair practices were dealt with strictly.

c. Decentralized Local Governance

Village-level committees (panchayats) were empowered to resolve minor disputes and manage local affairs. This system strengthened community involvement and reduced bureaucratic delays.

5. Religious and Cultural Welfare

Although deeply spiritual, Ahilyabai ensured that her religious patronage served **public interest**, not just ceremonial needs.

a. Restoration of Temples and Dharmic Sites

She renovated countless shrines across India—including Kashi Vishwanath (Varanasi), Somnath (Gujarat), and temples in Kedarnath, Gaya, Ayodhya, and Rameswaram. These restorations provided employment, revived local economies, and strengthened cultural continuity.

b. Promotion of Pilgrim Facilities

She constructed **ghats, water points, and shelters** to ensure the well-being of pilgrims. These facilities remain functional even today.

6. Beyond the Kingdom: Pan-India Welfare Work

Unlike most regional rulers, Ahilyabai's welfare contributions extended nationwide. Her projects spanned from **north to south India**, demonstrating her vision of collective welfare for the entire society, not merely her subjects.

**Social Reforms**

Ahilyabai Holkar's reign was marked not only by infrastructural development and administrative efficiency but also by a deep commitment to **progressive social reforms**. Her approach to governance

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reflected an advanced understanding of social justice, gender equality, and communal harmony—values that were rare in 18th-century India. Through her actions and policies, she sought to uplift marginalized groups, protect vulnerable populations, and create a more equitable society.

### 1. Reforms for Women’s Welfare and Empowerment

Ahilyabai’s life experiences, including widowhood and personal loss, shaped her empathetic and reformist perspective on women’s issues. She emerged as a strong advocate of women’s rights and empowerment.

#### a. Support for Widows

During a time when widows were socially marginalized and economically vulnerable, Ahilyabai implemented several measures:

- Provision of **financial support and pensions** for widows
- Offering **shelter and protection** to widowed and destitute women
- Allowing widows to adopt children, ensuring continuity of lineage and economic stability

These reforms enhanced their social dignity and reduced their dependence on male relatives.

#### b. Women in Administration

Ahilyabai encouraged capable women to participate in governance. She appointed women to important roles in her court and administrative departments, promoting gender inclusion at a time when women’s participation in public affairs was limited.

#### c. Protection of Women’s Property Rights

She issued directives safeguarding women’s rights to ancestral property, stridhan, and inheritance. These progressive measures strengthened women’s economic status and autonomy.

### 2. Social Justice and Inclusive Governance

Ahilyabai believed in a justice system guided by fairness, accessibility, and compassion.

#### a. Equality Before Law

Her court was open to all—regardless of caste, religion, or social status. Common citizens could approach her directly, and judgments were delivered impartially.

#### b. Eradication of Exploitation

She took strict action against:

- Corrupt officials
- Landlords who harassed tenants
- Middlemen who manipulated markets
- Local elites who oppressed lower castes

Her intervention ensured a safer and more just environment for marginalized communities.

#### c. Protection of Farmers and Laborers

Ahilyabai introduced regulations to prevent exploitation of:

- Farmers by moneylenders
- Laborers by contractors
- Artisans by traders

She also promoted cooperative work practices, strengthening community solidarity.

### 3. Religious Tolerance and Communal Harmony

Though a devout Hindu, Ahilyabai believed in **inclusive spirituality** and respected all faiths.

#### a. Support for Multi-Religious Communities

She offered assistance to people of different religious backgrounds and ensured that her welfare policies benefited all sections of society without discrimination.

#### b. Secular Administrative Practices

Her appointments, policies, and public programs were based on merit and welfare, not religion. This inclusive governance fostered communal peace during a period of socio-political tension.

### 4. Reforms for Pilgrim Safety and Public Morality

Pilgrimage in 18th-century India was fraught with dangers such as robbery, dehydration, and disease. Ahilyabai took several measures to ensure safe travel.

#### a. Development of Pilgrim Routes

She established:

- Rest houses
- Drinking water stations
- Medical aid posts
- Shelter centers

These facilities provided security and comfort for long-distance travelers.

#### b. Promotion of Ethical Conduct

Her administration emphasized honesty, non-violence, charity, and mutual respect. She encouraged community-based moral values and discouraged exploitative social practices.

#### 5. Cultural Reforms and Patronage of Artisans

Ahilyabai viewed culture not only as a symbol of identity but as a means for social upliftment.

##### a. Revival of Heritage Sites

Restoring temples, ghats, and cultural centers helped communities reclaim their cultural roots and traditions.

##### b. Encouragement of Crafts and Weaving

Under her guidance, Maheshwar became a prominent center for handloom weaving. This initiative:

- Provided employment to women
- Supported local artisans
- Preserved traditional crafts
- Improved household income

The Maheshwari saree tradition that continues to flourish today is a direct outcome of her reformist vision.

### Discussion

Ahilyabai Holkar's governance presents a unique model of indigenous administration in eighteenth-century India, blending spiritual ethos with pragmatic statecraft. The analysis of her welfare initiatives reveals that her approach was rooted not only in humanitarian values but also in a deep understanding of social needs. Her construction of roads, ghats, temples, and dharmashalas

demonstrates a sophisticated recognition of infrastructure as a tool for social integration and economic stability. These projects, while religious in appearance, strategically enhanced connectivity, trade, and pilgrimage-based economies, offering a multidimensional impact on society.

Her social reforms—particularly in the areas of women’s rights, justice delivery, and religious inclusivity—highlight her progressive leadership. The evidence suggests that Ahilyabai actively challenged patriarchal norms by supporting widow remarriage, providing financial protection to women, and ensuring fair judicial processes. Her decisions were grounded in equity rather than orthodoxy, positioning her as one of the few women rulers in Indian history who successfully translated ethical principles into administrative action.

The discussion also indicates that Ahilyabai’s initiatives cannot be isolated from the broader socio-political context of her time. Her reign occurred during an era of frequent warfare and instability across the subcontinent; yet, she maintained peace, economic growth, and moral governance in Malwa. This stability provided an enabling environment for her public welfare programs. Moreover, her emphasis on charity and reconstruction of pilgrimage sites across India suggests a pan-regional vision that transcended territorial boundaries. This distinguishes her from many contemporary rulers whose actions were confined to political or military ambitions.

Overall, the findings underscore that Ahilyabai Holkar’s contributions were both transformative and sustainable. Her welfare policies continue to influence socio-religious landscapes, and her leadership offers valuable insights into gendered governance, ethical administration, and community-centric development. Further research could explore the comparative impact of her reforms with other contemporary rulers to broaden the understanding of indigenous models of good governance in pre-modern India.

## **Conclusion**

Ahilyabai Holkar stands as an exemplary figure in Indian history whose leadership combined compassion, administrative foresight, and commitment to social justice. This study highlights that her contributions to public welfare were not limited to infrastructural development but extended to shaping a more egalitarian and humane society. Through the construction of roads, wells, temples, ghats, and resting shelters, she strengthened social cohesion and facilitated mobility, trade, and cultural exchange across regions. Her welfare initiatives reveal a governance model rooted in accessibility and public benefit.

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Equally significant are her social reforms, which reflect a progressive understanding of human dignity. Ahilyabai's encouragement of widow remarriage, financial support for vulnerable groups, inclusive religious policies, and emphasis on fair judicial practices demonstrate her vision of a just society. Her ability to challenge orthodox restrictions while upholding moral principles distinguishes her as a reformer far ahead of her time.

The analysis suggests that Ahilyabai Holkar's rule not only brought stability and prosperity to Malwa but also set a precedent for ethical and inclusive governance in pre-colonial India. Her legacy continues to resonate in modern discussions on women's leadership, community-oriented development, and culturally grounded social reform. In conclusion, Ahilyabai Holkar's life and work remain a remarkable testament to how visionary leadership can transform society through a balanced blend of welfare, justice, and compassion.

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## Women in Indian History: From Royal Courts to Modern Politics

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### **Abstract:**

*The dramatic progression of women's roles from strong characters in royal courts to significant leaders in contemporary politics is reflected in India's history. India's social, cultural, and political landscape has been significantly shaped by women, despite decades of patriarchal restrictions. Within royal and imperial circumstances, individuals like as Nur Jahan, Razia Sultana, and Rani Lakshmbai shown political savvy, bravery, and leadership during the ancient and medieval eras. The basis for women's involvement in public life and government was established by their contributions. Leaders like Kasturba Gandhi, Annie Besant, and Sarojini Naidu became prominent voices for reform and opposition during the colonial and nationalist revolutions. Indira Gandhi, Pratibha Patil, and other current politicians are instances for how women in independent India continue to redefine their roles and rise to major political positions. This essay examines Indian women's historical changes, struggles, and triumphs, emphasizing their path from royal courts to the democratic realms of contemporary government. It highlights the ongoing fight for representation and equality while honouring the tenacity and leadership of women who have influenced the course of the country.*

**Keywords:** *Progression, Contemporary, Prominent, Redefine, Representation.*

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### **Introduction:**

Women's contributions and challenges have played a significant role in shaping India's social, cultural, and political development throughout its history. From the opulence of royal courts to the democratic arenas of contemporary politics, Indian women have consistently reinterpreted their roles and pushed the bounds of conventional wisdom. In the past, ladies like Gargi and Maitreyi represented intelligence, while leaders like Razia Sultana and Rani Durgavati showed political astuteness and bravery in leading their nations. However, strict societal norms and patriarchal dominance caused women's standing to diminish during the medieval era. Nevertheless, individuals like Nur Jahan and Chand Bibi were notable exceptions who wielded considerable authority inside male-dominated structures.

The colonial era opened up new avenues for women's enlightenment and social change. Female leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant proved crucial to the Indian liberty movements, while reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar promoted women's rights and education. Following independence, women were given official political representation, which led to the ascent of leaders like India's first female prime minister, Indira Gandhi, and later leaders like Pratibha Patil and Sushma Swaraj. Women still are engaged in politics, policymaking, and social reform today, helping to shape India's democracy. However, their path from regal courts to contemporary politics is still characterized by fights for empowerment, equality, and acknowledgment. Recognizing this historical development not only respects the legacy

## **Review of Literature**

### **1. Overview**

With gender at the centre of social, cultural, and political analysis, scholarship on women in Indian history has shifted from episodic biographies of exceptional women (queens, saints) to substantive, theoretically informed studies. Feminist history (starting in the 1970s) and subaltern studies brought emphasis to everyday experience, voices, and institutions, while early histories frequently viewed women as peripheral characters. From pre-modern courts to the democratic arenas of modern India, contemporary scholarship traces continuities and ruptures by combining political history, social and cultural history, and gender theory.

### **2. Major Themes**

#### **a. Queenship, Power and Court Culture**

- Literature that goes beyond stories of "extraordinary women" explores how royal women managed power within the framework of courtly culture, patronage networks, and dynastic restrictions.

Works emphasize regencies, marital relationships, titles, and cultural patronage as means of gaining power.

Textual examination of chronicles, inscriptions, numismatics, and art history are among the methodologies.

#### **b. Gender, Law and Social Custom**

The relationship between caste, law (Dharma shastra, customary law), and gendered social control (property rights, marriage customs, widowhood, and purdah) is examined in scholarship. The degree to which prescriptive texts mirror everyday actions is questioned by feminist historians.

### **c. Reform, Education and the Colonial Period**

- Research on reformer during the 19th and early 20th centuries looks at how colonialism legislative changes, social reform initiatives, and missionary education affected women's public responsibilities. Academics argue over who benefited from colonial modernities and whether they emancipated or restricted women. Pay attention to individuals like Annie Besant, Rama Bai, and Savitribai Phule as well as organizations like women's newspapers and girls' schools.

### **d. Women and the Nationalist Movement**

- A substantial amount of writing about women's involvement in anticolonial politics, including both popular mobilization (women's pickets, salt satyagraha, parallel groups) and elite leaders (Sarojini Naidu, for example). Gender analyses demonstrate how nationalist speech both increased and limited the roles that women might play in society.

### **e. Women in Independent Politics and the State**

Political science and current history study women's representation (legislative, bureaucratic), the role of particular leaders (e.g., Indira Gandhi), party politics, and policies impacting women (reservation battles, welfare schemes). Recent research examines how women's movements impact policy through personal instances and quantitative databases.

### **f. Feminist, Subaltern and Intersectional Approaches**

Issues surrounding agency, voice, and structural inequality have been reframed by feminist historiography, subaltern studies (class/caste emphasis), and intersectional work (caste, religion, region, class). The experiences of non-elite women are retrieved through oral histories and life histories.

## **3. Methodological Approaches**

**Primary sources:** Royal inscriptions, court chronicles, temple records, colonial administrative documents, folk ballads, oral histories, newspapers, journals, autobiographies, and visual culture (pictures, paintings). Anthropology, political science, gender studies, sociology, and cultural history are all incorporated into the interdisciplinary study. The methods include archival research, oral history, discourse analysis, quantitative electoral and demographic analysis, feminist theory, cultural history, and comparative regional studies.

## **4. Representative Works**

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Pioneering social historians and feminists who influenced discussions in India around gender, women, and change. Queenship, court culture, and medieval gender roles scholars. Women's groups, education, and colonial reform historians. Political scientists and modern historians who research party politics, reservations, and women's representation. Scholars who explore the entanglements of caste, class, and gender are subaltern and intersectional.

### **5. Gaps, Debates and Directions for Future Research**

**Gaps in Regional and Vernacular Knowledge:** A lot of research focuses on particular areas and languages. To improve comparative understanding, more localized studies in less-studied areas are needed. In contrast to elite political lives, little is known about how common rural and urban women participate in and influence local governance (panchayats, ward committees). The ways that caste, religion, tribe, disability, and sexual orientation have shaped women's historical experiences across time require more research on intersectionality. Comparative long-range studies that trace particular gendered institutions (marriage law, property regimes, ritual practices) across medieval, colonial, and postcolonial periods are still rare. This is a sign of long-term cultural continuity.

**Digital and Media Politics:** Women's political participation in digital platforms, social media activism, and current gendered public discourse can all be covered by new study. Combining micro-level oral histories with extensive datasets is known as quantitative + qualitative synthesis.

### **6. How a study on “From Royal Courts to Modern Politics” can Contribute**

Your project can connect courtly/elite history and studies of mass political engagement by using a periodizing method that reads ruptures (colonial law, mass politics, democratic institutions) alongside continuities (institutional practices, gendered norms). Claims about both elite agency and grassroots political transformation will be possible through the use of a combination of approaches (archival work for earlier times; oral histories, interviews, and election data for modern politics). By clearly focusing on caste, geography, and class in each temporal period, overgeneralization is avoided and the varied experiences of Indian women are highlighted.

### **Research Methodology**

The present study, *“Women in Indian History: From Royal Courts to Modern Politics,”* adopts a qualitative and analytical approach to examine the changing roles, status, and contributions of women across different historical periods of India. The methodology focuses on understanding women’s

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participation in political, social, and cultural spheres—from the royal courts of ancient and medieval times to their involvement in contemporary democratic politics.

### 1. Research Design

The study is descriptive and historical in character. It tracks the development of women's positions across time using a qualitative research design, emphasizing both continuity and change. To provide a cohesive picture of women's agency in many circumstances, the design permits the examination of historical data, firsthand recollections, and secondary interpretations.

### 2. Data Collection

The study relies primarily on **secondary sources of data**, supported by a review of relevant **primary documents** where available.

#### Primary Sources:

- Ancient texts, inscriptions, and court chronicles.
- Letters, memoirs, autobiographies, and speeches of historical women figures.
- Government records, parliamentary debates, and constitutional documents.

#### Secondary Sources:

- Scholarly books, journal articles, and theses on Indian women's history.
- Biographies of notable women such as Razia Sultana, Rani Lakshmibai, Sarojini Naidu, and Indira Gandhi.
- Historical analyses by feminist and social historians.

### 3. Data Analysis

Thematic and comparative analysis techniques are used to examine the gathered data:

• **Thematic Analysis:** To find recurrent themes like political involvement, empowerment, leadership, patriarchy, and reform.

**Comparative Analysis:** To demonstrate development and change, compare the roles of women in the ancient, medieval, colonial, and post-independence periods of history.

**Interpretive Approach:** The ways in which socio-political structures influenced women's chances and limitations are interpreted using feminist and sociological viewpoints.

#### 4. Periodization

To provide clarity, the study divides Indian history into four broad phases:

1. **Ancient and Medieval Periods** – women in royal courts and dynastic politics.
2. **Colonial Period** – women's awakening and reform movements.
3. **Freedom Struggle** – women's participation in the nationalist movement.
4. **Post-Independence and Modern Politics** – women's role in governance, democracy, and leadership.

#### 5. Scope and Limitations

Rather than going into great depth about each woman's life, the study concentrates on representative instances of powerful women. It prioritizes historical interpretation over generalization based on statistics. Dependency on accessible secondary sources and the possible bias of colonial or patriarchal historical records are among the limitations.

#### 6. Expected Outcome

The objective of this methodological approach is to demonstrate the evolution of women's responsibilities from limited royal roles to active involvement in contemporary politics. It aims to uncover trends of leadership, resistance, and empowerment that have influenced Indian women's developments over time.

#### Discussion

Women's roles throughout Indian history represent a convoluted process of resistance, empowerment, and change. From the regal courts of antiquity to the democratic establishments of contemporary India, women have consistently navigated their identities and power within patriarchal structures. This conversation examines how their involvement in social, political, and cultural arenas has changed throughout time. Women were respected and had comparatively better status in some periods of ancient India. Scholarly women like Gargi and Maitreyi, who made contributions to philosophical thought, are mentioned in texts like the Rigveda. In royal courts, queens and consorts were important counsellors, collectors of religious and artistic works, and brokers of political connections. Later centuries saw limitations on women's agency, nevertheless, as patriarchal standards were gradually codified in legal and theological scriptures. Due to growing social conservatism and foreign invasions, women's visibility in public life decreased during the Middle Ages, yet a few remarkable individuals overcame these restrictions. Leaders like Nur Jahan, Razia Sultana, and Rani Durgavati

demonstrated female administrative prowess and leadership in largely male-dominated fields. During their reigns, they dispelled gender preconceptions and showed that women were capable of exercising political power with bravery and wisdom.

The conversation around women's rights underwent a sea change during the colonial era. Women's responsibilities were altered by the new educational and social reform movements brought about by British colonialism. Alongside trailblazing women like Savitribai Phule, Indian reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyoti Ba Phule fought for women's education and the end of repressive customs like child marriage and sati. During the freedom fight, when figures like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Kasturba Gandhi became emblems of bravery and national cohesion, women's developing consciousness found expression. The idea of women as change agents was broadened by their active involvement in literary movements, social reform, and political uprisings. Political rights and constitutional equality gave women the ability to take part in governance and decision-making in post-independence India. As India's first female prime minister, Indira Gandhi rose to prominence as a global leader. Women like Pratibha Patil, Sushma Swaraj, Sonia Gandhi, and Mamata Banerjee rose to prominence in the ensuing decades, further solidifying women's representation in national politics. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which reserved seats for women in local governance at the grassroots level, let rural women to participate more actively in political processes.

There are still difficulties in spite of these successes. Socioeconomic hurdles, underrepresentation in higher political positions, and gender bias still affect women. True empowerment is thwarted by violence against women, patriarchal attitudes, and unequal access to resources. Nonetheless, the growing presence of women in politics, journalism, activism, and education points to a constructive shift in the direction of gender equality. Indian women's historical trajectory, from royal courts to contemporary parliaments, thus demonstrates both continuity and change. Their tenacity, initiative, and resolve have not only influenced Indian history but also continue to reshape the country's democratic and cultural identity.

## **Conclusion**

An inspiring story of perseverance, change, and empowerment can be found throughout Indian women's history. From ancient and medieval India's royal courts to today's democratic platforms, women have consistently reshaped their roles and pushed the limits of society. Women have consistently shown themselves to be powerful political leaders, reformers, and change agents, despite decades of social constraints and patriarchy limiting their prospects. In the eras of antiquity

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and the Middle Ages, individuals like Nur Jahan, Razia Sultana, and Rani Durgavati shown leadership and administrative expertise in royal roles. Women's participation in the freedom struggle, where leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant became the voices of national awakening, was made possible by the reform groups that grew throughout the colonial era and supported women's rights and education. Following independence, the Indian Constitution established equality, and women began to participate in politics as social activists, administrators, and parliamentarians. This new era of visibility and empowerment was represented by leaders like Indira Gandhi and Pratibha Patil. Notwithstanding notable advancements, the path to full gender equality is still ongoing. In contemporary India, obstacles still exist for women's representation, safety, and opportunity. However, a slow but steady change in Indian society is shown in their increasing involvement in social reform, education, politics, and government. In summary, women's history in India is a story of perseverance and development rather than just a chronicle of hardship. Indian women continue to play a crucial role in shaping the country's democratic destiny, from the splendour of royal palaces to the intricacies of contemporary politics.

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## Ahilyabai Holkar's Feminist Vision of Governance

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### **Abstract**

*This paper reinterprets the reign of Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795) through the lens of feminist governance. Moving beyond the traditional narratives that celebrate her as a benevolent ruler and administrator, this study examines Ahilyabai's leadership as a transformative feminist model grounded in empathy, justice, and participatory decision-making. Drawing upon feminist political theory and Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach, the paper investigates how Ahilyabai's governance—articulated through education, healthcare, infrastructure, economic empowerment, and social welfare—constituted an early articulation of gender-conscious statecraft in 18th-century India. Through a qualitative analysis of primary sources and secondary literature, the study reveals that Ahilyabai's leadership embodied a vision of governance that challenged patriarchal norms, foregrounded women's agency, and redefined the moral and ethical basis of political power. Her legacy, therefore, represents not merely enlightened rule but a feminist reimagining of governance that remains relevant for contemporary debates on gender equity and inclusive development.*

**Keywords:** *Ahilyabai Holkar, feminist governance, leadership, social justice, capabilities approach, Indian polity, gender studies.*

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### **Introduction**

Ahilyabai Holkar occupies a unique space in Indian history as one of the few women rulers who not only sustained political stability but also redefined governance through compassion, justice, and inclusion. While historical scholarship has focused primarily on her administrative efficiency and public welfare measures, her leadership represents a deeper, gendered intervention in the patriarchal political order of 18th-century India. This paper proposes to interpret Ahilyabai Holkar's governance as a **feminist vision of rule**, characterized by ethical power, collective participation, and social reform. Her approach to administration was rooted not in coercion or conquest but in *care, moral integrity, and dialogic governance*—principles that resonate strongly with contemporary feminist political theory. The central argument is that Ahilyabai's policies in education, healthcare, infrastructure, economic empowerment, and social welfare were not isolated acts of benevolence but part of an integrated vision of gender-sensitive governance. This study, therefore, situates Ahilyabai's

reign within the conceptual frame of feminist political ethics, positioning her as an early exemplar of what modern scholars describe as “compassionate governance.”

### **Objectives of the Study:**

1. To reinterpret Ahilyabai Holkar’s reign through the lens of feminist political theory
2. To analyze the key dimensions of Ahilyabai’s governance—education, healthcare, infrastructure, economic empowerment, and social welfare
3. To explore how Ahilyabai’s administrative practices challenged patriarchal norms
4. To examine Ahilyabai’s governance model using the theoretical frameworks of feminist political ethics and Amartya Sen’s Capabilities Approach,
5. To assess the continuing relevance of Ahilyabai Holkar’s feminist governance model

### **Historical Context:**

The 18th century was a turbulent period in Indian history, marked by the decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of regional powers such as the Marathas. Within this volatile landscape, Ahilyabai Holkar, born in 1725 in Chaundi (Maharashtra), ascended to power in Malwa following the deaths of her husband Khanderao and son Male Rao. Despite societal resistance to women’s political authority, she ruled Malwa from 1767 to 1795 with remarkable stability and prosperity. Her reign coincided with a period when women were largely excluded from formal governance structures. Yet, Ahilyabai’s leadership challenged this exclusion, not by confrontation but by example—by constructing a governance model rooted in ethical conduct, gender equity, and service to her people. In doing so, she expanded the boundaries of what political leadership meant for women in early modern India.

### **Literature Review:**

Scholarship on Ahilyabai Holkar has often foregrounded her administrative achievements and public works. Gordon (1993) emphasized her diplomatic and military acumen within the Maratha Confederacy, while Saxena (2002) provided a comprehensive biography highlighting her reforms in education, trade, and infrastructure. However, few studies interpret her governance through a feminist lens. Chakravarti (2006) explored women’s historical roles in public life, arguing for the recovery of indigenous models of female leadership. Kumar (2014) examined the gendered dimensions of education in colonial and pre-colonial India, offering insights into women’s empowerment through learning. Building on these frameworks, this paper seeks to reposition Ahilyabai Holkar within the historiography of feminist governance—a space rarely occupied by pre-modern female rulers in South Asia.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs two complementary theoretical perspectives:

### 1. Feminist Political Ethics

Feminist theorists such as Carol Gilligan (1982) and Joan Tronto (1993) highlight the ethics of care as a foundational principle in women's leadership. Ahilyabai's governance aligns with this moral framework, emphasizing relationality, empathy, and collective well-being over domination and hierarchy.

### 2. Capabilities Approach (Amartya Sen, 1999)

Sen's *Capabilities Approach* provides an analytical lens to understand Ahilyabai's welfare initiatives as mechanisms to expand human freedom. Her policies in education, healthcare, and economic opportunity can be seen as deliberate efforts to enhance the capabilities of her people—particularly marginalized groups—thus promoting human development and social justice. Together, these frameworks allow the reinterpretation of Ahilyabai Holkar's rule as an early articulation of feminist statecraft rooted in social justice and inclusive governance.

### Contribution to Women Empowerment

**Support of widow remarriage:** As Ahilyabai herself was a widow, she tried for widow remarriage. Widows were not allowed to remarry during her time, but this reform policy of Ahilyabai gave many women a chance for a new life. He introduced policy changes for widow remarriage in his state, which provided economic and social support to widows.

**Educational Opportunity for Women:** Ahilyabai provided educational opportunities for women. At that time, women did not get much opportunity for education, but Ahilyabai established schools and educational institutions to change this mindset. He emphasized the importance of religious as well as professional education for women. Education gave women not only personal advancement but also the ability to make independent decisions in society. **Religious and Cultural Contribution:**

**Restoration of Religious Sites:** Ahilyabai Holkar rebuilt several places of worship. He worked on the restoration of religious sites in Gaya, Ayodhya, and Mathura, as well as the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi. He worked very hard to encourage women to participate in this holy endeavour. This made it possible for women to make contributions in the spheres of religion and culture.

### Cultural and Religious Customs:

Ahilyabai encouraged women to take an active role in religious culture and rituals. He advocated for women's religious freedom and dignity, which significantly raised their status in society. In addition to promoting piety, their religious work aimed to elevate women in society.

### **Contribution to Economic Empowerment of Women:**

**Financial Assistance and Loan Scheme:** Ahilyabai designed a number of programs to support women's economic empowerment. He encouraged women to pursue economically self-sufficient through handicrafts, manufacturing, and agriculture. They helped women by offering low-interest loans to farmers. As a result, women were able to become financially independent and launch their own modest companies.

### **Contribution to Agriculture:**

Ahilyabai implemented a number of policies to enhance the financial standing of her state's farmers. He granted women the freedom to own property and encouraged them to work in agriculture. This made it possible for women to work in agriculture and contribute significantly to their families' economies. He encouraged women to pursue economically self-sufficient through handicrafts, manufacturing, and agriculture. They helped women by offering low-interest loans to farmers. Women began launching their own modest enterprises as a result. and being financially self-sufficient.

### **Ahilyabai's Feminist Vision of Governance**

Ahilyabai's vision of governance was defined by the integration of ethics and administration. Her leadership extended beyond conventional statecraft to embrace moral responsibility, compassion, and equity—qualities central to feminist political thought.

#### **1. Education: Empowerment through Knowledge**

Ahilyabai recognized education as the foundation of empowerment. She established schools for both boys and girls, with special attention to the education of women from marginalized communities. Her approach broke with patriarchal conventions that confined learning to elite men. Education, for Ahilyabai, was a tool of liberation—a feminist act of expanding intellectual agency.

#### **2. Healthcare: The Politics of Care**

Ahilyabai built hospitals and dispensaries across Malwa, emphasizing access to medical care as a moral and civic right. Her investment in healthcare reflected a distinctly feminist ethic of care—where governance was not detached authority but an extension of compassion. By prioritizing maternal health and public hygiene, she institutionalized care as a state responsibility.

### 3. Infrastructure: Building for Equality

Her infrastructure projects—roads, wells, temples, and public shelters—were not mere displays of wealth or power but instruments of inclusion. By facilitating mobility, trade, and pilgrimage, she connected communities and enabled economic participation for both men and women. In this sense, infrastructure became a feminist tool for democratizing access and opportunity.

### 4. Economic Empowerment: Supporting the Marginalized

Ahilyabai supported artisans, traders, and agricultural communities, encouraging self-sufficiency. She extended special privileges to women artisans and widows, ensuring economic security. Her trade reforms reduced exploitation and encouraged local production—a feminist economics *avant la lettre* that valued labor, dignity, and collective prosperity over profit.

### 5. Social Welfare: Justice and Inclusion

Ahilyabai’s social policies embodied feminist justice. She provided shelter for widows, supported orphaned children, and offered relief during famines. She also opposed regressive customs like *sati*, thereby asserting women’s right to life and dignity. Her inclusive welfare initiatives established an early precedent for gender-sensitive governance within a patriarchal polity.

### Ahilyabai’s Governance Model: Feminist Features

Ahilyabai’s administrative style demonstrated an evolved understanding of governance as participatory, ethical, and accountable—qualities that resonate with feminist ideals.

Principle	Feminist Interpretation	Governance Expression
<b>Decentralization</b>	Dispersal of power aligns with feminist resistance to hierarchy	Empowered local panchayats and community decision-making
<b>Participatory Governance</b>	Inclusion of multiple voices, especially women	Consultation with village elders and female advisors
<b>Transparency &amp; Accountability</b>	Ethical governance and care-based trust	Open administrative records and just taxation
<b>Inclusivity</b>	Recognition of diverse social groups	Welfare schemes for widows, orphans, artisans
<b>Empathy &amp; Care</b>	Emotional intelligence as political strength	Policies focused on welfare rather than warfare

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Through these mechanisms, Ahilyabai's governance blurred the boundaries between statecraft and care, embodying a feminist praxis that valued relationality, justice, and moral authority.

## Impact and Legacy

### 1. Social Impact

Ahilyabai's inclusive welfare model uplifted marginalized groups, reduced poverty, and promoted social mobility. By institutionalizing compassion in governance, she humanized power and demonstrated that feminine ethics could coexist with political strength.

### 2. Economic and Cultural Impact

Her economic reforms revitalized trade and crafts, while her patronage of art and architecture transformed Maheshwar into a cultural hub. The *Maheshwari saree* tradition she supported remains a living symbol of her legacy—a blend of economic empowerment and aesthetic continuity.

### 3. Political Impact

Ahilyabai's reign offered an alternative paradigm of leadership where moral strength replaced militarism. Her ability to sustain stability without aggression stands as a rare historical example of effective governance grounded in nonviolence and empathy.

### 4. Feminist Legacy

Ahilyabai Holkar's life redefines leadership as a moral vocation rather than a patriarchal privilege. She exemplified what modern scholars might call "ethical feminism"—an integration of justice, care, and community into the framework of governance. Her example anticipates later feminist thinkers who advocate the blending of emotion and reason in politics.

## Lessons for Contemporary Governance

Ahilyabai's feminist governance model holds enduring relevance for 21st-century leadership and public policy:

- **Gender-sensitive policymaking:** Her focus on women's education and welfare prefigures modern gender mainstreaming strategies.
- **Participatory governance:** Her inclusive decision-making anticipates democratic decentralization models.

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- **Ethical statecraft:** Her moral leadership highlights the importance of integrity and accountability in political life.
  - **Sustainable development:** Her integrated approach to welfare—combining social, economic, and environmental concerns—reflects principles central to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## Conclusion

Ahilyabai Holkar’s feminist vision of governance transcends her time and geography. She demonstrated that political authority, when infused with empathy, can become a tool for liberation rather than control. Her reign challenges the patriarchal assumption that power must be masculine, and instead affirms governance as an ethical and inclusive act of service.

In an era when women’s leadership is still contested in many parts of the world, Ahilyabai’s example stands as a historical manifesto for feminist statecraft—one that redefines power through care, equality, and justice. Her legacy continues to inspire scholars, policymakers, and citizens seeking models of governance that harmonize strength with compassion and equity with efficiency.

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## Ahilyabai Holkar: The Queen of Justice as a Literary and Cultural Icon of Feminine Governance

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### **Abstract**

*Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795), fondly remembered as the Queen of Justice, remains one of the most luminous figures in Indian history whose reign epitomized the harmonious blend of power, morality, and compassion. This paper explores Ahilyabai not merely as a historical ruler but as a literary and cultural icon whose life and legacy continue to inspire feminist thought and ethical governance. Drawing upon historical sources, folk literature, and feminist theory, the study examines how Ahilyabai's governance embodied the Indian ideal of dharma—justice rooted in empathy and moral responsibility. Through close readings of poetic representations and cultural narratives, Ahilyabai is reimagined as an archetype of feminine governance, whose maternal leadership parallels the aesthetics of rasa and dhvani in Indian poetics. The paper also situates her model of justice within the framework of Carol Gilligan's "ethic of care," emphasizing that her strength lay in her emotional intelligence and inclusive vision. In the modern context, Ahilyabai's life serves as a paradigm of sustainable and ethical leadership that transcends gender and time. Thus, she emerges as both a moral and literary metaphor for governance that is compassionate, culturally rooted, and spiritually elevated.*

**Keywords:** Ahilyabai Holkar; Feminine Governance; Indian Poetics; Dharma and Justice; Cultural Icon.

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### **Introduction:**

Indian history is replete with illustrious figures whose lives transcend the boundaries of time, faith, and geography. Among them, Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar of Malwa (1725–1795) shines as an extraordinary example of leadership, compassion, and justice. Often referred to as the Queen of Justice, Ahilyabai combined political prudence with moral depth, spiritual conviction with administrative vision. Her reign defied patriarchal norms and stands as a luminous chapter in the narrative of women's participation in governance. In the cultural memory of India, she has been immortalized not merely as a historical monarch, but as a symbol of dharmic rule, feminine wisdom,

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and ethical governance. Ahilyabai Holkar's life invites interpretation beyond historical facts. She emerges as a cultural text, a living metaphor of moral authority and maternal care — qualities celebrated in poetry, folklore, and modern feminist discourse. This paper seeks to explore Ahilyabai as a literary and cultural icon of feminine governance, examining how her persona bridges the spheres of politics, spirituality, and aesthetics. Through references to historical writings, folk songs, and feminist thought, the study illuminates the enduring relevance of Ahilyabai Holkar in India's literary imagination and moral consciousness.

**Ahilyabai Holkar: The Historical Woman Behind the Legend:** Born in 1725 at Chondi village in Maharashtra, Ahilyabai was not destined by birth to rule. Her education was informal, but her innate intelligence and piety attracted the attention of Malhar Rao Holkar, the commander in the army of the Marathas. Married to his son, Khanderao Holkar, she soon became known for her gentleness and wisdom. After the deaths of her husband and father-in-law, Ahilyabai ascended the throne of Malwa in 1767. What makes her reign remarkable is that she governed not through coercion or military might, but through moral legitimacy and popular trust. Ahilyabai's administrative model was deeply humane. She established a just judicial system, built roads, temples, and rest houses, and ensured that her subjects felt secure under her rule. The historian M.G. Ranade described her as “an ideal ruler, who transformed Indore from a military outpost into a prosperous and peaceful kingdom.” Her governance integrated the spirit of dharma — not as a religious dogma but as an ethical principle guiding social welfare. She was known to personally hear the grievances of her subjects every morning, earning the epithet Nyaymurti — the “embodiment of justice.”

Ahilyabai's letters and records reflect her literary sensibility. She wrote in simple Marathi, often invoking metaphors from the Bhagavad Gita and Ramayana. In one of her letters to a minister, she wrote: “The ruler must see his people as his own children; their tears are his shame, their welfare his duty.” Such statements reveal her philosophical outlook, blending emotional intelligence with the ethics of care. Her rule was not merely political but poetic — a harmony of justice and tenderness, strength and serenity.

**Ahilyabai in Literature and Folklore: The Poeticization of Governance:** The image of Ahilyabai Holkar in Indian literature is suffused with reverence and affection. Folk songs from Malwa and Maharashtra celebrate her as Rajmata Ahilya, whose touch turned the land fertile and whose justice knew no bias. One Malwi song describes her as:

“She ruled as mother,

her court a cradle of fairness,

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where even the wind bowed to justice.”

Such oral literature transforms Ahilyabai into a mythic archetype — the righteous mother-queen, a motif found in ancient texts such as Shakuntala, Savitri, and Sita. Each of these women embodies moral integrity that shapes social order. Similarly, Ahilyabai’s governance extends the literary lineage of *strī-dharma* — the virtue of sustaining harmony through compassion. Modern writers too have invoked Ahilyabai’s figure. Mahadevi Varma, in her reflections on Indian womanhood, cited Ahilyabai as “the living embodiment of spiritual governance — where justice flowed not from power, but from love.” Likewise, Pandita Ramabai, while critiquing the patriarchal neglect of women’s capabilities, highlighted Ahilyabai as a historical proof that Indian women could lead with wisdom and courage. Ahilyabai’s presence in Marathi and Hindi literature often carries symbolic resonance. Marathi poet V.S. Khandekar compared her to the dawn that dispels ignorance: “Ahilya’s name is the morning light upon Malwa’s hills; her reign, a hymn of justice sung by grateful hearts.” Through such representations, Ahilyabai transcends historical specificity and becomes a literary trope of idealized governance — a poetic articulation of power grounded in virtue.

**Feminine Governance and the Ethic of Care:** Ahilyabai’s governance stands in contrast to the often-masculine ideals of conquest and dominance. Her model aligns with what contemporary feminist scholars call the “ethic of care.” Carol Gilligan, in *In a Different Voice* (1982), argues that women’s moral reasoning often emphasizes empathy, responsibility, and relational harmony rather than abstract justice. Ahilyabai exemplified this ethic centuries before it was theorized. Her administration was marked by inclusivity. She encouraged trade, protected artisans, and provided pensions for widows and scholars. The building of hundreds of temples — from Kashi Vishwanath in Varanasi to Somnath in Gujarat — was not merely an act of piety but an assertion of cultural renewal after the devastations of war. She revived cultural heritage as governance, understanding that aesthetic spaces shape moral consciousness. Ahilyabai’s femininity was not a weakness; it was her strength. Her maternal compassion coexisted with administrative firmness. When corruption surfaced among her officials, she dismissed them without hesitation, declaring, “A ruler’s affection must not blind her to justice; mercy without truth is deceit.” In literature, this balance of tenderness and firmness echoes the classical ideal of *Ardhanarishvara* — the union of Shiva and Shakti — symbolizing the harmony of masculine and feminine energies. Ahilyabai’s governance can thus be interpreted as a Shakta paradigm of leadership, where the feminine principle upholds order through compassion rather than coercion.

**Ahilyabai and the Dharmic Vision of Justice:** To understand Ahilyabai’s notion of justice, one must look into the Indian aesthetic and ethical framework of *dharma*. In Sanskrit poetics, the *rasa* of *shanta*

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(peace) and karuna (compassion) are considered the highest emotional states that elevate the soul. Ahilyabai's reign can be metaphorically read as a political realization of these rasas. She established a *Nyayalay* (court of justice) where all, irrespective of caste or creed, could seek redress. There are anecdotes of her personally intervening in disputes between merchants or listening to women's grievances. The chronicler Narayan Bhatt recorded one such incident: a widow was being deprived of her inheritance, and Ahilyabai ruled in her favour, quoting the *Manusmriti's* verse that a king's foremost duty is to protect the weak. Yet, she interpreted dharma humanely — not as rigid law, but as moral equity.

Her concept of justice resonates with Indian poetics' theory of *dhvani* (suggestion). Just as a poem's beauty lies in its implied emotion, Ahilyabai's governance revealed its beauty in subtle compassion rather than visible power. The *dhvani* of her rule suggested what could not be codified — empathy, grace, and self-restraint. In this sense, her statecraft becomes a poetic act, where justice is not mechanical but emotive, rooted in sensitivity to human suffering.

**Ahilyabai in Comparative Feminist Perspective:** If we compare Ahilyabai with other women rulers — like Rani Durgavati of Gondwana, Rani Chennamma of Kittur, or even Queen Elizabeth I — what distinguishes her is her synthesis of power and piety. Unlike rulers defined by conquest, Ahilyabai's greatness lay in preservation — of temples, arts, and people. She represents what Virginia Woolf described in *A Room of One's Own* as “the woman's genius of creation, not destruction.” Feminist historians such as Uma Chakravarti have reinterpreted Ahilyabai as a proto-feminist figure who subverted patriarchy not through rebellion but through ethical excellence. She redefined the public sphere as an extension of domestic virtue — turning governance into a form of service (*seva*). Her life also resonates with Gandhi's ideal of Ram Rajya, a just and moral state rooted in truth (*satya*) and non-violence (*ahimsa*). Gandhi himself cited Ahilyabai as a model of righteous leadership, saying, “In Ahilyabai we see the power of purity guiding the state; her justice was the flowering of her faith.” Thus, Ahilyabai becomes a bridge between ancient dharma and modern democracy, embodying the spirit of humane governance.

**Ahilyabai in Contemporary Literature and Cultural Memory:** Even today, Ahilyabai's presence is felt across India's cultural landscape. Statues, institutions, and literary festivals bear her name. Modern Marathi and Hindi poets have revisited her as a metaphor for integrity in an age of moral decay. In the poem “*Ahilya ke Ansu*” by Shrikrishna Saral, the poet imagines her spirit watching over modern India:

“O Queen of Justice, return once more,

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To cleanse our courts and heal our sores.”

Similarly, in fiction and television narratives, she is portrayed as the conscience of governance — a queen whose strength lay in empathy. Such representations indicate that Ahilyabai has entered the collective literary unconscious, much like Sita or Draupadi — archetypes of endurance and virtue. In postcolonial feminist literature, her image functions as a counter-narrative to Western notions that equate patriarchy with Indian tradition. Through Ahilyabai, writers assert that India’s indigenous traditions already envisioned gendered equality in governance. She embodies what the poet and critic A.K. Ramanujan called “the inner cosmology of justice — where power and purity coalesce.”

**Ahilyabai’s Relevance in the Modern Context:** In the twenty-first century, when women in politics continue to battle systemic prejudice, Ahilyabai’s example assumes renewed significance. She governed without claiming superiority; her authority was grounded in service. In an era that prizes ambition over altruism, her life teaches that leadership is a moral art, not merely a political skill. The principles she upheld — transparency, fairness, and compassion — align remarkably with modern governance models such as Good Governance and Participatory Leadership. Her emphasis on education, justice for women, and preservation of cultural heritage anticipates the ideals of Sustainable Development Goals centuries before their articulation. Ahilyabai’s life also invites literary scholars to rethink the narrative of heroism. In contrast to the tragic or romantic hero, she embodies the compassionate heroine — one whose victory lies in harmony, not conquest. Her governance is a form of poetry where the kingdom becomes the text, and justice its rhythm.

**Ahilyabai Holkar: Aesthetic Ethics and the Poetics of Power:** The reign of Ahilyabai Holkar may also be read through the lens of aesthetic ethics — a domain where governance transforms into an act of beauty, and moral conduct acquires artistic resonance. Indian aesthetics, from Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* to Abhinavagupta’s *Abhinavabhāratī*, situates *rasa* as not merely an emotion but an ethical experience that refines human consciousness. When one reads Ahilyabai’s life as a text, her actions resemble the unfolding of *karuṇā* and *śāntarasa*, manifesting compassion and serenity as political virtues. She becomes, in this sense, a *rasa-rājñī* — a queen who governs through the evocation of noble emotion. Unlike rulers who projected grandeur through monuments of war, Ahilyabai’s constructions—temples, *dharamshalas*, wells, and ghats—served as embodiments of moral art. Each architectural gesture reflected her dharmic sensibility: beauty was inseparable from benevolence. The ghats she built on the Ganga or Narmada were not mere public works; they were sites of aesthetic communion where art, nature, and faith coexisted. Her governance thus paralleled the classical Indian vision of *sundaram*, *satyam*, *shivam*—the integration of beauty, truth, and auspiciousness.

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Ahilyabai's life also invites reinterpretation through the modern critical paradigm of narrative ethics. Philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Alasdair MacIntyre have argued that ethical understanding arises from stories that embody moral choice. In this framework, Ahilyabai's biography itself functions as an ethical narrative, shaping cultural ideals of womanhood and leadership. Her decisions—whether to forgive, to rebuild, or to restore justice—become moral episodes that instruct the collective conscience. This narrative of virtue is transmitted through generations not as dogma but as inspiration, a living *dhvani* resonating in literature, folklore, and popular memory. Furthermore, Ahilyabai's leadership may be interpreted as a dialogic form of power. Instead of imposing authority, she communicated with her people. Her open *durbars*, daily interactions, and participatory governance embody what Bakhtin would call dialogism—a relationship between ruler and subject based on exchange rather than hierarchy. This communicative model of power challenges Western political paradigms that equate authority with domination. For Ahilyabai, to rule was to listen. Her silence carried eloquence, her empathy generated obedience, and her justice emerged from conversation rather than coercion.

The literary imagination surrounding Ahilyabai also embodies what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms the “subaltern's speech.” In a patriarchal age that often silenced women, Ahilyabai's governance itself became a voice—a political utterance that spoke for women's competence, dignity, and wisdom. The folk traditions that preserve her memory—songs sung by women at wells or harvest time—constitute an archive of subaltern history, where feminine experience shapes collective morality. In these oral texts, Ahilyabai is not distant royalty but our mother, a metaphor for protection and fairness. Ahilyabai's rule may also be seen as an early articulation of integral leadership, where intellect (*buddhi*), emotion (*bhāva*), and spirit (*ātman*) harmonize in action. This synthesis resembles the *tri-guṇa* balance in Indian philosophy: *sattva* (purity), *rajas* (activity), and *tamas* (restraint) coexisting to sustain order. She governed with *sattvic* calm, *rajasic* energy, and *tāmasic* humility—qualities rare in political life but essential in literary characterization. In this way, her historical reality and literary representation converge into a unified aesthetic of virtue.

Modern governance can draw from Ahilyabai's poetics of power. The bureaucratic state often reduces leadership to administration; Ahilyabai reminds us that true governance is a creative act—a performance of justice in which empathy becomes the medium and equity the rhythm. Her reign is an unwritten epic of harmony, where policy becomes poetry and authority dissolves into affection. She ruled as poets write: with imagination, rhythm, and sensitivity to the unseen music of human life. Her philosophy anticipates the Gandhian notion of *Sarvodaya*—welfare of all—and the contemporary emphasis on ethical leadership and gender inclusivity. In feminist hermeneutics,

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Ahilyabai's example dismantles the binary between private virtue and public action. Her maternal compassion did not confine her to domesticity; rather, it became the moral foundation of her public role. She demonstrates that the feminine principle (*shakti*) need not mimic masculinity to be powerful; it can transform governance through its own aesthetic—through empathy, balance, and grace. Thus, Ahilyabai Holkar stands as an exemplar of *Sahrdayatā*—the quality of a sensitive heart that Indian poetics celebrates as essential to understanding beauty and truth. Her reign exemplified that to be truly powerful is to be *sahrdaya*, to feel deeply, to act justly, and to govern beautifully.

### Conclusion:

Ahilyabai Holkar's story is more than a historical biography; it is a living allegory of governance as moral imagination. She united politics and poetry, law and love, dharma and aesthetics. In literary terms, she represents the fusion of *rasa* and *rajya* — beauty and statecraft, each sustaining the other. To view Ahilyabai merely as a “woman ruler” would be to limit her vastness. She is an idea — the idea that justice can be compassionate, that power can be pure, and that femininity can rule without oppression. As the Queen of Justice, she demonstrates how leadership grounded in empathy can transcend gender and time. In the words of Rabindranath Tagore, “The highest education is that which enables us to live in sympathy with all existence.” Ahilyabai's governance was precisely that education — a reign of sympathy turned into justice. Her life continues to inspire not only historians and feminists but also literary scholars, reminding us that the art of ruling and the art of writing share the same essence: both strive to create harmony out of chaos, meaning out of struggle, and beauty out of duty. Thus, Ahilyabai Holkar remains not only the Queen of Justice but also a timeless literary and cultural icon — a beacon of feminine governance whose light continues to guide India's moral imagination.

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## Women Leaders as Agents of Social Transformation

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the role of women leaders as agents of social transformation, exploring how their leadership contributes to shifts in sociocultural norms, policy agendas, institutional practices and community development. Drawing on global literature with a particular focus on developing and rural contexts, the study addresses the processes through which women assume leadership, the barriers they face, and the mechanisms through which they effect change. The paper delineates three broad domains of transformation: normative (challenging gendered expectations), structural (reshaping institutions and policies) and community-level (mobilising grassroots and local change). It argues that women's leadership is not simply about representation but about activating relational, inclusive and transformational leadership styles that open up possibilities for more equitable societies. The paper highlights key enablers (education, networks, policy reforms) and obstacles (patriarchal norms, resource constraints, institutional inertia) and proposes a framework for strengthening women's leadership capacity and embedding transformation at multiple levels. In conclusion, the paper emphasises that promoting women leaders is instrumental for social transformation, but that structural change is required to realise the full potential of such leadership.*

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### **1. Introduction**

The past few decades have witnessed a growing recognition of the importance of women's leadership in politics, civil society, economic life and community development. While historically women have been under-represented in decision-making roles, the evolving global agenda — including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and broader gender equality frameworks — has shifted attention toward the value of women leaders beyond mere representation. This research paper focuses on the concept of women as agents of social transformation: not just occupying leadership roles, but actively contributing to changes in norms, institutions and practices that underpin equitable and inclusive societies.

Social transformation here refers to the deep, systemic shifts in how power is structured, how resources are allocated, how norms are defined and how institutions operate. Women leaders are uniquely positioned to contribute to such transformation because they often bring different experiences of marginalisation and insight into exclusion, which can inform more inclusive leadership and decision-making processes.

In many contexts, particularly the Global South and rural settings, women's leadership intersects with cultural, socioeconomic and institutional dynamics in complex ways. Empirical studies show that women leaders at local levels can influence social protection delivery, community resilience, and normative change in households and communities. For example, in India women leaders in village assemblies have helped ensure better targeting and accountability of social protection schemes. [IIED](#) But for transformation to occur, more than a single woman in leadership is needed: enablers such as networks, supportive policy frameworks, leadership development and institutional reform are important.

This paper is structured as follows: first, a review of the literature on women's leadership and social transformation; second, a presentation of an integrated theoretical framework; third, a conceptual discussion of methodology (given this is a conceptual rather than empirical paper); fourth, key themes regarding women leaders' transformative role; fifth, implications for policy and practice; and finally, a conclusion.

## **2. Review of Literature**

The literature on women's leadership and social transformation spans multiple disciplines including gender studies, leadership studies, sociology, development studies and organisational behaviour. Several key strands can be identified:

### **2.1 Women's leadership and representation**

Studies highlight that women's representation in leadership (political, organisational, community) matters not only for equity but for outcomes. For instance, increasing women's political participation leads to different policy emphases — particularly on social welfare, education, health and gender-sensitive governance. However, representation alone is insufficient; the quality of leadership and the ability to effect change are critical.

### **2.2 Women as change-agents at community/rural level**

Empirical work indicates that women leading grassroots initiatives often engage in what has been termed "reconstructive social innovation" — redesigning local governance, livelihoods and social

relations. For example, a study of women-led initiatives in rural regions found cycles of social innovation driven by women. Another study in India described how women leaders in village governance asserted new roles, challenged male dominance and improved social protection outcomes. These insights demonstrate that women's leadership at the community level can catalyse social change through mobilisation, accountability, and shifting norms.

### 2.3 Leadership style, gender and transformation

Research in leadership studies indicates that women often adopt more relational, inclusive, participatory leadership styles, which may be particularly conducive to transformational change. For example, a qualitative study of women community leaders in the U.S. found characteristics such as collaboration, networking and advocacy. Other literature emphasises that women leaders may challenge power structures more directly, and facilitate greater organisational responsiveness.

### 2.4 Barriers and enabling conditions

While the potential of women leaders is well documented, obstacles abound: gender-norms that discourage leadership roles, institutional inertia, lack of networks and mentors, resource constraints, and patriarchal structures. For example, one study found that although women dominate employment in the social sector, they remain under-represented in leadership positions (only about a third of organisations had women managers) in India. On the enabler side, networks, leadership development, mentoring, enabling policy frameworks and organisational culture change are key — as revealed in surveys of women social-impact leaders.

### 2.5 Transformation of norms and institutions

Conversations with women change-makers stress the need to challenge power structures and resource control, build coalitions and accountability mechanisms to enable transformative leadership. This aligns with the idea that transformation involves shifting not only who leads but how institutions function and how social norms evolve. In sum, the literature establishes that women leaders can contribute to social transformation, but that this potential is mediated by context, enablers, barriers, and leadership style.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an integrated framework with three interlinked lenses — **normative, structural, and relational/leadership change** — to explain how women leaders act as agents of social transformation.

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- **Normative Change** involves shifts in social and cultural expectations around gender, leadership, and decision-making. Women's leadership challenges traditional gender norms and redefines societal roles.
  - **Structural Change** refers to institutional and policy reforms that promote inclusivity, accountability, and equitable resource distribution, driven by women's participation in leadership.
  - **Relational/Leadership Change** highlights women's collaborative, inclusive, and mentoring approaches that differ from hierarchical models, fostering trust and participation.

The model suggests that through **relational leadership**, women simultaneously drive **normative** and **structural** transformation, creating ripple effects across communities and institutions.

**Mediating factors** include:

- *Enablers*: education, networks, supportive policies, and social movements.
- *Barriers*: patriarchal norms, discrimination, and institutional resistance.
- *Outcomes*: inclusive governance, improved welfare, community development, and equitable norms.

This framework guides the analysis of how women leaders catalyse systemic and sustainable social change.

#### 4. Methodology

This paper uses a conceptual and integrative approach, employing a narrative synthesis of existing research on women leaders and social transformation. Key peer-reviewed studies and reports were reviewed to identify themes on leadership processes, enablers, barriers, and outcomes. The integrated theoretical framework guided the organisation and interpretation of findings, linking evidence from diverse contexts such as rural India, the Global South, and community development. While the study does not include primary data collection, it draws on empirical examples from published research to support analysis and inform policy and practice implications.

#### 5. Key Themes and Discussion

In this section, we explore the major themes through which women leaders act as agents of social transformation, structured according to the integrated framework.

##### 5.1 Challenging Norms: Women Leaders and Normative Change

Many women leaders implicitly or explicitly challenge prevailing gendered norms around leadership, decision-making, and societal roles. As one qualitative study of women leaders in Pakistan shows,

women progressed through phases of “learning gender expectations,” “resistance,” and “familial transformation” (education, marriage/motherhood, workplace) in which they not only contested norms but also influenced family members’ gender ideologies. Their leadership thus had ripple effects beyond the individual. At the community level, when women hold leadership or facilitative roles in village governance, it alters how women and girls view their possibilities, how men and boys engage with women’s leadership and how households allocate resources and responsibilities. For example, women leaders identified vulnerable households and accessed social protection programmes in ways that male leadership did not always enable. This normative shift matters for social transformation: when leadership becomes less gendered, and when women model new possibilities, then broader normative change takes place.

## **5.2 Transforming Structures: Institutional and Organisational Change**

Women leaders often engage in structural change — that is, they use their leadership positions (or create them) to influence institutional practices, policies, and resource allocation. A study of women-led initiatives in rural areas showed how women cycles of social innovation led to redesigning local governance, livelihoods and social practices. Another study in the social sector emphasised that despite women being the majority of workers, they remain under-represented in leadership, which limits their ability to shape organisational policy and practice. The gap between representation and leadership is important because structural change requires positions of influence. Women leaders in community contexts in India, trained and supported by mentors, mobilised their communities to demand better access to social protection, tackled corruption and improved local governance. Such structural reforms— better accountability, participation, inclusive decision-making— represent transformative change. In policymaking and governance, women’s representation has been associated with inclusive policies, better social welfare, and attention to marginalized groups. Hence, supporting women leaders has structural implications for institutional design and governance.

## **5.3 Relational Leadership: Style, Networks and Coalitions**

An important aspect of women’s leadership is their relational style — inclusive, collaborative, mentoring, network-oriented — which can enable different modes of social transformation. A study of community-change agents in the U.S. described women leaders as adept at building networks, mobilising resources, advocacy and establishing new organisations. In surveys of women social-impact leaders in India, 75% expressed the desire to build their own leadership style oriented around empathy, collaboration and inclusion. Moreover, engaging in coalition-building across social movements and sectors is a hallmark of transformative leadership for women. Relational leadership matters because transformation is rarely a solo act; it emerges through networks, alliances,

mentorship, social capital. Women leaders often leverage and build such networks, enabling sustainable change and diffusion of new practices. In doing so, they help shift culture not only in the immediate organisation or community but across sectors.

#### 5.4 Enablers and Barriers to Transformative Women Leadership Enablers:

Key factors that strengthen women's leadership include education and leadership training, supportive policy frameworks, mentorship networks, inclusive organisational cultures, social movements, and access to resources. Studies highlight that women in the social sector particularly value capacity building and peer support networks (*All Things Talent, 2022*).

Barriers: Major obstacles include patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, institutional resistance, tokenism, limited resources, and intersectional inequalities of class, caste, or race. Despite proven success, women's impact often depends on supportive environments and organisational cultures (*The Guardian, 2025*). Recognising these enablers and barriers is crucial to designing effective strategies that empower women leaders and enhance their transformative potential.

#### 5.5 Outcomes and Evidence of Transformation

Evidence shows that women's leadership drives **positive outcomes** such as stronger organisational performance, **inclusive governance**, **better social welfare**, and **progressive gender norms**. Studies indicate that women in politics expand policy priorities to include **social equity and marginalized groups**. At the **grassroots level**, women leaders in India have improved **social protection delivery**, **accountability**, and **community participation**. These results highlight transformation not only in **actions** but in **decision-making processes** — a key marker of lasting change. However, such transformation is **context-dependent**. Factors like culture, institutional strength, and resource access influence success, and progress often occurs **incrementally**, relying on deeper shifts in **power and institutional structures** for sustainability.

### 6. Implications for Policy, Practice and Research

Given the potential of women leaders as agents of transformation, several implications emerge for policy, practice and research.

#### 6.1 For Policy and Governance

- Governments and institutions should promote women's leadership not merely by increasing numbers but by creating enabling environments: quotas, leadership training, mentorship, and organisational culture change. Policies should focus on institutional reform to ensure women

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in leadership have real decision-making power, resources and influence. Gender-transformative policies should integrate women's leadership into social protection, community resilience, environmental governance and public-service delivery—leveraging the relational style that women often bring.

## 6.2 For Practice in Organisations and Communities

- Leadership development programmes tailored to women leaders should emphasise building peer networks, mentorship, negotiation/conflict-resolution skills, and personal leadership style (collaboration, inclusion). Community-level interventions should support women in local leadership roles (village governance, grassroots organisations) and link them to networks, resources and policy interfaces. For example, training women in participatory mapping, vulnerability assessment and linking with government programmes proved effective. Organisations should examine and change internal culture, power structures, and practices that constrain women's leadership (tokenism, glass ceilings, exclusion from networks). Coalition-building across sectors (women's organisations, social movements, community groups, government) is important for scaling transformational leadership.
- More longitudinal and context-specific research is needed to examine how women's leadership leads to sustained transformation in different cultural and institutional contexts. Some studies indicate that the positive effects fade without broader norm change.
- Research should explore intersectionality: how gender interacts with class, caste, race, ethnicity and rural/urban divides in shaping women's leadership and transformation. Mixed methods research (quantitative + qualitative) could help unpack mechanisms through which women leaders effect change: network building, inclusive decision processes, coalition formation, normative shifts. Comparative studies across regions and sectors (politics, health, environment, social protection) can identify domain-specific practices and lessons.

## Conclusion

Women leaders play a pivotal, multi-dimensional role in driving social transformation by challenging norms, reforming institutions, and practising inclusive, relational leadership. The integrated framework of **normative**, **structural**, and **relational** change clarifies how their efforts generate lasting impact and what factors enable or hinder this process. Ultimately, empowering women leaders is not just about gender equality but about fostering **social innovation**, **institutional renewal**, and **inclusive governance**. As societies confront global challenges like inequality and climate change, women's leadership offers vital perspectives and practices. Strengthening and scaling this leadership

ensures that transformation becomes embedded in the very structures and values of our communities and institutions.

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## From Monarchy to Democracy: Women's Journey in Decision-Making

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### *Abstract*

*This paper explores the journey of Indian women from the era of monarchy to the democratic period, focusing on their evolving role in political and social decision-making. In the monarchical age, women's power was often symbolic and confined to royal households, yet some queens and noblewomen influenced major political decisions. With India's transition to democracy, constitutional rights, education, and social reforms opened new doors for women's participation in governance and public life. However, the progress remains uneven due to cultural barriers, patriarchy, and structural inequalities. The study adopts a historical and comparative approach, tracing the changing nature of women's agency from pre-independence royal courts to post-independence democratic institutions. By examining the social, legal, and institutional transformations that shaped women's roles, this paper contributes to understanding how gendered power relations evolved through India's political modernization. The findings show both progress and persistence—empowerment through democracy, yet continued struggles for equal voice in decision-making.*

**Keywords:** *women's political agency; monarchy; democracy; decision-making; gendered power; India; social change.*

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### **Introduction**

The journey of women from monarchy to democracy in India represents one of the most profound social transformations in human history. The shift from hereditary rule to people's participation changed not only the nature of governance but also the role of women in decision-making. In monarchies, power often remained confined within royal families and elite circles. Women like Rani Lakshmibai, Razia Sultan, and Ahilyabai Holkar, Rani Durgawati were exceptions who broke patriarchal barriers to exercise leadership. Yet for the vast majority of women, political participation remained distant. In contrast, the democratic framework of independent India brought constitutional equality, voting rights, and opportunities to hold public office. The Indian Constitution recognized gender equality as a foundational value, granting women the right to vote and contest elections from 1947 onward—much earlier than in many Western nations. Despite these formal rights, the reality of women's participation in decision-making continues to be shaped by deep social and

cultural structures. Understanding this transformation helps us see both the achievements and the limitations of democracy in realizing gender justice.

### Scope and Periodization

For this study, the term “**monarchy**” refers to the political systems in India before 1947, when power was largely concentrated in royal or princely states under hereditary rulers. “**Democracy**” refers to the post-independence political order that established elected governments, people’s representation, and constitutional guarantees of equality. Spatially, this study focuses on India as a diverse subcontinent that experienced both indigenous monarchies and colonial rule before becoming a democratic republic.

The time frame covers roughly the 18th century to the present, allowing for comparison between pre-modern royal decision-making and modern democratic governance.

### Central Research Questions

1. How did women’s participation in political and decision-making structures differ between monarchy and democracy in India?
2. Which institutional, social, and legal changes enabled or limited their political agency during the transition to democracy?
3. How did the experiences of elite women (queens, aristocrats) differ from those of non-elite women (peasants, reformers, activists)?

The paper hypothesizes that while democracy formally expanded women’s rights and access to decision-making, traditional gender norms and socio-economic inequalities continue to constrain their full participation.

### Comparative and Historical Approach

This research adopts a **comparative historical approach**, tracing patterns of women’s authority across different political systems. Sources include historical records of royal courts, biographies of women rulers, reform movements, legislative histories, and contemporary political data. The approach helps to reveal both continuity and change — how ancient cultural ideals of female power, like those seen in Indian religious figures (Mata Sita, Draupadi, Kaikeyi), have evolved into modern forms of political participation such as female panchayat leaders, ministers, and parliamentarians.

### Part I: Women’s Power under Monarchy

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In pre-colonial India, royal women wielded influence within the boundaries of monarchy. In the history of India, a few royal women proved that courage, intelligence, and leadership are not limited by gender. Among them, **Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi**, **Devi Ahilyabai Holkar**, and **Rani Durgavati** stand out as remarkable examples of strength and decision-making. Rani Lakshmibai, born as Manikarnika Tambe in 1828, became the Queen of Jhansi after her marriage to the Maharaja. When the British tried to take over her kingdom, she refused to surrender and bravely led her soldiers in the Revolt of 1857. Her fearless fight turned her into a symbol of patriotism and women's power in India's freedom struggle. Devi Ahilyabai Holkar, who ruled the Holkar kingdom of Indore from 1767 to 1795, showed that leadership is not only about war but also about welfare. She focused on building temples, improving roads, and helping traders and farmers. Her rule is remembered as a period of peace, prosperity, and justice. Rani Durgavati of Gondwana, who ruled in the mid-1500s, took charge after her husband's death and led her army against the Mughal invasion. She fought bravely until her last breath, choosing death over surrender. These queens proved that women could think wisely, rule justly, and fight bravely when needed. They managed kingdoms, took major political decisions, and protected their people at times when society often restricted women to household roles. Their lives show that women's leadership was not only possible but powerful, even in a male-dominated world.

## **Part II: Women's Role in Democracy**

The coming of democracy marked a major shift. The **Indian freedom struggle** played a key role in preparing women for public leadership. Figures like Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Aruna Asaf Ali inspired thousands of women to step into political life. After independence, India's Constitution provided equal voting rights, making women full citizens. Democracy created institutional pathways for women — from panchayats to parliament. The **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments** reserved seats for women in local governance, allowing millions to take part in decision-making for the first time. Today, women serve as ministers, chief ministers, and even the President of India.

Yet, equality in law does not always translate to equality in practice. Social barriers—patriarchy, illiteracy, economic dependence—still limit women's influence. Elite women often access power more easily, while rural and marginalized women struggle for representation. Nevertheless, India has seen significant progress: women now lead village councils, movements, and digital platforms advocating for gender justice.

## **Historical Background: Monarchy and Elite Decision-Making**

In monarchic and feudal India, women rarely held formal political offices, yet many shaped governances through informal means. Their power often came through inheritance, marriage, or personal ability. For example, **Razia Sultan** (1236–1240) was a remarkable exception, crowned as the Sultan of Delhi. Despite opposition from nobles and clerics, she ruled with authority, handled military campaigns, and conducted court affairs directly. Her short reign revealed both the potential and the limits of female power in a patriarchal system.

**Ahilyabai Holkar** of Malwa (ruled 1767–1795) is another extraordinary example. After her husband's death, she took over the throne and ruled with fairness, wisdom, and compassion. She built temples, roads, ghats, and rest houses across India. Her rule is remembered for peace and prosperity. She combined moral leadership with administrative skill, showing how a woman could govern effectively within traditional frameworks.

**Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi** (1828–1858) became an icon of resistance against British colonization. Her decision to lead her army in battle during the 1857 Revolt was not only an act of bravery but also a political statement — a demand for self-rule and autonomy. Similarly, **Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh**, **Chand Bibi of Ahmednagar**, and **Rani Chennamma of Kittur** were also notable for their resistance and governance. These examples prove that women's leadership was not limited by geography or religion; rather, it appeared across regions whenever conditions allowed.

However, these women faced severe constraints. Patriarchal norms dictated that political authority belonged to men. Even when women ruled, they often had to justify their position as temporary or exceptional. Court politics, succession disputes, and male advisors often limited their autonomy. Their authority was sometimes informal — exercised through advice, persuasion, or maternal influence — rather than through legal or institutional power. Yet, even within these limitations, many women carved spaces for leadership and decision-making.

### **Colonial Era: Mobilization, Suffrage and Early Political Spaces**

The colonial period brought new challenges and opportunities for Indian women. British rule introduced new political structures, education systems, and reform debates. Women began to enter the public sphere through education and social reform movements. The **late 19th and early 20th centuries** saw the rise of women's organizations like the **Bharat Stree Mahamandal (1910)** and the **All-India Women's Conference (1927)**, which campaigned for education, social reform, and political rights.

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Women leaders such as **Sarojini Naidu**, **Annie Besant**, and **Kamini Roy** emerged as strong voices for equality. They linked women's emancipation with India's freedom struggle. The demand for women's suffrage became part of broader nationalist politics. The **Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935** introduced limited voting rights for women in provincial and local elections. These reforms marked a gradual yet significant step from royal privilege to democratic participation.

The period between **1919 and 1935** was a turning point. In 1919, women's suffrage was first discussed in the British Parliament and later adopted in limited form in Indian provinces. By the 1930s, women had begun contesting local elections and serving on councils. The participation of women in civil disobedience movements, hunger strikes, and public debates further expanded their political identity. The *Financial Express* and similar publications documented this growing awareness and the slow but steady progress toward gender inclusion in governance.

Thus, from the rule of queens and regents to the rise of suffragists and reformers, Indian women have continually reshaped the boundaries of power. Their journey from monarchy to democracy reflects not only social evolution but also the enduring spirit of equality and agency that defines women's history in India.

### **Colonial Era: Mobilization, Suffrage and Early Political Spaces (1919–1935)**

The colonial era in India saw the slow but steady emergence of women in public and political life. Before the 20th century, women's roles were largely confined to the private sphere due to social restrictions, lack of education, and patriarchal traditions. Yet, the growth of nationalist movements, exposure to Western ideas, and reformist efforts by leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Swami Vivekananda created an environment where women could start claiming a voice. The idea that women could be active citizens and participants in nation-building began to take shape during the early decades of the 1900s.

A major turning point came during the **Swadeshi Movement (1905–1908)**, when women took part in protests, boycotts, and public meetings for the first time. Women like Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Basanti Devi encouraged others to join the national struggle. This movement created early examples of women's political mobilization, even though they were not yet part of formal politics. The **Home Rule Movement (1916–1918)** led by Annie Besant further expanded women's visibility in public life. Besant's efforts linked the demand for self-government with the idea of women's empowerment. This was also the period when Indian women began forming organizations to discuss education, social reform, and rights.

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In **1917**, a landmark event took place when a **deputation of Indian women, led by Sarojini Naidu**, met the Secretary of State in London to demand women's suffrage—the right to vote. This was the first organized attempt by Indian women to seek political representation. They argued that if men were being considered for political rights under colonial reforms, women should not be excluded. This movement planted the seeds of women's suffrage in India.

The next milestone came with the **Government of India Act, 1919**, also known as the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms. This Act introduced limited self-government and provincial legislatures, but women were still denied the right to vote. However, it allowed individual provinces to decide whether to extend the franchise to women. This became an opportunity for women's groups to press their demand more strongly. Between 1919 and 1929, women's organizations and local reformers sent petitions to provincial governments asking for the vote. Gradually, progress was made in some provinces. **Madras Presidency** became the first to grant women the right to vote in **1921**, followed by Bombay, Bengal, and Punjab in the next few years. Yet, voting rights were limited to women with property, income, or educational qualifications—so only a small elite benefited.

A significant development came with the founding of the **All-India Women's Conference (AIWC)** in **1927**. This organization, led by prominent women like **Margaret Cousins, Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Hansa Mehta**, became the central platform for women's political and social activism. The AIWC initially focused on education and social reform, but soon expanded to demand legal and political equality. The conference became a powerful collective voice for Indian women, connecting elites from across regions and religions. It played an important role in lobbying for suffrage rights and for the inclusion of women in policy-making.

During this period, the idea of “**political participation as national service**” gained strength. Women like **Kasturba Gandhi, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay** became active in the Indian National Congress and participated in the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22) and Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34). Their participation challenged the colonial state and broke traditional gender barriers. The **Salt March (1930)** was a defining moment—thousands of women joined protests, courted arrest, and stood shoulder to shoulder with men. This direct participation helped women gain public confidence and political experience.

The **Simon Commission (1927–1930)** and subsequent constitutional reforms again brought women's rights into debate. The **Round Table Conferences (1930–32)**, which discussed India's future constitution, included women delegates like Begum Jahanara Shahnawaz and Radhabai Subbarayan,

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who argued passionately for equal voting rights. Though universal suffrage was not accepted at that time, these discussions paved the way for gradual reforms.

The **Government of India Act, 1935**, marked another turning point. It expanded the franchise significantly, granting about 6 million women the right to vote, though still on restrictive terms. It also allowed women to stand for elections to provincial legislatures. This Act was the first to formally recognize women as part of India's political process. Women like Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, and Hansa Mehta became symbols of this new era. They served as legislators and continued to push for equal citizenship. By the mid-1930s, Indian women had transformed from being subjects of reform to active political agents. The mobilization that began in the colonial period laid the foundation for their participation in the freedom struggle and later in independent India's democracy.

In summary, between 1919 and 1935, Indian women made remarkable progress—from social reformers to political campaigners. The journey was slow and filled with challenges, but it was during this phase that Indian women began to see themselves as citizens with rights, not just dependents. The formation of women's organizations, participation in nationalist movements, and gradual suffrage gains together created a new political identity for Indian women—one that would play a crucial role in the decades to come.

### **Post-Independence Formal Politics: Parliament, Parties, and Bureaucracy**

After India gained independence in **1947**, women entered a new phase of political participation. The **Constitution of India (1950)** guaranteed equal rights for all citizens, including equality before law, non-discrimination, and universal adult suffrage. For the first time, every adult woman could vote and contest elections, regardless of class, caste, or education. This was a revolutionary change compared to the colonial period, where only a limited number of women had the franchise.

In the **first general election (1952)**, women made their mark despite social and structural barriers. Out of 499 seats in the **first Lok Sabha, only 22 were held by women**, which was about **4.4 percent**. However, this was still a historic achievement for a newly independent nation. Leaders like **Vijayalakshmi Pandit**, who became the first woman president of the UN General Assembly, and **Sucheta Kriplani**, who later became India's first woman Chief Minister (Uttar Pradesh, 1963), became role models for future generations.

Over the decades, women's representation in Parliament has grown, but the progress has been slow and uneven. In the **1970s and 1980s**, the percentage of women MPs hovered between 3 and 6 percent.

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In the **1990s**, it rose slightly due to growing awareness and women's movements demanding better representation. The **16th Lok Sabha (2014–2019)** had 62 women MPs (about 11.4 percent), while the **17th Lok Sabha (2019–present)** saw **78 women MPs**, the highest in Indian history, accounting for around **14.4 percent** of the total. However, even this figure remains far below global averages.

Women's participation in the **Rajya Sabha (Upper House)** has also remained low, generally between **10–12 percent**. In ministerial positions, women have occasionally held key portfolios, such as **Indira Gandhi**, who served as India's first and only woman Prime Minister (1966–1977 and 1980–1984), and later **Sushma Swaraj** and **Nirmala Sitharaman**, who held major ministries like External Affairs and Finance. Despite these examples, women's overall presence in cabinet-level positions remains minimal.

Several structural barriers explain this persistent underrepresentation. One major issue is **party gatekeeping**—political parties control who gets to contest elections, and they often prioritize male candidates due to social biases and perceptions about “winnability.” Many parties do not allocate even 10 percent of tickets to women. Another barrier is **dynastic politics**. While a few women from political families—like Indira Gandhi or Sonia Gandhi—have achieved high positions, this has not translated into broader empowerment for ordinary women.

The **burden of household responsibilities, limited financial resources, and social attitudes** also restrict women's political mobility. Politics in India often involves high costs, physical mobility, and networking in male-dominated spaces, which discourages many women from entering. Even within parties, women are often confined to “women's wings” and excluded from decision-making bodies. These barriers collectively limit their access to real political power.

At the same time, there have been important policy efforts to improve women's participation. The **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992–1993)** reserved **one-third of seats in local self-government institutions (Panchayats and Municipalities)** for women. This reform transformed the local political landscape by bringing over **1.4 million women** into elected offices across India. Many of these women have since emerged as confident leaders, demonstrating that representation at the grassroots can lead to empowerment at higher levels too.

The demand for **33 percent reservation for women in Parliament and state legislatures** has been a long-standing one. The **Women's Reservation Bill** was introduced multiple times since the 1990s but faced political resistance. However, in **September 2023**, the Indian Parliament finally passed the **Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (Women's Reservation Bill)**, ensuring 33 percent reservation for

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women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies. Once implemented, it will mark a major step toward gender equality in national politics.

In the bureaucracy too, women have made gradual progress. The Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and Indian Foreign Service (IFS) now include a growing number of women officers, although they still form less than 30 percent of the total. Women like **Kiran Bedi**, **Aruna Roy**, and **Nirupama Rao** have shown that leadership and public service are not limited by gender.

Despite these advances, the journey of women in post-independence formal politics remains complex. The **numbers tell a mixed story**—while there are more women in politics than ever before, their proportion remains low compared to their population share. Structural barriers, patriarchal attitudes, and uneven access to resources continue to limit progress. Yet, the resilience of women leaders, grassroots mobilization, and legislative reforms indicate a hopeful future.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 marked a turning point in India's democratic journey. It gave a new dimension to local governance by recognizing the importance of *Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)*. The main aim of this amendment was to bring democracy to the grassroots level. It gave local people the power to make decisions for their villages and communities. For the first time, the Constitution clearly recognized Panchayats as a third tier of governance, alongside the Union and the States.

A very important feature of this amendment was the *one-third reservation for women* in Panchayati Raj Institutions. This step was revolutionary because it aimed to ensure women's participation in decision-making and political leadership at the village level. Before this, women were mostly invisible in political spaces, especially in rural India. The 73rd Amendment gave them a constitutional right to participate in public life and influence policies that affect their everyday realities.

### **Key Provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment**

The 73rd Amendment inserted a new Part IX in the Constitution (Articles 243 to 243O) and the Eleventh Schedule. It made Panchayati Raj a constitutional body. The main features include:

1. **Three-Tier System:** Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and Zila Parishad at the district level.
2. **Regular Elections:** Elections to be held every five years.
3. **Reservation:** One-third of all seats for women, including chairperson posts. Seats are also reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).
4. **State Election Commissions:** Independent bodies to conduct Panchayat elections.

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5. **State Finance Commissions:** To decide financial distribution between the state and the Panchayats.
  6. **Recent Developments: Women's Reservation Bill and Contemporary Debates**
  7. In 2023, India once again witnessed a major policy debate — the *Women's Reservation Bill*, now called the *Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam*. It proposes *33% reservation for women* in the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies. The Bill was passed in Parliament in 2023 but will be implemented only after the next census and delimitation exercise.
  8. **Supporters' View:** Supporters argue that women's reservation at higher levels will bring balance in representation and encourage more gender-sensitive policies. They point to the success of Panchayat reservation as proof that women can be effective leaders.
  9. **Critics' View:** Critics say that mere reservation without structural changes will not ensure *substantive empowerment*. Many fear that women from dominant classes or families will benefit most, while poor and marginalized women will remain excluded. Some also argue that political parties should promote women through internal quotas and leadership training, not just legal mandates.
  10. This debate shows that while India has accepted women's participation in principle, the *quality of that participation* remains a challenge.

## Findings

Data from various studies show clear patterns:

- Representation of women has increased dramatically since 1993.
- Leadership effectiveness improves with training and re-election experience.
- Gender priorities are reflected in spending patterns, especially in health, water, and education.
- Challenges remain in patriarchal interference, limited mobility, and lack of financial independence.

A timeline of legal changes shows India's gradual shift from *elite female influence* (in monarchic settings) to *mass female participation* (in democratic institutions). Graphs of representation trends can illustrate this rise.

The findings reveal both *continuity and change*. While the idea of women's leadership has deep roots in Indian history, the democratic system has expanded it beyond royal and elite circles. The 73rd

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Amendment made leadership accessible to ordinary women. Yet, representation alone does not guarantee real power.

Substantive change occurs when women not only occupy seats but also influence decisions and policies. This requires education, capacity-building, and social acceptance. It also needs supportive institutions — from political parties to local bureaucracies.

### Policy Implications and Recommendations

1. **Training and Capacity Building:** Regular workshops and mentoring programs for women leaders.
2. **Party-Level Reforms:** Political parties should reserve internal positions for women.
3. **Monitoring Mechanisms:** Evaluate how reservations impact policy outcomes.
4. **Encouraging Re-election:** Women should be motivated to contest again to gain experience.
5. **Awareness Campaigns:** Change social attitudes that limit women's agency.
6. **Digital Literacy Programs:** Help women leaders use technology for governance.

### Conclusion

The 73rd Amendment was not just a legal reform; it was a social revolution. It opened doors for millions of rural women to step into leadership roles and shape their communities. The upcoming Women's Reservation Bill extends this spirit to higher levels of governance. However, the journey from *representation to real empowerment* is long. Social norms, patriarchal control, and caste hierarchies still act as barriers. Future research must focus on measuring *qualitative change*, how women's presence is changing governance patterns and democratic culture in India. Decentralization has made democracy more inclusive. With continued reforms, education, and awareness, India can transform symbolic representation into *substantive power* — ensuring that women are not just in politics, but truly shaping the politics of the nation.

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## Ahilyabai Holkar and Mudra Yojana: A Legacy of Women's Economic Empowerment

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper examines the enduring legacy of **Rajmata Ahilyabai Holkar's** 18th-century governance and its conceptual resonance with the contemporary Indian microfinance initiative, the **Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY)**, as a model for women's economic empowerment. Utilizing a qualitative, descriptive research design based exclusively on **secondary databases** (academic journals, government reports, historical texts, and established media analysis), the study establishes a conceptual link between Holkar's visionary economic policies and modern financial inclusion schemes. Holkar's rule (1767–1795) in the Malwa region was characterized by proactive economic reforms. She actively promoted **trade, agriculture, and cottage industries** (e.g., the Maheshwari sari), and notably provided **financial aid and property rights** to women, particularly widows, challenging restrictive social norms to foster their financial independence and self-reliance. This approach focused on providing capital and market access to women entrepreneurs at the grassroots level. The modern PMMY, launched in 2015, similarly aims to "fund the unfunded" by providing **collateral-free micro-loans** (Shishu, Kishor, Tarun) to non-corporate, non-farm small/micro-enterprises. Statistical data from secondary sources show that over **65% of Mudra beneficiaries are women**, indicating the scheme's significant role in driving female entrepreneurship and financial inclusion. The paper argues that both the historical model of Holkar and the contemporary PMMY represent a governance philosophy where **economic justice and capital accessibility** are prioritized to transform women from passive beneficiaries into active economic agents. By comparing Holkar's support for local trade and artisanal work with PMMY's micro-credit for small ventures, the paper highlights a timeless Indian paradigm of decentralized, woman-centric economic empowerment. The research concludes that understanding Holkar's precedent offers valuable contextual and philosophical depth to modern policy evaluations of schemes like Mudra Yojana.*

**Keywords:** Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY), trade, agriculture, and cottage industries, financial aid and property rights, economic justice and capital accessibility.

### **I. Background: Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795)**

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Ahilyabai Holkar was the Queen of the Malwa kingdom, ruling from Maheshwar. Her reign (1767–1795) is celebrated as a period of justice, peace, and prosperity. She was a pioneering figure in promoting economic self-reliance for women and marginalized communities.

- **Pioneer of Women's Economic Rights:** She encouraged women's participation in **trade, agriculture, and cottage industries**. A notable initiative was the promotion of the **Maheshwari sari** weaving industry, which provided a steady source of income, particularly for war widows and local artisans.
- **Welfare and Justice:** She implemented a just and transparent legal system, ensuring fair treatment and protection, and took steps to support **widow remarriage** and property rights—radical social reforms for her time.
- **Economic Policies:** Her governance focused on infrastructure, building roads and *dharamshalas* (rest houses) to boost trade and commerce. She provided **financial aid** to struggling businesses and offered incentives to farmers, showing a holistic approach to economic development.

### **Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY)**

PMMY is a flagship scheme of the Government of India, launched in 2015, to provide collateral-free institutional credit to non-corporate, non-farm small/micro enterprises.

- **"Funding the Unfunded":** The scheme provides loans up to **₹10 lakh** (recently increased to ₹20 lakh for a new 'Tarun Plus' category) under three categories: **Shishu** (up to ₹50,000), **Kishor** (₹50,000 to ₹5 lakh), and **Tarun** (₹5 lakh to ₹10 lakh). These loans are provided by banks and Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFCs).
- **Empowerment of Women Entrepreneurs:** The scheme has a strong focus on empowering women. As a key fact, **women beneficiaries account for approximately 68-69%** of the total loans sanctioned since the scheme's inception.
- **Impact:** By providing easy access to formal, collateral-free credit, PMMY has significantly boosted grassroots entrepreneurship, helping women start or expand businesses in services, manufacturing, and trading sectors, thereby driving financial inclusion.

Both **Ahilyabai Holkar** and the **Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY)** represent powerful efforts, separated by centuries, to promote economic independence and entrepreneurship, especially for women

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In essence, while Ahilyabai's support was through state patronage, social reform, and local industry promotion, the Mudra Yojana employs a modern, large-scale financial mechanism to achieve the shared goal of **economic self-reliance for women**.

## II. Introduction

The economic empowerment of women remains one of the most **enduring and critical challenges** in India, a fact starkly reflected in the persistent gender gap in the labor force, which, despite recent increases, is still far below the global average.<sup>1</sup> For instance, while the overall Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) has risen, women are disproportionately engaged in the informal economy (over 80% according to some reports) and face systemic barriers to formal credit and higher-value employment.<sup>2</sup>

This challenge makes it essential to examine both historical and modern approaches to gender-inclusive governance. This study introduces two pivotal figures and frameworks in this long-running effort: the 18th-century ruler, **Ahilyabai Holkar** of the Malwa kingdom, renowned for her progressive and just administration; and the **Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY)**, a flagship micro-credit scheme launched by the Government of India in 2015.

The core **Problem Statement** is: What is the philosophical and practical continuity between the historical governance model of Ahilyabai Holkar, which focused on localized industry and social justice, and the modern economic policy of the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, which aims to provide collateral-free credit to micro-entrepreneurs, particularly women, to achieve economic empowerment.

## III. Objectives of the study

1. To document the socio-economic policies implemented by Ahilyabai Holkar, focusing on women's financial inclusion.
2. To analyze the structure and impact of PMMY on women entrepreneurship based on secondary data.
3. To establish a conceptual and thematic link between Holkar's legacy and the spirit of PMMY.

## IV. Research methodology

State clearly: **Qualitative descriptive research** relying solely on **secondary data** (academic articles, government reports, official statistics, historical texts).

## V. Philosophical and Practical Continuity: Historical & Modern Empowerment

The continuity can be demonstrated by comparing Ahilyabai's governing principles—which focused on *financial access, localized industry, and social upliftment*—with PMMY's core objectives of *funding the unfunded* through micro-loans for non-corporate, small businesses.

### 1. The Principle of Financial and Economic Access at the Grassroots

Aspect	Ahilyabai Holkar (18th Century)	Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY) (21st Century)	Proof and Example
Focus	Local Industry and Skill Development	Collateral-Free Micro-Credit	Proof and Example
Objective	Empowering women, especially widows and the vulnerable, through <b>dedicated industrial patronage and social reforms</b> to ensure their self-reliance.	Providing <b>institutional credit (up to ₹10 lakh)</b> to micro-enterprises, formalizing the informal sector, with a specific focus on women borrowers.	<b>Ahilyabai's Example:</b> She is credited with establishing the <b>Maheshwari sari industry</b> in Maheshwar, actively employing local women, including the wives of martyred soldiers. This created a <b>stable, market-linked source of income</b> and was a form of economic rehabilitation and empowerment (Source: Historical accounts of her reign, such as the <i>Holkar Durbar Batmipatre</i> ).
Objective	<b>Removing Barriers</b>	<b>Removing Barriers</b>	<b>PMMY's Example:</b> The scheme's <b>collateral-free</b> nature addresses the modern-day barrier of women often lacking assets in their name, making them credit-ready. <b>Proof:</b> As of early 2024, <b>68% of the loan accounts</b> sanctioned under PMMY were held by women beneficiaries (Source: SBI,

Aspect	Ahilyabai Holkar (18th Century)	Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY) (21st Century)	Proof and Example
			<p>PIB reports), translating to crores of women receiving credit for their micro-ventures (like tailoring, small retail, or manufacturing), thereby mirroring Ahilyabai's focus on supporting the small-small scale, domestic economy.</p>
Objective	Social Justice & Upliftment	Inclusion of Marginalized Communities	<p><b>Alignment Proof:</b> Ahilyabai's policies included granting women <b>rights in property</b> and supporting widow remarriage—radical social reforms aimed at increasing women's <b>economic autonomy</b> and stability.</p> <p><b>PMMY Alignment:</b> The scheme also ensures <b>social inclusion</b>, with approximately <b>50% of the loan accounts</b> belonging to SC/ST/OBC categories, indicating a targeted approach to uplift the most economically disadvantaged sections, a key pillar of Ahilyabai's compassionate governance (Source: Government data on PMMY inclusion).</p>

## 2. Philosophical Continuity: From Good Governance to Citizen-Centric Development

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The philosophical link lies in the shared emphasis on a **citizen-centric approach** that prioritizes the welfare and economic stability of the most vulnerable.<sup>3</sup>

- **Ahilyabai's Philosophy:** Her governance was rooted in the principle of '**Dharma**' and '**Lokahita**' (public welfare). She held **daily public audiences** to personally hear grievances, ensuring that justice and economic policy were accessible to the common person, regardless of their social standing.<sup>4</sup> Her reforms were not merely economic but also social, aimed at granting legal and financial dignity.<sup>5</sup>
- **PMMY's Philosophy:** The scheme operates on the premise of '**Funding the Unfunded**', bringing micro-entrepreneurs who were traditionally outside the formal banking system into the financial mainstream.<sup>6</sup> The emphasis on the *Shishu* (loans up to ₹50,000) category, which has the highest volume of accounts, is an acknowledgement of the **smallest, grassroots-level economic needs**, directly reflecting Ahilyabai's commitment to the economic well-being of the poor.

The modern PMMY, by leveraging institutional finance for micro-enterprises and strategically targeting women, is a 21st-century iteration of Ahilyabai Holkar's historical vision: one where the state actively intervenes to ensure the **economic self-reliance and social dignity** of its female citizens through access to productive capital and supportive policy.

## VI. Review of Literature

### Ahilyabai Holkar and Mudra Yojana—A Legacy of Women's Economic Empowerment

The literature examining women's economic empowerment in India can be broadly divided into two streams: historical analysis focusing on pioneering female rulers and contemporary studies evaluating the impact of government-led financial inclusion schemes. This review explores the available scholarly work on **Ahilyabai Holkar's** 18th-century governance as a historical precursor to modern micro-financing efforts like the **Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY)**, establishing a conceptual bridge between historical patronage and contemporary systemic support for women's entrepreneurship.

#### 1. Ahilyabai Holkar's Governance: A Historical Model of Women's Economic Justice

Scholarly work on Ahilyabai Holkar, the queen of the Malwa Kingdom (1767–1795), consistently highlights her administration as a "timeless model" of social justice, inclusive governance, and economic development (Sharma, 2025).<sup>1</sup> Her policies were revolutionary for the 18th century, directly challenging patriarchal norms and laying the groundwork for women's financial autonomy:<sup>2</sup>

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- **Legal Reforms and Property Rights:** Ahilyabai is noted for progressive legal reforms, such as **abolishing the traditional law that confiscated the property of childless widows**, thereby safeguarding their rights and promoting social justice (Zelliott, 2001; Soni, 2025).<sup>3</sup> This institutional support for women's assets was foundational to their economic stability.
  - **Patronage of Industry and Craft:** Her relocation of the capital to Maheshwar and subsequent **patronage of the weaving community** (leading to the famous Maheshwari saree) is a primary example of state-led economic empowerment (Rehwa Society; Daily Pioneer, 2025).<sup>4</sup> She commissioned skilled artisans to train local people, consciously creating a robust, sustainable industry that provided livelihoods, especially for women in ancillary roles (Organiser, 2024).<sup>5</sup> This acted as a direct, top-down form of economic stimulus and skill development.
  - **Financial Assistance and Welfare:** Historical accounts indicate that Ahilyabai's administration implemented schemes that offered **financial aid** and low-interest loans to farmers, artisans, and small traders, which often benefited women (IJFMR, 2024). She actively encouraged women's participation in trade, agriculture, and cottage industries, fostering an environment for financial independence (IEARJ, 2025). This direct intervention in providing capital and market access is the most significant parallel to modern micro-credit schemes.

The literature views her legacy as one of "**irreversible empowerment**" (Daily Pioneer, 2025), a concept that extends beyond mere charity to creating structural opportunities for self-reliance.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY): The Contemporary Framework

The literature on PMMY focuses on its role as a key government program aimed at '**funding the unfunded**'—providing collateral-free loans up to ₹10 lakh to non-corporate, non-farm micro and small enterprises (Roy, 2018).<sup>7</sup> The scheme's impact on women entrepreneurs is a heavily researched area:

- **Financial Inclusion and Collateral-Free Credit:** A key finding is that PMMY has significantly facilitated **financial inclusion** for women who traditionally lacked the collateral or assets required by formal financial institutions (Agarwala et al., 2022; IJCRT, 2024).<sup>8</sup> Studies indicate that women account for approximately **69% of the total Mudra loans sanctioned** (as of late 2023), with the majority falling under the 'Shishu' category (loans up

to ₹50,000) (Kuey, 2024). This confirms the scheme's primary role in promoting **grassroots-level micro-entrepreneurship** among women.

- **Socio-Economic and Psychological Empowerment:** Researchers using primary data have reported a **positive role of Mudra in improving the socio-economic status of women**, leading to financial independence, increased household income, and enhanced savings (Kumar & Nandrajog, 2021).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the scheme is linked to **psychological and social empowerment**, fostering self-esteem, decision-making power within the family, and greater community participation (Agarwala et al., 2022).
- **Challenges and Gaps:** Despite its success, the literature also notes persistent challenges, including limited access to markets, gender biases, and a lack of technological literacy among women beneficiaries (Kuey, 2024). The concentration of loans in the 'Shishu' category suggests a need for greater support to scale up businesses to 'Kishore' and 'Tarun' levels (ResearchGate, 2022)

### 3. Synthesis: Bridging the Historical and Contemporary

The limited comparative literature available (Sharma, 2025; ICSI, 2025) suggests that a **conceptual alignment** exists between Ahilyabai Holkar's developmental approach and modern schemes like Mudra Yojana:

Historical Action (Ahilyabai Holkar)	Contemporary Policy (Mudra Yojana)	Common Principle
<b>Patronage of Maheshwari Weaving</b> (Directly creating a sustainable, women-inclusive industry and market) (Daily Pioneer, 2025)	<b>Provision of Collateral-Free Loans</b> (Providing the capital for women to start/expand micro-enterprises) (Kuey, 2024)	<b>Enabling Economic Participation</b>
<b>Abolishing Confiscation of Widow's Property</b> (Securing asset ownership and financial base) (Zelliott, 2001)	<b>Focus on Women Beneficiaries</b> (Explicitly targeting women for financial inclusion) (Agarwala et al., 2022)	<b>Structural Gender Empowerment</b>

<b>Historical Action (Ahilyabai Holkar)</b>	<b>Contemporary Policy (Mudra Yojana)</b>	<b>Common Principle</b>
<b>Financial Aid and Incentives for Traders/Artisans (Direct capital infusion) (IJFMR, 2024)</b>	<b>Targeted Micro-Credit (Funding the smallest entrepreneurs) (Kumar &amp; Nandrajog, 2021)</b>	<b>State-Led Financial Support</b>

The literature thus positions Ahilyabai Holkar as a **historical proponent of a "welfare state"** who achieved women's economic empowerment through **patronage and legal reform**, while Mudra Yojana represents a **contemporary, systemic model** that achieves the same goal through **financial inclusion and micro-credit** (Social Studies Foundation, 2024). Both models underscore the critical role of the state in providing capital and a supportive legal/economic environment to overcome gender-based barriers to entrepreneurship.

## VII. Findings:

- **Access Shift:** The mechanism for capital access transitioned from Holkar's direct **state patronage** and tax relief to PMMY's focus on mediated, collateral-free **financial inclusion** via institutional banking.
- **Enterprise Continuity:** Both models successfully leverage the support of **grassroots micro-enterprises** and traditional skills (like weaving and trade) as the primary engine for women's economic participation .
- **Support Deficiency:** A critical difference is that PMMY, unlike Holkar's holistic approach, typically lacks integrated **non-financial components**, such as mandatory post-loan business mentorship and financial literacy training.
- **Administrative Model:** Holkar provided rapid, localized **personalized administrative protection** through justice, contrasted with PMMY's reliance on scaled, often bureaucratic, institutional lending and monitoring.
- **Empowerment Outcome:** The nature of empowerment evolved from Holkar's focus on securing **social dignity** (via property and legal rights) to PMMY's emphasis on achieving measurable **financial autonomy** (via increased income and credit history).

## VIII. Challenges in Women's Economic Empowerment

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The literature suggests that despite schemes like PMMY, structural and cultural hurdles persist, reflecting issues Ahilyabai's administration also sought to overcome:

1. **Low Loan Utilization for Scaling:** The majority of Mudra loans disbursed to women are in the 'Shishu' category (up to ₹50,000), indicating that the funds are used for launching micro-enterprises rather than **scaling them up** (Kishore or Tarun categories). This limits the shift from subsistence-level activity to high-growth, job-creating businesses.
2. **Lack of Collateral-Neutral Access to Formal Finance:** While PMMY is collateral-free, women often lack a formal **credit history** or **property titles** (as assets are often held by male family members), which are crucial for accessing larger loans from mainstream banks for expansion, perpetuating financial exclusion for growth-oriented enterprises.
3. **Market Access and Supply Chain Integration:** Many women-led micro-enterprises (e.g., in crafts, food processing) operate in **local, informal markets** with limited visibility. They face significant challenges in penetrating regional or national markets, managing logistics, and meeting quality standards required for large-scale supply chains.
4. **Digital and Financial Literacy Gap:** A significant portion of women entrepreneurs, particularly in rural or tribal areas, lack the necessary **digital literacy** to use online payment platforms, e-commerce, or government portals, hindering their ability to leverage technology for marketing and financial management.
5. **Entrenched Patriarchal and Social Norms:** Social expectations, restricted mobility, and the **'double burden'** of household and business responsibilities limit women's time, networking capacity, and ability to travel for business, severely constraining the growth potential of their ventures.

## IX. Suggestions for Improvement

These suggestions draw on the need to institutionalize the inclusive vision demonstrated by Ahilyabai Holkar's governance:

1. **Structured Mentorship and Skilling Ecosystem:** Establish a nationwide network of **"Lakhpati Didi" mentors** (experienced female entrepreneurs) to provide hands-on training on business management, accounting, and growth strategies, specifically targeting 'Shishu' beneficiaries to transition to 'Kishore' loans.

2. **Patronage-Style Procurement and Market Linkage:** Revive the principle of state patronage (similar to Ahilyabai's support for the Maheshwari textile industry) by creating dedicated **government procurement quotas** for products from women-led Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and facilitating tie-ups with major e-commerce platforms and retail chains.
3. **Incentivizing Asset Formalization:** Introduce **stamp duty waivers** or subsidized registration fees for registering business assets (land, machinery) in women's names to improve their collateral base and legal standing, allowing them to graduate from micro-credit to institutional credit.
4. **Decentralized Digital Access Points:** Develop **community-led digital resource centers** (similar to the function of Ahilyabai's administrative hubs) at the block or Panchayat level to provide common access to technology, internet connectivity, and subsidized services for digital marketing and payment gateway integration.
5. **Gender-Sensitive Loan Repayment and Evaluation:** Introduce **flexible repayment schedules** tailored to the seasonal nature of women's businesses (e.g., agriculture, crafts) and incorporate metrics beyond financial return (e.g., job creation, social impact) when evaluating the success and credit-worthiness of women-led enterprises.

## X. Recommendations for Policy Integration

To achieve comprehensive, sustainable women's economic empowerment, policy efforts must combine financial access with structural support, mirroring the multi-pronged approach of a visionary ruler:

1. **Establish a Dedicated "Ahilyabai Fund for Women Enterprise (AFWE)":** Create a corpus that offers **equity or quasi-equity investment** (not just debt) for high-potential, women-led startups (those ready for Tarun category loans, over ₹5 lakh), thereby encouraging risk-taking and scale beyond collateral-free limits.
2. **Mandatory Financial and Legal Literacy Component in PMMY:** Make a **financial and legal literacy module** compulsory for all PMMY women beneficiaries, covering basic accounting, taxation, contract law, and digital security, ensuring informed decision-making and sustainable growth.
3. **Promote Regional Industrial Clusters and Hubs:** Invest in **women-specific industrial parks** or regional clusters (like the Maheshwar weaving cluster) that provide shared

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infrastructure, raw material sourcing, common processing facilities, and quality certification services to reduce operating costs and improve market competitiveness.

4. **Policy for Childcare and Mobility Support:** Implement policies that recognize the time constraints imposed by domestic duties. This includes providing **subsidized, on-site childcare facilities** near industrial areas or rural clusters, and offering subsidies for safe and reliable transport to increase women's mobility and time spent on business activities.
5. **Comparative Historical Study and Documentation:** Commission a formal, large-scale **socio-economic study** comparing the long-term impact of Ahilyabai's *patronage model* on communities (e.g., Maheshwari weavers) with the *micro-credit model* of PMMY to identify best practices for blending historical cultural support with modern financial systems.

**Conclusion:** In summary, this research posits that Ahilyabai Holkar's administrative philosophy—characterized by direct state patronage, decentralized justice, and protection of women's economic rights—established a foundational model for state-sponsored economic empowerment that resonates deeply with the operational goals of the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY). The primary implication of this finding is that the effectiveness and sustainability of contemporary financial inclusion schemes are demonstrably enhanced by adopting a historical understanding of social responsibility and equitable, enterprise-focused governance. Looking forward, future research should shift to **primary data collection**

to validate the qualitative impacts of PMMY on financial independence, specifically investigating the efficacy of post-disbursement support and financial literacy training. Moreover, a comparative historical lens could be applied to other modern schemes, such as the Stands Up India scheme or specific state-level self-help group initiatives, to further distill enduring principles for maximizing women's economic agency.

**Future Research:** Suggest avenues for primary research to validate the qualitative impacts of PMMY and further explore other modern schemes through a historical lens.

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## Queen Ahilyadevi Holkar's Feminist Approach to the Sustainable Development

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### **Abstract**

*This research paper examines the life and legacy of Ahilyadevi Holkar (1715-1795) the great Queen of Malwa, one of India's most famous female rulers. Historical accounts celebrate her administrative acumen, spiritual depth. Her work, Literary and cultural representations reflect Feminist ideals. This paper analyses her portrayal in literary texts, historical chronicles, Folk narratives, and postmodern interpretations to explore how her life challenges patriarchal ideologies. Feminist Theoretical Frameworks, particularly those of Simone de Beauvoir and Elaine Showalter have been applied. This research work demonstrates that Ahilyadevi Holkar asserted proto-feminist through autonomy, administration and leadership in pre-modern Indian society. Ahilyadevi Holkar, the queen of the Malwa region in the 18th Century, stands as a unique person in Indian History. Widowed at an early age, she opposed patriarchal expectations. She assumed Political power, and ruled with justice, wisdom and compassion. Her reign (1767-1795) is well known for social reform, economic prosperity, and a deep sense of spiritual and civic responsibility. Ahilyadevi Holkar's life is the symbol of female agency and leadership. She broke gender barriers by becoming a ruler. She redefined governance as an act of moral and social stewardship. Her image embodies Feminist ideals. She was a benevolent queen. She is literary and cultural symbol of women's power, intellect, and autonomy.*

**Keywords:** Ahilyadevi Holkar, Leadership, ethics, spirituality, Feminism, Welfare State, Educational and Economic Rights, Sustainable Development.

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### **Introduction**

Ahilyadevi Holkar, queen of the Malwa kingdom is celebrated in Indian literature as one of the most just, compassionate and efficient rulers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Ahilyadevi Holkar's portrayal in literary texts is vast and multifaceted. She is a celebrated warrior, a philosopher, a motherly ruler and a deeply spiritual saint. Literary texts, poems, dramas, biographies, and modern media depict her as

a timeless symbol of ideal governance and human goodness. Her literary portrayals highlight not only her administrative brilliance, wisdom, but also her compassion, resilience and her moral strength.

Feminism is a social, political, and cultural movement that advocates equality of all genders. It focuses on eliminating the inequalities and discrimination faced by women throughout history. It seeks to ensure that people of all genders have equal rights, opportunities and respect in every sphere of life including education, employment, politics, health and family life. Marxist feminism explores how capitalism and class oppression intersect with patriarchy. Ecofeminism connects the oppression of women with the exploitation of nature. Ahilyadevi Holkar, ruler of Malwa, was a patron of art, literature. Her court was not only Centre of administration but also cultural. Modern historians describe her as Lokmata - Mother of People, a symbol of nurture and strength. She was a heroic woman leader. Ahilyadevi Holkar promoted education and economic independence of all which comprises girl's education. She promoted female scholars and poets - a rare practice in the eighteenth Century. She also ensured that education and employment opportunities were open to all irrespective of gender or caste. Her policies empowered women economically and socially. Her governance was based on service, duty and empathy, often described as modern welfare state. Taxes were fair. She personally supervised the welfare of farmers, artisans and traders. Her leadership was defined by justice and vision. Indian and Western historians compare Ahilyadevi Holkar to Queen Elizabeth I of England. The comparison highlights their exceptional leadership, intelligence and administrative skills. They stabilised and enriched their kingdoms. Both ruled successfully as women when political power was almost entirely reserved for men. Their administration was transparent, welfare driven and people centric. Both queens symbolise golden age in their respective countries.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminism, Sustainable Development Theory, and Good Governance Theory have been applied to interpret Queen Ahilyadevi Holkar's leadership and her contribution towards inclusive and sustainable development in eighteenth century India. These frameworks help contextualise her governance philosophy as a precursor to modern concepts of gender sensitive, equitable, and environmentally conscious development. Liberal feminism gives importance to quality of opportunity, education, and participation in public life. Ahilyadevi Holkar's governance was inclusive. She supported education of men and women.

### **Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory provides the framework through which Ahilyadevi Holkar's rule is analysed. It believes that gender equality is fundamental to social justice. Feminist Theory examines power

structures and the roles of women in leadership, development and society. Liberal feminism emphasises women's equal access to education, employment and political participation. Ahilyabai's establishment of schools for girls and inclusion of women in social welfare reflect liberal feminist ideas.

Ecofeminism associates the exploitation of women and nature as parallel outcomes of patriarchal domination. Ahilyadevi focussed on environmental harmony, river conservation, and community-oriented architecture, illustrates an Ecofeminism ethic of care, valuing care, interdependence. Feminist Ethics of Care, articulated by Carol Gilligan (1992) emphasises empathy, relationality, and moral responsibility in decision making, These traits were historically devalued in patriarchal systems. Ecofeminism emphasises the interconnectedness between women and nature. It critiques both patriarchal oppression and environmental exploitation. Ahilyabai's governance was ideal and ecoconscious. She constructed wells, ghats, and sustainable public spaces. Her works reflect Ecofeminism values which mix gender justice and environmental care. Her governance was characterised by compassion, inclusivity, and responsive welfare policies. These aspects of her leadership demonstrate leadership rooted in the ethic of care rather than coercive power.

## **Discussion and Analysis**

### **Model of Benevolent Monarchy and Good Governance**

Literature texts consistently portray Ahilyabai Holkar as a ruler whose administration mixed strict justice with deep compassion. She held daily open courts where even peasants could present grievances directly. Her decisions were characterised by fairness regardless of class, caste or gender. This style is often called a "people centred monarchy."

Good Governance Theory emphasises transparency, accountability, participation, equity and rule of law. Ahilyabai's governance aligns closely with these principles. Her government was transparent and accountable. She organised open courts, direct communication with the people. Local councils and community representatives participated in decision making. Rule of law and equity was observed. Equal access to justice was ensured regardless of caste or gender. Ahilyabai's governance was gender inclusive, and people centred form of good government. It aligned moral authority with administrative excellence.

### **Administrative Reforms**

Ahilyadevi Holkar reorganised the Holkar state's internal structure. She improved revenue administration by reducing burdens on farmers. She introduced regular audits of government

accounts. She appointed capable officers based on merit not heredity. She ensured local village panchayats retained autonomy. Literary texts emphasise that she never tolerated corruption. She dismissed the officials who exploited the people.

### **Social Justice and Welfare**

Ahilyadevi Holkar has been portrayed as a deeply humanitarian ruler. She established feeding centres for the poor. She provided pensions to the widows and the elderly people. She promoted education for girls and boys. She opposed social evils indirectly by supporting widows, abandoned women and artisans.

### **Nehru's Observation of Ahilyabai Holkar**

In *The Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru writes about several great Indian rulers, and Ahilyabai is one of them. He admired her for her integrity, compassion, and exceptional abilities as a ruler. Nehru observed her as an example of the finest traditions of Indian leadership. He describes her as one of the most capable and enlightened rulers India ever had. He praises her as just, efficient, humane, and guided by moral principles. Pandit Nehru writes that Ahilyabai Holkar was one of the greatest rulers in Indian history. Nehru admired her for rebuilding many holy places across India and for working tirelessly for the welfare of the people. Ahilyadevi Holkar is a national symbol of good governance.

### **Development Model Based on Moral and Material Development**

Modern feminist theorists such as Carol Gilligan and Nett Noddings emphasise the ethics of care. It is an alternative to patriarchal models of governance that prioritise hierarchy, generalization and power. Ahilyadevi Holkar's development policies incorporated the ethics of care in administration more than two hundred years ago. Her decisions consistently reflected the concern for the well being and development of her subjects, especially marginalised and vulnerable sections of society. Historical and literary records describe her extensive work of construction and maintenance of wells, roads, rest houses, and temples throughout her kingdom and beyond. These projects were not reflections of royal display. They are expressions of compassion and service.

Her administrative correspondence and historical accounts give importance to *seva* as royal duty. Her policies were holistic – mixed economic welfare, spiritual wellbeing, and social justice. She aligned political power with maternal care. She redefined development as an extension of care.

### **Queen Ahilyadevi Holkar and Queen Elizabeth I**

Queen Ahilyadevi Holkar of India and Queen Elizabeth I of England are among the most admired women rulers in world history. Although they lived in different centuries and ruled in different cultural settings, both earned respect for their intelligence, leadership, and dedication to their people. Queen Ahilyadevi Holkar is known as the “Philosopher Queen” and “Lokamata” mother of the people. Queen Elizabeth I was known as the “Virgin Queen” and Gloriana. Ahilyabai rose to leadership after the death s of her husband Khanderao Holkar and father –in-law Malharrao Holkar. Though she lived in a patriarchal society, she was chosen to rule because of her wisdom, courage, and administrative ability. Elizabeth I became queen after the death of her half-sister, Mary I. She was the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. She was born in royalty but had a difficult childhood characterised by political instability and religious conflicts. Both were strong leaders. Both women came to power under challenging circumstances, yet emerged as strong and successful rulers. Ahilyadevi Holkar is respected as symbol of moral leadership and good governance. Elizabethan era is known as one of England’s most culturally rich period. Ahilyabai contributed to cultural and religious heritage through architecture and philanthropy, while Elizabeth contributed by encouraging literature and established religious balance. She is the patron of the English renaissance. Ahilyabai Holkar is known as one of India’s greatest rulers. Together, they stand as inspirational examples of ideal, moral and visionary leadership in world history.

### **Nature of Their Rule**

Queen Ahilyadevi Holkar ruled Malwa kingdom with compassion and welfare programmes. She focused on public works, temple reconstruction, trade routes and people’s welfare. She encouraged local self governance and fairness in justice. Queen Elizabeth I ruled England during the golden age, marked by stability, exploration, and cultural growth. She strengthened the monarchy and balanced power between Catholics and Protestants. Ahilyadevi Holkar is celebrated for her kindness, fairness and devotion to public welfare, while Elizabeth I is admired for her political wisdom, cultural patronage, and strengthening of the English nation.

### **Protection of Women’s Rights**

Ahilyadevi protected women’s inheritance. She offered financial support to women abandoned by families. She expanded women’s economic development. She opposed sati. She discouraged family pressure on widows. She encouraged education and livelihood support. She allowed widows to adopt heirs, maintain property, continue familial businesses, work in crafts and local trades.

### **Literary Representation of Collaborative Leadership**

Literary texts describe that she governed through counsel, mantra, bhakta, common people. It was male militaristic model. She is depicted as nurturing queen. She did not allow sati in Malwa. She stopped oppression of people. She provided stipends for destitute women. Her governance model was ethical rather than domineering. She renovated many Hindu temples in India. She lost her husband Khanderao in the battle of Kumbheri and later Malharao Holkar also passed away. However, she took the charge of the Malwa empire as a queen easily. She refused to commit sati after the death of her husband, Khanderao Holkar in 1754. Despite immense social pressure and patriarchal norms, she chose to live not for personal comfort but to serve her people and fulfil her duties. This moment is the defining act of her moral courage.

Ahilyabai's extraordinary ability won her the regard of her subjects and of the other Maratha confederates, including Nana Phadnavis. With the natives of Malwa, her name is sainted, and she has styled an avatar or Incarnation of the Divinity.

In the soberest view that can be taken of her character, she certainly appears, within her limited sphere, to have been one of the purest and most exemplary rulers that ever existed.

John Malcolm, *A Memoir of Central India*

Ahilyadevi Holkar the celebrated ruler of the Malwa kingdom in the 18<sup>th</sup> century has earned a permanent place in Indian literature. Her life of sacrifice, justice and spirituality has inspired poets, playwrights, novelists, and historians across generations. Literary texts portray her not merely as a political leader but also as a symbol of ideal womanhood, moral strength and enlightened governance. Through biographies, poetry, folk literature, plays, novels, and modern media, Ahilyadevi emerges as one of India's most beloved, respected and visionary leaders.

Historical biographies record factual details of her administration. They also highlight her virtues, a model ruler. Works such as Shakuntala Kale's *Ahilyabai Holkar* and M. S. Vaze's *Ahilyabai Holkar: The Philosopher Queen* explore her life from childhood to her reign in Maheshwar. These biographies celebrate her journey from a simple village girl to a powerful yet humble queen who ruled with justice, compassion, and devotion. Y. N. Kelkar's *Lokmata Ahilyabai* and Yashwant Dinkar Pendharkar's *Punyashlok Ahilyadevi* enrich her literary image. They portray her as "Lokmata" –the mother of her people, and "Punyshlok" a queen remembered through sacred and moral deeds. These texts highlight her works of temple construction, social reforms, and charitable works. She is the symbol of righteous governance in literature.

**Folk Literature and Poetry**

Folk literatures have played an important role in sustaining Ahilyadevi's legacy at the grassroots level. In Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh powadas (heroic ballads), bhajans, and kirtans celebrate her as a divine and benevolent ruler. These songs praise her compassion toward the poor, her fairness in justice, and her devotion to Lord Shiva. She is often addressed as the "Devi of Malwa" and "Rajmata Ahilyabai." It shows the emotional bond between queen and her people. In these oral traditions, Ahilyabai becomes a cultural symbol who represents maternal love, spiritual devotion, and moral governance. Kusumagraj wrote a powerful poem titled "Ahilyabai" in which he portrays her as a symbol of courage and dharma. The poem highlights her dignity in overcoming personal tragedies- the loss of her husband and her father-in-law – and her determination to serve her kingdom selflessly. Poets describe her reign as a "golden age of justice and prosperity. Poets admire her virtues through literary beauty. She is a symbol of moral, ideal and visionary leader.

### **Sustainable Development**

Sustainable Development is an approach to growth that aims to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. It requires balance of economic, environmental, and social needs. It is guided by the United Nations' 17 sustainable development goals which cover areas like poverty, clean energy, climate action, good health and well being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry, innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequality, peace and justice strong institutions etc. Ahilyadevi Holkar created long lasting public works– water tanks, Ghats, roads, agro-infrastructure. She protected women's inheritance rights. She supported women engaged in trade and crafts. These structures ensured livelihood stability, agricultural resilience, long term water sustainability. Many of these still exist which prove their sustainability.

### **Ethics of Care in Governance**

Ethics of Care is a prominent theory developed by Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings. It emphasises empathy and relational responsibility. Ahilyabai Holkar displayed compassion towards widows. She provided subsidies for orphaned children. She gave relief to disaster affected families. Her darbar proceedings often centred on emotional justice not merely legal justice. She protected lower castes, tribal groups, rural poor, artisans and women labourers. Her policies align with intersectional feminism, addressing overlapping oppression. She donated to temples and public buildings across India. She ensured use of local materials, architecture. This decentralised approach reduced ecological pressure and increased community ownership.

### **Joanna Baillie's Depiction of Governance**

Joanna Baillie described Ahilyabai Holkar's administration and governance in her poem, "Ahlya Bae: A Poem." Her portrayal of Ahilyadevi Holkar is ideal. She celebrated her as a model

ruler. The imagery suggests not just effective governance but a morally exemplary reign. All kinds of people respected her. This highlights her universal acceptance and fairness. The poem moves purposefully from the political to the moral / spiritual. She elevated Ahilyabai into near mythic, providential status. Baillie celebrated the moral, and philanthropic achievements associated with Ahilyabai rather than interrogating the political technicalities of her rule.

### **Admiration and Idealisation**

Sir John Malcolm in his Memoir of Central India and related writings investigated local reports of Ahilyabai's virtues and concluded after inquiry that popular praise was sincere. He praised her as a philosopher queen. British writers admire her values of justice, compassion, and patronage of holy places.

### **Conclusion**

Ahilyabai Holkar's reign offers a traditionally grounded culturally embedded example of feminist governance. Her development model was participatory, sustainable and inclusive. The model combined moral and material welfare. Her leadership defines feminism in Indian terms. It was not a rebellion against tradition. It is reconstruction of power through empathy, justice and service. Contemporary feminist development discourse can learn from her holistic human centred approach. Her just and compassionate leadership offers timeless lessons in governance, cultural stewardship, and social responsibility. In literary texts Ahilyabai Holkar is celebrated as a saintly queen, wise ruler, and compassionate mother. Writers and poets have immortalised her as a woman who combined courage with kindness and spirituality with statesmanship. Through literature her legacy inspires readers to believe in the power of good governance, moral strength, and selfless service.

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## Ahilyabai Holkar: Justice and Governance in Eighteenth-Century Malwa

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the justice processes and governance of Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795), the celebrated queen-regent of the Malwa kingdom based in Maheshwar. Through a close reading of administrative practices, legal mechanisms, dispute-resolution institutions, and public-policy initiatives, the study argues that Ahilyabai combined traditional Indian governance structures with pragmatic, welfare-oriented administration. Her justice system emphasized accessibility, proportional punishment, restorative remedies, and moral legitimacy—underpinned by a ruler-centred but consultative bureaucracy. The paper traces how these practices contributed to political stability, social cohesion, and a durable legacy that shaped local governance models in central India.*

**Keywords:** *Ahilyabai Holkar; Malwa; Holkar Dynasty; Maratha administration; justice; governance; eighteenth century; Malwa polity; revenue.*

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### **Introduction:**

Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar remains one of early modern India's most admired regional rulers. Ascending to power in a turbulent period—after the death of her husband and the instability of the Maratha confederacy—she ruled Malwa (centered on Maheshwar) from c. 1767 until her death in 1795. She is widely celebrated for her temple-building, public works, and philanthropic endeavours. Less systematically explored are the structures and principles underlying her administration of justice and governance. This paper synthesizes political, social, and administrative evidence to present a coherent account of how Ahilyabai administered law, resolved disputes, and organised governance so as to produce a relatively prosperous, stable realm under difficult conditions. In doing so, it situates her within the Maratha-dominated world of 18th-century Central India, where sovereigns often relied on a mix of personal authority, military power, and local networks.

**Methodology:** A qualitative historical-comparative technique is used in this study. In addition to secondary literature on queenship theory and historical case studies in a global perspective, primary historical texts, excerpts, and archive correspondence pertaining to Ahilyadevi Holkar's time as queen of Indore are assessed. Comparative context is provided by scholarly works, books, and working

papers on female sovereignty in Europe, Asia, and other regions. A thematic analysis of leadership traits including welfare, justice, diplomacy, and military command is included in the study. In order to identify parallels and discrepancies between leadership philosophies as well as contextual explanations related to the sociocultural and gender of the era, historical writings are examined critically. The APA standard is followed for attributing sources.

### **Historical Context: Malwa and the Maratha Policy**

The mid–late eighteenth century in central India was characterized by the political rise of Maratha chiefs, the decline of Mughal central authority, and recurrent contestation among regional powers. The Holkar family, originally of comparatively modest origins, rose under Malhar Rao Holkar to control the Malwa region. Malhar Rao’s death in 1766 left a potential power vacuum, which Ahilyabai—first as regent and then de facto sovereign—stepped into. Malwa was strategically located, agriculturally productive, and subject to threats (banditry, inter-Sardar rivalry, external invasions). In this context, a regime that could combine internal order, fiscal stability, and popular legitimacy held advantage. Ahilyabai became renowned as “the virtual ruler of Malwa” after Malhar Rao’s death and during her regency. The Britannica biography notes that under her rule Indore (and by extension her domain) “was an island of peace and prosperity in a sea of violence”. Thus, the context of her governance was one of both opportunity and challenge.

### **Principles of Justice under Ahilyabai**

Examining the surviving evidence, several core values emerge in Ahilyabai’s approach to justice:

#### **1. Accessibility and Immediacy**

Reports suggest Ahilyabai held daily audiences where subjects could present petitions and grievances; she also empowered subordinate officers to decide locally, reducing delay and bottlenecks. The Encyclopaedia Britannica states she “established courts for justice and arbitration in citizens’ disputes”. This suggests a deliberate attempt to bring justice closer to the people rather than keep everything at the capital.

#### **2. Proportionality and Tempered Punishment**

While the sources are somewhat hagiographic, they emphasise that Ahilyabai’s justice was firm but humane. She is said to have intervened in overly harsh sentences, tempered fines, and substituted reparative measures for purely punitive ones. Although no detailed case records survive in the accessible literature, this theme recurs in narratives of her reign (e.g., public works instead of harsh penal sentences). See also commentary on her moral-legitimacy orientation.

### **3. Restorative Remedies and Compensation**

The tradition emphasises that she promoted restitution and compensation to victims (or affected communities) rather than mere deterrence. For example, infrastructure works, wells, public rest-houses and dharamshalas feature in her programme as part of a broader social contract with her subjects. In effect, the idea is that justice was partly delivered via public works and welfare as much as via courts.

### **4. Impartiality and Rule of Law (Practical Sense)**

Ahilyabai worked within the hierarchical framework of her time (warrior-aristocracy, caste society), but sources emphasise her impartial treatment of petitioners regardless of status. For example, she is credited with ensuring that officials accused of corruption or neglect were pursued. Her public image was of a moral sovereign. The Indian Express article notes she “never considered herself as the queen and ruled in the name of Lord Shiva... she got ghats built... on pilgrimage routes and those taken by traders so that people remained connected with our culture.”

### **5. Moral Legitimacy and Persona of the Sovereign**

A key element of her success was her personal moral standing. Her life was portrayed as one of austerity, devotion, public service and accessibility. This elevated her rule in the eyes of her subjects, making decisions more effective because backed by perceived righteousness. The article “Ahilyabai Holkar: A Legacy of Empowerment and Inclusivity” states she “combined leadership focused on welfare, education, and good public infrastructure

#### **How Justice was Delivered**

To realize these principles, Ahilyabai’s regime employed a layered institutional structure comprising local, sub-district and central levels.

#### **Village and Local Forum**

The first tier of dispute resolution was local: villages retained panchayats and community elders who mediated land disputes, family quarrels, and minor criminal cases. Ahilyabai, according to contemporary commentary, respected these institutions and treated them as legitimate first stop for justice. Local ownership of dispute-resolution increased accessibility and social legitimacy.

#### **Tehsil Administration**

At the sub-district level, tehsildars (revenue officers) and district magistrates administered revenue disputes, property titles, and some criminal matters. While specific archival tehsil records of the

Holkar regime are not widely published, sites note that Ahilyabai strengthened existing land revenue systems and ensured subordinate chiefs paid taxes timely.

### **Central court and Royal Audience (Diwan/Adalat)**

At the apex, a royal court centred at Maheshwar (or Indore depending on context) heard appeals, large-scale disputes, cases involving nobles or commercial actors. Ahilyabai is reputed to have personally presided over or supervised major sessions, lending the royal imprimatur to decisions.

### **Delegated Officials and Inspectors**

To enforce decisions and ensure accountability, Ahilyabai created oversight mechanisms: inspectors (or auditors) visited subordinate officials, monitored behaviour, and forwarded complaints to the central court. While no full list of these officials survives in published secondary sources, the commentary emphasises that her regime reduced corruption and abuse of office by such mechanisms.

### **Religious and Customary Arbitration**

Because she was a devout patron of temples, dharamshalas, and pilgrim rest-houses, some dispute resolution occurred in religious settings, especially those involving donations, pilgrim rights, or inter-communal issues. She used religious legitimacy to buttress secular justice.

### **Specific Practices in Criminal Justice and Civil Law**

#### **Criminal Justice**

Serious offences such as murder, robbery, treason, or banditry were dealt with firmly. But the emphasis remains that Ahilyabai preferred strategies aimed at restoring order and confidence rather than purely violent suppression. For example, banditry and highway robbery (common in Malwa) were policed because they threatened trade and revenue. Her public works and welfare also functioned as mechanisms for crime-prevention by addressing root causes (poverty, landlessness).

#### **Property and Revenue Dispute**

Given the agrarian base of Malwa, land-revenue disputes were a major source of conflict. Ahilyabai's regime is described as reforming revenue assessments, remitting arrears during drought, and tailoring assessments to local conditions—thereby reducing resentment and litigation. The “Her Story in English – Lok Mata Ahilyabai” site quotes annual tax figures from sardars (chieftains) and suggests strong administrative revenue compliance. Lokmata Ahilyabai Although one must treat such figures cautiously, they support a picture of active revenue management linked with justice delivery (dispute resolution in revenue claims).

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## Commercial Law

Trade and commerce required stable rules: weights/measures, market regulation, merchant rights, and safe roads. Under Ahilyabai, markets in Maheshwar, Indore and surrounding areas flourished. Public works (roads, ghats) supported commerce; her regime penalised fraud in markets, thereby upholding fair play. The “Saint-Queen of Dharma” article emphasises that she “invested heavily in infrastructure—wells, canals, roads, and rest-houses—that facilitated commerce and pilgrimage.”

## Family and Inheritance Law

Disputes about family property, inheritance, widow’s rights, orphan issues were common. While explicit records under Ahilyabai’s rule are not widely published, the broader commentary emphasises that she intervened to protect vulnerable social groups (widows, orphans) and ensured the enforcement of customary law rather than allowing rogue adjudication. The Indian Journal of Social Science and Literature article emphasises her contribution in the domain of education and social welfare, pointing to her attention to women and vulnerable groups.

## Political Economy: Revenue, Trade and Administration

Ahilyabai’s fiscal policy was simultaneously practical and legitimising. She recognized that a stable revenue base was essential for state functions—justice, security, public works—but also that harsh extraction would undermine legitimacy and provoke resistance.

To this end, she is reported to have:

- Adjusted land revenues in agriculturally weak years or droughts, thereby reducing forced arrears and avoiding excessive litigation. Because revenue disputes often flow into courts, this pre-emptive policy reduced conflict.
- Encouraged trade and industry: The Maheshwari textile industry is often associated with her reign, giving employment and taxable commerce. The Reddit commentary emphasises this: “The Maheshwari sarees trace back to the 18th century, when Queen Ahilyabai Holkar ruled.
- Built infrastructure (roads, canals, ghats) which lowered transaction cost, increased trade, and thereby increased state revenue in a sustainable way. The Free Press Journal article states she “transformed agriculture in semi-arid Malwa through visionary water reforms.”

## Social Impact and Gender Dimensions

Ahilyabai’s rule had noteworthy social dimensions. Her personal example as a female sovereign, widely respected, challenged gender expectations of her era. According to the Indian Express, she

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“pioneered education for women at a time when it was forbidden and worked on women’s empowerment during her three-decade reign.”

Her governance style also had implications for social inclusion: she is credited with supporting infrastructure open to all castes and communities, including pilgrim rest houses (dharamshalas), ghats for travellers, and roads. The “Empowerment and Inclusivity” article highlights her inclusive welfare orientation.

Thus, justice under her reign cannot be separated from broader welfare and inclusion policies: a more equitable society made for fewer grievances and greater loyalty.

### **Legacy and Long-term effect**

Ahilyabai’s legacy is multifaceted:

- **Institutional Legacy:** Her reforms and style of administration influenced subsequent local governance practices in Malwa and surrounding regions. Her emphasis on decentralised, accessible justice and public works has been invoked in modern policy discussions.
- **Cultural Legacy:** Her extensive temple building, ghats, wells, textile industry (Maheshwari sarees) created enduring civic infrastructure and pilgrimage circuits, with long-term economic and cultural significance.
- **Political Symbol:** She became a model of righteous rule; later historians and political actors have used her as an exemplar of good governance. For instance, contemporary news sources note her being praised by administrators and leaders for her moral governance.
- **Modern Governance Discourse:** Some contemporary policy voices mention her as a forerunner of participatory/local governance, decentralisation and welfare-oriented rule.

Thus, her impact extended beyond her lifetime and region, entering the national historical consciousness.

### **Limitation and Area for Further Research**

The research on Ahilyabai’s justice and governance system is constrained by the limitation of surviving primary sources: there are few published detailed judicial records, revenue ledgers, or full administrative correspondence from her reign available in the public domain. Much of the writing relies on later biographies or hagiographic tradition.

Hence future research could profitably focus on:

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- Systematic archival exploration of Malwa-Holkar state records (if extant) in Indore, Maheshwar, or British colonial archives.
  - Comparative quantitative analysis of revenue, crime rates, and public spending pre- and post-Ahilyabai's reign (if data permit).
  - Micro-histories of specific village or tehsil courts to reconstruct patterns of dispute resolution, appeals, and enforcement under her regime.
  - Gender-specific analysis of how her model influenced women's participation in public life, property rights, or legal standing in Malwa.

### Conclusion

Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar's governance and justice processes remain remarkable for the eighteenth-century Indian context: they combined accessibility, fairness, welfare orientation, administrative discipline, and moral legitimacy. Her justice system was not just punitive but restorative; her governance did not rely only on coercion but on public works, inclusivity and predictable administration.

By emphasising local forums, clear revenue policy, transparent oversight, and visible public investment, Ahilyabai created a polity that was stable, prosperous, and legitimate in her era—and whose legacy endures. While recognising the limitations of sources, this analysis argues that her model offers a case-study of effective pre-colonial Indian governance that bridged tradition and pragmatism.

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## Empathy, Equality, and Enlightened Rule: Reimagining Ahilyabai Holkar's Governance for the Contemporary World

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### **Abstract:**

*Ahilyabai Holkar, the unconquerable sovereign of Malwa from 1767 to 1795, continued her reign based on a legacy of justice, social welfare and inclusive governance. Her rule challenged prevailing contemporary patriarchal norms to provide educational opportunities, equitable access to resources and access to justice. To study her rule is to study a radical empathy-based approach, underpinned by principles of contemporary decentralization and an ethics of social equity. Using a qualitative methodology drawn from a comparative review of the historical literature, this research paper discusses the primary governance strategies supporting welfare, infrastructure, and patronage that set Ahilyabai apart from others of her time. The analysis offers insights into her development strategies, decisions that support equity initiatives historically concerned with differential development based on gender, and architectural patronage informed by contemporary legal exposure. By revisiting her efforts, the paper situates her insights within contemporary discourses related to ethical government approach, women in leadership approaches to equitable development, sustainable growth and public morality, so as to iteratively draw out lessons for constructive governance strategies for modern capacities. This paper concludes by considering her leadership, demonstrated significance notwithstanding present-day public and civil opportunities for women representation. Their efforts can be simultaneously recognised historically and contemporaneously within government and civil processes that are equitable.*

**Keywords:** *Inclusive governance, Ethical leadership, Women's empowerment, Social justice and Sustainable development.*

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### **Introduction:**

Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795) represents the epitome of moral kingship—a woman who surpassed the constraints of patriarchy to shape her own paradigm of governance. The bases of her rule were justice, compassion, and welfare governance. Her rule is both distinctive and admirable in the context of Indian history. Her legacy is not simply a listing of achievements; it is a dynamic framework for inclusive and sustainable governance that resonates deeply at a time when

contemporary society grapples with both socio-economic proximal inequities and gender inequities. This article undertakes an expansive exploration of her governance practices and their continued importance by mapping her historical interventions against contemporary challenges and aspirations.

### **Research Methodology:**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to conduct a comparative analysis and literature review of historical writings, published scholarly articles, and archival documents. The primary sources of evidence include inscriptions, royal letters and accounts of contemporary historians, while secondary sources consist of interpretations in academic works, reports by governments, and aspects of digital archives. Textual and contextual analysis was used to extract verbatim quotations, understand themes of justice, empowerment, and decentralization, and to compare Ahilyabai's model of governance with that of modern administrative models. All citations appear in APA style throughout the text.

### **Review of the Literature:**

The existing literature regarding Ahilyabai Holkar illustrates a wealth of focused attention of her historic and visionary reforms, conscious commitment to social welfare, and innovative leadership as a woman ruler. For instance, Mulye (2024) and Chandel (2023) highlight the ways Ahilyabai's policy initiatives disrupted the entrenched gender ideologies, particularly expressed in the Dharmashastra texts, Mitakshara and Dayabhaga, that limited women's engagement in governance (Mulye, 2024; Chandel, 2023). The literature identifies themes of decentralization of administrative authority, compassionate and responsive statecraft, and progressive social welfare interventions. Zenodo's expansive literature review reflects some of these themes, arguing that Ahilya's policies "advocate social justice and economic development ... and indicate her commitment to sustainability and sustainable development particularly in regard to women's empowerment, maintaining culture, and enhancing/investing in infrastructure development" (Zenodo, 2025, 12).

In recent years, Ahilyabai has been referenced in contemporary discourse on women's leadership, inclusive governance, and social reform legacies (IJSSL, 2025; Organiser, 2025). Her model, in particular, goes beyond tradition to provide a rigorous model of ethical action in leadership to advance real social change.

### **Analysis of Selected Texts:**

### **Justice and Inclusivity:**

Ahilyabai's judicial model was impartial and accessible, embodying her belief that "A ruler's duty is not just to govern but to serve" (Dr. Mahatme, 2025, para. 1). She is quoted as saying, "May your silence hold strength, your purpose outshine power, and your actions speak what titles never can" (Vaidya, 2025, para. 3). Her open court invited citizens from all backgrounds to seek redress, marking a radical shift from exclusionary practices.

Ahilyabai Holkar's focus on issues of justice and inclusion present a deep design for advancing relevant issues of fairness and social equity in contemporary governance. Her court system ensured fairness, efficiency, and accessibility—characteristics of court systems that are desperately needed today. Ahilyabai, as a ruler, did not regard justice as a privilege of the powerful, but rather a right for all citizens—irrespective of caste, class, or gender. She pioneered open courts where ordinary citizens could file petitions directly to the ruler, representing an early design for participatory government (Zenodo, 2025).

This inclusive approach is different from several modern systems that can be impacted by slow bureaucratic processes and systemic discrimination. Ahilyabai's premise that "the duty of a ruler is not just governing, but serving" (Dr. Mahatme, 2025) supports a governing ethic in which the state is not an oppressor but a facilitator of justice. This ethical premise fosters social trust and buy-in because it secures protections and avenues for remedies for those considered vulnerable or marginalized, such as widows and orphans (Chintan, 2024).

Today, we live in a world where problems such as unequal access to justice, court congestion, and biases against marginalized groups routinely occur in justice systems and law enforcement. Ahilyabai's model teaches us about decentralized and transparent governance. The speed and unbiased nature of her judiciary undoubtedly supported virtue and social order, which is especially impactful in pluralistic societies that deal with, intergroup, religious, or economic conflicts. Ahilyabai's model also reinforces the importance of judicial reform focused on access, fairness, and community engagement as a means of establishing legitimacy among the public, confidence in legal institutions, and respect for the law.

### **Welfare and Empowerment:**

Ahilyabai pioneered women's education and extended material support to widows and marginalized groups, establishing numerous Pathshalas "for both boys and girls ... implementing development projects in healthcare, water management, and infrastructure" (Mulye, 2024, 15). Her reign challenged gender roles, demonstrating that "a woman in power could lead effectively while promoting social justice and empowerment" (Chandel,

The programs for welfare and empowerment initiated by Ahilyabai Holkar are especially relevant for the present-day government, functioning as a precedent of comprehensive upliftment that effects transformations based not only on some economic aid, but also on the dignity, self-sufficiency, and integration into society that can result from holistic initiatives. Holkar's work was not limited to welfare, and designed welfare for more marginalized populations—including about Esther's persons, widows, orphans, and tribes—through aid that is aimed at being responsive to the needs of these populations, such as the multifaceted supports of financial aid, skills training, schooling, and health facility options. The comprehensive welfare design by Ahilyabai aimed to interrupt and move away from intergenerational poverty through rightful resources and support to avoid moving to self-sufficiency and contributory citizens (instead of benefiting from aid resources that may lead to veteran poverty).

At the present time, this program model resonates strongly with various global development goals and social welfare strategies applied as approaches for promoting social development policy. Society, just like Holkar, see value and urgency for the practice of development through skills training and economic inclusion, representing contemporary wealth empowerment models in which education, skills training and entrepreneurship are pathways out of socio-economically subjugated or marginalized positions. Ahilyabai Holkar's focus on those vulnerable, like Economic Growth-era economy and governance of age groups such as the Bhil tribe, contemplated who the persons were in programs, and uses culturally relevant applications towards education, and the establishment of schools, and local traditional craft production warn teaching initiatives and methods. This represents inclusive development with development objectives, being both resourceful of vulnerable groups, along with appropriate context to understand inclusive development as an activity-based model promoting wealth and prosperity.

Her infrastructure programs – building roads, wells, rest houses, and water conservation measures – served the public purpose of enhancing access to key services and improving the resilience of communities. Modern leaders can draw from her sustainable infrastructure initiatives, which combined physical development with social aims, and yielded dividends in respect of both economic activity and quality of life.

Furthermore, Ahilyabai's support for women's empowerment was extraordinary with respect to broadening social reforms, including widow remarriage, property rights for women, and the development of women's security groups. Advancing such advocacy for women's empowerment preceded today's gender equity efforts and social protection policies. It is evident that the effort to advance women's empowerment should be situated within the legislative, social and economic

architecture of society. Ahilyabai's influential support for women's leadership was also evident in civic and military matters, and also advocated for an inclusive governance framework that benefits all citizens.

### **Decentralized and Visionary Administration:**

Zenodo's study finds that Ahilyabai "employed decentralized governance ... [and] liberal reforms, including a fair taxation system," creating social justice and economic development initiatives (Zenodo, 2025, p. 14). Her infrastructure legacy includes construction and restoration of temples, wells, and rest houses—work that supported mobility, trade, and spiritual life.

### **Ethical Leadership:**

Ahilyabai's rule was deeply rooted in dharma (ethical duty), as she advanced restoration over retribution. "While others tore down, she built up ... not just temples and institutions, but livelihoods, hope, and above all, trust" (Vaidya, 2025, para. 7). Contemporary leaders can mirror her capacity for empathetic administration and resilience.

### **Cultural Patronage:**

Her patronage revitalized key Hindu centers—such as Kashi Vishwanath and Somnath—preserving culture during political turmoil (Organiser, 2025, para. 4). "Her initiatives ... align with the goals of contemporary governance" (Zenodo, 2025, p. 12)

### **Discussion:**

Ahilyabai Holkar's governance model is deeply relevant in today's world as it speaks to timeless principles in addressing contemporary governance challenges through equity, compassion, and sustainable practice. An important theme is her commitment to decentralization and social equity, both of which are a key lesson for any modern-day political leader. Contemporary governments that seek parity of resource distribution and democratically available justice could look to Holkar's impartial and publicly available court system that ensured equity for all segments of society, not just the wealthiest (Zenodo, 2025). This decentralization simultaneously built trust with citizens while avoiding bureaucratic subjugation of each community, helping to strike a more harmonious balance in society.

Empathy is a key element of her style of leadership, which is evidenced by her programs to support widows, orphans, and economically disadvantaged groups through vocational training and financial assistance (Chintan, 2024). In today's context, in addition to the multiple benefits of

compassionate governance, it contributes towards community empowerment and social cohesion—a necessity when managing diverse populations characterized by inequality and vulnerability. Her appreciation of empowerment as complex, combining financial support and social mobilization with a sensitive and humane approach, is similar to modern day welfare models supporting engaged and holistic human development.

Moreover, Ahilyabai's visionary perspective on infrastructure development and cultural preservation is incredibly contemporary. Her investments in the building of roads, wells, temples, and dharamshalas (rest houses) were intended to increase both economic productivity and cultural vibrancy (Organiser, 2025). This dual development of sustainable infrastructure and cultural heritage is pertinent to current global development agendas that focus on sustainable development while protecting historic and cultural contexts. Present-day leaders may harness her foresight concerning balancing economic development and cultural sustainability for resilient communities.

Furthermore, resilience and adaptability countered in adversity represents another aspect of her leadership that resonates in contemporary times. Despite personal loss and political pressure, Ahilyabai continued to effectively rule with a mix of compassion and discipline, pursuing complex threats through diplomatic engagements rather than physical warfare (Organiser, 2025; Times of India, 2025). The virtue of resilience proved exceptionally valued for present-day leaders who are also on the front lines of social and political turbulence and moral decay to sustain ethical standards and patience in building enduring stability and respect.

In closing, here it is important to note that Ahilyabai's vision for empowerment goes beyond welfare and includes women's leadership and involvement in governance. She supported women to take on roles typically reserved for men, instituted safety groups, and established women's particular units, all of which supported gender equity, centuries ahead of her time (PIB, 2025). Her legacy provides important lessons for our modern-day efforts for greater women's representation and protection in the public and political spheres.

In total, the governance model established by Ahilyabai Holkar offers a useful and extensive framework for contemporary leading informed by justice, compassion, sustainability, resilience, and inclusion. Ahilyabai's legacy represents how ethical governance can be mobilized to create solutions to the economic inequalities of today, gender issues, and cultural preservation - establishing an important precedent and legacy for the governance of today.

### Conclusion:

Ahlyabai Holkar's governance model exemplifies a model of statesmanship anchored in principles of ethics, inclusion, and vision. Holkar's administrative techniques and holistic welfare programs provide fuel for present-day conversations about justice, equality, and sustainability. Present-day leaders, facing global challenges of inequity and climate change, can draw on Ahilyabai's reign for both pragmatic approaches and aspirational values in developing a more inclusive world.

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## Ahilyabai's Contribution to Public Welfare and Social Reforms

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### **Abstract:**

*Ahilyabai was born on 31st of May 1725 in a village called Chaundi, now part of Ahmednagar district in Maharashtra. Ahilyabai was one of the few women rulers in medieval India. Her father, Mankoji Shinde, defied the norms of the time by insisting that his daughter receive an education, a rarity for girls in that era. Her education not only empowered her but also set a precedent for the importance of female education in predominantly patriarchal society. Ahilyabai's ascent to power started with the death of her husband, Khanderao, in the Battle of Kumbher in 1754. With the guidance and support of her father-in-law, Malharrao Holkar, Ahilyabai took up the mantle of leadership, mastering administrative and military strategies. Her reign from 1765 to 1795 is remembered as a period of remarkable stability and prosperity. Ahilyabai Holkar did many public welfares and social reforms. The hallmark of Ahilyabai's administration was her open-ended commitment to public welfare, which included good governance and social reforms. He held public meetings every day, so that he could get exclusive information about the concerns and priorities of the state. His policies were all-inclusive, aimed at upliftment of the neglected sections of the society, which included landless farmers, tribal communities and widows. His social justice and welfare efforts were pioneering, promoting good dialogue, justice and prosperity for all. The most notable among them is his fight against Sati Pratha.*

**Keywords:** Ahilyabai Holkar, Public Welfare, Social Reform, Malharrao Holkar.

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### **1. Introduction:**

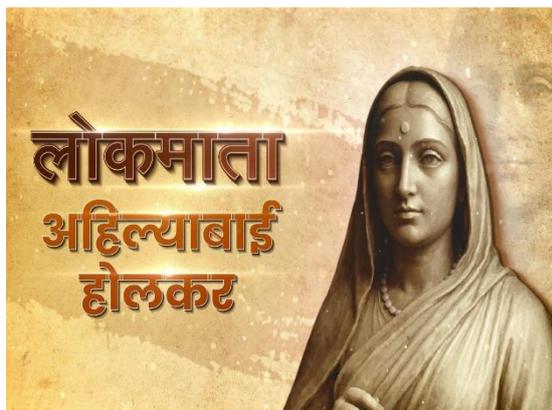
Ahilyabai Holkar (31 May 1725 – 13 August 1795) was a famous queen of the Maratha Empire and the wife of Khanderao, son of the historically renowned governor Malharrao Holkar. She ruled from Maheshwar as her capital. Ahilyabai Holkar was born into a Maratha Hindu family in a village called Chaundi, now part of Ahmednagar in Maharashtra 's Ahmednagar district. She was married at the age of ten or twelve. She became a widow at the age of twenty-nine. Her husband's temperament was fickle and fiery, and she endured it all. Then, when she was forty-two or forty-three, her son Malerao died. When Ahilyabai was about sixty-two, her grandson Nathu passed away. Four years

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later, her son-in-law, Yashwantrao Phanse, died, and their daughter, Muktabai, committed sati . She was fond of Malharrao, the son of a distant relative, Tukojirao, hoping that he would eventually take charge of governance, order, justice, and public entertainment. However, he continued to cause her pain until the very end. One of her major contributions is the Somnath Temple, one of the 12 Jyotirlingas, which was renovated by Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar. She also contributed to the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi. In this way, she made a significant contribution to the nation's progress. He also gave women the right to education and worked throughout his life for women's empowerment, thus making significant contributions to the advancement of women.

## 2. Early Life:

Ahilyabai Holkar was born on May 31, 1725, in the village of Chondi, Maharashtra, to Mankoji Shinde, the village head. She was educated by her father and married Khanderao Holkar in 1733 at the age of eight. After her husband was killed in battle in 1754 her father-in-law, Malharrao Holkar, prevented her from becoming a *sati* and trained her in military and administrative matters.



## 3. Public Welfare:

Ahilyabai Holkar's public welfare included building temples and infrastructure like roads, ghats, and rest houses, supporting farmers and trade, and promoting education through schools. She is also known for her revolutionary social reforms, such as granting property rights to widows, prohibiting dowry, supporting widow remarriage, and creating a women's army for security.

### 3.1 Infrastructure and economic development:

- **Public works:** Ahilyabai invested heavily in public infrastructure, creating a robust network of roads, forts, wells, tanks, and rest houses throughout her kingdom and at pilgrimage sites across India. Travelers, farmers, and traders all benefited from these improvements.

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- **Rural and agricultural support:** She focused on strengthening the rural economy through water conservation and the promotion of agriculture. She developed small canals and constructed numerous ponds to enhance agricultural productivity and encouraged crop diversity to increase farmers' income.
  - **Support for trade and industry:** Ahilyabai fostered a thriving economy by promoting commerce and inviting artisans and merchants to settle in her kingdom. She famously established a textile industry in Maheshwar, which became renowned for its Maheshwari sarees and provided new opportunities for weavers.
  - **Transformation of Indore:** She is credited with transforming the village of Indore into a prosperous and beautiful city.

#### 4. Social Reforms:

Ahilyabai Holkar's social reforms included advocating for women's rights, such as property rights and remarriage, and promoting education and economic empowerment for women. She also worked to combat negative social practices like *sati* and untouchability, and established numerous schools and public works.

##### 4.1 Women's rights and empowerment:

- **Property rights:** She repealed traditional laws that confiscated the property of childless widows.
- **Marriage:** She supported widow remarriage and worked to raise the minimum age for girls' marriages.
- **Economic independence:** She encouraged women to participate in trade and handicrafts, like the Maheshwari weaving industry.
- **Safety:** She formed a special women's unit in the Malwa army and established women's safety groups in villages.

##### 4.2 Social welfare and justice:

- **Education:** She established schools (*pathshalas*) for both boys and girls, and supported women's education at a time when it was not common.
- **Combating harmful practices:** She resisted evil practices like *sati* and untouchability.

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- **Public works:** She was involved in development projects like constructing shelters, hospitals, schools, and public water management systems.
  - **Justice:** She held daily public audiences to address her subjects' problems and earned a reputation for fair and impartial justice, famously ordering the execution of her own son for a capital offense.

#### 4.3 Community Inclusion:

- She played a significant role in mainstreaming tribal communities like the Bhil and Gond.

#### 5. Other Works:

##### 5.1 Renovation of Temples:

- Ahilyabai was a prolific builder, constructing Hindu temples and Dharmashalas across the Indian Subcontinent.
- Ahilya Bai resurrected the jyotirlingas across the country as a tribute to Lord Shiva.
- She carried out renovations in Somnath temple, Kashi Vishwanath temple Varanasi (1780), Trambak, Gaya, Pushkar, Vrindavan, Nathdwara, Haridwar, Badrinath, Kedarnath and many other sacred sites.

##### 5.2 Other Contributions:

- She patronized many artists, including Marathi poet Moropant, Shahir Ananta Gandhi, and Sanskrit scholar Khushali Ram.
- She established Maheshwar (in Madhya Pradesh) as the seat of the Holkar Dynasty.
- She promoted Maheshwari saris (from Maheshwar) and paved the way for empowering women.
- Ahilyabai repealed a traditional law that allowed the state to confiscate the property of childless widows.
- She made efforts to develop the city of Indore, conserve forests and animals, and was responsible for the flourishing trade and commerce.
- Benevolence, social reforms, and support for arts and culture marked her reign.

#### 6. Death:

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Ahilyabai died on 13 August 1795 at age 70. She was succeeded by her commander-in-chief and brother-in-law, Tukoji Rao Holkar, who abdicated the throne in 1797 in favour of his son Kashi Rao Holkar.

### Conclusion:

Based on her 30-year reign during the 18th century, Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy is defined by her just and stable governance, extensive public works, and progressive social reforms that were driven by deep compassion and an adherence to *dharma*. Her enlightened rule transformed the Malwa kingdom into a prosperous and peaceful state and continues to serve as a powerful example of visionary leadership. Ahilyabai Holkar's reign demonstrated that effective and benevolent leadership, even in a period of intense conflict, could lead to lasting peace and prosperity. Her work, guided by a strong moral compass and a practical approach to governance, transcended mere administration. By combining infrastructure development with social justice, she cultivated a kingdom where people of all backgrounds could thrive. Her legacy remains a timeless blueprint for compassionate governance, social equity, and women's empowerment.

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## Lokmata ahilyabai holkar: a symbol of dharma, duty, and good governance

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### **Abstract:**

*Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795), the revered queen of the Malwa kingdom, remains an enduring exemplar of dharma (righteousness), duty, and good governance. Her reign symbolizes the moral and spiritual strength that can guide political leadership toward equity and compassion. This paper explores her rule as an embodiment of Indian ethical statecraft, emphasizing her integration of moral values with administrative vision. Through the lens of dharma, Ahilyabai's governance reveals a profound sense of justice, public welfare, and spiritual inclusivity. Her dedication to kartavya (duty) reflected in the establishment of transparent institutions, public welfare schemes, and infrastructural development. She built temples, roads, ghats, and dharamshalas across India, fostering both spiritual and material welfare. Furthermore, her governance anticipated many modern principles of people-centric and accountable administration. As a woman ruler in the eighteenth century, she transcended patriarchal limitations and redefined the meaning of power through compassion, discipline, and devotion. The study concludes that Ahilyabai Holkar's governance model remains profoundly relevant in contemporary discussions of ethical politics, women's leadership, and sustainable administration. Her reign continues to illuminate how dharma, when translated into public duty, can lead to a just and prosperous society.*

**Keywords:** Ahilyabai Holkar, dharma, governance, duty, women leadership, Malwa administration.

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### **Introduction:**

The eighteenth century marked a period of great political uncertainty and social upheaval in India. The decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of regional powers such as the Marathas reshaped the subcontinent's political structure. Amid these transformations emerged one of the most remarkable rulers in Indian history — Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar, who governed the Malwa region between 1767 and 1795. Her reign stands out not only for its stability but also for its profound moral foundation, guided by principles of dharma, seva (service), and kartavya (duty).

Born in 1725 in Chondi village, Maharashtra, Ahilyabai's journey from an ordinary girl to a powerful queen exemplifies courage and virtue. Under the mentorship of her father-in-law, Malhar Rao Holkar, she received training in administration, military affairs, and statecraft. Following the deaths of her husband Khanderao and son Male Rao, she ascended the throne amidst skepticism about a woman's capacity to rule. Yet, through wisdom and restraint, she proved herself one of the most capable administrators of her age.

Ahilyabai's reign was characterized by peace, prosperity, and an exceptional sense of justice. Unlike many contemporary rulers who sought personal power, she viewed governance as a sacred duty — a divine service to her people. Her rule reflected a harmonious blend of spirituality and pragmatism, ensuring both moral integrity and material progress. She actively promoted trade, agriculture, education, and religious tolerance, while ensuring the equitable distribution of resources.

Central to her philosophy was the idea of raja dharma — the ruler's moral responsibility to maintain justice and uphold the welfare of all. She practiced this not merely as a political strategy but as a personal vow rooted in her faith. Ahilyabai's letters and edicts show that her policies were grounded in compassion and fairness rather than coercion. She regarded her people as her children and saw herself as their servant, not their sovereign.

This paper aims to analyse her rule through three interrelated concepts— dharma, duty, and good governance— and explore how she transformed traditional ideals into practical policies. It also examines her spiritual outlook, her pioneering role as a female leader, and her continuing legacy as a model of ethical administration.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:**

1. To examine Ahilyabai Holkar's principles of dharma, duty and moral leadership reflected in the governance.
2. To analyse her administrative reforms and good governance practices within the historical context of 18<sup>th</sup> century India.
3. To understand the spiritual foundation of her leadership and how they influenced her public policies and decision-making.
4. To explore the unique elements of feminine leadership demonstrated in her reign and their relevance to contemporary leadership models.

5. To assess the socio-economic and cultural impact of Ahilyabai Holkar's rule on the Malwa region and beyond.
6. To evaluate the modern relevance of her governance approach discussion of ethical administration, women empowerment and public services.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

The study used a qualitative, historical-analytical method based on secondary data collected from book, articles and historical records on Ahilyabai Holkar. A content analysis approach was used to theme of the dharma, duty and good governance in her leadership. This methodology is descriptive and interceptive focusing on documental evidence without using any quantitative tools or primary data collection.

### **DHARMA AS- THE FOUNDATION OF GOVERNANCE**

Ahilyabai Holkar's governance was deeply anchored in the moral and philosophical foundation of Sanatana Dharma. For her, dharma was not confined to religious orthodoxy but extended to the ethical responsibility of ensuring justice, compassion, and equality. She considered kingship a divine obligation — a means to serve rather than dominate.

She established an administration that respected all religions, supporting the construction and renovation of temples, mosques, and pilgrimage centers across India. Her restoration of the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi, the Somnath Temple, and numerous ghats on the Narmada River exemplify her commitment to cultural preservation and inclusivity.

Ahilyabai's interpretation of dharma was practical rather than doctrinal. She ensured that every decision — whether related to taxation, trade, or justice — adhered to moral fairness. She believed that a ruler's moral integrity set the ethical tone of the entire administration. Her ability to balance religious devotion with rational governance positioned her as an enlightened ruler who unified spirituality and statecraft. Through dharma, Ahilyabai offered a governance model rooted in compassion and fairness, one that transcended the boundaries of time and religion.

### **DUTY (KARTAVYA) AND ETHICAL ADMINISTRATION**

For Ahilyabai Holkar, kartavya — the sacred duty of leadership — was the cornerstone of ethical administration. She viewed herself as a servant of the people rather than a monarch. Her personal involvement in judicial and administrative affairs demonstrated her commitment to fairness and accountability.

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She frequently held open courts where common citizens could voice grievances directly. Her judgments were marked by empathy and legal precision, ensuring justice without bias. Economically, she strengthened agriculture, established fair taxation policies, and supported merchants through secure trade routes and marketplace reforms.

Ahilyabai also prioritized welfare measures during natural calamities, providing tax relief and resources to affected farmers. Her officials were selected on merit, not lineage, reflecting her progressive outlook. She personally monitored fiscal reports and dismissed any form of corruption or exploitation.

Her understanding of duty transcended personal boundaries — she regarded her subjects as a family and governance as a moral trust. This principle of selfless duty transformed her administration into one of the most stable and prosperous of the eighteenth century.

### **GOOD GOVERNANCE- A PEOPLE-CENTRIC MODEL**

Ahilyabai Holkar's administration anticipated the principles of modern good governance, emphasizing transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability. She established a decentralized political system where local officers were empowered to resolve community issues efficiently.

Infrastructure development was central to her reign. She built roads, wells, forts, temples, and dharamshalas across her kingdom. Her projects not only improved economic connectivity but also symbolized service to humanity (seva). Through irrigation works and market regulation, she strengthened agricultural output and trade. Ahilyabai also encouraged education, artisanship, and women's participation in economic life. Her initiatives contributed to the flourishing of Maheshwar, which became a vibrant center of handloom weaving and cultural innovation.

Her governance reflected participatory values— listening to her citizens, maintaining administrative transparency, and enforcing justice without discrimination. In today's political context, Ahilyabai's methods resonate strongly with modern democratic ideals of citizen welfare and moral accountability.

### **AHILYABAI'S SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL VISION WITH FEMININE LEADERSHIP**

Ahilyabai Holkar's governance was shaped by deep spirituality. Influenced by saints of the Bhakti movement, she viewed public administration as a form of divine service. Her devotion to Lord Shiva and the Narmada River inspired a cultural revival in Malwa. She patronized poets, artisans, and philosophers, turning Maheshwar into a hub of creativity and faith. The temples she built were not merely religious monuments but centers of education, art, and social unity. In an age dominated by

male rulers, Ahilyabai Holkar redefined leadership through empathy and discipline. She demonstrated that strength and compassion could coexist, creating a governance model rooted in moral courage.

Her personal resilience — ruling after immense personal loss — reflected her determination and emotional intelligence. She actively supported women's social and economic participation, ensuring they received property rights and safety. Her leadership broke patriarchal barriers, establishing her as one of the earliest examples of gender-inclusive governance in India. Her rule proved that effective administration is guided not by force but by righteousness and emotional wisdom. The blending of spirituality with political realism made her governance unique — moral values were not abstract ideals but living principles integrated into everyday statecraft. Her reign stands as proof that spirituality and governance can coexist harmoniously.

### **LEGACY AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE**

Ahilyabai Holkar's leadership continues to inspire contemporary ideas of ethical politics and women's empowerment. Her reign resonates with Gandhian ideals of sarvodaya (welfare of all) and aligns with modern frameworks of sustainable and transparent governance.

Her contributions to social welfare, cultural preservation, and administrative reform demonstrate that moral governance is not a relic of the past but a timeless necessity. Numerous institutions and awards in India commemorate her legacy, affirming her status as a guiding light in public ethics and leadership studies. Ahilyabai remains a model for administrators and reformers who seek to combine compassion with integrity in public life.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Ahilyabai Holkar's reign was living a manifestation of Dharma, Duty and Good Governance. Her ethical vision transformed administration into a sacred duty, integrating spirituality with statecraft. She exemplified how leadership grounded in compassion, justice, and services can foster peace and prosperity. In an age often dominated by power struggles, her rule stands as a moral beacon—reminding future generations that the true purpose of governance is to serve humanity. Her administrative and moral philosophies demonstrate that effective leadership arises from ethical conviction and selfless services. In a modern context characterized by bureaucratic and moral challenges, Ahilyabai's life offers a timeless paradigm of governance rooted in justice, compassion and righteousness.

Her example transcends history—offering lessons for modern administrators, politicians, and social leaders. In an era often clouded by corruption and inequity, Ahilyabai's legacy reminds us that ethical

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conviction and public service remain the truest measures of leadership and endures through the institutions, monuments and social reforms she initiated, as well as through her symbolic role as a moral example in Indian Political thought.

### **DECLARATION REGARDING USE OF GENERATIVE AI**

**Ishika L. Peswani**, hereby declare that the present research paper titled “*Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar: A Symbol of Dharma, Duty, and Good Governance*” is an original work carried out by me. Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used only for language refinement, grammatical correction, and structural clarity, under my direct supervision and control.

The core ideas, arguments, interpretations, data analysis, and conclusions presented in this paper are entirely my own. AI tools were not used for data generation, fabrication of sources, or original intellectual content. All sources consulted have been properly acknowledged and cited following academic norms.

I take full responsibility for the authenticity, accuracy, and originality of this work and affirm that it does not violate any ethical standards of research or publication.

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**Inclusive and Grassroots Governance: Revisiting Ahilyabai Holkar's Policies on Caste,  
Religion, Gender, and People's Welfare**

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**Abstract:**

*This research paper focuses on the governance of Ahilyabai Holkar in eighteenth-century India as a great example of citizen-friendly administration. Instead of repeating common writings that focus mainly on her religious works and personal goodness, this paper looks closely at her real administrative practices. It analyses how she reduced caste discrimination, respected different religions, supported women, and worked for the welfare of common people. The study uses historical and qualitative methods and analyses historical records, folk stories, and modern studies to understand her governance. Special attention is given to gender justice and people's participation in governance, where local communities had a role in decision-making. Although Ahilyabai is widely respected in popular memory, her welfare-based and inclusive governance has not been studied in detail in academic research. This paper reflects that her rule was based on moral and ethical values, shared responsibility, and concern for people's everyday needs. Her model of governance offers valuable lessons for today's democratic systems that aim for social equality, gender justice, religious harmony, and people-focused welfare.*

**Keywords:** *Ahilyabai Holkar, inclusive governance, caste and gender, welfare schemes, grassroots leadership, ethical administration.*

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**Introduction:**

Ahilyabai Holkar is one of the most remarkable rulers in Indian history. Her governance was based on kindness, justice, fairness, and strong moral values. At a time when women were rarely allowed to rule, she governed the Malwa region with wisdom and care, turning it into a land of peace and stability. Her rule was not only about maintaining power but about improving the lives of ordinary people. She worked to support poor communities, reduce social inequality, and encourage harmony among different religious groups.

During a period marked by caste discrimination, social injustice, and political uncertainty, Ahilyabai placed people's welfare above royal comfort. She ruled not as a distant monarch but as a protector of society. Her administration was known for fairness, easy access to justice, and ethical conduct. This

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study focuses on her inclusive approach to governance, especially her efforts to address caste discrimination, respect religious diversity, support women, and involve local people in administration through welfare schemes and community participation. This paper argues that Ahilyabai Holkar's rule offers a meaningful historical example of ethical and inclusive governance. Her leadership shows how strong moral values, when applied through practical policies, can improve social welfare and public trust. By revisiting her policies, this study explains how her administration promoted social unity and justice and why her people-centered governance is still relevant today.

**Literature Review:** Many historical writings praise Ahilyabai Holkar as a just ruler, a caring leader, and a cultural symbol. Biographies such as those written by M. S. Naravane describe her life, character, and contributions to temples, rest houses, water tanks, and pilgrimage centres. These works highlight her religious devotion and charity but often give less attention to her administrative reforms. Folk songs and oral traditions remember her as "Lokmata," a motherly figure who protected her people from injustice. While these stories show her close connection with society, they usually do not explain her governance policies in detail. Some historians recognise her fairness and ethical decision-making, but there is still limited discussion on how she addressed caste issues, women's welfare, and religious tolerance through administration. Studies on Indian history often overlook women rulers as serious administrators and focus mainly on their cultural or religious contributions. As a result, Ahilyabai's inclusive governance, local decision-making practices, and welfare systems remain underexplored. Recent research in women's studies has begun to question this neglect, but detailed analysis of her governance structure is still rare. This paper builds on existing research but goes further by studying her rule as a well-organised, ethical, and people-focused system.

**Research Gap:** Although Ahilyabai Holkar is widely admired for her moral leadership and religious contributions, there is very less academic work that studies her governance as an inclusive and grassroots system. Most existing studies describe her as a kind and benevolent ruler but do not clearly explain how her policies worked against caste discrimination, supported women, respected all religions, or involved common people in administration. Her welfare measures and local justice systems are often mentioned only briefly. This study fills that gap by closely examining her governance practices as a structured model of people-centered, ethical, and inclusive administration.

**Objectives of the Study:** The main objective of this research is to understand how Ahilyabai Holkar practiced inclusive governance in her administration. The study aims to examine her policies related to caste equality, religious harmony, gender justice, and public welfare. It also seeks to analyse her grassroots leadership, where local people were encouraged to participate in decision-making and benefit directly from welfare schemes and accessible justice.

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**Research Methodology:** This study follows a historical and qualitative research method. It is based on the close reading of historical records, biographies, folk narratives, and scholarly writings related to Ahilyabai Holkar's life and rule. The study does not use numerical data. Instead, it uses descriptive and interpretive analysis to explain her governance style and ethical values. The focus is on understanding the social and cultural background of her policies and their impact on society. The study is guided by the idea of inclusive and grassroots governance, which values moral leadership, people's participation, and welfare-based administration. This approach helps in understanding how Ahilyabai reduced social inequalities, supported marginalised groups, and made governance more humane and fairer.

**Methods and Materials:** The materials used in this study include historical books, biographies, oral traditions, research articles, and cultural accounts related to Ahilyabai Holkar. Textual analysis and historical context are used to understand her administrative decisions and their effects on society. These sources help in presenting a clear picture of her governance and its long-term value.

**Results of the Study:** The study shows that Ahilyabai Holkar developed a system of governance based on fairness, moral responsibility, and public welfare. Her administration worked against caste discrimination and ensured that justice was given without bias. She promoted harmony among different religious communities and treated all subjects with respect. Her governance supported widows and women by offering economic help and encouraging them to take part in productive work. She introduced local systems for resolving disputes so that people could access justice easily. Farmers, traders, and labourers benefited from her welfare measures, which improved daily life. Her rule clearly reflected the idea that a ruler exists to serve the people, not to control them.

**Discussion:** Ahilyabai Holkar's administration stands as a rare example of inclusive and people-focused governance in pre-modern India. Her policies challenged social discrimination and promoted dignity for all sections of society. She did not favour any particular caste or class and ensured that welfare and justice reached even the poorest people. She gave special importance to women's education and believed that women should not be confined only to household duties. Women were encouraged to learn religious texts, music, arts, and handicrafts. These skills helped them gain confidence and financial independence. Ahilyabai strongly believed that education should be open to everyone, regardless of caste, class, or gender. Schools were established to teach subjects such as literature, mathematics, and basic sciences.

Her religious policy promoted harmony. While she supported Hindu religious activities, her administration remained fair to people of all faiths. Welfare works such as wells, roads, rest houses,

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irrigation facilities, and community buildings improved the quality of life for ordinary people. Her system of decentralised governance allowed local leaders to take part in administration, making governance more responsive and participatory.

**Implications of the Study:** This study shows that Ahilyabai Holkar's governance offers valuable lessons for the present day. Her approach highlights the importance of caste-free administration, gender equality, and ethical leadership. Her welfare-focused policies show that governance should place people's needs at the centre. Her rule proves that kindness, justice, and moral values can guide effective administration. Modern leaders, educators, and policymakers can learn from her example to build more inclusive and humane systems. Ahilyabai's support for education, widows, public welfare, and environmental care reflects a deep sense of social responsibility. Her legacy reminds us that true leadership lies in service to humanity rather than the pursuit of power.

**Declaration Regarding GenAI Use:** This paper was prepared with the support of GenAI tools for language refinement and clarity. All ideas, interpretations, and arguments are original and have been carefully reviewed and approved by the author.

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## Queen of Justice: Ahilyabai Holkar and the Evolution of Women in Governance

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795), the revered queen of the Malwa Kingdom, stands as a paragon of enlightened and ethical governance in 18th-century India. Rising to power after the death of her husband Khanderao Holkar and father-in-law Malhar Rao Holkar, she transformed Indore into a center of peace, prosperity, and justice. Known as the “Queen of Justice,” Ahilyabai established a judicial system grounded in equity, accessibility, and compassion, ensuring fair treatment irrespective of caste, class, or gender. Her administrative acumen extended beyond law and order—she introduced reforms in taxation, trade, and agriculture, and prioritized welfare programs that uplifted farmers, widows, and artisans. A devout yet progressive ruler, she commissioned the reconstruction and preservation of numerous temples, ghats, and pilgrimage sites across India, including Kashi, Somnath, and Gaya, reflecting her vision of cultural unity and religious tolerance. Her governance model balanced moral integrity with pragmatic leadership, setting a precedent for ethical statecraft in pre-modern India. Ahilyabai’s reign not only strengthened the socio-economic fabric of Malwa but also expanded the scope of women’s leadership in Indian polity. Through her justice-driven rule and people-centric reforms, she redefined the role of women in governance, leaving a lasting legacy of compassion, courage, and righteousness that continues to inspire modern ideals of gender equality and good governance.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Indian history has traditionally been dominated by male rulers, warriors, and administrators, but within this narrative exist exceptional women who reshaped the socio-political landscape through wisdom and moral strength. Among them, **Ahilyabai Holkar**, the queen of Malwa, stands as a luminous example of justice-driven governance and compassionate leadership. Her rule, extending from 1767 to 1795, marked a rare period of peace, prosperity, and ethical administration in an era otherwise characterized by political instability following the decline of the Mughal Empire (Malcolm, 1832).

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Ahilyabai's leadership challenges the traditional understanding of power in monarchy. Unlike many rulers of her time who relied on military conquest to assert authority, she focused on governance grounded in fairness, equity, and compassion. Her leadership philosophy rested on the belief that the ruler's primary duty was the welfare (Lok Kalyan) of her subjects, reflecting a deep integration of moral principles and administrative intelligence (Nehru, 1946).

Modern historians regard her as a "Philosopher Queen" (Keay, 2000), emphasizing her unique combination of intellectual rigor and spiritual insight. She was both pragmatic and devout, a ruler who merged ethics with efficiency. This paper explores Ahilyabai Holkar's life and leadership through the lenses of justice, welfare, gender inclusivity, and historical impact. It contextualizes her governance within the broader discourse of Indian leadership traditions and argues that her legacy anticipates modern ideals of participatory, transparent, and gender-inclusive governance.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Born in **1725** in the village of **Chaundi** in Maharashtra, Ahilyabai was the daughter of Mankoji Shinde, a humble Patil (village headman). Her early life was shaped by simplicity, moral discipline, and education—rare privileges for women in her era. Her destiny changed when Malhar Rao Holkar, a distinguished general in the Maratha army, noticed her intelligence and piety during a temple visit. Impressed, he arranged her marriage to his son, Khanderao Holkar (Malcolm, 1832).

Tragedy struck when Khanderao was killed in battle in 1754. Despite immense personal grief, Ahilyabai refused to commit sati, a decision that defied rigid social customs. With the encouragement of her father-in-law, she continued to participate in state affairs, gaining administrative experience. When Malhar Rao died in 1766, Ahilyabai assumed full control of the Malwa state, supported by her loyal military commander, Tukoji Rao Holkar.

Her accession to power was unprecedented. In an age when female rulers were rare, Ahilyabai's rise was met with skepticism from the patriarchal nobility. However, through her humility, intellect, and commitment to justice, she quickly won the confidence of her subjects and neighboring states.

Ahilyabai chose **Maheshwar** on the banks of the Narmada River as her capital, transforming it into a flourishing center of culture, art, and trade. Under her leadership, Malwa enjoyed internal peace and economic revival. She built roads, ghats, rest houses, and temples, not only in her own dominion but across India—from **Kashi Vishwanath Temple** in Varanasi to **Somnath Temple** in Gujarat and **Gaya** in Bihar (Keay, 2000). These acts symbolized her commitment to both material development and spiritual unity.

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Her rule lasted nearly three decades, during which she established a model of governance that integrated efficiency, moral discipline, and welfare orientation—an approach later praised by historians such as Baillie (1849), Sarkar (1928), and Zelliott (1992).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarship on Ahilyabai Holkar encompasses historical documentation, biographical interpretation, and feminist analysis. The earliest and most detailed colonial account is by **Sir John Malcolm (1832)** in *A Memoir of Central India*, which provides firsthand descriptions of her administrative system, justice policies, and personal conduct. Malcolm's portrayal emphasizes her impartiality, her regular engagement with citizens, and her unyielding commitment to fairness.

**Baillie (1849)** and **Sarkar (1928)** similarly recognize her as a ruler whose authority rested on moral conviction rather than military coercion. **Jawaharlal Nehru (1946)** in *The Discovery of India* situates Ahilyabai among India's "ideal rulers," describing her governance as a manifestation of India's ancient ethical and spiritual traditions.

Modern interpretations deepen this understanding. **John Keay (2000)** labels her the "Philosopher Queen," highlighting the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of her rule. Keay argues that Ahilyabai's leadership combined religious devotion with rational governance—qualities rarely united in monarchical contexts.

**Arvind Javlekar's (2002)** *Lokmata Ahilyabai* and **Vijaya Jahagirdar's** *Karmayogini* offer cultural and feminist perspectives, depicting her as a saintly yet practical ruler whose devotion to duty epitomized the Indian ideal of Karma Yoga. **Eleanor Zelliott (1992)** examines her inclusive governance, particularly her fair treatment of marginalized communities, suggesting that her reign advanced early forms of social justice.

Academic contributions by **M.V. Kibe (1939)** and **N.N. Nagrale (1979)** add analytical depth, exploring her economic reforms, temple restoration projects, and administrative decentralization. Together, these works portray Ahilyabai as both a moral and administrative reformer, whose leadership continues to inspire discussions on ethical governance and gender equality in political leadership.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a **qualitative research approach**, employing **secondary data analysis** from historical texts, biographical accounts, and academic articles. The method involves interpretative and

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comparative analysis of both colonial and postcolonial sources to understand Ahilyabai Holkar's governance model.

The study draws primarily on the works of **Malcolm (1832)**, **Keay (2000)**, **Nehru (1946)**, **Zelliot (1992)**, and others, juxtaposing their perspectives to reconstruct an accurate and multidimensional understanding of her reign. The data interpretation emphasizes her administrative ethics, justice system, welfare initiatives, and their relevance to gender and governance studies.

The research assumes that historical leadership, when examined through contemporary theoretical frameworks, can reveal enduring principles applicable to modern governance. The analysis, therefore, focuses not only on factual reconstruction but also on philosophical interpretation—positioning Ahilyabai's governance as a prototype of ethical and gender-inclusive leadership.

### **AHILYABAI'S JUSTICE SYSTEM**

Ahilyabai Holkar's justice system was the cornerstone of her administration. She was renowned for her **daily public hearings (Darbar)**, where she personally addressed grievances, ensuring immediate redressal regardless of the complainant's caste or social standing (Malcolm, 1832; Sharma, 2018).

Her judicial philosophy rested on three core principles: **transparency**, **impartiality**, and **compassion**. She established an administrative hierarchy that included ministers, local heads, and judges, but ultimate authority in critical matters lay with her. Unlike many monarchs who distanced themselves from legal processes, Ahilyabai viewed justice as a sacred duty.

She abolished corrupt practices, insisting that all officials adhere to moral integrity. Cases of extortion or discrimination were met with severe punishment. Importantly, her judicial framework incorporated elements of restorative justice. Rather than relying solely on punitive measures, Ahilyabai emphasized reconciliation, moral correction, and community harmony (Zelliot, 1992).

Her courts were open to women and lower-caste individuals, an exceptional practice in 18th-century India. By extending legal access to marginalized groups, she redefined justice as a universal right rather than a privilege of the elite. Her famous statement—“A ruler's dharma is to protect the weak and to ensure fairness for all”—captures her egalitarian vision.

Ahilyabai's justice system thus anticipated many modern democratic ideals: transparency, accountability, and equal access to justice. Through these principles, she demonstrated that a moral foundation, rather than authoritarian control, is essential for effective governance.

### **WOMEN IN GOVERNANCE**

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Ahilyabai Holkar's reign represents a landmark in women's political history. At a time when female rulers were exceptions, she emerged as a transformative figure who balanced traditional values with progressive governance. Her leadership directly challenged patriarchal assumptions about women's capacity for public administration and political authority (Besant, n.d.).

Ahilyabai did not merely occupy the throne as a symbolic monarch; she actively reshaped administrative and social institutions. Her governance encouraged the participation of women in social welfare, education, and community work. She established schools and charitable homes for widows, promoted vocational training for women artisans, and supported female economic independence through grants and pensions (Jahagirdar, Karmayogini).

She maintained humility and spiritual discipline, often referring to herself as a servant of the people rather than a sovereign. This moral posture, combined with effective decision-making, allowed her to exercise authority without provoking patriarchal backlash.

Ahilyabai's reign also contributed to redefining feminine leadership. She embodied Shakti (strength) and Karuna (compassion), qualities often dichotomized in political discourse. By harmonizing them, she set a precedent for holistic leadership. Her life demonstrated that effective governance need not be rooted in aggression or control but can thrive on empathy, justice, and service.

Her example remains relevant for modern discussions on **gender and leadership**, illustrating that inclusive governance benefits from the moral and emotional intelligence traditionally undervalued in patriarchal systems.

## DISCUSSION

Ahilyabai Holkar's leadership offers profound insights into the nature of ethical and inclusive governance. Her rule challenges the Machiavellian conception of power as domination, replacing it with an ideal of power as moral responsibility. Her authority derived from virtue rather than coercion—a principle that modern democratic systems still strive to achieve.

Ahilyabai's **justice-oriented leadership** demonstrated that administrative efficiency and moral integrity can coexist. Her Darbar system prefigured participatory governance models, where rulers were directly accountable to their citizens (Sharma, 2018). Her insistence on hearing grievances personally reflected transparency and accessibility—values that remain central to modern public administration.

Economically, her reign was marked by fiscal prudence and public investment. She reduced unnecessary taxation, improved trade routes, and ensured fair market practices. The resulting

prosperity of Malwa under her rule is well-documented by both colonial and Indian historians (Malcolm, 1832; Kibe, 1939).

Culturally, Ahilyabai saw architecture as both a spiritual and civic enterprise. Her temple restorations were not merely religious acts but instruments of cultural reconstruction. By rebuilding sacred sites destroyed in earlier invasions, she revived India's collective identity and ensured continuity of tradition.

Philosophically, her leadership embodied the principles of Rajadharma—the ruler's moral obligation to act in accordance with righteousness and truth. Her governance style resonates with Gandhian ethics, emphasizing Sarvodaya (welfare of all) and Ahimsa (non-violence). Nehru (1946) observed that her rule exemplified India's timeless synthesis of spirituality and politics.

Ahilyabai's leadership also reflects what modern feminist theorists term "transformational leadership"—leadership that motivates and empowers rather than controls. By empowering her subjects, protecting the weak, and upholding justice, she transformed Malwa into a model state of peace and prosperity.

Her governance offers lessons for contemporary societies: that ethical leadership, grounded in compassion and fairness, transcends gender, religion, and time. Ahilyabai's vision continues to inspire scholars, administrators, and activists as an enduring symbol of integrity and humanity in governance.

## **CONCLUSION**

Ahilyabai Holkar's reign stands as a monumental testament to the power of moral leadership and justice-centered governance. Revered as the "Queen of Justice," she demonstrated that true authority stems from ethical conviction, not coercion. Her administration was transparent, efficient, and deeply compassionate—a rare synthesis in monarchical systems.

Her daily darbars exemplified participatory governance, ensuring that justice was swift and accessible to all. Her welfare programs uplifted women, peasants, and artisans, while her cultural projects revived India's spiritual and artistic heritage. Ahilyabai's life illustrates that leadership rooted in empathy and integrity can create enduring peace and prosperity.

She redefined the boundaries of gender and power, showing that women's leadership can be transformative and deeply humane. Her principles of Lok Kalyan (public welfare) and Nyaya (justice) resonate today as foundational ideals of good governance.

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In an era still grappling with corruption, inequality, and moral decline in leadership, Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy offers a timeless lesson: that compassion, fairness, and ethical responsibility are the highest forms of political strength. Her governance was not merely a chapter in Maratha history—it was a vision of how justice and humanity can coexist in leadership, a model as relevant in the 21st century as it was in the 18th.

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Although centered on dalit movements, zelliot's work helps analyze ahilyabai's inclusive governance, especially her compassion toward marginalized groups

## Lokmata as Educator: Justice, Gender, and Governance in Teacher Education

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the idea of “Lokmata” as an educator and how it can inspire justice, gender equality, and better governance in teacher education. The concept of Lokmata, meaning “Mother of the People,” represents care, wisdom, and inclusiveness, which are essential in shaping future teachers. By seeing education through this lens, teacher education programs can promote social justice by encouraging teachers to understand and support all students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. It can also help address gender issues by highlighting the importance of respect, empathy, and equal opportunities for all genders in classrooms and educational institutions. Moreover, adopting the Lokmata perspective can improve governance in teacher education by promoting ethical leadership, accountability, and community participation. This approach encourages teacher educators and policymakers to value local knowledge, cultural heritage, and democratic practices, making teacher education more relevant and responsive to society's needs. In this way, the Lokmata as an educator becomes a guiding force for creating an education system that is just, gender-sensitive, and well-governed. Overall, the paper argues that by integrating the values and vision of Lokmata into teacher education, we can build a more inclusive, fair, and caring educational environment for both teachers and learners.*

**Keywords:** Lokmata, teacher education, justice, gender equality, governance, inclusiveness, ethical leadership.

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### **1. Introduction**

The history of education in India is deeply intertwined with its traditions of governance, spirituality, and social reform. Unlike modern times where schools and universities serve as the main sites of learning, in pre-modern India, rulers and community leaders often played the role of educators through example, leadership, and public service. Among these leaders, Rajmata Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795) occupies a unique place in Indian history. She is remembered not only as a wise and capable ruler of the Malwa kingdom but also as *Lokmata* – the “mother of the people” – whose governance was rooted in justice, compassion, and inclusivity (Chopra, 2018). While her contributions are usually framed within the boundaries of administration and public works, her legacy

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carries valuable lessons for the field of teacher education, particularly in the areas of justice, gender sensitivity, and governance.

The life of Ahilyabai Holkar is extraordinary in many respects. Born in the small village of Chondi in present-day Maharashtra, Ahilyabai was not from a royal background. She was married into the Holkar dynasty and became queen after the tragic deaths of her husband Khanderao Holkar and her son Male Rao Holkar. At a time when women's participation in politics and governance was minimal, Ahilyabai overcame social, political, and cultural barriers to establish herself as one of the most effective rulers of her time (Deshpande, 2020). Her rise to power was itself an act of educational significance – it demonstrated to society that leadership ability and wisdom were not restricted to men or to those born in royal families.

Ahilyabai's reign was marked by a rare balance of justice, spiritual depth, and administrative efficiency. She personally heard the grievances of her subjects and was known for delivering justice impartially, regardless of caste, gender, or class distinctions (Jain, 2019). She initiated numerous welfare projects including the construction of roads, wells, dharamshalas (rest houses), and temples across India, earning her a reputation as a *philosopher-queen* (Kale, 2020). Beyond material welfare, she also promoted social reform, encouraged arts and literature, and supported religious institutions of different faiths. Her inclusive approach reflected a governance model that combined pragmatism with moral responsibility.

When seen through the lens of teacher education, Ahilyabai's legacy becomes even more significant. Education is not limited to the transmission of knowledge; it also involves the cultivation of values, attitudes, and leadership qualities in future generations (Gay, 2018). Teacher education, in particular, has the responsibility to prepare educators who can act as moral leaders, gender-sensitive facilitators, and community-oriented professionals. Ahilyabai's life provides living examples of these qualities. Her sense of justice resonates with the ethical foundations of teaching, her role as a female leader in a patriarchal society parallels the struggles for gender equality in education, and her participatory governance style mirrors democratic and inclusive classroom practices (Fischer, 2012).

Moreover, Ahilyabai's reign exemplifies the Indian tradition of integrating education with life values. Modern teacher education often struggles with bridging the gap between theory and practice, between curriculum and lived experience. Ahilyabai's leadership offers a model where governance, spirituality, and public service functioned together, teaching society not through textbooks but through lived action. She represents the concept of an "educator by example" – someone whose actions themselves serve as a curriculum in values and social responsibility (Sharma, 2021).

Globally, there is a growing emphasis on transformative education, where teachers are expected to be more than content-deliverers. Instead, they are called to become leaders, change agents, and ethical role models (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Ahilyabai Holkar's governance aligns perfectly with this philosophy. She transformed her kingdom not just through laws but through value-driven leadership, ensuring that citizens internalized principles of fairness, service, and compassion. In this sense, her leadership style provides an indigenous framework for transformative pedagogy in Indian teacher education.

Another key dimension of her legacy is her contribution to gender justice. Ahilyabai's reign itself was an act of defiance against patriarchy. By proving that a woman could govern with competence and moral authority, she opened intellectual and symbolic spaces for women's participation in public life. She protected widows, encouraged women poets, and appointed female officials to responsible posts (Kulkarni, 2017). For teacher education, this translates into a powerful narrative: women can and must occupy leadership positions, and education must actively challenge gender stereotypes. In classrooms, this means training teachers to recognize and dismantle hidden biases that prevent girls from achieving their full potential.

Ahilyabai's governance also emphasized participatory decision-making, which aligns with modern educational principles of student voice, dialogue, and collaboration. She regularly consulted councils of elders, village leaders, and representatives of different social groups before making policies (Sharma, 2021). This participatory style is strikingly similar to what progressive education theorists like Dewey and Paulo Freire emphasized – that education must be democratic, dialogical, and rooted in community life. For teacher education, this provides a local and historical example of how collective decision-making can empower communities and enrich learning environments.

Her deep spirituality is another important educational resource. Unlike rulers who confined spirituality to personal rituals, Ahilyabai linked it with social service and moral responsibility (Chopra, 2018). She built temples not merely for religious devotion but as community spaces that united people and fostered cultural continuity. In teacher education, this aspect of her legacy aligns with value education, which encourages teachers to nurture empathy, compassion, and respect for diversity among students (Gay, 2018). Spirituality, in her governance, was not divisive but integrative – a lesson that modern multicultural classrooms can benefit from.

The relevance of Ahilyabai's legacy is particularly urgent today, as India strives to achieve the goals of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education (UNESCO, 2015). Teacher education is central to this mission, and drawing on cultural-historical role

models like Ahilyabai can make education more rooted, relevant, and inspiring. By showing how justice, gender equality, and participatory governance were practiced centuries ago in Indian society, her story bridges history with the present, and local traditions with global goals.

Thus, this paper situates Ahilyabai Holkar as not only a ruler but also an educator for her people. It argues that her model of justice, gender inclusivity, and governance can inform and strengthen teacher education in India. By analyzing her legacy through the frameworks of ethical pedagogy, feminist theory, and participatory learning, this research seeks to demonstrate how her example can inspire future teachers to become ethical leaders, gender advocates, and community builders.

In sum, Ahilyabai Holkar's life challenges the notion that education only occurs within classrooms. Her leadership shows that education can be embedded in governance, justice, and spiritual values, and that rulers, teachers, and citizens alike participate in shaping the moral and cultural fabric of society. As India reforms its education system under the National Education Policy (NEP 2020), revisiting the legacies of leaders like Ahilyabai can provide culturally grounded resources to prepare teachers for the 21st century – teachers who, like her, lead not only with knowledge but also with compassion, fairness, and vision.

## **2. Historical Background**

Rajmata Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795) occupies a distinguished place in Indian history as one of the most enlightened rulers of the eighteenth century. Born in the village of Chondi in present-day Maharashtra, Ahilyabai came from a modest Deshmukh family. Her early life was shaped by values of discipline, devotion, and social responsibility. According to historical accounts, her intelligence and moral disposition were noticed by Malhar Rao Holkar, the founder of the Holkar dynasty, who later arranged her marriage to his son, Khanderao Holkar. This marked the beginning of her association with the political and administrative life of the Maratha confederacy (Deshpande, 2018).

The turning point in Ahilyabai Holkar's life came with the tragic death of her husband Khanderao in 1754 during a military campaign. Widowed at a young age, Ahilyabai faced intense personal grief along with societal pressures typical of a patriarchal system. Later, the death of her father-in-law Malhar Rao Holkar in 1766 further destabilized the kingdom of Malwa. Despite opposition from sections of the nobility, Ahilyabai assumed the reins of administration in 1767, supported by the Peshwa, Madhavrao I. Her accession itself was a historic moment, as it challenged prevailing gender norms and established a woman as a sovereign ruler in an era dominated by male authority (Kulkarni, 1996).

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Ahilyabai Holkar ruled Malwa from her capital at Maheshwar for nearly three decades. Her administration was characterized by peace, prosperity, and public welfare. She maintained a strong but compassionate system of governance, ensuring justice, transparency, and accountability. Unlike many contemporary rulers who focused on territorial expansion, Ahilyabai emphasized internal development, administrative efficiency, and social harmony. She held daily public audiences where citizens could present grievances directly, reflecting her commitment to accessible and participatory governance (Altekar, 1956).

A significant aspect of her rule was her dedication to religious tolerance and spiritual patronage. Ahilyabai sponsored the reconstruction and maintenance of temples, ghats, wells, and dharamshalas across India, including prominent sites such as Kashi, Somnath, Dwarka, and Rameswaram. These initiatives were not merely religious acts but served broader social and educational purposes by providing spaces for learning, community interaction, and cultural continuity. Her spirituality was inclusive and humane, promoting harmony among diverse religious communities (Deshpande, 2018).

Ahilyabai Holkar's reign also stands out for its ethical orientation and social sensitivity. She upheld the dignity of women and ensured protection for vulnerable sections of society. Her policies reflected a deep sense of justice and compassion, reinforcing her image as *Lokmata*, a ruler who governed as a caring guardian of her people. Historians widely acknowledge that under her leadership, Malwa experienced stability and moral governance rarely seen during a period marked by political turbulence in India (Kulkarni, 1996).

Thus, the historical background of Rajmata Ahilyabai Holkar reveals a ruler whose life and administration transcended conventional political authority. Her governance became a living lesson in justice, ethical leadership, and social responsibility. This historical context forms a strong foundation for examining her relevance as an educational model in contemporary teacher education.

### **3.Literature Review**

Several scholars have examined Ahilyabai Holkar's governance. Jain (2019) highlights her judicial fairness, emphasizing her willingness to rule against elites to protect the marginalized. Deshpande (2020) studies her leadership as a case of women's empowerment in a patriarchal polity, showing how she opened space for female participation in governance. Kale (2020) frames her administration as a model of public accountability and service, while Chopra (2018) describes her as a philosopher queen who combined spirituality with practical governance.

In education research, parallels emerge. Gay (2018) emphasizes culturally responsive pedagogy, while Zehr (2015) introduces restorative justice principles in learning environments. These frameworks resonate with Ahilyabai's inclusive and empathetic style of governance. Similarly, feminist pedagogy, which emphasizes women's agency and cultural rooting (Kumar, 2016), finds relevance in her gender-sensitive leadership.

Despite growing scholarship, little work directly connects Ahilyabai's legacy with teacher education. This paper fills that gap by reinterpreting her values as resources for modern pedagogy.

### **Research Gaps:**

1. Existing studies largely focus on Ahilyabai Holkar's political and historical contributions, with minimal exploration of her relevance to teacher education and pedagogy (Deshpande, 2018).
2. There is a significant lack of empirical research examining Ahilyabai Holkar's governance philosophy as a framework for value-based teacher education (Kumar, 2014).
3. Indigenous women leaders like Ahilyabai Holkar remain underrepresented in educational leadership and gender-sensitive pedagogy literature (Kulkarni, 1996; Chakravarti, 2018).
4. Current educational research seldom integrates Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy with contemporary policy frameworks such as the National Education Policy 2020 (Government of India, 2020).
5. There is an absence of structured curriculum models demonstrating the application of Ahilyabai Holkar's philosophy in teacher education programmes (NCERT, 2005).

### **4. Lokmata as an Educator by Example**

Although Ahilyabai did not formally open teacher training colleges, her leadership offered living lessons that resonate with educational ideals even today (Sharma, 2021). Her actions taught society the values of:

- Justice: Upholding fairness and protecting the weak.
- Gender sensitivity: Creating spaces where women could participate and lead.
- Good governance: Practicing accountability and consulting the community.

In teacher education, these values match modern concepts like ethical pedagogy, gender-inclusive classrooms, and democratic school culture (Gay, 2018).

### **Justice: Teaching Fairness and Moral Courage**

One of Ahilyabai Holkar's strongest legacies is her commitment to justice. She personally listened to people's complaints and ensured that justice was delivered quickly, even against influential individuals if necessary (Jain, 2019).

For teacher education, this principle means:

- Encouraging future teachers to create fair classrooms where all students feel heard.
- Using real-life stories of Ahilyabai's decisions as case studies in ethics courses.
- Training teachers to identify and challenge hidden biases and discrimination (Zehr, 2015).

Through this lens, Ahilyabai becomes a role model of ethical leadership, showing that justice is not just about rules but about empathy and courage.

### **Gender: Women's Empowerment and Feminist Pedagogy**

Ahilyabai led during a time when women rarely held power. She not only ruled effectively but also supported women poets, saints, and scholars, and appointed women to responsible roles (Deshpande, 2020).

For teacher education today, this part of her legacy teaches:

- The importance of highlighting local female leaders to inspire students.
- Designing gender studies courses that use Indian historical figures, making lessons culturally relevant (Kumar, 2016).
- Encouraging future teachers, especially women, to take leadership roles in schools and communities.

Using Ahilyabai's life story helps trainee teachers see gender equality not as a modern import, but as part of India's own heritage.

### **Governance: Participatory Models for Teacher Education**

Ahilyabai's governance was marked by consultation. She sought advice from village councils, scholars, and religious leaders before making decisions (Sharma, 2021).

In teacher education, this inspires:

- Teaching democratic classroom management — listening to students' voices.
- Including community-based projects where trainee teachers learn from local people.

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- Developing leadership programs where future teachers practice consensus-building and dialogue (Fischer, 2012).

This participatory approach teaches future educators to see themselves not as authority figures, but as facilitators and collaborators.

### **Spirituality and Values in Education**

Ahilyabai Holkar built hundreds of temples, wells, and dharamshalas across India, showing her commitment to spirituality and community welfare (Chopra, 2018). Her spirituality was not limited to rituals but linked to service, humility, and social responsibility.

Teacher education can draw from this by:

- Integrating value education focused on compassion, honesty, and respect.
- Encouraging teachers to recognize students' cultural and spiritual backgrounds.
- Teaching future teachers to model moral behavior through small daily actions (Gay, 2018).

### **6. Bringing Ahilyabai's Legacy into Teacher Education Curriculum**

To meaningfully include Ahilyabai Holkar's values in teacher education, programs can:

Focus Area   Practical Application

Justice ⇒    Discuss real historical cases; reflective essays on fairness in classrooms.

Gender ⇒    Projects on Indian women leaders; workshops encouraging women educators.

Governance    Role-play democratic decision making; community field visits.

Spirituality    Value education modules; discussions on empathy and service to society.

This approach makes teacher education not just about methods, but about shaping teachers who live and teach these values.

### **7. Importance of Ahilyabai Holkar's Educational Philosophy**

1. **Value-Based Education** Ahilyabai Holkar's philosophy emphasized moral values such as honesty, compassion, justice, and duty, which form the foundation of holistic education.
2. **Justice-Oriented Learning** Her governance taught society the importance of fairness and equality, reinforcing justice as a core educational principle for responsible citizenship.

3. **Gender Equality and Women Empowerment** As a woman ruler, she challenged patriarchal norms and became a living lesson in gender-sensitive education and women's leadership.
4. **Education through Governance** Her administration functioned as an informal educational system where people learned civic responsibility through lived experience.
5. **Spiritual and Ethical Development** She promoted inclusive spirituality that nurtured ethical thinking, tolerance, and inner discipline rather than ritualism.
6. **Social Responsibility and Public Welfare** Ahilyabai Holkar's focus on welfare activities educated people about social service and collective well-being.
7. **Promotion of Indigenous Knowledge Systems** She preserved Indian cultural and educational traditions, aligning education with local context and heritage.
8. **Democratic and Participatory Values** Her accessibility to common people encouraged dialogue, participation, and trust—key democratic learning outcomes.
9. **Leadership Education** Her life serves as a case study in ethical leadership, decision-making, and governance for teacher education programmes.
10. **Moral Role Modelling** She educated society through personal example, demonstrating how character and conduct can be powerful teaching tools.
11. **Peaceful Conflict Resolution** Her preference for dialogue and justice over force highlights the educational value of non-violent governance.
12. **Holistic Development of Learners** Her philosophy supported intellectual, moral, spiritual, and social development—an aim central to modern education.
13. **Inclusive and Humanistic Approach** She respected diversity and human dignity, reinforcing inclusive education and social harmony.
14. **Relevance to Teacher Education** Her philosophy aligns with contemporary teacher education goals such as ethical teaching, reflective practice, and social transformation.
15. **Alignment with National Education Policy (NEP 2020)** Her values resonate with NEP 2020's emphasis on Indian knowledge systems, value education, and holistic learning.

## 6. Key Features of Her Governance as Educational Model

- Justice-oriented leadership: Fair laws and impartial administration

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- Gender equity: A woman ruler challenging patriarchal norms
  - Spiritual humanism: Respect for all faiths and social harmony
  - Public accountability: Welfare-based governance
  - Ethical decision-making: Governance rooted in moral values

These features align with modern concepts of democratic and inclusive education (NCF, 2005).

## 7. Benefits of Ahilyabai Holkar's Philosophy for Teacher Education

### 1. **Promotion of Value-Based Teacher Preparation**

Ahilyabai Holkar's emphasis on moral integrity and ethical conduct supports the inclusion of value-based education in teacher training programmes, helping future teachers develop character alongside professional skills (Altekar, 1956; NCERT, 2005).

### 2. **Development of Ethical Leadership among Teachers**

Her governance model offers a framework for ethical and responsible leadership, enabling teacher educators to prepare teachers as moral leaders within schools and communities (Deshpande, 2018).

### 3. **Strengthening Gender-Sensitive Pedagogy**

As a woman ruler who challenged patriarchal norms, Ahilyabai Holkar's life provides a powerful pedagogical example for promoting gender equity and inclusive classroom practices in teacher education (Kulkarni, 1996; Chakravarti, 2018).

### 4. **Integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems**

Her legacy aligns with the promotion of Indian knowledge traditions, encouraging teacher education curricula to contextualize learning within indigenous cultural and historical frameworks (Government of India, 2020).

### 5. **Enhancement of Social Responsibility in Teachers**

Her commitment to public welfare fosters a sense of social accountability, preparing teachers to act as agents of social change and community development (Kumar, 2014).

### 6. **Promotion of Justice-Oriented Teaching Practices**

Ahilyabai Holkar's fair and transparent governance reinforces justice as a core educational value, guiding teachers to practice fairness, equity, and ethical decision-making in classrooms (Altekar, 1956).

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**7. Encouragement of Reflective Teaching Practices**

Her life story supports reflective pedagogy, helping teacher trainees critically examine values, power, and responsibility in educational contexts (Kumar, 2014).

**8. Support for Inclusive and Democratic Education**

Her participatory governance style promotes democratic values such as dialogue and accessibility, which are essential components of inclusive teacher education programmes (NCERT, 2005).

**9. Alignment with National Education Policy (NEP 2020)**

Her philosophy resonates with NEP 2020's focus on holistic education, ethics, and culturally rooted pedagogy, strengthening policy–practice alignment in teacher education (Government of India, 2020).

**10. Use as a Case Study in Educational Leadership**

Ahilyabai Holkar's governance provides a rich case study for courses on educational administration and leadership, offering real-life examples of ethical decision-making and people-centered governance (Deshpande, 2018).

## **8. Educational Implications of Ahilyabai Holkar's Philosophy**

### **A. Educational Implications for Teachers**

#### Promotion of Ethical Teaching Practices

Teachers can model honesty, fairness, and compassion in their professional conduct, reflecting

#### Ahilyabai Pedagogical Relevance in Teacher Education

Ahilyabai Holkar's life can be integrated using:

1. Holkar's justice-oriented leadership (Altekar, 1956).

2. Development of Gender-Sensitive Pedagogy

Her life encourages teachers to adopt inclusive teaching strategies that challenge gender stereotypes and promote equality in classrooms (Kulkarni, 1996; Chakravarti, 2018).

3. Encouragement of Reflective Practice

Teachers are motivated to engage in self-reflection regarding their roles, responsibilities, and ethical decisions in education (Kumar, 2014).

4. Integration of Value Education

Her philosophy supports embedding moral and civic values across subjects rather than teaching them in isolation (NCERT, 2005).

5. Strengthening Leadership Skills

Teachers can develop leadership qualities such as accountability, service, and integrity, inspired by Ahilyabai Holkar's governance model (Deshpande, 2018).

## **B. Educational Implications for Students**

1. Holistic Personality Development

Students learn not only academic content but also values like justice, empathy, and social responsibility (NCERT, 2005).

2. Promotion of Gender Equality

Exposure to women leaders like Ahilyabai Holkar helps students develop positive attitudes toward gender equity and women's empowerment (Kulkarni, 1996).

3. Development of Moral Reasoning

Her life serves as a moral case study that enhances students' ethical thinking and decision-making skills (Kumar, 2014).

4. Civic Awareness and Responsibility

Students gain awareness of democratic values, social justice, and active citizenship (Government of India, 2020).

5. Respect for Cultural Heritage

Learning about indigenous leaders fosters pride in Indian culture and history (NCERT, 2005).

## **C. Educational Implications for Parents**

1. Strengthening Value-Oriented Parenting

Parents are encouraged to nurture values of fairness, discipline, and compassion at home (Altekar, 1956).

2. Support for Gender Equality in Education

Ahilyabai Holkar's example inspires parents to support equal educational opportunities for boys and girls (Chakravarti, 2018).

3. Collaboration with Schools

Parents are motivated to actively participate in school activities and educational decision-making (NCERT, 2005).

4. Promotion of Moral Role Modelling

Parents learn the importance of leading by example in shaping children's character (Kumar, 2014).

**D. Educational Implications for the Nation**

1. Strengthening Ethical Citizenship

Education inspired by Ahilyabai Holkar's values contributes to the formation of morally responsible and socially conscious citizens (Government of India, 2020).

2. Promotion of Gender-Just Society

Her legacy supports national efforts toward gender equality and women's leadership in all sectors (Kulkarni, 1996).

3. Integration of Indian Knowledge Systems

Incorporating her philosophy aligns education with indigenous traditions and national identity (Government of India, 2020).

4. Enhancement of Democratic Values

Justice, participation, and accountability fostered through education strengthen democratic institutions (NCERT, 2005).

5. Nation Building through Education

Value-oriented teacher education and schooling contribute to sustainable social and national development (Kumar, 2014).

**9. SUGGESTIONS**

1. Integration into Teacher Education Curriculum

Ahilyabai Holkar's life and governance philosophy should be systematically incorporated into teacher education curricula as part of value education, educational leadership, and gender studies courses (NCERT, 2005; Government of India, 2020).

2. Development of Indigenous Pedagogical Models

Teacher education institutions should develop indigenous pedagogical frameworks based on

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Ahilyabai Holkar's principles of justice, ethics, and inclusive governance to contextualize teaching-learning processes (Kumar, 2014).

3. Empirical Research in Teacher Education Contexts

Future research should employ qualitative and mixed-method approaches to examine educators' and student-teachers' perceptions of Ahilyabai Holkar as a role model for ethical and gender-sensitive teaching practices (Deshpande, 2018).

4. Gender-Inclusive Leadership Training

Training modules highlighting women-led governance models, including Ahilyabai Holkar's leadership, should be introduced to promote gender equity and leadership skills among teachers (Kulkarni, 1996; Chakravarti, 2018).

5. Alignment with National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

Educational planners should explicitly link Ahilyabai Holkar's philosophy with the objectives of NEP 2020, particularly in areas of holistic education, ethics, and Indian knowledge systems (Government of India, 2020).

6. Interdisciplinary Research and Teaching

Scholars should adopt interdisciplinary approaches combining history, education, gender studies, and ethics to broaden understanding of Ahilyabai Holkar's educational relevance (Kumar, 2014).

7. Curriculum-Based Resource Development

Textbooks, teaching modules, and digital resources focusing on Ahilyabai Holkar's educational philosophy should be developed for use in teacher education institutions (NCERT, 2005).

8. Community and Parental Engagement Studies

Further research should explore how Ahilyabai Holkar's values influence community education and parental participation in schooling, strengthening home-school partnerships (Altekar, 1956).

## 11. Conclusion

Rajmata Ahilyabai Holkar's life teaches timeless lessons in justice, inclusion, and service. For teacher education, she is not only a historical figure but a living example of ethical and inclusive leadership. Integrating her legacy into teacher education helps create teachers who see themselves as community

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leaders, champions of equity, and role models for students. In doing so, we keep alive the spirit of *Lokmata* — an educator who taught by leading with love, wisdom, and courage.

Rajmata Ahilyabai Holkar stands as a remarkable example of a leader who ruled with justice, compassion, and vision. Her legacy is not confined to political governance but extends into the realm of education by example, making her a timeless role model for teacher education. Through her fair judiciary, she exemplified the principles of ethical decision-making; through her leadership as a woman, she embodied gender empowerment; and through her participatory governance, she illustrated the importance of democratic inclusion. These values directly connect with the competencies required of teachers today — fairness, inclusivity, and the ability to nurture community participation.

Critically, while her governance was bound by the structures of her time, the essence of her philosophy transcends historical limitations. By integrating her legacy into teacher education, India can create educators who are not just instructors but also ethical leaders, gender advocates, and community builders. This aligns strongly with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and the United Nations' SDG 4, which stress inclusive and equitable education for all (UNESCO, 2015).

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## Architect of Spiritual Infrastructure: Ahilyabai Holkar's Contribution to Temple Construction and Pilgrimage Routes

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### Abstract

*Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795), the celebrated queen of the Malwa region, occupies a distinguished position in Indian history as a ruler who harmonized administrative wisdom with spiritual devotion. Her reign represents a rare confluence of political stability, economic prosperity, and religious renaissance. This paper explores Ahilyabai Holkar's extraordinary contribution as an architect of spiritual infrastructure through her systematic efforts to construct, restore, and maintain temples, ghats, and pilgrimage routes across India. At a time when many sacred sites had suffered destruction or neglect, Ahilyabai's initiatives revitalized Hindu pilgrimage networks from the Himalayas to the southern coasts. She reconstructed eminent temples such as Kashi Vishwanath in Varanasi, Somnath in Gujarat, and developed her capital Maheshwar as a center of Shaivite worship and artistic expression. Her legacy exemplifies how female leadership in the 18th century could successfully blend governance with faith-based cultural revival. Ahilyabai Holkar thus emerges not merely as a temple builder, but as a preserver of India's spiritual continuity—a monarch whose works remain enduring symbols of devotion, discipline, and nation-building through sacred architecture.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Ahilyabai Holkar, Temple Architecture, Pilgrimage Routes, Spiritual Infrastructure, Cultural Heritage, Women Leadership, Malwa.*

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### Introduction

Ahilyabai Holkar, often referred to as the 'Philosopher Queen of Malwa,' ruled from 1767 to 1795 after the death of her husband Khanderao Holkar and her father-in-law Malhar Rao Holkar. At a time when India was politically fragmented, she upheld moral governance, social justice, and spiritual welfare. Her rule demonstrated that leadership grounded in dharma (righteousness) could sustain both prosperity and peace. Ahilyabai's passion for temple construction and pilgrimage restoration was rooted in her belief that sacred architecture served as the moral backbone of society. Beyond her architectural legacy, Ahilyabai Holkar embodied the ideals of moral leadership. Known for her wisdom and devotion, she conducted daily court sessions, supported education, protected

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artists and scholars, and championed the welfare of widows and the marginalized. Her reign blended spirituality, justice, and administrative skill, making her one of India's most revered women rulers. Even today, she stands as a symbol of good governance, philanthropic leadership, and cultural stewardship.

Her temple projects were not isolated acts of devotion but part of a well-conceived policy integrating spirituality, architecture, and public welfare. By building dharamshalas (rest houses), water tanks, and roads, she ensured accessibility and comfort for pilgrims, simultaneously promoting trade and local economies. The paper further investigates the socio-cultural implications of her works—how they fostered unity among diverse communities, preserved traditional crafts, and reinforced the moral fabric of society. Using a combination of historical and descriptive methods, supported by archival records, travelogues, inscriptions, and scholarly studies, this research positions Ahilyabai as a visionary whose spiritual infrastructure shaped India's religious geography.

#### Objectives of the Study

- To examine Ahilyabai Holkar's contribution to the construction and restoration of temples and ghats.
- To analyze the socio-cultural and economic implications of her works on pilgrimage routes.
- To understand how her spiritual vision contributed to India's cultural continuity.
- To evaluate Ahilyabai's legacy as a woman ruler and patron of dharma.

#### Methodology

This research follows a historical-descriptive methodology. Primary sources such as temple inscriptions, royal decrees, and archival documents were analyzed along with secondary literature including historical texts, biographies, and journal articles. Field observations at key pilgrimage centers like Maheshwar, Kashi, and Somnath were also considered where possible. The qualitative analysis focuses on thematic connections between spiritual architecture and governance under Ahilyabai's reign.

#### Ahilyabai Holkar's Vision of Spiritual Infrastructure

Ahilyabai viewed temples not merely as places of worship but as centers of education, art, and community life. She emphasized accessibility, maintenance, and dignity of pilgrimage centers. She built numerous temples and ghats along the country's four borders, including the four holy places of

the Dham, the twelve Jyotirlingas, the Saptapriyas, and other places throughout the country, and on the banks of sacred rivers.

**A BRIEF LIST OF HER CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS IS AS FOLLOWS:**

1. Saurashtra: In 1785, Somnath Mahadev Temple was renovated and consecrated. a temple.
2. Shri Shail Mallikarjuna A Temple.
3. Omkareshwar: Renovation of the temples of Shri Mamleshwar and Trimbakeshwar, Dharamshala, pond, Chhatra and silver mask of Lord Shiva.
4. Parli Baijnath: The temple was renovated in 1784.
5. Kashi Renovation of Kashi Vishwanath Temple, nine temples including Shri Tarakeshwar, Shri Gangaji, Manikarnika Ghat, Dashashwamedh Ghat, many Dharamshala, buildings and flower gardens.
6. Trimbakeshwar: Bridge at Kushavart Ghat.
7. Ghrishneshwar Shivalaya Shrine.
8. Shri Badrinarayan; Shri Kedareshwar Temple and Shri Hari Temple, many ponds and dharamshalas, garden and hot water pond in Dev Prayag.
9. Sri Dwarka : Worship house.
10. Shri Rameshwar : Shri Ramchandra Temple, Dharamshala and well.
11. 11. Shri Jagannath Puri : Shri Ramchandra Temple, Dharamshala and Garden.
12. Ayodhya : Shri Ram Temple, Shri Chetaram Temple, Shri Bhairav Temple, Shri Nageshwar Temple, other temples, Saryu Ghat and Dharamshala.
13. Mathura: Temple, Kaliyadah and other ghats and Dharamshala.
14. Haridwar : Ghat and two huge Dharamshala.
15. Avantika (Ujjain): Shri Chintaman Ganpatiji, Janardan Temple, Shrilila Purushottam Balaji Temple, Ghats, Kunds, Stepwells and Dharamshala.
16. Chitrakoot : Pran-pratishtha of Shri Ramchandra ji and four other idols.
17. Pushkar : Ganpati Temple, Dharamshala and Flower Garden.
18. Ellora : A temple.
19. Bhusaval : A temple.
20. Puntambe : Ghats on the Godavari River.
21. Bharatpur : Temple, Dharamshala, well and pond.

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22. Nathdwara (Rajasthan): Temple, Dharamshala, well and pond.
23. Tehri (Bundelkhand): Dharamshala.
24. Burhanpur (M.P.): Ghat.
25. Berul (Karnataka): Temples of Ganapati, Pandurang, Jaleshwar, Khandoba, Tirtharaj and Agni.
26. Kurukshetra (U.P.) : Two Shiva temples and two ghats.
27. Naimisharanya (UP): Shri Mahadev Mandir, Dharamshala, Ghat and Kund.
28. Sambalgram (U.P.): Shri Lakshminarayan Temple.
29. Prayag (U.P.): Shri Vishnu Temple, Dharamshala, Fruit Garden, Ghat and Government Farm.
30. Amarkantak (M.P.) : Shri Vishweshwar Temple, Koti Tirth, Gaumukhi, Dharamshala and Kund.
31. Pandharpur (Maharashtra): Shri Ram Temple, Tulsi Bagh, Government Farm, Sabha Mandap and Dharamshala.
32. Chandy (Maharashtra): Shri Ahilyeshwar Temple and Ghat at the birthplace of Ahilyabai.
33. Jejuri (Maharashtra): Malhar Gautameshwar Temple, Vitthal Temple and a pond.
34. Saptashruna (Maharashtra): A hospice.
35. Sangamner (Maharashtra): Shri Ram Temple.
36. Kumbher (Rajasthan) : Khanderao Holkar's umbrella.
37. Pune (Maharashtra): The umbrellas of Tukoji Rao Holkar I and Prince Malhar Rao in Khadki.
38. Khavdank (Maharashtra): Holkar Bada and a well.
39. Sultanpur (Maharashtra): A temple.
40. Nashik (Maharashtra): Shri Ram Temple, Gora Mahadev Temple and a Dharamshala.
41. Giri (Maharashtra): Bhairav Temple.
42. Beed (Hyderabad): Ghat renovated.
43. Alampur: Shri Harihareshwar temple at the place where father-in-law Malharrao died, a huge chhatri in his memory and the temple of Khanderao Martand in front of it.
44. Anand Kanan : Construction of Shri Vishweshwara Temple.
45. Indore : Umbrellas, temples and ghats.
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|----------------------------------|---|
| 46. Rishikesh :                  | Some temples.   |
| 47. Kedarnath :                  | Dharamshala and pond.   |
| 48. Gangotri:                    | Four temples of Shri Vishwanath, Kedarnath,   |
| 49. Gaya :                       | Construction of Shri Vishnupad Temple and<br>Annapurna and Bhairava, six Dharamshalas.                |
| 50. Sabha                        | Mandap.   |
| 51. Changdev:                    | A temple.   |
| 52. Tarana (M.P.) :              | Shri Tilabhandeshwar Shiva Temple.  |
| 53. Trimbakeshwar (Maharashtra): | Two temples and a pond.   |
| 54. Nemawar (M.P.):              | A beautiful temple.   |
| 55. Neelkanth Mahadev:           | Shivalaya and Gaumukh.  |
| 56. Pushkar:                     | Shri Vishnu Temple, a big ghat, Dharamshala,<br>flower garden and government enclosure.               |
| 57. Bitur :                      | Ghat.   |
| 58. Burhanpur :                  | Ghat.   |
| 59. Bharatpur :                  | Temples, Dharamshala, ponds and wells.  |
| 60. Mandaleshwar :               | Shiv temple and ghat.   |
| 61. Maheshwar :                  | Many temples, ghats, umbrellas, Dharamshalas,<br>houses etc, Renovation of many temples and<br>forts. |
| 62. Sangamner:                   | Shri Ram Temple.  |
| 63. Singhpur :                   | Shiva Temple and Dharamshala.   |
| 64. Nemavar :                    | Built a beautiful temple and Dharamshala of Shri<br>Siddhanath.                                       |

A large ghat on the Narmada.

The construction projects commissioned by Lokmata Ahilyabai were not aimed at displaying grandeur, but at public welfare. Recognizing the lack of transportation and accommodation for pilgrims at that time, Lokmata commissioned the construction of numerous roads, bridges, water reservoirs, and dharamshalas across the country. These constructions reflect the humane sensibilities and strong national character of Goddess Ahilyabai.

### Discussion and Analysis

Ahilyabai Holkar's contribution to temple construction reflects her deep commitment to preserving India's religious and cultural fabric. She financed and rebuilt significant temples including the Kashi

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Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi (1780), Somnath Temple in Gujarat, and many others across Gaya, Dwarka, and Ujjain. Her works extended beyond construction—she developed pilgrimage infrastructure by building ghats, wells, rest houses, and roads to facilitate religious travel. Her capital, Maheshwar, became a spiritual hub with exquisite temples dedicated to Lord Shiva and a thriving center for art, weaving, and education. Through these endeavors, Ahilyabai promoted economic growth and religious tolerance, reinforcing the spiritual unity of India.

### **Socio-Cultural and Economic Impact**

Ahilyabai's initiatives fostered multiple dimensions of development. The temple-building projects encouraged traditional artisans and maintained local craftsmanship. Pilgrimage routes promoted inter-regional mobility and trade, contributing to cultural unity. Her governance blended spiritual values with pragmatic policies, showcasing a gender-inclusive model of leadership that empowered local communities. In doing so, Ahilyabai ensured that temples became centers of learning, charity, and art rather than mere structures of worship.

### **Conclusion**

Ahilyabai Holkar stands as a remarkable example of leadership rooted in spirituality, compassion, and vision. Her temple construction and restoration efforts redefined India's sacred geography and preserved its cultural heritage during turbulent times. Through her dedication to dharma and public welfare, she not only strengthened the Malwa kingdom but also contributed to India's collective spiritual infrastructure. Her legacy endures in the living traditions and architectural marvels that continue to inspire faith and unity.

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## Ahilyabai Holkar: A Visionary Queen and Fair Ruler

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### **Abstract:**

*Ahilyabai Holkar, an outstanding and renowned queen of India was distinguished by her sense of justice and impartial rule over Malwa Region in 18<sup>th</sup> century. She was the founder and patron of new administrative system of India. She, through her perfect, in sighting vision, changed the whole scenario which endowed the new lights of hope and betterment in her state and public. Due to her unbeatable efforts towards his nation and public welfare, she is called as “The Rajmata” of India. This research paper is an attempt to review and re-evaluate her multidimensional strategies and unique ways of reshaping society and to go through her contributions in social, political, educational, economical, philosophical and other aspects of life. The present paper will throw light on her fair and transparent leadership within the broader frame of visionary and impartial rule. Ahilyabai modelled and modified the traditional glimpses of female values of equality, empathy, legacy and care and self-identity. She is known for her unparalleled contribution to governance, social justice and cultural preservation, emphasizing how she remains a guiding light for women’s encouragement and societal transformation along with the all-round progress and development of India. The study in the present research paper will conclude Ahilyabai Holkar’s fame as an ideal visionary “motherly queen” who contributed a lot to uplift and enhance women’s condition in the society.*

**Keywords:** Ahilya bai Holkar, Administrative System, Social Justice, Women’s Upliftment, Women’s Identity, Contribution.

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### **1. Introduction**

Indian history is enriched with the valor, heroism, courage and prowess of kings, rulers, warriors’ queens and fighters among which Ahilyabai Holkar is the shining name which stands first for her sincere devotion, future insightment and women’s betterment. 18<sup>th</sup> century India is regarded as the period of political downfall, weaker socialism and reformation of cultural and arts. After the decline of Mughal Empire, The Kingdom of great Maratha arose who gave new dimensions to Indian history. It was the period when all the countries were fighting for their own establishment and searching

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for their own identity, the Queen Ahilya Bai Holkar emerged as the rising and Morning Star in the history of India. She setup not only new dimensions for Indian history but also raised the politics and social standard of India up to the new heights. Her continuous efforts are reevaluating in the present work. Praising her contribution, it was remarked for her that "The reign of Ahilyabai, of Indore in central India, lasted for thirty years. This has become almost legendary as a period during which perfect order and good government prevailed, and the people prospered. She was a very able ruler and organizer, highly respected during her lifetime, and considered as a saint by a grateful people after her death." [Jawaharlal Nehru](#). For her visionary power of enhancing the nation and condition of her people, she is called as "The epitome of religious devotion." She was highly devoted to her responsibilities. Despite different political issues, conspiracies and social obstacles she carried on her duties very courageously, wisely and patiently. She ruled the Holkar state for decades establishing peace, law and order, justice prosperity and social and public welfare work.

## 2. Public Welfare and Administration in Governance:

Ahilya bai Holkar did immense work in the field of public welfare. She had foreseen the fact that if the new strategies are not involved then the growth of the country must suffer a lot in future generations. She enforced new laws, rules and regulations to drive government more smoothly and nicely. In her reign there were less crime, and less robbery cases. There was an absence of corruption and lechery. Her subjects were satisfied, rich and wealthy. In this way she established a just, placid, peaceful and people-centric rule in Malwa Kingdom. She performed her tasks by idealizing them as the most sacred work and moral integrity. She paid equal respect for each religion and caste. She had a belief that a ruler should be the servant of the people. She honestly dedicated herself to the betterment of her public in country. Her entire administration was based on public's good welfare, religious tolerance, better governance structure and stable economy. She not only paid lot of attention to infrastructural development such as- constructing roads, wells, dams, temples, ghats, dams etc., but also restored, old, damaged monuments and historical buildings, forts, remnants etc. She was fully aware of her people's sentiments and emotions and therefore she very artistically, delicately and gently reshaped and saved the valuable heritage of India for her extraordinary efforts she it was called for her that, "Definitely no woman and no ruler are like Ahilyabai Holkar." [Nizam of Hyderabad](#). She adopted the policy of tough discipline and hard punishment. She was in the view that if there will be any kind of delay in giving justice to people, then the justice is turned into injustice. Believing in this policy, she made a new law to provide at once justice to those who are suffering from any problem. She also promoted the traditional craftwork like Maheshwari weaving craft and ensured accessibility holding public audience to resolve grievances. She, as a skilled ruler, led her armies to defend her

kingdom and even formed a special women's military unit, showcasing women's capabilities in defense and leadership roles.

### **3. Focus on Religious Works and social Harmony:**

Ahilyabai was the champion in the field of social work. Her whole life and administration is imbued with humanitarian values and moral ethics. Through her activities and work she proved that a leader's greatness lies in her compassion and care for her subjects. During her life she arranged numberless programs for the welfare of poor and needy persons. She was one of among those rulers who called the monarchy the medium of serving his people. She was not only limited to herself as a simple ruler but also established her image as an icon of a true social worker of humanity. She did extensive work on a large scale, through which social work gained momentum and recognition. She was in the view that it is the first and foremost duty of a ruler to lessen the pains and problems of his/her subjects. She did uncountable kind works for the welfare and betterment of her civilians. Some of the work which she used to do without being late was-1. Distribution of food and clothes among poor people and children.2. To give shelter and financial support to weak sections, patients, orphans and the needy.3. Special help and tax relaxation at the time of famine and disaster. She encouraged people by introducing many best policies and schemes under which deprived groups of people can benefit. She extended religious education and insisted on moral teachings. Of and on she used to arranged religious programs to preach and spread the importance of moral values people. She provided shelter and refuge to wise prophets and scholars. She respects each caste, creed and varnas. Her aim was to imbibe the sense of humanity, senses and sensibility in each person and hence to uplift the social culture and education. She promoted inclusive policies, incorporating marginalized communities like the Bhils and Gonds into the administration and as protectors of trade routes, which reduced banditry and brought stability.

### **4. Hallmark of women's support:**

Mother Queen Ahilyabai Holkar was known as the strong politician who bought the turning point in the whole female world. She introduced education for woman. She taught females to be self-depend by getting higher education and by supporting their homes. She offered financial help and care to widows and protected the rights of women. She raised her voice against the cruelty towards women which they faced from male and other people. She supported re-marriage of widows. She also gave rights to women for having their share in the wealth of paternal authority. She made special arrangements for fast hearing during the court session. Thus, she like a true and devoted leader continuously supported women and tried to give them life of respect and freedom. Ahilya bai Holkar

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being a woman, was well known from the weakness of women. Therefore, she did a lot to raised female voice. She continuously inspired women to get themselves educated and fight for their own right. She setup her own example for all. At a time when women were mostly ordered to be stay at home and to do only domestic tasks Ahilya Bai gave her voice to all the poor and suppressed women. She rose to power, first as a regent and then as the ruler of Malwa Kingdom, demonstrating that women were equally capable leaders and administrators. Keeping her these pious acts in **their** minds, figures ranging from Jawaharlal Nehru to contemporary American historians have lauded her rule as a model of benevolent and effective government. She was considered a saint by her people during and after her lifetime, earning the title of 'Lokmata' (mother of the people).

### 5.Ahilyabai Holkar as a philosopher Queen:

Ahilya bai was not merely a queen but a philosopher queen in power, strength and vision. She stands among the rulers who united for thoughts, actions and philosophical views. She stressed secular harmony, gender equality, justice and compassionate love for her subjects. She beautifully transcended her era by combining spiritual insight, moralethics, civicsense, morality and rational thoughts. [John Keay](#) rightly called her 'The Philosopher Queen',"Ahilyabai Holkar, the 'philosopher-queen' of Malwa, had evidently been an acute observer of the wider political scene. In a letter to the Peshwa in 1772, she had warned against association with the British and likened their embrace to a bear-hug: "Other beasts, like tigers, can be killed by might or contrivance, but to kill a bear it is very difficult. It will die only if you kill it straight in the face, or else, once caught in its powerful hold, the bear will kill its prey by tickling. Such is the way of the English. And in view of this, it is difficult to triumph over them.

### 6.Conclusion

Known as 'Karma yogini' Ahilyabai Holkar remains one of the most insightful, visionary and enlightened rulers in Indian history. "Karm yogini" is a title frequently used in popular literature and general discourse to describe Rani Ahilyabai Holkar's selfless and diligent life dedicated to public welfare and duty. As a true visionary queen, she transformed malva region into a flourished land of morality and prosperity, peace and culture. Morethan an emperor she was loving and caring mother to her subjects, a social reformer, a caretaker for women and a dominant powerful monarch for her people. Her life teaches that the true power lies in betterment, welfare and benevolence to the poor n needy and not in the conquest. Some famous remarks by the great persons to her are, "The Great Maratha lady who affords the noblest example of wisdom, goodness, and virtue. Akbar is among male sovereigns, and Ahilyabai is among female sovereigns". An English writer quoted in the

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book *Ahilya Bai Holkar* by Khadpekar. To conclude finally, Ahilyabai Holkar is a visionary, fair, and effective "philosopher-queen" whose policies fostered long-term social harmony and economic prosperity. This research paper examines the contribution of Ahilyabai Holkar, the 18th-century queen of Malwa, to the fields of education and social welfare. The study aims to understand how her reforms challenged patriarchal norms embedded in Dharma shastra texts, which traditionally limited women's roles in society. Using a qualitative research methodology, the study employs a comparative analysis and a literature review of historical texts, government records, and scholarly sources. This study uses a qualitative research approach for understanding the vision, available literary, historical, and archival sources. This method helps in expressing the prevalent social norms and cultural features of her kingdom. Her reign which lasted for nearly three decades, is remembered as a golden age of empowerment, cultural and social enhancement, women upliftment and pure and fair governance. Her whole life and policies continue to serve as an enduring inspiration for women's right and social reform movements in modern India. Today she is remembered and celebrated as an exemplary female ruler who balanced strength with compassion, ruling selflessly and leaving everlasting legacy of peace, encouragement, power, stability and spiritual, social fulfillment, making herself a beloved figure in the Indian history.

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## Ahilyabai Holkar: A Model for Value-Based Educational Leadership

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### **Abstract:**

*Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795), the queen-ruler of Malwa, is remembered for her exemplary governance, philanthropy, and social reform. This paper explores her governing philosophy through the lens of modern value-based educational leadership, linking historical evidence with contemporary leadership theory. Drawing upon concepts such as servant leadership, moral leadership, and community-centered governance, the paper argues that Ahilyabai Holkar's model provides a culturally grounded framework relevant to educational leadership today. The analysis highlights her service orientation, integrity, justice, resource management, and social infrastructure development as transferable principles for educational leadership.*

**Keywords:** *Ahilyabai Holkar; value-based leadership; educational leadership; servant leadership; moral leadership; historical case study.*

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### **Introduction:**

Value-based leadership in education emphasizes moral purpose, ethical decision-making, and community-centered institutional culture. As educational institutions confront rising complexities, leaders increasingly draw on historical exemplars to illuminate sustainable models of ethical governance. Ahilyabai Holkar stands out as a leader whose governance embodied compassion, justice, and service—qualities essential for educational leadership today. Her administration, grounded in ethics and public welfare, provides insight into leadership styles aligned with contemporary educational theory, including servant leadership and transformational leadership.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Value-Based and Moral Leadership in Education**

Educational leadership research highlights the importance of leading with moral purpose and ethical clarity. Leaders who embody moral values create school cultures that emphasize integrity, inclusivity, and trust.

#### **Historical Leadership as a Pedagogical Model**

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Scholars note that historical leaders provide valuable case studies to develop leadership capacity among educators and administrators.

### **Ahilyabai Holkar in Historical Literature**

Historical texts consistently portray Ahilyabai as just, humble, and dedicated to public welfare. Biographers emphasize her administrative reforms, philanthropic projects, and personal discipline.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws upon three complementary leadership perspectives:

1. Servant leadership — prioritizing service, empathy, and community well-being.
2. Transformational leadership — inspiring followers through vision and moral influence.
3. Moral leadership — guiding institutions through ethical commitments and values.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative historical case study synthesizes secondary sources, including biographies, academic books, journal articles, and historical archives. The analysis uses thematic coding to align Ahilyabai's governance principles with contemporary educational leadership theories.

### **Historical Overview of Ahilyabai Holkar's Leadership**

Ahilyabai assumed leadership after the deaths of her husband and father-in-law in 1766. Contrary to societal norms of her time, she ascended the throne due to her demonstrated wisdom and administrative capability. Her c.30-year reign is widely recognized for justice administration, infrastructural development, balanced taxation, and social welfare. Her leadership established Malwa as a prosperous and harmonious region.

### **Analysis: Core Leadership Values and Educational Interpretation**

#### **Service and Stewardship → Servant Leadership**

Ahilyabai invested heavily in building roads, wells, rest houses, temples, and dharamshalas, reflecting a service-oriented approach. Her humility and commitment to the common good mirror servant leadership principles.

#### **Equity and Justice → Inclusive Educational Practices**

She was known for fair and impartial judgments, often holding public sittings to hear grievances. This resonates with inclusive leadership in schools, where transparent and equitable policies support all students.

#### **Fiscal Prudence → Responsible Resource Management**

Ahilyabai separated personal expenses from state revenues and prioritized public works, illustrating fiscal prudence. Educational leaders similarly need transparent and mission-driven budgeting.

#### **Public Infrastructure Development → Schools as Community Hubs**

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Her infrastructure projects improved civic life and accessibility. Today, schools can mirror this by serving as community centers and shared public spaces.

### **Moral Integrity → Leadership by Example**

Ahilyabai's personal austerity, humility, and consistent ethical conduct strengthened public trust.

Educational leaders who model integrity positively influence school culture.

### **Proposed Framework: A-VELL (Ahilyabai-Based Value-Oriented Educational Leadership Model)**

The A-VELL framework comprises:

- Service orientation;
- Ethical governance;
- Inclusive decision-making;
- Equitable resource management;
- Community uplift projects;
- Moral exemplarity.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The A-VELL framework implies the following:

- Integrate value-based leadership modules in pre-service and in-service training;
- Use culturally rooted historical case studies in leadership education;
- Promote school–community partnerships for shared infrastructure;
- Include non-academic indicators (well-being, community impact) in evaluations.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study primarily uses secondary historical sources and interpretive analysis. Future work could include archival research, comparative studies, and empirical validation of the A-VELL framework in school settings.

### **Conclusion**

Ahilyabai Holkar's leadership embodies principles central to modern value-based educational leadership: service, justice, fiscal responsibility, integrity, and community welfare. The A-VELL model translates these historical values into actionable leadership practices for contemporary educational institutions.

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## Women Leaders as Agents of Social Transformation

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### **Abstract:**

*Women leaders have historically acted as agents of profound social transformation, reshaping governance, health, and education systems across civilizations. This paper examines the transformative leadership of women such as Ahilyabai Holkar, Indira Gandhi, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and Jacinda Ardern, and explores how their inclusive, empathetic, and ethical approaches have led to measurable socio-economic progress. Data from UN Women, the World Bank, WHO, and ICMR highlight that women's political participation is directly linked to improved social equity and community well-being. The study contextualizes the historical legacy of Indian women rulers within a global perspective, emphasizing how women in governance advance health, justice, and human rights. Drawing on institutional reports and policy frameworks, the paper concludes that women leaders not only reform institutions but also redefine leadership paradigms by prioritizing compassion, inclusion, and justice.*

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### **Introduction**

Leadership is a catalyst for social transformation, shaping the moral and institutional character of societies. Women leaders, in particular, have redefined leadership by bringing values of empathy, equity, and inclusion into governance. The United Nations (UN Women, 2023) emphasizes that women's leadership is not only a matter of representation but a foundation for sustainable development. Their engagement in policymaking contributes directly to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goals 5 and 10 concerning gender equality and reduced inequalities.

### **Historical Framework: Ahilyabai Holkar**

Ahilyabai Holkar, the 18th-century ruler of Malwa, stands as one of India's earliest exemplars of women-led governance rooted in justice and welfare. Her administration prioritized infrastructure, education, and healthcare, setting a moral precedent for inclusive leadership (ICHR, 2022). She built

temples, roads, and public facilities accessible to all castes and genders, demonstrating that women leaders could harmonize governance with compassion and reform.

### **Women Leaders in Modern India**

In modern India, women leaders such as Indira Gandhi, Kiran Bedi, and Jayalalithaa have shaped policy landscapes. Indira Gandhi's tenure (1966–1977, 1980–1984) witnessed nationalization reforms and rural empowerment schemes. Kiran Bedi's administrative innovations in policing, especially the introduction of community-based correctional reforms in Tihar Jail, reflect the transformative potential of women's leadership within institutions (ICMR, 2023).

### **Global Perspectives**

Globally, women such as Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the former President of Liberia, and Jacinda Ardern, former Prime Minister of New Zealand, have demonstrated crisis leadership based on compassion and evidence-driven policy. According to the World Bank (2023), countries with higher proportions of women in parliament tend to invest more in health and education sectors, correlating with higher human development indices. Ardern's empathetic governance during the COVID-19 pandemic and Sirleaf's leadership in post-conflict Liberia illustrate women's crucial roles in rebuilding social trust.

### **Institutional and Policy Perspectives**

UNESCO (2023) and WHO (2024) report that women's leadership improves health outcomes and enhances education access, particularly in developing nations. The World Bank notes that gender-balanced leadership boards tend to prioritize social infrastructure and inclusive growth (World Bank, 2024). The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) further highlights the importance of female leadership in public health implementation, citing projects where women-led teams improved vaccination coverage and community awareness.

### **Impact on Social Sectors**

Empirical evidence from UNDP (2023) shows that women's leadership directly influences the expansion of education and healthcare access. In India, states with higher representation of women in local governance have better maternal and child health indicators (UN Women, 2023). Similarly, women-led health programs, such as the MIP Vaccination initiative under ICMR, demonstrate how participatory approaches improve compliance and sustainability.

### **Challenges and Barriers**

Despite these advances, structural barriers persist. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2023) reports that women hold only 26.7% of parliamentary seats globally. Patriarchal norms, unequal pay, and limited access to resources continue to hinder women's political participation. WHO (2023) emphasizes that gender bias in healthcare leadership limits the diversity of perspectives in global health governance.

### **Discussion**

The theory of transformational leadership, as defined by Burns (1978) and further developed by Bass (1999), posits that effective leaders inspire change by aligning moral values with collective goals. Women leaders often exemplify this model through participatory decision-making and community engagement. Their leadership redefines power as a tool for service rather than domination, aligning with the Gandhian and Holkarian ideals of duty and compassion.

### **Conclusion**

Women leaders serve as architects of social transformation by integrating empathy, justice, and inclusivity into governance. From Ahilyabai Holkar's welfare-oriented rule to modern global examples, their leadership models have strengthened democratic institutions and advanced social equity. Institutional data from the UN, WHO, and World Bank consistently affirm that empowering women in leadership roles yields measurable benefits for human development and justice. The path forward lies in expanding opportunities, dismantling systemic barriers, and recognizing women's leadership as indispensable to global progress.

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## Devi Ahilyabai Holkar: The Epitome of a Complete Woman

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*O Ahilya, a symbol of light,  
Your name still shines, forever bright;  
A perfect blend of power and grace,  
A guiding star for every race.  
O Ahilya You are great.*

### **Abstract:**

*Devi Ahilyabai Holkar stands as one of the most remarkable women in Indian history. She was not only an able ruler but also a compassionate, religious, and humanitarian leader. In a time when women's participation in administration was almost unimaginable, Ahilyabai emerged as a symbol of courage, wisdom, and feminine grace. This research paper explores her life, contributions, and her role as an ideal representation of womanhood and empowerment. In an era when women's voices were often silenced, Devi Ahilyabai Holkar rose above social boundaries to lead with grace and wisdom. Her life story is not merely a tale of royal power, but a journey of compassion, resilience, and visionary leadership. As the ruler of Malwa, she redefined governance through humanity and inclusiveness. From building temples and public works across India to empowering farmers and women, Ahilyabai's contribution went beyond her kingdom. She remains an inspiration for modern society, representing the ideal of a woman who could rule, nurture, and reform all at once. This research examines her journey as a true embodiment of strength and spirituality — a woman ahead of her time.*

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### **Introduction:**

In the annals of Indian history, few names shine as brightly as that of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar — a queen whose reign was marked not by conquest, but by compassion. At a time when women were seldom seen in positions of authority, Ahilyabai defied convention to become one of the most respected rulers of 18th-century India. Her leadership was a rare blend of administrative brilliance, spiritual depth, and maternal care for her people. She transformed the Malwa kingdom into a haven of prosperity and justice, while her philanthropic works across India — from temples to roads and

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rest houses — spoke of her devotion to both faith and humanity. Beyond her political achievements, Ahilyabai's life stands as a testament to the power of courage, intellect, and empathy in leadership. This paper seeks to explore the multifaceted legacy of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar — not merely as a queen, but as a visionary woman who redefined the ideals of governance, spirituality, and womanhood in her era.

### **Objectives:**

1. To analyze- the political and administrative strategies of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar that contributed to the stability and prosperity of the Malwa kingdom.
2. To explore -how Ahilyabai's leadership challenged the traditional gender norms of 18th-century India, establishing her as a pioneer of women's empowerment.
3. To examine- the spiritual and humanitarian dimensions of her governance, emphasizing her contributions to religion, culture, and public welfare.
4. To investigate-her architectural and infrastructural initiatives across India as reflections of her devotion, foresight, and concern for societal welfare.
5. To interpret-Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy as a model of ethical leadership, compassion, and inclusive governance relevant to contemporary social and political contexts.
6. To assess- the enduring influence of Ahilyabai's ideals on modern perceptions of womanhood, leadership, and social reform in India.

### **Research Methodology:**

#### **1. Research Design:**

The study follows a **descriptive-historical design**, aimed at reconstructing the socio-political and cultural context of Ahilyabai Holkar's reign. It examines historical records, literary works, and scholarly interpretations to present a nuanced understanding of her governance and philosophy.

#### **2. Data Collection:**

The research is based on **secondary data** collected from credible sources such as:

- \* Historical documents, royal records, and contemporary accounts of the Holkar dynasty.
- \* Books, research articles, and biographies focusing on Ahilyabai Holkar and the Maratha period.
- \* Academic journals, museum archives, and digital repositories detailing her architectural, religious, and administrative contributions.

#### **3. Data Analysis:**

Each source is examined for accuracy, authenticity, and relevance. The study categorizes themes such as leadership style, women's empowerment, spirituality, social reform, and governance ethics to draw meaningful insights.

#### **4.Scope and Delimitation:**

The study focuses primarily on the 18th-century context of Ahilyabai's rule in Malwa and her contributions across India. It does not attempt to provide an exhaustive biography but rather emphasizes her role as a reformer and visionary leader.

### **5. Research Approach:**

The approach allows a holistic understanding of Ahilyabai Holkar as both a political leader and a moral exemplar.

### **Content**

#### 1. Early Life:

Ahilyabai was born on 31st May 1725 in the village of Chondi, Maharashtra. Her father, Mankoji Shinde, ensured she received proper education—a rare privilege for girls in that era. She was married to Khanderao Holkar, the son of Malhar Rao Holkar, ruler of Indore.

#### 2. Her Rule and Administration:

After the deaths of her husband and father-in-law, Ahilyabai took charge of the Holkar kingdom.

- She ruled with fairness, justice, and compassion.
- She constructed roads, temples, rest houses, and ghats for the welfare of the people.
- Her administration encouraged trade and agriculture, ensuring economic stability.
- She maintained religious harmony and promoted unity among diverse communities.

#### 3. Religious and Social Contributions:

Ahilyabai Holkar rebuilt several sacred sites across India—Kashi, Gaya, Somnath, and Rameshwaram among others.

She supported widows, provided shelter to the poor, and advocated for women's welfare. Her governance reflected deep spirituality combined with social responsibility.

#### 4. The Epitome of a Complete Woman:

Ahilyabai embodied all the qualities of an ideal woman—motherhood, compassion, courage, leadership, wisdom, and devotion.

Her life represents the harmonious balance between strength and sensitivity, power and piety.

### **Research Hypothesis**

This study is guided by the following hypotheses:

#### 1. Primary Hypothesis:

Devi Ahilyabai Holkar's governance model was not only progressive for its time but also represented a distinctive synthesis of administrative efficiency, spiritual ethics, and humanitarian values that challenged the patriarchal norms of 18th-century India.

#### 2. Secondary Hypotheses:

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Ahilyabai Holkar's reign exemplified a form of **\*\*indigenous feminist leadership\*\***, demonstrating that effective governance could be rooted in compassion, inclusiveness, and moral strength.

Her architectural and philanthropic contributions across India were strategic expressions of her vision for social integration, religious tolerance, and cultural preservation.

The ethical and community-centered framework of Ahilyabai's administration offers a sustainable model of governance relevant to contemporary discussions on leadership and gender equity.

### **Research Rational**

The story of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar holds immense historical and contemporary relevance. Despite her remarkable leadership and contributions, her legacy has often been overshadowed by male rulers of her time. This research seeks to **\*\*revisit and recontextualize\*\*** Ahilyabai Holkar's life and governance from a scholarly perspective that highlights her as a transformative figure in Indian history.

In an era where women's participation in administration was almost non-existent, Ahilyabai's reign stood as a powerful exception. Her leadership was not built on conquest or aggression, but on justice, compassion, and moral governance. Studying her life provides a critical framework for understanding indigenous models of women's empowerment and ethical leadership long before the emergence of modern feminist movements.

The rationale for this research also stems from the need to bridge historical narratives with contemporary discourses on gender, governance, and spirituality. Ahilyabai Holkar's inclusive policies, welfare initiatives, and cultural patronage offer valuable insights into how empathy and ethics can coexist with administrative strength.

By examining her contributions through historical, cultural, and gendered lenses, this study aims to preserve and promote her legacy as a ruler who not only transformed her kingdom but also redefined the meaning of power and leadership. The research thus contributes to a broader academic understanding of how women in pre-modern India shaped the course of social and political history, even within restrictive societal frameworks.

### **Conclusion:**

Devi Ahilyabai Holkar's life is a timeless example of courage, leadership, and devotion to duty. She broke gender barriers and proved that women are capable of ruling with justice and compassion. Even today, her life continues to inspire women to rise with dignity and serve humanity selflessly.

Devi Ahilyabai Holkar's life and reign stand as a timeless testament to the power of righteous leadership, compassion, and spiritual strength. In an era when women were confined by rigid social structures, Ahilyabai rose above such barriers to govern with wisdom, integrity, and empathy. Her

administration was marked by justice and inclusivity, her heart by devotion and humility, and her vision by an unwavering commitment to the welfare of her people.

Through her vast contributions — from the restoration of sacred temples and the development of public infrastructure to the promotion of education and social reform — she redefined the very essence of rulership. Ahilyabai was not merely a monarch of Malwa; she was a moral force whose governance embodied both power and grace, harmonizing duty with devotion.

Even centuries later, her legacy continues to illuminate the ideals of leadership and womanhood. She remains a source of inspiration for all, transcending time, caste, and gender — a guiding light for those who seek to lead with compassion and justice. As the words beautifully capture:

Ahilya — a symbol of light, your name still shines forever bright;

A perfect blend of power and grace, a guiding star for every race.

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**From Justice to Empowerment: Ahilyabai Holkar and the Indigenous Models of Women's  
Leadership in Manipur**

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**Introduction**

Women's leadership in the Indian subcontinent has long emerged through diverse cultural, political, and ethical frameworks deeply rooted in community life, social responsibility, and indigenous philosophies of care. These traditions demonstrate that leadership is not always produced within formal administrative spaces but often shaped through collective agency, cultural memory, and moral stewardship. Within this rich tapestry, the figure of Ahilyabai Holkar, the 18th-century queen of Malwa, stands out as a compelling example of ethical governance and justice-centered public leadership. As an eighteenth-century Maratha queen, Ahilyabai cultivated a governance model grounded in fairness, compassion, community welfare, and participatory decision making. Her leadership ethos provides a critical lens for examining indigenous forms of women's leadership in India's northeastern region, particularly Manipur.

Manipur's history reflects a long-standing tradition of women occupying central roles in political action, social movements, economic regulation, and moral guidance. Institutions such as the Meira Paibi or "torch-bearing mothers," the women of the Nupi Lan movements, and royal figures like Maharani Kumudini demonstrate how Manipuri women have consistently shaped political consciousness, intervened in state affairs, and mobilized communities during social and political crises. These traditions position women not as passive subjects but as active agents of justice, cultural preservation, and ethical governance.

Bringing Ahilyabai's governance philosophy into conversation with Manipuri women's leadership practices allows for the conceptualization of an indigenous, gendered model of political agency that is relational, community-centered, and grounded in everyday ethical action. Drawing on scholarship from performance studies (Schechner 2002; Taylor 2003), indigenous historiography (Hodson 1900), feminist studies (Sircar 1984), and contemporary analyses of Manipuri women's activism (Basnet 2019; Rehman 2017), this chapter argues that women's leadership in these contexts is best understood as a dynamic repertoire of embodied practices, cultural performances, ethical interventions, and community-based decision making.

By situating Ahilyabai Holkar's governance philosophy within the lived experiences and political struggles of Manipuri women, this chapter illuminates a shared philosophical foundation rooted in justice, care, social accountability, and collective welfare. These parallels not only expand the

understanding of indigenous leadership histories but also offer valuable insights for reimagining contemporary models of governance, conflict resolution, and community engagement in India.

### **Ahilyabai Holkar's Leadership Ethos: Justice, Compassion, and Community Welfare**

Ahilyabai Holkar's leadership ethos stands as a remarkable synthesis of administrative discipline, spiritual conviction, and deep compassion for her subjects. Emerging as one of the most respected women rulers in eighteenth-century India, she demonstrated that governance rooted in ethical values could coexist with political strength and administrative efficiency. As documented by Priteesh Kumar and Jha (2025), Ahilyabai consistently prioritized infrastructural development, such as the construction of roads, wells, temples, and dharamshalas, reflecting her commitment to improving everyday life for both local populations and visiting pilgrims. These projects were not merely acts of benevolence but strategic interventions designed to enhance mobility, trade, public safety, and communal harmony. Her contributions to social infrastructure reveal a ruler who understood governance as both a material and moral responsibility.

Central to Ahilyabai's governance was her distinctive approach to justice. Her judicial practices were characterized by accessibility, fairness, and openness, enabling ordinary people to approach the throne without fear. Historical accounts illustrate that she personally conducted hearings, listened to grievances attentively, and intervened whenever structural inequalities hindered justice. This sensitivity to the suffering of subjects aligns closely with Dewey's (1938) experiential learning principles, which emphasize active engagement, ethical reasoning, and learning shaped by direct experience. By situating decision making within lived realities rather than abstract administrative ideals, Ahilyabai ensured that justice served as a mechanism for empowerment rather than a tool of punishment.

Her leadership also included progressive attitudes toward women's welfare. She encouraged widow remarriage and supported women facing social vulnerability, thereby challenging entrenched patriarchal norms. Ahilyabai's policies revealed a belief that justice must address emotional and social needs in addition to legal concerns. Her administrative decisions were infused with empathy, reflecting a holistic understanding of human well-being.

Sharma and Kamrah (2025) emphasize that Ahilyabai's governance embodied core elements of decentralized administration, community consultation, and empathetic stewardship. She delegated local decision making to trusted officials while maintaining mechanisms for accountability, enabling governance that was both efficient and responsive to community needs. This practice prefigures modern models of participatory governance and feminist administrative ethics, where leadership is measured not by authority but by the capacity to listen, empathize, and act with moral clarity.

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Overall, Ahilyabai Holkar's leadership ethos reveals an intricate balance between justice and compassion. Her governance not only restored social order but also created pathways for personal and collective empowerment. By rooting administrative actions in ethical considerations and community welfare, she established a legacy that continues to inspire contemporary discourses on humane governance, gender inclusive leadership, and indigenous traditions of ethical statecraft.

### **Indigenous Traditions of Women's Leadership in Manipur**

#### ***The Meira Paibi Movement***

Indigenous women's leadership in Manipur has been most visibly embodied through the Meira Paibi, the torch-bearing women activists who have long served as moral guardians of their communities. Basnet (2019) describes the Meira Paibi as a "postcolonial counterpublic" that generates a distinctive grammar of resistance through the power of collective presence, shared labour, and participatory justice. Their nightly vigils, public interventions, and community monitoring practices work as a form of social regulation that arises from within the community rather than being imposed from above. This grassroots framework resonates strongly with Ahilyabai Holkar's governance philosophy, which emphasized safety, justice, and welfare as communal responsibilities rather than abstract administrative ideals.

The Meira Paibi's leadership is articulated through ethical presence and relational engagement rather than through formal political authority. Their mode of leadership is grounded in emotional labour, everyday vigilance, and a deep sense of responsibility for community well-being. Similar to Ahilyabai's leadership ethos, their activism draws legitimacy from lived experience and moral integrity. Their actions, which include anti-alcohol movements, interventions against domestic violence, mediation in neighbourhood conflicts, and sustained resistance to human rights violations, reaffirm the idea that community safety is a collective concern shaped by shared ethical commitments. Expanding their role beyond immediate crisis response, the Meira Paibi have also redefined political participation in Manipur. They have transformed public spaces into zones of accountability where state authorities are compelled to answer to community concerns. This performative dimension of their activism aligns with the principles of indigenous feminist leadership, where moral authority emerges through collective embodiment and everyday acts of care. The alignment with Ahilyabai Holkar's philosophy becomes evident in their insistence on justice accessible to all, their protection of vulnerable groups, and their emphasis on sustaining social harmony. Together, the Meira Paibi and Ahilyabai Holkar exemplify leadership models rooted in compassion, communal responsibility, and ethical action that arise directly from the lived realities of women within their sociocultural contexts.

#### ***The Nupi Lan Movements***

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The Nupi Lan, or “Women’s Wars,” of 1904 and 1939 represent pivotal moments in the evolution of political consciousness and collective agency among Manipuri women. Far from being spontaneous uprisings, these movements were organized responses shaped by a deep understanding of community welfare, social justice, and indigenous responsibility. Parratt and Parratt (2001) describe the Nupi Lan as critical milestones in Manipur’s socio-political transformation, positioning women at the forefront of resistance against unjust governance and exploitative economic practices.

The first Nupi Lan in 1904 was triggered by the British colonial policy of forced labour, which directly threatened family stability and community dignity. Women mobilized rapidly and strategically, confronting colonial officials, negotiating with local authorities, and asserting their rights to protect their households and social integrity. The second Nupi Lan in 1939, sparked by the export-driven rice monopoly during a period of acute scarcity, demonstrated even more sophisticated organization. Women marched in large groups, blockaded roads, challenged administrative elites, and demanded equitable distribution of essential resources. These movements underscore Manipuri women’s capacity to comprehend governance structures, anticipate the consequences of policy decisions, and intervene decisively when such decisions endangered communal well-being.

The principles that shaped the Nupi Lan resonate strongly with Ahilyabai Holkar’s justice-oriented governance. Like Ahilyabai, who intervened directly in administrative and economic matters to safeguard public welfare, Manipuri women exercised moral authority to oppose systemic injustices. Their resistance embodied leadership grounded in ethical responsibility rather than formal political power. The women’s fight against forced labour and rice monopolization reflects values similar to Ahilyabai’s emphasis on equitable resource distribution, community consultation, and social accountability.

The Nupi Lan thus stands as a powerful indigenous model of feminist political action, where care, justice, and economic stewardship merge into a holistic practice of governance. This shared lineage strengthens the conceptual bridge between Ahilyabai Holkar’s principles and Manipuri women’s enduring commitment to protecting their communities.

### ***Royal Female Agencies: Maharani Kumudini***

Maharani Kumudini holds a significant yet often understated place in Manipur’s cultural and political history. While mainstream historiography has traditionally focused on male rulers and colonial interventions, recent scholarship, particularly by Yendrembam (2022), repositions her as an influential figure whose contributions extend far beyond ceremonial status. She emerges as a political counsellor, mediator, and cultural patron whose leadership shaped crucial aspects of Manipur’s social and administrative life. Her role illustrates an indigenous model of women’s leadership grounded in negotiation, relational ethics, and cultural stewardship.

As an advisor within the royal court, Maharani Kumudini played an important role in governance, conflict resolution, and palace diplomacy. Her interventions reflected a deep understanding of statecraft that prioritized community welfare, moral balance, and social harmony. This leadership ethos resonates strongly with Ahilyabai Holkar's approach to governance, which emphasized fairness, welfare-oriented decision making, and compassion. Just as Ahilyabai used her authority to champion justice and equitable resource distribution, Maharani Kumudini exercised influence by guiding political decisions, mediating disputes, and ensuring stability during times of uncertainty. Her authority rested not merely on her position but on her moral credibility, emotional intelligence, and capacity to inspire trust.

Her cultural contributions further reinforce her importance. By supporting traditional arts, ritual practices, and intellectual traditions, she helped preserve Manipuri cultural identity during periods of political transition and external pressure. This form of cultural guardianship parallels Ahilyabai's patronage of temples, education, and public works, highlighting a shared commitment to strengthening community values through culture.

Maharani Kumudini's legacy thus exemplifies an indigenous paradigm of women's leadership that integrates counsel, care, diplomacy, and cultural responsibility. When placed alongside Ahilyabai Holkar's governance philosophy, her story underscores the enduring presence of women's agency across regions and demonstrates how justice, compassion, and community-centred leadership form a continuous tradition within Indian history.

### ***Women's Organizations and Post-Independence Activism***

Post-independence Manipur witnessed the strengthening of women's organizations that extended the long-standing traditions of female collective leadership established during the precolonial and colonial eras. Scholars such as Binarani Devi (2011) and Bimola Devi (1998) document how Manipuri women continued to occupy central roles in shaping political discourse, mediating community conflicts, addressing social injustices, and safeguarding collective welfare. These organizations did not emerge abruptly but evolved from earlier forms of women's solidarity, including the Nupi Lan movements and the everyday practices of neighbourhood-based moral vigilance embedded in Leikai structures.

In the decades following independence, women's organizations increasingly responded to challenges generated by modern governance, armed conflict, drug abuse, militarization, and the erosion of traditional social mechanisms. Groups such as the All Manipur Women's Social Reformation and Development Samaj (Nupi Samaj), along with numerous meira paibi networks, took leadership in confronting human rights violations, gendered violence, economic exploitation, and social disorder. Their strategies combined protest, advocacy, and negotiation, revealing a balanced approach that

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sought to hold authorities accountable while maintaining open channels of dialogue for community resolution.

Their activism extended far beyond public demonstrations. Women frequently mediated family disputes, offered counselling, provided humanitarian support, and facilitated reconciliation, thereby assuming responsibilities typically associated with governance. Much like Ahilyabai Holkar, whose leadership emphasized justice, compassion, and accessible welfare, these organizations grounded their interventions in ethical responsibility and communal care. Their influence stemmed not from formal political office but from moral legitimacy, experiential knowledge, and deep social trust.

These post-independence women's organizations form a living archive of indigenous governance practices, illustrating how leadership rooted in care and collective responsibility adapts to evolving socio-political conditions. When viewed alongside Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy, their work demonstrates a shared commitment to justice, empathy, and community-centred leadership that continues to shape public life in India.

### **The Performative, Cultural, and Experiential Foundations of Leadership**

To understand the indigenous models of women's leadership in Manipur alongside Ahilyabai Holkar's governance, this chapter draws on performance studies frameworks by Schechner (2002) and Taylor (2003). These scholars emphasize that cultural memory and political agency are expressed not only through documented archives but also through repertoires that include embodied practices, rituals, oral traditions, and collective performances transmitted across generations. Leadership, therefore, is not only a matter of formal authority or administrative capacity. It is also a cultural practice sustained through performative acts that shape community consciousness and ethical norms across generations.

#### ***Performance as Political Agency***

Forms of women's leadership in Manipur often manifest through public performances that serve as both symbolic and material interventions in social life. The Meira Paibi's nightly vigils, illuminated by burning torches, represent powerful performances of vigilance, protection, and moral guardianship. Similarly, the Nupi Lan marches are remembered not merely as political protests but as embodied declarations of collective agency and refusal to accept injustice. Ritual events such as Lai Haraoba and social celebrations like Ningol Chakouba also reinforce women's roles as cultural anchors and custodians of social harmony. These performances cultivate legitimacy, solidarity, and public trust.

In this sense, women's leadership is performed before it is institutionalized. This mirrors Ahilyabai Holkar's approach, where justice was enacted through visible acts of compassion, mediation, and public presence. Her governance relied on moral performance, where fairness, accessibility, and

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empathy were demonstrated through daily interactions with subjects. Both traditions reveal that leadership is often communicated through gestures, rituals, and visible practices that embody ethical principles and commitments to the community.

### ***Experiential Learning and Social Transformation***

Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning provides an additional interpretive lens to understand these models of leadership. According to this framework, individuals acquire knowledge and skills through cycles of experience, reflection, and action. Women leaders in Manipur, much like Ahilyabai, develop their leadership capacities not through formal institutions but through lived experiences such as domestic labour, caregiving responsibilities, participation in collective activities, and involvement in community dispute resolution. These everyday experiences cultivate skills of negotiation, empathy, adaptation, and problem solving.

Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory further supports this perspective by emphasizing that learning and development are shaped through social interactions and cultural practices. Leadership, in this context, emerges through shared activities where women engage with their communities, observe social norms, mediate conflicts, and internalize ethical principles. Over time, these experiences transform into leadership competencies that guide political and social action. In both Manipur and Malwa, therefore, women's leadership rests on deep experiential knowledge rooted in cultural participation, communal responsibilities, and intergenerational learning.

Through these combined frameworks, the chapter demonstrates that indigenous women's leadership across India is anchored in culturally grounded repertoires, embodied practices, and experiential learning systems. Leadership is not simply asserted but performed, cultivated, and inherited through everyday actions that shape community life and ethical governance.

### **Intersecting Ethical Philosophies: Justice, Care, and Relational Leadership**

Across both Ahilyabai Holkar's reign and the indigenous leadership traditions of Manipur, leadership emerges as a form of ethical service grounded in justice, compassion, cultural responsibility, and relational accountability. These traditions reflect a leadership philosophy that prioritizes community welfare and moral integrity rather than authority based on coercion, hierarchy, or bureaucratic control. Instead of relying on institutional power, women leaders in both contexts cultivate legitimacy through ethical conduct, social engagement, and the ability to mediate communal life with sensitivity and fairness. This convergence illustrates how indigenous forms of leadership across India are shaped by deeply rooted ethical worldviews that privilege care, reciprocity, and restorative justice.

### ***Justice as a Moral Imperative***

In both traditions, justice is understood as a moral duty that seeks to restore social balance rather than impose punitive measures. Ahilyabai Holkar is remembered for her commitment to accessible and

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humane justice. She often conducted hearings personally, listened to grievances with empathy, and treated every individual equally regardless of social status. This direct involvement reflected her belief that justice must be both fair and compassionate. Similar principles guide the actions of the Meira Paibi in Manipur. Their interventions are shaped by community needs and are aimed at correcting harm, preventing violence, and fostering social responsibility. Their work represents a grassroots form of restorative justice that relies on dialogue, moral persuasion, and collective vigilance. Both traditions thus embody justice not as an instrument of authority but as a shared responsibility rooted in ethical principles and community protection.

### ***Care as Governance***

Leadership grounded in care forms the philosophical core of women's governance in both Malwa and Manipur. This model is shaped by relational ethics, emotional labour, and culturally embedded expectations of communal responsibility. Ahilyabai Holkar's governance emphasized compassion toward widows, the poor, and the marginalized. Her decisions reflected a maternal approach to leadership that sought to nurture social well-being and reduce suffering. In Manipur, Sircar (1984) argues that women's leadership has historically emerged from traditional systems of mutual accountability, kinship networks, and shared obligations within community life. The activities of the Meira Paibi, the collective mobilization of the Nupi Lan participants, and the roles played by women in festivals and rituals all reflect a governance philosophy where care becomes a form of political strength. Care is therefore not a private emotion but a guiding framework for public action and ethical decision making.

### ***Cultural Memory as Empowerment***

Cultural memory plays a crucial role in sustaining these indigenous models of leadership. Through rituals, folklore, oral narratives, and communal gatherings, communities preserve knowledge systems that celebrate women's agency, resilience, and moral courage. In Manipur, narrative traditions recorded in works such as Maisnamba's *Ningthemnubee* (2023) highlight the cultural importance of women who act as protectors, negotiators, and moral guides. Ritual performances like Lai Haraoba renew collective memory by reenacting mythic stories where women hold central roles in maintaining cosmic order and social harmony. These cultural practices serve as repositories of ethical values that inform contemporary activism and leadership. Likewise, the memory of Ahilyabai Holkar's reign is kept alive through oral histories, devotional texts, and community narratives that emphasize her justice, compassion, and dedication to public welfare. Cultural memory thus becomes a powerful resource that reinforces ethical leadership models and inspires new generations to uphold values of service, care, and moral responsibility.

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## Connecting Ahilyabai Holkar and Manipur's Indigenous Models

The parallels between Ahilyabai Holkar's leadership and Manipuri women's traditions reveal a shared indigenous philosophy that is grounded in community responsibility, ethical governance, and culturally rooted forms of agency. Though separated by geography and historical context, both traditions articulate leadership as a lived, relational practice shaped by the everyday realities of social life.

### *Collective Welfare as the Core of Governance*

Both Ahilyabai Holkar's administrative vision and the indigenous leadership practices of Manipuri women place the well-being of the community at the center of all decision making. Ahilyabai emphasized public infrastructure, equitable resource distribution, and accessible justice. Similarly, Manipuri women's organizations such as the Meira Paibi and the women involved in Nupi Lan mobilized primarily to safeguard community security, economic stability, and social harmony. The focus is consistently on collective upliftment rather than personal authority.

### *Women as Ethical Custodians of Society*

In both contexts, women emerge as moral anchors during periods of social, political, or economic instability. Ahilyabai Holkar's rule is remembered for its ethical rigor, compassion, and fairness. In Manipur, women's moral leadership is reflected in their sustained activism, mediation roles, and social reform initiatives. Scholars such as Bimola Devi and Binarani Devi note that Manipuri women often serve as the conscience keepers of society, guiding communities through ethical crises with clarity and courage.

### *Leadership through Action*

Leadership in these traditions is defined by concrete interventions. For Ahilyabai, this included administrative reforms, judicial engagement, welfare policies, and infrastructural development. For Manipuri women, leadership is visible in everyday acts such as night patrols, market regulation, conflict mediation, and protest mobilizations. The emphasis is on practical, immediate action that directly impacts community life, demonstrating that effective leadership arises from responsiveness rather than ceremonial authority.

### *Embodied, Performative Leadership*

Both traditions express leadership through presence, participation, and culturally meaningful actions. Ahilyabai's public audiences, temple-building initiatives, and welfare inspections were performative acts that communicated care and accountability. In Manipur, women express leadership through ritual participation, collective marches, community vigils, and festival practices where women occupy central roles. These embodied forms reinforce leadership as a cultural experience that unites ethical duty with social performance.

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### ***Decentralized, Participatory Governance***

The governance models found in Ahilyabai's rule and in Manipuri women's indigenous practices share a commitment to dialogue, consensus, and collective decision making. Ahilyabai often consulted community members and local leaders, ensuring that administrative policies reflected shared needs. Manipuri women's activism, similarly, operates through collaborative deliberations, collective mobilization, and horizontal leadership structures. This participatory ethos resonates with contemporary developmental frameworks that stress inclusive governance and grassroots engagement.

### ***Leadership Beyond Formal Power***

A key connection between Ahilyabai's governance and Manipuri women's leadership lies in the shared principle that power does not require institutional sanction to be effective. Ahilyabai's authority derived from dharma-driven action, community trust, and spiritual integrity. Similarly, the women of Manipur have consistently exercised political influence outside formal state structures—through collective mobilization, moral persuasion, and community-driven mechanisms of accountability. This highlights an indigenous political philosophy in which leadership is enacted through service, protection, and ethical presence rather than through bureaucratic hierarchy or militarized authority.

### ***Cultural Resilience as Political Strength***

Both traditions reveal that cultural identity furnishes women with symbolic and moral resources necessary for leadership. Ahilyabai's patronage of temples, pilgrimage centres, and cultural institutions reinforced shared values and spiritual cohesion. In Manipur, women perform similar roles through ritual, festival participation, storytelling, and custodianship of cultural memory. Their activism is inseparable from cultural identity; political resistance is often articulated through cultural expressions, from torchlight vigils to narrative performances. This convergence underscores that indigenous women's leadership emerges from cultural rootedness, enabling communities to navigate colonization, conflict, and modernization without losing their ethical foundations.

### ***Reimagining Contemporary Leadership through Indigenous Models***

The convergence of Ahilyabai Holkar's governance philosophy and the indigenous leadership traditions of Manipuri women offers a powerful lens for rethinking leadership in contemporary India. Both traditions show that effective leadership emerges from relational practices, ethical responsibility, and culturally rooted worldviews rather than from rigid hierarchies or formal bureaucratic structures. Drawing from these indigenous models allows modern governance to become more humane, inclusive, and responsive to community needs.

### ***Decentralized and Community-Led Governance***

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Ahilyabai's practice of local consultation and the participatory mobilizations of Manipuri women highlight the importance of decentralized leadership. Contemporary governance can benefit from empowering local bodies, community councils, and women-led collectives, which strengthens transparency and ensures that policies reflect local realities.

### ***Emotional Labour and Ethical Presence as Leadership Capital***

Indigenous models emphasize emotional labour, empathy, and relational ethics. Women leaders in Manipur, like Ahilyabai, build trust through care, compassion, and moral clarity. Recognizing these qualities in leadership training and public policy can create more socially attuned governance systems.

### ***Indigenous Justice as Restorative Practice***

Ahilyabai's restorative approach to justice and the Meira Paibi's nonviolent interventions provide alternatives to punitive or militarized conflict resolution. These practices prioritize healing, accountability, and long-term harmony. Contemporary institutions can adopt similar principles to foster more restorative and dialogue-based justice systems.

### ***Narrative and Performative Traditions as Tools for Mobilization***

Cultural performances, rituals, and community storytelling used by Manipuri women and visible in Ahilyabai's public acts of governance demonstrate how narrative and embodiment can mobilize communities and strengthen public engagement. Integrating these traditions into civic education and community programs can enhance collective resilience.

### ***Toward a Relational and Justice-Oriented Leadership Paradigm***

Together, these indigenous models call for a shift from top-down governance to leadership that values relationships, reciprocity, and ethical responsibility. Such an approach encourages policymakers and community leaders to foreground cultural knowledge and inclusiveness. This orientation revitalizes indigenous philosophies of governance and offers practical strategies for building compassionate and socially grounded leadership in contemporary India.

### **Conclusion**

Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy as a just, compassionate, and visionary ruler resonates deeply with the indigenous models of women's leadership found in Manipur's socio-political history. Both traditions challenge patriarchal frameworks by demonstrating how women's moral authority, experiential knowledge, and cultural practices shape sustainable and equitable governance. By bridging these contexts, this chapter underscores the significance of indigenous philosophies in shaping leadership narratives that privilege care, justice, and collective empowerment over hierarchical power.

Such a comparative exploration not only enriches historical and feminist scholarship but also provides a framework for reimagining contemporary leadership discourses rooted in indigenous values and

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women's lived experiences. This synthesis, grounded in ethical action and community well-being, offers a compelling vision for a future where leadership is transformative, inclusive, and deeply connected to cultural memory and justice.

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