

The Contribution of Ahilyabai Holkar in the Domain of Education and Social Welfare

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Abstract: 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 Dharmashastra texts, such as the Mitakshara and Dayabhaga, 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 to gain a nuanced understanding of the available literary, historical, and archival sources. This method helps in interpreting the prevalent social norms and cultural features of her kingdom. The comparative method helps distinguish her administrative policies and governance from those of other rulers of that era. It explores how Ahilyabai Holkar's governance prioritized inclusive education and public welfare (Mulye, 2024). She established numerous Pathshalas (schools) for both boys and girls, extended support to widows, and implemented development projects in "healthcare, water management, and infrastructure". The research reveals that Ahilyabai's leadership challenged the prevailing gender ideology of her time. Her actions reflected a vision of ethical governance that combined administrative strength with moral responsibility. She demonstrated that a woman in power could lead effectively while promoting social justice and empowerment (Chandel, 2023). The significance of this lies in its emphasis on Ahilyabai Holkar's role as a reformer whose contributions are often overlooked in mainstream historical narratives. Her legacy offers valuable insights into women's leadership and the historical roots of gender-sensitive governance. By revisiting her initiatives, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions on social reform, education, and gender equality in India.

Keywords: Ahilyabai Holkar, Social Reforms, Women's Rights, Education, 18th-Century India

I. INTRODUCTION

Ahilyabai Holkar, a celebrated queen of the Malwa region in 18th-century India, is remembered not only for her administrative excellence but also for her transformative contributions to education and social welfare. At a time when rigid patriarchal norms and regressive traditions dominated society, her reforms stood as a beacon of progressive governance and compassion. Through her initiatives, she challenged entrenched gender roles, promoted widow remarriage, emphasized women's education, and built

institutions that supported holistic community development. This research paper examines the significance of Ahilyabai Holkar's reforms and assesses their enduring relevance in contemporary Indian society. (Dave, 2024)

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The prevailing literature on Ahilyabai Holkar primarily focuses on her administrative abilities, diplomatic acumen, loyalty, and fidelity to her subjects. She greatly emphasized traditional education, temple construction, bridging the gap between different caste and class groups, and various social welfare activities required during that time. Her life and contributions have been explored in works such as *Matoshree* by Sumitra Mahajan (2021) [2], *Queen of Indomitable Spirit* by Chinmayi Mulye (2024) [3], and *Ahilyabai* by Arundhati Singh Chandel (2023) [1], as well as tributes in the *Organizer Magazine* (2024) [4].



[Fig.1: Ahilyabai Holkar's Throne at Maheshwar Fort]

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, using secondary data collected from authentic historical records, scholarly articles, books, and reputable online sources. A comparative analysis was conducted to evaluate the impact of Ahilyabai Holkar's initiatives on the prevailing societal norms of her time. Sources were selected based on their credibility, relevance, and academic rigour to ensure the accuracy and depth of the analysis.

IV. EARLY LIFE AND BACKGROUND

Ahilyabai is a prominent figure from India's historical past; she was born on May 31, 1725, to Sushila Shinde and Malkoji Shinde, a Patil (town chief) of Chondi, Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra. She was born into a family that upheld high moral and ethical values, which were reflected in her actions throughout her life. Even from a young age, Ahilyabai exhibited the qualities of a leader. Growing up in an era when women were socially excluded and confined to

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patriarchal norms, she was fortunate to receive an education from her father, a rare privilege for girls of her time. (Dave, 2024)

The Subedar of Indore, Malhar Rao Holkar, was passing through Chondi in 1733 on his way to Poona. During this halt near a Shiva temple, he observed an eight-year-old girl worshipping Shiva with immense devotion, undistracted by the royal camp full of opulence. Her simplicity and unwavering focus intrigued the Maharaja, who, impressed by her demeanor, decided to make her his daughter-in-law. Khanderao and Ahilyabai were married within that year. (*Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar*, 2024)

After her marriage, she spent most of her time learning valuable skills from her mother-in-law, Gautama Bai, and her husband, Khanderao. The Maharaja, recognizing her immense potential, took it upon himself to train her in administration, accounts, politics, military strategy, and skills such as warfare and archery. Ahilyabai actively participated in military campaigns alongside her husband, showcasing her proficiency.

However, Ahilyabai's life was marked by sorrow and grievous incidents, as she had experienced a challenging period. She contemplated committing Sati after Khanderao's death in 1754, but was discouraged by her father-in-law (Dave, 2024).

In 1766, the death of her father-in-law, Malhar Rao Holkar, left her dispirited. Shortly afterwards, she lost her son, Malerao. The grief continued in 1791 with the tragic death of her daughter, Muktabai, who committed Sati. These personal tragedies were compounded by political instability, which posed a significant threat to the Holkar kingdom during this period.

Despite these challenges, Ahilyabai's intense devotion to Shiva remained unwavering. Upon her coronation in December 1767, she adopted the state seal, which read "श्री शंकर आजावरुन" (By Shiva's command), signifying her deep faith and acknowledgement of Shiva as the supreme ruler of her kingdom. Her faith and resilience empowered her to champion the rights of women and the marginalized, advocating for their education, opportunities, and protection against the patriarchal laws of the time. Through her leadership, she not only nurtured the welfare of her people but also laid the foundation for lasting social reform. (Organizer Magazine, 2024)

V. RESULTS

The findings of this study show that Ahilyabai Holkar made remarkable contributions to education in 18th-century India. She focused on making education accessible to all, especially women, and promoting formal and practical learning. She established schools, libraries, and craft workshops, and supported scholars and poets. This section presents these findings in different parts for better understanding.

A. Education for All

Ahilyabai Holkar strongly believed that education should be available to everyone, regardless of caste, class, or gender. She established schools (Pathshalas) that taught various subjects, including the Vedas, Sanskrit, literature, mathematics, and science.

These schools also emphasised moral education and the development of a society founded on values and ethical principles. Her vision was to erect an educated and self-reliant society. (Mulye, 2024)

B. Promotion of Women's Education

Ahilyabai gave special importance to educating women. She believed that a woman's life should not be limited to household work. Women under her rule were taught religious texts, music, arts, and handicrafts. These subjects not only enhanced knowledge but also provided them with skills to become independent. She understood that empowering women would contribute to the growth and development of the entire society.

C. Institutions and Infrastructure

To support learning, Ahilyabai established educational spaces, including schools, libraries, and public halls. She ensured that these institutions were easily accessible to the local people. Some important institutions she established include:

- i. School near Bajarajeshwar Temple – Maheshwar, Madhya Pradesh
- ii. Ahilyabai's Library – Inside Maheshwar Fort
- iii. Weavers' Peth – A craft training center in Maheshwar
- iv. Ahilyāpura Colony – Ambad, Jalna district (for skill-based education)
- v. Maheshwar Weaving Workshops – For promoting local crafts and vocational training.

D. Vocational and Practical Learning

Besides formal education, Ahilyabai also supported skill-based training. She opened workshops where people, especially women, could learn crafts such as weaving and embroidery. These centers helped people earn a livelihood and become self-reliant. This shows that she promoted not only academic learning but also practical life skills essential for independence.

E. Support to Scholars and Culture

Ahilyabai was also a great supporter of learning, culture, and literature. She invited poets, scholars, and intellectuals from across India to her court, providing them complete freedom to share their knowledge. She also encouraged the translation of important religious and scholarly texts into local languages, so more people could benefit from them.

Notable names she supported include:

- i. Krishnadas Shastri – Religious Scholar
- ii. Moropant Paradkar – Renowned Marathi poet
- iii. Shahir Anantaphandi – Famous ballad singer
- iv. Khushali Ram – a Sanskrit scholar from Jayanagar

VI. SOCIAL WELFARE REFORMS AND PUBLIC WELL-BEING

Ahilyabai Holkar's governance is remembered not only for educational reforms but also for her deep commitment to social welfare. She made dedicated efforts to improve the lives of widows, travellers, and other vulnerable segments of society. At a time when the royal focus was primarily on



military or political expansion, Ahilyabai directed her energy and personal wealth toward fulfilling the basic needs of people— shelter, food, health, and dignity.

A. Welfare of Widows and Women in Need

Widows in the 18th century often faced social rejection and hardship. Ahilyabai opposed the cruel practice of Sati and protected widows from being forced into it. Although she once considered Sati herself after her husband's death, she was discouraged by her father-in-law and later became a champion for widow welfare.

i. She provided:

- Shelter homes for widows and orphaned women
- Elementary education helped them develop various skills to make themselves self-sufficient.
- Support for widow remarriage, which was revolutionary for that time. (Dave, 2024)

B. Construction of Wells, Roads, and Rest Houses

Ahilyabai believed that good governance meant attending to people's everyday needs and concerns. She spent her funds on city development:

- i. Wells and tanks for drinking water
- ii. Paved roads for easy travel
- iii. Rest houses (Dharmshalas) for pilgrims and travellers

She built these facilities across India, not just in her kingdom. For example:

- i. Well and Dharamshala, Varanasi, Gaya
- ii. Water tank and road repair, Maheshwar
- iii. Rest shelters for pilgrims, Mathura, Rameshwaram

C. Free Food Distribution and Charity

Ahilyabai believed that no one should sleep hungry. She financed:

- i. **Free kitchens (Anna-daan)** in temples
- ii. **Food storage** for emergencies and famines
- iii. **Charitable donations** to the poor and sick.

D. Religious and Social Inclusivity

Though Ahilyabai was strongly Hindu, her territory was free from discrimination against other religions or ethnic groups. She rebuilt and maintained temples of many sects and supported people of different castes and backgrounds. Her charitable work and religious donations extended beyond any single community.



[Fig.2: Places Where She Built Temples]

E. Health and Traditional Medical Support

Before modern hospitals, Ahilyabai supported traditional healthcare through:

- i. Ayurvedic treatment center in temples and ashrams
- ii. Distribution of medicinal herbs
- iii. Support for local vaidya (doctors) who offered free treatment

These efforts provided accessible healthcare to low-income families and pilgrims, especially in rural areas.

F. Tree Plantation and Environmental Care

Ahilyabai also recognized the importance of trees and greenery for public health and environmental well-being. She used her private funds to plant thousands of shade-giving and medicinal trees along roads, near wells, and around temples.

i. Trees planted included:

- **Peepal (Ficus religiosa)** – air-purifying and sacred
- **Neem (Azadirachta indica)** – used for medicine
- **Banyan (Ficus benghalensis)** – provided deep shade
- **Mango** - regulates microclimates
- **Tamarind** – provided cool shelter and promoted soil health
- **Amla (Indian gooseberry)** – used in Ayurvedic treatments

These plantations served both spiritual and practical purposes, providing travellers with rest, enhancing the environment, and promoting health.

"Let the trees give shade to the poor and the traveller; let them stand as guardians of peace," she said.

To this day, old banyan and neem trees in temple courtyards and near rest houses in Maheshwar and other towns are credited to Ahilyabai's efforts.

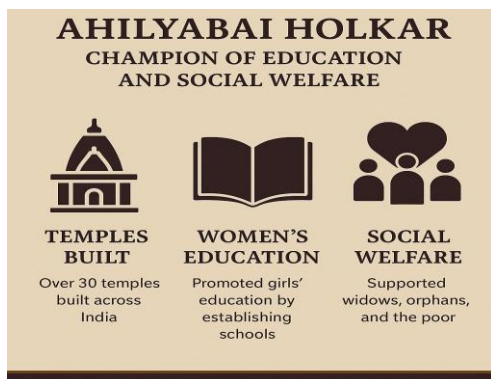
VII. CONCLUSION

Ahilyabai Holkar served as the most powerful woman ruler of the Maratha kingdom of Malwa. Through her deep commitment to education, women's empowerment, public welfare, and environmental care, she challenged the patriarchal and discriminatory systems of her time. Her focus on inclusive education, support for widows, construction of roads and resthouses, promotion of traditional healthcare, and tree plantation—all funded from her wealth—reflects not just administrative excellence but also a moral responsibility toward society. Unlike many rulers whose legacy is marked by warfare and power, Ahilyabai's greatness lies in her service to humanity. Her work established long-lasting institutions and social practices that continue to inspire modern values, including gender equality, community service, and sustainable development. Her example and public policies helped create a more compassionate view of widows. The construction of wells, roads, and rest houses made life easier for ordinary people and pilgrims who often walked long distances under harsh conditions. Free food services were available to all, without restrictions based on caste or religion. She viewed feeding the hungry as both a spiritual and social duty. The temples she constructed often served multiple roles, including places of worship, shelter, education, and healing.



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Her legacy continues to be celebrated during her 300th birth anniversary in 2025. (Dave, 2024) (*Organizer Magazine, 2024*). It reminds us that real progress begins when leadership is rooted in compassion, knowledge, and justice.



[Fig.3: Visual Summary of Ahilyabai Holkar's Contributions to Education and Social Welfare]

DECLARATION STATEMENT

I must verify the accuracy of the following information as the article's author.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE



Mahima Soni has completed her postgraduate degree in Sociology from Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), Bhopal. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Arts from Barkatullah University, where she majored in Sociology. Throughout her academic journey, she has maintained a strong interest in social justice, equality, and inclusive education. Actively involved in community service, she was an enthusiastic participant in the National Service Scheme (NSS) and has been awarded a 'B' Certificate in recognition of her contributions. Her academic interests are deeply rooted in areas such as gender studies, Indian social reform movements, and the structural dimensions of Indian society. In 2024, she qualified for the UGC–National Eligibility Test (NET) in Sociology with a 93.7 percentile, reflecting her academic dedication and potential as a future educator and researcher. Currently, Mahima is preparing for the Civil Services Examination, with the aspiration of serving the nation through administrative and educational reform. Her passion lies in contributing meaningfully to the development of an inclusive, equitable, and socially aware education system in India. Her recent research focuses on the life and legacy of Ahilyabai Holkar, a historical figure who exemplifies gender sensitive governance and grassroots social reform. Through this work, Mahima aims to highlight the significance of past reformers in shaping contemporary discussions on gender, education, and social equity.

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