

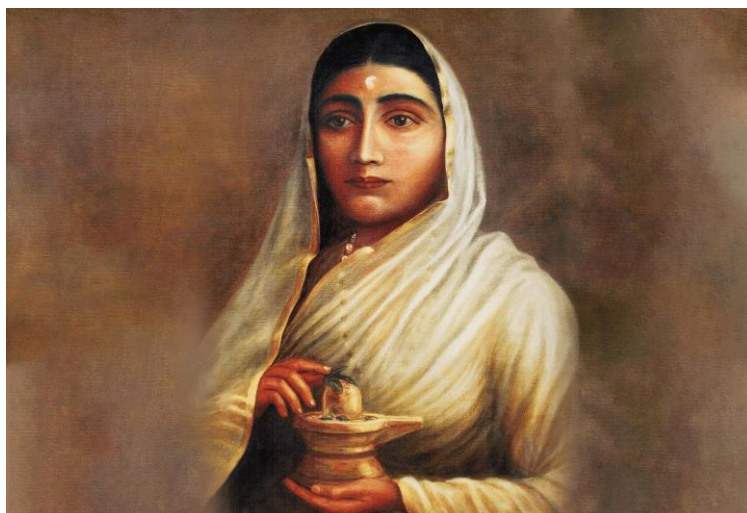


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Ahilyadevi Holkar

Ahilyadevi Holkar is regarded as one of the most exemplary female rulers in Indian history. As a ruler of the Malwa kingdom, she spread the message of dharma and promoted industrialization in the 18th century. Known for her wisdom and administrative skills, Ahilyadevi had a humble beginning in a small village near the Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra. She was born in Chondi to the village head, Mankoji Shinde, on May 31, 1725. Women did not go to school during that time, but her father taught her how to read and write.

Young Ahilyadevi's character and simplicity impressed Malhar Rao Holkar, the caretaker of the Malwa territory, and he served as a commander in service to Peshwa Bajirao. So great was his liking for the girl that Malhar Rao got Ahilyadevi married to his son, Khanderao, at the age of eight, in 1733. Twelve years after the wedding, in the year 1754, Ahilyadevi's husband got killed during the siege of Kumbher fort. Grief-stricken, it is said that Ahilyadevi wanted to sacrifice herself by committing Sati. But it was her father-in-law, Malhar Rao, who dissuaded her against it and instead trained her in administrative and military matters. Her father-in-law was fully aware of Ahilyadevi's administrative and political abilities and fully believed in her. After the deaths of her father-in-law in 1766 and her son, Malerao, the very next year, Ahilyadevi petitioned the Peshwa to allow her to take over the reign of Malwa. She had been thoroughly trained in military and administration matters by then, brilliant at it.



Though some of the nobles objected to this, she had the full support of the Holkar army. On many occasions, Ahilyadevi led the army herself from the front like a brave warrior, armed

with bows and arrows on the elephant. The Peshwa granted her permission to take over in 1767, and Ahilyadevi proceeded to rule Malwa wisely and sensibly for the next 28 years. During her reign, Malwa was never once attacked, when at that time, the whole of Central India was facing a power struggle, with battles being fought for the throne. Under her rule, Malwa remained an oasis of stability and peace.

She turned her capital city, Maheshwar, into a literary, musical, artistic, and industrial center. She even established a textile industry there, now home to the famous Maheshwar saris. Her simple residence was also a center of inspiration and reverence for the people. It is still maintained in the same state as it used to be at the time of Ahilyadevi. Rani Ahilyadevi never observed purdah, held daily public meetings, and was accessible to anyone who needed her. Ahilyadevi turned Malwa into a prosperous land, starting with improving the place's infrastructure by building forts and roads and repairing Ghats. She built wells, tanks, and rest houses across areas stretching from the Himalayas to pilgrimage centers in South India. She sponsored festivals and gave donations to build, repair and restore temples.

Ahilyadevi initiated reforms in the land revenue system of the kingdom. She divided the whole kingdom into three segments- Northern, Central, and Southern. Ahilyadevi had simplified the procedure of recovering land revenue. She looked after the public fund and often carried out surprise inspections of the work of her officials. Ahilyadevi knew well that for the country's progress, growth of agriculture and commerce was essential. Hence, she paid particular attention to the development of the farmers and improved their lot, and provided them with all kinds of facilities.

From Badrinath, Dwarka, and Omkareshwar to Puri, Gaya, and Rameswaram, every holy pilgrimage place in India had a contribution, in one way or another, from Ahilyadevi Holkar. Most notable was the famous Kashi Vishwanath temple, which she rebuilt and restored in 1780, 111 years after its destruction by Aurangzeb. The warrior queen passed away on August 13, 1795, at 70. Centuries later, her legacy lives on in the form of the numerous temples and Dharamshala and in the amount of public work she dedicated her life to.

She built hundreds of temples, more than 30 Dharamshala and garibkhanas, and numerous ghats and wells, all for the welfare of the people. Ahilyadevi Holkar's 28-year-reign during the 18th century is still cited as a benevolent and effective governance model.

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Reference:

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2. Lokmata Ahilyabai - Arvind Javlekar