

♦ LOKMATA AHILYABAI HOLKAR ♦

# AN ETERNAL FLAME



SHE TOUCHED INDIA'S HEART AND SOUL



LOKMATA AHILYABAI HOLKAR

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*Dedicated To*

*The mountains, rivers, trees and people of India*



## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Social Studies Foundation presents this commemorative coffee table book with profound honour and a deep sense of reverence, to mark the third birth centenary of the illustrious Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar. As we celebrate the 300th year since her birth, this volume seeks to offer a fitting tribute to the life and legacy of one of India's most enlightened and benevolent rulers.

Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar's reign stands as a luminous chapter in the annals of Indian history. She was not merely a ruler but a visionary, whose wisdom, courage, and devotion to her people transcended the norms of her time. Her enlightened governance transformed the Malwa region into a centre of prosperity, spiritual revival, and architectural splendour. With unwavering resolve, she undertook the restoration of sacred temples, revitalized infrastructure, and promoted the arts, culture, and learning beyond the boundaries of Malwa, across India. Her rule was characterized by her resolve for the cultural unification of India and deep-seated compassion for the welfare of her subjects.

As we present this work on the occasion of her third birth centenary, our aim is to capture not just the historical magnitude of her achievements but also the timeless values she embodied. Through a blend of evocative visuals and meticulously curated narratives, this book aspires to offer a window into her world—where leadership was imbued with empathy, governance was an act of service, and spirituality was intertwined with everyday life. Her legacy, undimmed by the passage of centuries, remains a source of inspiration for those who seek to lead with wisdom and integrity.

In celebrating the 300th birth anniversary of this extraordinary woman, we hope this coffee table book will serve as more than just a tribute. We hope it will be a beacon for future generations to reflect on the profound impact of Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar's life and deeds—an enduring testament to her spirit of resilience, generosity and unwavering devotion to her people. We feel honoured to present the book to our esteemed readers, and we do this with a sense of gratitude. We extend our warmest wishes to readers as they embark on an exciting journey through her remarkable life.

We are deeply thankful to **Hon. Prime Minister Shri. Narendra Modi** and **Pujya Amma Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi**, Chief Patron, Lokmata Ahilyabai Samaroh Samiti, for their inspiring messages, which have added immense value to the book.

We would like to humbly say that this is not a complete picture of Ahilyabai's life and works. During the journey of compiling the matter for the book, we were pleasantly surprised to discover many more places and artefacts which narrate the story of Ahilyabai. This journey will surely continue for future!

Social Studies Foundation

## EDITOR'S NOTE

संगच्छध्वं संवदध्वं सं वो मनांसि जानताम्।  
देवा भागं यथा पूर्वे सञ्जानाना उपासते।।

*Let us come together, converse together, let our minds be one;  
As Gods in ancient times sat together in unison to worship.*

— *Rig Ved, X-192 - 2*

Ahilyabai Holkar believed in India's oneness because she believed in the oneness of the mankind. This sets her apart from her contemporaries. She was unique. *Ekamevadweetiya*. This book is a gentle reminder. Ahilyabai's life story is the stuff of which dreams are made: from a pretty, nine-year-old Dhangar (the shepherd community known for hard work and honesty) girl to the Holkar queenship is an inspiring tale. Fate blessed Ahilyabai with greatness, Time ratified it, and Narmada, the great river, sanctified it with its sweet, holy water. Ahilyabai was a hymn on the lips of Malwa. She will remain so for many centuries.

As the Malwa queen Ahilyabai was a close witness to the unprecedented political turmoil in the eighteenth century India. The sub-continent was chock-a-block with wars, fragile alliances, and peace treaties which were violated even before the ink had turned dry. Loyalty was up for sale. Amidst such humongous chaos, Ahilyabai stood head and shoulders above her peers — all men. They believed in sword, she trusted her soul. Confrontation was their weakness, conciliation was her strength.

Ahilyabai led a spartan life. According to her biographers, she sat on a quilt in her '*darbar*' and her diet was frugal. Her uncontested status as the people's queen lent grandeur to her simplicity. A true democrat. A feminist to the core, minus the sloganeering. Ahilyabai's life resonates with modern sensibilities in ways more than one. First, she avoided the royalty baggage. She preferred egalitarianism to emeralds.

Second, Ahilyabai was accessible to all: philosophers and priests, administrators and artisans, traders and tillers, bankers and bards. She held even the scales of justice, regardless of class and creed. Also, she encouraged business and trade, art and craftsmanship. Third, Ahilyabai had a soft spot for the marginalised communities. The Bhills and Pendharris, who were seen as outlaws, for their wrongdoings, she was equally keen on improving their lot. She deployed the Bhills to guard the jungles with one paisa as their remuneration, it is said. Fourth, Ahilyabai set up schools for girls, and prodded women to be entrepreneurs, even if on a modest scale. This led to the timeless Maheshwari symphony, the exquisite sari which wove hope and dignity into the lives of the village women. Fifth and the most important, Ahilyabai's vision travelled beyond the boundaries of Malwa to the whole of Bharat encompassing divergent cultures, arts and learnings.

Similarly, women who came together to make pots, earthen lamps and wicks for countless temples built by Ahilyabai across India were kind of forerunners to the present-day self-help groups floated by women to augment their income.

Ahilyabai did all this and much more for her people long before the West bumped into the welfare state. Suffragette and Simone de Beauvoir came a good two centuries later. History has hailed Ahilyabai as a progressive ruler. She built roads, set up shelter homes, food centres and water tanks for pilgrims and travellers, and sanctuaries for birds and animals. She was liberal in her grants to Sanskrit schools and 'mutts' across India. She ensured that 'jyotirlinga' across the country got adequate supply of the 'Ganga-jal' all through the year.

However, Indians are indebted to Ahilyabai for her temple crusade. It was a mammoth and peaceful movement, which stirred India. What prompted Ahilyabai to reconstruct temples? Was this just a temple tantrum? We need to understand Ahilyabai's weltanschauung.

First, wanton destruction of temples by Muslim invaders such as Mohammad Gazni and Aurangzeb had wounded India's collective morale. A bruised civilisation needed a healing touch. Ahilyabai thought, and rightly so, that Gods could fuse India into a cohesive whole. Second, For Ahilyabai, 'Dharma' was a way of life, and not bigotry, a thought upheld by Indian philosophers and saints, and which is ingrained in India's collective psyche.

Ahilyabai was proud of her Holkar legacy. The Peshwas, the Holkars and the Scindias were the formidable pillars of the Maratha Confederacy which took on the Mughals. Moreover, the Confederacy transcended the boundaries of their regime as far as Sindh. Simultaneously, Ahilyabai drew spiritual sustenance from Maharashtra's saint-poets, such as Jnaneshwar, Eknath, Namdeo, Tukaram, Janabai and Bahinabai, who penned soulful verses on devotion and compassion in simple, home-spun Marathi.

The Holkar history is replete with enough evidence to prove that Ahilyabai was well versed in defence matters. For instance, a vibrant intelligence network was in place, and a cannon factory too. Envoys from other states called on her from time to time. She had appointed ambassadors to various courts in the country. Comparisons can be off-putting, even detestable-especially when the East is juxtaposed with the West. Yet, one can't resist the temptation of drawing a parallel between Ahilyabai and St. Joan of Arc (1412-1431) of France. Although separated by geography, culture and three centuries both shared a bond. Both displayed exceptional courage when driven against the wall. Scholars and chroniclers have memorialised the Maheshwar queen in glowing terms. Said Dr. Jadunath Sarkar, "Ahilyadevi was a top class diplomat. Her charity was not naive religiousness. They are permanent centres to inculcate values".

In 'Memoirs of Central India', considered a classic, Scottish official Sir John Malcolm has described Ahilyabai as "one of purest and most exemplary rulers that ever existed". Acharya Vinoba Bhave, thinker, Bhudan crusader and one of Mahatma Gandhi's trusted colleagues, said, "Ahilyadevi's rule was a novel experiment in Indian history...Ahilyadevi remains unmatched in the entire history of India". Social scientist Eleanor Zelliott is grateful to Ahilyabai for taking up women's issues.

Rich praise - and well deserved.

Ahilyabai Holkar was the priceless tiara in the crown of the Maratha Confederacy. That she was accepted as leader by her male contemporaries is a testimony to her sterling qualities and unblemished reputation. Ahilyabai's name has been inscribed in gold on the trees and mountains of India, the wind chiselling out each letter lovingly. A popular adage in central India sums up Ahilyabai Holkar's life and times. 'A queen who gave us the Ram-Rajya'.

We bow to the people's queen, Mother India's dearest daughter.

Ambarish Mishra



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to all those who lent a helping hand to the book. Their unwavering support, efforts, and resources have made this project a reality.

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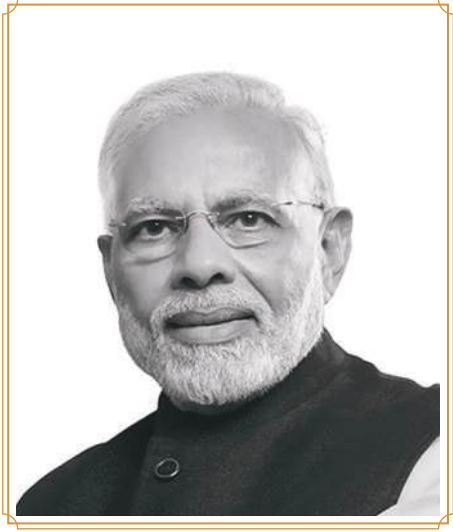
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'An Eternal Flame' is a collective endeavor, and we are deeply grateful to all those who participated in this joyous journey.

Social Studies Foundation, Pune





## PRIME MINISTER MESSAGE

It is heartening to learn about the Coffee Table Book on Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar being brought out by Social Studies Foundation. Three centuries after her birth, her life continues to be an inspiration for one and all.

A remarkable leader, Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar transformed her kingdom into a place of justice and prosperity. She pursued governance as a sacred responsibility to make sure that the needs and aspirations of the people came first.

From building and restoring temples, to the construction of roads, wells, and Dharmashalas, her indefatigable efforts have left behind an indelible imprint on our cultural and spiritual landscape.

As the Member of Parliament of Varanasi and as the Chairman of the Shree Somnath Trust, I also have a special connection with Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar. From Somnath to Vishwanath, she worked on rejuvenation of our pilgrimage centres. Her work stands as a towering symbol of her devotion and vision for a future that remains connected to the past.

Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar's contribution to the spiritual and cultural rejuvenation of Bharat inspires us in our present efforts to focus on both Vikas and Virasat. Blessed with a sense of justice and empathy, Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar strived for the welfare of artisans, farmers, and merchants, supported various social reforms and promoted social inclusion through the upliftment of underprivileged communities.

Drawing inspiration from the values of great reformers like Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar, we march ahead confidently to make every individual an equal partner in the development of our country. The vision of Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas is creating an inclusive, fair and just society that is building a Viksit Bharat.

The year-long Tricentenary celebrations have not only honoured Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar's unparalleled contributions, but have also ignited a renewed sense of awareness and pride in the next generation. On this momentous occasion, we bow to the memory of Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar - an eternal source of inspiration and a symbol of the unwavering spirit of our nation.

Narendra Modi



# AMMA (SRI MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI DEVI) MESSAGE

ॐ नमः शिवाय

Spiritual knowledge ignites the soul when it moves from the head to the heart, transforming into the most beautiful and ultimate gift of enlightenment. Our sacred land of Bharat, a cradle of enlightenment, has birthed countless divine incarnations, saints, and sages. These self-realized souls illumine the path of the past, present, and future generations with their profound and unparalleled wisdom. Many of these great souls guided their people on a spiritual journey and ruled with dharma, inspiring the nation to walk the path of dharma. These illumined souls were not only men but also women. While the world engages in discussions about gender equality, Bharat has been a pioneer in this ancient practice since the Vedic period. Rajamata Sadhvi Ahilyabai Holkar shines as a luminous beacon within this noble lineage—a testament to the power of compassion, leadership, and spiritual power.

Compassion is the first spark and final beacon in our journey of spirituality and worldly existence. Rajamata Sadhvi Ahilyabai Holkar embodies compassion, courage, determination, patience, perseverance, and unwavering patriotism. Through her boundless love, fearlessness, and selflessness, she rose to symbolise the cherished and revered role of a motherly figure in the rich tapestry of Bharat's history.

As an extraordinary visionary and a majestic ruler, Rajamata Sadhvi Ahilyabai Holkar's reign was a shining example of exceptional leadership. Her contributions touched nearly every facet of life, illuminating pathways in social welfare, humanitarian efforts, culture, education, spirituality, religion, architecture, and more. Her humanitarian legacy transcended the borders of her kingdom, leaving an indelible mark across Bharat, that continues to reverberate in the hearts of millions. She demonstrated to the world the incredible power of women, showcasing how they can exemplify the finest motherly virtues while courageously leading a nation through hardships, including the relentless trials posed by foreign invasions.

Let us draw inspiration from her extraordinary legacy and continue to elevate our spirits. Together, we can embrace the profound truths that light our path towards a brighter, more equitable future. Let us try to embody the compassion and strength exemplified by Rajamata Sadhvi Ahilyabai Holkar, forging a legacy of hope and resilience for generations to come.

ॐ नमः शिवाय

AMMA (SRI MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI DEVI)  
(Chief Patron, Lokmata Ahilyabai Samaroh Samiti)



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*Hardwork and perseverance will surely lead you to success and wealth*

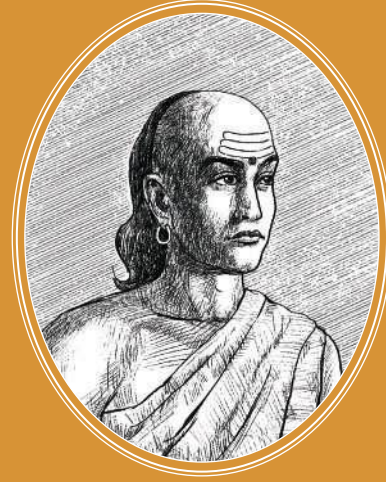
For thirty years her Reign of Peace  
The land in blessings did encrease  
And she was Blessed by every Tongue  
by Stern & gentle, old and young.  
& where her works of love remain  
on mountain pass, on hill or plain  
there stops the traveller a while,  
and eyes it with a mournful smile  
with muttring lips that seem to say  
“This was the work of Ahalya Bae”

Joanna Baillie

Scottish Poetess (1762-1851)



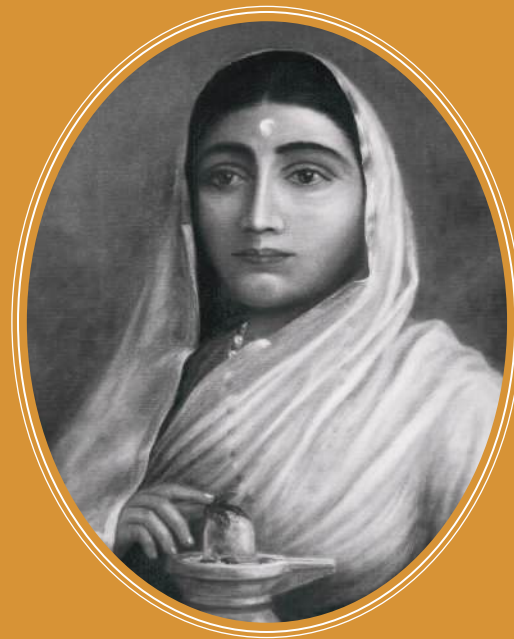
*Lord Shree Ram*



*Arya Chanakya*



*Adi Shankaracharya*



*Lokmata Ahilyadevi*

*The Almighty shaped a vast expanse into the sacred land of Bharat, where countless luminaries have fortified its intrinsic unity. Lord Ramchandra, through his exemplary life, infused the essence of righteousness across the nation. With his unparalleled intellect, Acharya Chanakya laid the foundation for political and administrative cohesion. Adi Shankaracharya firmly anchored the nation's religious, spiritual, and cultural harmony. In this illustrious lineage of nation-builders, Lokmata Ahilyabai shines as a resplendent beacon of unity and strength.*

# THE AMBASSADOR OF INDIAN CULTURE

Ahilyabai Holkar is often referred to as ‘The Maharani of Malwa’, but to her subjects, she was *Lokmata* meaning ‘Mother of the people’ or ‘Goddess of the people’- ‘Devi’ In India, the term *Lokmata* is commonly used for rivers, which are revered as sacred entities and life-giving forces. Similarly, Ahilyabai held a special place in the hearts of the people, much like a sacred river.

Even today, in the Malwa region, Ahilyabai is fondly addressed as *Ahilyadevi* or simply *Matoshree* (respected mother). Though she formally ruled over Malwa her immense public works, generosity and religious devotion earned her the title of *Lokmata* across all of India. She truly was the ambassador of Indian culture.

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महारानी थी मालवा की, महान थे उनके कार्य  
जनहित के सब निर्णय, सबको थे स्वीकार्य  
राजकाज में निपुण रही, भारत में नाम कमाया  
मालवा की इस देवी ने, संस्कृति का ध्वज लहराया

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- लोकमाता • पुण्यश्लोक • मांसा
- प्रातःस्मरणीय • न्यायदायिनी
- युगप्रवर्तक • शिवयोगिनी • धर्म
- लोकराज्ञी • लोकोत्तर • संन्यस
- शिवचरणरत • कर्मयोगिनी • रा

*During her lifetime and later people showered a range of epithets on Ahilyabai Holkar. A few of them are here*

देव • गंगाजलनिर्मल • मातोश्री •  
पुण्यात्मा • पुण्यशीला • देवी •  
परायण • राजयोगिनी • साध्वी •  
तस्वामिनी • प्रजादितकारिणी •  
जमाता • न्यायप्रिय • राष्ट्रमाता •



# AHILYA WEDS KHANDERAO

Ahilya's marriage with Khanderao, Malharrao Holkar's son, was solemnised with great fanfare in 1733. The exact date is not available, though.

Ahilya's father Mankoji Shinde was the Patil of Chaundi, a sleepy hamlet near Ahilyanagar (Ahmednagar) in Maharashtra. The benevolent village headman took great care of the village and its local inhabitants. His spacious 'wada' was always chock-a-block with villagers, travellers and local officials. Moreover, Mankoji's lineage was impeccable.

---

शिवजी को समर्पित श्रद्धा, सती सा उसका था आचार  
केश सजीले, नयन थे गहरे, सौंदर्य उसका रहा अपार  
मल्हारराव ने देखी दिव्यता, प्रारब्ध मन ही मुस्कुरा रहा  
पुत्रवधु बन चली अहिल्या, इतिहास स्वयं पर इतरा रहा

---

How Subhedar Malharrao Holkar chose Ahilya as his daughter-in-law is a cute story. On his way to Pune he, leading a large paraphernalia, took a halt at Chaundi, in the Beed 'pargana', in the evening. Tents were set up and local officials arrived to look after the guests.

Malharrao was talking to them as he scanned the landscape. Cows were coming back home and stars were sparkling in the cobalt blue sky. Soft strains of 'bhajans' were serenading the nearby Lord Shiva temple.

Malharrao was taken aback when he saw a little girl, draped in an exquisite 'nau-waari' (nine yard) saari, taking measured steps to the temple, even as she held in her tiny hands a silver plate of flowers, holy water and incense sticks.

A picture of grace and confidence, Malharrao thought.

The girl cleaned the temple courtyard and the sanctum sanctorum; offered flowers to the deity and poured the holy water and milk on the 'shivlinga'. A row of earthen lamps made the temple glow with splendour.



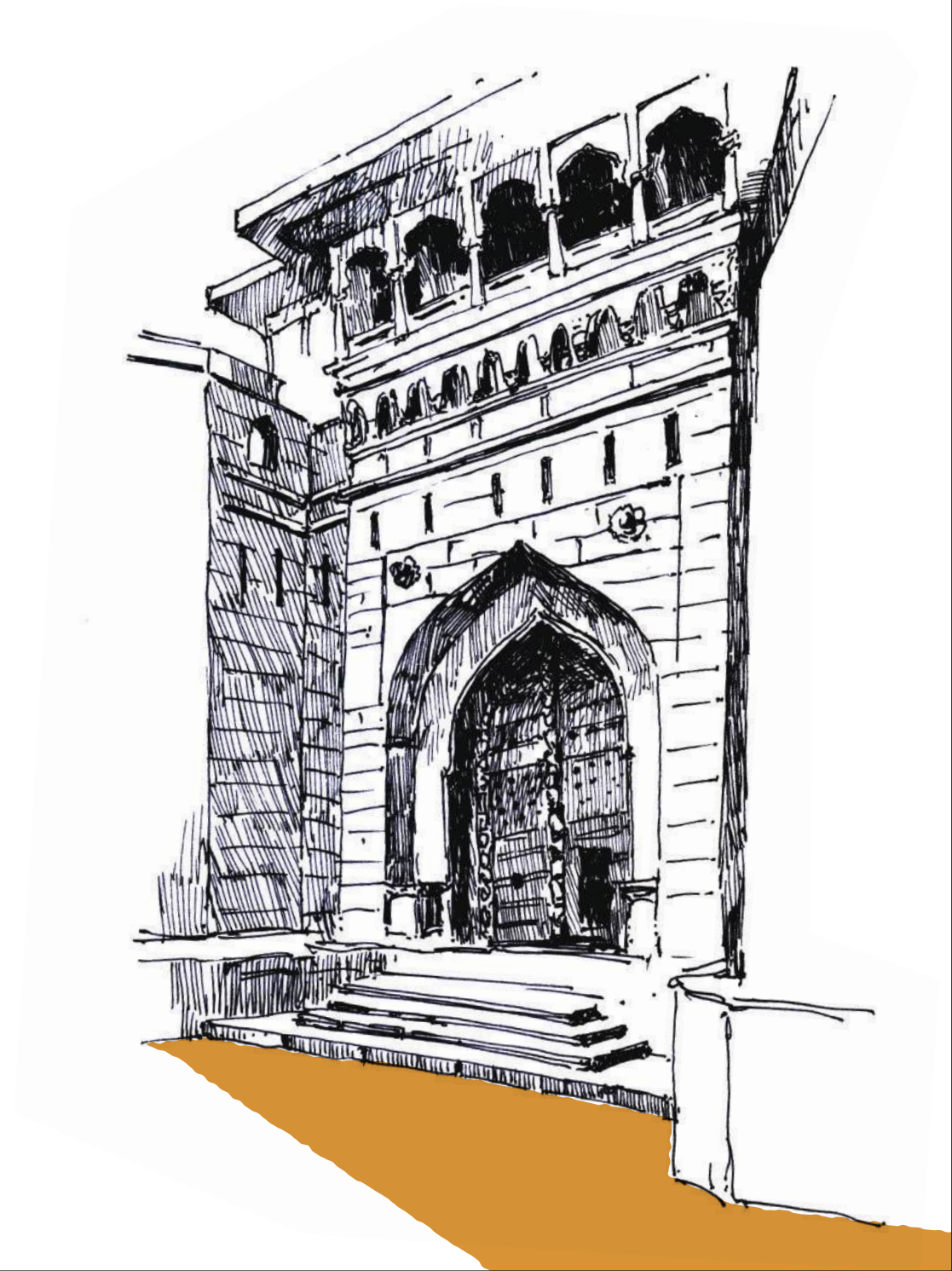


*Ahilyeshwar temple, Chaundi, Maharashtra*

The girl looked pretty : round face, lustrous hair and intense eyes. Her movements were quick and graceful. The Subhedar consulted his colleagues. “I think she should be my daughter-in-law,” he said. They wholeheartedly endorsed his choice. Soon, the girl’s parents were summoned.

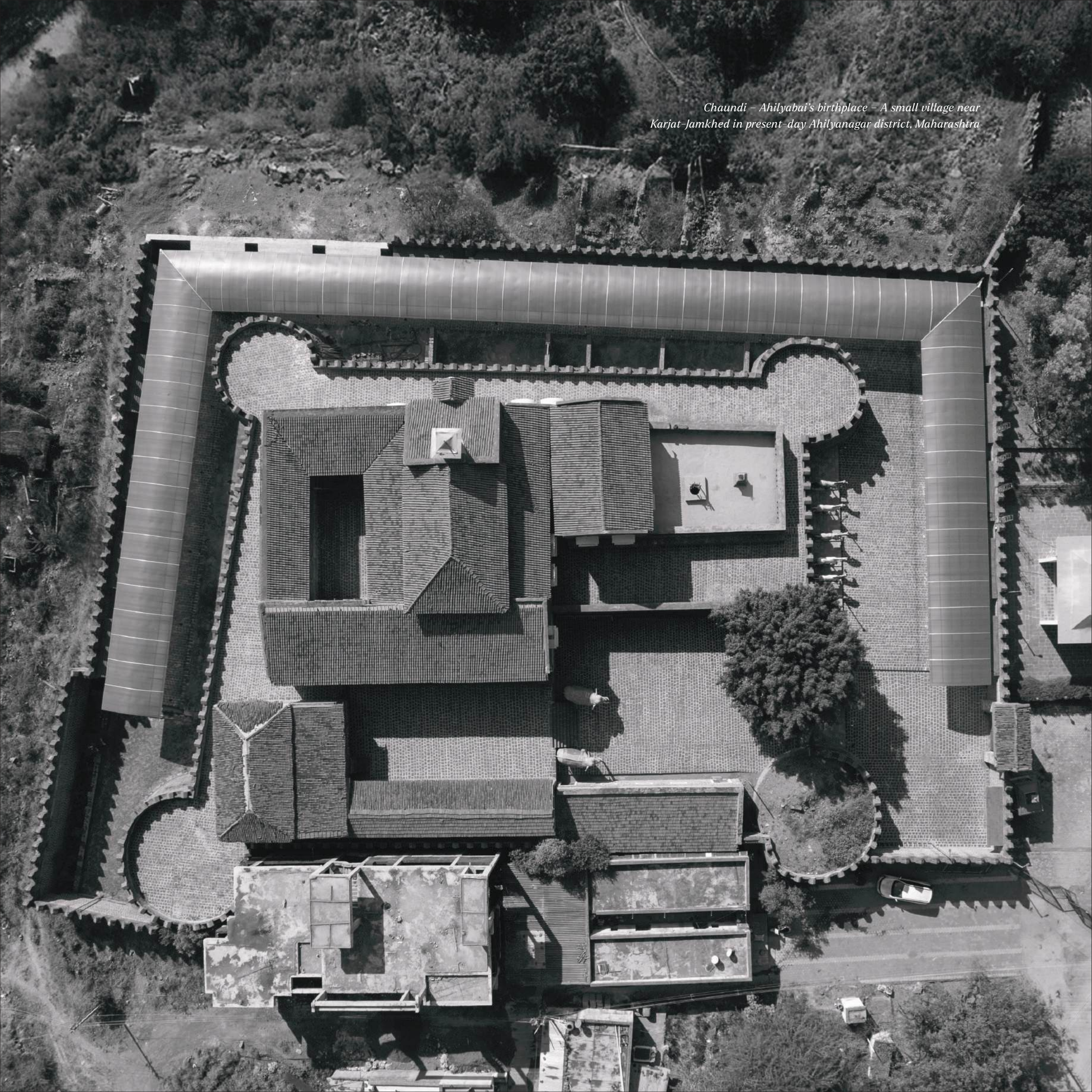
Mankoji Shinde and his wife Sushilabai were exceedingly happy. According to another source, it was Bajirao Peshwa who saw the little Ahilya on her way to the temple, and spoke about her to Malharrao.

The wedding took place at the majestic Shaniwar Wada in Pune in 1733. Bajirao Peshwa, so goes the story, offered the bride gold ornaments weighing 200 ‘tola’. Wow!



अखंडित लक्ष्मी अलंकृत राजमान्य  
स्नेहांकित मलारजी ढोळकर दंडवत.  
विनंती उपरी येथील कुशल जाणोन  
स्वकीय लेखन करणे. ह्यांतर  
चिरंजीव खंडेराउ ह्याच्या लग्नाची तीथ  
ज्येष्ठ शुद्ध ७ सुरंजेस कर्तव्य निश्चय  
जाला आढे. तरी आपण येऊन  
लग्नमंडप शोभिवंत करावा.  
रवाना चंद्र ११ मोहरम हे विनंती.

*Chaundi – Ahilyabai's birthplace – A small village near Karjat-Jamkhed in present-day Ahilyanagar district, Maharashtra*





*Near a temple in Chaundi, Subhedar Malharrao Holkar first noticed young Ahilya as she diligently went to the temple to light oil lamps. Struck by her simplicity, confidence, and devotion, he saw in her the qualities of a great leader*





*Drone picture of present day Chaundi*



H.H. THE MAHARAJAH BARA MALHARRAO SUBHADAR  
SAHEB HOLKAR.

GOTAMA BAI HOLKAR.

# MADE OF STEEL

Ahilyabai's mothers-in-law, Gautamabai and Harkubai (there were two others) cast an abiding influence on the young daughter-in-law.

Ahilya was a little girl when she stepped into the Holkarwada as Khanderao's wife. Gautamabai, the seniormost among Malharrao's wives, took Ahilya under her wings, and trained her in domestic duties as well as palace protocols, account keeping, healthcare, hospitality and so forth.

Gautamabai had a mind of her own. She wouldn't think twice before chiding her husband if need arose - gently, though. In fact, women, whether from the Holkar, Scindia or the Peshwa dynasty, showed remarkable grit and resilience, and a deep understanding of public affairs.

Harkubai, known for her sharp political acumen, was one of Ahilyabai's chief advisors on matters pertaining to state. She belonged to the Songir family, and had an eye for detail and excellent intelligence-gathering skills. Udabai was Ahilyabai's sister-in-law, and both shared a deep bond.

In the Peshwa era women often joined the menfolk on military expeditions. Needless to add, they were exposed to new regions and lifestyles and gained first-hand knowledge of defence matters. Many women looked after wounded soldiers.

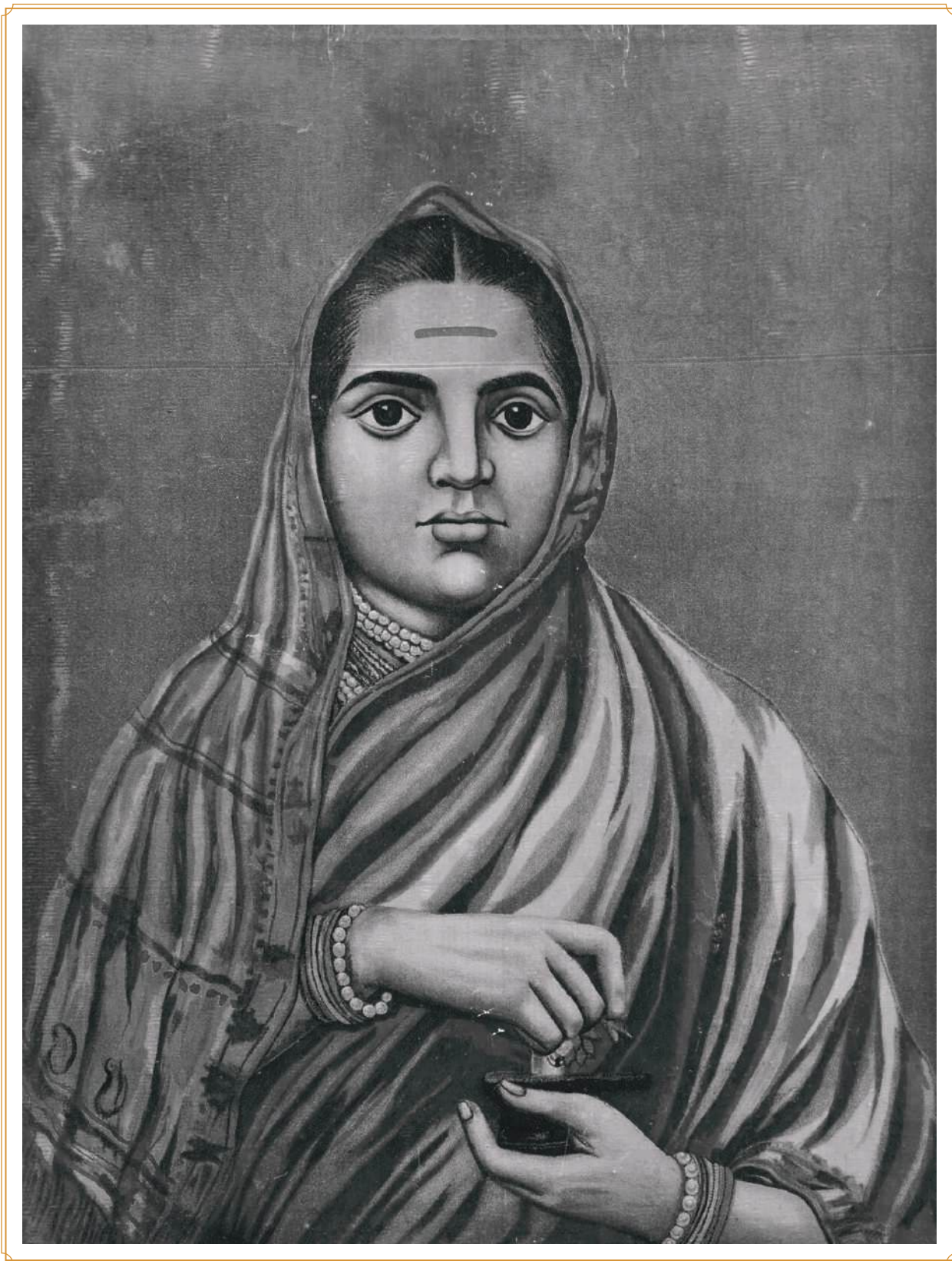
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दृढ़ता जिसके रोम रोम में, शालीनता स्थायी भाव रहा  
राजवंश की नववधु ने, राजकाज का हर हुनर सीखा  
होलकर, सिंधिया, पेशवा, दृढ़ थी इनकी स्त्री शक्ति  
युद्धकला में थी पारंगत, अदम्य थी इनकी राष्ट्रभक्ति

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# SUBLIME AND SERENE

Ahilyabai Holkar carried herself with dignity. She had fine features: deep set eyes, lustrous hair and an aquiline nose. Moreover, the soft glow on her face reflected the inner strength and a calm state of mind.

Anandibai, one of the principal dramatis personae of the Peshwa mythology, was curious to know more about Ahilyabai. The 20-something Anandibai belonged to the 'Mirror-On-The-Wall' brigade, which has sashayed down the pages of history for centuries across continents and cultures.

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किंवदंतियों और कहानियों की नायिका  
अनेक मनो को झकझोरने वाला  
अनुपम सौंदर्य, दिव्य रूप  
वह प्रतिमूर्ति थी सौम्यता और सादगी की

---





It so happened that Anandibai was camping in Dhar, 70 kms. away from Maheshwar. She dispatched a trusted maid to Maheshwar to check if the 55 year old Ahilyabai was indeed a ravishing beauty.

On returning to Dhar the maid told Anandibai that the Maheshwar maharani was indeed beautiful - in a special way. "Ahilyadevi looks sublime and serene."

Although no authentic record is available; but it is quite likely that on hearing the maid's report Anandibai chose to keep away from the mirror for a week !



*A contemporary painting of Ahilyabai at the Holkar wada in Chandwad, Nashik*

# SHE WAS FIRM, EVEN WITH HER HUSBAND

History says Ahilyabai's husband Khanderao lacked his father's, Malharrao's courage and conviction, valour and vision. He had a glad eye, and loved his drink.

Steeped in patriarchal values and the culture of entitlement Khanderao did hardly anything to take charge of his life. He was both an obedient son and a confused husband. Ahilyabai tried to reform Khanderao, but to no avail. To be fair to the man Khanderao never ridiculed his wife, whether in the privacy of the palace nor in the Holkar daftar, where Ahilyabai worked all through the day.

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दाम्पत्य जीवन की दोहरी भूमिकाएँ निभाना  
राजकाज का लेखाजोखा सजगता से संभालना  
जीवनसाथी की ज़िद झेलकर सख्ती से काम लेना  
आसान न था उसके लिए, नए किरदारों में नैया खेना

---





*Indore Palace (as seen today) is locally known as Rajwada or Holkar Palace. The construction of the palace was started by Malharrao Holkar, the founder of the Holkar dynasty, in the year 1747 A.D. Ahilyabai got her lessons of administration, accounts, law and politics under her father-in-law and her mother-in-law Gautamabai at the palace*

A solitary instance stands out like a sore thumb, though. He once stormed into the Holkar daftar (administrative office) and demanded money from his wife. Ahilyabai, who was busy clearing the accounts files, was taken aback as Khanderao created a scene. “I want some money - right now,” he thundered.

Ahilyabai checked her husband’s account book and told him in no uncertain terms that he had exhausted his expenditure limit, and that he wouldn’t get a penny more. Seething with anger Khanderao snatched the account books from his wife and flung them away.

Unperturbed, Ahilyabai asked Gangobatatya, her trusted aide, to file a complaint against Khanderao, and asked the latter to pay 25 Mohura as fine for going on a rampage in the office.



# KHANDERAO DIED YOUNG

The Kumbher (aka Kumher) battle was triggered by the escalating tension between the Peshwas and Rana Surajmal of Bharatpur. For the Peshwas, Surajmal was a vassal, and expected homage and fealty from him.

However, Surajmal, like many local chieftains, was eager to assert his independence. The Peshwas decided to wrest Kumbher from the recalcitrant Surajmal, who then held the fort.

Raghunathrao's - he was Peshwa Balaji Bajirao's younger brother - invasion failed. Malharrao Holkar, aided by his son Khanderao, tried his luck.



---

सूरजमल से छिड़ा युद्ध, केंद्र रहा कुंभेर  
भूमि, गगन पर भय का साया, छाया था अंधेर  
छाया था अंधेर, काल था छिपा वही पर  
तोप का गोला गिरा, खंडेराव का काल बनकर

---

In January 1754 Malharrao fired the first salvo on the Kumbher fort. However, Surajmal put up a brave fight and the battle dragged on for nearly a month and half. The air of Kumbher was thick with smoke, and the earth was drenched in blood.

Tragedy struck on March 17, 1754.

After a hearty lunch Khanderao, according to records, set out to inspect the troop. As he stepped out of the Holkar camp, a lofty cannonball-shot by one of Surajmal's brash soldiers hit Khanderao on the head. He died instantaneously.

On hearing the news Malharrao was beside himself with grief and anger. Holding Khanderao's body in his arms the father vowed to avenge his son's death. The Holkar women were present too. It was a heart wrenching scene.

Ahilyabai, hardly 30, sat desolate amidst the ruins of a young dream. Future looked bleak.

What is of supreme significance is that Malharrao's decision not to allow Ahilyabai to perform sati as was the practice in the Holkar family. He knew his daughter-in-law could be groomed to helm the Holkar ship amidst storm.





*One of the royal emblems of the Holkar dynasty*

# BUSY AS BEE

Ahilyabai began her day at the crack of dawn. After bath she would sit down for prayers and meditation. A team of learned priests would perform an elaborate Shiv pooja even as the camphor fragrance filled the morning air.

Lunch was around noon - a frugal, vegetarian meal. A quick nap and Ahilyabai would be off to her darbar, where she would go through administrative papers, hold parleys with her trusted colleagues on urgent matters of the state, and dispense justice without fear or favour.

Evenings were set aside for prayers. She would often invite scholars who would read out to her extracts from India's ancient texts.

After a quiet dinner Ahilyabai would be back to work till 11 p.m. She believed in devoting every hour of her life to her people.

Ahilyabai was God's best gift to Maheshwar.




*Maheshwar Deughar*

---

पूजा, ध्यान-धारणा करना, थे उनके ये स्थायी भाव  
सात्विकता और शिवमय जीवन, सदा रहा उनका स्वभाव  
नित्य, नियम और अनुशासन, दैनिक कार्य का थे हिस्सा  
न्याय मिले तत्काल सभी को, हर दिन होता नया किस्सा

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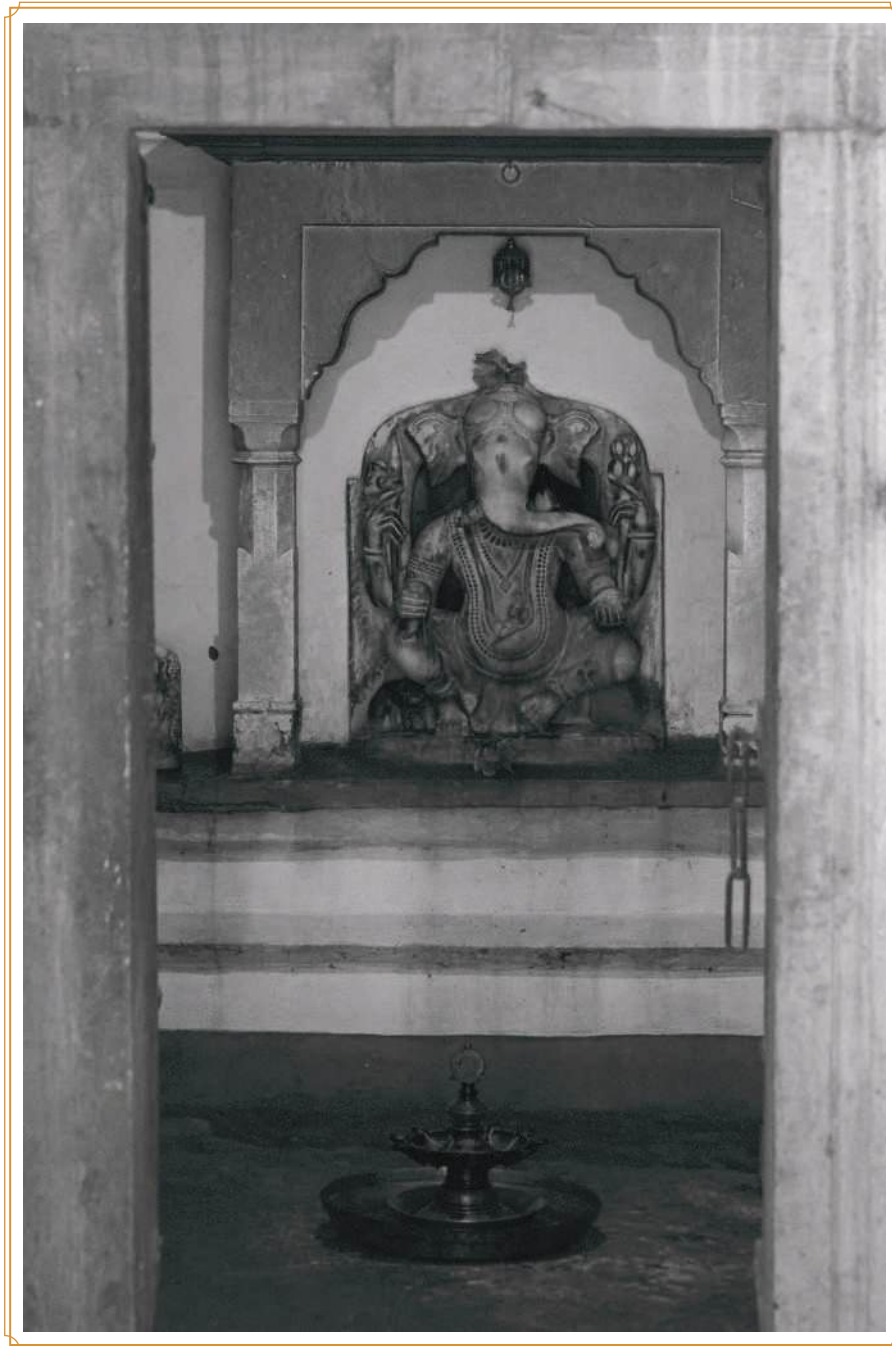


*Puja at 'tulsi' vrindavan was part of Ahilyabai's daily routine. 'Ahilya Kamdhenu' is a voluminous and handwritten 1639-page text, in Sanskrit, written by Pandit Khushaliram Bhatt, a contemporary scholar in circa 1771. It talks about Ahilyabai's religious rituals*



*Ahilyabai is believed to have used a 'japa-mala' (rosary) while worshipping Lord Mahadev. Made of sacred 'rudraksha' beads, the rosary threaded together as many as 101 miniature 'shiv-linga', each studded with precious 'nava-ratna' gemstones*





*The Ganesh temple at Ahilyabai's Maheshwar residence*

*The Shivalinga which Ahilyabai carried with herself  
all through the day, according to popular belief*



*River Narmada is revered as manifestation of Goddess Narmada which, according to folklore, possesses purifying powers. Ahilyabai's life embodies the pristine purity of Narmada*





UNEASY LIES  
THE HEAD...



Often, Ahilyabai would be weighed down with cares and worries. Running an empire amidst political chaos was certainly a daunting task. Moreover, as head of the Holkar dynasty she was supposed to help the Maratha confederacy keep going from strength to strength in troubled times. 'Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown.'

Meditation or a quick visit to a nearby pilgrim centre was her way of regaining inner strength. Soon, she would be back to work. Moreover, her commitment to people was unflinching. She firmly believed that her rule was of and for the people. She was merely a trustee appointed by Lord Shiva. Hence, *shivlinga* became her regime's emblem.

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कांटों-सा जीवन रहा

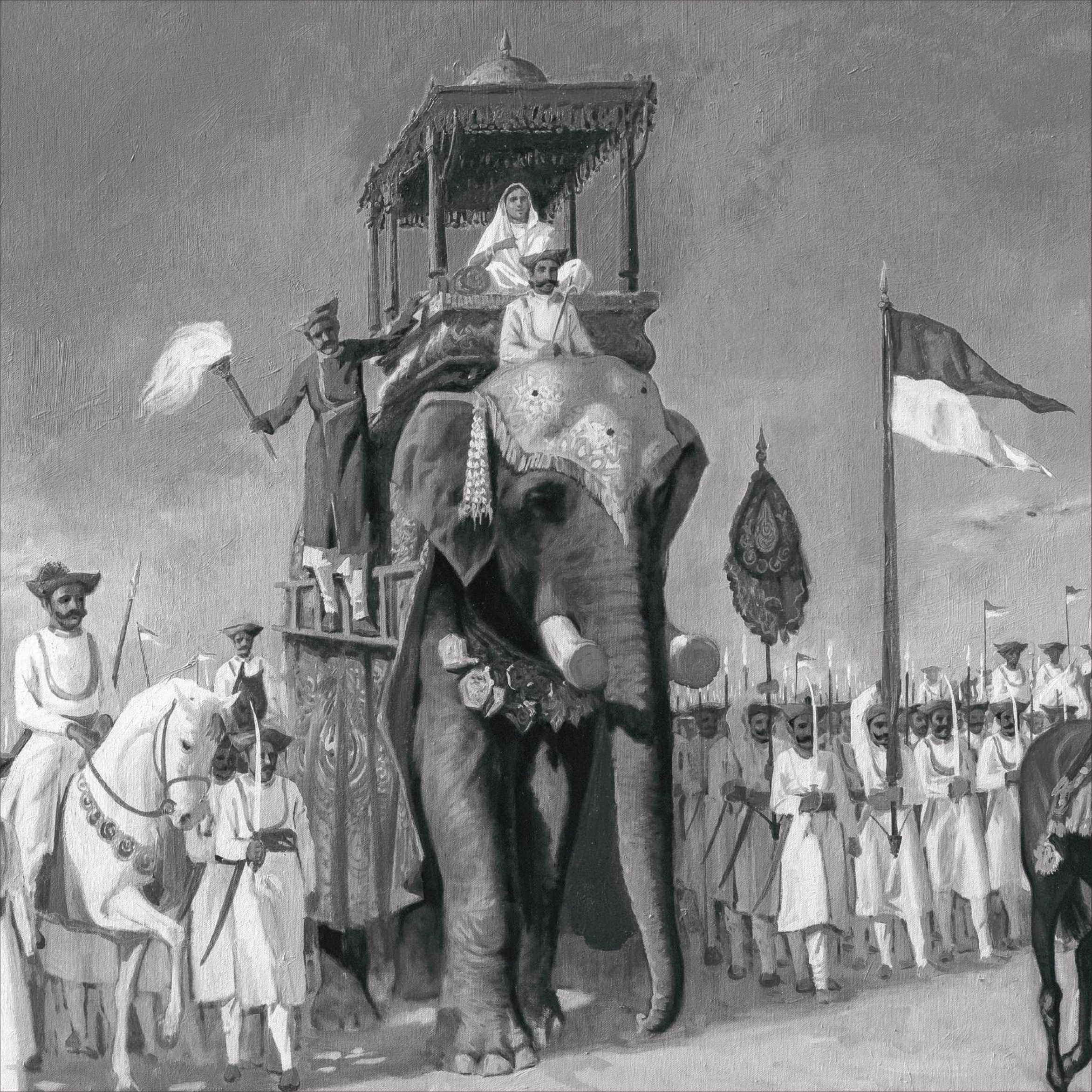
सिर कांटों का ताज,

कांटों पर थी चल रही

तालमेल पर टिका था राज

---





# THEY THOUGHT SHE WAS 'GOONGI GUDIA'



Ahilyabai faced her acid test when the death of Malerao, her only son on March 7, 1767, triggered a succession row in the kingdom. With the Peshwas taking their own sweet time to settle the issue, the air was filled with uncertainty and suspicion.

Gangadhar Yashwant Chandrachud, aka Gangobatatya, smelt an opportunity. He wrote to Raghobadada, a controversial figure in the Peshwa regime, asking him to take charge of Maheshwar, as, and this was a ruse, Ahilyabai was “in grief” following the passing away of Malerao.

---

सत्ता, शासन, सुख और वैभव, राजनीति का प्रतिफल हैं  
इसके फेर में पड़ अपने भी, बन जाते शत्रु अपने हैं  
चलते रहे खेल अनगिनत, शतरंज की बिछी बिसात  
सूझबूझ और विवेक से, अहिल्या देती प्रतिस्पर्धी को मात

---

Wracked by financial worries, Raghobadada thought appropriating the Holkar throne would bring him close to the coveted Peshwaship. However, the elaborate plan which the duo worked out was to backfire on them.

Ahilyabai wrote to Peshwa Madhavrao and the Maratha sardars as well. They stood by her.

Soon, Peshwa Madhavrao, in a written communique to Ahilyabai, endorsed her right over the Holkar regime. She took charge of the civil governance, while entrusting Tukoji Rao Holkar the task of helming the army. As a reconciliatory gesture, she appointed Gangobhatya's son as the Diwan of the kingdom.

Ahilyabai could be pretty tough with people around her. Tukoji Rao, the defence chief, was a pain in the queen's neck. He would keep asking her for money, and refuse to submit proper accounts. Once, she severely reprimanded him. An angry Tukoji Rao roped in Mahadji Scindia and the latter called on Ahilyabai.

In the course of talks Mahadji said he and Tukoji Rao could make matters difficult for her - even dethrone her. Ahilyabai cast a stern glance at Mahadji, and reminded him that she wasn't a helpless widow at their mercy, but the daughter-in-law of the great Subhedar Malhar Rao Holkar.

She would often send curt letters to Nana Phadnavis, the Peshwa Administrator, and ask him not to take her for granted. In the world of men Ahilyabai was a Superman!



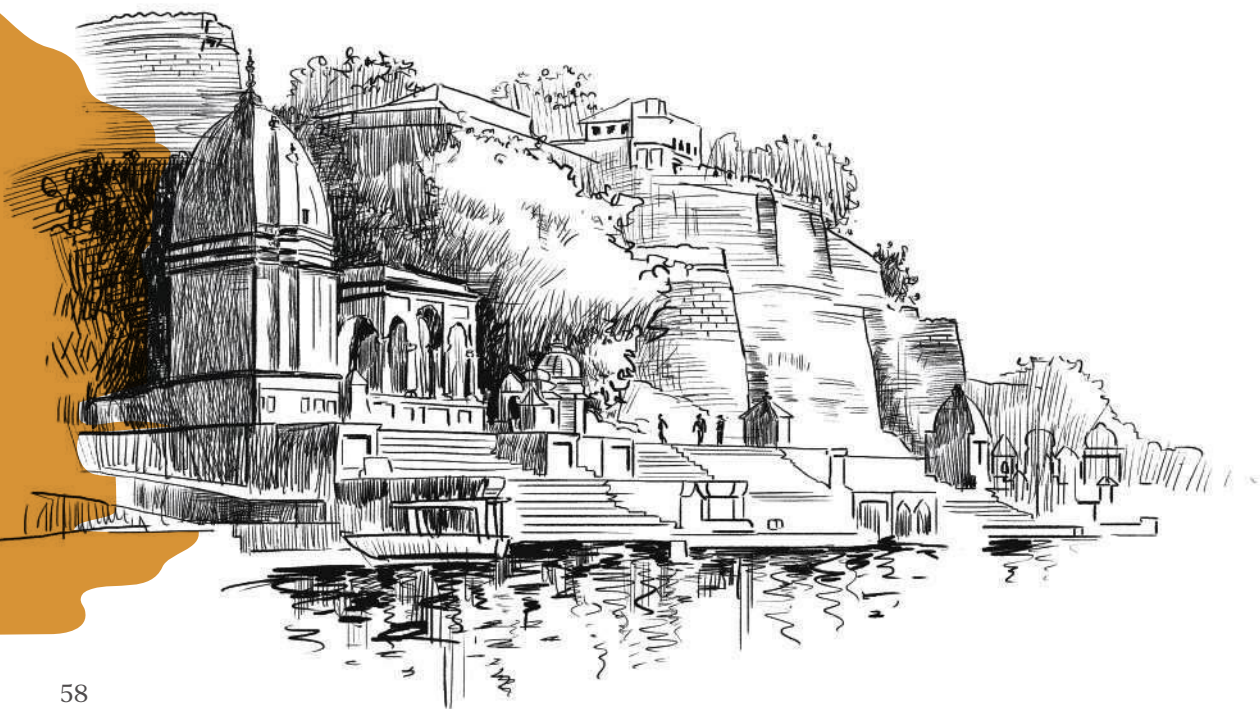
*The seal found on Ahilyabai's official documents*



# MAHESHWAR

After the untimely death of her husband and son, a distraught Ahilyabai decided to leave Indore, the seat of the Holkars' politics and administration for decades, and shift to Maheshwar, 90 kms. from Indore. A hefty fort kept an eagle's eye on the idyllic town.

Soon, a wada (palace) was built inside the fort. Ahilyabai's darbar was held in a spacious, but austere suite, and the daftar (office) began to buzz with activity. Ahilyabai would sit on a simple quilt and hold consultations with her officials, meet visitors and administer justice.



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मन था रमा राजकाज में, आत्मा रत अध्यात्म में  
वैभव छोड़ इंदौर का, चली रानी नर्मदा शरण में  
धर्म-कर्म औ' राज चलाने, नई धरा पर रखे चरण  
रानी ने इंदौर छोड़, महेश्वर को बनाया 'राज' भवन

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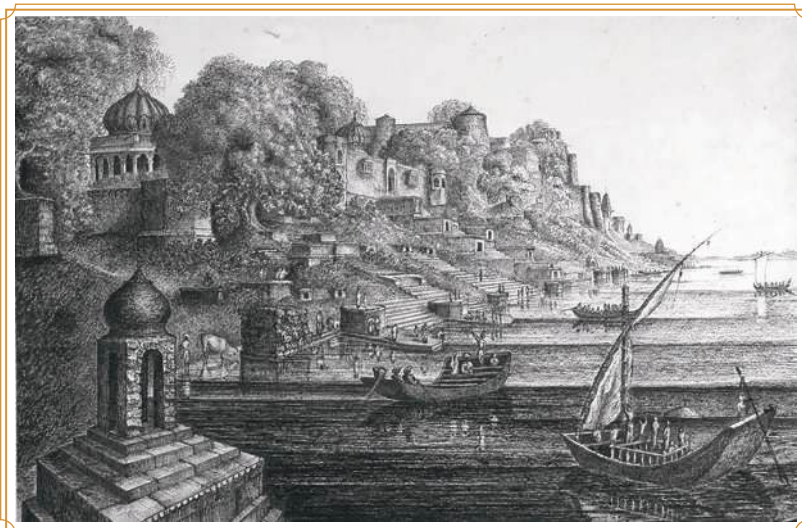


*Maheshwar Ghat*



Ahilyabai's decision to re-locate to Maheshwar was a well thought move. She was keen to ensure her eminence in the post-Malharrao era. The Peshwa-Holkar ties could have strained given the fluid political situation across the country.

Ahilyabai cleverly invoked the Peshwa-Malharrao agreement of 1734, which paved way for the bifurcation of the latter's reign into *daulat* (kingdom) and *khasgi* (a private fund meant for the maintenance of the women of the royal family). Malharrao was keen to ensure his wife's - Gautamabai's - financial security. Bajirao Peshwa acquiesced. Accordingly, land with an annual revenue equivalent to Rs. Three lakhs was gifted as *inaam* to Gautamabai by the Peshwas. After her death Ahilyabai became the legal heir to the landed property, which included Maheshwar.



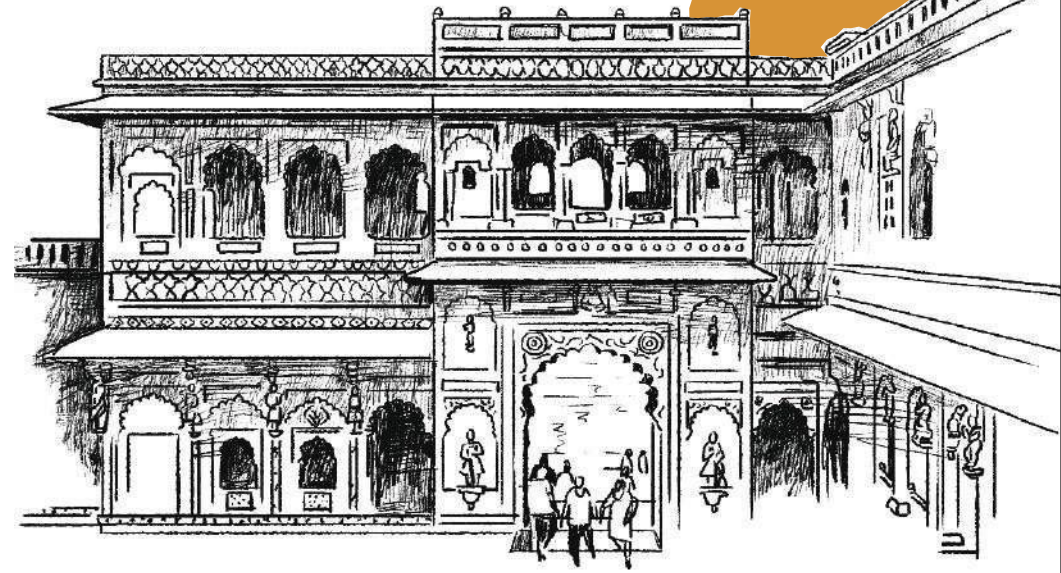
*Maheshwar Ghat in olden times*





*Narmadamaityya - a witness to history of Maheshwar*





Under the agreement the Peshwas had no moral or legal right to impinge on Ahilyabai's private property. By leaving Indore for good she saved herself from the embarrassment of being at the mercy of the Peshwa.

Nestled in the nature's lap Maheshwar soothed Ahilyabai's wracked nerves. She would often watch from her balcony the serene Narmada river flow majestically, blending past and future, fact and fiction.

Also, Maheshwar is another name of Lord Shiva, the deity Ahilyabai revered and worshipped, and in whose name her official communiques and diktats were issued.

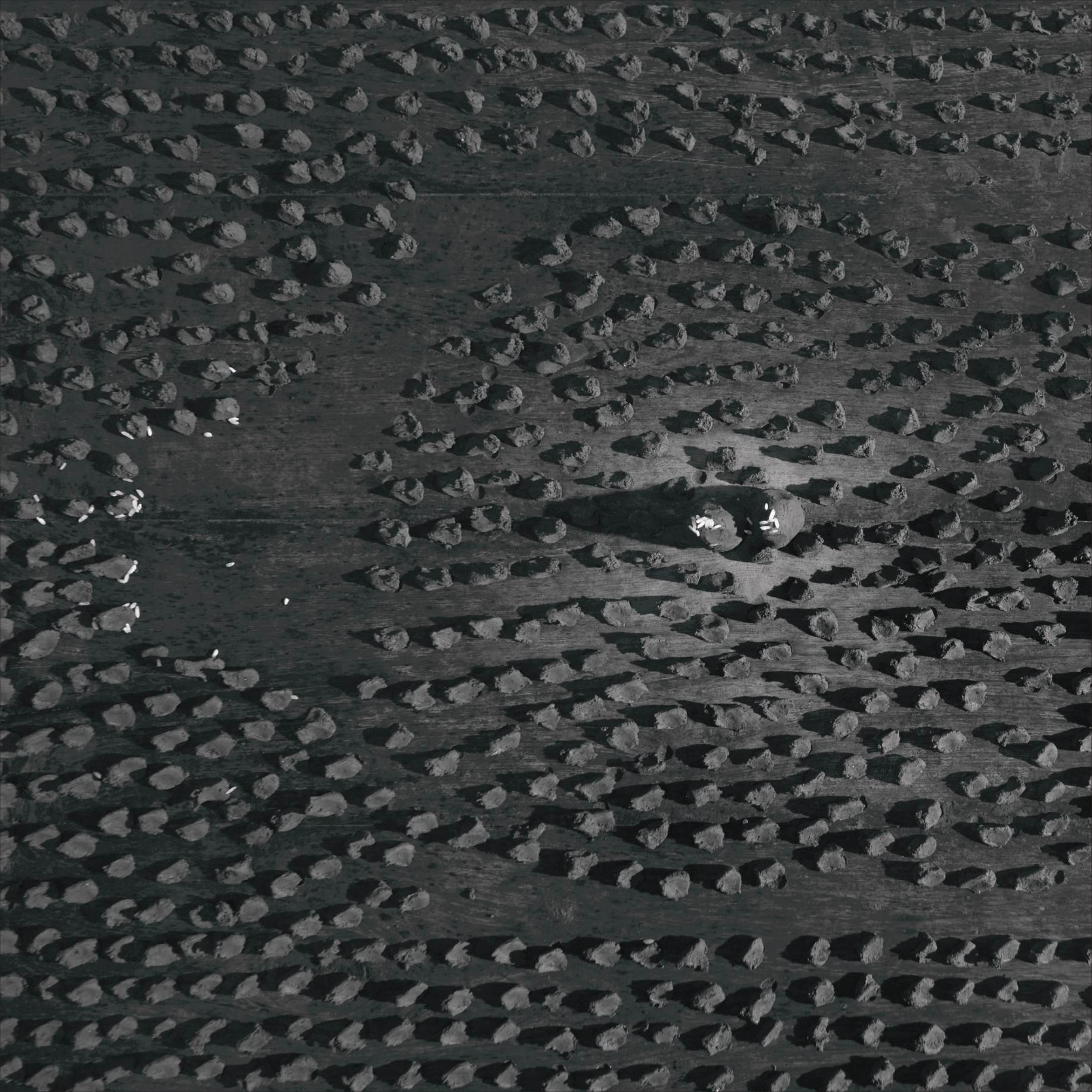


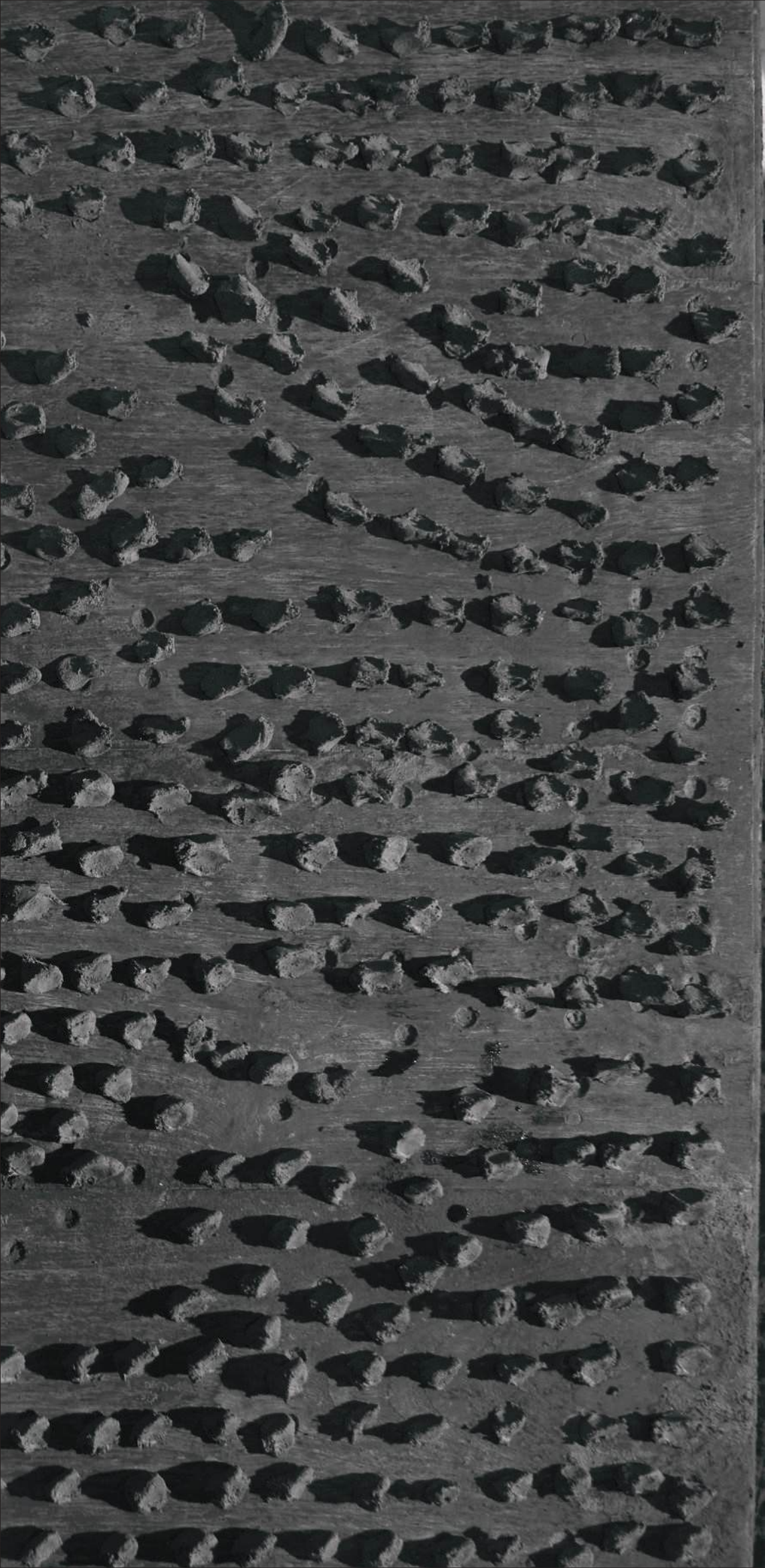
*In accordance with the Holkar dynasty's 'shraaddha' rituals, 13 married women were invited for 'prasad' along with priests and other dignitaries. However, the custom was set aside in Ahilyabai's honour, and, instead, 13 widows were invited for the ritual. The gesture, as documented in the 'Holkar Utsavdarsh', sums up Ahilyabai's compassion for the underprivileged*











*The Parthiv lingarchan puja has been a sacred tradition at the temple in Ahilya fort, Maheshwar, since 1766, initiated by Ahilyabai Holkar*

*Everyday III Brahmins each would prepare a board with 1,000 little shivlinga made out of the soil of the fields, and would put grains in each shivling. The boards would be blessed and the linga collected and finally offered to the river Narmada. Two hundred and fifty years on, the tradition continues*

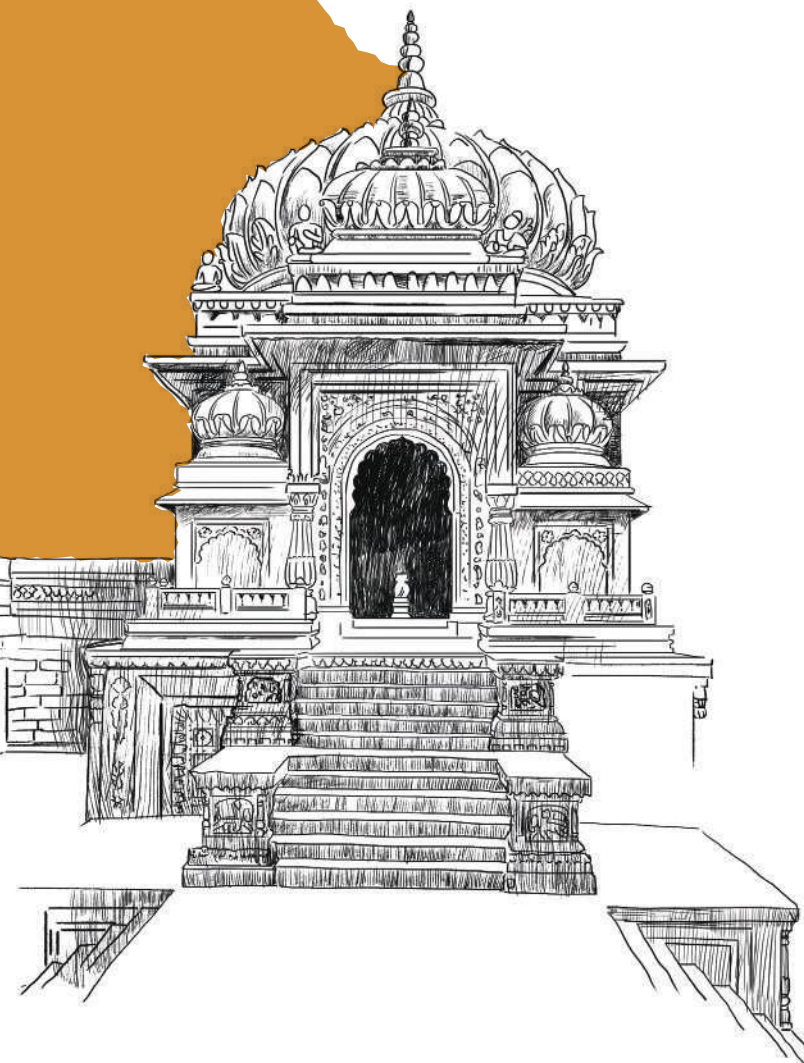




Legend and history delicately weave Maheshwar's story, delineating its journey from a temple town to a prosperous handloom hub and centre of education, trade and culture.

Queen Ahilyabai is credited with having revived the handloom tradition of central India. She invited Sakharam Dhongade, a prominent weaver from Indore, and requested him to begin his business in Maheshwar.

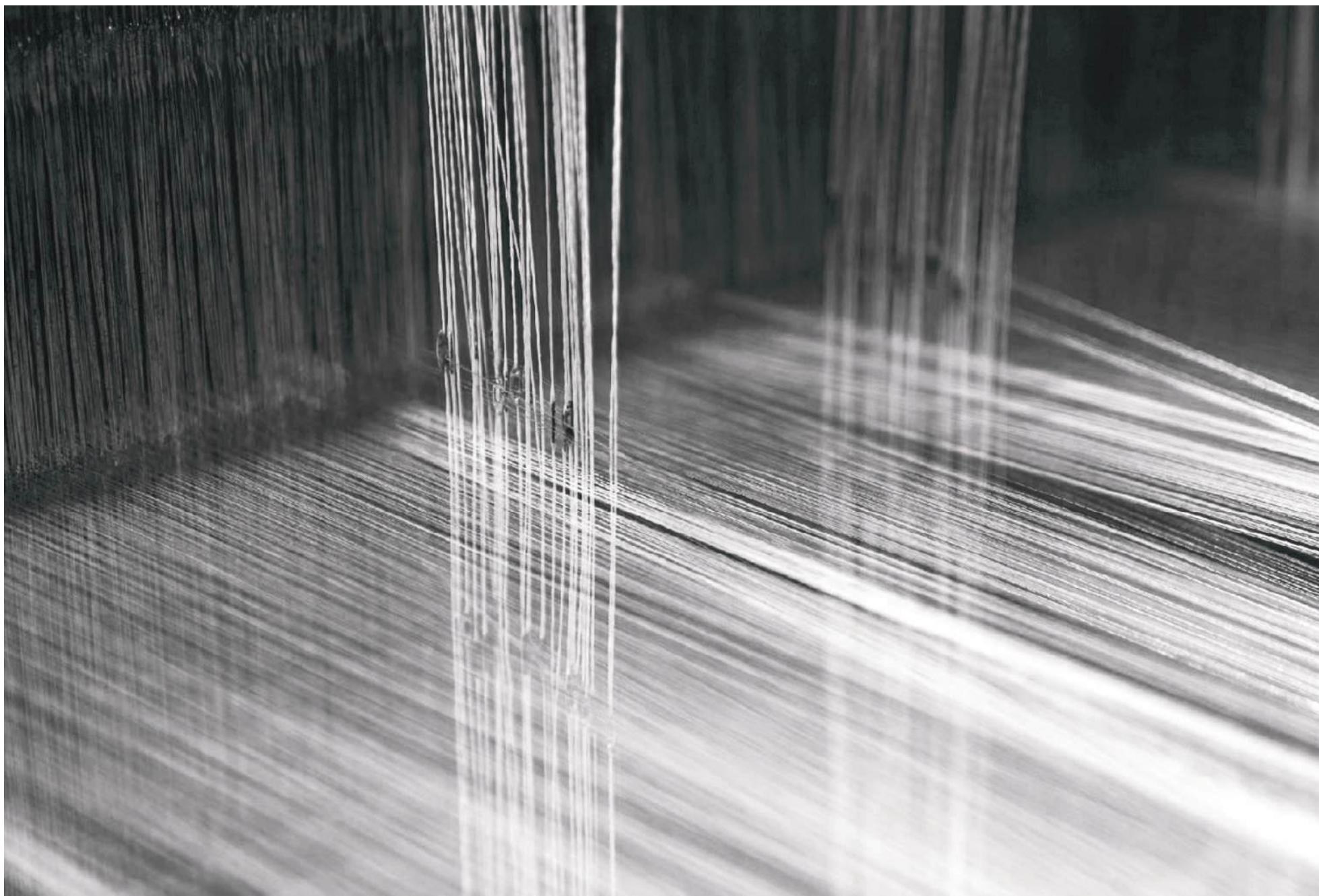
Soon, weavers from Surat and Mandu set up their looms in Maheshwar. The flourishing industry offered livelihood to Maheshwar women, especially the war widows. Similarly, she gave patronage to writers and poets.



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नए रूप में सज रही थी नई राजधानी  
मंदिरों की नगरी महेश्वर में,  
शिक्षा, व्यापार और संस्कृति की शुरु हो रही थी कहानी  
दूर-दूर से बुलाए गए बुनकर कुशल,  
आजीविका के नए स्रोतों से  
प्रजा को मिल रहा था सुफल

---



*The small yet vibrant town of Maheshwar has earned a distinct identity in the global textile market, renowned for its uniquely patterned Maheshwari handloom sarees*

A huge library, boasting best books on ancient Indian culture and philosophy, and rare texts cast a sobering influence on the *wada*. She started schools and Sanskrit *paathshala* to give a push to education.

Today, Maheshwari sarees, laced with fine *zari* borders and intricate patterns, and exquisite stoles, scarves and turbans, attract a large market across continents.



*Ahilyabai Holkar is credited with having revived the handloom tradition of central India. The legacy of the iconic Maheshwari saree continues*







*Woven with intricate craftsmanship, Maheshwari sarees provide a source of livelihood - and dignity - to local weavers, mostly women*



# AHILYABAI, THE ADMINISTRATOR

Ahilyabai ruled with a firm hand, holding even the scales of justice. Her working hours were pretty long, rain or sunshine. Accessible to all, whether a chieftain or a cowherd, she combined ground wisdom with ancient religious scriptures to deliver justice.

While the rest of India was trapped in political turmoil, peace and social harmony prevailed in Malwa during Ahilyabai's three decade-long rule. There were no rebellions or famines. Ahilyabai invited traders and *sahukars* to set up their *pedhi* (business office) in Maheshwar. Artisans and architects made a beeline to Maheshwar as the queen built temples, *ghats* and rest houses in many cities of India.

Ahilyabai was held in high esteem, especially because of her spotless personality, by contemporary rulers such as the Rajputs and the Jats, and her detractors too – the Muslim potentates such as the Mughals and the Nizam.

Madhavrao Peshwa would never fail to address her as *Matoshree* (mother). Ditto with his uncle Raghobadada and Subhedar Tukojiroo Holkar, chief of the army staff and close confidante of Malharrao.

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जब कमान हो सशक्त हाथों में सुरक्षित  
राज्य की जनता रहती संपन्न और हर्षित  
जब सारे भारत में थी राजनैतिक उथल-पुथल,  
मालवा का जनजीवन फला-फूला सकुशल  
मंदिर, घाटों, धर्मस्थलों का खूब हुआ निर्माण,  
महारानी की दूरदृष्टि ने अर्थव्यवस्था में फूँके प्राण

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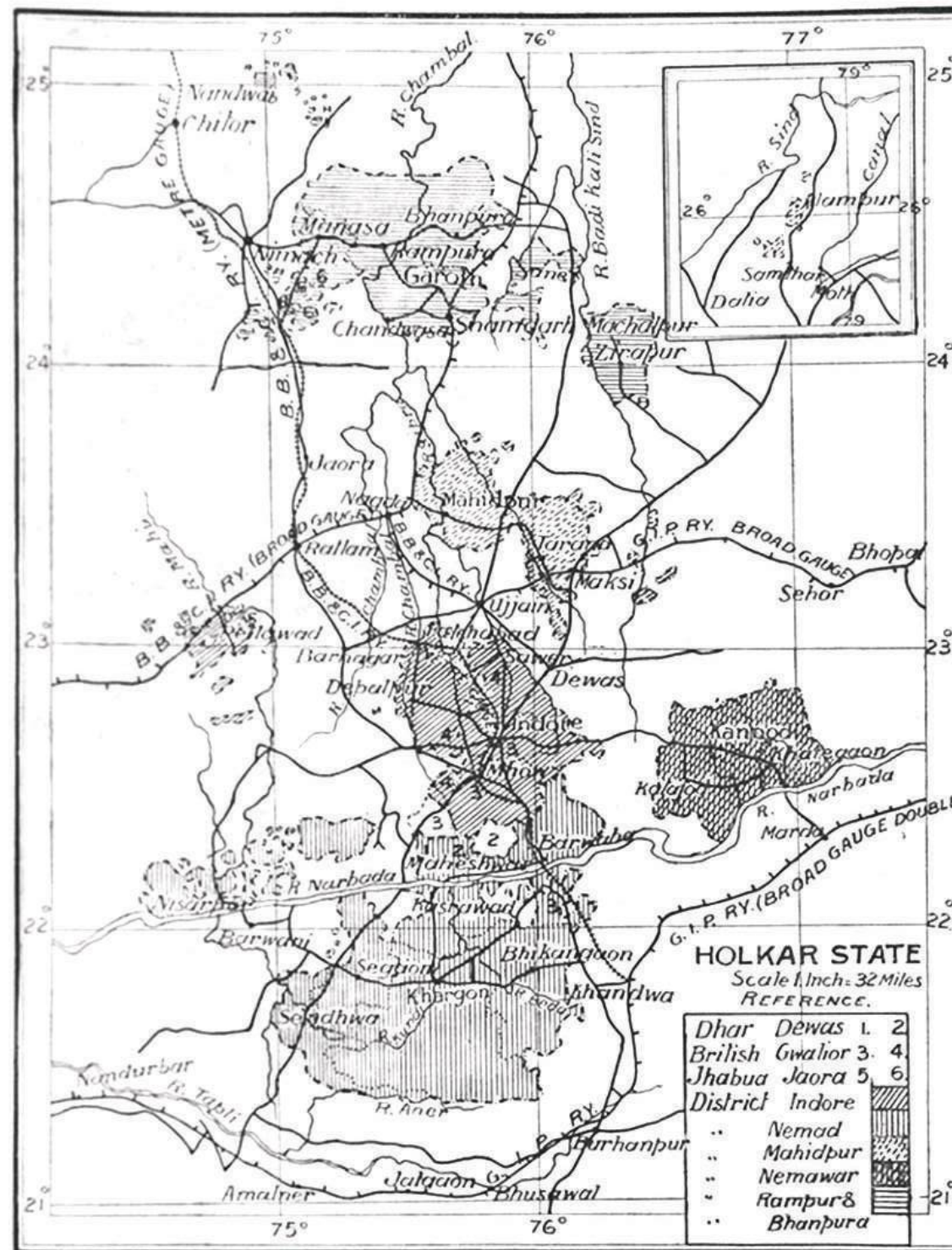


*Coins issued by Ahilyabai after she rebuilt the famed Vishwanath temple at Kashi*



# EXPANSION OF THE MARATHA POWER (1758 CE)





Ahilyabai Holkar's leadership left an enduring imprint across central India  
- from the rugged Malwa plateau to the fertile plains of Nimar



*Chandwad, near Nashik, was one of the key stopovers of Ahilyabai's communication route*



*The Holkar 'wada', also known as Rangmahal, at Chandwad*







*The Holkar palace (Chandwad, Nashik) boasts a network of subways from the famous stepwell in the north and south of the wada*



# AHILYABAI, THE SAVIOUR OF THE MARGINALISED

Never even in her dreams did Ahilyabai lose her sense of responsibility and commitment to her people. Many of her policy decisions are a testimony not only to her administrative skills, but to her faith in human values as well.

For instance, she brought the Bhills, who had for long been creating nuisance for pilgrims, traders and travellers, into the mainstream by appointing them as service providers and security guards. She also allocated land to many Bhills so that they could take to farming.

Also, Ahilyabai went out of the way to safeguard women's interests. Also, she scrapped the law which gave the government wide powers to usurp the property of a childless widow.

Once, a rich widow came to Ahilyabai's court seeking her help. As she had no heir the lady wanted to donate her wealth and property to the Holkars, except that she wanted an adequate allowance for herself till she was alive.

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आखिर कब तक भील भटकते बन-बन औ' वीरानों में  
कब तक नारी रहती वंचित अपने मूल अधिकारों से  
पुनर्वास का दौर चला, भटकों को मिला ठिकाना था  
मूल प्रवाह में रहें सभी, रानी ने मन में ठाना था

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*The iconic Somnath Temple*

Politely refusing the lady's offer, Ahilyabai, displaying a pan-Indian outlook, requested her to use her wealth for the reconstruction of the Sorti Somnath temple, which was repeatedly destroyed by Mohammad of Gazni. "Should you accept the suggestion I would bear your travel and boarding expenses," Ahilyabai told the widow.

A strong, unified India was Ahilyabai's grand dream.

# LEGACY OF AHILYABAI'S COMPASSION

Ahilyabai Holkar's welfare efforts extended far beyond her state, leaving a lasting impact in distant regions. Gauchar, a hill town in Chamoli district, Uttarakhand, stands as a testament to her compassion. The town, whose name means "grazing grounds for cows," owes its identity to Ahilyabai's intervention during her pilgrimage to Badrinath.

According to legend, while passing through the village, Ahilyabai noticed a man mistreating a cow out of frustration over his damaged crops. She immediately compensated him with gold coins and urged him to treat the cattle with care.

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कण-कण में ईश्वर दिखे, करुणा है आधार  
पशुओं को चारा मिले, जल भी मिले अपार  
तीर्थार्दन पर थी महारानी, जब गौ का देखा कष्ट  
गौचर दान किया माता ने, गौ पीड़ा को किया विनष्ट

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Overjoyed, he spread the news, attracting other farmers who sought similar compensation. Ahilyabai proposed a solution: she would reward them with gold coins if they reserved land for grazing cows. The villagers agreed, and the flat grassland became known as Gauchar.

To this day, the town retains its name and a portion of the grazing land remains protected. As an act of gratitude, the city council recently built a grand entry gate in her memory.

*A drone picture of the fast shrinking grazing ground in Gauchar, on way to Badrinath, on the banks of river Alaknanda*





An aerial photograph showing a winding road through a dense forest in Malwa, India. The road starts from the left, curves through the forest, and then makes a sharp turn to the right, following the contours of the hills. The forest is thick and green, covering the entire landscape. The road is a light color, contrasting with the dark green of the trees. The overall scene is a beautiful representation of the Malwa region's natural beauty.

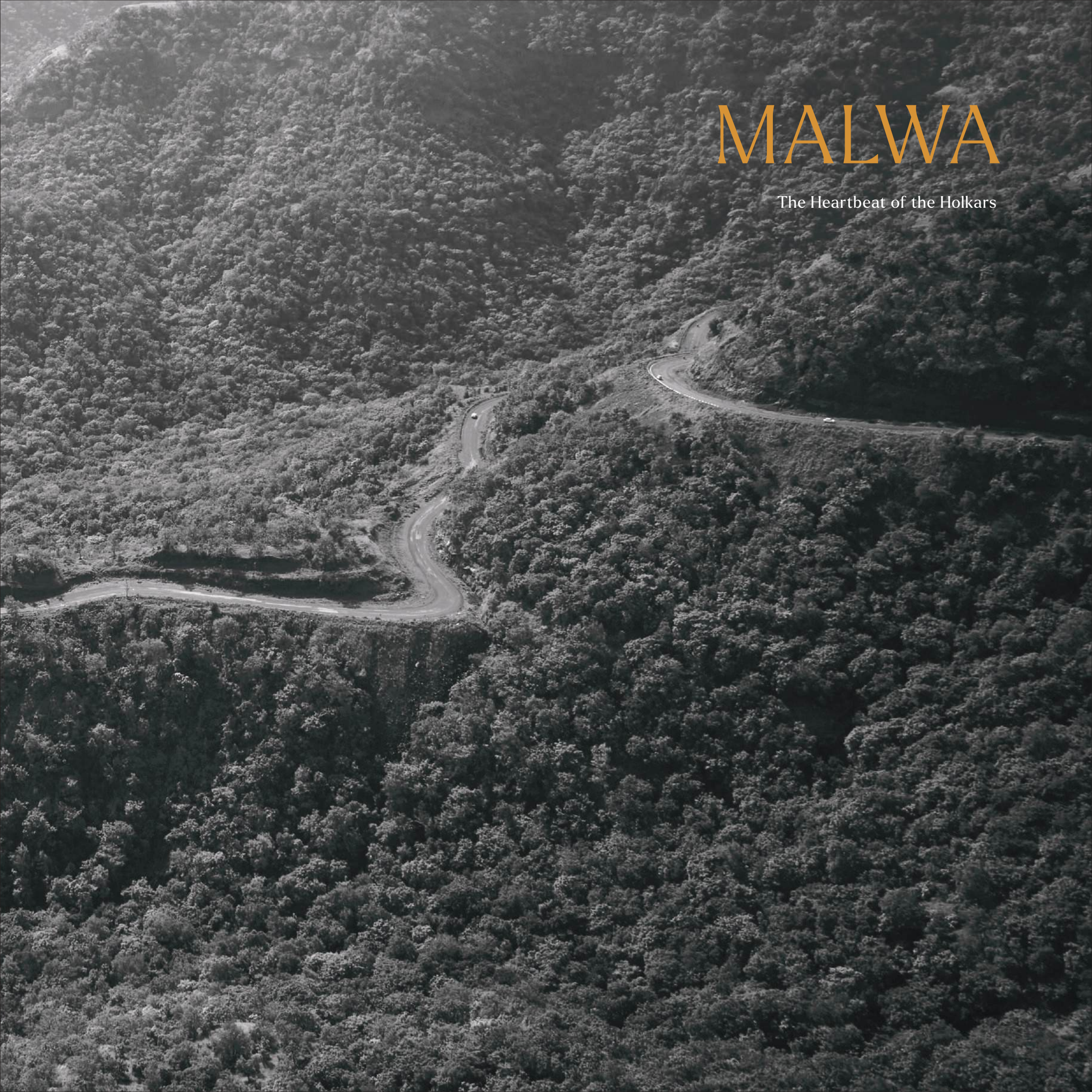
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मही, बेतवा, परबती, क्षिप्रा, केन, चंबल का नीर  
साल, साग के वन लहराते, हैं चंचल 'रेवा' के तीर  
इंदौर, महेश्वर नगर निराले, उद्योगों से मिला ऐश्वर्य  
वैभवशाली संस्कृति वाले, मालवा का अनुपम सौंदर्य

---

# MALWA

The Heartbeat of the Holkars



The Malwa plateau sprawls languidly between western Madhya Pradesh and south-eastern Rajasthan, including Gujarat. Blessed with teak and *sal* forests, Malwa is nourished by rivers such as Betwa, Mahi, Parbati, Kshipra, Ken and Chambal.

The mighty Narmada meanders through the terrain like a thread of gold.

The black, rich Malwa soil facilitates extensive cultivation of cotton, while the brown soil offers a rich yield of wheat and opium – and endearing stories of bravery and courage.

Malwa has for long been a melting pot of culture, fusing *lavani* with *nirgun bhajans*, *baati* (made of wheat flour) of Rajasthan with *khopra pak* of Gujarat. Malwa was the centre of Sanskrit literature during the glorious Gupt rule. The miniature paintings of Malwa are exquisite. Also, the mellifluous Malwa *ki lokdhunein*, Malwa's folk soundscape.

*Jam Gate. The towering sentinel marks the entrance to the Nimar region. The gate remains a lasting symbol of Ahilyabai's enduring legacy*





श्री गणेशाय नमः ॥ स्वस्ति ॥  
 श्री विक्रमार्क समसत्  
 १८७७ सत्सिना गच्छः शा  
 वि १७१२ पुष्पकु ससे क्मि  
 लिङ्ग मति नस्ते ॥ १ ॥ प्राये  
 त्कनया दश्या पुष्पे बुधय  
 । सरे । सुषामला रि स व स  
 । र्वे न स व स्य व ल ज्ञा ॥ सा रि  
 । व पुजा प रानित्यं ब्रह्म्या ध  
 । मे तत्प रा ॥ अहल्य र्या ब बंधे  
 । ह मार्ग दारि सु शो भ न ॥ ३ ॥

The Jam gate bears an inscription recording its construction in  
 Vikram Samvat 1847, which corresponds to 1791 AD

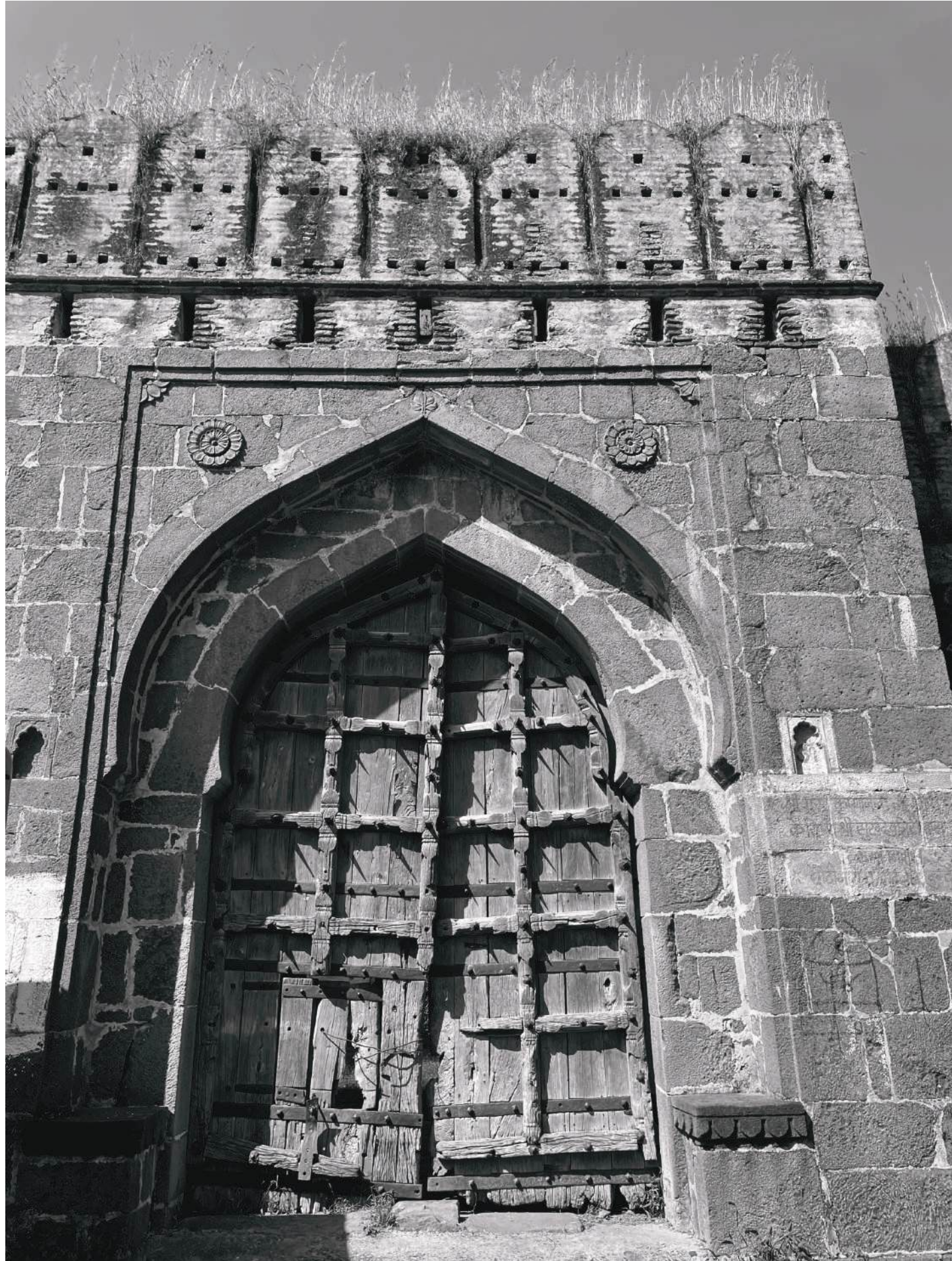








*Holkar Gadhi at Jam Gate*



# TEMPLES AS TEMPLATE

Ahilyabai built temples across India : Hrishikesh, Sambal Gram, Shri Shailya, Chitrakoot, Ujjain, Gangotri, Gaya, Chaundi (her birth place), Nashik, Pushkar, Pandharpur and Badri Narayan. The list is endless.

Of special significance is the fact that Ahilyabai happily took upon herself the task of re-building temples destroyed by Muslim invaders and rulers. For instance, the Mohammad of Gazni repeatedly destroyed the famous Somnath temple in Gujarat, while Aurangzeb desecrated the Varanasi temple.

That Ahilyabai should build temples beyond the limits of the Holkar rule - for instance, in Rameshwar and Puri, among many other pilgrim centres, points to her pan-Indian vision, a united Bharat which takes in its majestic sweep a plethora of states.

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आक्रमकों की मार से विक्षत, मंदिर, धर्मस्थल रहे पुकार  
दमित आस्था, दबा था भारत, हर तरफ मचा था हाहाकार  
अदम्य श्रद्धा मन में संजोए, नवनिर्माण का लिया संकल्प  
मंदिर, घाट, धर्मशालाएँ, पुनरुद्धारों का चला प्रकल्प

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Grishneshwar Temple



*Trimbareshwar Temple*



Also, a slew of beautiful ghats such as Kushavarta, Rameshwar, Dashashwamedh, Manikarnika (built at the cost of Rs. 25,000 in circa 1785) and Hari ki Poudi, to name a few, are a testimony to her unshakeable faith in Hindu religion and its unifying character.

Ahilyabai built roads and alms-houses; she got wells dug and set up free food centres for the needy pilgrims.

She firmly believed that consolidation of Hindus would be a fitting answer to those out to spread their faith by sword.



*Ram Temple, Holkarwada Pandharpur, Maharashtra*



*Badrinath Temple where Ahilyabai built Dharmashala*



*Shri Jagannath Puri Temple*





*An ariel view of Gokarna Mahabaleshwar, Karnataka, where Ahilyabai set up a 'dharmashala' and 'annachhatra', free food centres for the pilgrims*

Old Somnath shrine in Gujarat rebuilt by Ahilyabai





*A bust of Ahilyabai in the precincts of the Somnath temple*

*The Renuka temple in Chandwad,  
near Nashik rebuilt by Ahilyabai*



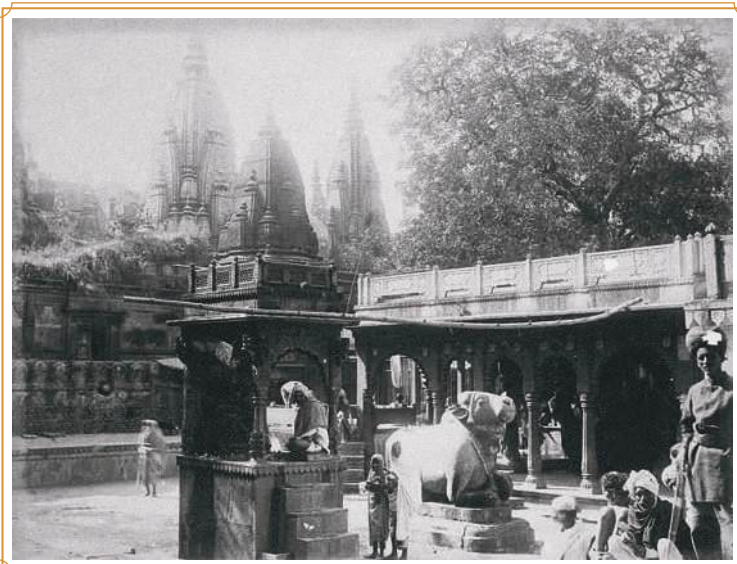


*Omkareshwar Temple*





*Kashi Vishwanath Temple, Banaras*

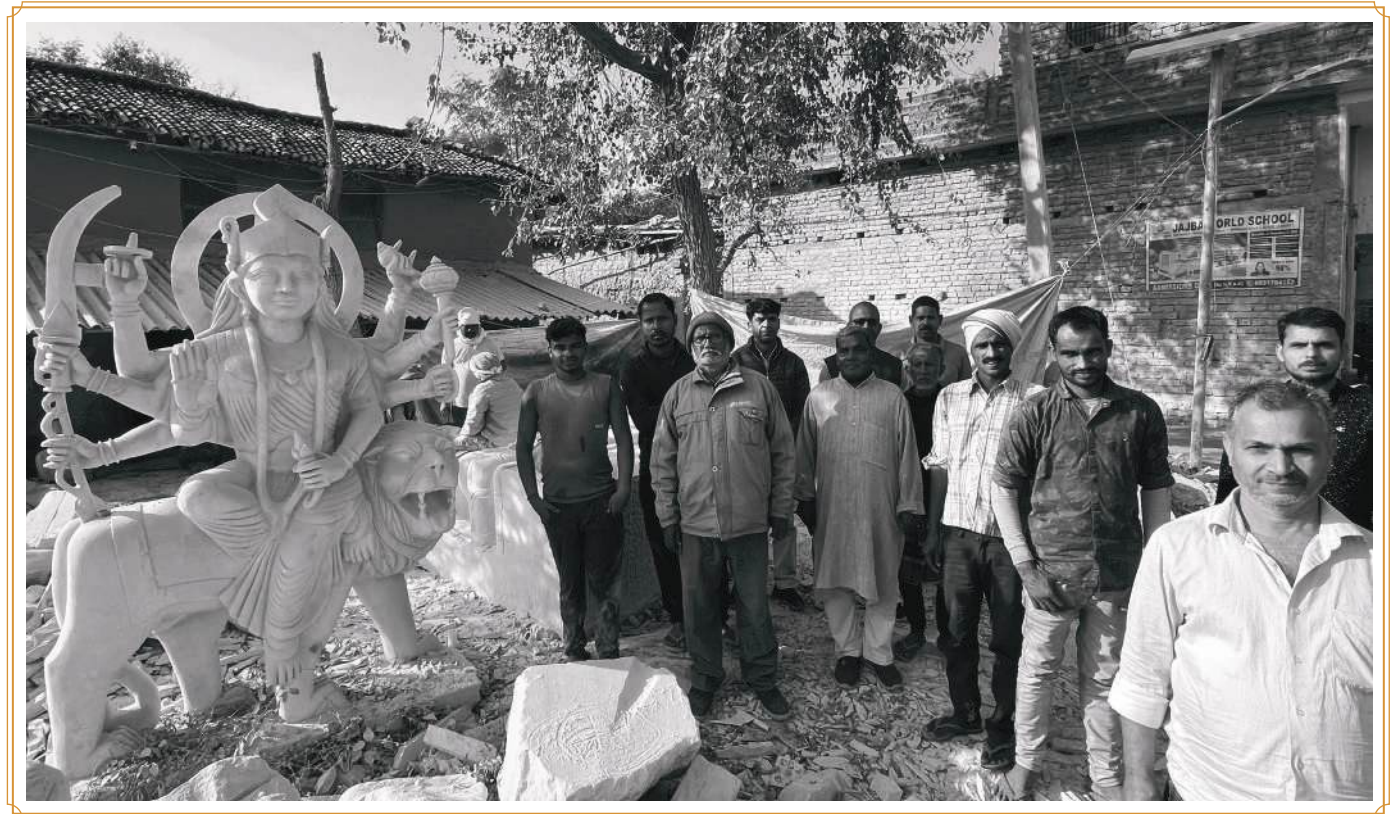


*Old Kashi Vishwanath Temple, Banaras*

*Vishnupad Temple, Gaya, Bihar*



## *Ahilyabai's vision to shape the artistic heritage*



Ahilyabai Holkar's reign was not just about building and restoring temples—it nurtured a cultural legacy that spread artistry across India. Pattharkatti, a small village in Bihar, stands as a remarkable testament to this influence. As its name suggests, Pattharkatti, located about 20 km from the town of Gaya, is home to skilled stone carvers. This village owes its distinct identity to Ahilyabai Holkar, who invited artisans from Rajasthan to restore the ancient Vishnupad Temple on the banks of the Phalgu River. Many of these craftsmen, primarily Gaud Brahmins from Rajasthan, chose to settle here as Ahilyabai ensured their smooth resettlement.

Even after 300 years, this tradition of stone carving endures, though only a few families from the original Rajasthani lineage remain. Ahilyabai's vision continues to shape the artistic heritage of this region.

# *Water wisdom of Ahilyabai*

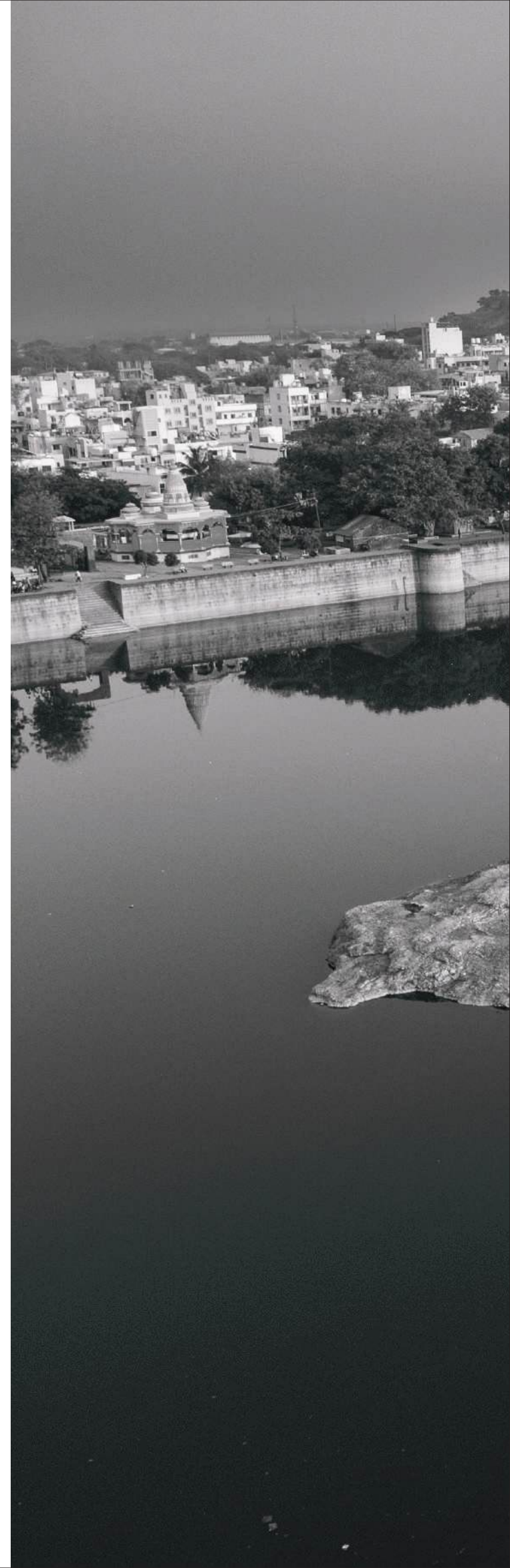
## *The enduring 'baravs'*

Ahilyabai Holkar's visionary approach to religious infrastructure development significantly enhanced public welfare and water management in India. Beyond restoring and rebuilding temples, she constructed roads and ensured access to drinking water at key pilgrimage sites. The baravs (structured wells) she built exemplify efficient water management and have stood the test of time.

Ahilyabai's innovative water conservation efforts included a pioneering system that harnessed lakes, tanks, ponds, and wells for irrigation. She strategically constructed bunds and reservoirs on hill slopes to capture rainwater, minimizing runoff and maximizing water retention. The semi-arid regions of central India continue to benefit from these baravs even after three centuries.

Ahilyabai's farsighted policies prioritized the optimal utilization of rainwater, ensuring long-term water availability in the region. The water sources she established include several architecturally distinguished stepwells in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Rajasthan. These continue to serve communities year-round, demonstrating her lasting impact on sustainable water management.

*Jejuri's iconic Holkar Lake, built by Ahilyabai in 1770 AD, lies southwest of the town, offering stunning views of the Khandoba temple atop the hill. Spanning 18 acres, this 'Malhar Gautameshwar Talav,' as named by Ahilyabai, remains a crucial water source, aiding groundwater conservation for the surrounding region*



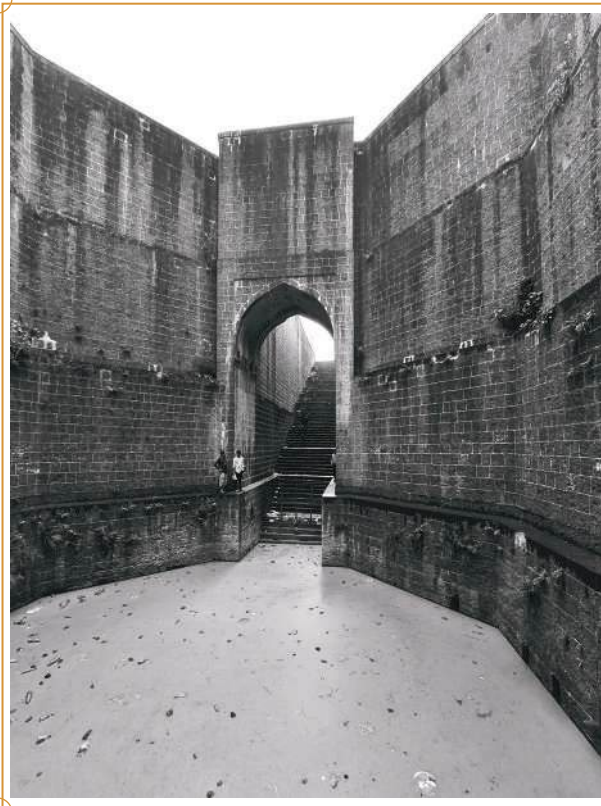




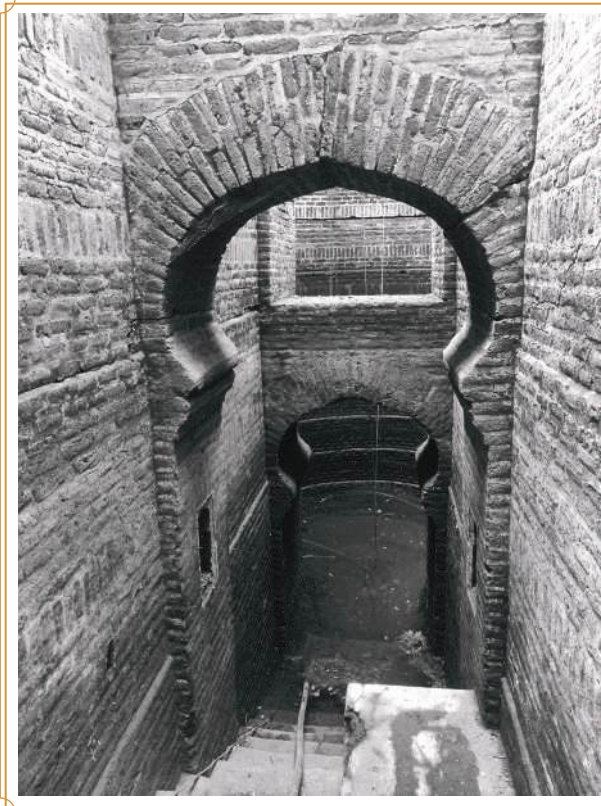
*The Shivatirtha stepwell, built by Ahilyabai Holkar at Verul (Ellora), served as a vital water source for pilgrims*



*Shivlinga shaped barav at Pitkeshwar  
near Indapur, Pune district*



*Barav built by Ahilyabai  
at Karmala of Solapur district*



*Stepwell at Girnare,  
Nashik district*

# FAITH AS FULCRUM

A devout Hindu, Ahilyabai was deeply pained by the wanton destruction unleashed by foreign invaders who came to proselytise and conquer India fabled for its riches and natural resources.

The marauders torched towns and villages, defiled women and destroyed forts and libraries. Temples and mutts were razed to the ground. They went back home with the loot – and kept coming back for more.

India's soul was wounded. She needed a healing touch.

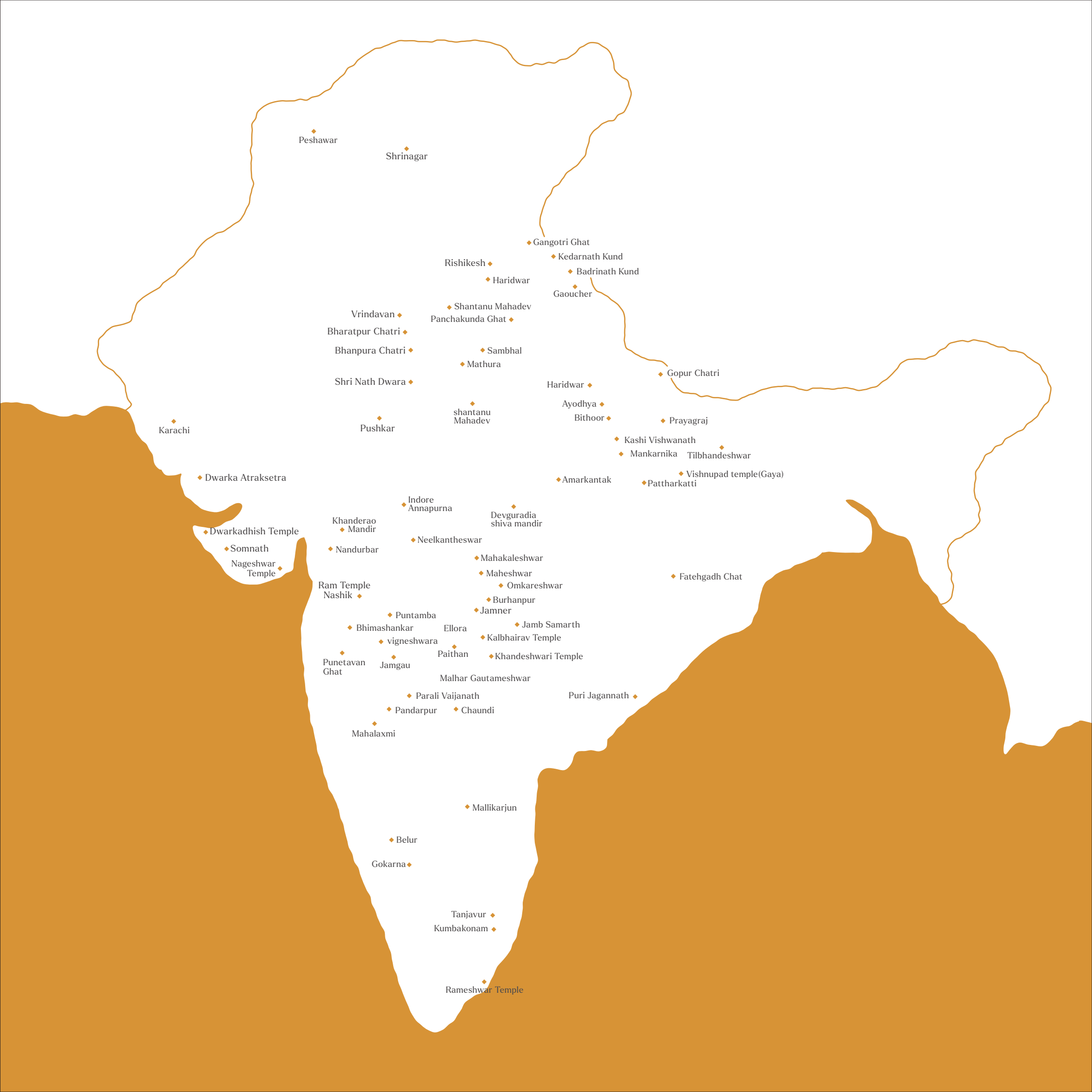
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श्रद्धा शक्ति बन जाती है, कांटों में बन जाती राह  
भारत लहलुहान हो जाय, आक्रांताओं की यही थी चाह  
मंदिर लूटे, शिखर गिराए, धन लूटा, और फूँके गांव  
इतिहासों की साक्षी से, रानी ने दी नवसृजन की छांह

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Peshawar

Shrinagar

Gangotri Ghat

Kedarnath Kund

Badrinath Kund

Rishikesh

Haridwar

Gaoucher

Shantanu Mahadev

Panchakunda Ghat

Vrindavan

Bharatpur Chatri

Bhanpura Chatri

Shri Nath Dwara

Sambhal

Mathura

Haridwar

Ayodhya

Bithoor

Gopur Chatri

Prayagraj

Kashi Vishwanath

Mankarnika Tilbhandeshwar

Vishnupad temple(Gaya)

Pattharkatti

Karachi

Dwarka Atraksetra

Pushkar

shantanu Mahadev

Amarkantak

Indore Annapurna

Devguradia shiva mandir

Dwarkadhish Temple

Somnath

Nageshwar Temple

Khanderao Mandir

Nandurbar

Neelkantheswar

Mahakaleshwar

Maheshwar

Omkareshwar

Burhanpur

Jamner

Ram Temple Nashik

Puntamba

Ellora

Jamb Samarth

Kalbhairav Temple

Bhimashankar

vigneshwara

Khandeshwari Temple

Punetavan Ghat

Jangau

Paithan

Malhar Gautameshwar

Puri Jagannath

Parali Vaijanath

Pandarpur

Chaundi

Mahalaxmi

Mallikarjun

Belur

Gokarna

Tanjavur

Kumbakonam

Rameshwar Temple

Ahilyabai tapped the inner strength of the collective Hindu psyche in a bid to arouse India. Aware of the fact that for Hindus temple is not merely a place of worship, but a repository of faith, tradition and culture, she built hundreds of temples across the country, and ghats. Also, she offered munificent donations for the repairs and reconstruction of old, decrepit shrines.

Thus, shraddha became shakti.

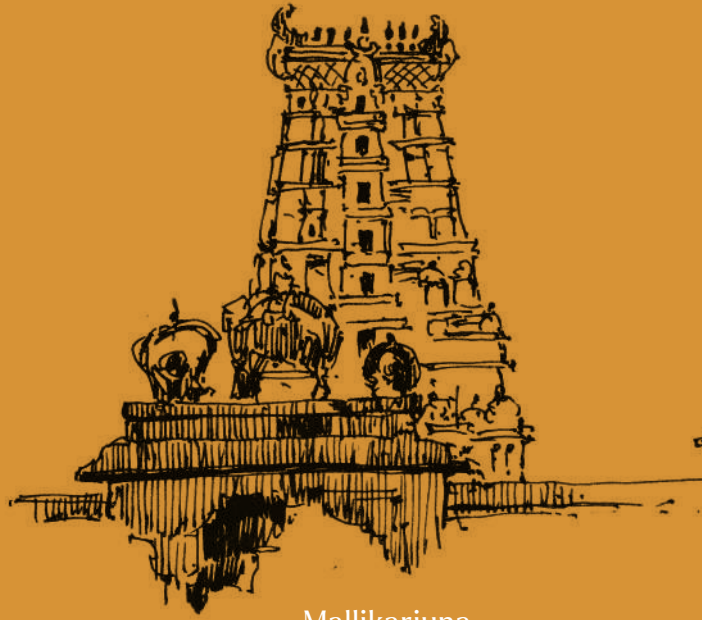


*The dieties Ahilyabai worshipped everyday*





Somnath



Mallikarjuna

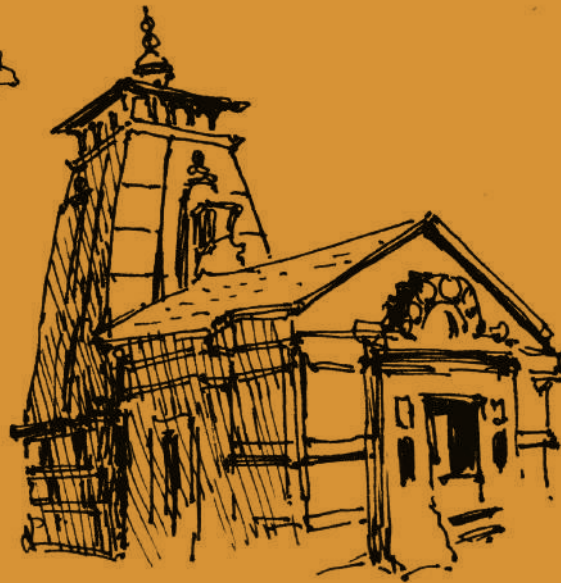


Mahakaleshwar

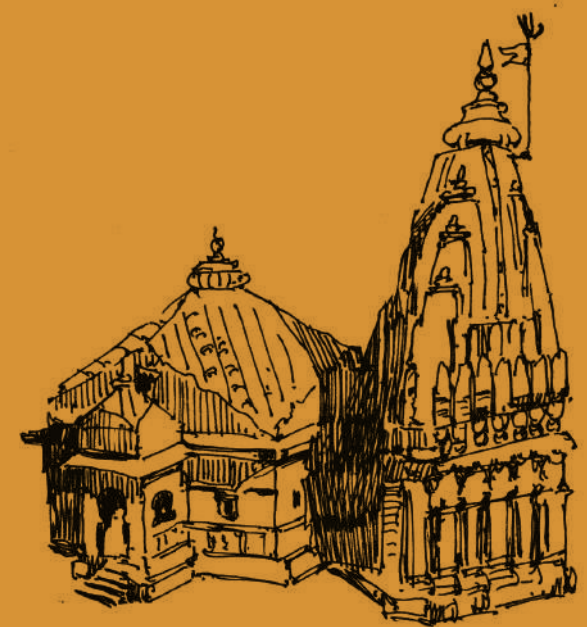
# 12 JYOTIRLINGA



Grishneshwar



Kedarnath



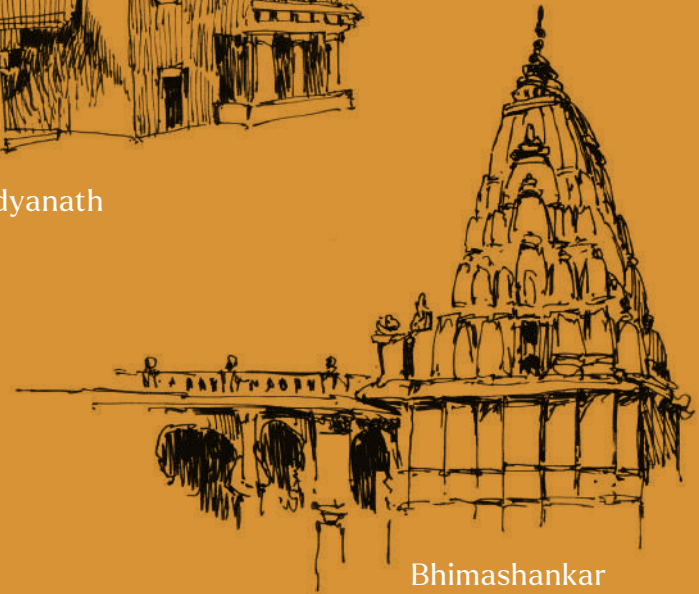
Trimnakeshwar



Omkareshwar

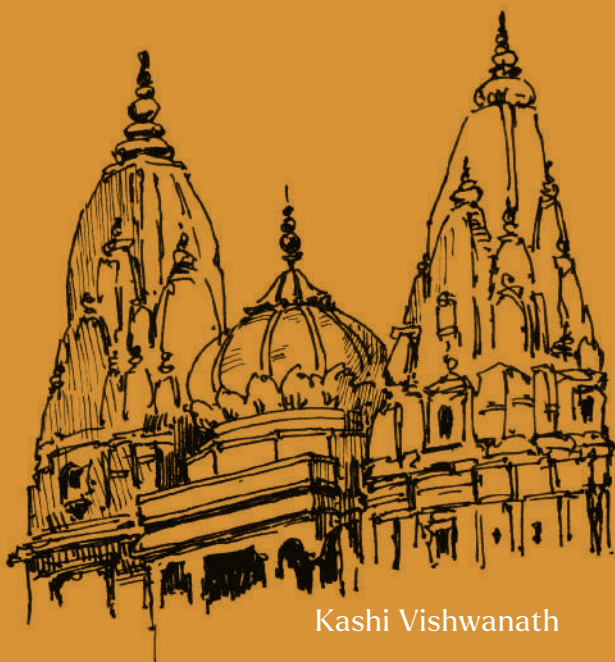


Vaidyanath



Bhimashankar

*The twelve jyotirlinga deepened India's cultural oneness and its spiritual content. Ahilyabai ensured non-stop supply of the holy Gangajal to the jyotirlinga, and made arrangements for the daily 'puja'. She undertook several welfare measures, whether reconstruction, repairs, feeding centres, and building pathshala, ponds and digging wells. The tradition continues unabated*



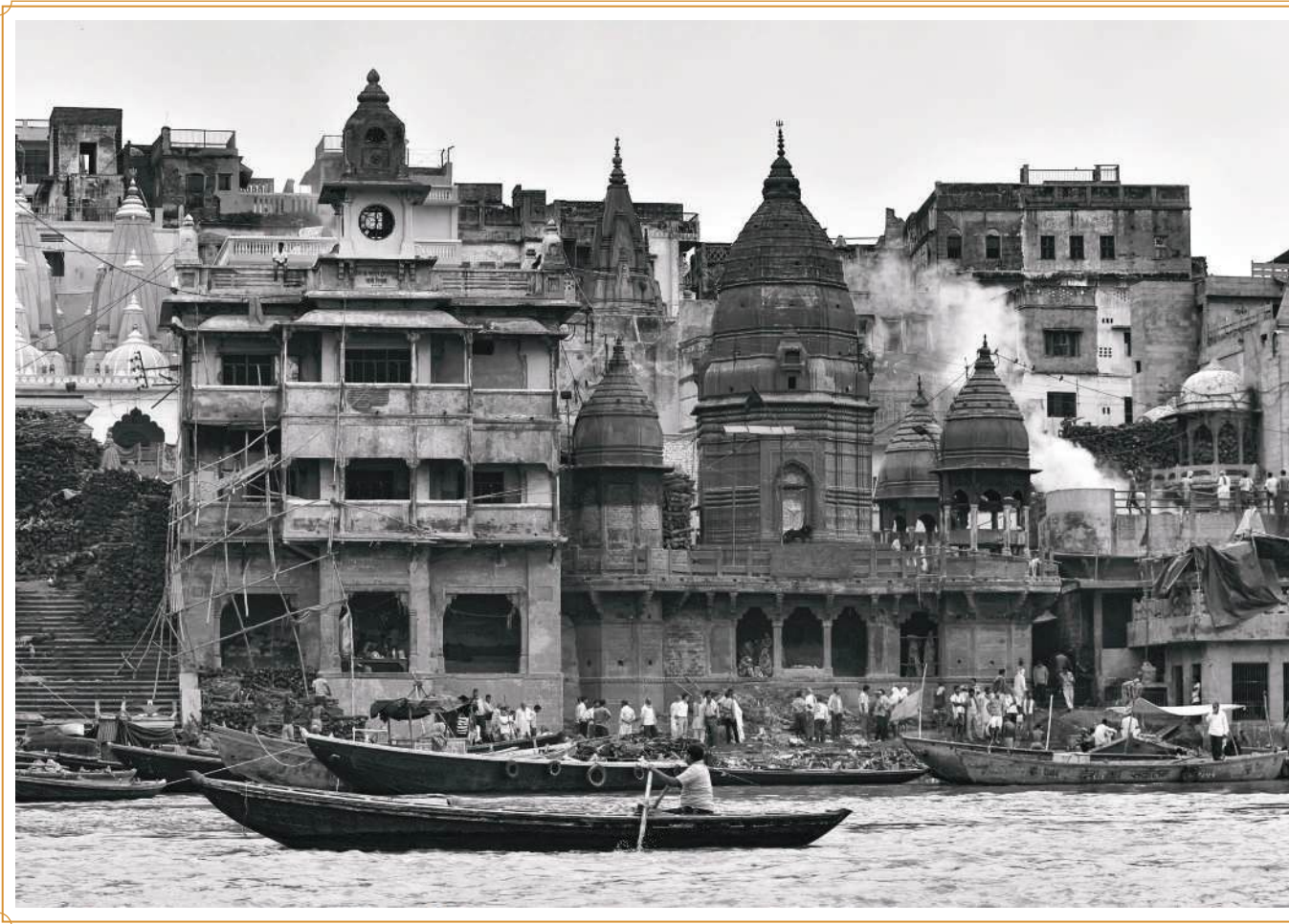
Kashi Vishwanath



Nageshwar

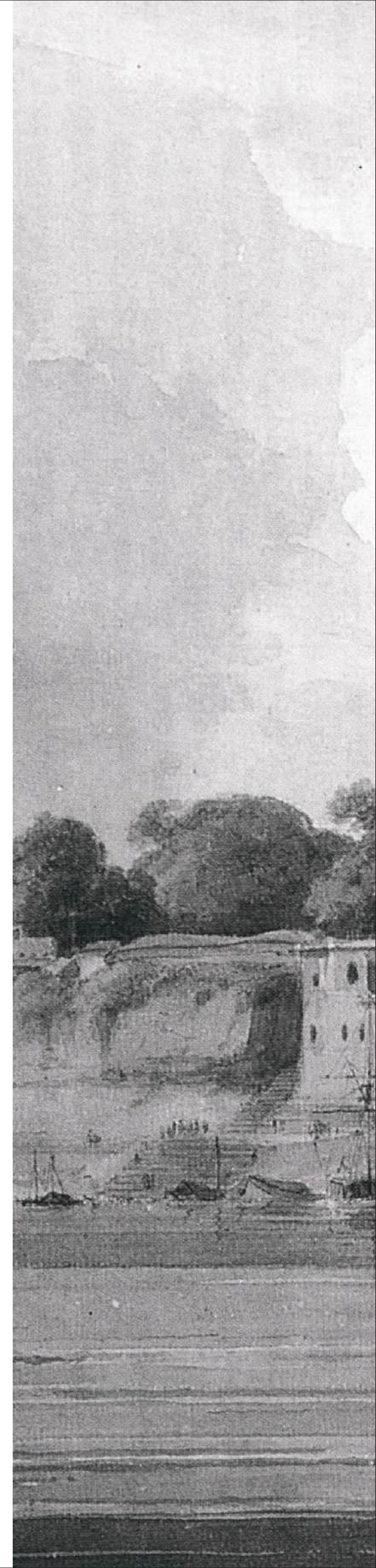


Rameshwar



*Manikarnika ghat*

*Manikarnika and Dashashwamedh : Situated on the banks of river Ganga at Kashi, the two ghats have for long been serving as cremation grounds for millions of Hindus, transcending caste, creed and community. The ghats were built by Ahilyabai*





*Dashashwamedh ghat, early 19th century*



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MANUFACTURES ALL KINDS  
BANARASI SAREES &  
SCARVES & SUITS &  
DRESS MATERIALS

अहिल्याबाई घाट  
AHILYABAI GHAT

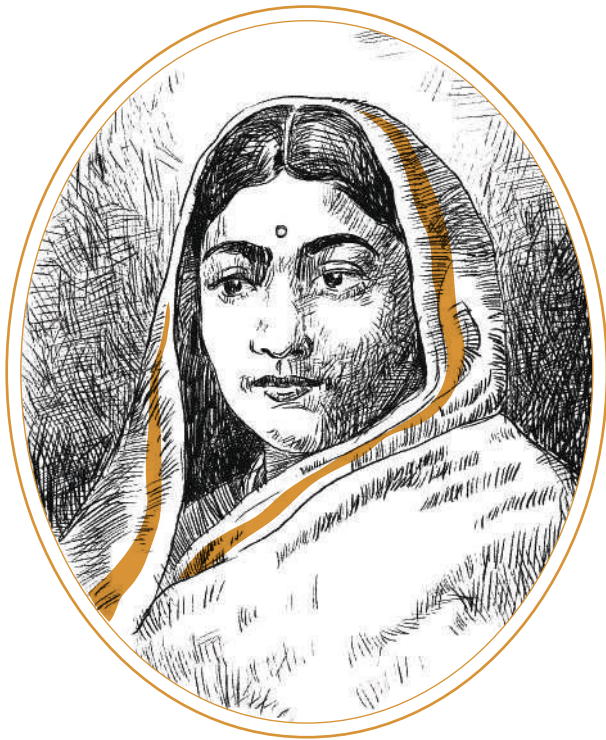
अहिल्याबाई  
अहिल्याबाई

गंगा  
गंगा

*The Ahilya ghat in Kashi*



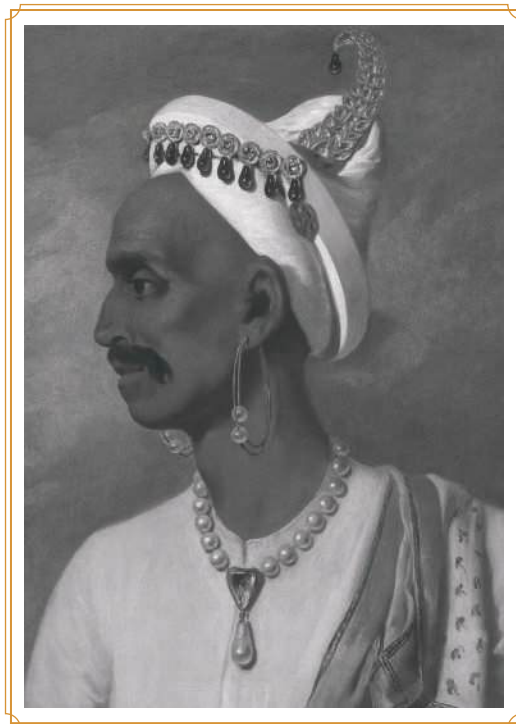
# NO ONE SHOULD DOUBT HER INTEGRITY



Although Ahilyabai spent generously on temples, ghats and alms-houses from her private funds, her detractors, led by Tukojirao Holkar - who was in charge of the army, while Ahilyabai led the administration - began a whispering campaign that she was dipping into the state exchequer.

Reports reached the Pune office of Nana Phadnavis, the administrator of the Peshwas. How could she splurge the state fund on temples and shrines when the Maratha confederacy needed funds for the army? Ahilyabai's philanthropy was a costly affair for the Holkar regime, they pointed out.

Needless to add, the charge was baseless as the Holkar state was financially sound. Malharrao had left behind a whopping Rs. 16 crore for Ahilyabai's Khasgi (private) funds.



*Nana Phadnavis*

Phadnavis, an astute strategist, wrote to Ahilyabai insinuating that she was spending from the state exchequer on her dream themes. Ahilyabai hotly contested Phadnavis's claim and said that she was willing to show her account books to the Pune darbar. 'Should you find a penny being spent from the government fund on temples and ghats, I shall re-pay five times the amount from my personal account,' she wrote.

A financial expert from the Peshwa darbar, who scrutinised Ahilyabai's account books, wrote back to Phadnavis saying that her integrity was beyond reproach.

Phadnavis promptly offered apologies to the queen.




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दान करो तो अपने दम पर, राज्य को ना बर्बाद करो  
 परोपकार की भागीरथी से, सबका जीवन सुखी करो  
 नीरक्षीर विवेक संपन्न रानी हिसाब की पक्की थी  
 चोखे-स्पष्ट बहीखातों से, आलोचकों की जुबान बंद की

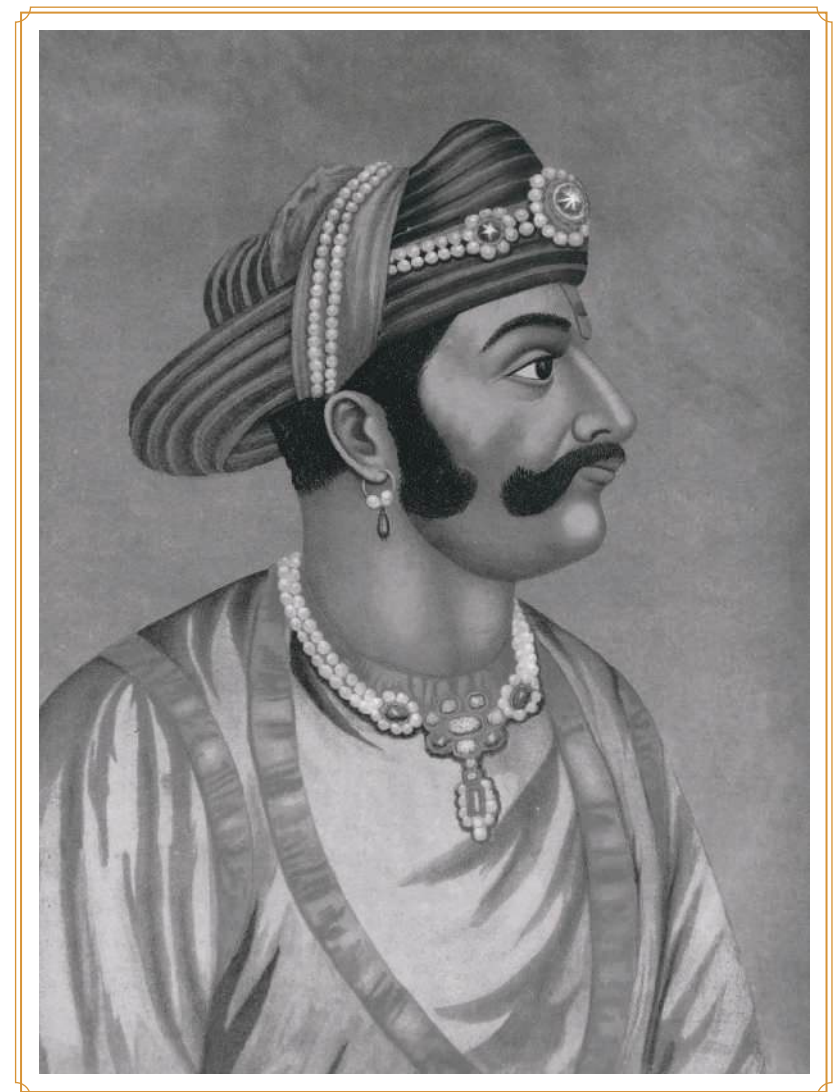
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# GOHAD: A JEWEL IN AHILYABAI'S CROWN

Located near Gwalior and ruled by Chhatar Singh, the Rana of Gohad, in Madhya Pradesh, was for long on Malharrao's radar. While he was away from Indore on one of his military missions in the hot, muggy north India, Ahilyabai drew up a plan to attack the Gohad fortress. This was sometime in early 1765.

She had learnt strategic military moves from Malharrao, and she thought time had come to put them into practice. Neither did she consult her father-in-law nor sought his permission for the military expedition, it is said.

Backed by a powerful artillery Ahilyabai led the troop to Gohad. A cannon was set to target the fortress, and the Rana sent a senior official with message of peace: they were willing to vacate the fortress. Ahilyabai conquered Gohad without firing a single cannon. It was victory without a war.



*Malharrao Holkar*



---

सही समय पर सही फैसला, कूटनीति कहलाती है  
दुश्मन को घेर पटक देना, कुशल शासक की निशानी है  
साहस से जब धावा बोला, रानी ने गोहाड़ को घेरा  
आत्मसमर्पण किया शत्रु ने, बिना चलाए एक भी गोला

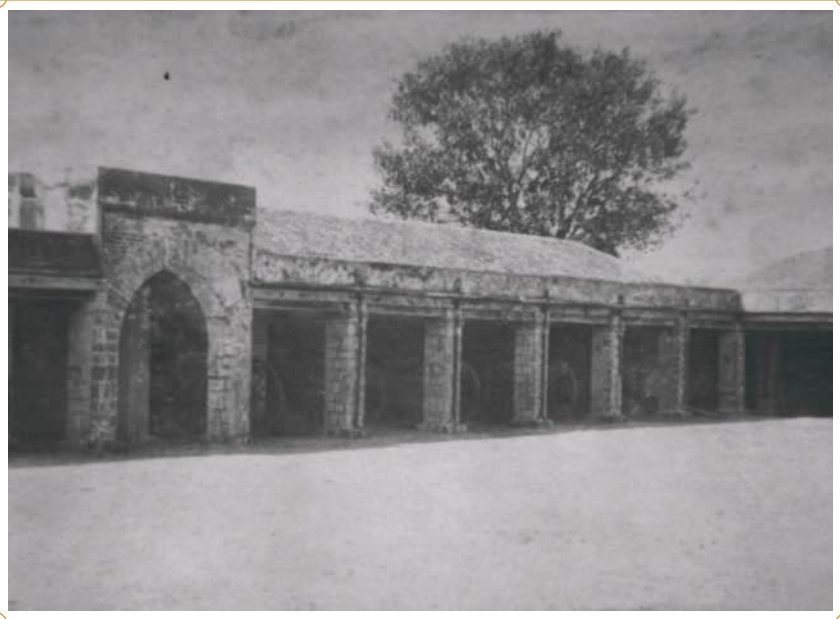
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*Gohad Fort*



# CANNONS APLENTY



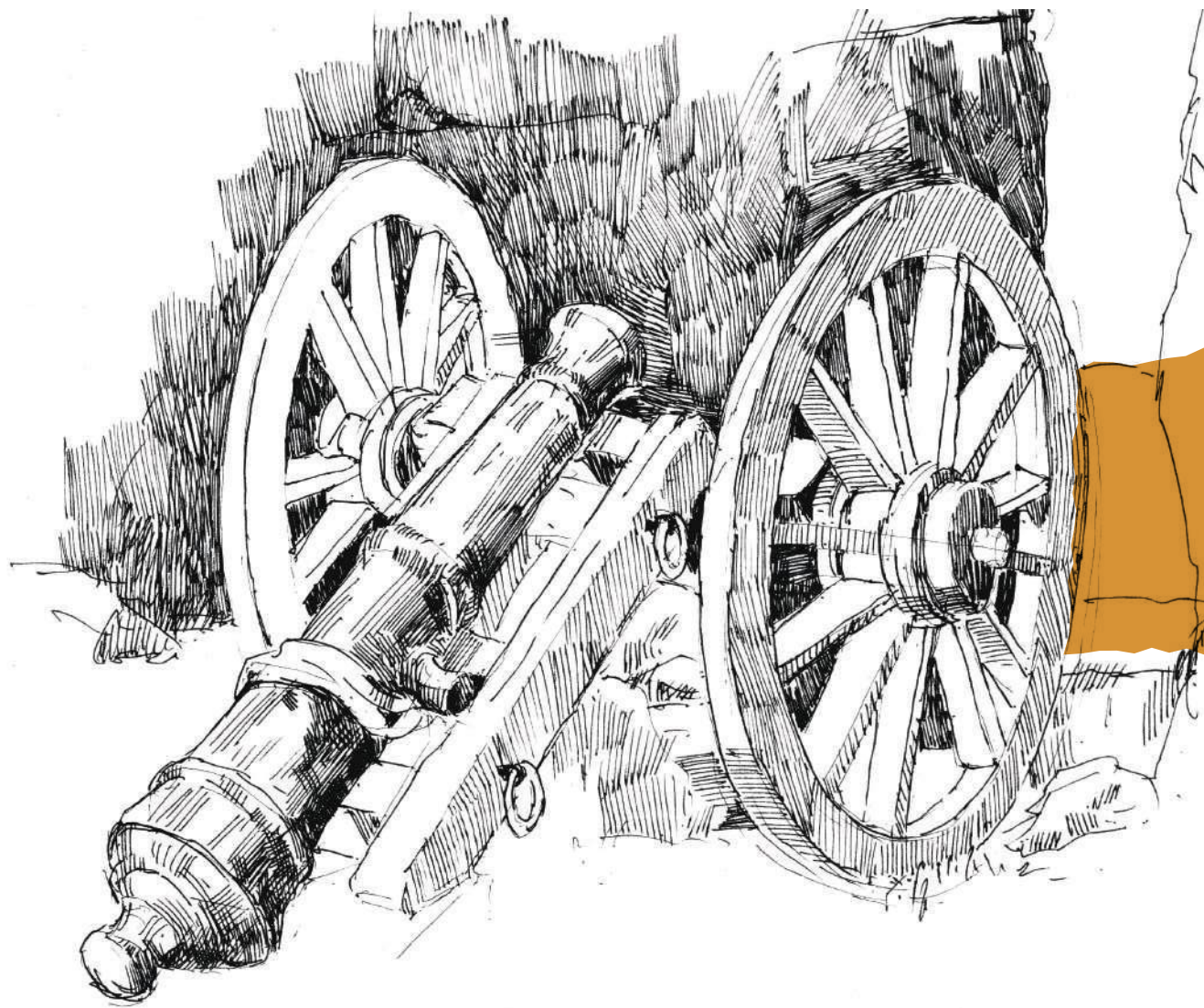
The steady rise of the British in India was a matter of concern for Malharrao Holkar, and he often shared it with his daughter-in-law. Malharrao asked her to pay greater attention to the artillery, which was the USP of the British army.

Ahilyabai got down to set up a new cannon factory for her regime. She first chose Gwalior, but later shifted to a sprawling site in Bhanpura, near Mandsaur. Cannons were variously named: Jwala Bhawani, Jaywanti etc., each weighing 10 to 30 kilos. Over 130-150 bullocks moving the cannons from one place to another must have been a visual treat to villagers. The cannon factory was Ahilyabai's first brush with defence matters.

---

ललकार रहे थे ब्रिटिश सभी को, खतरा भारत पर छाया था  
राज्य सुरक्षित रहे हमेशा, मल्हारराव ने समझाया था  
शस्त्र संपन्न अब बने राज्य, अहिल्यादेवी ने की हर तैयारी  
तोपें बनने लगी दनादन, शस्त्र जखीरा जुट गया भारी

---



# SHE SNUBBED THE BADSHAH

Ahilyabai's spine was made of steel. She knew well that she was the undisputed chief of the great Holkar dynasty, and its cherished values which she had inherited from Malharrao Holkar. She wouldn't allow anyone, even the Mughal emperor, to trample on her toes.

It so happened that the Mughal emperor, weak and imbecile, was planning to invade the Deccan plateau to annex Bijapur and Golkonda. He wrote to the Maratha sardars, including the Holkars, seeking strategic support.

Two military officials from the Mughal darbar raced to Maheshwar with a letter from the Badshah. They stood before Ahilyabai, and offered their salaams to her. She asked them to hand over the letter, as was the practice, to the Diwan.

---

मदद मांगने आए मुगल, जमा रहे थे धाक  
स्वाभिमानी रानी ने, दिखाई उनकी औकात  
दिखाई उनकी औकात, हटाई बुद्धि से धूल  
कूटनीति निभाने में, रानी न करती कोई भूल

---





The soldiers politely refused, saying that the missive was from the Mughal emperor and that it should be accepted by the queen herself.

Their words reeked of the Mughal vanity.

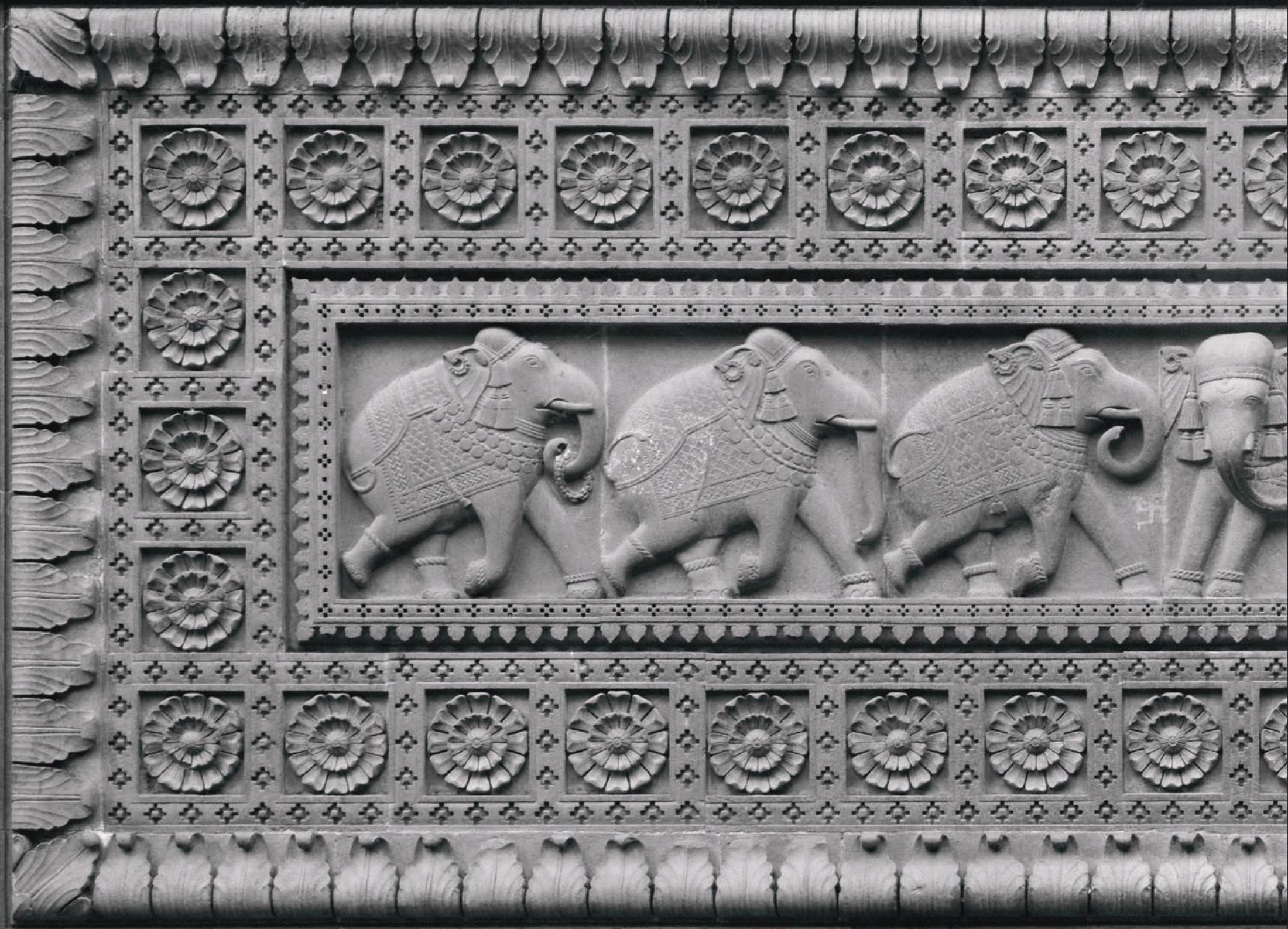
Ahilyabai was furious, but didn't put her ire on display. She told them that they will have to follow the protocol of the Holkar court. Furthermore, she reminded the duo that the emperor was seeking help from the Holkars.

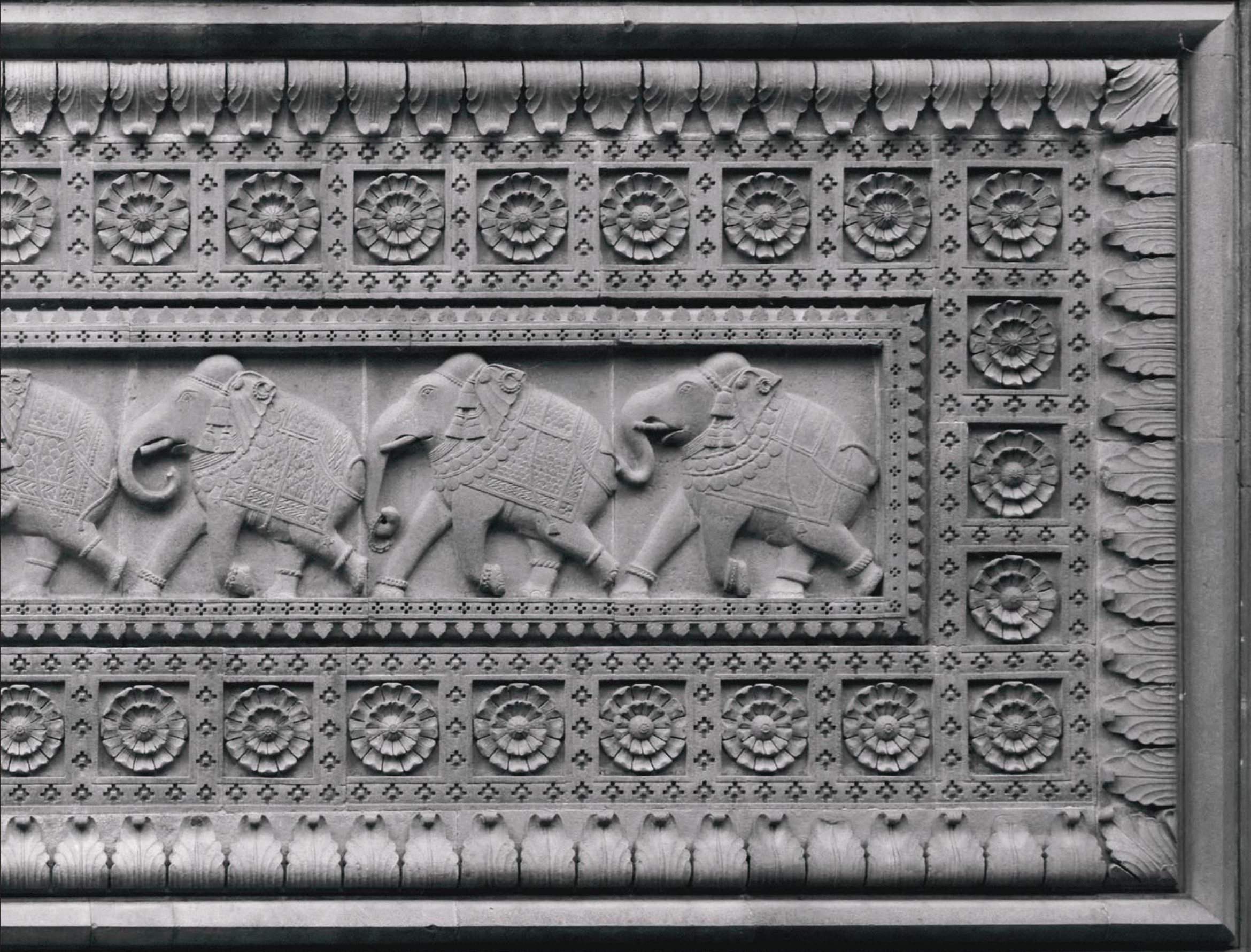
"It's not the other way round," she said. Her voice had a cold edge.

Their heads down, the messengers promptly followed her orders.











# PRAGMATIC AND PRACTICAL

Ahilyabai could hear the distant hoofsteps of Time. Although apprehensive of the British rulers, she was quick to realise that they were remarkably ahead of the Indian kings in terms of defence preparedness.

For instance, nearly 7,500 Company forces trounced around 40,000 Indian soldiers in the battle of Buxar in 1764. The Company boasted a well-trained drill force, modern warfare strategies and latest weaponry.

In astute move, Ahilyabai hired the services of John Parker Boyd, a US military official, to revamp the Holkar army. Under an agreement he was to train the army as chief officer. The battle dress and headgears, and military equipments were to be supplied by the Holkar regime.

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जीत मिलेगी तभी जब, अनुशासित होगी राज्य की सेना  
बने रहना है प्रासंगिक तो, समय के साथ होगा चलना  
विदेशी प्रशिक्षक हुए नियुक्त, सेना ने पाया रूप नया  
कदम से कदम मिलाकर, इंदौर समय के साथ चला

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After a month-long rigorous training, a battalion of smart looking and agile soldiers, led by Brigadier General Boyd, marched in great style to Maheshwar to hold a guard of honour for Ahilyabai.

A letter from Boyd to Ahilyabai (April 10, 1793) is uniquely interesting. Stating that he had been to Surat, a rich mercantile town of Gujarat, to buy arms, Boyd says that the Surat merchants were initially reluctant to sell guns to “others”. However, they readily agreed when told that the Holkar empress needed them for her army. It is significant to note that Boyd was a salaried employee; Ahilyabai didn’t allot him jagir.

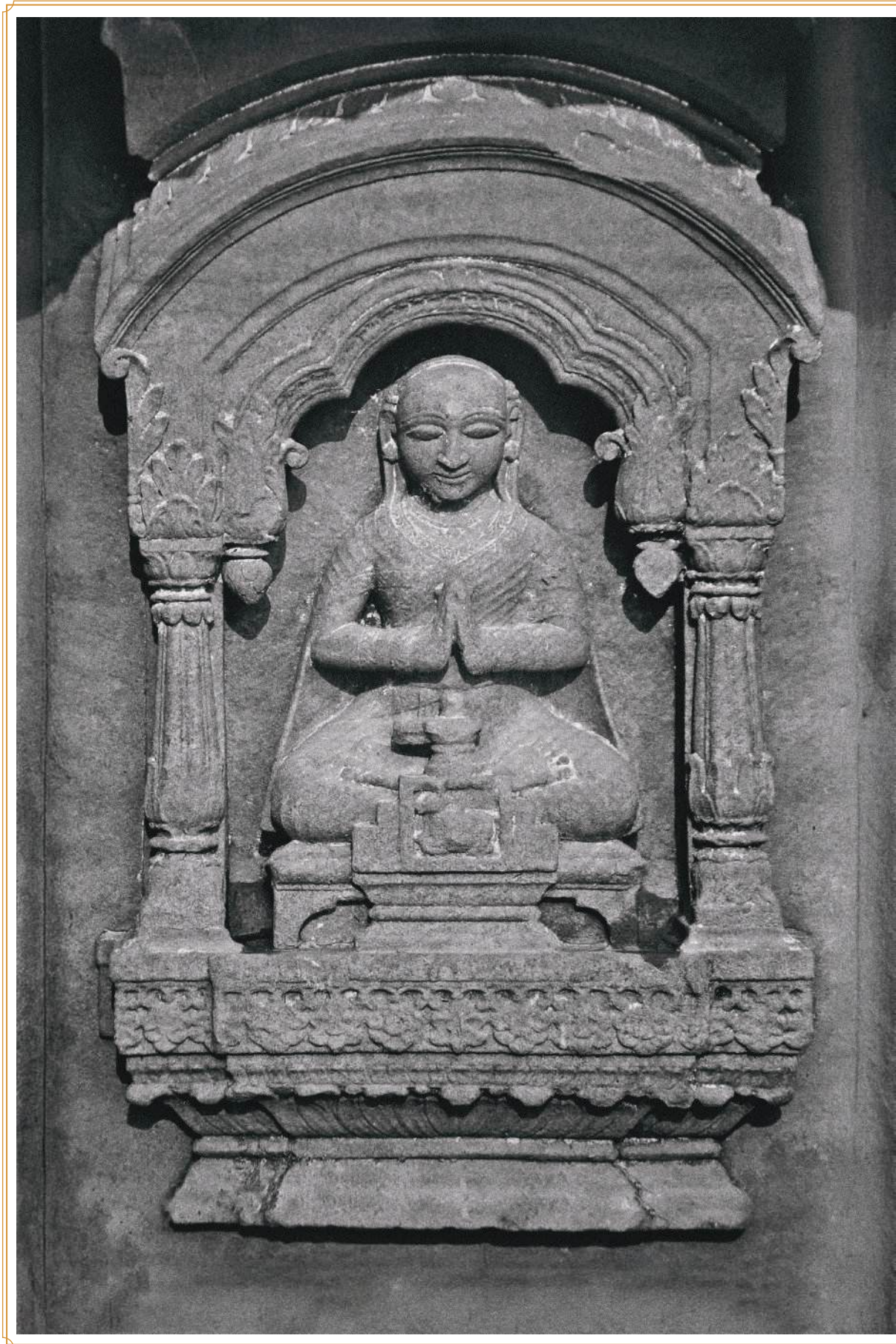
However, Ahilyabai never allowed Boyd to interfere in the administrative matters of her regime. After the Holkar task came to an end, the American veteran retired to the sylvan surroundings of Indore from where he periodically wrote laudatory letters to Ahilyabai, reiterating his loyalty to her and her kingdom.

*Ahilyabai Holkar stood as a formidable pillar of the Holkar dynasty, embodying both maternal care and unwavering strength*



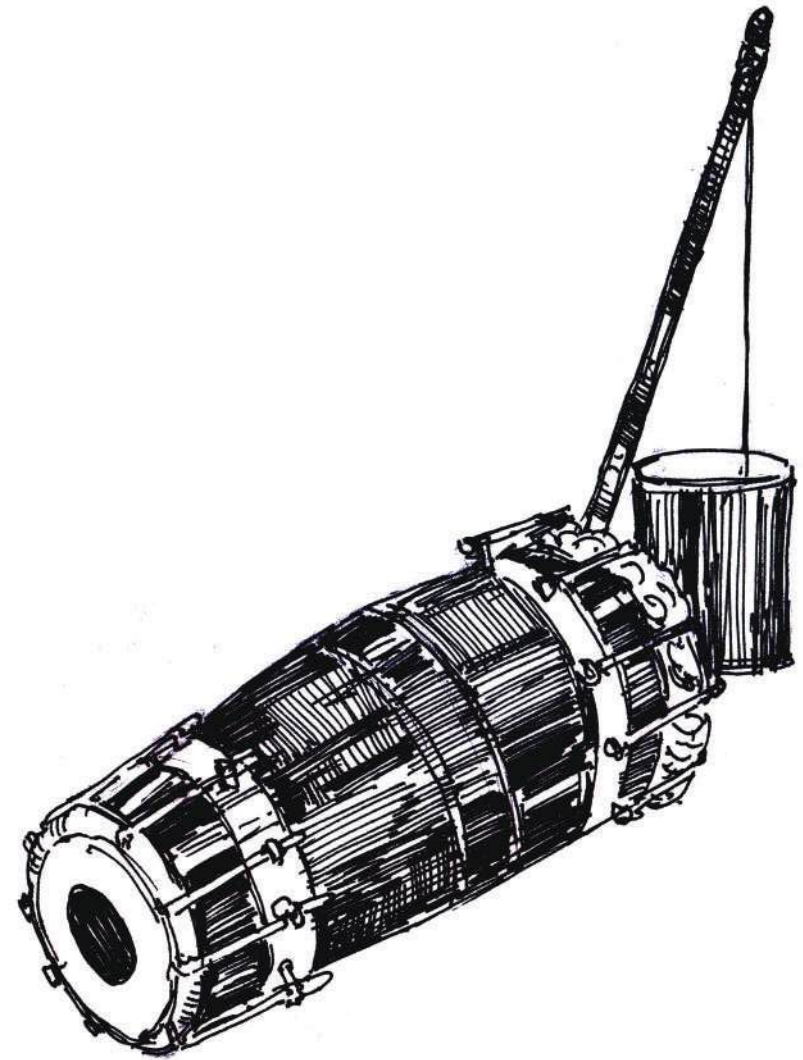


ईश्वर ने मुझपर जो उत्तरदायित्व रखा है,  
उसे मुझे निभाना है.  
मेरा काम प्रजा को सुखी रखना है.  
मैं अपने प्रत्येक काम के लिए जिम्मेदार हूँ.  
सामर्थ्य और सत्ता के बल पर  
मैं यहाँ जो भी कुछ कर रही हूँ  
उसका ईश्वर के यहाँ मुझे जवाब देना होगा.  
मेरा यहाँ कुछ भी नहीं है,  
जिसका है उसी के पास भेजती हूँ.  
जो कुछ लेती हूँ वह मेरे ऊपर ऋण है.  
न जाने कैसे चुका पाऊँगी।



*Ahilyabai's idol carved out of stones at Manikarnika ghat, Kashi*

# OF POETS AND POETRY



Once, Anant Bhavanbaba Gholap, aka Anant Fandi (1744-1819), was brought before Ahilyabai by a band of Bhills. They had mugged the well known poet in the deep forest of Satpura while he was on his way to Maheshwar. Anant Fandi began to sing his poems eulogising Ahilyabai's valour and love, and the Bhills, so goes the story, realised their folly.

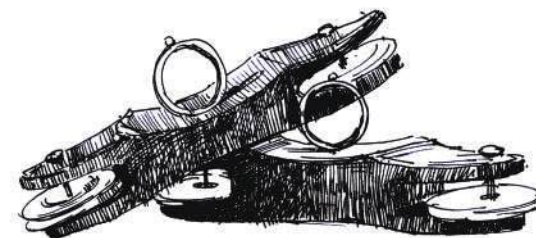
On being asked what were his plans Anant Fandi told them that he wished to go to Ahilyabai's court. Overcome with remorse the Bhills, who held Ahilyabai in high respect, escorted him to the darbar.



Ahilyabai, her colleagues and members of the family were spellbound as Anand Fandi began to recite *lavanis*, a genre of poetry popular in Maharashtra, one after the other. His mellifluous voice resonated through the darbar hall.

While showering him with gifts Ahilyabai gently goaded him into writing devotional songs which would strike a chord with the laity. A *lavani* speaks of love and romance. However, people need to be told about faith and human values, she told him. In later years Anant Fandi switched over to devotional poetry, it is said.

Poet Moropant and Khushaliram Bhat too were impressed by Ahilyabai's leadership qualities. The queen welcomed them in her court, on separate occasions, with warmth. Of the two, Khushaliram Bhat was appointed as court poet and scholar.

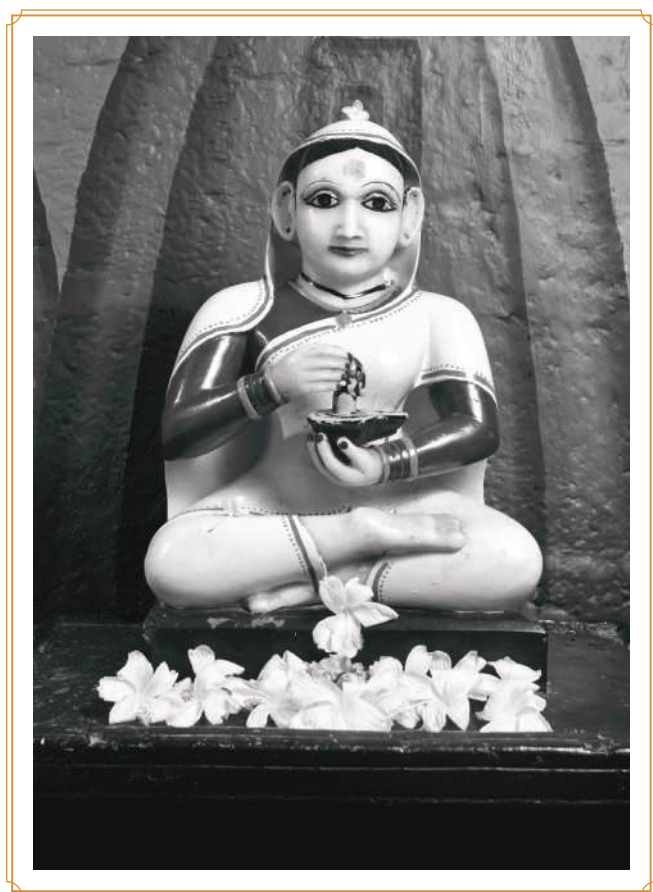


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कला और साहित्य समाज का दर्पण माने जाते हैं  
इसीलिए तो साहित्यकार सदैव आदर पाते हैं  
अनंत फंदी के काव्य में सदा रहा श्रृंगार  
उनके काव्य की लोकप्रियता सदा रही अपार  
भक्तिमय हो वातावरण, और श्रद्धा मन में पले बढ़े  
रानी के आवाहन पर, फंदी ने भक्तिमय काव्य गढ़े

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# FLIGHTS OF ANGELS SING THEE TO THY REST



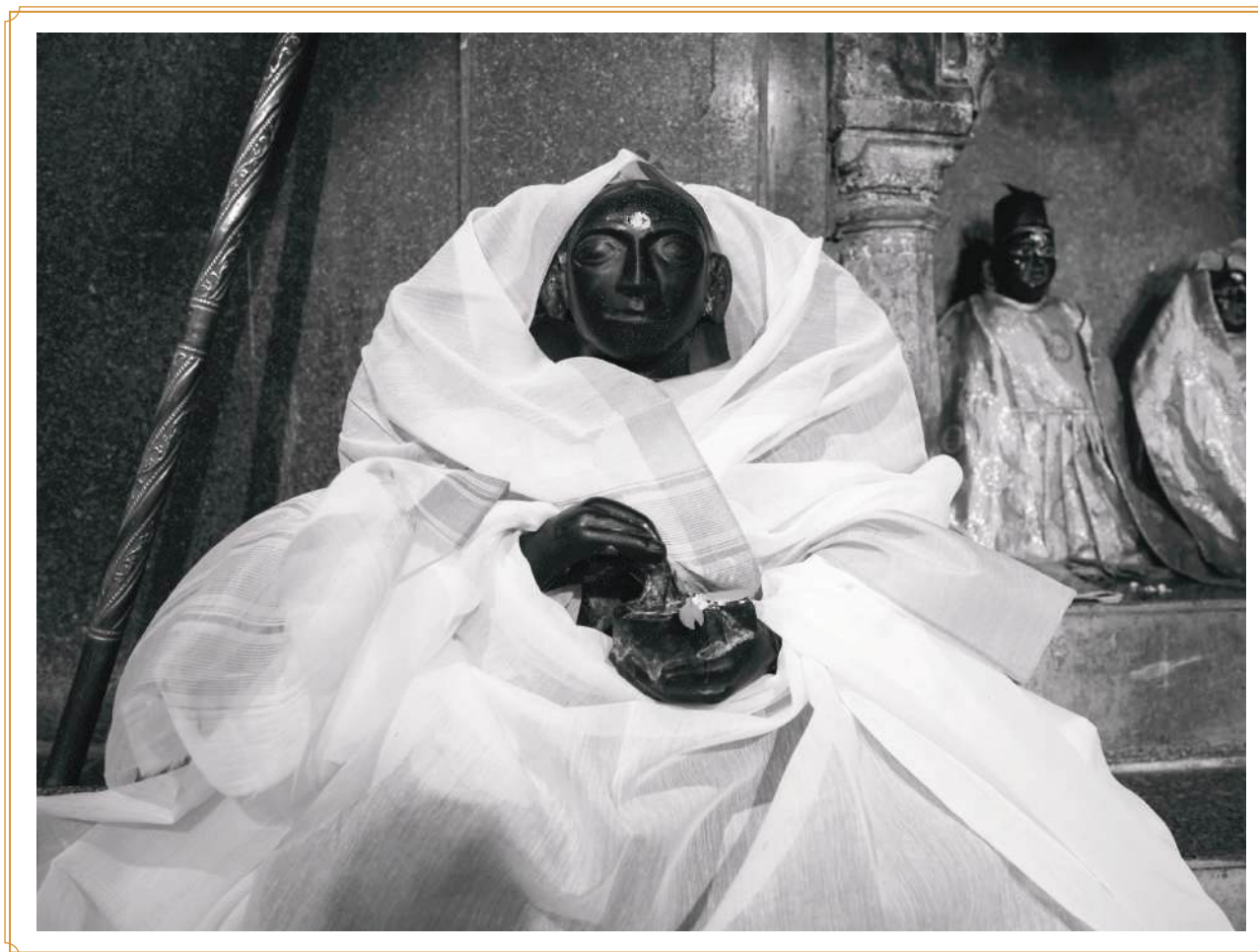
On May 31, 1795 Ahilyabai turned 70. Political chaos, personal tragedies and cracks in the 'Marathe Shahi' (Maratha confederacy) were causes for concern.

Mahadji Shinde's sudden death had saddened her heart. The Scindia-Holkars were long-time allies, and had extended the boundaries of the Maratha confederacy beyond the Sindhu river, right up to Attock. The alliance may have, in later years, gone sour, but memories lingered on. The success was hanging in balance.

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सुख-दुःख, पीड़ा, वेदना, मानव जीवन का हिस्सा हैं  
राजा हों या रंक, ये तो सबके भाग्य का हिस्सा हैं  
रानी का जीवन था अनुपम, कर्म रहे अति दिव्य  
स्वर्णिम था वह काल, जब कार्य हुए थे भव्य

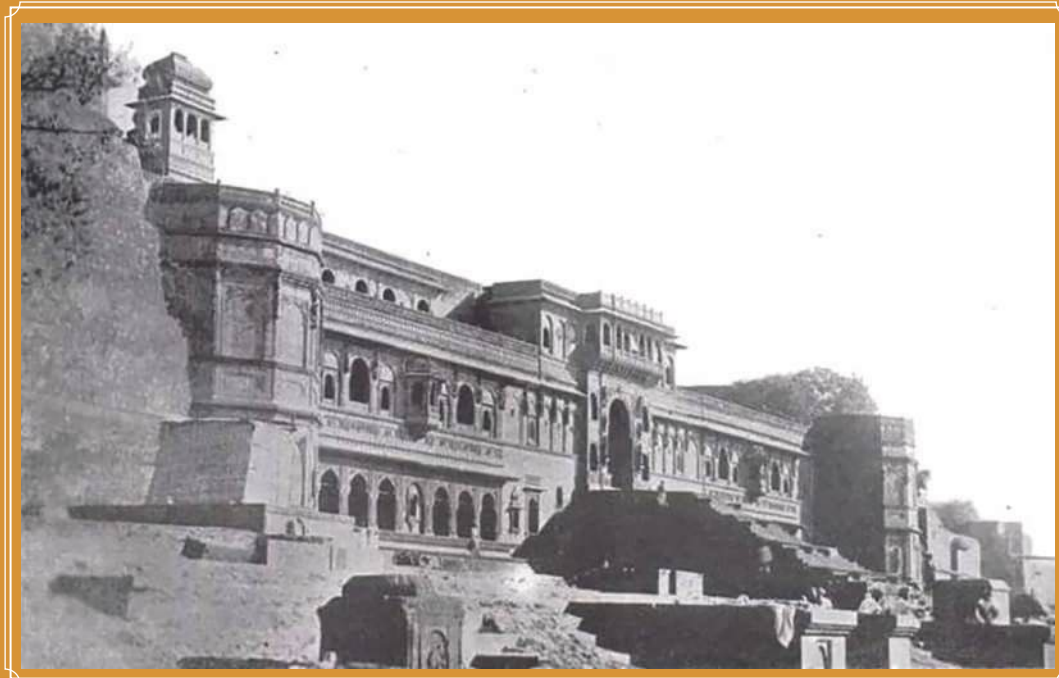
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Nevertheless, Ahilyabai set aside her grief, and resumed duties as head of the Holkar dynasty. A deep urge to serve people steeled her resolve. A luminous ray of hope followed her wherever she went. Like a mighty river, which races through thick forests and proud mountains she rose above adversities.

Having spent every breath of life for the good of the people Ahilyabai's heart brimmed with a sense of fulfilment. A life well lived, indeed. Promises to be kept were many, but pledges redeemed were many too.


Ahilyabai's health began to deteriorate. She apparently had a premonition as she donated a cow as an act of penance before breathing her last on August 13, 1795. With her ended an era now engraved in gold.



*The fabled Shiva temple and Ahilyabai's 'samadhi' on the bank of river Narmada. Ahilyabai passed away in Maheshwar on August 13, 1795*



Picture courtesy: Subodh Pathak



काल उन्ही के यश गाता है, जिनके हों कर्तृत्व महान  
जिनकी चिन्हित राह पर, चल समाज पाता सम्मान  
पुत्रवधु बन रही कर्मरत, रानी बनकर न्याय किया  
माता बनकर प्रजा को पाला, देवी बनकर धर्म जिया  
भग्न आस्था ध्वस्त धर्मस्थल, अनुप्राणित हो पुनः जगे  
पुण्यश्लोक देवी के हाथों, धर्म संस्कृति के चक्र फिरे  
स्मरण कर रहा सारा भारत, कीर्ति जिनकी रही महान  
हर युग माता से प्रेरित हो, समाज जीवन का ही उत्थान



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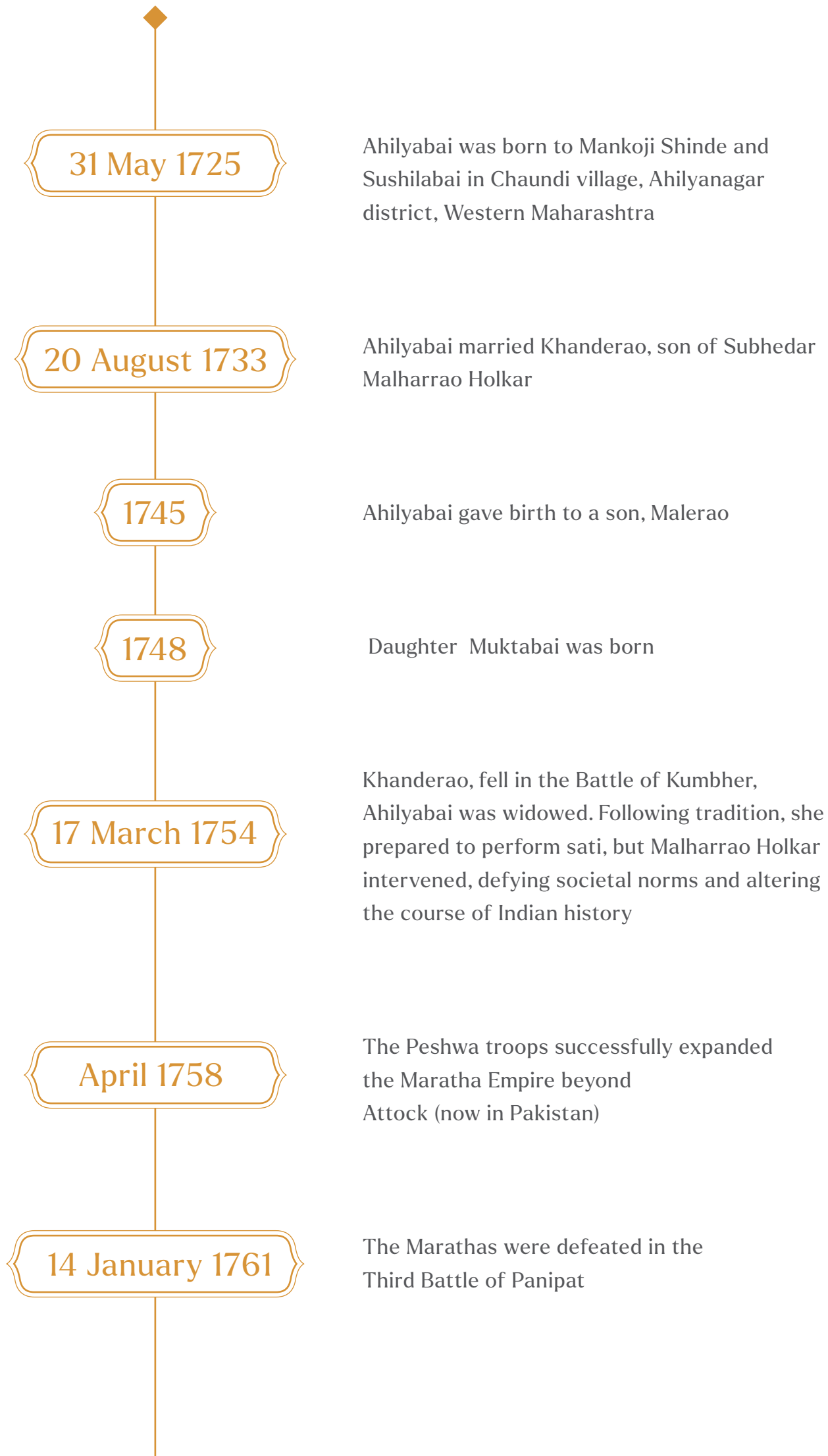
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# TIMELINE

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*Chronology of events  
in the life of Ahilyabai Holkar*



29 September 1761

Death of Gautamabai Holkar, Ahilyabai's mother-in-law

1762

A cannon and gunpowder factory was established in Bhanpura under the sole leadership of Ahilyabai

16 March 1765

Ahilyabai stepped onto the battlefield for the first time and triumphantly conquered Gohad Fort

20 May 1766

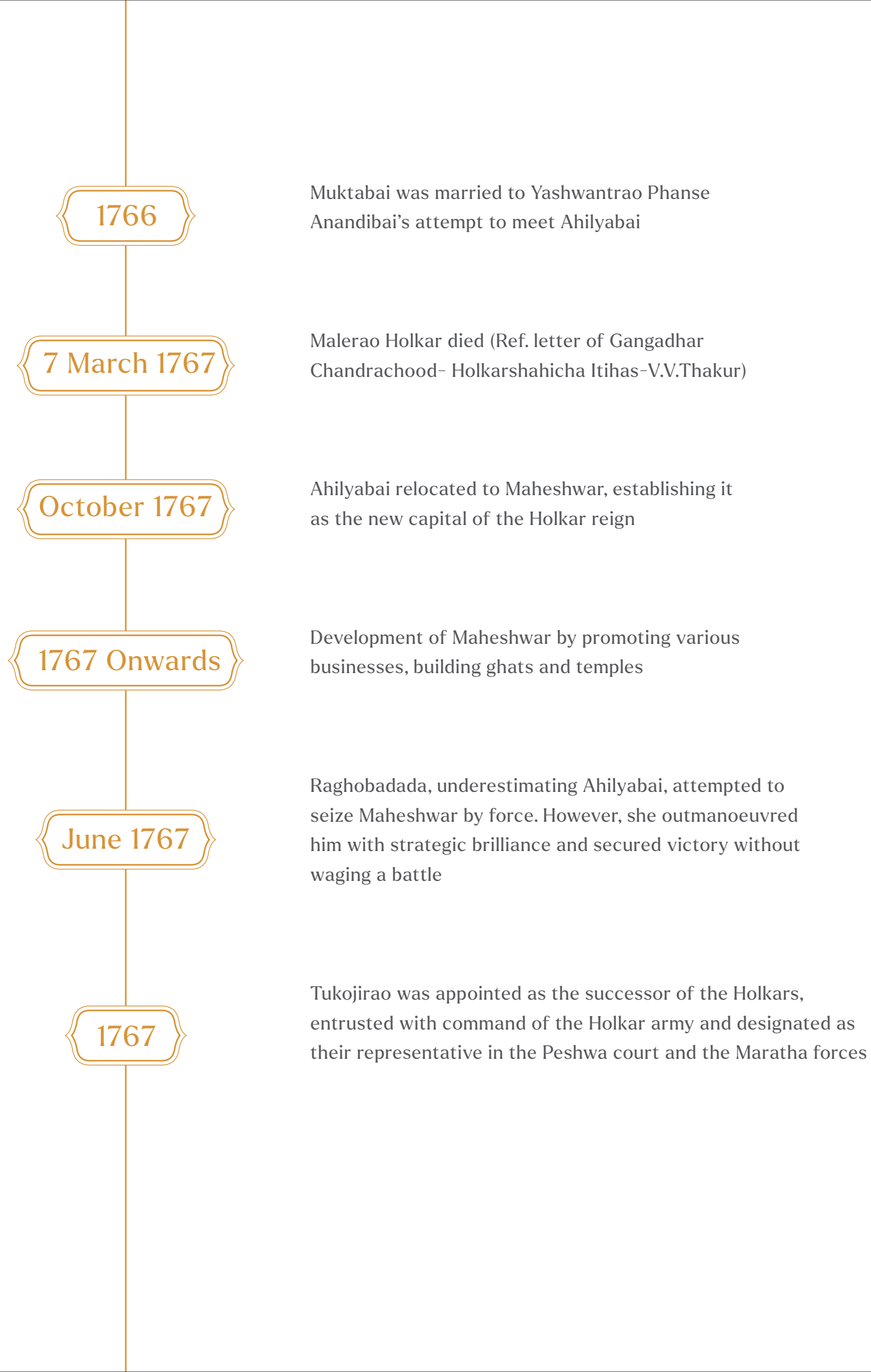
Subhedar Malharrao Holkar died at Alampur

23 August 1766

Malerao, Ahilyabai's son, was declared the successor of the Holkar state

1766

Yashwantrao Phanse met Ahilyabai's challenge by capturing the Bhil leader, Mandrup Singh, who had been looting pilgrims. In a strategic move, Ahilyabai granted him the right to collect the Bhilkawdi tax in exchange for ensuring the pilgrims' safety



1769

Ahilyabai introduced a new coin for the first time, featuring a sacred Shivalinga adorned with Bilvapatra, symbolizing devotion and spiritual significance

1771

1st Rebel of Chandrawats: Ahilyabai masterfully led the war against the Chandrawat rebellion, ultimately securing their defeat

18 November 1772

Peshwa Madhavrao died

13 December 1772

Narayanrao became the new Peshwa

30 August 1773

Peshwa Narayanrao assassinated

28 May 1774

Sawai Madhavrao takes over as the next Peshwa, Ahilyabai through Tukojiroo became the advisory member of Barbhai in Pune durbar

May 1779

A lawyer (or ambassador) from the Peshwa's office Vitthal Shamraj, was appointed to the Maheshwar Darbar

1782-1783

The 2nd Chandrawat rebellion was peacefully resolved by Ahilyabai through strategic diplomacy, without engaging in battle

1783

Ahilyabai started a postal system from Maheshwar to Pune. The work was assigned to Padamsi Nensi firm

1784

Restored the Ayodhya Ram Mandir and refurbished the Sarayu ghat

1785

Rebuilt Somnath Temple

1785

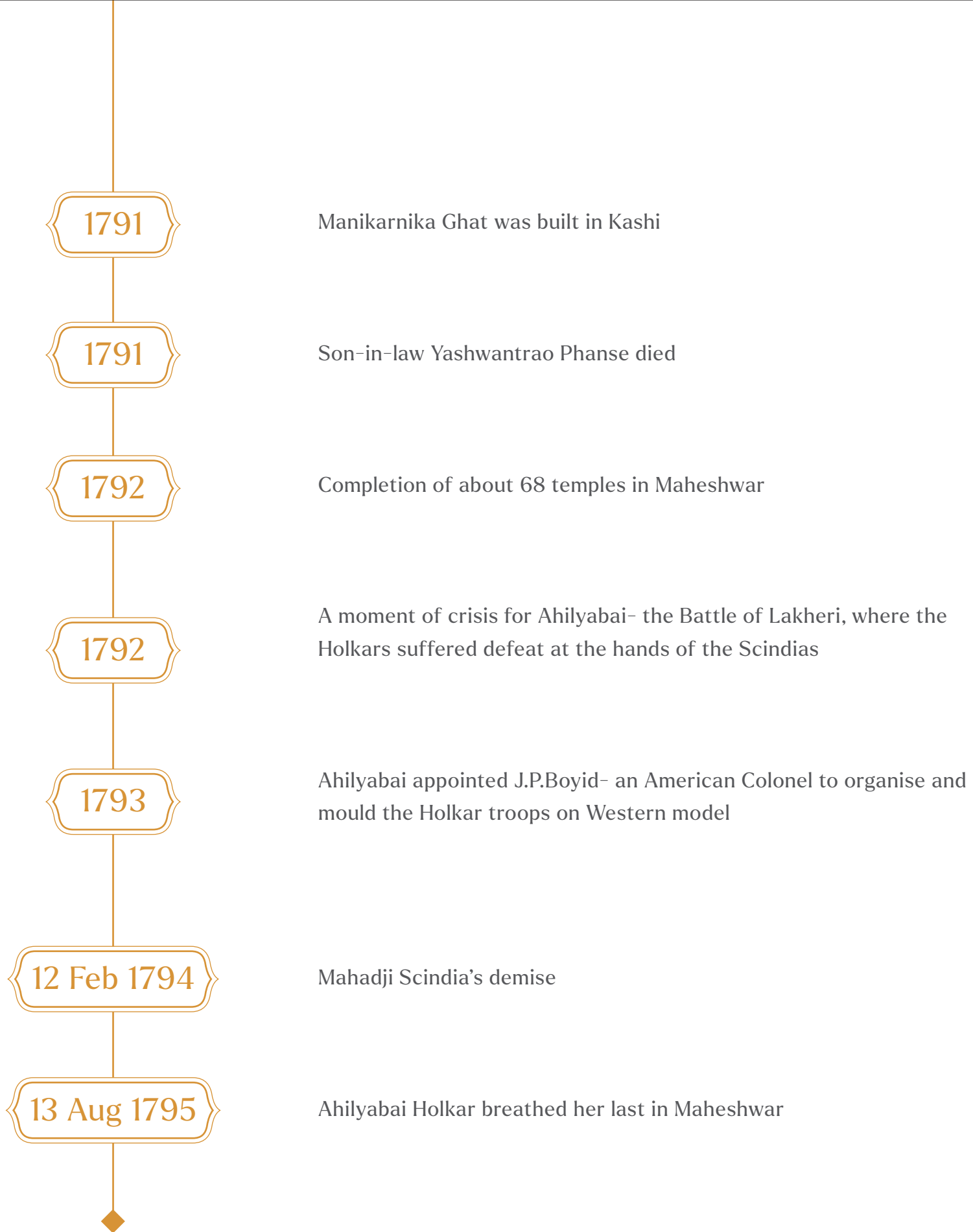
Rebuilt Kashi Vishwanath Temple and Dashashwamedh ghat

1787

The 3rd Chandrawat rebellion, Ahilyabai triumphed, capturing and executing Sobhagsingh with a cannon. The Pune Peshwa Durbar honoured her victory and praised her courage

15 September 1787

Grandson Nathoba died





ईश्वर ने मुझपर जो उत्तरदायित्व रखा है,  
उसे मुझे निभाता है.

मेरा काम प्रजा को सुखी रखता है.  
मैं अपने प्रत्येक काम के लिए जिम्मेदार हूँ.  
सामर्थ्य और सत्ता के बल पर  
मैं यहाँ जो भी कुछ कर रही हूँ  
उसका ईश्वर के यहाँ मुझे जवाब देना होगा.  
मेरा यहाँ कुछ भी नहीं है,  
जिसका है उसी के पास भेजती हूँ.  
जो कुछ लेती हूँ वह मेरे ऊपर ऋण है.  
न जाने कैसे चुका पाऊँगी।