

LOKMATA AHILYABAI HOLKAR



Queen of
Indomitable
Spirit



By Chimmayee Mulye

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Publisher's Note

We are fortunate to have been instrumental in bringing out this book on the occasion of 3rd birth centenary of a visionary in the history of Bharat, Lokamata Ahilyabai Holkar. The centenary is set to begin from 31st May 2024 and will be celebrated across the country with different programmes and publications.

This book is a tell-tale account of the life and works of Ahilyabai and is primarily targeted for the teen-age readers.

We thank Chinmayee Mulye, the author, for sincerely and passionately delving into the life of Ahilyabai and lucidly bringing out her works, vision and character. Vijay Achrekar, a contemporary artist with an independent style of creating his artwork, has made the book visually bright and soothing with his illustrations. We thank him for completing the work in a very short period of time and with intense dedication. Lokesh Karekar of Locopopo Design Studio, has designed the book in an elegant manner appropriate to the letter and spirit of the book. We thank him for the same. Madhav Joshi of Param Mitra Publications made it possible for the book to be printed in the given timeframe for which we are thankful to him.

We are grateful to the Holkar family for providing a photograph of the painting of Ahilyabai from the family archives, which we could use for the cover page of the book. We are also grateful to Raj Kamble of Famous Innovations for making us the team available and his valuable inputs on the project. We have to express our gratitude towards Pramod Bapat and Vilas Bhagwat who spent their valuable time and helped us manage to put the team together and coordinate all our efforts.

We are sure that the book will be of immense value to the readers.

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Ahilyadevi: Getting to Know Her

Life often surprises us with unexpected turns that lead to extraordinary opportunities. Just six months ago, as per my father's suggestion, I delved into the pages of "Karmayogini" by Vijaya Jahagirdar and stumbled upon the captivating tale of Devi Ahilyabai. Instantly, I found myself drawn into her world, wandering the halls of the Indore Palace and imagining the humble yet exquisite surroundings of Devi Ahilyabai's home in Maheshwar.

Encountering Devi Ahilyabai's story was nothing short of a revelation. It sparked a newfound passion within me, compelling me to share her extraordinary journey with everyone around me. Little did I know, fate had something grand in store. The timing couldn't have been more perfect—the book was scheduled for release on Devi Ahilyabai's third centenary. When the opportunity arose for me to contribute to its publication by writing about her, I seized it without hesitation.

Captivated by Devi Ahilyabai's indomitable spirit and unwavering commitment to her people, I poured my heart and soul into crafting her narrative. It was a labour of love, driven by the desire to honour her legacy and inspire others with her remarkable story.

Now, as her third centenary approaches, I am filled with gratitude for the chance to play a part in preserving Devi Ahilyabai's memory and sharing her enduring legacy with the world. It serves as a poignant reminder of the power of literature to illuminate the lives of extraordinary individuals and the profound impact they can have on our journey.

The book is tailored especially for teenagers. In today's world, many criticize the perceived lack of direction among the youth, but I see it differently. They lack direction not because they lack potential but because they lack inspiring

figures to emulate. Devi Ahilyabai's character has the potential to influence everyone's life profoundly. Her journey touches the soul deeply. Her visionary approach and her progressive mindset, centuries ahead of her time, provide us with the perspective we desperately need today as a society.

At a time when feminism is gaining momentum and patriarchal views are being challenged, Devi Ahilyabai stands out as a beacon of female empowerment. Three hundred years ago, she shattered stereotypes by ruling with grace and strength. Despite facing attempts by male rulers to undermine her authority simply because of her gender, she proved her mettle time and again, asserting that she was more than capable. While others focused solely on personal gain, her vision extended to the betterment of the entire country, leaving a legacy that spans from Rameshwar to Chardham and from Kashi to Dwarka.

She was truly a blessing to our country, and her work commands immense respect and deserves to be shared with the world. If through this book, I can inspire even a handful of teenagers, I would consider it the greatest success of my life.

Lastly, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the individuals who have supported me throughout this journey. I extend my sincerest thanks to the Social Studies Foundation for granting me this incredible opportunity. I am deeply indebted to Prof. Shivaji Joshi for his invaluable insights into the life of Devi Ahilyabai. I would like to thank Mrs. Sarika Joshi for her input on language. Special thanks are also due to Dr. Neha Godbole, whose expertise and guidance have been invaluable. Finally, I must acknowledge the most important person in my life, my father, Mr. Avinash Mulye, whose unwavering support and inspiration have been the driving force behind my writing journey.

- Chinmayee Mulye

Preface

The Journey to Royal Responsibilities

It was a pleasant morning in Chondi, a small village in Beed near Aurangabad. The river was flowing silently. There was a beautiful Mahadev temple on the bank. Sunrays touched the Shivalinga as if the sun was taking blessings from Lord Shiva. The sound of chanting mantras had filled the air. The fragrance of flowers blooming around the temple was refreshing.

Little Ahilya woke up early, before sunrise, as usual. It was her daily routine. To wake up early, clean the house's porch, spray water, and draw a beautiful rangoli. Anyone visiting the house in the morning would feel fresh and cheerful. After that, she used to take a bath and go to the Mahadev temple to perform morning pooja and other rituals. Though she was just twelve years old, she liked performing all these tasks.

Mankoji and Sushilabai Shinde were the parents of this gem of a person. Mankoji had taught her to read and write and her mother had prepared her for all the household responsibilities.

Ahilya got ready to visit the temple. She braided her hair and wore a **nauwari*** saree with an intricate design. Drew a crescentic bindi on the forehead. She looked beautiful and elegant in that attire. With a pooja thali and **abhishek** patra* in her hands, for the holy bath of Mahadev, she walked towards the temple.



He noticed the elegance, conviction, and honesty in that little girl. The clarity in her actions, poise in her movements, and her devotion.

She entered into the temple. It was filled with morning light. As she entered, everyone present there in the temple could hear the soft sound of her anklets. She moved swiftly towards the Shivalinga. She cleaned it, started with the **abhisheka***, and while chanting the mantras that she knew, with full conviction, completed the pooja. That was pleasing to everyone in the temple. With closed eyes, and folded joint hands, she asked for blessings.

Someone special was paying careful attention to everything she did that day. Her small acts of divinity and spirituality drew him in. He was not an ordinary person. He was none other than, Peshwa Bajirao. He was travelling to Pune and had halted at Chondi.

He approached her and asked her name. She turned, startled, to see Peshwa Bajirao standing behind her. Any girl of her age would have boggled, but Ahilya was not an ordinary girl. Confidently she introduced herself.

Peshwa kept asking her questions regarding all the rituals she performed. Confidently, she explained the purpose behind every step. He was surprised to see, that Ahilya was not performing any ritual just for the sake of faith, but also was well aware of why she was doing that.

Bajirao saw resoluteness and fearlessness in her eyes but at the same time, humbleness in her language. Amused by this event, Bajirao decided on behalf of a dear friend who also was his Sardar, Malhar Rao Holkar.

He told Malhar Rao, that Ahilya would be a perfect partner to his only son, Khanderao. When Malhar Rao, saw this beautiful girl, he decided to go with Bajirao's decision and immediately spoke with her parents regarding the marriage proposal.

Mankoji and his wife Sushilabai were delighted to receive a proposal from such a rich and elite family for their daughter and immediately gave their consent. The wedding took place in Pune in 1733. As a wedding gift, Peshwa Bajirao gave her 200 tolah gold. Ahilya was now a proud daughter-in-law of Subhedar Malhar Rao Holkar.

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The Dawn of Holkar Legacy

Malwa was a stepping stone for Marathas. It was a checkpoint for Rajasthan, Rajputana and Delhi. The significance of Malwa from a military and geographical point of view was tremendous. Peshwa divided the responsibility of Malwa to three of his Sardars. Holkar, Scindhia and Pawar. They were stationed like, Holkars in Indore, Scindhia in Ujjain and Pawar in Dhar. The main task for them was to collect the taxes from these areas, and indirectly monitor activities in the entire India.

Ahilya came to Indore with Khanderao in Holkar palace. At the entrance, she was welcomed by her four mothers-in-law, Gautamabai, Banabai, Dwarikabai and Harkubai with aarti as per the ritual. Gautamabai was Malhar Rao's first wife. Everyone called her Baiji. She was very particular about her household duties and proudly handled the entire Holkar household.

Holkar Palace was an enormous building. Decorated with intricate and fancy interiors. Big curtains and sumptuous chandeliers beautified the halls of the palace. With awe, Ahilya familiarised herself with the entire building. She began performing household chores under Baiji's supervision. Ahilya was perfect in every minor exercise from the start. Her father-in-law Malhar Rao, was immensely impressed by her attitude. Ahilya's four mothers-in-law were extremely cordial with her. Her sister-in-law, Udabai, quickly became her dearest friend and remained by her side till the end.

* **Nauwari**: a 9-yard saree, draped in the traditional Maharashtrian way

* **Abhishek** patra: A small vessel containing holy water to bathe shiva linga.

* **Abhishek**: Holy bath of Mahadev



The day was special for everyone. Peshwa Bajirao had honoured Malhar Rao with the Subhedar (Chief commander) title. He was to receive all the documents and stamps defining his rights as Subhedar that day. Young Ahilya was dutifully completing all of the responsibilities assigned to her. She wanted everything to be apt and perfect. Perfection was in her blood. Everyone was talking to each other about how the new daughter-in-law had brought luck to the family. But Ahilya was not

flattered by **any one of this**. Instead, she **focussed** on all the tasks she was given. She knew that she had no role in Malhar Rao's success. He had merited this honour due to his bravery and martial abilities.

Ahilya was decorating the place of pooja when Baiji called her. She told Ahilya, that Malhar Rao wanted her to accompany him, to collect the stamps. He had decided the most capable "son" of his family would collect all the material from the advocate of Peshwa Bajirao. Ahilya felt overwhelmed by the trust and love she was receiving from her father-in-law.

Ahilya wore a lemon-yellow coloured nauvari saree and all the royal jewels which Baiji gave her. Baiji herself groomed her. She decorated Ahilya's hair bun with a jewelled clip, drew a big crescentic bindi on her forehead, and put kajal in her big glittery eyes. Ahilya looked marvellous.

Clam and content, Ahilya stood near her mother-in-law in the main hall as the ceremony started. The pride on her face and the confidence in her eyes were visible. The red and white Holkar flag was kept on the royal seat. The advocate of Peshwa entered the palace with stamps. The pooja was performed by the pandits.

After the pooja, Malhar Rao walked towards Ahilya, took her hand and started walking towards the advocate. As the beauty and brain of Holkars walked towards the royal seat, Baiji's eyes filled with tears of contentment. Malhar Rao asked the advocate to hand over everything to his dear Ahilya. With poise, she took everything from him. He handed over the stamps to Ahilya and mischievously told her that all of this would be her responsibility from that moment and also with full commitment she had to take care of Holkar's realm till her last breath. His mischievous remark unknowingly predicted the rise of the Holkars.

The Warrior “Son” of Malhar Rao

Khanderao used to accompany Subhedar on the battlefield to get trained under his father. Most of the time Ahilya tagged along. Khanderao never really developed any interest in battle strategies or administration. But Ahilya was different, she used to listen to every minute detail from Malhar Rao and consumed the knowledge with full dedication. Malhar Rao noticed her inquisitiveness and decided to train her further.

Ahilya's education began. Reading and writing were just primary things. Malhar Rao also made sure of her training in horse riding, swordplay, artillery, accounting, administration and everything else. Like a highly absorbent sponge, Ahilya was grasping everything. Excellence was inherent in her.

Along with all this, she also had to be trained in the household. After all, she was the daughter-in-law of Holkars. Gautamabai had taken responsibility for this training. She was nurturing this tender sapling with all the love and care. **She loved her like her daughter.** Ahilya was extremely lucky regarding her in-laws. But God never gave her the happiness she deserved in her marriage. Her husband Khanderao, did not prove a suitable match for her. The sole son of such a famous fighter was squandered due to excessive drinking. He was a juvenile delinquent. After his marriage to Ahilya, he married Parvatibai and Surat Kuwarbai. As the time passed, the number of women around him

increased. Ahilya was frequently dissatisfied with how her husband lived his life. However, she maintained her sanctity and devoted herself to her in-laws' service.

Malhar Rao was well aware of his son's reckless behaviour. He was also deeply pained at the misconduct of Khanderao.

As he had noticed the abilities of his beloved daughter-in-law Ahilya, naturally he developed trust in her and started assigning important tasks to her.

Whenever Malhar Rao returned from the battles, Ahilya used to linger around him, to hear all the updates. Malhar Rao used to explain every why and how of battles he went to. Ahilya was extremely analytical and always had an interest in all the stories. She always dreamt of fighting battles alongside Malhar Rao.

Malhar Rao had everything. Talent, valour, wealth. The only thing lacking was a capable son, who could handle everything he built from scratch.

When he looked at Ahilya, he would say that she was the son, God had gifted him to take care of his empire.

A Test of Strength and Leadership

Nijam's son Nasirjang started creating a nuisance again. Entire Indore started the preparations for the battle. Messages were sent to various masters. The army was getting ready. **Sometroupes** were leaving Indore. Malhar Rao was about to leave. Gautamabai came to see him off with **Aarti**. She told him that Ahilya wanted to go for the battle with him and was pretty headstrong about the same.

Malhar Rao called her and told her that he would call her when it's the right time, but till then she must look after the entire administration and accounting in his absence. She was only fifteen years old and had been given responsibility for the entire Holkar daftar. She told Malharba that she would do everything as instructed.

Ahilya was brilliant in all the office work. The way she handled accounting was mesmerising. Experts like Gangoba Tatya and Anyaba Palshikar were impressed by her grasping ability and sharp mind. Very soon she started looking after every task in the Holkar **Daftar (Office)**. Malhar Rao's pain of not having a worthy descendent was beginning to reduce as he observed Ahilya's work ethic and perfection.

That was a usual day in Holkar daftar. Ahilya was working with **Gangoba tatya**. Suddenly drunk Khanderao entered the daftar. Ahilya and Gangoba Tatya were stunned by his entry. He was furious to see Ahilya at his place in the Holkar daftar. Ideally, he was supposed to be the person handling all the operations but his father trusted Ahilya more. His ego overpowered his guilt for the same.



Arrogantly he told Ahilya about his need for the money. He wanted more money, as all the funds he got for his expenses were wasted.

His blood was boiling as he was not able to accept the fact that he had to ask for money from his wife. Ahilya checked the account books and told him, that his expense limit was over and she wouldn't be able to release more funds from accounts for him. Gangoba Tatya was shocked to see her courage, she had done what Subhedar could never do to Khanderao.

As she tried to show Khanderao the account books, enraged, he snatched those books and threw them on the floor. Ahilyabai just couldn't take this anymore. She worshipped every single thing in that office. Immediately she ordered Gangoba Tatya to file a complaint against her husband for dishonouring the documents and ordered Khanderao to pay the penalty of twenty-five rupees.

Khanderao couldn't handle this insult. Frantically he left the office and went to Baiji's room to tell whatever happened. When Baiji heard the entire story, she appreciated Ahilya's decision and admonished Khanderao, about his behaviour. She warned him that as Holkar's only successor, he should have taken Ahilya's place and that his irresponsible behaviour would no longer be tolerated.

This was the time when women were not even allowed to question their husbands at any point. But, for Ahilyabai, her duties were the topmost priorities.

Honouring Bonds Beyond Duty

Malhar Rao was always on the battlefield. Sometimes Duranis or sometimes Nizam. It was the month of April. Malharba was on a mission. As usual, Ahilyabai was taking care of the entire Holkar realm. It had been a long time, but there was no news from Malhar Rao.

As per her schedule, Ahilyabai reached Holkar Daftar for her daily work, and a messenger brought the darkest news. It was a message of Peshwa Bajirao's demise. Ahilyabai was shocked. Hurriedly she came back to the palace and found out that Malhar Rao had returned. There was no intimation of his homecoming. He was deeply disturbed by that news and didn't know how to contain his emotions. All Ahilyabai could do was to be there and let him open up. Malhar Rao cried like a baby. After all, Peshwa was not just his master but also his dear friend. He kept saying that he had lost his beloved Rau.

Ahilyabai and Baiji helped him get over the deep sorrow he was in. Slowly he started his routine. By this time, in Pune, Nanasaheb was coronated as the next Peshwa and Malhar Rao had to forget his agony and join the duty.

As time passed, Malhar Rao returned to his fights in the North. He used to send letters to Ahilyabai about expenses, politics, and many policies, and Ahilyabai strictly followed each command.

After Peshwa Bajirao's death, many poojas and spiritual programs were arranged in Indore. Gangoba Tatya was looking after all the expenses regarding this. That day as the routine started, Ahilyabai came to Daftar and was looking after the expenses. Suddenly she stopped while checking the entries and asked Gangoba Tatya regarding the expenses of pooja arranged for late Bajirao for the peaceful journey of his soul.

She noticed that he had shown those expenses in government expenditure and not in the personal expenditure. Gangoba Tatya explained that this pooja was arranged for Peshwa by his Subhedar so it was added under the government expenses title.

Ahilyabai firmly informed him that not everything should be treated professionally. Some relations are beyond that. What Subhedar and Bajirao had was even deeper than a blood relation. So whatever expenses are added under this head, immediately should be transferred to the personal expenses.

She also gave strict instructions to Gangoba Tatya that not even a single penny from personal expenditures should be reflected in government expenses.

Gangoba Tatya was much older and more experienced than Ahilyabai, yet he had never encountered such sincerity before. He was certain he would never forget this day until the end.

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Defending Rights and Upholding Dignity

Four years had passed since Ahilyabai started contributing to Holkar daftar. She was extremely particular in every task she performed. Whether it was finances, administration or judicature, she was flawless. Not just Malhar Rao but all the people working in Holkar **Daftar** respected her for her meticulous perfection. She took care of artillery and ammunition as well. She had given strict instructions to all the accountants, to make sure that the funds were released on time for all the war situations on priority. Malhar Rao and Ahilyabai were the most efficient pillars of the Holkar realm.

Ahilyabai was busy in office like usual, when suddenly a woman rushed in, breaking the security. Everyone was startled by what had just happened. She fell on Ahilyabai's feet and started weeping uncontrollably. Hurriedly Ahilyabai moved her feet and tried to console that lady. Ahilyabai requested her to calm down and asked her about the issue.

She told her that she was a widow of a rich guy without a son. There was no legal heir to their property. All her relatives were forcing her to adopt their kids so that they would embezzle it.

For the same reason, they were threatening her and harassing her in some or the other way. She requested Ahilyabai to take hold of her entire property, merge it with the Holkar assets and let her



work for Ahilyabai. Ahilyabai could see the helplessness and fear in her teary eyes. Ahilyabai immediately refused this proposal. She told her not to be so weak and insisted **she not surrender in front of them**. Ahilyabai told the widow that she had full rights to whomever she wanted to choose as her rightful heir.

Gangoba Tatya couldn't resist and suggested that Ahilyabai reconsider her request for a merger. That would improve the condition of the government treasury. If she was allowed to adopt the kid of her choice, that would be Holkar's financial loss. **Ahilyabai gave a sharp look to Gangoba Tatya and sarcastically suggested he then poisoned all the rich widows in Indore for the betterment of the treasury.** Further, she told Gangoba Tatya that not having a son is not the fault of any woman but protecting their rights was their responsibility. Gangoba Tatya looked ashamed.

She politely spoke with the widow about whom she would like to adopt. So, the widow wanted to adopt her maid's son. Ahilyabai gave her full rights to adopt whomever she found deserving. When the widow asked about the measures to be taken regarding the harassment by her relatives, Ahilyabai appointed soldiers for her protection and ordered Govindrao to gift clothes to the kid. When Gangoba Tatya asked Ahilyabai about how much the widow should be charged for this permission,

Ahilyabai sternly reminded him that Holkars were there to look after the betterment of their citizens and not just to fill their pockets with their money.

Nurturing Hope Amidst Uncertainty

Khanderao, Ahilyabai's husband was not brilliant in handling governance or on the battlefield. Being Malhar Rao's son, everyone naturally expected a lot from him. After all, he was the only legal heir to the entire kingdom. But Khanderao was completely devoted to "wine and women". He had no sense of responsibility nor he was willing to look after anything. Malhar Rao was always worried about the future of the empire he had built.

Peshwa Bajirao delegated control of Malwa to Pawar, Scindhia and Holkar. All were equally active and fearless **worriers**. However, Scindhia had something that Holkar did not, and vice versa. The Scindhia family was blessed with an efficient and brave bloodline of sons but did not have enough money to take care of their reign and army, on the other hand, Holkars had tremendous property but were unfortunate in having a competent heir to take care of everything. Though Khanderao was not a competent administrator, he was an obedient son and never disrespected his father or ignored his instructions.

With his other wives and mistresses, Khanderao used to stay in a separate palace. Ahilyabai stayed with her in-laws, in the big Indore palace of Holkars. She used to visit Khanderao whenever he asked. Most of the time Khanderao used to be high on drugs or alcohol, and ate non-vegetarian food

but he always respected Ahilyabai's choices and from the beginning, he refrained from these things if he wanted to spend time with her. She had that impact on him. She never asked for it, but it was Khanderao's respect for her pureness in every aspect of her life.

After a few years of marriage, Ahilyabai and Khanderao were blessed with two children, Malerao and Muktabai. Ahilyabai always wanted her son to be as able as his grandfather and tried to inspire him with stories from Indian mythology. But unfortunately, Malerao was not how Ahilyabai wanted him to be. He never liked those stories. Instead, he took an interest in weird things like playing with insects and animals. Ahilyabai tried to introduce him to a wooden sword, and shield but he never developed any fascination towards that.

Ahilyabai used to be worried all the time about the future of her kid. She kept praying for him to grow and become like his grandfather and not his father.

Muktabai on the other hand, was very calm and wise. She learnt everything very swiftly. She knew all the Sanskrit prayers and did everything told by her mother.

Ahilyabai was trying to make peace with the entire situation and was trying to be hopeful that someday, Malerao would follow in his grandfather's footsteps and make everyone feel proud.

A Tale of Diligence and Recognition



Subhedar was going to come to Indore after almost fifteen months. Ahilyabai was excited to hear everything that had happened during that time on the battlefield and at the same time a bit stressed, as her work would be scrutinised by him. She was working late hours in the dafter so that nothing should be missed. She gave instructions regarding financial recoveries, writing letters to kamavisdars (administrators) to **Gangobatatya**, Govindpant and Ganesh Vitthal.

Dussehra was just around the corner. Ahilyabai was busy in Dussehra preparations when she received a letter notifying her about the arrival of Malhar Rao. Ahilyabai felt elated. She thought about all the discussions that she would have with Subhedar. The discussions about battle, politics, victory and valour used to give her better insights into governance. She was thinking about all this, while her eyes were fixated on the map of India drawn on the wall. She had learnt that map by heart. She knew every road, mountain and river on that map. Maharashtra, Nizam ruled state, Rajputana, Bidar, Vidarbha, Nemad, North India, South India everything. She hardly ever left Indore but knew everything about every little part of India.

Her reverie broke, as she heard the sound of drums and curved horns welcoming Malhar Rao. Hurriedly she went to welcome him. As Malhar Rao came, his wives welcomed him with the aarti. Ahilyabai touched his feet. He could see the mix of emotions on her face. Happiness, excitement and a pinch of tension. He smiled and gave her his blessings.

The next day everyone sat around Subhedar to hear the battle stories. Ahilyabai was trying to understand and analyse every part of that narrative. She wanted to consume every ounce of that insight. The entire day had passed, and she still wanted Malhar Rao to continue the narration.

The next morning Ahilyabai was under tremendous pressure. After one and a half years, Malhar Rao was going to visit the office and look into everything. The finances, administration, letters, recoveries everything. During his absence, she was taking care of everything on his behalf. Today was the day, her work was to be reviewed by Subhedar. He told her not to come to the office that day. Ahilyabai knew, he wouldn't just supervise the sheets, but also would talk to all the employees about her work.

Ahilyabai couldn't concentrate on anything the entire day. She somehow completed her daily tasks but kept thinking about what might be happening in the office.

It was almost the time of sunset when she saw Malhar Rao coming towards the palace. With a fluttering heart, Ahilyabai went in front of him. He called everyone. Baiji, Udabai, Dwarikabai, Banabai, Khanderao, Harkubai. Ahilyabai stood in front of him. As she looked at his face, she couldn't figure out what might happen. She thought she had made a grave mistake in the office work. She was about to apologise when Malhar Rao clapped and called his servant. He came in with a tray containing a four-layered pearl necklace. It had a gold pendant with a Holkar stamp engraved on it.

Smiling, Malhar Rao placed that necklace around her neck and applauded. He was proud and delighted after seeing her work. There was no scope to find a single mistake. She had done her work flawlessly. He told Ahilyabai how proud he was of her. Ahilyabai felt exhilarating. For her, it was a certificate of her work. Baiji prayed for her betterment and asked God to take care of this incredible daughter of Her's. Ugabai, her sister-in-law and her best friend hugged her and congratulated her.

Malhar Rao was looking at this entire celebration with a peaceful smile. All he could see was the bright future of Holkar's reign.

Battle of Kumbher: Loss, Grief and Vengeance

Kumbher, Deeg and Bharatpur. The Yamuna Basin. It was the territory of Jats. Surajmal Jat ruled this territory. Technically it was under the rule of Maratha, but Surajmal was never as supportive to Peshwa as he was expected to be. So, **Raghunathrao decided to take matters into his own hands and to kneel Surajmal in front of him and sieged the fort in Kumbher.** Raghunathrao was demanding the pay-off of one crore. Surajmal refused to pay that much money and offered forty lakhs instead. When Raghunathrao denied that amount, Surajmal challenged him for the battle. Raghunathrao called Malhar Rao for help. Malhar Rao brought Khanderao along with him so that even he would get some battle experience. Unfortunately, Raghunathrao and his army couldn't defeat **Surajal** and had to back out.

In January 1754, Malhar Rao and Khanderao Holkar again attacked Kumbher. They sieged the Kumbher fort once again. The Maratha soldiers were planted carefully all around the fort. Cannons were ready to fire. On the other side were Surajmal's armed forces, ready inside the fort with his artillery.

The Kumbher battle started. Holkar's cannons and rifles were blazing. For a month and a half, the battle continued, but there was no fruitful outcome.

17 March 1754 turned out to be the darkest day in the lives of Holkars. It was a noon time. Post lunch Khanderao Holkar

came out of his tent. He was high on drugs most of the time. He climbed on his horse and rode near the Holkar flag. As he reached there, a big cannonball was shot by Surajmal's soldier and hit him. The cannonball instantly took his life and Khanderao died on the spot. There was nothing anybody could do.

The shocking news spread everywhere. Malhar Rao rushed to the scene. Weeping uncontrollably, Malhar Rao hugged his dead son. His only son, the true heir of Holkar's reign had died. He couldn't control his emotions. He took his son's dead body in his arms and cried unabashedly.

All the Holkar ladies were at Kumbher too. Khanderao's two other wives, his mistresses and his two favourite dancers, everyone was shocked. And Ahilyabai, her entire world was devastated. She was merely thirty when she became widowed. Baiji was unmanageable. Her sole child was killed. The moment they heard this dreadful news, they hurtled towards the battlefield. Everyone gathered around Khanderao's dead body. All of them kept crying and blaming their ill fate.

Malhar Rao stood up. His eyes flashed with anger for a moment. Enraged by his only son's death, he took the soil of that battlefield in his hands and took an oath, that he wouldn't stop until the entire Kumbher was destroyed, and that he would make sure the fall of Surajmal Jat.

A Decision Between Duty and Destiny

The preparations for Khanderao's cremation started. The letters were sent to everyone regarding Khanderao's demise.

Ahilyadevi looked extremely calm that day. She took a bath and wore a green saree, green bangles, pearl chains and red Kumkum on her forehead. She was all set to commit Sati. It was an old ritual, that a wife should die



along with her dead husband. Ahilyadevi was Khanderao's first wife. So, according to society's rules, she was supposed to perform **sati**. Along with her, Khanderao's two other wives were also going to perform the ritual. Not just them, but his two Muslim mistresses were willing to do the same.

Ahilyadevi was sitting next to Khanderao's dead body with his head on her lap when **Mhalhar** Rao rushed in. Crying, he implored her not to perform **sati**. Startled by this request, Ahilyadevi looked at him. She told him being Khanderao's first wife, it was her duty to go with him. Baiji was right there and understood the gravity of this situation. She decided to support her husband and she too came and sat in front of Ahilyadevi. They told her that the future of the Holkar empire was in her hands. Their only son, the legal heir of Holkars is gone and now everything relies on her. Ahilyadevi kept refusing this request.

Finally, Malhar Rao promised her that from now onwards he would think that Ahilya was dead and his Khanderao was alive, that he would treat her just like his son and he would consider her as his legal heir. He further told her that, nine other women were willing to go with him but there was no one except for her to take care of anything and so she should stay back, not just for him but for the people of this kingdom.

Ahilyadevi was in a dilemma. She had to choose between her duty as a wife and her duty towards her people. In front of her, was her most respectful father-in-law who always treated her like his own child. Who nurtured her into what she was and never asked anything in return. That day for the first time she could see the helplessness in that person's eyes. He and her mother-in-law were crying for her to stay back, instead of crying for their son who had just died. That was the decisive moment, which would have changed history.

Ahilyadevi thought about everything thoroughly and decided to respect Malhar Rao and Baiji's request. She could not refuse them. She thought about them, her people, her kids and decided to stay back.

When Ahilyadevi decided to stay back, she knew that society would not accept it very easily. They would continue to torment her with their prejudices. But she decided to stay strong. She decided to devote her entire life to her in-laws and for the betterment of the people of her kingdom.

The last rites of Khanderao were performed at Kumbher. His two wives and nine mistresses performed sati with him. Silently, Ahilyadevi kept seeing the fire, she wasn't part of it, but she could feel the fire burning away that old Ahilya, who had entered the Holkar palace as Khanderao's wife. From that moment onwards she was only Subhedar's daughter-in-law.

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Navigating Challenges and Forging a Path Forward

The sad demise of Khanderao made Subhedar rely more and more on Ahilyadevi, as she was the only ray of hope who could successfully execute his plans. Malhar Rao started directing his letters to her officially. Ahilyadevi too was keenly interested in obeying his orders.

As Khanderao Holkar died in the imperial service, the Mughal Emperor granted pargana Ambad to Malerao, the only son of Khanderao and granted pargana Verul for the livelihood of **Ahilybai**.

Ahilyadevi now had only two motives in her life. To raise her kids well and to look after the Holkar governance for the betterment of her people.

Ahilyadevi implemented Subhedar's directions and goals systematically. So, Malhar Rao was never concerned about the state of Indore. Ahilyadevi validated Malhar Rao's trust and confidence in her. Thus, it prepared Ahilyadevi for the future to manage the administration of the state. She closely watched the political currents of the time.

Ahilyadevi was thoroughly looking after everything, when one day, **Gangobatarya** brought up an issue of Bhilla. They were threatening and robbing the tourists who visited Indore. He told Ahilyadevi that, they tried everything in their power to stop them, but it was of no use. Ahilyadevi asked why was it happening when there were

saranjami sardars to look after each small area assigned to them. Gangobatatya looked abashed and told her that the saranjami sardars receive bribes from Bhilla leaders.

Saddened by this news, Ahilyadevi decided to take matters into her own hands. She kept wondering why despite having so many able sardars in the Holkar army, the situation was not under control. She told Gangobatatya to write letters to all the saranjami sardars, telling them that, the area under them was allotted to them for a reason. And they were supposed to protect the people of that area. She ordered them to do so and if at any Bhilla tortured any tourist for the money, the looted money would be collected from the respective saranjami sardar.

She knew that was not enough. So, she decided to take another revolutionary action. Her daughter Muktabai, had reached the age where they were supposed to find her a suitable groom. Ahilyadevi knew her son was incapable of taking care of the empire and hence decided to follow old Indian mythological tradition to find herself an able son-in-law. She decided only the person who showed the valour to defeat Bhilla and controlled the entire situation, would be the worthy suitor for Muktabai.

All the elder ladies in the house were worried about the social status and caste of the person who came forward. Ahilyadevi instantly told them that his bravery would be his status and valour would be his caste.

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A Mother's Concern Amidst Royalty

Malhar Rao chose a very well-mannered and well-cultured bride for Malerao. Mainabai, the daughter of Bahads. Mainabai's parents were extremely happy to receive a proposal from such a royal family. Baiji and Malhar Rao were hopeful that after marriage Malerao would change. But Ahilyadevi knew the real Malerao. Her son was even worse than his father Khanderao. So, when the wedding discussions were in process, Ahilyadevi decided to meet and talk to Bahads and tell them about the reality of their would-be son-in-law.

Ahilyadevi was way ahead of her time. When women and their families did not have much of a choice while choosing the groom, Ahilyadevi decided to expose the real Malerao to Mainabai's parents to help them make the right decision.

She called them and told them everything about Malerao. Being Malhar Rao's grandson, he was expected to be as able and brave as his grandfather. But Ahilyadevi's fate was not so considerate, her son had all the qualities of his father. He was a whimsical person. Just like his father, he was always under the influence of alcohol and drugs. He never took an interest in studies, instead kept playing dice with his friends. He was fascinated by animals like elephants, horses, tigers and cheetahs. Especially for him, there was an elephant playhouse built near the river. His pet cheetah always accompanied him to Durbar.

He was extremely erratic. He loved seeing other people suffer. Back then, in the royal houses, everyday Brahmins were called for various poojas and they were given some goodies as a charity. Malerao deliberately used to keep poisonous scorpions in their gifts or their pots. When these Brahmins used to get stung by these scorpions and were in pain, he used to laugh and enjoy the scene. He was an extreme egoist. Once he hit one of his playmates badly just because he broke Malerao's viti* by mistake during their play.

Ahilyadevi wanted Mainabai's parents to know all of this and make the right decision about their daughter's future and gave them the option of refusing the proposal. But blinded by the dreams of royalty, Bahads decided to move forward with the wedding. And hence, Malerao got married to Mainabai in Indore.

All the royal guests were invited to this wedding. The couple looked great together. But Ahilyadevi was worried. She did not want anything bad to happen to Mainabai. She kept praying to Mahadev, to make everything normal.

** viti: Gilli danda*

Echoes of Empire: Marathas, Abdali, and the Road to Panipat

The news from the North was not good. Raghunathrao had come to Indore to discuss the same. After lunch, Malhar Rao and Raghunathrao were going to have a meeting regarding the same. Like always Malhar Rao called Ahilyadevi for the meeting. Her input always helped him and hence, the three of them started their discussion regarding Delhi issues.

There was news of Abdali attacking Delhi. He was attempting to use Shuja-ud-daula, Bijaysingh, and Rajputs to eliminate Marathas from Delhi. Ahilyadevi started discussing Abdali's political traits with them. Raghunathrao couldn't believe this.

Both of them agreed and decided to leave for Delhi the next day.

She knew all of this politics even though she was in Indore. She intimated to Malhar Rao and Raghunathrao that, if strict action is not taken immediately, this issue would lead to a big scandal.

Though they left for Delhi, Subhedar changed the plan in the middle and they marched towards Rajputana. Malhar Rao had a plan to loot the entire area. When Ahilyadevi got to know about this plan. She felt enraged and kept thinking about what was more important for Subhedar, the people or the money. She just could not understand the logic behind the actions of such an extraordinary person.

This action led to the same thing that Ahilyadevi anticipated. During all the three months, Malhar Rao spent in Rajputana, Abdali destroyed Delhi. He demolished all the temples in Mathura and Vrindavan which were extremely sacred for Hindus. He killed every Hindu he could find. Yamuna was flowing with the blood of lakhs of innocent Hindus. He conquered the entire area from Delhi to Panjab and appointed Najib Khan to look after it.

When Mhalhar Rao and Raghunathrao reached Delhi, all they could see was destruction. After listening to the complete story, Malhar Rao couldn't contain his anger and decided to take back the area conquered by Abdali. Najib Khan was not as insightful and brave as Abdali and hence, he was defeated by Malhar Rao and Raghunathrao. They kept moving forward, conquering the Abdali-ruled area. They did not stop at Panjab; they proceeded and expanded the boundaries of the Maratha empire up to Attock which was beyond the Indus River.

During all of this victorious period, Malhar Rao made a grave mistake, which eventually led to the War of Panipat. Najib Khan was arrested by Marathas and everyone was suggesting Malhar Rao killed him right there. But Najib Khan pleaded for Subhedar's mercy. Subhedar granted him the safe conduct he asked for. His decision was not approved by all, but nobody dared to stand against it.



Reconciliation and Resolve



Subhedar's decision on Najib Khan's release made Peshwa and everyone around him doubtful about his intentions. Everyone thought that he had accepted the bribe from **Najibkhan**. This disturbed Malhar Rao. Malhar Rao was avoiding going to Pune, which was making the situation even worse.

He was trying to find a solution when Ahilyadevi gave him a suggestion to visit Pune. She told him, that there was no point in avoiding a meeting with Peshwa, as that was making things complicated. She insisted that Subhedar visit Peshwa, clear the misunderstanding and help him financially to pay off his huge debt. Subhedar approved this idea and decided to visit Peshwa Nanasaheb.

Subhedar left for Pune. He went to meet Peshwa Nanasaheb. He had carried all the Holkar account books along to prove his innocence. He submitted everything and as suggested by Ahilyadevi, cleared all the doubts Nanasaheb had in his mind.

Nanasaheb shared his worries regarding the debt of Peshwas. It was a huge debt of seventy-five lakhs. Immediately Malhar Rao promised the amount of sixty lakhs to him, out of which thirty lakhs would be on behalf of Scindhia and made sure it was paid on time hence Ahilyadevi's predictions were proved right and the action taken accordingly worked.

This step not only helped Malhar Rao regain the trust of Peshwa but it also brought Scindhia and Holkar a bit closer. After all, they were the two strong pillars of the Maratha empire.

The Tragic Echoes of Panipat

As anticipated by Ahilyadevi, the mistakes of Malhar Rao from the past did haunt Marathas eventually. Abdali bounced back and attacked Delhi. Najib Khan who was saved from assassination by Malhar Rao betrayed him and helped Abdali.

Malhar Rao was in Rajputana at that time. He immediately left for Delhi as he received the request for help from Scindhia. Sadashiv Bhau marched from Pune and all the other Maratha sardars joined him on the way. Subhedar kept telling him not to come to Panipat. He was fully aware of the Marathas' limits and repeatedly advised Sadashiv Bhau that the combat in the open field was not the Maratha army's strong suit and that they should instead use the legendary guerilla techniques to beat Abdali. However, the old general's advice went unheeded.

Just a year before Panipat, Malhar Rao had sustained heavy loss at the hands of Abdali in the battle of Shikandara and so he knew exactly about the situation in which the Marathas were placed. Abdali was too strong even for Scindhia and Holkars. Naturally, Malhar Rao wanted to avoid a clash with Abdali on an open battlefield. Unfortunately, in this battle, three of the most valuable Maratha **worriers** were martyred. Vishwas Rao, Sadashiv Bhau and Dattaji Scindhia.



When Malhar Rao saw that the defeat was inevitable, then he withdrew. It was not a matter of surprise that Marathas lost in the battle of Panipat in 1761. This defeat gave a sudden setback to their activities in the North. The legacy of Maratha's invincibility was shattered.

This ebb and flow of Maratha power was closely watched by Ahilyadevi. She had seen her father-in-law at the height of power before the Panipat disaster. Even after showing tremendous valour in this battle, Malhar Rao was criticised badly by everyone and Nanasaheb Peshwa developed grudges against him.

It was only Ahilyadevi who could share the grief of the old Subhedar. She consoled him and tried her best to assist him in all the measures he took to regain his lost ground.

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The Final Farewell: Ahilyadevi's Loss of Gautamabai

The loss in Panipat took a toll on everyone. Especially Gautamabai. The doubt of Peshwa on Holkars and everyone's criticism due to Malhar Rao's early retirement from the battle affected her deeply. All the accusations of her husband post-battle scarred her profoundly. Due to the mental pressure of all this, her health started deteriorating. Her asthma worsened. Plenty of doctors were trying all the remedies they knew but there was no effect on her. Everyone was worried.

Meanwhile, Nanasaheb Peshwa died in 1761 and Madhawrao was coronated as the next Peshwa. He reached out to all the sardars in Malwa and tried to improve relations with them, which were tainted due to his father. He sent a letter to Malhar Rao, regarding the same and assured him, that Peshwai would be forever indebted to him.

Ahilyadevi read these letters to Gautamabai, thinking at least those letters would give her Baiji some peace of mind, and her health might improve. But nothing worked. Ahilyadevi was restless. After coming to Holkar palace, Baiji and Subhedar always treated her like their own child. Baiji always stood by her, in her every decision. Whenever in doubt she discussed political views and administration decisions with her. And now, she could feel that Baiji would not be with her for long.



Malhar Rao was not in Indore at that time. It was as if, Baiji was alive just to see her beloved husband one last time. Finally, he arrived at Indore.

He asked the doctor about her health the doctor told him, that it was just a matter of a few nights. Saddened by this, he decided to prioritise her over everything. When Baiji saw him, she called him close and requested him to sit next to her. Malhar Rao sat there with her head on his lap. Then she called Ahilyadevi closer, and told her, that from there onwards, she would have to look after everything. The house, Daftar and also her old father-in-law. Ahilyadevi promised her to do as directed by her one last time with tearful eyes. Baiji was alive till midnight. At midnight she peacefully left this world.

Ahilyadevi was inconsolable. She had lost her friend, philosopher, guide and most importantly her mother.

Strengthening Maratha Defences Against New Threats

Even after such a big blow, Ahilyadevi had to overcome the grief and start working. On the other hand, Malhar Rao was busy planning his further actions, and suddenly a piece of news came in from Rajputana.

In November 1761, Madhosingh, whom Malhar Rao had helped to get the throne, denied the Maratha rule in Rajputana and attacked all the Maratha posts. He wanted to abolish Marathas from Rajputana. **Mhalhar** Rao marched there. Ahilyadevi insisted on taking Malerao along during that time so that he would learn something about warfare.



The two armies encountered each other in Mangrol. Malhar Rao defeated him. It was a big triumph for the Marathas, which proved that Panipat's defeat could not undermine, the Marathas, and they were still the unbeatable army in India.

After this battle, Malhar Rao was called to South India for help by Peshwas. He got busy there and for two or three years, did not return to Indore. During this period, Malhar Rao kept instructing Ahilyadevi regarding the administration in Indore. Whenever he asked for any reinforcement or financial aid, Ahilyadevi used to fulfil that on priority.

While Malhar Rao handled South India, a new monster was strengthening his roots. The Britishers. They were getting stronger in India. It was 11th February 1765, when Britishers conquered Allahabad fort, after defeating Badshah, Shuja-ud-daula and Meer Kasim. Malhar Rao realised that, cautiously they were becoming dominant in India. He also knew that the biggest strength of the Britishers was their artillery. He decided to strengthen his artillery and wrote a letter to Ahilyadevi regarding the same. In the letter he told her, to keep the artillery and ammunition ready. The big artillery should be kept at Gwalior and she should proceed further after making proper arrangements for its expenses for a month. On the march, she should arrange for military posts to protect the road.

Even Ahilyadevi had noticed some traits of Britishers. She went to Gwalior to start the work of a new cannon factory. She knew everything about different types of cannons and about the respective cannonballs. She started the workshop to develop the new cannons.

The cannonballs used to weigh ten to twenty-five kilos. All the cannon experts, accountants and other employees everyone used to be there. Once made, the transport of those cannons needed 125 to 150 bulls.

Cannons were named Jwalabhawani, Jayvanti, Fatteh-mubarak etc. Ahilyadevi used to look after all of this single-handedly. Soon the cannon factory was all set in Gwalior and the full-fledged cannon production started. All because of Ahilyadevi.

Ahilyadevi's Triumph: The Conquest of Gohad

Panipat loss gave a major setback to Maratha Supremacy. Malhar Rao had only one aim in his life now, to regain the lost prestige of Marathas, for which some speedy steps were necessary. He was in Delhi, and Ahilyadevi was in Gwalior. The cannon factory was to be set in Gwalior but there was no suitable space hence she decided to set it in Bhanpura. All the cannons were produced in Bhanpura. Malhar Rao also supported the decision of Her's.

Ahilyadevi knew his motives and took a revolutionary decision. Ahilyadevi knew Malhar Rao, had a plan to conquer Gohad. It was the area under the rule of Jat. She had well-equipped artillery with her, and she was military-trained by Malhar Rao. So, she decided to march towards Gohad and conquer the Gohad Fort. She was well-determined and confident that she would succeed.

The Holkar artillery led by Ahilyadevi marched towards Gohad. The Jat was flustered by this. There was no time to send letters to anyone for help. Ahilyadevi's army reached near the fort. The cannons were projected towards the fort and Ahilyadevi was all set to order the fire when the equestrian with a white flag marched towards her. Gohad Jat had kneeled and decided to empty the fort. Though she did not conquer the entire Gohad area under Jat's rule, it was a single-handed victory for Ahilyadevi.

Malhar Rao appreciated her for this and he was extremely proud. This victory of Ahilyadevi permanently embossed her name with golden letters in the pages of history.



The Fall of a Titan

Malhar Rao was in Delhi when Ahilyadevi conquered the Gohad fort. He decided to take advantage of this opportunity and planned an attack on Gohad with Mahadji Scindhia.

Gwalior cannon factory was fully functional now. Ahilyadevi ordered full-fledged production of cannonballs in Gwalior. More than a thousand workers were working in the cannon factory. Hand grenades and cannonballs were being prepared under the guidance of Ahilyadevi. She sent messengers to Indore and ordered Ramaji Yadav to start arms production. New swords, spears armour everything was being produced in Indore. Under her guidance, the army of three thousand soldiers was ready. All she wished for was Malhar Rao's victory at any cost.

Mahadji and Malhar Rao left Delhi, conquered many posts in Bundelkhand and reached Alampur. Their next target was Gohad. They wanted to attack Gohad and vanquish the entire area.

Ahilyadevi was ready for the next command from Malhar Rao to release the army and artillery from Gwalior when she received a letter from Alampur. She opened the letter and the news shattered her to the core.

It was a letter from Mahadji, notifying about the sad demise of Malhar Rao. Ahilyadevi stood stock still for a moment. Everything around her felt meaningless.

In disbelief, she kept reading that letter again and again. Worriedly everyone gathered around her. With a heavy heart, Ahilyadevi disclosed the news in front of everyone.

Letters were sent to Indore, calling all the wives of Malhar Rao at Alampur. Ahilyadevi left Gwalior immediately. Everyone reached Alampur. The moment Ahilyadevi saw Malhar Rao's dead body, the calm and control were lost. She ran towards him and burst into tears. She was inconsolable. She had never felt so helpless before. Her entire life till now, flashed in front of her eyes. From the day, she entered the Holkar palace, he and Baiji had been the biggest support for her throughout. When Baiji had died, she managed to overcome that blow somehow but the demise of Malhar Rao was an unbearable pain. The feeling of becoming an orphan.

The last rituals of Malhar Rao started. Banabai and Dwarkabai decided to put themselves into the funeral pyre according to the custom of Sati. Ahilyadevi felt like a lost lamb.

Everyone she loved, was leaving. She could not see any ray of hope. Udabai and Sitabai, her sisters-in-law stood by her side. Malerao performed all the rituals. As the fire started, Ahilyadevi stood there numbly, watching everything with helpless eyes.

A New Dawn in Maheshwar

Everyone returned to Indore. Nothing felt the same. No more letters from Malhar Rao, no orders from Banabai or Dwarikabai to any of the servants, no political discussions, no corridor-occupying laughs. Everything felt sad and empty. Harkubai chose not to follow the custom of Sati after the death of Malhar Rao. She was the only person who was giving Ahilyadevi some moments of relief.

The guidance of Malhar Rao in the last six months turned out to be fruitful for Malerao. His attitude had changed to much extent. He started taking administration work seriously. Responsibly he sent letters to all the royal families regarding Malhar Rao's quietus. That was the only thing which was giving Ahilyadevi a small ray of hope. On the background of his whimsical actions in the past, these changes were noticeable.

Being the only legal heir to the Holkar realm, Malerao was appointed as a new Subhedar by Peshwa Madhawrao. But, Peshwa and Ahilyadevi both knew that he was incapable of taking control and better decisions whenever necessary. So, though Madhawrao coronated Malerao as a new chief, Ahilyadevi was looking after everything.

Initially, things were going smoothly. Malerao respected the decisions taken by Ahilyadevi, but slowly the money and power started affecting his attitude. Ahilyadevi's discipline, and her popularity, started bothering Malerao. His arrogance increased. He started insulting her whenever she tried to correct him. And not just her, but also the most experienced employees of Holkar daftar. Ahilyadevi then decided moving to Maheshwar.

Maheshwar was a city that exuded spirituality in every particle. The Raj Rajeshwar Mahadev temple stood beautifully on the banks of Narmada. The river was so sacred that every stone of it had a purity of Shivalinga.

Ahilyadevi was an earnest worshipper of Mahadeva. She felt peaceful in such a sacred surrounding. The moment she set foot in Maheshwar, she decided to develop it in every aspect. Entire Maheshwar was joyous to see their beloved Ahilyadevi. Very soon in a simple long hall, Ahilyadevi's durbar started.

The Challenge of Bravery

Everyone was sitting at their usual places in Maheshwar Durbar. Ahilyadevi entered with her white quilt. She never sat on the normal chair after Khanderao's death. She used to carry her white quilt everywhere and always sat on that. She sat in her place. She glanced at everyone.

A long time back, she had set a task for finding the right and brave husband for her daughter Mukta. She had declared that the person who would permanently solve the problem of Bhilla terror would be chosen as her son-in-law. Nobody had come forward till then. She had decided to declare this officially in Durbar that day. She told everyone, how Bhillas were troubling the pedestrians and tourists, how they robbed them. She finally announced that she was officially setting a challenge for Muktabai's wedding. Only the able person who would solve the Bhilla problem would be wedded to Muktabai.

There was a pin-drop silence in the durbar after this announcement. Everyone kept looking at each other, and suddenly a confident voice broke the silence. A handsome and scintillating man stood and assured Ahilyadevi that he was perfectly able for that task.

He told her that he knew everything about archery, swordplay, and different types of cannons. All he wanted was some men and money. Assertively he told Ahilyadevi that he would meet her only when he had fulfilled his promise. His conviction impressed Ahilyadevi. She told Tukoji to give him what he asked for.



Tukoji asked Ahilyadevi, what would people say if he was of some different caste or about the family he belonged.

Immediately she told him, those things wouldn't matter to her. Bravery would be his caste and courage would be his family. Then she asked him his name. The name of that valorous man was Yashwant Rao Phanase.

Transforming Lives and Embracing Change

As promised Yashwantrao won against Bhillas. He captured all the Bhilla leaders and brought them to Ahilyadevi. With their hands tied, they stood in front of Ahilyadevi. She looked straight at them. They could not face her and started looking down. Ahilyabai asked them for vindication of their actions. They told her that, they did not have any skills which would give them jobs or money, so to fulfil their need for money, they did not see any other way.

Everyone thought Ahilyadevi would treat their actions as crimes and they would be jailed for life. But Ahilyadevi was not an ordinary ruler. She knew that imprisonment wouldn't solve the problem those Bhilla were facing. She knew they didn't need punishment, but an opportunity to earn money. Just one chance would change their lives forever. She was pondering over the situation. Everyone's curiosity was at its peak.

Ahilyadevi opened her eyes and told Bhilla leaders that from that very moment, they were appointed as the helpers of all the tourists and pilgrims visiting all the temples in that area. They would help them cross the river, and guide them to visit tourist spots. In return, they would collect a fee from those tourists. That way, the financial problems Bhilla were facing would be solved.

Everyone including Bhilla leaders was in awe. Everyone applauded. She gave Nayak title to all the Bhilla leaders and the official order of appointment was immediately prepared. She allocated land to them specifically for farming purposes.



She then turned to Yashwantrao. Happily, she welcomed him to the family. She told him to call his parents immediately. In front of everyone, she declared that Mukatabai would be married to Yashwantrao as he proved his valour.

Muktabai and Yashwantrao's wedding was a milestone event for everyone in Indore. Ahilyadevi married off her daughter at the age of eighteen without knowledge of the person's caste or royalty. According to the rituals, a widowed woman was not allowed to perform any pooja, but Ahilyadevi herself performed Muktabai's Kanyadan vidhi. All the people of Indore, witnessed something revolutionary that day.

23

Betrayal and Bloodshed

Ahiyabai used to stay in Indore and visit Maheshwar once in five to six months. Whenever she came to Indore from Maheshwar, she had to complete an entire backlog of office work, as Malerao never looked into anything. All he knew was to spend money on enjoyment, alcohol, drugs and women.

Ahilyadevi had just come to her room after finishing the work from Daftar when Tukoji Holkar came to visit her. From his face, he looked hurt and angry. She asked him the reason. When Tukoji showed Malerao the numeration of the money he had spent in the last five months, Malerao threw him out of the office. Ahilyadevi was angry but at the same time, she knew she could do nothing.

Saddened by this, she was thinking about what actions could be taken, when she noticed that Tukoji was still there and looked like he was in dilemma. Ahilyadevi asked him what had happened. He told her that he didn't know how to tell her a few horrible things that had happened when she was in Maheshwar. She told him to stop worrying and tell her what it was. Stumbling he told her that Malerao murdered a weaver. Ahilyadevi couldn't believe her ears. Trying to control her anger, she asked Tukoji the complete story. Tukoji told her, everything.

Heera was Malerao's mistress. He was obsessed with her. That day a weaver came to the palace. Somebody told him that this weaver secretly met Heera. When Malerao asked around about him, he got to know that they were in love. Infuriated, Malerao ordered soldiers to find him and bring him to the horse stable. They brought the weaver there. Wickedly laughing Malerao decided to torture him to death in front of Heera. He ordered his soldiers to cut the weaver's hands. Heera was telling him to stop, but he kicked her and then cut the legs. The weaver kept begging for his life. He promised Malerao that he would leave the country and settle somewhere else but Malerao was beyond control. When the weaver realised that Malerao was about to kill him, he started yelling that he would haunt Malerao and would take revenge for all of that even after his death. Malerao got angry by this and finally ordered to cut off his head. His dead body fell on the floor. The spatters of blood were everywhere.

Ahilyadevi couldn't bear any of this. Enraged, she went straight to the horse stable. Still, there was a lot of blood. Raghoji and Bhagoji were cleaning everything. Ahilyadevi had no idea what to say about the same. Immediately she ordered Tukoji to start the detailed investigation of the entire event.

24

The Haunting Legacy: Ahilyadevi's Tragic Loss

The entire weaver incident traumatised Malerao. He started to feel the presence of a weaver around him. Whenever he closed his eyes, he was seeing the whole event in front of his eyes. The spatters of blood and screams of the weaver filled his head. To top it all, Heera took poison and committed suicide. This action of Heera affected him even more. He couldn't sleep at night. He kept crying for help. He screamed that **Weaver** was trying to kill him. He could not eat or drink anything as he kept imagining the presence of the weaver's blood. He kept crying like a baby. Everybody started to think that Malerao was haunted by the ghost of the weaver.

Ahilyadevi called all the medical experts she knew. All possible treatments started. All the doctors were working day and night to reduce his pain. But nothing worked.

It had been three months since the hallucinations started. Malerao's body had become as thin as a skeleton. He was unable to consume any food. He had become insomniac and schizophrenic. That day, he became extremely violent and began beating himself with a whip. After a lot of effort finally, Ahilyadevi could control him. She was feeling lost. After all, she was an unfortunate mother of this unfortunate child. **Once a handsome man, then looked like a corpse.**

Ahilyadevi came home from daftar when the doctor treating Malerao came to meet her. Helplessly he told her that he had tried all the treatments possible and nothing was changing. Malerao was not able to get over the entire incident. He had lost his appetite, his sleep and himself. He told her that even the medicines were not able to put him to sleep.

Ahilyadevi knew a lot about different types of medicines. She told him to give Malerao a stronger dose which would at least induce some sleep. Feebly the doctor decided to sedate him with medicine. Finally, Malerao slept after three months. She felt a little relaxed.

It was lunchtime. Ahilyadevi called everyone. She served food to everyone. Nobody had peaceful meals in a long time. The entire household was distressed due to Malerao's condition. All had just finished lunch when Raghoji came rushing. He told Ahilyadevi to get to Malerao's room without delay.

Everyone ran towards the room when they found that Malerao had passed away. The lifeless body of her only son was in front of Ahilyadevi. All the madness was over. Her baby, her one and only boy, the Holkar family's last legal heir was gone. Numbly she stood there staring at her son's placid face.

Defying Tradition: Ahilyadevi's Struggle Against Sati

The last rites of Malerao were about to begin. His two wives Mainabai and Pirtabai were merely twenty and ten years old. They kept asking Ahilyadevi why they had to perform Sati. Ahilyadevi had no answers to that. But she decided to talk to their parents. She called Bahad and Sardar Wagh. She requested them to revoke the decision of their respective daughters performing Sati. She told them that her son never gave them the happiness they deserved. He never respected them or loved them. Pirata had never even seen her husband after their wedding as she was staying with her parents. Ahilyadevi insisted on allowing them to stay alive as widows of Malerao. She promised that she would take full care of them throughout their lives.

Bahad told her that it was their family ritual, that a girl should not stay a widow after her husband's demise. If a girl performs Sati, everyone worships her otherwise people make her life miserable. Besides none of them were ready to take the responsibility of their daughters.

When Ahilyadevi kept insisting, Bahad lost his patience and started questioning her religiousness. Ahilyadevi furiously asked them, why was it a compulsion for a woman to sacrifice her life for a man. A man would never have done anything like that. She added that leave alone dying for a woman, a man would marry another within a few weeks after her death.

She despised the entire patriarchal thought process they both emphasised on. But both of them refused to even allow Ahilyadevi to take care of both the girls throughout.

All her efforts to stop all the absurdity were in vain. It was as if no one wanted to even consider her views. Instead, everyone kept blaming her for not performing Sati when it was her time. She still kept telling everyone but her words were vanishing into thin air. She kept thinking about Malhar Rao. Though he was her father-in-law, he protected her, and there were these men, who wanted to let their daughter die out of social pressure.

Mainabai and Piratabai came in front of Ahilyadevi for her blessings. They bent to take her blessings. Ahilyadevi hugged them. She held their faces in her hands and looked into their eyes. They looked like feared little lambs. She couldn't handle any of the situation. Those small girls in green sarees, Kumkum-filled foreheads and green bangles looked so helpless. That day she decided to lawfully abolish this ritual of Sati one day.

The girls sat on the chita with Malerao's head on their lap. The fire started. As they felt the heat, they started screaming. But nobody bothered. People started playing drums loudly. The screams of those little girls were suppressed in that sound. Ahilyadevi fainted. Everything around her felt dark and silent at last.

26

Defending Holkar Sovereignty

After the death of almost every beloved person in her life, Ahilyadevi could not stay in Indore palace anymore. She decided to shift to Maheshwar.

She decided to develop Maheshwar as a new capital of Holkar's reign. There were two main reasons for that. Primarily, Maheshwar was safe from all sides, as on one side there was Maratha conquered land and on the other side was Indore, which was the army base of Holkars. Another reason was the divinity of that place. Ahilyadevi always felt peaceful when she was in Maheshwar. The construction of her palace was also over. So, Ahilyadevi finally left the Indore palace and shifted to Maheshwar.

Everyone knew that there was no legal heir to Holkar sovereignty after Malerao but Ahilyadevi had the calibre to handle everything.

Ahilyadevi was sitting on the balcony of her Maheshwar palace. Narmada River was flowing silently. After coming to Maheshwar that river had become Ahilyadevi's companion. For hours she used to stare at the river. For some time, she used to forget all the pressures. She was lost in her thoughts when Renu told her about the arrival of Udabai and Harkubai.

With a dismayed face, Udabai entered into her room. Worriedly Ahilyadevi asked her about what had happened. Udabai had received information from Shivaji Gopal, a trusted servant, that **Gangadhar Yashwant Chandrachud means Gangoba Taty**a from Holkar daftar in Indore, had sent a letter to Raghobadada in Pune to attack Indore.

Gangoba Taty was Diwan (finance officer) in Holkar daftar, so he knew every financial and personal detail of Holkars. When Malerao died, he decided to take advantage of that opportunity and conspired against Ahilyadevi. Gangoba Taty, though ambitious and powerful enough to exert influence had not dared work out his sinister designs as long as Malhar Rao was alive. But after the death of Malhar Rao, he thought his schemes would work out. So, he sent Raghobadada a secret message to attack as quickly as possible.

Raghobadada wanted to be coronated as **Peshwas** after the demise of Nanasaheb, but instead, Madhavrao sat on the throne. He knew Holkars were the strength of Peshwa, so if he controlled Indore, then he would be able to dethrone Madhavrao. So, he decided to support Gangoba Taty's plan.

Udabai told Ahilyadevi to stop thinking about past sorrows and protect what was left for her. Ahilyadevi decided to leave behind everything that had happened. She knew very well that just because she was a woman, Gangoba Taty and Raghobadada were underestimating her. Infuriated by the treacherous nature of Gangoba Taty, she decided to fight back and protect what Malhar Rao built from scratch.

Immediately she went to Daftar. She called Shivaji Gopal and started dictating the letters. The first letter was for Peshwa Madhavrao. After the demise of Malerao, no order was sent from Pune regarding the appointment of the next Subhedar.

In the letter, she wrote about the conspiracy planned by Raghobadada and insisted on granting her all the rights to rule the state. She had decided that she would take care of the entire administration and Tukoji would be in charge of army operations. She trusted Tukoji and he was Malhar Rao's distant relative and did share Malhar Rao's bloodline.

The next letter was sent to Tukoji to report to Maheshwar for further planning. He was near Udaipur. The moment he received the letter, he ordered his troops to proceed to Maheshwar.

After that one by one, she sent twenty-seven secret letters to different Maratha sardars like Bhosle, Gayakwad, Scindhia, Pawar and Yakade to keep their army ready for her help. She reminded them about the times when Malhar Rao had helped them.

She was all set to send a message to the entire world that Holkar's reign was not desolate, and that Malhar Rao's daughter-in-law would stand strong to protect it from all the storms.

The Tale of Courage

Letters from all over Malwa were received by Ahilyadevi. Everyone assured her that they would support her at any cost. Peshwa Madhavrao sent a letter to Ahilyadevi and gave all the rights of Subhedari to her. She officially appointed Tukoji as the new army in charge. Her brave son-in-law Yashwant Rao was also there at her service.

Whatever happened after that was legendary. Ahilyadevi decided to introduce a women's army for this battle. Fifty selected women soldiers joined the Holkar army. It was one of the rare events in history that women soldiers wearing armour and carrying spears and shields were on the field. An army of seventy thousand soldiers was ready to fight for Ahilyadevi.

A messenger brought news, that Raghobadada and Gangoba Tatyra were ready with fifty thousand army on the Kshipra River bank and all set to attack. Ahilyadevi decided to give him one last chance and decided to send him the letter. In the letter, she warned him that if the battle started, she along with her women's army would lead the Holkar troops. And reminded him, that even if she lost, she would have fought so bravely that every person alive would sing songs of her bravery. However, if she defeated him, everyone would mock him for losing to a woman. Even Tukoji sent him a letter saying his army was all set for the combat.

Raghobadada realised that his plan to conquer Maheshwar and snatch the Holkar reign had failed miserably. He understood that underestimating Ahilyadevi was a grave mistake. She was not the type of lady who would give in when faced with danger.



He knew if he backed out, everyone would have said that he got scared and withdrew. So, to keep his image intact, he sent a letter to Ahilyadevi saying he was visiting her to give condolences about Malerao's death and not for any battle.

Ahilyadevi told him, that if he wanted to visit her, he should come with his few trustworthy soldiers. If anyone from his army tried to cross the river, the war would be inevitable.

That incident once again proved the calibre Ahilyadevi possessed.

Ahilyadevi rewarded all the employees of Holkar daftar who supported her. She sent gifts to all the Maratha sardars who stood by her. She kept praying and thanking her beloved Mahadev for preventing a huge loss.

28

Nothing Belongs to Me

Peshwa Madhavrao had conferred all the rights of Holkar's reign to Ahilyadevi. Ahilyadevi undertook the charge of civil administration and entrusted the command of her troops to Tukojirao Holkar. The entire property of Holkars that is Daulat and Khasgi were under her control.

The office of the Subhedar had two functions. The first was to look after the charge given by the Peshwa, referred to as Daulat. The second one Khasgi- meaning private estates, which had a sub charge of looking after the personal property of the ladies of the house. After the deaths of Malhar Rao and Gautamabai, the entire property belonged to Ahilyadevi. She was the undisputed queen of Indore. Any other woman in her position would have made sure to keep the entire property for herself and would have enjoyed every bit of it. But Ahilyadevi was not an ordinary soul.

She called pandits to decide on an auspicious day when she would perform a pooja. It was not any ordinary pooja. In front of everyone, with all the rituals, she was going to forego the entire property she owned in the name of her people and lord Mahadev. She always believed that nothing was Her's, whatever she got was a loan from God. According to her, God had given her whatever she had, and it was her humble duty to protect that. Everything she had was there because God wanted



her to keep her people happy. Her strong belief was that she would ultimately have to face God, and if she wanted to look him in the eye, she needed to be pure, honest, and flawless in her every duty. Her letters always ended with “by the orders of Shri Shankar Mahadev”. By doing so, she wanted to emphasise the fact that she was not doing anything, but Mahadev was making her do that.

As per her decision, the pooja was performed at Maheshwar Palace. With all the pandits chanting the mantras, she put Tulasipatra at the doorstep of the palace, which depicted that from that moment onwards, officially nothing belonged to her and every penny she had belonged to the public and Mahadev. During the pooja, she took an oath that,

“Her only duty would be the welfare of her people. She would be responsible for her every action. For whatever she did for the welfare of the community, she would be answerable to God. Whatever responsibilities God gave, she would try her best to fulfil them.” Once again, she proved that she was a phenomenal woman.

Nurturing Bonds and Securing Alliances

Ahilyadevi's incumbency began. All the lessons learnt from Malhar Rao were applied at every step. Every day in Daftar used to be extremely busy.

When she started her regime, the first decision she took was for the neighbours, Scindhia. She realised that after Panipat's defeat, Scindhia were in an extremely fragile condition. Only Mahadji returned from the battlefield. All other brave Scindhia men were martyred. Nobody was ready to loan them any money. The widows of Ranoji, Jayappa and Dattaji were dependent on him. So, she decided to lend him the amount of thirty lakh. Holkars were one of the richest Maratha sardars in India. She made sure that the two eyes of Peshwa, Holkars and Scindhia, were in good condition at any cost. It was a part of her foreign policy.

Among all the stormy nights, a ray of happiness filled everyone's life in Maheshwar. Muktabai was blessed with a baby boy. Finally, after a long time, Ahilyadevi was happy. She did not want anybody to jinx their happiness and decided to keep the celebrations low-key. After a private naming ceremony at Maheshwar, her grandson was named Nathoba. Ahilyadevi started planning the entire Holkar future around her grandson.

The Benevolent Reign of Ahilyadevi

As soon as Ahilyadevi assumed power, another issue knocked on the door. The Rampura episode. It was the first political event she faced after she came into power. She had to plan all the arrangements for the fight as Tukojirao was in the North. Far away from the scene of action.

Rampura together with Bhanpura formed the Garoth district of the Indore state. That district was the northernmost limit of the state and was surrounded by Rajputana on the North. It was populated by a prince of Udaipur with the aid of many Chandrawat Jats who had their jagirs in that area. Maharana Jagat Singh of Udaipur had assigned the Jagir of Rampura to Madho Singh. After a few years, Ishwari Singh also claimed the throne. They stood against each other. Knowing his weakness, Madho Singh had called Malhar Rao for his help. As promised by Malhar Rao, Madhav Singh procured what he demanded. In return, he rewarded Malhar Rao with a lot of money and Rampura pargana. The decision to cede Rampura to Malhar Rao displeased the Chandrawats. But knowing their limitations, they kept quiet. To pacify them, Malhar Rao had assigned the Jagir of twenty-one villages to Chandrawats.

After the deaths of all the Holkar men, they decided to grab the opportunity and rebel against the Holkars. This rebellion was put down by

Annaji- the military officer deputed by Ahilyadevi. Again, one of her own had conspired against her. The army of thirty thousand men from Udaipur was ready to march. Holkars merely had an army of five thousand men as many accompanied Tukojirao in the North.

Ahilyadevi knew that a battle would cause a tremendous loss and the defeat was inevitable. So, she decided to use a guerilla technique to solve the issue. She restored the Jagir of twenty-one villages with the Chandrawats on condition that they would not raise their banner against Holkar. It was a fair deal for them and they decided to back off. A huge war was avoided. But only Ahilyadevi knew that all of those decisions were momentary. Once the Holkar troops were back at their base, she was going to show Chandrawats their place.

31

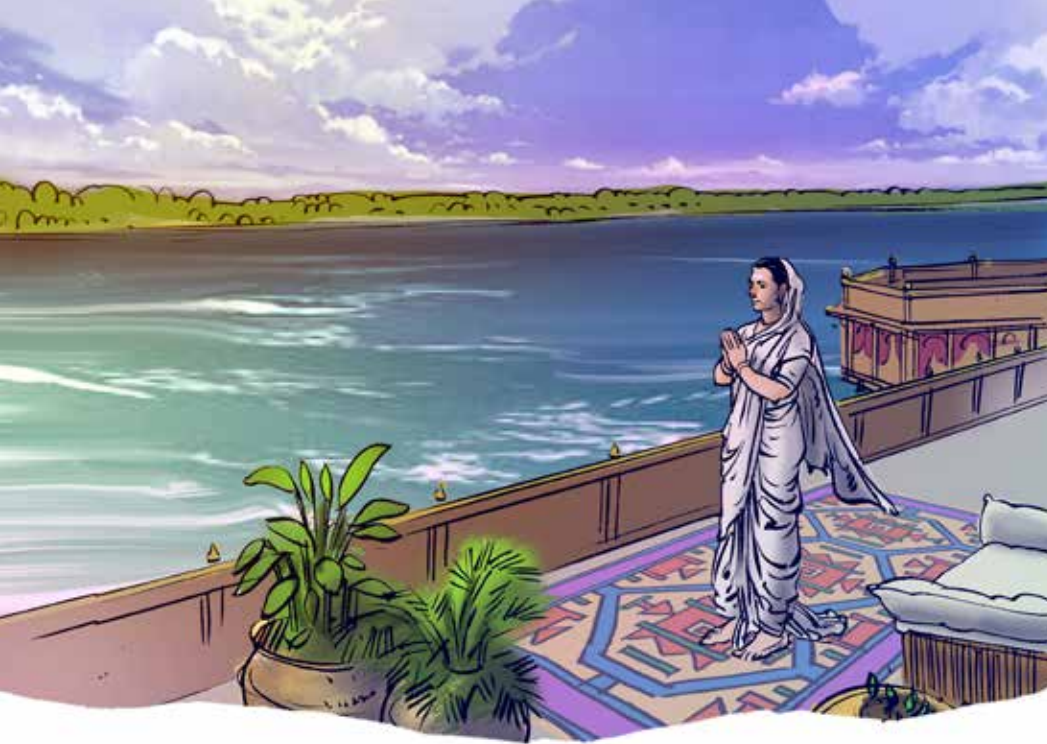
Maheshwar: Ahilyadevi's Vision of Divine Renaissance

Maheshwar. A beautiful Hindu pilgrimage centre on the Narmada River bank. The moment Ahilyadevi set foot in Maheshwar she had decided to develop it in all aspects.

The beautification of Maheshwar had begun. She built beautiful ghats on the river bank. All the artistic temples looked beautiful after restoration. The divinity was embraced by the sound of chanting of Mantras in different temples. The storytellers, and artists performing kirtan settled in Maheshwar. Beautifully paved roads were built. Staircases made of stones looked marvellous. Temples of Lord Ram, Lord Krishna and Mahadev enhanced the sanctity of the city. Huge markets were set.

Ahilyadevi's simple yet beautiful palace on the fort was attention-grabbing. The architecture was in such a manner that she could see Narmada and the entire Maheshwar skyline from her balcony. Whenever she stood there, it gave her peace of mind.

She knew a weaver from Indore named Sakharam Dhongade. She decided to call him at Maheshwar. She invested in his weaving business and settled him there. As his business flourished, many weavers started coming to Maheshwar. Within four years more than a hundred weavers started weaving silk sarees and dhotis. Soon it became one of the most important businesses in Maheshwar.



A Day in the Life of Ahilyadevi

Ahilyadevi used to call all her Sardars for the meeting at Maheshwar **palace**. The Maheshwar Palace was nothing like the Indore Palace. It was a nice and cosy building. It did not have elite chandeliers or classic chairs but simple artefacts and homely sitting arrangements. The meetings used to take place in a large diwan khana of Maheshwar palace. All the sardars used to sit on nice white chairs and Ahilyadevi used to sit on her simple white quilt. With a clean white saree, big radiant eyes, wide forehead, curly hair, wheatish complexion and pallu covering her head, Ahilyadevi looked like a female deity.

All the matters used to be discussed in these meetings. Ahilyadevi's judication was always on point. Nobody ever held any grudge against her for any of her decisions in any matter.

Ahilyadevi's daily routine was fixed. She woke up before sunrise. In her beautiful Maheshwar sanctum, she performed the morning pooja. Then she used to read some books. Followed by food donations to Brahmins. After that, she used to have lunch.

The lunch at Maheshwar used to be a unique affair. Ahilyadevi was strictly vegetarian. Every day, **Ahlyabai** joined

Soon goldsmiths started moving to Maheshwar. The gold ornaments and Maheshwari silver utensils became the proficiency.

Ahilyadevi started the restoration of old temples and buildings. Holy fire, and chanting mantras gave an entirely different aura to that place.

Ahilyadevi was very keen on education. The first thing she did after shifting to Maheshwar was setting a Sanskrit school. Within two to three years more than one fifty students joined there. Due to all of these initiatives, intellectuals from all over India started settling in Maheshwar.

Soon Maheshwar developed financially as well as culturally. In every aspect, it was as enthralling as *Indranagari*.

three hundred people for lunch at the Maheshwar palace. These people did not just include the family members and the ones in daftar but also the cleaners, messengers, maids and their families, toilet cleaners, washermen, farmers etc.

Ahilyadevi never believed in caste discrimination and hence, everyone became her family without any hesitation. People of all castes and religions were welcome for the lunch every day.

Eating with people of all levels gave her a deeper insight into their lives. Due to that one exercise,

everyone felt closer to her, very easily she bypassed the inferiority complex these people might have had, and the feeling of equality among all these people kept them away from any internal issues.

Post lunch she used to take a nap and by two o'clock in the afternoon, she started her administration work in the office. By six in the evening, she used to leave and do some more charity. Then dinner and again office work from nine to eleven at night. This routine of Her's continued throughout her life, whatever may be the situation.



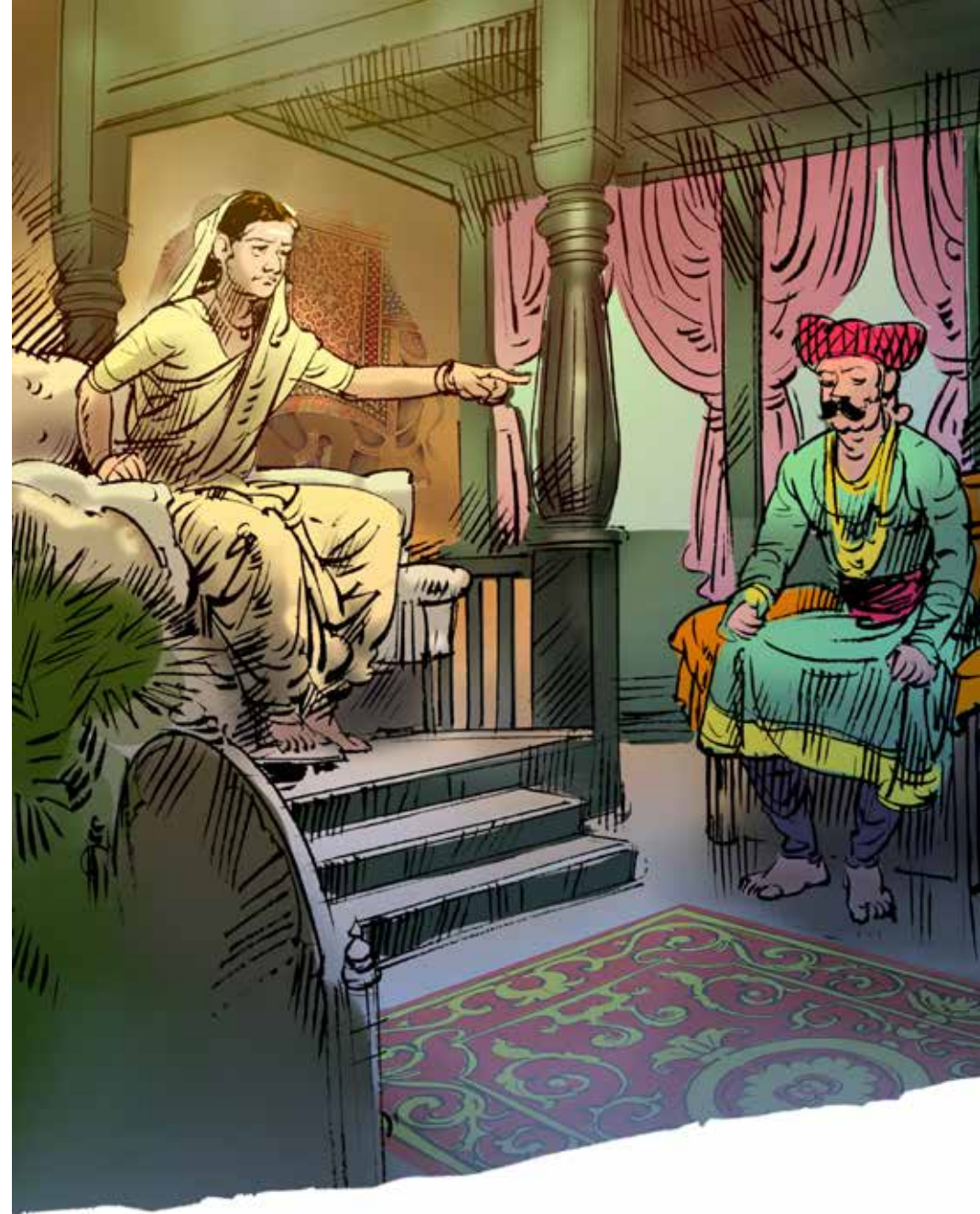
Defying Patriarchal Pressure

Wealth and position changed Tukojirao. After he took charge of Holkar's army affairs, everyone started calling him Subhedar. His attitude changed. It was decided initially that the entire administration would be under Ahilyadevi and all the decisions must be taken after consulting her. But Tukojirao slowly became unruly. He made certain decisions without Ahilyadevi's consent and they started drifting apart.

The misunderstanding began with the entry of Naro Ganesh into Holkar Daftar. After the conspiracy by Gangoba Taty, Ahilyadevi decided to appoint Shivaji Gopal, her trustworthy employee. But Tukojirao, without consulting her, appointed Naro Ganesh. This made Ahilyadevi furious. That incident created a rift between the two.

When Malhar Rao was Subhedar, after every battle, he used to send the looted money to Indore. From that, one-fourth part used to be sent to Pune to Peshwa, some part was added to khasgi and the remaining was used for army expenses. Malhar Rao's attention to detail and specific preferences greatly contributed to the prosperity of the Holkar estate. Ahilyadevi was trained under his guidance, so she expected the same from Tukojirao.

Tukojirao did not follow that method ever. Whatever he looted from different battles, he used all of that for his personal expenses and opulence.



He kept asking for more and more funds from Ahilyadevi for the maintenance of the army. Ahilyadevi never liked this attitude of Tukojirao.

Finally, after spending hours in daftar, struggling to manage all the expenses, Ahilyadevi decided to confront him. She was in Indore when Tukojirao had just returned from the battle in the North. Instead of giving her the money, he was asking for more money from her for the army expenses. Ahilyadevi lost her temper and directly asked him about all the account books. She wanted to cross-check all the expenses.

Tukojirao knew that if he showed her what she was asking for, the embezzlement would be clearly proven and he was scared that eventually, he would lose Ahilyadevi's trust forever. And as a result, she could even take away all his powers. So, he kept avoiding submitting any expense-related documents. Instead, he kept accusing Ahilyadevi of wasting money on all the charity work. Ahilyadevi strictly reminded him that all those expenses were done from khasgi. And the entire khasgi money belonged to her and he had no right to even ask her about that.

To overcome that issue, Tukojirao decided to take the help of Mahadji Scindhia. Mahadji decided to meddle and visited Ahilyadevi. The initial discussion was normal when unexpectedly he suggested that she should be aware that after all she was a woman and if Tukojirao and Mahadji decided, they could take everything she owned by power. With a scathing look, Ahilyadevi told him not to keep any such doubt. If the time came, she would battle them, arrest them, and groom them with elephant-tying chains. She cautioned him that she was more than just a hapless Holkar widow; she was Malhar Rao's brave daughter-in-law. Mahadji foresaw the consequences of the scenario and changed the subject before it deteriorated.

Just because she was a woman, the typical patriarchal society tried to threaten her and break her. But she was a valiant woman who knew no fear.

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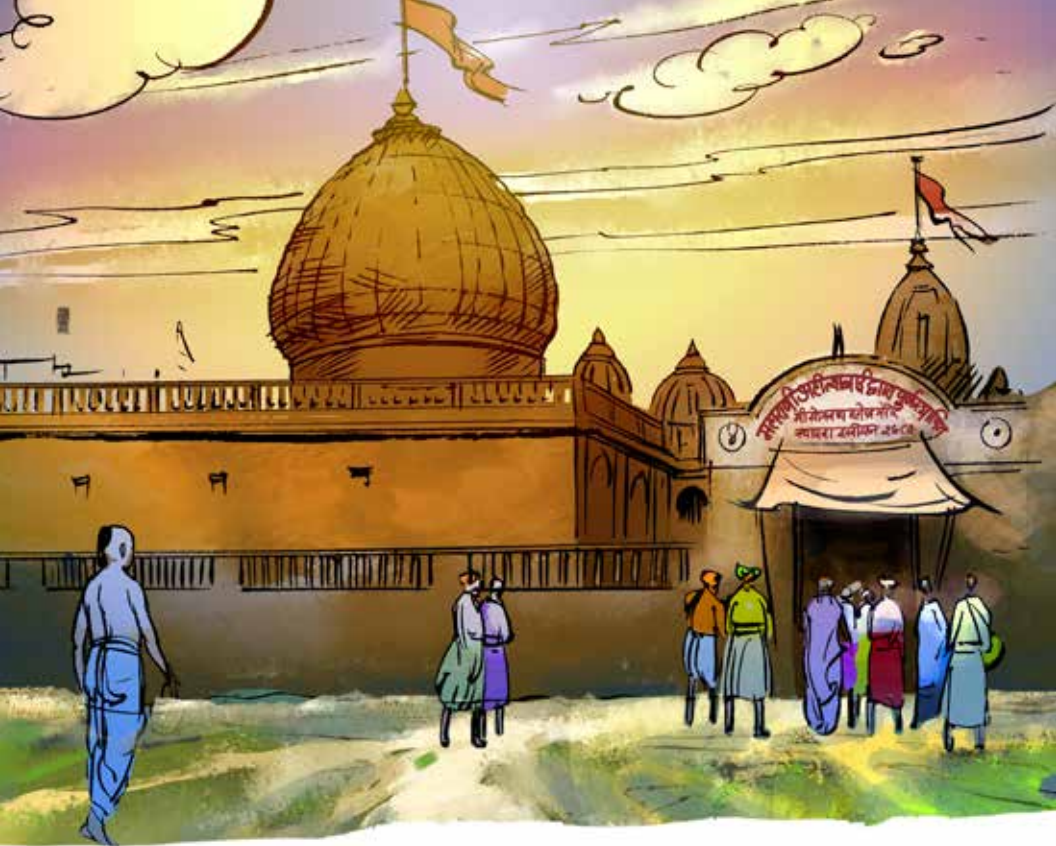
A Tale of Compassion and Vision

Ahilyadevi had a fixed time for judication. People of Maheshwar brought their problems to her. Everyone had utter faith in her. They knew whatever she decided was for everyone's betterment.

That day a rich, old widow came in to meet her. She had brought all her jewels and property papers along. She bowed and told Ahilyadevi that she wanted to surrender her entire property to Holkars. She expressed her grief and told her that there was no trustworthy heir to look after the entire property. Instead, all her relatives wanted to snatch everything from her. The only request she made was to look after her expenses till she was alive.

Modestly Ahilyadevi told her that, she did not want her property. Instead, she suggested the widow donate her money for the betterment of the city. She told her that the construction of the temple was proposed at the Sahastradhara and she could contribute to that. The next suggestion she gave was beyond anyone's imagination.

She told her that in 1706, Muhammad Ajam Khan had destroyed the Sorti Somnath temple.



Ahilyadevi: Beauty in Simplicity

Ahilyadevi was a majestic lady. She had everything but owned nothing. She was religious but not a bigot. She was generous to deserving people but harsh to the deceitful ones. In the male-dominated era, she proved her supremacy in every aspect.

Ahilyadevi was a mesmerising beauty, that all the royal women envied. Anandibai was Raghobadada's wife and was extremely self-absorbent and as conceited as a barber's cat. She had a strong sense of pride in her appearance. During a visit to Dhar, she instructed her servant to observe the famed beauty of Ahilyadevi, as she wanted to verify if her beauty surpassed that of Ahilyadevi.

When her servant returned, Anandibai asked her to describe how Ahilyadevi looked. The servant told her, that there was no match to the beauty of Ahilyadevi. She further said that Ahilyadevi was not as fair as Anandibai but the virtuous glow she had was way superior to the mere fairness of skin. Her eyes were as beautiful as the lotus petals but the radiance in them was extraordinary.

That temple held tremendous value in the eyes of all the Hindus. Ahilyadevi offered her that a few trustworthy guards would accompany the widow to the Somnath temple, and the money she wanted to donate would be used for building that temple where it belonged. She told her that if she was willing to do all of that, then all the travel expenses, arrangements for her stay and other expenses would be handled by **Ahlyabai**.

Ahilyadevi was probably the only ruler of her era, who did not just think about the area under her rule but she made decisions considering the betterment of the entire country.



And to top that all, her chiselled lips. She told her that the divinity of Ahilyadevi is unmatched and it was visible from her every single aspect. She was an ideal example of beauty in simplicity.

The answer of her servant abashed her and, in her mind, she decided not to compare herself with Ahilyadevi ever.

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Cultivating Culture in Maheshwar

Maheshwar flourished economically due to various businesses Ahilyadevi supported. All the people of Holkar reign respected and loved her. People were happy.

As per her routine, Ahilyadevi started her day. After the rest in the noon, she went to daftar. Govindrao was working there. He noticed that Ahilyadevi was thinking about something. When he asked her, she told him that a truly developed city was not just a financially strong one but it should also be rich culturally. Govindrao asked her about what could be done regarding that.

After giving enough thought to that, she finally told Govindrao that the way everyone in the country had heard about the heroism of Holkars, the greatness of art, education and culture of Maheshwar should also be known. She desired that Maheshwar should be the birthplace of great literature. People from various places should come to Maheshwar to get an education. The city should be renowned as the cultural mother of Hindustan. She ordered Govindrao to search and invite such people to Maheshwar. She told him to write letters to various doctors, astrologers, sculptures, intellectuals, poets, and writers with her sign and stamp. She told him to be convincing enough that they would consider shifting and settling in Maheshwar.

Govindrao promised her to take care of the matter immediately. Ahilyadevi was a visionary. Money and financial growth were secondary for her. She knew that to keep the flame of Hindu culture ignited in people's

minds was a necessity. And with her every decision in administration, she kept trying for the same.

She was working when a poet entered the Maheshwar palace. He asked her permission to perform in front of her. He told her that he had heard about the appreciation an artist got in Maheshwar and hence he had come to show her the poems he had written.

She kept all of her work aside for a while and sanctioned his request. He started reading the poem. After listening to a few lines, Ahilyadevi interrupted and stopped him from reading further. She had noticed that the poet had written a poem glorifying her. She liked his euphemistic way of describing the scenario. But she told him, that he should not waste his poetry for pleasing her. Instead, he should write poems describing God, so that when people sing them, they would feel closer to the Almighty.



What she did further surprised everyone. She told him to submit her poetry on Ahilyadevi and ordered her servant to immerse it in the Narmada River. She told everyone that she was not great enough about whom the poem should be written.

Unity and Preservation of Hindu Culture

Ahilyadevi never thought only about Holkar territory. She was a clairvoyant leader. She believed that if all the rulers of different states worked together keeping one aim ahead, the betterment of the entire country. She kept telling the same to everyone and always got saddened when she heard about domestic dissension amongst Hindu rulers.

Her vision was clear, united India and united Hindus. Whenever she heard about the destruction of Hindu temples by Muslims, she wondered why they were destroying whatever was built and bore tremendous sanctity. Why they couldn't build their mosques without demolishing the temples. Whenever she met any faqeer, she donated money and requested him to convey the message to other Muslims to stop the destruction. Almost all the pilgrimage sites in India faced the wrath of Muslim rulers. They had destroyed the temples most sacred for Hindus. One such devastated spiritual centre was Kashi. Aurangzeb had destroyed the Kashi temple and the Hindus of Kashi were either converted to Muslims and remaining fled the area. Some theologians from Kashi had come to visit Ahilyadevi in Maheshwar.

Ahilyadevi humbly greeted them and requested them to sit. They told her that they had studied Veda and wanted to indoctrinate students. They wanted to open an *ashram*, but they were not able to do so in Kashi due to Muslim terror.

Ahilyadevi suggested they teach at Sanskrit school in Maheshwar. She told them that Maheshwar would be honoured to have such brilliant theologians. With modesty, they told her that they wanted her help to set up the *ashram* in Kashi, as there were plenty of phenomenal students already studying under their guidance in Kashi.

Ahilyadevi thought for a while and told them that she wouldn't be funding them immediately. One of her employees Visaji Deshpande would accompany them to Kashi. He would scrutinize the place, talk to the current rulers, analyse the situation and if there was any merit in the proposal and future planning of those Brahmins, then the funding would be released.

The Brahmins thanked her. She told them not to thank her yet as there was one more condition. The name of the area allotted to them would be Brahmapuri, and after every three months, her snoopers would check on Brahmapuri. They might visit as students, or a layman or a beggar. If they discovered any irregularities, the Brahmins would be punished; nevertheless, if the school ran well, the funding would remain.

Brahmins accepted all the conditions and left for Kashi with a smile on their faces and blessings for Ahilyadevi in their hearts.

38

Governance, Communication, and Diplomacy

Tukoji Holkar was never completely honest with Ahilyadevi. Due to this guilt, he never communicated with her nor did he inform her about the important news happening on the field.

As Ahilyadevi was in charge of the entire administrative activities, that information was crucial. When Malhar Rao was Subhedar, he used to inform and instruct Ahilyadevi about every small incident. Ahilyadevi looked after administration since the age of fifteen. By then she had established connections with all the rulers in the country. Ahilyadevi always stayed in Maheshwar. So, to receive every minute detail of whatever was happening in India, her ambassadors were present in the durbars of almost all the significant rulers in India. These were the men of her own choice. Similarly, eight ambassadors were appointed by other rulers in the Holkar court.

Ahilyadevi's ambassadors were appointed in thirteen different courts like Udaipur, Jaipur, Hyderabad, Ayodhya, Scindhia Durbar, Pune Peshwa Durbar, Nagpur, Lucknow, Bhopal, Kota, Delhi, Dongarpur and Deolepratapgad. Due to this, she used to receive elaborate details from all the places.

She had also started a special postal system from Maheshwar to Pune. That work was assigned to the Padamsi Nensi firm. The work of communication was to be carried out through twenty pairs of messengers; each pair being paid Rs. 204 a year. A communication from Maheshwar would reach Pune in five to six days. The distance was 152 km.

The amount would be deducted in proportion if extra time was taken. If the letter was damaged in any manner, then it was supposed to be compensated by the firm.

Ahilyadevi never believed in violence. She considered co-existence and unity as the keys to keeping invaders like Britishers within their limits. Due to her mild tone of administration, rulers from all over India respected her.

For Ahilyadevi, her officers and subjects bore a feeling of mingled awe and affection, she could be at once stern when needed to be so, and kind when there was room for her discretion in dealing with an officer. Not just a benevolent administrator, but as a considerate mother was, she looked upon by her subjects.

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Ahilyadevi's Divine Vision: The Kotilingarchan Pooja

Ahilyadevi was extremely religious. She worshipped Lord Mahadev. When she assumed her rule, she eschewed her entire *Khasgi* money in the name of Lord Mahadev. Ahilyadevi's entire life was devoted to the betterment of people. In the month of Shraavan, the entire Maheshwar used to feel like a sanctorum. People from all over the places used to visit Maheshwar.



Every morning, one hundred eight Brahmins, used to perform a pooja named *Lingarchan* pooja on behalf of Ahilyadevi. She never asked anything for herself from that pooja the only intention of the pooja was the betterment of her people.

The month of Shravan was just around the corner when Ahilyadevi called over one thousand Brahmins for a meeting. The agenda of that meeting was peculiar. She wanted them to perform the Kotilingarchan pooja on the Narmada ghat and also wanted to set that as a yearly ritual. The pooja would be executed for the betterment of all the people who lived in Hindustan. The Brahmins would make one crore small shivalingas, they would chant Mantras for the establishment of vital breath and then everything would be immersed in Narmada again.

There was a hidden motive to start such pooja. She wanted the involvement of everyone from Maheshwar in that event. During such an event, everyone would get an opportunity to earn something. The cleaners, persons bringing sand from Narmada, swimmers, flower vendors, Brahmins everyone. Everyone loved that concept and appreciated her vision.

As the month of Shravan began, the entire Maheshwar was embellished with flowers. The air was filled with divinity. That was Monday when the pooja was to be performed. Ahilyadevi herself was involved in preparations. The place of pooja was decorated with white flowers. The fragrance of incense sticks crammed the venue. The entire atmosphere was sacred.

When one thousand Brahmins started the pooja. In that peaceful ambience, the chant of Mantras by a thousand Brahmins was goosebump-inducing. Everyone present there, felt close to God. After the pooja, Ahilyadevi donated a decent amount of money to everyone actively involved in the pooja. All the people of Maheshwar wholeheartedly blessed their Matoshree.

The Joyful Union

Nathoba, Ahilyadevi's grandson was getting married. After a long night, finally a glimmer of hope filled Ahilyadevi's life. That was the time to keep all the stress and sorrows aside and gear up for the joy. After a long period, Ahilyadevi's house was going to witness the joy. Ahilyadevi was as pleased as punch. She did not want any blemishes in her beloved grandson's wedding. She with Muktabai and Udabai was doing all the preparations.

She called the jewellers from all over, **Special** orders of Maheshwar silk sarees were given to weavers. The bride belonged to the Shinde family, Ahilyadevi's maiden voyage. So, all the people from Chondi had come. Ahilyadevi was filled with immense joy due to everything that had happened.

The wedding continued for eight long days. Entire Maheshwar was invited. Every day banquets were given to the people of Maheshwar. The meals included all kinds of delicacies. Every person in Maheshwar celebrated Nathoba's wedding like a festival.

After the wedding, thirteen-year-old Nathoba and eleven-year-old cute little Balabai came to Ahilyadevi to take her blessings. Wholeheartedly Ahilyadevi blessed them. She remembered when she had entered the Indore palace after her wedding to Khanderao. She was almost the same age. The moment she entered the palace, Gautamabai, her Baiji had become her mother. She never felt away from her maiden home. She missed Baiji at that moment and decided to be the same for this new member of the house.

She kept dreaming about the beautiful future of the couple. But little did she know about the pain the future held for her.

Ahilyabai's Unbiased Judgment

The sweet sound of little Balabai's anklets filled the corridors of Maheshwar palace. Everything felt perfect. Ahilyadevi was feeling refreshed. With a fresh perspective, she went to daftar as per her routine.

It was the time of judicature. Many people used to visit her for the problem-solving. Everybody trusted her judgement and used to be satisfied with her verdict. That day when she went into Daftar, she noticed a huge mob. She noticed those two groups were fighting over something.

The moment Ahilyadevi entered, everyone stopped talking. With a strict glance at them, she asked about the issue. They told her that they belonged to the border area of Ujjain and Indore. The issue was the land dispute. The land was located in such a way that the people from both cities were claiming it. They had gone to Mahadji Scindhia for a solution, but even he could not solve the issue. Everyone in Malwa knew, that Ahilyadevi would give the best judgement possible.

Ahilyadevi thought for a few moments. She knew if she gave complete land to any of the parties, the other group of people would get offended. That was a real mess. After some time, she asked them if whatever decision she gave them, would be **ok** for them and **if would they follow the same.** Everyone agreed.

Ahilyadevi knew the exact location of that land. She told them, that none of them would have complete ownership over that land.

The land would belong to people from both sides. But nobody would be allowed to build any houses there, instead, it would be used as a meadow. The people from both sides should carry their cattle for grazing.

Everyone was extremely happy about the decision. They applauded and thanked her for her unbiased judgment.

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Battling Illness with Scientific Resolve

Since birth, Nathoba was physically weak. The ailment was his permanent companion. Ahilyadevi always used to worry about his health. That's why when Muktabai agreed to his second marriage, Ahilyadevi was sceptical.

Ahilyadevi was not just a great administrator, but also a great analytic. When she used to accompany Malhar Rao and Khanderao to the battlefield, she wanted to be a part of everything. The first ever responsibility which Malhar Rao had given her, was looking after the medication of injured soldiers. She used to check the wounds, or illness of a soldier, identify the cause and used to tell the doctor the exact problem and always make the doctor's work easy. Even at Maheshwar, whenever anybody got sick, before going to the doctor, they asked Ahilyadevi for a home remedy.

Peshwa Nanasahab, Peshwa Madhavrao and Najibkhan all had died because of tuberculosis. When she closely observed the symptoms of Nathoba's illness, she suspected that he might be having the same issue. His frequent fever cycles, his cough and cold issue, weak immunity always alarmed her. He was the only ray of hope for her. So, she decided to take an early action.

She called the best doctor from Maheshwar. He checked Nathoba. Gave him medications and when he was about to leave, Ahilyadevi called him. The doctor went to her room. She told him to use the entire medical knowledge he had and start the research on medicine for tuberculosis. From her expertise, she told him to use even gold extracts to make

the medicine stronger and more effective. She told him that whatever funding was needed for the development of medicine would be provided by her.

The doctor was surprised to see her diagnostic abilities and scientific approach so, he promised her to give his best. He assured her, that if the time came, he would go to the Himalayas to find the appropriate medicinal plants, but he wouldn't let her down.

Ahilyadevi felt hopeful by that. All she knew was to protect her baby from any menace.

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A Stand of Resolve

After the death of Aurangzeb, Delhi was unstable. There was no able heir who could take care of the Mughal reign. Many Muslim rulers sat on the throne but none was as ruthless as Aurangzeb himself.

The condition worsened and Mughals had to take the help of Marathas who were once their sworn enemies. To maintain their territory under their influence, the Mughals started asking Maratha sardars like Holkars, Scindhia and Bhosle for help. In return Mughals paid them.

That was the time when the Mughal emperor wanted to attack the south and wanted the help of all the Maratha and Rajput sardars from east to west. So, he sent his messengers with the letters asking for the same. The messengers were delivering the letters as ordered. To deliver the message, they reached Maheshwar.

As per her routine, Ahilyadevi was in daftar. She was talking to Harkubai when Renu and Raghoji came in and intimated to them about the arrival of two Muslim soldiers. Ahilyadevi was surprised to hear that. She called them inside. They entered with the letter in their hand and stood in front of Ahilyadevi. As usual, she was sitting on her white quilt. She ordered them to give the letter to *Diwanji*.

The Mughal soldiers refused to give the letter to her *Diwan* and told her that, as the letter was from Badshah himself, she should stand up and respectfully, with a bow, accept the letter.



The Battle for Accountability

Tukoji along with his accountant Naro Ganesh was constantly embezzling money. He never sent anything to Ahilyadevi for the enrichment of **dualat** money. Not just that, to pressurise her to send money from her *khasgi*, they kept lying to Nana Phadanvis and Haripant Fadke that the Holkar troops could not take part in the battles because Ahilyadevi would not pay the soldiers.

Tukoji had conflicts with Mahadji as well. Mahadji used to handle the North and looted a lot of money from Rajputana. Tukoji never accompanied him, but he used to ask for his share of the looted amount, as Malwa was shared between three Sardars, Holkars, Scindhia and Pawar.

Nana Phadanvis decided to look into the matter. Nana Phadanvis sent a letter to Ahilyadevi, questioning her about the accounts. He doubted her intentions. He accused her of spending Daulat money for all her social work and building temples.

Ahilyadevi was trained under Malhar Rao, he used to divide the looted money into three parts. One part used to go to **Daulat** which was used for all the army maintenance, the other part was sent to Peshwa as a tax and the third part used to be added to **khasgi** for the personal expenses of women of the house. When Malhar Rao died, he left the amount of sixteen crores in *khasgi* for Ahilyadevi. She was always very particular regarding accounting.

Imperiously Ahilyadevi looked at them and refused to do so. She told them to be heedful of the fact that Badshah wanted help from the Holkar army and not otherwise. She further stated that as per the rule of her durbar, even Peshwa's letters were brought to her by *Diwan*. She stringently told them that if they wanted the Holkar army to help them, then they should follow the rule and give the letter to Diwan as per her orders, or else no help would be provided.

That was a clear message to everyone that Holkars would not kneel in front of everyone.

All the charity, construction, and restoration work were done with that money. All the sardars from Peshwa Durbar and Tukoji had an eye on the Holkar *khasgi* property. They knew, that if they got hold of it by some or the other way, that would be a big fortune. But they also knew, that Ahilyadevi was not a decrepit woman so everyone was plotting against her in some or the other way.

Ahiyabai received Nana Phadanvis's letter. She felt violated. After all the loyalty Malhar Rao and herself had shown to Peshwa, she had to answer something like that which had doubted her dignity.

Furiously she wrote the letter to Nana telling him all about Tukoji's behaviour and bad intentions. She suggested Nana send an accountant from Pune Durbar to check all her and Tukoji's account books. In the letter, she also clarified that all the expenses he mentioned, were done using her *khasgi* money. She challenged him that while tallying accounts if he found a single penny from *Daulat* used for her personal or charity work, she would return ten times the money from *khasgi*.

When the accountants from Peshwa Durbar scrutinised all the account books of Ahilyadevi in Maheshwar, they wrote to Nana that there wasn't a single flaw in those accounts and Ahilyadevi was not the person who should ever be doubted.

Haripant told Nana Phadanvis that she was not an ordinary lady and hence he should not upset her or lose her trust because that would be a grave mistake. Nana realised the gravity of the situation and apologised to her.

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The Melodious Encounter

After an exhausting day in daftar, with an intention of rest, Ahilyadevi came home, when she saw a group of seven-eight Bhilla. When she observed, she could see a young lad around thirty to thirty-five years old along with them. From his appearance, it was visible that he was mugged and beaten by someone. Worriedly she went closer and asked what had happened.

The Bhilla leader stood embarrassed in front of her. He told her that the person with them was a poet named Anantfandi. While he was travelling to Maheshwar from his town Sangamner, in the Satpuda jungle they mugged him. They tied him to a tree and when they were about to leave, that smart poet started singing one of his poems.

His voice was so melodious, that instead of leaving him behind and running away, they kept listening to his song. They asked him where he wanted to go, and he told them that he wanted to meet Ahilyadevi once, to show her his talent.

The moment they heard her name, they realised their mistake. They returned the things they had mugged from him and brought him to Maheshwar safely. Ahilyadevi warned them and set them off.

Ahilyadevi asked Anantfandi about what kind of poems he writes. He told her that he was a shahir from Maharashtra and wrote *lawni* and *powada*. She called everyone from the house.



When he answered affirmatively, she told him to use his art for the betterment of people. She told him, that the *lawni* was an extremely materialistic mode of expressing his art. That was purely about describing women and romance and didn't add any value to society. She humbly told him to use his incredible god gift for the betterment of people. She told him if he would start writing and performing spiritual poems, that would bring people closer to God and our religion.

Ahilyadevi's words sank their roots deep into the heart of Anantfandi. He greeted her and took an oath in front of her to devote his life to the enlightenment of people through his writing. His perspective to look at was life changed. He decided to follow her words of wisdom and left.

Ahilyadevi truly changed his life. Later Anantfandi wrote many *bhajans* and spiritual poems. And without a doubt, people loved his creations a lot.

Muktabai, Harkubai, Renu everyone sat there while he performed the *lawni* he had written.

Everyone was spellbound by his tuneful voice. Everyone was enthralled by that music. After he stopped, for a long time there was applause. Everyone felt refreshed. As a reward, Ahilyadevi gave him a gold bracelet and some money. She also welcomed him to Maheshwar and promised him to arrange his programme there. Happily, he left the palace.

The next day he was surprised to see Ahilyadevi's messenger at his door. He was curious and a bit scared at the same time. Immediately he went to meet her. As usual, she was sitting on her white quilt. A clean white saree, peaceful eyes and a virtuous face. She smiled as he entered and told him to sit.

At first, she praised him for his ability to write beautiful poems. Then asked him if she could suggest something.

The Unheeded Advice

The politics in India was getting complicated day by day. Britishers were taking advantage of conflicts between the Maratha sardars. As long as Peshwa Madhavrao was alive, the Britishers did not dare to interfere in the Maratha affairs. But soon after Madhavrao's death, the British power got an opportunity to fish in the troubled waters.

The self-centred Raghobadada was the first Maratha who sought the help of the East India Company to achieve his selfish designs to sit on the throne. Ahilyadevi tried to convince Raghobadada that he should not join hands with the English. Instead, he should work for the Peshwa and preserve the unity of the house. When he did not listen to anybody, Ahilyadevi thought that she should strategize to fight the English troops.

Ahilyadevi requested Peshwa to protect the interest of Bhilla so that the Bhilla could be used to guard the hilly areas and the Ghats through which the British troops might move. She told the Pune authorities to take the support of Angreys to countercheck the British menace on the sea. She also suggested the Peshwa secure the support of the French so that it could be dispatched to Bombay to fight against the English. But unfortunately, nobody in Pune Durbar was taking her suggestions seriously. She had depicted the British activities correctly. She always compared the Britishers to bears which makes the person laugh and then die.

As slowly the British power was increasing in India, suddenly an ominous news came to Maheshwar. British troops were planning to attack the Vasai fort.

Vasai was near Pune and had great significance from a security point of view. British had planned that before the Maratha army reached Vasai, they would finish their job and conquer the Vasai fort. Ahilyadevi was expecting Tukoji and Mahadji to lead the entire operation and beat the English army. That's when Shivaji Narayan brought a piece of news to Ahilyadevi. She was shocked after listening to that news. The news was about Mahadji.

Pune Durbar was constantly asking Mahadji to send his troops but Mahadji was refusing to do so. He had told Peshwa that he would help them on one condition and that was, as per his demand Peshwa should either give him either the fort of Asirgarh or Nagar. Ahilyadevi couldn't believe his attitude. Ahilyadevi was more worried about the British menace and so she expected the Maratha Chief to forget his interest. Unfortunately, nothing worked and Vasai Fort was conquered by the Britishers. That was a major setback for Marathas.

Ahilyadevi could do nothing but feel sorry for Peshwa as his two pillars of strength Scindhia and Holkar could not help him in those difficult times.

The Abolition of Dowry

That was a routine day in daftar when a group of four to five Brahmins entered. They looked distressed. From their appearance, they seemed poor. Ahilyadevi told them to sit down and asked them what was the matter. They told her that they belonged to poor Brahmin families and were not able to wed their daughters. Surprised, she asked them about the reason. According to her, all the Brahmin families were well-educated and well-cultured, even though they belonged to any economic class. So, she kept wondering about the root cause of that issue.

The Brahmins told her that though they were blessed with an intellect, unfortunately, they were cursed with greed. There was an unwritten rule, that at the time of the wedding, the parents of a girl should give dowry to the groom's family. Unless the dowry amount matched their demand, they wouldn't continue with the wedding.

Ahilyadevi strongly disapproved of tradition and felt a strong urge to discontinue that. She thought to herself that ideally, marriage should be the coming together of two souls and not some sort of bargain. In the Hindu religion, the bride is compared to the goddess Lakshmi, so why have such a filthy tradition?

She immediately called Mukund Hari with a pen and paper and dictated to him her message. He wrote as per her instructions that from thereafter,

as a new law, the tradition of dowry was being abolished. If anybody from any caste or religion was found giving or accepting the dowry, then that would be considered a punishable crime. The person receiving it should pay double the amount, the person giving the dowry should pay the exact amount and if there was any mediator to finalise the wedding, then whatever amount he had received should be **paidvas** a fine to Holkar daftar. She ordered him to make fifty copies of that letter and send them to all the areas that came under the Holkar rule.

Brahmins praised the decision enthusiastically and blessed her by chanting mantras.

The Magnanimity of Ahilyadevi

Moropant entered Maheshwar and the city was much better than he had imagined. He had travelled the entire country to present his poetry and singing. Wherever he went he could see Ahilyadevi's work. The temples, wells, public rest houses and whatnot. He did not know her personally so he stayed at Visajipant's house in Maheshwar. Before meeting Ahilyadevi Moropant wanted to understand her perspective behind her social work.

After dinner, he sat with Visajipant for the discussion. He told Visajipant that, for performance in front of different rulers he travelled almost the entire country. From Rameshwar to Chardham and from Dwarika to Kashi, Ayodhya. Everywhere he noticed Ahilyadevi's work in some or the other form. He asked Visajipant, what was the need for so much work. He also asked about the money she spent on all of that.

Visajipant smiled and started talking. He told Moropant that, she had built wells because she had seen the worst condition of soldiers without water while returning from Panipat. The public rest houses were built because she had seen the huge massacre by Najibkhan. Those innocent people lost their lives just because they could not find any safe place to hide and stay. She had restored the temples demolished by Muslims. She reasoned that, due to intolerance, Muslims intentionally harmed Hindu religious beliefs by demolishing their sacred temples. If the temples were left in their demolished state, it would be a disservice to their pride and prejudice. She repeatedly told the Muslim monarchs that if the Holkars assisted them in their missions, which led to mutual alliances, there was no reason to dismantle what had already been established.

She stated that the entire project was funded by deducting the money from her personal funds. Even a single coin did not strain the government's treasury.

He was then given a thorough explanation of Ahilyadevi's work by Visajipant. The benevolence was extended to Jyotirlingas, Chardhams, and seven sacred cities known as Saptapuris. The temples were constructed at Shree Mallikarjun, Shree Vajjnath, Shree Kashi Vishwanath, and Shree Ghrishneshwar. Idols were reinstalled at Shree Somnath and Shree **Onkareshwar**. Almshouses and **dharamshals** were started at Badrinath, Dwarka, Rameshwar, and Jagannathpuri. These were referred to as Chardhams. Rest houses, temples, and ghats were constructed at Ayodhya, Mathura, Haridwar, Kashi, Kanchi, Avantika and Dwarka, the Saptapuris. Besides all of that, many temples, wells, ghats, rest houses, and kunds were developed at various locations in Maharashtra, Malwa, and Rajputana.

During the hot months of the year, she stationed people on the roadways to provide travellers with water, and when the cold season began, she gave them warm clothes. She used her treasure not only to build temples but also for other purposes. She had constructed a road from Varanasi to Kolkata.

After hearing all of it, he was very pleased with her social skills. She considered not only the areas inside her dominion but also those ruled by others.

The Visionary

Legacy of Ahilyadevi

Moropant was a notable contemporary Marathi poet. When Ahilyadevi learned of his arrival, she quickly **despatched** a palanquin for him. He entered the Maheshwar Palace. The simplicity of her house was soothing. As usual, she sat on her quilt in a white saree. With a grin, she greeted him with the respect he deserved.

He sat on the mattress. First, he complimented her on all of her efforts. He praised her work for its profundity and forward-thinking approach. Following the friendly talk, he requested permission to display his work in front of her. She nodded.

As he sang and presented his poetry everyone was fascinated. Happily, Ahilyadevi rewarded him with a gold bracelet and a shawl. She extolled his art.

Moropant sought her permission after the concert to clear up some of his misgivings. She assured him he could ask for whatever he wanted. He inquired as to her motivations for arranging for the maintenance of several temples for over a century. He was familiar with her approach to building and restoring temples, but he wanted to grasp her perspective on continuing that maintenance for such an extended length of time.

She grinned and informed him she was constantly thinking about long-term rewards. She reminded him that while monarchs changed, temples remained permanent; in such cases, if temple expenses were already covered, someone would undoubtedly continue to look after them.

She said that temples were the most effective way to keep Hinduism alive in people's imaginations.

His next query concerned the temple of Shree Kashi Vishwanath. When he was in Banaras, he undoubtedly went to the Kashi Vishwanath temple. He was heartbroken to find Gyanvyapi Mosque in the spot where the Kashi Vishwanath temple formerly stood gloriously. At the same time, he was shocked to discover a new temple built directly in front of the Mosque. When he inquired about the building, he learned that the temple was being built under the orders of Ahilyadevi. He questioned her why she constructed the temple just in front of the Mosque when it could have been placed elsewhere in Kashi.

She told him that Hindus are tolerant and forgiving people. They would easily forget the scars inflicted by Muslim emperors. To keep the fire burning in the hearts of Hindus, the temple was built directly in front of the mosque.

Moropant was honored to have encountered such a visionary in his life. He bowed in front of her and gladly accepted her departure.



The Call to Arms

After the second marriage of Nathoba, the pooja was organised in Maheshwar. Nathoba with his both wives Balabai and little Gauri was performing pooja. Ahilyadevi was looking at them with teary eyes when Renu told her about a messenger who was waiting for her in Daftar.

Ahilyadevi immediately left to attend to him. He was none other than Shivdev, her secret agent. He had brought a message from Rajputana. Rajput had rebelled once again. They planned to conquer the Maratha-ruled area. They had conquered Rampura and had marched to Nimbheda and took possession of Jawad. The worst part of the entire situation was, that Shivaji Nana, the Holkar officer who was posted at Nimbheda Fort surrendered and ran away.

Ahilyadevi immediately understood the reason behind that attack. Just a few days before, Rajputs had defeated the Scindhia army at Lalsot. That was not just a big blow to the Scindhia army but also to the Maratha empire. The Rajputs were not content with the victory at Lalsot. They decided to make full use of that opportunity as Scindhia was hard-pressed.

Another piece of news was, that Chandrawats took advantage of the opportunity to take the long-due revenge from Holkars, they had joined armies with Rajputs and the combined army marched up to Chakardya and Chaldu endangering the Holkars.

That was the third time, Chandrawats and Rajputs had tried to sabotage the Maratha power in Rajputana. Though she was a strong supporter of peace, she decided to fight back that one time as she couldn't take that anymore. Even at that time, Tukoji was away from Malwa so she had to take matters into her own hands.

Immediately Ahilyadevi herself started the drumroll to gather the army. She ordered to congregate weapons from the weapon factory, horse riders were ordered to prepare the horses, and cannons and guns were gathered. Within half an hour Abajipant and Ragho Ranchhod along with three thousand armed soldiers left Maheshwar. Letters were sent to different army chiefs to join the Holkar army at Jawad. Ahilyadevi stayed at Maheshwar and waited for the news from Rampura. It was the evening time when Ahilyadevi saw a rider moving fast towards Maheshwar fort. Rushing she went downstairs. That was Shivdev. He had brought a grave news, that in a grim battle, Abajipant fell on the battlefield. Though that was a big loss, Ahilyadevi stayed calm. She was not disturbed even a bit.

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Defeating Rebellion and Assuring Victory

Immediately she called her brave and trustworthy Sardar, Sharifbhai. Along with him, some more soldiers were ready to leave. She infused a vigorous spirit of patriotism into her soldiers. She told them not to be scared of anyone. She inspired them to fight together and defeat them. She warned them that if they escaped the scene and returned alive and vanquished to Maheshwar, she would not spare them. She ordered them to go and crush the opponent's army and destroy Mewar. Everybody was eager to show her their valour and the army left for Rampura. Ahilyadevi decided to remain near the scene of action to inspire her soldiers all the while.

New soldiers were enrolled daily and were sent to the battlefield. The fresh recruits added to the strength. Scindhia's help was secured through the orders to the Mamledars of Malwa to join hands with the Holkars. In addition to that, Ahilyadevi also dispatched her brother Tulaji Shinde with five thousand horses.

A strong force of three thousand was kept in reserve to be used at a critical time. A fierce battle ensued between the two armies near Mansoor, where Maldas Metha was killed by the Holkar army. And the army of Maharana of Udaipur was defeated.

The victorious army proceeded and took Jawad, Nimbheda, and Ranipura back from Rajput. Then the Holkar army set the cannons at Amed and started bombarding fireballs at Rampura. Chandrawats were fighting from Rampura.

They could not survive the attack of Holkar cannons and the leader of Chandrawats fled to Amad.

Holkar's army decided to attack Amad. They brought a cannon named Jwala from Rampura. They started the fire which injured Bhawani Singh Chandrawat. The battle for the day stopped. Sharifbhai and Ragho Ranchhod decided to attack again the next day. Chandrawats got to know about their plan and as a counterattack, they planted explosives outside the Amad fort. But that was not their lucky day. The imprudence of the Chandrawat army resulted in the setting off of the explosives they had planted for the Holkar army. In that blast, Saubhag Singh Chandrawat, Bhawani Singh's brother received dangerous wounds and was captured by the Holkar army. Holkar army won the battle. Everyone was overjoyed by the victory.

Saubhag Singh was brought in front of Ahilyadevi. He was pleading for his life. But everyone knew he was subjected to capital punishment. Ahilyadevi did not show any mercy. She ordered her soldiers to tie him to a cannon and fire. Whatever was ordered was followed by her soldiers. When Bhawani Singh got that news, he fled the scene with the remaining three hundred soldiers.

Ahilyadevi had won a complete and decisive victory over the Chandrawats. Her fame spread far and wide. When the news of Chandrawat's defeat reached Pune durbar, Nana Phadanwis ordered to fire off three cannon shots in honour of Ahilyadevi. A grand celebration was held at Pune where Nana Phadanwis showered praise and appreciation for the martial qualities of Ahilyadevi, who previously was looked upon simply as a righteous lady.

The Agrarian Renaissance

Every day in daftar used to bring a new challenge. That day, some farmers came to meet Ahilyadevi. Due to less rainfall, they could not get enough yield from their farms. And so, they wanted the exemption in taxes that they paid. Ahilyadevi did not cancel their entire tax, instead, she gave them an extra time of two years to complete it.

Ahilyadevi always believed that the farmer was the main pillar of strength of any kingdom. So, she designed special laws and rules for the farmers. She had ordered all her officers to give special attention to farmer problems.

She had declared that due to drought or floods if the farmer was hampered, then the taxes of that respective year should be exempted. During that time, many states recorded drought but during the entire time when Ahilyadevi was in charge, her kingdom never faced even a single drought.

She had implemented many policies to avoid the drought conditions. The first and the most important was planting trees. She always followed the science for her every action. She insisted on planting the mango, lemon, tamarind, peepal, banyan, and Indian fig trees. The roots of these trees penetrate deeply into the soil and increase the groundwater level.

She gave lands to the farmers below the poverty level with an agreement that they would plant a minimum of twenty fruit-giving plants on that land.

Out of those twenty plants, the yield of eleven trees should be given to the government and the yield of the remaining nine trees was to be kept for themselves.

Maheshwar was situated on the bank of the Narmada River. The river is one of the sacred rivers in India. As that was the main source of water, people used it for all the household chores. Ahilyadevi noticed that all those activities caused major water pollution. She separated the continuously flowing water from the main Narmada River and ordered people to use that water for their day in day out activities. That was never mixed with the main river and was supplied to the farmers for farming. That improved the quality and quantity of the grains.

The major issue faced by farmers was the animals like deer and birds which ate the grains from their farms. Ahilyadevi figured out the main problem behind that and decided to keep a few farms secured for those birds and animals. When enough food was available to them, they stopped damaging the active farms of farmers.

To increase the income of farmers, she allowed them to sell their agricultural yield wherever they wished. So, farmers started getting more and more income from farming.

She knew that when a person gets enough money, he tends to spend that on various additions. She had experienced that in her own house. Her husband and her son were no exceptions. So, she banned alcohol in her kingdom. That kept the farmers away from **additions** and stayed happy.

In all, under Ahilyadevi's rule, all the people of her kingdom were happy.

Ahilyadevi's Impact Beyond Borders

Ahilyadevi was lauded, and her work was valued not only by her friends but even by her adversaries. Nizam and Tipu Sultan frequently clashed with the Marathas. However, Ahilyadevi's gentle temperament meant that they never harboured a grudge against her. In reality, Nizam always praised her work. Her charitable endeavours extended to towns such as Mysore and Hyderabad, which were ruled by the Nizam and Tipu Sultan.

Ahilyadevi devoutly worshipped Lord Mahadev. She felt that the holy water of the Ganga River should reach all of the well-known religious locations throughout India on the festival of Mahashivaratri.

Immediately the list of forty-five such locations was created. The water was supposed to be sent to all the areas from Rameshwar to Badrinath and from Kashi to Gujrat. The list of people and their salaries were finalised. And the ritual started. Every year people transported the Ganga water to all the sacred places in India.

The news of the battle between Tipu Sultan and Martha reached Maheshwar. That was the month of Magh. As per the ritual, Ganga water transport had started. The water was to be taken to Rameshwar. The situation was tough as the battle had created chaos in South India. Ahilyadevi told her people not to stop. As expected, they were stopped by Tipu's men on the way. Ahilyadevi's men told them that they were carrying the holy Ganga water to be transported to Rameshwar on Ahilyadevi's orders.

When Tipu's men heard her name, they immediately sent a message to Tipu. Without any objection, he permitted her men to move forward.

As the operations of the Maratha army mostly included Holkar soldiers, Tipu was not on good terms with Holkars but he always respected Ahilyadevi and never stood between her and her religious activities.

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A Personal Tragedy Amidst Professional Triumphs

Ahilyadevi's Lord Mahadev gave her tremendous success in her professional life, but he forgot to bless her with a happy personal life. When she thought everything was getting back to normal, her fate decided otherwise. Her grandson Nathoba was a weak child since his birth. He fell sick very often. As per Ahilyadevi's orders, the doctors were trying to find different medicines and combinations but nothing was giving the expected results.

Suddenly his health started deteriorating. Balabai was not old enough, but she had realised the gravity of the situation and so was continuously at his bedside. Gauri was just ten years old. She knew nothing. She kept asking Ahilyadevi why her husband didn't play with her like before. But Ahilyadevi had no answers to her innocent questions. In a very short period, Gauri had won her heart. She loved that little girl a lot.

Ahilyadevi was continuously praying to God, to keep her only ray of hope, her grandson safe. That day was kojagiri pournima. Dasra celebrations had just ended. Everyone drank the sweet milk and that somehow triggered vomiting for Nathoba. His fever spiked. He could not eat anything. He was constantly coughing. That continued for five days. Finally, doctors started giving him heavy doses on the orders of Ahilyadevi. As per the old Hindu ritual for requesting God to fulfil one's wishes, the idols of Gods were kept in water, and Muktabai was doing charity. Everyone was trying to do whatever was possible to please God.

Everyone was praying for Nathoba's long life. Ahilyadevi and Muktabai were begging Lord Mahadeva for Nathoba's recovery. But nothing worked.

Yashwantrao, Muktabai realised that nothing was going to help anymore. Their baby was counting his last breaths. Ahilyadevi was constantly sitting next to him. She could not concentrate on any task in Daftar. Every time he coughed; he was spitting blood. His body looked like a skeleton covered with skin. He had lost a lot of body weight.

Everyone knew that Nathoba's end was near. Ahilyadevi told the doctor to give him a tranquillizer. She did not want him to feel any pain during his last few breaths. Doctors did so. Nathoba finally slept silently after many nights. After some time, his breathing slowed down and God took away her only grandson from Ahilyadevi.

Little Gauri was sleeping next to Ahilyadevi. She kept moving her hand in her hair. She only had one thought in her mind with her grandson, her little granddaughters-in-law would also be gone. She sat there like an idol, looking at Nathoba's lifeless body.

The last rites of Nathoba were performed in Maheshwar. Ahilyadevi took a position and sought to persuade Muktabai to stop his wives from performing sati as they were very young. But once again her request fell on deaf ears. Balabai and Gauri were compelled to conduct sati per the Phanse family custom. Ahilyadevi had no choice but to helplessly watch everything unfolding around her.

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A Tragic Tale of Betrayal and Retribution

Tukojirao traveled to Maheshwar to meet Ahilyadevi. After nearly four years, he mustered the guts to meet her. Despite being two years older than her, he addressed her as Matoshree out of respect. Finally, he came to his senses and recognized the true nature of his accountant, Naro Ganesh, whom he had chosen without Ahilyadevi's consent. Being picked as the army head of Holkars, he was expected to exhibit his courage just like Malhar Rao. However, because of Naro Ganesh's negative impact, he was rarely active on the battlefield. He apologised to Ahilyadevi for his behaviour. Ahilyadevi advised him to show some valour on the battlefield and bring some pride to Holkar's house. She also told him to settle the conflicts with Mahadji. After all, Scindhia and Holkar were two arms of the Maratha empire. Tukojirao agreed with her and left for Indore.

After coming to Indore, he abandoned Naro Ganesh. All of his illegal properties were seized. Tukojirao doubted the relationship between Naro Ganesh and his wife Rakhmabai, so he confiscated her income as well. Tukojirao did not stop with that, he arrested Naro Ganesh and ordered him to pay thirty lakh which he had embezzled.

Ahilyadevi was receiving all of this information at Maheshwar. Despite her disapproval of Naro Ganesh, she did not appreciate how Tukojirao handled him. However, she was unable to do anything. Rakhmabai was continuously writing to her to investigate the situation,

but Ahilyadevi couldn't control what was happening. And one day, Maheshwar received terrible news. Naro Ganesh was punished with death by Tukojirao.

Ahilyadevi sat silently. She knew whatever happened was wrong, but things had become so entwined that the occurrence couldn't be avoided.

She left Daftar and proceeded to sit in her favourite seat. The balcony of her chamber, from which she would share her grief and intimate secrets with her one consistent companion, Narmadamaiyya.

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Ahilyadevi's Heart-Wrenching Ordeal

That was a peaceful evening. Ahilyadevi proceeded to the sanctum of Maheshwar palace as usual. She joined her hands and sought Lord Mahadev's blessings for the wellbeing of her people. Muktabai came running as she sat silently with her eyes closed. Muktabai, terrified, told her to rush to Yashwantrao's chamber. Ahilyadevi felt her heart skip a beat. She immediately joined her. The scene in his chamber was horrendous. Yashwantrao was lying on the floor, vomiting, and having frequent loose motions. He was unable to ingest any food. Ahilyadevi shockingly asked him what had happened in twelve hours. She remembered meeting him in the morning when he was all fine.

Muktabai informed her he was depressed following Nathoba's death. He hadn't been sleeping or eating properly since that occurred. Yashwantrao looked at Ahilyadevi and told her that he knew his end was fast approaching and that he wouldn't survive very long. He told her to look after his Mukta after him. Ahilyadevi tried to console him and told him that she wouldn't let anything happen to him.

The entire past flashed before Ahilyadevi's eyes. The bold young man who had accepted the challenge and confronted Bhilla. The grand wedding ceremony was when he became a part of the family as Muktabai's loving husband, the happy father of his Nathoba, was lying in front of her.

Doctors were continuously trying to give him different medicines. But nothing was working. The cholera was

determined to take his life. Anything fed to him was immediately flushed, either through vomit or loose faeces. Even doctors were helpless. Servants were constantly changing his clothes and sheets. Muktabai kept crying as she couldn't tolerate whatever was happening. Doctors decided to try one last strong medicine but before they could pour it into his mouth, a large watery stool was released and he stopped moving. Doctors checked him and declared him dead.

Everyone started crying. Muktabai was uncontrollable. She hugged her mother like a little girl and started weeping. Ahilyadevi pulled her closer and kept moving her hand on her baby's head.

Another bolt had fallen and Ahilyadevi knew the consequences very well. The demise of Yashwantrao was about to take her beloved Mukta from her. Ahilyadevi kept requesting everyone to keep her lovely child, her Muktabai alive. Finally, Muktabai herself declared that without her son and her husband, her life was meaningless. She humbly asked Ahilyadevi to let her go. Helplessly, Ahilyadevi asked Muktabai's mother-in-law to allow her to bathe her daughter and get her ready one last time. That was the time when widows were not allowed in any pooja. But ignoring all the relatives, Muktabai's mother-in-law told Ahilyadevi to be with her daughter one last time.

Udabai, Harkubai and Ahilyadevi followed Yashwantrao and Muktabai. Muktabai sat with Yashwantrao's head on her lap. His two other wives sat next to her. Pandits chanted mantras. Ahilyadevi and Muktabai were silently looking at each other as the fire started. Ahilyadevi kept looking at her baby assuring her that her mother was there with her in that pain. As the sound of drums increased, Ahilyadevi fainted.

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Ahilyadevi's Return from Despair

After the demise of Yashwantrao and her Muktabai, Ahilyadevi stayed in her room most of the time. She did not want to eat anything nor could she sleep peacefully. She kept writing letters to Tukoji Rao telling him to take charge of the entire kingdom. All she wanted to do was leave for Kashi and stay away from everything till her last breath. She had closely witnessed the deaths of five men and eighteen women in her family. She felt like she had left with no energy to handle anything anymore. She kept praying to God to take her along.

Santaji Holkar, Tukoji Rao's brother was at Maheshwar accompanying Ahilyadevi. Ahilyadevi had almost decided to leave everything and quit her part when Mahadji's letter was received at Maheshwar. He had sent his condolences for her loss. He also wrote that Tukoji Rao was not able enough to look after anything. He was not engaged in any of the key fights, and if she gave everything to him and left, he would certainly mishandle everything, and the Holkar banner would soon be meaningless. He wrote ahead that she had survived extreme blows and that was the time, she emerged from that blow like a phoenix and continued her reign till her last breath. He had reminded her of her promise to Malhar Rao that she would protect Holkar's reign till her last breath.

The letter gave her the motivation she needed. She felt like there still was someone who thought about her and took care of her. She decided to ignore her negative thoughts and got back to her daily routine.

Ahilyadevi's Pragmatic Approach

That was the time when almost all the Maratha chiefs had battalions of European pattern. To become more powerful than the others, they took the help of British officers. Even Mahadji Scindhia had secured the services of D. Boine and organised his battalion on the European pattern. That was one of the best-trained troops.

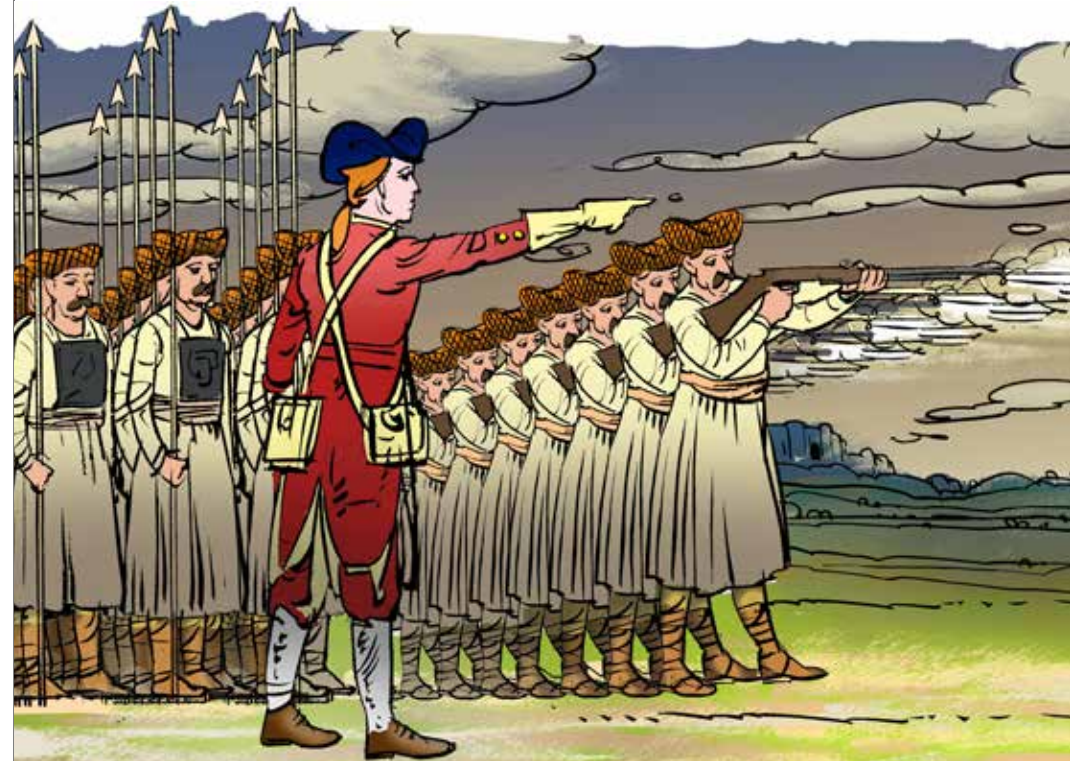
Like Scindhia, Ahilyadevi also ordered Tukoji Rao to build up a well-trained army. To organise the Holkar army in a European fashion Ahilyadevi appointed Dundarmek a French officer and asked him to train the soldiers. Unfortunately, with that army, Holkars stood against Scindhia in Lakheri. The entire operation was led by Tukoji Rao's sons, Malhar Rao II, Kashirao and Yashwantrao. D. Boine was extremely clever and he defeated Holkar's army badly. That was a severe blow for Ahilyadevi.

There was a major difference between the administration of other sardars and Ahilyadevi. All of the others had granted British officers complete privileges and unrestricted access to their kingdom's government. But Ahilyadevi was unlike any other self-centred person. She never really liked the Britishers. She was well aware of their ill will and so decided to appoint a non-British commanding officer. In 1793, she appointed J. P. Boyd an American Colonel to organise and mould the Holkar troops on the Western model. He had agreed to work on certain conditions. Colonel Boyd had signed an agreement with Ahilyadevi. According to the agreement, Colonel Boyd would serve as a chief officer. His job would be to train the Holkar army in the Western model

at Pune. The uniforms, shoulder flags and belts would be provided by Holkars. Gunpowder, cannonballs, and all the other artillery-related materials would be supplied by the state. Within a month, he along with the trained army should report to Maheshwar. After reaching Maheshwar the troops would pay a guard of honour to Ahilyadevi and the oath ceremony would be performed.

J. P. Boyd was a paid employee of Holkars and Ahilyadevi never gave him any rights in administration policies. After he completed his tasks, he was stationed at Indore from where he wrote to Ahilyadevi that he would serve the state honestly and would remain loyal to her.

Though Ahilyadevi was essentially a peace-loving personality, she did her best to maintain the reputation of the House of Holkar.



The Succession Struggle

Tukojirao was two years older than Ahilyadevi. Both were aging. Tukoji's sons were getting older so Ahilyadevi decided to nominate one of them as a new Subhedar. Malhar Rao II was short-tempered and was already treating the people in a bad manner. Kashirao, the eldest son of Tukoji was spastic but he was well-behaved and comparatively capable of taking care of administration. So, Ahilyadevi nominated Kashirao Holkar to be the successor and Malhar Rao, the second son of Tukoji to command the Holkar army.

Malhar Rao was not at all happy with this decision. He always considered Kashirao unfit for the responsibilities. He became very angry over the arrangements made by Ahilyadevi. He was doubtful about his future position and wanted his share. He started threatening everyone. Ahilyadevi was deeply pained by the behaviour of Malhar Rao. Because of his behaviour, she decided to nominate Bapu Holkar, Tukoji's nephew as the army commander. The letters were sent to Pune Durbar. The clothes and documents for Kashirao and Bapu Holkar were requested.

Deeply hurt by that decision, Malhar Rao had left Maheshwar forever. But did not keep calm and started creating problems for Ahilyadevi. He gathered soldiers and started plundering. Ahilyadevi tried her best to convince Malhar Rao that his unruly behaviours would finally put him at a loss. But all that fell on the deaf ears of Malhar Rao.

Finally, Ahilyadevi decided to take strict action against him. She dispatched her troops and caught him. She ordered them to capture and arrest him. As per her orders, he was captured and put behind bars in Kushalgarh.

The End of an Era

Tired of everything happening around her, Ahilyadevi was looking after the administration. She entered the daftar and Appaji Jagdev was waiting for her with a letter in his hands. With a sad face, he gave it to her. She opened the letter and sat down with teary eyes. That was a message to inform about the sad demise of Mahadji Scindhia. They had worked together for forty years. He had always stood by her in every difficult situation. Her another pillar of strength had fallen. She was extremely saddened by the news.

Every day brought a new issue. Tukojirao was still not behaving the way he was expected. Frustrated by everything Ahilyadevi was still performing her duties. The dirty family politics was sickening her.

Ahilyadevi had experienced many ups and downs throughout her lifetime. Her primary motivation was to protect and improve Holkar's reign. All of the shocks and suffering she had been through had gathered deep within her. After so many years, all of her emotional traumas were manifesting themselves physically. The fever cycles had begun. Her condition deteriorated. However, her routine stayed unbroken. The poojas, work in daftar, meetings with various persons, and judicial proceedings had not stopped. The accounting and letters of numerous orders were ongoing, but exhaustion was taking control.

When she sat alone on her room's balcony, the thoughts of Malhar Rao, Gautamabai, Khanderao, Malerao, Nathoba, and Muktabai made her melancholy. To combat all of that, she began spending more time on spiritual activities.

Work in Daftar reminded her of Malhar Rao, and while giving directions to Renu for home chores, she remembered Gautamabai. While worshipping Lord Vishnu, the visage of the idol resembled Khanderao. While gazing at the silently flowing Narmada, she remembered her lovely and serene daughter Mukta. When she watched tiny girls playing together, she thought of her little daughters and granddaughters-in-law who performed sati. Sometimes in her fantasies, her little Gauri urged her to play along. Not only did she see family members, but also Maahadji, who was laughing loudly and admiring all the goodies produced in her kitchen. Despite being surrounded by everyone in her house, she felt alone.

The month of Shravan began. As per the ritual, a thousand Brahmins performed Kotilingarchan pooja. The bhajans in temples filled the air in Maheshwar. One moment she felt at peace, the next moment the fall of the Maratha empire saddened her. She was completely tired of everything happening around her. The amalgam of all the emotions was exhausting her. She knew her end was near. She donated a cow.

She felt exhausted from all of her efforts. Harkubai and Udabai were seated next to her. In the shrine, Brahmins were continuously chanting Lord Mahadev's name. She had been unconscious for some time and would wake up after a while. When she closed her eyes, she saw Shree Kashi Vishweshwar in front of her. The sound of chanting gradually became all she could hear. That music invaded her head. While listening to that, her breathing gradually slowed, and her soul departed her body forever. Ahilyadevi's cow sensed her death on the porch. At that very moment, the cow cried out and died.

The proud daughter-in-law of Subhedar Malhar Rao, extraordinary wife of Khanderao, loving mother of Malerao and Muktabai, Matoshree of all the people, the Gangajalnirmal Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar was finally free from all the sorrows of her life.

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Footprints of the Indomintable Queen

Ahilyadevi, a luminary of Indian history, embodied the virtues of resilience, devotion, and duty throughout her illustrious thirty-year reign. Following the untimely demise of her husband and father-in-law, she shouldered the weight of governance with unwavering courage and resolve.

Her rule was not merely about maintaining order; it was about fostering a society where happiness thrived. Ahilyadevi's commitment to social harmony was exemplary. She welcomed all faiths with open arms, fostering an environment where religious and charitable institutions flourished under her patronage. Her devotion to inclusivity stood as a beacon of tolerance in an era marked by religious discord.

Ahilyadevi's legacy extends beyond governance; she was a trailblazer for women's empowerment. Rejecting the notion of women confined to domestic duties, she championed self-reliance and courage among her female subjects. Her leadership transcended gender norms, inspiring generations to defy societal constraints.

Thousands of workers were given day-to-day labour to handle the bread-and-butter challenges of the day. In matters of statecraft, Ahilyadevi's diplomacy was unparalleled. She commanded respect not only from her own subjects but also from neighbouring rulers. As a mediator among Maratha chieftains and other regional powers, she played a pivotal role in maintaining stability and fostering cooperation.

Yet, her vision extended far beyond political manoeuvring. Ahilyadevi foresaw the encroaching threat of British influence and advocated for unity among Indian rulers. Her efforts to rebuild temples demolished by Mughal invaders were not merely acts of religious restoration; they were symbols of resistance against colonial forces and assertions of national identity. For this very reason, she focused her efforts on the betterment of India through spirituality. From Rameshwar to Chardham and from Kashi to Dwarika she built and restored temples which were demolished by Mughals.

The peculiarity of Ahilyadevi's personality was, her extraordinary attitude to complete ordinary tasks. May that be administration or military or judication. People always found her reachable. The simple yet extraordinary thought of having a daily meal with people of all castes and financial levels made everyone feel equal in her reign. Anyone was comfortable meeting her and discussing their issues. Not only did the people of her realm trust her judgment but the rulers of surrounding kingdoms also asked her to solve their problems.

Ahilyadevi was a perfect amalgam of the best qualities of all the great people India had ever seen. She had the vision of united India and united Indians like Chhatrapati Shri Shivaji Maharaj and Shri Shankaracharya, the best administration and judication of Arya Chanakya and divinity of Samartah Ramdas Swami and Sant Dhnyaneshwar.

Ahilyadevi's enduring legacy lies in her ability to inspire. Her life serves as a testament to the power of virtue, spirituality, and moral integrity. Even today, her tale resonates as a guiding light, reminding us of the transformative potential of compassionate leadership.

In essence, Ahilyadevi's rule was a symphony of resilience, compassion, and foresight—a legacy that continues to enrich the tapestry of Indian history and inspire generations worldwide.



I am Chinmayee Mulye, and it is with great joy and humility that I present to you my first book. I have a background in Microbiology and ongoing studies in Psychology. As a former student of Jnana Prabodhini Prashala and a passionate pursuer of knowledge, I embarked on a journey that led me to delve into the lives of remarkable individuals whose stories resonate across time.

In crafting this book, my aim is simple yet profound: to share Ahilyabai's inspiring saga with the youth of today, to ignite within them a sense of purpose and a desire to lead lives filled with meaning and significance. Drawing upon my own experiences and insights gained through my academic pursuits, I hope to weave a narrative that resonates with readers of all ages.

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