



Ahilyabai Holkar

A Magnificent Ruler, Saintly Administrator

○ Eleanor Zelliott

India has had many female rulers, warrior women and poet queens, but Ahilyabai Holkar commands more affection and respect for her accomplishments during her 30-year-long reign than any other does. She was noted for her piety, for her administrative ability, for her keen interest in all her people and for an extraordinary amount of building at holy sites all over the country. Her rule of Malwa in the 18th century is still cited as a model of benevolent and effective government.

Ahilyabai was born in 1725 in the village of Chondi, in Bhid district, Maharashtra. Her father, Mankoji Shinde, was the *patil* of the village, a member of the proud Dhangar community. Women then did not go to school, but Ahilyabai's father taught her to read and write. Her mother also seems to have been a well-read and pious woman.

Her entrance on to the stage of history was something of an accident: Malhar Rao Holkar, a commander in the service of the Peshwa Bajirao and lord of the Malwa territory, stopped in Chondi on his way to Pune and, according to legend, saw the eight-year-old Ahilyabai at the temple service in the village. Recognising her piety and

her character, he brought the girl to the Holkar territory as a bride for his weak son, Khande Rao. Ahilyabai's husband was killed in battle in 1754. Twelve years later, her father-in-law, Malhar Rao died. From 1766 until her death in 1795, she ruled Malwa, trained in both administrative and military matters by Malhar Rao. A letter to her from Malhar Rao in 1765 illustrates the trust he had in her ability during the tempestuous battle for power in the 18th century:

"Proceed to Gwalior after crossing the Chambal. You may halt there for four or five days. You should keep your big artillery and arrange for its ammunition as much as possible....On the march you should arrange for military posts being located for protection of the road."

Already trained to be a ruler, Ahilyabai petitioned the Peshwa after Malhar's death, and the death of her son, to take over the administration herself. Some in Malwa objected to her assumption of rule, but the army of Holkar was enthusiastic about her leadership. She had led them in person, with four

bows and quivers of arrows fitted to the corners of the howdah of her favourite elephant. The Peshwa granted permission, and, with Tukoji Holkar (not a relative) as the head of military matters, she proceeded to rule Malwa in a most enlightened manner, even reinstating a Brahmin who had opposed her.

Ahilyabai never observed *purdah* but held daily public audience and was always accessible to anyone who needed her ear. The administrator and historian, Sir John Malcolm wrote most enthusiastically about her abilities some 40 years after her death:

"Her first principle of government appears to have been moderate assessment, and an almost sacred respect for the native rights of village officers and proprietors of land. She heard every complaint in person; and although she continually referred cases to courts of equity and arbitration, and to her ministers for settlement, she was always accessible. So strong was her sense of duty on all points connected with the distribution of justice, that she is represented as not only patient but unwearied in the investigation of the most insignificant cases, when appeals were made to her decision."

A contemporary American historian, Stewart Gordon, adds that a definite proof of her ability as a ruler was that her territories in Malwa were not attacked or disrupted by local battles during her reign, in spite of wars all around. According to Gordon, Ahilyabai had one of the

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most stable reigns of the 18 century.” And Malcolm adds that she kept, almost to the man, the same set of ministers and administrators throughout her reign. Among Ahilyabai’s accomplishments was the development of Indore from a small village to a prosperous and beautiful city; her own capital, however, was in nearby Maheshwar, a town on the banks of the Narmada river. She also built forts and roads in Malwa, sponsored festivals and gave donations for regular worship in many Hindu temples. Outside Malwa, she built dozens of temples, *ghats*, wells, tanks and rest-houses across an area stretching from the Himalayas to pilgrimage centres in South India. The *Bharatiya Sanskritikosh* lists as sites she embellished, Kashi, Gaya, Somnath, Ayodhya, Mathura, Hardwar, Kanchi, Avanti, Dwarka, Badrinarayan, Rameshwar and Jaganathpuri. Ahilyabai also rejoiced when she saw bankers, merchants, farmers and cultivators rise to levels of affluence, but did not consider that she had any legitimate claim to any of that wealth, be it through taxes or feudal right. She must, in fact, have financed all her activities with the lawful gains obtained from a happy and prosperous land.

There are many stories of her care for her people. She helped widows retain their husbands’ wealth. She made sure that a widow was allowed to adopt a son; in fact, in one instance, when her minister refused to allow the adoption unless he was suitably bribed, she is said to have sponsored the child herself, and given him clothes and jewels as part of the ritual. To honour the memory of Ahilyabai Holkar, in 1996 leading citizens of Indore instituted an award in her name to be bestowed annually on an outstanding public figure. The then prime minister of India gave away the first award to

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Nanaji Deshmukh. The only time Ahilyabai seems not to have been able to settle a conflict peacefully and easily was in the case of the Bhils and Gonds, “plunderers” on her borders; but she granted them waste hilly lands and the right to a small duty on goods passing through their territories. Even in this case, according to Malcolm, she did give “considerate attention to their habits”.

Ahilyabai’s capital at Maheshwar was the scene of literary, musical, artistic and industrial enterprise. She entertained the famous Marathi poet, Moropant and the *shahir*, Anantaphandi from Maharashtra, and also patronised the Sanskrit scholar, Khushali Ram. Craftsmen, sculptors and artists received salaries and honours at her capital, and she even established a textile industry in the city of Maheshwar.

One of her old retainers told Malcolm the facts of her daily life: She rose an hour before daybreak to say prayers. Then she had scriptures read to her, distributed alms and gave food to a number of Brahmins. Her breakfast, as indeed all her meals, was vegetarian. After breakfast, she prayed again, and then took a short rest. From two to six she was in her *darbar*, after religious exercises and a light meal, she again attended to business from nine to eleven. Her life was marked by pray; abstinence and work, with religious fasts, festivals and public emergencies affording the only change in this routine. Her devotion was to Shiva, although she respected all religions.

“*Shri Shankara*” appeared on all royal proclamations along with her signature.

In spite of all that is known the warrior queen and all that she left behind—timeless testimonies her imagination and benefits she has not, in my opinion, be the recognition that she rightfully deserves. Visitors to Varana of the golden domed temple of Vishvanath, Lord of the World, in the heart of the city. Pilgrims headed for Pandharpur, a major sacred site in Maharashtra, go a little further along the same route’ to Mangalvadhe, to a place called Gopalpur, a large endowment for religious travellers. Both are part of Ahilyabai’s building and charitable legacy. It is said that she even repaired the road from Varanasi to Calcutta, as well routes to sites of pilgrimage.

Historians of the 19th and 20th centuries—Indian, English and American—agree that the reputation of Ahilyabai Holkar in Malwa and Maharashtra was then, and is now, that of a saint. Nothing has been discovered by any researcher to discredit that. She was truly a magnificent woman, an able ruler and a great queen. □

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ERRATA

We regret that we forgot to mention that the photograph of a woman headloader on page 40 of issue no. 122 was contributed by Sue Darlow.

Editor