

STUDYING AHILYABAI'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

KAMALAKANTA ROUL¹, §

Abstract. In recent years, discourse on Ahilyabai Holkar impels political theorists to reflect on women's political leadership and right to equal participation in politics. In fact, Ahilyabai as a queen struggled with patriarchal politics and probed her ability to become a strong leader in the 18th century India. Ahilyabai ruled the Malwa state for three decades. During her reign, she practiced the principle of 'dharma,' provided benevolent administration, and promoted industrialisation. However, the larger political question is why women's political leadership is restricted everywhere despite their abilities to become leaders. Critiquing gender subordination is a significant tradition in the study of power in political theory. But adequate attention has not been given to study the female leadership in politics.

The paper tries to understand the political component of female leadership in politics. In addition, it explores three significant dimensions of Ahilyabai's political leadership: feminising the state power structure, political economy of development and finally, spiritualisation of politics. The paper argues that Ahilyabai provided a transformational leadership to the Malwa state, and probed that power could be used as empowerment, and not as domination or coercion. However, the paper examines Ahilyabai's two important approaches- spiritual and altruistic- to understand the nature of politics and the political leadership in Malwa state.

Keywords: Ahilyabai, Leadership, Transformational, Power, Development.

¹ Department of Political Science, Kamala Nehru College (University of Delhi), August Kranti Marg, New Delhi - 110049, India. e-mail: kkroul@knc.du.ac.in

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1. **Introduction: Women's Leadership in Politics and Ahilyabai Holkar**

Critiquing gender subordination is a significant tradition in the study of power in political theory. But adequate attention has not been given to study the female leadership in politics. The study of political leadership is a multidimensional concept. It believes that "leadership is essential to collective human endeavor" (Keohane, 2010). It is the ability to influence people and transform their potential into reality. The transformational leadership theory believes that "leadership always involves values, and the leader lifts his followers to higher levels of motivation and morality" (Keohane, 2010: 43-44). Political theorists argue that "transforming leader changes a situation in significant, positive, and identifiable ways rather than engaging in business as usual" (Blondel, 1987: 2-3). Ahilyabai, the Queen of Malwa state, exemplifies the transformational leadership in Indian politics. She has been called as Plato's "philosopher queen" (Keay, 2000). However, the most important question is that what are the central components of Ahilyabai's transformational leadership? How can Ahilyabai's leadership be studied in the context of today's gender politics?

Power politics has been a guarded fort of male leaders since ancient time. Women were kept out of political affairs considering them as 'private.' Their leadership abilities were unrecognised and restricted everywhere. Even in today's politics, women are under-representing nearly every political system. "Simply turning on the television to a summit of world leaders, a debate in the British Parliament, or a UN Security Council meeting reveals few female faces. Women make up half of the population of every country in the world. But the worldwide average percentage of women in national parliaments is only 20%. Of the more than 190 countries in the world, a woman is the head of government (president or a prime minister) in only 13. Women are 15% of ambassadors to the United Nations and 17% of the world's cabinet ministers" (Paxton and Hughes, 2014).

Robert Putnam's law of increasing disproportion is very much applicable in our time. It says that "the higher the political office, the more likely we are to find a man in post" (Putnam, 2000). Democratic politics in the contemporary world firmly stands to provide right to equal political participation. However, male members in society continue to occupy a significant portion in representative parliamentary system. In 2011, UN General Assembly stated, "Women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women" (UN Women). Noted feminist Kate Millet said that politics

is simply 'rule by male'. She urges that patriarchal politics has two fundamental aspects: "male shall dominate female; elder male shall dominate younger". In patriarchal government, Kate Millet further argues, "that half of the populace which is female is controlled by that half which is male" (Millet, 1970). But it is also true that women's leadership in politics and political participation has dramatically improved in last 100 years.

Ahilyabai Holkar (1725-1795) was a bright example in the 18th century India to reflect over the contemporary gender politics. She struggled with patriarchal politics, probed her ability to become a leader, provided a strong female leadership, and successfully ruled the Malwa state. On 31st May, 1725, Ahilyabai was born in Chondi village of Jamkhed, Ahmednagar. Now, this place is part of the state of Maharashtra. Ahilyabai was a proficient ruler of the Malwa territory which was part of the Maratha Confederacy. She had come from a very modest family and had no royal lineage. But she ruled the Malwa province from 1767 to 1795 and became very popular for her welfare politics and good governance. Mankoji Rao Shinde was her father who was the Patil (chief) of his village. Since there was no scope for women education, Ahilyabai's father homeschooled her at least to make her able to read and write. In 1733, at the age of 8, she married to Khanderao who was aged 10 years then. "Despite continual threats from invaders, Ahilyabai displayed exceptional courage in defending her Kingdom. Her leadership was not limited to standing on the sidelines, but leading the troops into battle, which was further accentuated through her strategic insight and bravery on the battlefield. Her efforts as a ruler sought to foster unity among Hindu rulers and promote peace and cooperation across the region. Ahilyabai's military prowess and determination ensured the security and stability of her Kingdom, making her a formidable figure in a male-dominated world" (Pandit, 2024). Her personal experience in battlefield and military campaign provoked her to modernise the state army in 1792 by raising four battalions and appointed French soldier Chevelier Dudrenec to help her in the process.

There are two groups of political historians who have mainly worked on Ahilyabai's life and works. The first group is very critical on the style and strategy of Ahilyabai's governance and urged that Ahilyabai should have "raised military and expanded her state instead of spending money on religious works" (James Grant Duff (1826) and Jadunath Sarkar (1998)). On the other hand, the second group is highly impressed by Ahilyabai's works and called her as the "philosopher queen" and an "exemplary ruler" (John Keay (2000), John Malcolm (1824), MV Kibe (1939), and N.N. Nagrale (1979)). Moreover,

Jawaharlal Nehru called Ahilyabai as “a remarkable woman” and described her rule as “almost legendary as a period during which perfect order and good government prevailed, and the people prospered” (Nehru, 1946).

However, the paper examines Ahilyabai’s two important approaches- spiritual and altruistic- to understand the politics and political leadership. Her politics and economy were the admixture of the principle of ‘dharma’ and the legendary vision for industrialisation. The paper believes that her humble and rural background helped her to understand the state economy, economic hardship, and well-being of common people. She preferred doing charity and good deeds rather than raising strong military and expanding her own state’s territory. Ahilyabai carried out several religious and welfare works not only in her state, but also in other states in India.

2. What is Political Leadership?

Every time we heard a common complaint that “ours is a society without leaders”. How do we understand the concept of political leadership? It is said that “political leadership represents but one of the many categories of leadership, and it is a most elusive one at that” (Dion, 1968). It is no more an ambiguous concept today, but a multidimensional one. The influence of political leaders varies which propels political theorists to create a distinction between “great” and “ordinary” leaders. Political leadership is “essentially a phenomenon of power: it is power because it consists of the ability of the one or few who are at the top to make others do several things (positively or negatively) that they would not or at least might not have done. But it is not, of course, just any kind of power” (Blondel, 1987: 2-3). On the other hand, James MacGregor Burns (1978) emphasises on the theory of “transformational leadership”. He “differentiates between transformational leadership and routine activities of brokering interests, which is called transactional leadership”. He argues that the transforming leader “changes a situation in significant, positive, and identifiable ways rather than engaging in business as usual”. For Burns, transforming leadership always “involves values: the leader lifts his followers to higher levels of motivation and morality, engages their imaginations and energies in accomplishing something that enlarges their lives” (Keohane, 2010: 43-44). The study of Ahilyabai, in this context, can be said that she not only provided a female leadership but transformational leadership was the central component in her politics and leadership.

3. Feminising the State Power Structure

Ahilyabai was an exceptional female ruler of the Malwa state. Her political understanding, military prowess, organising ability, and bravery made her a formidable ruler in a male-dominated world. John Keay rightly said, “Ahilyabai Holkar, the philosopher-queen of Malwa, had evidently been an acute observer of the wider political scene” (Keay, 2000). “The Queen of Malwa was not only a brave queen and skilled ruler but also a learned politician. Her observation of the British and their agenda was something even the Maratha Peshwa had” to consider it seriously in later stage. She wrote a letter in 1772 to the Peshwa and stated, “Other beasts, like tigers, can be killed by might or contrivance, but to kill a bear it is very difficult. It will die only if you kill it straight in the face, or else, once caught in its powerful hold; the bear will kill its prey by tickling. Such is the way of the English. And given this, it is difficult to triumph over them” (HT, 2020).

When the Malwa state was in a transitional crisis and it was about to fall, Ahilyabai provided a strong leadership, a stable political system, good government, and showed her courage in defending the state territory. She took up the baton of the state when her husband Khande Rao died, just after twelve years of her marriage, in the Battle of Kumbher (1754). Even, her father-in-law Malhar Rao Holkar died after some years and her only son was also died in a very early age. With so much pain and anguish, Ahilyabai decided to commit Sati. Malhar Rao Holkar averted her from practicing the traditional custom and started giving her training in statecraft and warfare. Since the day, Malhar Rao engaged Ahilyabai on regular basis in the matter of diplomacy, economy and issues related to the Peshwa and the Mughal Empire. Gautamabai Holkar, Ahilyabai's mother-in-law gave her training related to internal administration, finance, accounts, and audits. In many occasions, Ahilyabai undertook military campaigns on behalf of Malhar Rao and became a successful warrior. “She led Maratha armies against the Chundawat clan of Jaipur, rebellions and, despite a lack of resources and aid, won every battle”. She was also given the charge to run the state administration when Malhar Rao was out on military campaigns. The diplomatic and administrative skills of Ahilyabai are well stated in a letter of 1765 written by Malhar Rao when he was fighting a war in Delhi against Ahmad Shah Durani's invasion of Punjab. The letter commanded Ahilyabai “to take heavy artillery on a military expedition to Gwalior and attack the fort at Gohad...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... The big artillery should be

kept at Gwalior and you should proceed further after making proper arrangements for its expenses for a month. On the march you should arrange for military posts to be located for protection of the road.”

Ahilyabai was hapless when all male members of her family died one after one. The Malwa state emerged as ruler less and was moving to plunder, civil disorder, and anarchism. Since there was no male heir remained in the Holkar dynasty, Ahilyabai was advised by minister Gangadhar Jaswant to adopt a boy child and place him on the throne. She understood the conspiracy made by Gangadhar to capture the state power in the absence of a strong ruler. That provoked Ahilyabai to take up the mantle of the leadership. At the end, she petitioned before the Peshwa to rule the Malwa province. But, Ahilyabai's decision was opposed by a group of administrative officials that how could a women would assume to the throne. In contrary, the Malwa state army supported Ahilyabai's leadership and the Peshwa also supported and granted her the authority to rule.

Ahilyabai also made repeated suggestions to the Peshawa about military affairs. She wrote to the Peshawa, “Your honour should recruit ranks and files and sent military at various places to put fear in them. Your honour neglecting the military will not help. The military strength should be around twenty to twenty-five thousand. Your honour's military and the French should come together at Mumbai and your honour's military and the British should rebuild Vasai. Besides, Ahilyabai had raised a British style drill force around the year 1792-93 by employing an American general named Boyd” (Devidas, 2024).

The Malwa state had unique kind of revenue system. All revenue earnings were categorised as “Daulat” (treasury) and “Khajgi” (privy). Earnings from Maheshwar and Chandwad subdivisions were considered as “Stree Dhan” and were transferred to privy estate. It is because these subdivisions were gifted to Ahilyabai's mother-in-law by her father. The financial power of privy estate went to Ahilyabai after the demise of her mother-in-law. Public welfare and infrastructure works were financed from this fund. Ahilyabai's daily requirements were also managed from the privy estate. She had introduced several important public policies such as “Bhilkawadi tax, Nau Gyarah Kanoon and Koti Lingarchan Puja”. Ahilyabai shifted her capital from Indore to Maheshwar with two purposes: a) she was very much keen for agricultural growth and industrial development which was possible only in the bank of Narmada River, b) to make Maheshwar a safest city as it had on one side military camp of Holkar in Indore and the other side was under the control of Marathas.

4. Political Economy of Development

Ahilyabai's development policy had three major aspects: agro-industrialization, poverty alleviation and ecological development. Her development model is exactly what we called today as 'green development'. Ahilyabai's first approach to agriculture was to build self-confidence among farmers by adopting various measures. These measures were not only to boost farmers self-confidence, but to help them in increasing production. Ahilyabai pursued farmers for cotton and silk cultivation. Local markets for silk and cotton were set up. These productions were also supplied to spinning/weaving industry. Maheswar was the major centre of this industry. Many districts were created for the business. She successfully convinced farmers for animal husbandry as a subsidiary income to agriculture. It increased production in the farming sector. Ahilyabai encouraged mixed farming in the Malwa state. She promoted the "cultivation of spices as cash crops and tried cultivation of spices along with food grain in the fertile lands on the banks of the river Narmada". Orchard lands were developed where fruits and nut trees were grown. It not only increased fruits production in the state, but fruits were added in the diet of common people. While increasing the forest yields the green cover was also increased in the state. Moreover, Ahilyabai developed specific markets for forest productions and for fruits and honey. Tribals were given new employment and they also got income sources in their own localities. Ahilyabai used traditional knowledge of tribals to manufacture herbal medicines. That was the way she bridged the gap between rural and urban areas (Rambhau, 2024: 9).

Ahilyabai made several efforts for the development of manufacturing units like craft products and food items. Landless labourers and tribals were used to manufacture paintings and artistic materials. Market was also developed for such types of items. On the other hand, it helped in conserving the indigenous culture of the state. Ahilyabai widely encouraged the cottage industry and handicraft. Bhil tribals were bestowed the right to collect Bhilkawadi tax from their own areas. That helped the tribals to "refrain from loot and plunder of travellers passing through their area". It made the forest and remote areas safe for journey. As a result, traders and pilgrims fearlessly started travelling across the state which helped in generating the revenue. As a part of water management policy, Ahilyabai experimented for irrigation projects by using wells, ponds, tanks, and lakes. "She constructed bunds and tanks on the hill slopes to catch the rainwater flowing away from hilly areas. Stone gates were installed at these tanks to supply water through canals. Stone gates were installed at the great tank adjacent to the Matsyodari temple in Ambad town

and Khokad tank was built by constructing a wall using lime to store water and supply it to Chandwad town”.

“Indore prospered during her 30-year rule from a tiny village to a flourishing city” (HT, 2020). Likewise, Maheshwar was a small village which was transformed into the capital of Malwa. This village was situated on the banks of River Narmada and was known for religious purposes. Because of its religious importance many pilgrims and tourists were regularly visited the place. It attracted the attention of Ahilyabai and she developed the area with marketplaces and infrastructure. She had two purposes: first, tourists could comfortably visit this religious place and it could be turned into a commercial unit. “Sakharam Dhongade of Indore possessed sound knowledge of the business of silk. Ahilyabai called him to Maheshwar, offered him the seed capital for business and thus the business of weaving silk cloth started at Maheshwar. Within four years after that, more than 100 weavers were weaving Maheshwari Sarees and Dhotis”. Local tribals were given training for weaving clothes and sarees. It generated employment for many tribal people. Weavers were settled in Juna Bazar which was situated outside the Maheshwar Fort. Likewise, more new settlements were also made in the capital city. She also properly developed the goldsmith business in Maheshwar. Its silverware was very popular. Begging was prohibited in Maheshwar as everyone was provided employment under several projects. Koti Lingarchan Puja was an example of this. Ahilyabai made tree plantation compulsory along the roadside and in uncultivated and barren lands. As per the state rule, every farmer was asked “to plant 20 trees and out of which 11 shall be owned by the state and nine shall be owned by the farmer. This new rule was called Nau Gyarah Kanoon” (Chinmayee, 2024:16).

5. Spiritualization of Politics

Ahilyabai was a devotee of Lord Shiva since her childhood days. She dedicated herself and the Malwa state to Lord Shiva. Ahilyabai ruled the Malwa in the name of the Lord. She lived a very simple life like a saint and prioritised her relationship with common people. Her administration was based on the principle of ‘dharma’ and righteousness. While incessantly working for the common people she sacrificed her desire for materialism and consumption. Being a Malwa Queen, she had no interest in lavish life. In fact, she intentionally chose humble life with spiritualism as her inner strength. “Through public audiences held daily in her court, Ahilyabai addressed the grievances of her people and always

became available to anyone who needed her guidance” (HT, 2020). When she became the ruler of Malwa, regular discussions on religious scriptures, traditional knowledge and spiritualism were organised everywhere. She sponsored “festivals and offered donations to many Hindu temples” (ibid). Ahilyabai’s philanthropy reflected in the construction and renovation works of temples, ghats, wells, tanks, and other public facilities across India starting from Somnath temple, Gujarat to Jagannath temple, Puri, Odisha. Her welfare works covered most of the religious places-Ayodhya, Varanasi, Mathura. Koti Lingarchan Puja was one of the important religious policies of the Malwa state. It was performed on the river bank of Narmada in Shravan month. Thousands of people rushed to the place to offer puja in this holy month. On this occasion, Brahmins were asked to make one crore Shiva Lingams from the river soil. These Shiva Lingams were sold and worshipped by people. It was a kind of policy which was very helpful in generating employment for many poor people.

6. Conclusion: Ahilyabai Holkar’s Transformational Leadership

Political leadership is not only about influencing people and understanding the political reality. It is also to transform people’s potentials into reality in a very positive and significant way. Such type of political leadership is called transformational leadership. It uplifts people to a higher level of empowerment and fosters a shared goal through personal growth and development. Ahilyabai’s leadership was transformational in nature which had two important aspects: a) power is considered as empowerment, and not as domination or coercion, b) spiritualisation of politics involves values and morality rather than self-interest. This type of politics believes in a peaceful and blissful society. Ahilyabai provided a peaceful and happy life in the city of Maheshwar. Her reign was marked with remarkable economic growth and development. She transformed Malwa’s agrarian economy into industrialised one. “She transformed Indore into a progressive city, and build industries and universities”. A small village Maheshwar was also transformed into a capital city. It became a hub of handloom industry and was popular for Maheshwari saree. However, the most prosperous reign of Ahilyabai initiates a debate: “When women hold political power, economies grow”.

The contemporary debate on leadership focuses on political imbalance in representation. In such a political scenario how can we imagine empowerment and political leadership. The significant question is leadership for what, and for whom. Women are half of the

world population, but they “hold just 26.5% of parliamentary seats and 22.9% of ministerial positions worldwide”. It is not only just a debate on political imbalance or gender gap in representation, but also about “economic consequences for the future work. The future of work is not just about technology, automation, or upskilling-it is about power. Right now, that power remains unequally distributed” (Roy, 2025). Further, it is also argued that “When women hold political power, economies grow. A 10-percentage point increase in women’s parliamentary representation is associated with a 0.7% percentage point increase in GDP growth. Countries with greater female political representation consistently implement policies that support gender-equal labour markets, such as paid family leave, pay transparency and childcare infrastructure. These policies do not just benefit women; they increase workforce participation, boost productivity and fuel economic expansion” (Roy, 2025).

Ahilyabai was an exceptional female ruler of the Malwa state in 18th century India. When the state was in a transitional crisis, Ahilyabai provided a strong leadership, good government, and a stable political system. Jawaharlal Nehru rightly said, “The reign of Ahilyabai, of Indore in central India, lasted for thirty years. This has become almost legendary as a period during which perfect order and good government prevailed and the people prospered. She was a very able ruler and organizer, highly respected during her lifetime, and considered as a saint by a grateful people after her death.” (Nehru, 1946). Ahilyabai was not only a proficient ruler of the Malwa, but she turned the state into a welfare and prosperous state. Ahilyabai prioritized social welfare over mere territorial expansion and military campaign. She had shifted Malwa’s capital from Indore to Maheshwar and built the Queendom. Her leadership was based on ethical values and morality. She was very humbled and dedicated herself for liberating people from misery and hardship. She built a gendered state where discrimination based on gender affiliation was challenged. By nature, Ahilyabai’s Malwa was a benevolent and welfare state. Her approach to economic model was based on ecological principles and inclusive growth. It can be called as ‘green development’ also. Ahilyabai ruled the state for three decades but never used power for coercion or domination. She probed that power could be used for empowerment, and not as domination or coercion. However, Ahilyabai adopted spiritual approach to devise the altruistic nature of politics in the Malwa state. Her spiritual approach and modest family background helped her to not only rebuild the state economy and politics but also instrumental in establishing herself as a successful female political leader and a ruler who

provided a transformational leadership to the Malwa state. Public works and welfare activities of Ahilyabai are very popular even today. Annie Besant said, "Far and wide the roads were planted with shady trees, and wells were made, and rest-houses for travellers. The poor, the homeless, the orphaned were all helped according to their needs. The Bhils, who had long been the torment of all caravans, were routed from their mountain fastnesses and persuaded to settle down as honest farmers. Hindu and Musalman alike revered the famous Queen and prayed for her long life" (Quoted in HT, 2020). There is a popular saying in the locality: "*Chalu Dya Holkari Taki*" (Let the works of Holkar continue). Similarly, Scottish poet Joanna Baillie (1849) wrote a poem in the honour of Ahilyabai:

"For thirty years her reign of peace,
 The land in blessing did increase;
 And she was blessed by every tongue,
 By stern and gentle, old and young.
 Yea, even the children at their mother's feet,
 Are taught such homely rhyming to repeat.
 In latter days from Brahma came,
 To rule our land, a noble Dame,
 Kind was her heart and bright her fame,
 And Ahilya was her honored name."

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