

AHILYABAI HOLKAR: THROUGH THE LENS OF DHARMA

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Abstract. Ahilyabai Holkar, the queen of Malwa is hailed as a compassionate and just ruler who cared for her subjects and as a religious person. Most works on Ahilyabai discuss her public policies and her charities. Her charities to jyotirlingas across India led to her deification. However, her rule represents much more than this. This article tries to provide a different reading to Ahilyabai's reign. This article argues that Ahilyabai became a different voice during the 18th century because she truly understood dharma of a ruler. Unlike many other contemporaries, she focused more on the welfare of the people as part of her duty. This article also tries to show that Ahilyabai represents women's empowerment differently. She uses her feminine and nurturing nature to uplift the downtrodden of her state than falling prey to the traditional and masculine understanding of managing a kingdom. Her rule very successfully exemplifies that without following the core principles of realism, it is possible to have a secure and prosperous state for about 30 years, making Ahilyabai's reign more significant.

Keywords: Ahilyabai, Dharma, Ethics of Care, Realpolitik, Women Empowerment.

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1. Introduction

Devi Ahilyabai Holkar emerges from the annals of history as a formidable figure - a woman leader who carved an indelible niche during a tumultuous 18th century in India. She covered a journey from an ordinary household to the royal palace of Malwa owing to her extraordinary personality. Ahilyabai ruled Malwa for nearly 30 years and under her leadership Malwa gained in both military might and economic prosperity. Owing to her charities to many Jyotirlingas and other pilgrims and her people-centric administration she acquired the title of 'Devi' or 'Mata'. In recent times, Ahilyabai has attracted the interest of academia in India. Many scholars have celebrated her as compassionate ruler, torch bearer of 'Hindu culture' for her religiosity depicted by charities to pilgrims (Kibe, 1939) and as a symbol of women's empowerment (Dhulipadi, 2025; Paswan, 2025). This article tries to engage with the persona of Ahilyabai Holkar presented in the academic literature and attempt to locate her in a realm of dharma and not religion of feminine nurturing administrator and not that is defined as typically patriarchal ruler. In other words, this article is an attempt to explore life and works of Ahilyabai through the lens of dharma and tries to underline what is really unique and worthy of discussion in her rule.

This article is divided into three main sections namely historical background, portrayal of Ahilyabai in academic literature¹ and exploring Ahilyabai through a wider understanding of dharma than that of religion. First section, the historical background deals with the tumultuous 18th century and Ahilyabai's reign. It is important to situate Ahilyabai in a historical context so that her contribution to the state of Malwa can be appropriately appreciated. Her public welfare programmes, her vision for improvement of trade and businesses, her inclination for preservation of culture and art and her dream for an educated and progressive society were unique and bold programmes when compared with her contemporaries who were largely involved either in military activities or in preservation of elite culture (Alam and Subrahmanayam, 2012; Metcalf and Metcalf, 2012).

Second section of the article discusses two major themes under which Ahilyabai is discussed in the academic literature. These themes majorly revolve around just and people centric administration and her religious and spiritual side. Many scholars hail Ahilyabai as a symbol of true hindu ruler for charities to temples all over India. This article argues that

¹In this article the term academic literature is been used to make a distinction between academic and popular literature. There are plethora of folklores and songs about Ahilyabai and her rule which this article does not take account of. Further the article is largely based on secondary sources however the authors understand that a primary source based research would add significant value to the argument presented here.

categorising Ahilyabai's rule in such category itself comes from a western lens/observation. The Bhartiya understanding of Dharma lies in every act. Thus limiting Ahilyabai's religiosity to charity and not considering her administration as performance of her dharma is in itself a western perspective based on separation of church and politics.

Third section of this article presents another argument by looking at Ahilyabai's reign from the perspective of challenging the realpolitik understanding of ruling a state. With her nurturing nature and wider understanding of dharma she presents a very strong challenge to the realist principles which clearly mandates that the morality of ruler and the morality of subjects are very different and it is better to be feared than loved by the subjects.

2. Historical Context

To understand the significance of Ahilyabai's reign in Malwa, it is important to pay attention to the backdrop. The 18th century when Ahilyabai had to assume the throne was full of conflicts and chaos. This period can be defined as a complex of dramatic incidents including weakening of the Mughal empire and consequential emergence of regional powers including Rajputana and Maratha confederacy. The political upheaval also led to economic degeneration. While foreign trade had flourished under the Mughals, with India exporting renowned cotton textiles, raw silk, indigo, and spices, and importing luxury goods, the 18th century witnessed significant disruption. Constant warfare and the breakdown of law and order severely hindered internal trade and adversely affected foreign trade in various directions. The pervasive impact of constant warfare and instability was a primary driver of this economic decline. Beyond disrupting trade, it led to the looting of trading posts by both Indian and foreign invaders (Raychaudhuri and Habib, 1982; Balay, 1983). The need to fund incessant military campaigns resulted in increased revenue demands on the populace, further impoverishing them. The marches and counter-marches of rival armies devastated agricultural lands and disrupted daily life. This continuous state of conflict prevented any sustained economic growth and development across many regions along with a great deal of hardships for people even through policies of their own state.

Under such circumstances Ahilyabai ran a state based on fair taxes, irrigation schemes like step wells, reservoirs, agricultural reforms, health schemes, education, support for marginalised communities and cultural patronage. While she did not ignore strategic defence and alliance building, she never as obsessed with aggressive expansion like many other of her contemporaries.

3. Ahilyabai: Queen Who Understood Dharma

There are two kinds of academic literature discussing Ahilyabai. One, focuses on Ahilyabai's rule, her personality and her life (Kibe, 1939; Nagrale, 1979; Cummings, 2016; Javelekar, 2002) and second, that touches upon specific aspects of her rule of Ahilyabai i.e. for establishing handloom industry (Mathur, 2006), for the restoration of art (Cummings, 2016) for establishing an ethical bridge between colonial and post-colonial India. In most of the works cited, Ahilyabai is discussed in two broad categories - just and successful administrator and a deeply religious and spiritual person. For substantiating the portrayal of morally strong and successful administration, scholars have given examples of her welfare schemes, transparent administration, her direct contact with her subjects. She is also hailed as a warrior queen who secured her boundaries for 30 years. The military might of the state of Malwa was reflected in the maintenance of 15000 horse fleet for state's security and to help the Maratha rule. The Malwa state under the leadership of Ahilyabai was prosperous enough to provide loans to Peshwa Mahad Ji Scindhia (Nagrale, 1979). The second category of her portrayal deals with her religious and spiritual side. Most scholars while discussing her religiosity, cite two examples. One that she ruled in consultation with a lot of learned Brahmins and second that she contributed to the renovation and refurbishing of many pilgrims across India. This article suggests that viewing her religiosity in charity and her council with learned Brahmins itself is coming through a western lens of religion rather than Indian understanding of Dharma. Aurobindo, maintains a difference between western and Indian understanding of 'religion'. He suggests that in the west, individual's life is divided into three major realms, religion, irreligion and a life beyond these two categories. Whereas Indian understanding of dharma divides individual's life into only two categories - dharma and adharma. In many of his works on dharma, he defines dharma as a contextual, living cultural whole. It is defined as a law 'by which we govern our outgoing thought and action and our relations with each other so as to help best both, our own growth and that of the human race towards the divine ideal' (auromaa.org²). Thus self-realisation that ultimately leads to moksha can only be attained through doing one's duty towards others. Anything that does not help in doing one's dharma is adharma and therefore undoable. Locating Ahilyabai's rule in this context

²this cite is known as a non-affiliated project, aimed at creation and diffusion of materials related to the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. The quote used here is basically paraphrasing of many of Aurobindo's essays on related theme.

gives us a clearer idea of Indian way of ruling people. It is the people centric welfare policies and a progressive vision regarding education, upliftment of poor and women being transparent and just in her administration becomes part of *dharmparayan* (dutyful) life and not just her charities to temples. In fact using such charities to portray Ahilyabai as a *dharmik* person is narrowing down her actions to a western understanding of religion.

Cummings' work (2016) argues that the charities made by Ahilyabai were aimed at gaining legitimacy of a good ruler being a woman leader. Also it argues that the charitable contribution were to lead to a kind of deification of Ahilyabai as 'mata' or 'devi'. That observation also seems partial and incomplete if we locate them in the context of her compassionate and just administration. To say that she was to gain legitimacy through charities to pilgrims for she was a woman ruler is to sideline the fact that in Marathas and down south women queens and regents was not a new phenomena. In fact as Kalpna Sharma shows that a lot many women in the 18th century were ruling as queens and regents (1978) and much more were influencing policy making from behind the curtains³.

4. Realpolitik Vs Dharmrajya

This article argues that the most important take away from Ahilyabai's rule is that she presents a challenge to the idea of a realist state that is based on masculine assumptions of power and domination. She could deviate from the traditional, popular and masculine way of ruling as she understood the true spirit of dharma not as vanity or valour alone but self realisation through doing ones duty towards the society and helping other realising themselves. Whether she desired to be a 'devi' as Cummings suggests or she was realising her self by being selfless and dutiful towards her subjects, her rule undoubtedly proves that it is possible to have a prosperous and militarily strong state for about 30 years by focusing on people's welfare or performing ones duty of being a ruler towards her people. Her rule shows that even by moving away from the core of realist values and by making dharma the foundation of a state, a stable and flourishing regime is possible. Therefore in this aspect also, Ahilyabai becomes a different voice from her contemporaries.

Realism is considered to be one of the most prominent ideologies to explain how states behave in an anarchy. Realist ideology is based on the principles of constant struggle

³There is no dearth of works related to this theme where women of the royal families shaped or influenced policies from behind the curtain. See for instance Ruby Lal's 'Domesticity and Power in Early Moghal World' (2005) and Sushila Vaidya's 'Role of Women in Maratha Politics (1620-1752 AD)' published in 2008.

for power, expansion for prosperity, rationality in using coercive power to dominate or influence, different ethical universe for king and subject⁴ leaving scope for manipulation and exploitation of the subjects which is not unjustified in the realist philosophy. With a constant degeneration of the mughal empire and with emergence of multiple power centres along with British intervention in many places, India was nothing less than an anarchy. Therefore acting on the realist principles came naturally to many of the states

Ahilyabai though maintained a strong army and secured the interest of her state by making alliances and other tactical measures, she devoted large part of her energies for the betterment of the people rather than on expansion of the state through coercive power. Also, as almost all the works discussing Ahilyabai suggest, that she was loved and worshipped by her subjects and not feared. Her morality was not different to that of her people and she ruled with utmost transparency and affection rather than deception or threat. She bridged the gap of royal and commoner during her rule. This article put forwards a different reading of her administration and persona arguing that she could move away from the realist assumptions of ruling as she understood true meaning of dharma. She saw dharma in her duty towards her people and she focused more on the betterment of people when most other kingdoms were concentrating on wars resulting into deprivation of their own people. Therefore one should note that Cumming's argument that Ahilyabai desired to gain legitimacy for her rule and desired some kind of deification through her charities to pilgrims does not hold much ground if one observe her people centric administration coming from her understanding of dharma. Neither scholars like Kibe (1939) do justice to her in arguing that charities to pilgrims established her as a true hindu queen as the understanding of dharma goes much beyond temples. It is reflected in all the actions of life.

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