

BUILDING LEGACIES: AHILYABAI HOLKAR'S ARCHITECTURAL PATRONAGE AS AN ASSERTION OF GENDERED AUTHORITYPRINCE ANAND¹, §

Abstract. The study of art and architectural patronage in South Asia has been extensively explored, particularly during the medieval to pre-modern periods, focusing on the Indo-Islamic, Rajputana, and Maratha styles of architecture. However, the discourse has largely centered on the contributions of male rulers, leaving the role of gender in monument patronage underexamined.

Devi Ahilyabai Holkar remains a prominent figure in public memory, celebrated not only for her just and benevolent governance but also for her extensive patronage of religious architecture and charitable endowments. As a female ruler in 18th-century India, Ahilyabai's engagement in architectural projects highlights the intersection of power, piety, and gender. This paper investigates Ahilyabai Holkar's contributions to art and architecture from a gendered perspective, exploring how her patronage served as a means to legitimize her authority and secure enduring remembrance in the collective consciousness. The objective is to analyze Ahilyabai Holkar's architectural legacy and queenship and to identify other female patronage examples in pre-modern South Asia. Drawing on the work of art historians, biographies, and state records, this paper reconstructs key moments of architectural patronage and examines their broader meaning.

By situating Ahilyabai Holkar's patronage within the framework of gendered leadership, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of female authority and cultural production in pre-modern South Asia.

Keywords: Architectural patronage, Gender and power, Pre-modern South Asia, Religious endowments, Female rulers, Cultural legacy .

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1. Introduction

In a small hamlet named Chondi in Jamkhed near Ahilyanagar (previously Ahmednagar) in Maharashtra, a radiant girl was born on May 31, 1725, into the cultured family of Manakoji Shinde and his wife, Sushilabai. They named her Ahilya. Ahilyabai, who later became the daughter-in-law of Malhar Rao Holkar, the Subedar of the province of Malwa, is a name that evokes deep reverence in the hearts of Indians. Her unwavering dedication to the service of humanity has immortalized her as **Lokmata**.

From the moment she entered the Holkar household, Ahilyabai faced numerous challenges and hardships. Unlike many queens, she did not lead a life of privilege. Her husband, Khande Rao, lacked refinement and failed to fulfil his duties as a ruler. However, Ahilyabai's nurturing influence significantly improved his disposition. Tragically, Khande Rao's untimely death left her devastated, and she contemplated committing sati, an ancient practice in which a widow immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

However, with the persistent efforts of her father-in-law, Malhar Rao, Ahilyabai refrained from committing sati. He recognized her potential to lead and govern. After Khande Rao's death, she assumed administrative responsibilities, as her son Malerao was too young to take the throne. Unfortunately, Malerao's misconduct and indulgence in immoral activities further complicated matters. His untimely demise left Ahilyabai deeply heartbroken. Despite her personal tragedies, she emerged stronger, choosing to live and devote herself entirely to the welfare of her people.

Ahilyabai Holkar is renowned for her extraordinary contributions to religious and social welfare. She generously endowed numerous religious institutions, constructed and restored temples, and renovated places of pilgrimage. She also developed ghats, public hospices, and various facilities for pilgrims, ensuring that even the remotest corners of the Indian subcontinent were accessible and hospitable for worship and travel.

2. Architecture and Gender

The marvelous structures she built are outstanding examples of Indian architecture, showcasing exquisite artistry and architectural excellence. However, the engagement with studying these works through a gender lens remains relatively unexplored, particularly in the context of pre-modern religious structures consecrated or patronized by women.

Melia Belli Bose observes, "There was a presumption that women did not participate in the production and appreciation of art." She further explores how knowledge of gendered power relations shaped early modern Asian visual cultures and examines the extent

to which women negotiated or subverted socially sanctioned relationships. Historically, studies of art and architecture have been largely shaped by a focus on male contributions, leaving the artistic endeavours of women underexamined. (Bose, p. 2)

For instance, conventional historical narratives have predominantly concentrated on the power dynamics associated with the proliferation of art and architecture by male rulers, particularly during the Mughal period. These accounts have often overlooked the contributions of women. The extensive studies on Mughal architecture, focused almost exclusively on male rulers, exemplify this bias.

Recent scholarship has begun to uncover new dimensions by examining domesticity and the contributions of individual figures. For example, Vidya Dehejia's work on Chola queen Sembiyan Mahadevi explores gendered adornment and patronage, while scholars such as Devangana Desai and Tapti Guha-Thakurta have revised the study of Indian art by challenging perspectives rooted in European or colonial frameworks.

In her chapter on Devi Ahilyabai Holkar in *Women, Gender, and Art in Asia, c. 1500–1900* (edited by Melia Belli Bose), Cathleen Cummings remarks that despite Ahilyabai's enduring fame, near-sainted status in Maharashtra and Malwa, and extensive architectural patronage, there has been little scholarly attention paid to the religious structures she commissioned. (Bose, p. 21)

Through an analysis of some of the remarkable structures erected under her patronage, I aim to critically evaluate the intersection of gender and power relations in the architectural projects.

3. Religious Endowments and Political Authority

In Hindu tradition, there are twelve *jyotirlingas*—sacred sites dedicated to Lord Shiva—spread across the Indian subcontinent. Maratha rulers were instrumental in building and rebuilding several of these sacred sites, with Devi Ahilyabai Holkar herself patronizing the restoration or construction of four out of the twelve. The Holkar family, known for their judicious use of resources, avoided utilizing public funds for personal or familial expenses. Arvind Javlekar notes that after the death of her father-in-law and husband, Devi Ahilyabai dedicated her wealth to public charity. Her devotion to Lord Shiva was evident in her extensive religious endowments, a trait common among Maratha rulers.

For example, the rebuilding of the Trimbakeshwar temple in Nashik, following its recapture from the Mughals, was undertaken by Nanasaheb Peshwa. Similarly, the Saptakoteshwar temple in Goa was reconstructed by Chhatrapati Shivaji after it had been desecrated

by the Portuguese. Devi Ahilyabai's contributions, however, stand out for their scale, devotion, and the personal resources she committed to these projects.

While art historians like Melia Beli Bose suggest, a desire to legitimize her authority to rule, which also reiterates her female identity via the erection of charitable and religious institutions that reinforce her reputation as '*Mata*' and even '*Devi*'. (Bose)

Patronizing temples and the proliferation of art have been one of the important tools for legitimizing the rule from very ancient in the Indian sub-continent. Somnath temple, one of the twelve jyotirlingas which was built after the demolition of Aurangzeb by Devi Ahilyabai was totally re-built 9 times including the last time in 1951 by Sardar Patel.

In 1783, when Devi Ahilyabai chose to re-construct the demolished temple by Aurangzeb, Cathleen notes, this seems to have been stimulated by the desire to provide a space where worship to the jyotirlinga could continue. Cathleen Cummings writes that Ahilyabai's decision to reconstruct the temple appears to have been driven by her desire to restore a space for the worship of the *jyotirlinga*. Notably, she chose not to rebuild the temple on the footprint or foundation of the earlier structures but instead selected an adjacent site. This decision was partly necessitated by the presence of a mosque built by Aurangzeb on the original site of the temple. The placement of the new temple was deliberate, and as Cummings observes, the structure was designed to be inoffensive and unobtrusive, avoiding any overt assertion of Hindu superiority. (Bose)

Richard H. Davis, in *Lives of Indian Images*, elaborates on this decision, suggesting it was made to avoid potential conflicts while also ensuring that the new structure stood as a permanent marker of Ahilyabai's devotion, wealth, and power (Davis, 1997).

Similarly, the Kashi Vishwanath temple, another significant site, has a history of destruction and rebuilding. According to Philip Lutgendorf in *The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcaritmanas of Tulsidas*, the temple was first destroyed by Qutb-ud-din Aibak in 1194 and later by Razia Sultan, Hussain Shah Sharqi, and finally by Aurangzeb, who replaced it with the Gyan Vapi mosque. The mosque was built on the site of a temple reconstructed earlier by Raja Todar Mal, with traces of the original structure still visible on the mosque's rear wall. (Lutgendorf, 1991)

In 1776 or 1777, after securing rights from the East India Company, Ahilyabai Holkar financed the rebuilding of the Vishveshwara temple at Kashi (Varanasi). Cummings views this act as one of piety characteristic of a beneficent Hindu ruler, aimed at garnering respect and loyalty from the populace while bolstering her status and power. Notably, Ahilyabai again chose not to rebuild the temple on the original site of the destroyed temple (where



Figure 1. Somnath temple built by Devi Ahilyabai Holkar (Source: Internet)

the mosque stood) but instead constructed it adjacent to the earlier site, demonstrating both wisdom and a pragmatic approach to avoiding conflict

Stewart Gordon highlights that the ability to overcome factional disputes was a key means by which 18th-century rulers legitimized their power. Ahilyabai's decisions reflect this understanding of leadership, balancing religious devotion with political acumen. The Parli Vajjnath temple in Maharashtra, another sacred site dedicated to Lord Shiva, was also built by Ahilyabai Holkar. Parli held a special place in Maratha religious and political life, having become a strategic center of Maratha sovereignty after the recapture of the region following Aurangzeb's departure from the Deccan. Cummings observes that by constructing the Vajjnath temple at Parli, Ahilyabai piously positioned herself within the heart of Maratha sovereignty and authority.

Another example of her architectural patronage is the Gharneswara temple at Velur in Maharashtra, originally built by the Yadava rulers and later ruined. Ahilyabai's reconstruction of this temple reflects her commitment to reviving significant religious sites.

In *Architecture and Art of the Deccan Sultanates*, George Michell and Mark Zebrowski remark that while drawing inspiration from the grandiose projects of the pre-Islamic era, the temples built or rebuilt under Ahilyabai Holkar's patronage exemplify an inventive synthesis of diverse architectural elements. This synthesis, they argue, reflects the scope and cultural vibrancy of Maratha architecture during the zenith of their political and military power. (George Michell, 1999)

Through these examples, it is evident that Ahilyabai Holkar's architectural projects were not only acts of devotion but also strategic tools for asserting power, legitimacy, and cultural identity within the broader framework of Maratha sovereignty.

4. Challenging Gendered Norms

The construction of *chhatris* (cenotaphs) was an integral part of the Maratha tradition of commemorating deceased rulers and dignitaries. These monuments, typically built by sons in memory of their fathers, symbolized respect, devotion, and familial duty. However, Ahilyabai Holkar, in a departure from the prevailing gender norms, took on the task of building *chhatris* herself.

Melia Belli Bose notes that Ahilyabai's decision to construct a *chhatri* for her father-in-law, Malhar Rao Holkar, was a compassionate act that subverted the traditional notion of these structures being erected only by male heirs. By commissioning the *chhatri*, Ahilyabai honored Malhar Rao's memory and legacy, showcasing her devotion and piety while challenging the gendered expectations of such acts. The *chhatri* dedicated to Malhar Rao Holkar stands as a testament to her deep respect and gratitude towards the man who played a pivotal role in shaping her life and position as ruler. (Bose)

Ahilyabai Holkar also broke new ground by building the first *chhatri* dedicated to a woman—her only daughter, Muktabai, who tragically passed away at a young age. This *chhatri*, a remarkable architectural endeavor, reflected Ahilyabai's profound grief and love for her daughter. By dedicating a monument to Muktabai, Ahilyabai extended the tradition of *chhatri* building to women, a gesture that was both deeply personal and symbolically significant.

The *chhatri* for Muktabai exemplifies Ahilyabai's ability to weave her personal experiences into her architectural legacy. The structure is not only a space of remembrance but

also an enduring marker of the maternal bond and the place of women within the spiritual and architectural history of the time.

Ahilyabai Holkar's legacy extended not only through her patronage of temples but also through her religious endowments at major pilgrimage sites, which solidified her legitimacy as a ruler and continue to be recognized to this day.

Arvind Javlekar highlights that Ahilyabai made significant contributions to the upkeep and development of the sacred *Saptपुरी* (the seven holy cities), the twelve *vyotirlingas*, and the Char Dhams. At these sacred sites, she ensured the provision of essential facilities, including arrangements for bathing, worship, prayers, accommodations, and dining for pilgrims. (Javlekar, 2024)

Such initiatives demonstrated Ahilyabai's dedication to facilitating religious worship and pilgrimage, reflecting her piety and her role as a benevolent and legitimate Hindu ruler. These acts of devotion and service not only bolstered her authority as a leader but also spread her reputation across the length and breadth of the country, leaving a lasting impact on Indian religious and cultural life.

5. Conclusion

The architectural and cultural legacy of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar underscores her remarkable ability to navigate and redefine the boundaries of gendered power in pre-modern South Asia. As an 18th-century female ruler, Ahilyabai used religious and architectural patronage not merely as acts of piety but as deliberate strategies to legitimize her authority, foster community welfare, and secure an enduring cultural and spiritual legacy. By constructing and restoring significant religious sites, including temples and *chhatris*, she reinforced her image as a compassionate and capable leader while adhering to and subtly redefining the gender norms of her time.

Ahilyabai's patronage, exemplified in her reconstruction of temples like the Somnath, Kashi Vishwanath, and Parli Vaijnath, reflects her deep devotion and pragmatic governance. Her efforts ensured accessibility and inclusivity for pilgrims across the Indian subcontinent, while her innovative architectural designs combined traditional and contemporary styles, leaving a distinct imprint on Maratha architecture. Furthermore, her pioneering role in constructing memorials for women challenged entrenched norms, adding a new dimension to the cultural and historical discourse on female leadership.

By situating Ahilyabai Holkar's contributions within the broader context of gender, power, and art, this study highlights the intersection of devotion and authority in her architectural endeavors. It provides a lens to re-evaluate the contributions of women in shaping the

cultural and political landscapes of pre-modern South Asia, demonstrating the significance of their role in historical narratives. Ahilyabai's enduring legacy serves as a testament to her unparalleled leadership and the transformative impact of her architectural patronage.

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