

AHILYA BAI HOLKAR: THE QUEEN AND A SOCIAL REFORMERVIDYOTTMA JHA¹, §

Abstract. Ahilya Bai Holkar, the eminent Rajmata of Indore, is one of the most remarkable rulers and reformers in Indian history. Despite a modest upbringing in a village in Maharashtra, she arose from deep personal tragedy to lead the Holkar dynasty with unprecedented courage. The disposition of her rule was a combination of humanitarian concern and uncompromising discipline—given equitable access to impartiality and fairness, robust economic growth, and maintained social harmony. As she developed Indore into a thriving cultural and spiritual hub, she also assigned the construction of religious temples, ghats, and dharamshalas throughout India, including the famous Kashi Vishwanath Mandir. Unquestionably, Ahilya Bai was ahead of her time, as she actively advocated for women's rights, granting women the right to hold property, widow remarriage, and adoption, and empowering their productivity through various workshops, farming, and loans. She broke the social barriers of the caste system and promoted religious tolerance, fostering harmony among communities. Hence, when we look at the reign and era of Ahilya Bai Holkar, it gives a unique picture of her governance, which included vision, character, and compassion. She has left an extraordinary legacy of an all-inclusive authority, which is still an aspiration and will be a guiding light for centuries to come.

Keywords: Visionary, Justice, Empowerment, Social Barriers, Legacy.

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1. Introduction

In our country, countless women have made significant contributions to society and have played pivotal roles in its reform. Some were brilliant thinkers, others were fierce warriors, and some were revered saints. Back in ancient times, women held dignified and respected positions in society. According to Analayo, their roles extended far beyond just managing household tasks. Women have made equal, and in some cases, even greater contributions to society than men. The remarkable women of the past challenged the patriarchal norms of their time. Take Razia Sultan, for instance, the first and only female ruler of the Delhi Sultanate, or Savitri Bai Phule, who became India's first female teacher. Then there's Maharani Durgavati, a courageous leader who stood up against the Mughal emperor Akbar. These women, like so many others, have forever changed history through their valiant acts and sacrifices. In ancient India, women were honoured as men, sometimes superior men in many of the aspects of society at the time. They were seen as 'Shakti', meaning power. In this paper, I plan to discuss one of those amazing women, Ahilya Bai Holkar, who is remembered as the Rajmata of Indore. Ahilya Bai Holkar was the ruling queen and Rajmata of Indore (under the Maratha Confederacy). It was she who established Maheshwar as the capital of the '*Holkar Dynasty*'. Ahilya Bai is celebrated as one of the most beloved and respected rulers, known for her principled governance, dedication to social services, and philanthropic efforts, as well as her contributions to academic, spiritual, and cultural growth. She generously supported various temples, ghats, and Dharamshalas, all aimed at enhancing architecture across India. Her numerous commissions and donations throughout the country have earned her the title of Sadhvi, or holy woman, in recognition of her virtuous legacy.

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2. Historical Context

A Marathi Hindu family, Mankoji Shinde and Sushila Shinde, welcomed a baby girl and named her Ahilya Bai in the beautiful state of Maharashtra, specifically in the village of Chandi, which is now part of Ahmednagar district. Her father was from the Dhangar (Gadaria) community and held the position of Patil, or village head. Ahilya was the youngest of six siblings, and interestingly, she was the first in her family to receive an education at home. One day, Malhar Rao Holkar, the ruler of Malwa and a commander in the Maratha army under Baji Rao stopped in Chandi on his way to Pune. While at the temple, he saw Ahilya Bai during a temple ceremony and was impressed by her devotion and captivating personality. As a result Malhar Rao began to make plans for a marriage between his son and her. The marriage took place in 1733 with the groom being approximately 9 or 10 years old and Ahilya about 7 or 8. They had two children, a son named Maleji Holkar and a daughter Mukta Bai Holkar. Malhar Rao Holkar had attained a great height in the Maratha empire. Although he was a shepherd he was still a Subedar over a territory of thirty parganas that brought in substantial revenues to the state. With Malhar Rao rising to great prominence his power extended to being a kingmaker in both Northern and Central India. So, by 1750, he was the 'de facto' ruler of the Maratha Confederacy. He was awarded grant on a regular basis from government of Peshwa. It included monetary tributes, land and noble titles for his service to the empire. His territory was on the northern banks of the Narmada and on both sides of the Sahyadri mountains. Around 1751, he constructed a deal between the Peshwa and Mughal emperor Ahmad Shah Bahadur that ultimately raised his station to great importance by 1753.²

3. Education and Military Expertise

Malhar Rao recognized Ahilya Bai's potential from a very young age, so he made sure to give her plenty of opportunities to engage with important debates. Starting in 1754, he provided her with a solid platform and actively involved her in discussions about diplomacy, the kingdom's financial matters, and other significant issues related to both the Mughal Empire and the Peshwa. After her marriage, her mother-in-law Gautama Bai Holkar helped in raising and educating her. Gautama Bai passed on essential values to Ahilya and she trained her in administration, finance and politics. In 1759, she formally gave her 'Khasgi,' or land grant. Father-in-law to Ahilya, Malhar Rao Holkar, trusted

²Thombre P.V. (2007). LIFE AND LIFE'S WORK OF SHREE DEVI AHILYA BAI HOLKAR [HOLKAR STATE HISTORY, VOL. I, p. 4.]

Ahilya's skills immensely. This trust was seen in a letter he wrote in 1765; it was during the time of the Punjab invasion by the speaking about the invaders and their combined armies of the Durrani Empire and the Rohilla dynasty headed by Emperor Ahmad Shah Durrani. While Malhar Rao was busy fighting in Delhi, he instructed her, to prepare to engage an army and raise an attack on the fort of Gohad. He emphasized the need for her to take all the essential heavy artillery required for the mission, stating, "... proceed to Gwalior after crossing the Chambal. You may pause there for four or five days. Ensure your big artillery is ready and arrange for its ammunition as much as possible ... The heavy artillery should be stationed at Gwalior, and you should continue your journey after making proper arrangements for its expenses for a month. During the march, set up military posts to secure the road." Ahilbayai's attack turned out to be a success.

4. Governance and Administration

Ahilya Bai went through a great deal of personal sadness prior to becoming the ruler of Indore. Her only son, Male Rao Holkar, started his reign on August 23, 1766, at just 21 years old, after the Peshwa crowned him king. Sadly, he reigned for only six months, and died on April 5, 1767. After that, Malhar Rao adopted Tukoji Rao Holkar as his son and then appointed him as Subedar for a large monetary amount in rupees, and it was from that moment, that Ahilya Bai, truly became the ruler.³

According to historical records, certain groups from neighbouring areas, particularly the Chundawat clan of Jaipur, rose up during this shift in power. They seized the opportunity presented by Tukoji Rao's absence and the widespread devastation caused by the Third Battle of Panipat and its aftermath. It was Ahilya Bai who took charge, leading the Maratha armies against these uprisings. Despite facing limitations in resources and support, she triumphed in every battle.⁴

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³Holkar, Madhusudan Rao (March 16, 2021). "Khande Rao Holkar ki 267 vi Punyithi (17 March)". historyofbharat.com/. Madhusudan Rao Holkar. Archived from the original on 27 July 2022. Retrieved 27 July 2022.

⁴Date, K.K. Ahilyabai Holkar: Ideal Ruler, Maharashtra State Board of Literature and Culture, 1985.

support, she triumphed in every battle. At this point of time, we must remember that state administration had two high divisions: '*military and civil*'. The military division had its own divisions, Tukoji Rao Holkar was Subedar, which was tasked to Marathas. Ahilya Bai was quite audacious, remarking, "I am the daughter-in-law of Malhar Rao." The Saranjamdar system set up by Malhar Rao was quite effective and received recognition from the authorities in Puna. It functioned like a "camp within a camp," fully self-sufficient. State records provide numerous examples that highlight the spontaneity, diplomatic skills, and organizational talent displayed by Ahilya Bai. During her rule, the administration of justice was gentle yet swift, grounded in reality but also elevated, balancing prohibition with correction.

Ahilya Bai was a visionary leader who played a pivotal role in transforming Indore into a thriving state, establishing industries and universities along the way. To honour this remarkable ruler, the Indian government issued a stamp in August 25, 1996, celebrating the 200th anniversary of her death. Indore's airport proudly bears her name, becoming the Devi Ahilya Bai Holkar Airport. Additionally, the university in Indore is called Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya in her memory. A devoted worshipper of Shiva, she is renowned for her efforts in restoring and expanding several famous temples, including the Kashi Viswanath Mandir in Varanasi, the Gouri Somnath Mandir in Chola, and the construction of the iconic Dashashwamedh Ghat in Banaras. Beyond her own state, she also took care of the supply of Ganga water for temples, shrines, ghats, and ensured that temple donations, endowments, and annual pujas were well organized.

5. Social Reforms and Gender Policy

The Holkars were principled individuals who never spent public money on personal or family expenses. They used their own funds for private matters, which they gained from their personal property. It is estimated that Ahilya Bai inherited personal funds totalling up to sixteen crore rupees at that time. Therefore, we can conclude that she donated money from her personal resources to charity. The charities initiated by Devi Ahilya Bai in her region and across Bharata Kanda are well known. There is a detailed record called "Devasthan classification list 1923 by the Holkar government." The Holkar government appointed a "Devasthan officer, who travelled extensively to gather information in person. The arrangements made by Devi Ahilya at all the sacred places are as follows:

5.1. Religious Patronage.⁵

SI No.	Name of the Jyotir-Linga	Geographical Situation	Description of Charity	Authority for Statement
1	Shree Somanath	Kathiawad, on the sea side	In 1786 A.D., the idol was reinstalled	Maheshwar Durbar Batmipatre. Part II, P. 87
2	Shree Manikarjuna	Dist. Karnul Madras Presidency	Temple was built	State Record
3	Shree Onkareshwar	Central India (on the Narmada bank.)	House for Drums, Flower-garden, Palanquin, Boat, Silver-idol	State Record
4	Shree Vajjnath	Nizam's State	In 1784 A.D. The temple was rebuilt	Bharat Itihasa Shan-shodhak Mandal Report Shak 1834, Bhadrapad Number
5	Shree Nagnath	Nizam's State	In 1784 A.D., Annual payment of Rs. 81/- for worship	State Record
6	Shree Vishwanath	Benares	(i) Mankarnikaghat (ii) Reinstallation of Kashi-Vishwanath (iii) 6 Private temples (iv) Temple of the Ganges and 3 temples on the Ghat (v) Shree Tarkeshwar Temple (vi) Dashashwamedha Ghat (vii) Female Mankarnika Ghat (viii) Dharmashala, Rameshwar (ix) Dharmashala Kapildhara (x) 9 Private Bungalows (xi) Garden-field (xii) Plinth on Shitala Ghat (xiii) Dharmashala of Uttar Kashi (xiv) Establishment of Bramhapuri	State Record
7	Shree Trimbakeshwar	Nasik District	Bridge of Kushawarta- Ghat	State Record.
8	Shree Ghirishneshwar	Verul Nizam's State	Rebuilt Shivalaya Tirth	Bharat I.S.M. R. Shak1838
9	Shree Gokarna	On the western sea. Madras Presidency	Alms-House	State Record
10	Shree Mahakaleshwar	Ujjain (Central India)	Worship of the Linga on the Mahashivaratra night, and food distribution on the day following	State Record
11	Shree Rameshwar	Madras Presidency	Alms-House. Wells. Shree Radha-Krishna temple.	State Record
12	Shree Bhima-Shankar	Bombay Presidency	Alms-House	State Record

⁵Thombre P.V. (2007). LIFE AND LIFE'S-WORK OF SHREE DEVI AHILYA BAI HOLKAR [HOLKAR STATE HISTORY VOL. I, p. 34.]

Sapta Puri and Char Dham: Sapta Puri (seven cities) and Char Dham (four quarters) were looked up eventually by Hindus of all castes and creeds in worship and pilgrimage.⁶

- Dwarka: She built an Almshouse.
- Ujjain (Avantika): She built four Mandirs and a charitable building.
- Kanchipuram: Ganga water was sent annually
- Mathura: She built a Mandir 2 Ghat and one charitable building.
- Ayodhya: She built 4 Ram Mandirs and 3 charitable buildings.
- Haridwar (Maya): A Ghat and a charitable house
- Varanasi: Refer to the above table.

Char Dhama - Four Quadrants of Aryavarta

- Badrinath: 5 Dharmashalas and eight charity buildings
- Jagnath (Puri): A temple, Almhouse and garden land.

Ahilya Bai planned different schemes to empower women economically. She encouraged women to become financially independent through industry, agriculture, and handicrafts. To support this, she introduced loans for farmers at low interest rates, which also helped women. As a result, women began starting their own small businesses and achieving financial independence.

5.2. Contribution to Agriculture. Ahilya Bai took several steps to improve the economic condition of farmers in her state. She brought about a change by encouraging women to work in agriculture and giving them the right to own property. This empowered women to take part in the economy and play an important role in the financial structure.

5.3. Religious Tolerance. Ahilya Bai Holkar had a belief in religious tolerance. She encouraged the idea of everyone uniting regardless of religion, caste and community. She urged the people to participate in the religious festivals time and space.

⁶Malcolm, J., A Memoir of Central India, quoted in John Keay (2000). India: A History. Grove Press. p. 407. ISBN 978-0-8021-3797-5.

5.4. Work Against Caste Division. Ahilya Bai actively challenged the widely recognized caste discrimination in our society. She initiated effective interventions and provided equal opportunities for all castes in all areas. Therefore, she replicated the ideas of social integration and unity which she promoted in her realm. She appointed women to senior roles in her government, which inspired women to claim their rights.

5.5. Reconstruction of Religious Sites. Ahilya Bai Holkar actually refurbished and ordered the reconstruction of many religious places. She worked on the renovation of the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi as well as religious sites in Gaya, Ayodhya and Mathura. She made efforts for the inclusion of women in this religious work. This afforded women an opportunity to participate in the religious and cultural spheres.

5.6. Religious and Cultural Practices. Ahilya Bai promoted the meaningful involvement of women in religion and culture. She promoted women's dignity and freedom of religion and helped to improve the social status of women enormously. The work that she did in religion was not solely for the sake of piety, but to ensure that women had a place of significance in society.

6. The Legacy and Historiographical Assessment

Traveling throughout the Deccan Plateau of India, one encounters a distinct geography. When we enter the region, or to put it in a more specific way, we come across the change while crossing over the extreme Sahyadri Mountains on the Mumbai-Pune expressway, but that is slow and gradual. Even though in a relative sense it is not as dull as the Great Gangetic Plains of northern India, the geography remains fairly consistent for vast stretches. However, cultural markers change markedly and rapidly within the context of this massive plateau. For example, it is at the same time home to some of the shiniest IT centres in India, chiefly in Hyderabad and Pune, as well as to some of rural India's most deprived communities. And, if the clichés of economic disparities are not enough, one can scarcely underestimate the cultural and linguistic contrast across the Deccan Plateau. Moving over almost invisible state borders, one might be surprised to realize that these regions which appear visually continuous, are in fact occupied or expressed by scripts that tie them to different traditions. Certainly, linguistic variation separates and indicates connection. While Marathi, Telugu and Kannada would correspond to the states of Maharashtra, Telangana and Karnataka, respectively, and for that matter, communities of speakers of these languages are located throughout and beyond their neighbours. The

Deccan sultanates in between were perhaps less eminent and underwent a degree of neglect, and to some extent, became understudied. Because of this, the sources to investigate this region is limited. Notably, in the cultural and political framework of India after independence, and especially in recent times, the sultanates have become orphans where no one has even stepped up and claimed any inheritance. Consequently, vernacular sources and the non-Muslim past has been elevated over the Persian, Dakhani and Muslim dynasties, including Deccan sultanates. Maharashtra is a strong example. Since the 19th century, both native and western scholarship examined the Maratha Empire that emerged in the mid-seventeenth century. In that regard, the sultanates of Ahmadnagar and Bijapur, in whose services the Marathas began their careers, were viewed largely in terms of their involvement in early Maratha history. Recently the Deccan sultanates, including their social- political history and cultural legacy, have been revisited leading to some very good new research on the sultanates. The study of the visual arts of the Deccan raises important questions regarding past claims and provides a more nuanced understanding of the Deccan and its composite, not adversarial culture.⁷

So, from the above discussed background, we understand the diversity of our country. The British colonial authorities have provided innumerable narratives in order to disparage Indian civilization and culture, the situation of Indian women were one of the major references. The British identified a number of social evils that made the lives of women miserable, and made efforts at introducing '*reform*'. During the colonial era, many aspects of Sati, child-marriages, enforced widowhood, polygamy, dowry, access to education, Economic deprivation, purdah (ghoonghat), and other customs were present that made the lives of women difficult and miserable. Some customs impacted women from economically and socially more privileged homes. Other customs brought hardship to poorer women. Many social reform movements were initiated in the nineteenth century to address these issues, with assistance from Indian reformers, as well as British officials and other Europeans. Overall, these attempts to Improving conditions for women was a significant change, and it was referred to in positive terms. The position of women became a part of the discourse of nation-building and national identity.

The contentious issue of women became an area of symbolic contest played out between different types of historians; the women were to either be defended by the nationalists or rescued by the British or Indian reformers. Women in India started to be regarded simply

⁷Local States In An Imperial World: Roy S. Fischel, Edinburgh University Press, 2020.

as a homogeneous category, to the extent of developing a stereotype. Many communities in India, practiced widow remarriage and didn't (unless it was forced) practice sati, and some communities practiced divorces or separation, yet the image of complete subjugation of an Indian woman as a woman, wife and widow became the over-arching theme within modern history writing. Secondly, a western lens was applied to non-western societies and therefore the interpretations were quite disconnected from the context. For example, the concept of *stridhan* was equated with *dowry* and very little attention was given to the provisions dealing with its use and women's ownership. The immense social stigma that is attached with selling the household's jewellery one of the major components of *stridhan* was ignored. For that matter, the penal provisions laid down in ancient texts for women's property misappropriation were not looked into either. Long before Independence exclusive volumes by western scholars began to write on dharma and society, or to study the position of women in Hindu Law, despite many of them having not set foot in India even once. To illustrate the argument, we can use the Manusmriti as an example. This text comes from the Dharmashastra tradition which explicitly states that it should be read with reference to Mimamsa. However, no such exercise ever occurred. Scholars and researchers took selective verses from the text to construct an account that suited their purposes. Thirdly, the various unilinear interpretations not only created a monolithic (homogeneous) image of 'Indian Women' but also pulled this image backwards in time, to centuries and millennia gone by. Even when documentary sources of history were few and limited, and the discipline was in its infancy, grandiose claims were made about having sufficient knowledge to speak meaningfully to the history and culture of India. It must be stated, very few texts were translated, and a small handful of texts formed the basis for understanding everything. Works produced about women were based on selective texts. This idea of authority and singular narrative which claims to be the history of Indian Women has serious limitations. In a much broader context, research into human evolution has provided evidence that, in general, there was no gender-neutral lexicon. The terminology itself can indicate a gender bias. Whether 'mankind' is used in place of 'humankind', or one uses a 'hunting' practice rather than 'gathering', implies a cognitive process of seeing man in the center of existence. Evidence suggests hunted prey (or game) constituted only 35% of the diet of our early ancestors, which meant gathering of fruits and other edible materials contributed the larger share of the diet. The gathering of food resources, for example, was typically done by women. To the extent that gathering was more of an activity than hunting for game, that means women played a significant role. The gender

bias was so explicit that presumptive hypotheses were developed with no reasonable argument or evidence. David Clarke (1974), for example, associated the primary house and secondary house at settlements at Glastonbury with male and female respectively, basing the intrinsic nature of a relationship on a priori assumptions that women may be restricted only to household chores! It has been realized that it was not only Palaeolithic hunters but women also played a very important role. Furthermore, we find that not only do we have very few gender studies of the prehistoric period, but we now have more material remains dating from the proto-historic period. Gendered understandings of Harappan civilization is being developed and much archaeological material has been studied in this context. There are female figurines, idols of pregnant women, the statue of the "dancing girl", and various pieces of jewellery and personal items that were uncovered from various sites that provide us significant information on the public and private lives of both women and men. The figure of a girl from Mohanjodaro has been nicknamed a 'dancing girl' simply because of familiarity with the term devadasis, which appeared in later times. Thus, the explanation is backward looking. Although Deeksha Bharadwaj raised some significant issues regarding the tendency to take the obvious or mundane route in disregarding the extensive history of which there was a rich and varied corpus of feminine figurines from the north-west of the Indian subcontinent, she has equated felinity with fertility and reproductivity failing to take into account the subtle context and forms in which they were depicted. She has thoroughly described the range of processes and purposes that can probably be better understood on a gendered basis. These statuettes have been somewhat reductively connected to fertility and worship up to this point. Numerous terracotta female figurines occur at sites from the pre-Harappan period. The females on the figurines are depicted suckling a babe; holding utensils; kneading dough; nursing infants; carrying objects like drums; seated figures playing games; and various other objects; with steatopygia (pronounced fat around the hips and other parts of the body); floral head-dresses; and so on. Statuettes of pregnant women are also very common. However, nearly all of these figurines have made an (uncritical) association with fertility, religiosity, reproductive ideas, particularly as representations of Mother Goddesses. While some of these were clearly votive objects, others are assumed to be toys or held some other sort of utility. The stereotypic focus on the female form has associated women with the home, the hearth, and female characteristics of fertility, sexuality, and divinity. At times, even male figurines acting female roles have been identified as female figurines. However, we can consider a different perspective here, where royal and aristocratic Indian women did

forge political networks with key partners like financiers, military entrepreneurs, and hubs of religious power and patronage. By *History of Indian Women*, we note that during the pre-colonial era, Maratha women had acted as diplomats for their husbands, traveling far and wide, to receive their titles from Mughal emperors or to broker conciliations between violent Maratha kingdoms. Women like Tarabai Bhosle, Ahilyabai Holkar and Tulsibai Holkar were recognized for longer periods of stability during their regencies or after their husband's death. Those who did not resort to that form of statecraft had taken to the battlefield, confronting neighbouring kingdoms, Mughals or the British. The Maratha Rani of Jhansi confronted the British, during the Mutiny, ostensibly performing the duty to her dead husband, by taking on the appearance of a man to fulfil a man's role. Courtly women in the role of mothers, wives and powerbrokers were also able to then harness influence through their access to minor princes by securing formal positions, turning rivals aside, and gifting expensive objects or bribes. *Rosalind O'Hanlon* observes that "the sort of formal seclusion that might have existed in the zenana did not separate such women, in any real way, from politics; on the contrary. The half-humorous references of nineteenth-century witnesses... to 'domination behind the curtain' may have historically amounted to something like serious description".⁸

7. Conclusion

The story of Ahilya Bai Holkar is an inspiring one which shows that nothing is impossible if ambition, hard work and perseverance is invoked even when faced by the most difficult challenges. There was a period when Ahilya Bai was alone and she had to face the challenges life presented to her. Her personal pain and trauma did not affect her Kingdom, administration and duties to the people who depended on her as their Ruler. After serving a ruler for thirty years Ahilya Bai transformed Indore from a small village to a vibrant and flourishing city. Ahilya Bai Holkar was the complete ruler and the best example of grit and determination. Therefore, we see that, India has a legacy of great women who encountered women not only in sports, entertainment, science and grassroots activism, but also in politics, which is still mainly male dominated. Yet they faced the male-dominated challenges. They shattered the stereotypes and made measurable differences in different fields, while they were alive. The Rajmata Ahilya Bai Holkar used a more inclusive decision-making approaches using a shared to amplified under-represented voices. She acknowledged that empathetic decision-making and conflict-resolution strategies lift up

⁸Angma Dey Jhala (2008): *Courtly Indian Women in Late Imperial India*.

everyone in their communities, therefore, creating a path for future generations. Rajmata Ahilya Bai Holkar's is seen as more of a testament, showing how she came to power and also how substantive and decisive her legacy was in shaping the empire. The road paved by Ahilya Bai remains a roadmap for women empowerment. Ahilya Bai Holkar was a woman of foresight and vision. Such was the great queen's courage and affect in the royal space that even forty years after her death, Sir John Malcom wrote:

"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."

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