

A 'DEVI' IN LOKMATA AHILYABAI HOLKAR: A PSYCHOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATION

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Abstract. History is infused with leaders who silently but convincingly call for their consideration in academic literature by the virtue of the impact they had in society. One such figure is Ahilyabai Holkar. She was the daughter of an ordinary village man who set out to become an extraordinary queen of the Holkar dynasty in the Central region of India. Her story is woven in a compelling tale of losses but resilience, untouched by vanity and meaningfully guided by transcendence. The present work aims to delve into her life-history, carefully tracing her path from the lens of various psychological theories using the methodology of psychobiography, for curating an evidence-based narrative employing multiple historical sources. The primary perspectives incorporated includes existential and positive psychologies highlighting both, her vulnerabilities and the development of virtues in face of adversities. In reverence, the various titles given to her by historians and academicians such as Lokmata, Karmyogini and most significantly, Devi, are also discussed for their personal and cultural relevance from the viewpoint of Indian psychology and specifically the transpersonal perspective. Ahilyabai's life holds the capacity to resonate deeply with contemporary audiences due to the symbolism of uncorrupted feminine 'shakti' which she embodied through her actions of welfare, ranging from selfless charity to unapologetic justice she served. Her legacy is literally carved in stone, in light of various temple reconstruction projects she completed which served as a tool for cultural and spiritual reawakening across the land of Bharat. This paper explores her significance not just as a source of personal inspiration but as a catalyst for cultural revival through an act of divine intervention.

Keywords: Ahilyabai Holkar, Psychobiography, Transformational Leadership, Resilience, Cultural Rejuvenation, Nari Shakti, Devi.

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1. Introduction

*“In latter days from Brahma came,
To rule our land, a noble Dame,
Kind was her heart, and tright her frame,
And Ahlya was her honoured name.”*

Above is a stanza from a poem by Joanna Baillie (Baillie, 1849, p. 29) praising Ahilyabai Holkar (1725-1795) for her profound wisdom and the inspiring legacy she left behind. Her early life before marriage provides a hint of the virtuous character she held. Born in a middle-class, religious family, she was close to both of her parents. Particularly, her mother was a devout worshipper, an attribute that Ahilyabai picked up very early in life from her. She would accompany her to the temple daily and gradually develop a deep faith in Lord Shiva. It was during the time of temple visiting only that the grace of Ahilya touched Malhar Rao's heart, and the latter decided to seek her hand in marriage for his son, Khande Rao. This marked the beginning of one of the golden periods in India's history, which lasted approximately thirty years under the reign of the “philosopher queen” (Keay, 2000, p. 425) – Ahilyabai Holkar.

The depth of her character poses an intriguing question in the contemporary age, where it is difficult to locate any leader as revered as Ahilyabai was during her reign from 1767 to 1795 in the Malwa region. Unfortunately, this personality has not received the long-overdue attention in academic discourse for various reasons. Under such circumstances, her presence as a key figure in Indian history calls for a re-emphasis in contemporary times, where we as a society are aiming to resurrect the voices of women that were suppressed in the colonial past. Today, “Bhartiya Nari” is *bahuaayaamai* (multidimensional) and plays a pivotal role in sectors ranging from defence, finance, arts, culture, homemakers, healthcare professionals, etc. This dynamism is well-articulated in the persona of Ahilyabai, which makes her an important personality to be discussed and analysed in current-day academia.

2. The Premise

The present psychobiographical work aims to explore her life journey from various psychological perspectives to provide a well-rounded, in-depth analysis of her being. This attempt tries to bridge the gap between theory and its manifestation by presenting Ahilyabai as an example to various frameworks developed within psychology. It also fuels the greater objective of garnering relevant insights from her journey, which holds a scope for

value addition within people in general. Her life trajectory is traced through aspects from *existential* and *positive* psychology, along with the *ego* development phases she progressed through at times of both comfort and distress. The existential themes revolve around the unflinching will exercised by her under various situations, while the positive psychology highlights the virtues she embodied, expanding her capacity for personal growth despite adversity. In reverence, people exalted her with the title of *Devi* and *Karmyogini*, which calls for viewing her life-course from the lens of *Indian* and *transpersonal* psychology as well. The analysis is grounded in careful consideration of historiography (Sharma, 1967; Joshi, 1978; Jahagirdar, 2017; Sampath, 2022), thus providing anecdotal evidence to the conclusions made. The paper follows a chronological order, starting from her early adolescent experiences to later years, discussing the above-mentioned psychological themes that shaped her development.

3. Early Beginnings and Development of Virtuousness

From early adolescence, Ahilyabai was adored for her “maturity, depth and discipline” (Sharma, 1967, p. 2). She had a daily routine of visiting the temple to worship Lord Shiva. She would quietly indulge in rituals, reflecting mannerisms which highlighted maturity uncommon to her age group. Attracted by these attributes, Malhar Rao Holkar, one of the prime Maratha chiefs, cherished the idea of her being the daughter-in-law of the Holkar kingdom. She got married to his son, Khande Rao, at the tender age of nine years. Unsurprisingly, she sincerely adapted to the household responsibilities and took the new circumstances in her stride for greater personal development. Malhar Rao Holkar played a very important role in training her in various administrative tasks. Not bound by the social norms of that time, he made sure that she received the necessary education that was commonly given to a male heir. Ahilya, on the other hand, was receptive to these experiences and never limited herself to household chores. Thus, an initiation by visionary Malhar Rao with Ahilya’s commitment to expanding her horizons unlocked a potential that laid the foundation for Holkar’s bright future.

A profound example of her thoughtful character can be illustrated in the treatment she bestowed upon Khande Rao despite his ill-mannered and depraved behaviour. He was not interested in governance and indulged himself in substances of addiction. However, undeterred by this, she considered him worthy of all respect and love (Sharma, 1967). This resonates with Carl Rogers’ (1961) theory of *unconditional positive regard*, which

asserts that when a person receives warmth and acceptance freely without any demands or *conditions of worth*, he/she get better connected with one's positive true feelings. Under such a nurturing environment, an individual can develop into a "fully-functioning person", described as the one who can explore his/her potential for growth and act towards it (Rogers, 1961, p. 191). Ahilyabai, during bedtime, would narrate her husband stories from the scriptures and discuss some administrative cases she encountered throughout the day (Sharma, 1967). This stimulated Khande Rao's interest in state affairs and mended his indecent attitude towards his parents under the affectionate embrace of Ahilyabai. In the larger picture, it highlights her capacity for giving unconditional love to people, which in later life translated into the motherly manner she ruled the people in her kingdom.

4. Developing Resilience through Overcoming Adversities

Once aptly trained under the guidance of Malhar Rao, she used to accompany him in various expeditions and would also look after the state in his absence. However, she could hardly have anticipated the tragic turn of events that would soon test her spirit. This turning point came with the devastating loss of her husband, who died on a battlefield while fighting the Jats at Kumbheri in 1754 (Sharma, 1967). Upon hearing the news, she decided to commit Sati, a practice of self-immolation performed upon the death of one's spouse. Despite several requests by her father-in-law, Malhar Rao, she was adamant in her decision due to feelings of hopelessness and grief. However, through further counselling by him, she sidelined her desire to commit Sati in the light of a bigger purpose of giving support to her father-in-law and the state. She absorbed the pain of personal grief and looked at the broader perspective of being a "source of happiness to family and hundreds of thousands of others" (Sharma, 1967, pp. 24-25). This decision by her is a rich example of making meaning in difficult times and deriving strength from it. By exercising her freedom of choice, she transformed her personal grief into an opportunity to contribute to the betterment of society. This aligns with Viktor Frankl's (1984) existential psychology, which emphasises finding meaning in suffering. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1984), he says, "Suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning" (p. 135). Ahilyabai's narrative strongly resonates with this perspective. She searched for her purpose in life and found one in the service of others. Her resilience was put to the test time and again in various ways. Apart from the untimely death of her husband, she lived to witness the demise of her father-in-law, son, son-in-law, daughter, and grandchild. The impact of such psychological turmoil was challenging yet not soul-crushing for her

iron-willed demeanour. Her personal losses did not deter her; instead, they became the foundation for her spiritual growth and tireless service. Her life stands as a testament to the transformative potential of suffering when imbued with purpose.

5. A Spiritual Exemplar of Transformational Leadership

She formally assumed the leadership in 1767. Here, it becomes noteworthy to recollect her faithful gesture of placing tulsi leaves on the state coffers as a mark of reverence to Lord Shiva at the time of ascending the throne. Through this noble act, she sincerely equated the task of ruling with the worship of the Lord. She was often observed remarking that her deeds were the desires of the Almighty, not her actions. For her, ruling was a “sacred duty”, not something to be identified with one’s ego (Sharma, 1967, p. 60). This allowed her to remain detached from the fruits of her actions and thus equipped her with an enhanced ability to remain single-mindedly focused on virtuous tasks. The theme of detachment runs throughout her rule. This aligns closely with transpersonal psychology found in the Bhagwat Gita. According to it, the agency of the work done is not to be taken personally, for it invites a desire for success and consequent vanity. At the same time, it does not advise inaction. The balance is struck by “discarding the false notion that ‘I am the doer’ and ‘I am the enjoyer’”(Menon, 2008, p. 172). Rather, it emphasises work or ‘karma’ to be ‘niskama’, i.e., without expectation of any reward but an end in itself. This promotes well-being not just for oneself but the entire masses, as arrogance, greed, and injustice stemming from the fulfilment of desires are abandoned. Many authors have called Ahilyabai a ‘Karmyogini’ in light of these intentions (Jahagirdar, 2017; Sharma, 1967).

Ahilyabai’s nature of leadership and everyday conduct exemplifies various virtues. All the features of a well-lived life profoundly resonate with the firm but righteous choices she made throughout her existence. Historically, virtues are defined as “traits of character that make someone a good person” (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, p. 10). For a layman’s understanding, virtues include those behavioural tendencies that help an individual to live a satisfactory life. Such a person is considered ‘good’ through the positive impact he/she creates on others’ lives as well as the subjective feeling of contentment he/she experiences. A model for the classification of human strengths provides an opportunity to reorient the common perspective towards the recognition and celebration of positive values. One such system is proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004), known as Values in Action (VIA)

Classification of Strengths, which identifies twenty-four character strengths and groups them under six overarching virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. The numerous times Ahilyabai embodied these virtues are deeply interwoven with the key events of her life, which helps us in understanding her personality in greater depth.

She was an admirer of qualities like courage and integrity, and always placed them higher than social status. Once, came a time when the area under her reign got unsettled due to robberies by thieves and goons. The administration was unable to put an end to it, and the situation got worse every day. Under such conditions, she devised a novel plan to locate the bravest person in the region by announcing the marriage of her only daughter, Muktabai, to him if the person succeeded in making the area terror-free. Yashwantrao Phanase, a normal village man but a braveheart by actions, rose to this opportunity and, with great courage, eradicated the territory of order. True to her promise, she got Muktabai married to him, which fulfilled the dual tasks of finding a suitable groom for her daughter and making the region prosperous. She didn't care for the norm that a princess could only marry a royal prince. For her, the strength of character played a bigger role than social hierarchy in determining a person's worth. She also didn't follow the Purdah system of her times, where a woman was supposed to cover her face as a mark of decency and modesty. Like other unjust norms, she rightly defied this as well. She would also make no distinction between eating places for servants and ministers. All the people used to eat at the same place, further providing testimony to her impartial nature. These actions reverberate strong tendencies of authentic living as theorised by Martin Heidegger (1962). According to him, an individual encounters a choice between two ways of living- authentic and inauthentic. For the one who indulges in the former, a great amount of courage is required to break the shackles of conventional norms and live in resonance with one's true feelings. Not many can lead a truly authentic life in fear of exclusion and shame. However, such was not the case with Ahilyabai. She proudly embraced her decisions with utmost confidence and faith in her actions.

6. Conscience as a Fundamental Virtue for Social Rejuvenation

Another significant aspect of her personality was that she never resorted to injustice and malpractice. *Justice* was central to her character as she was renowned for treating people impartially and being deeply involved in the pursuit of delivering verdicts fairly. From

dismissing irrelevant laws to even jailing her commander-in-chief's son as punishment for theft, she tolerated no space for misconduct and oppression (Sharma, 1967). Through her noble deeds, she set out to lead by example for other members of her court, showcasing remarkable leadership. Numerous examples also exemplify her *courage* to practice righteousness under every circumstance. She scrapped the discriminatory law that prohibited property rights for issueless widows. She allowed them to adopt heirs and use the property in whichever way they found suitable without providing any compensation to the state. Apart from this, she didn't charge any hefty amount of taxes from her subjects. For her, ruling the state was a holy task that must not be marred by greed. She displayed phenomenal bravery when attacked by Ragobha after the death of her son, Male Rao. In those challenging times, she not only didn't hesitate to pick up arms for the safety of her state and its people but also displayed tactical prowess by preparing a cadet of about five hundred women, all thoroughly trained for war under the inspiring leadership of their ruler, Ahilyabai (Sampath, 2022). However, through diplomatic acumen, she was able to avoid the war, thus further underscoring her ability to deal with trying situations in courageous yet mindful ways. Tracing these instances shows that her life strongly echoes Kierkegaard's (1987) *ethical mode of existence*. Viney et. al. (2013) note that this type of living is "marked by a deep concern for justice, universal good, and genuine moral commitment" (pp. 432-433). The person's selfhood is relatively more developed in this stage, along with an increased capacity to handle responsibility, which is evident in Ahilyabai's case.

According to her, the resources of the state should be used for the upliftment of people, not for personal comfort and grandeur. Her simplicity and high thinking invited praise from many corners of India, but they never swayed her. Once, a poet wrote a book filled only with Ahilyabai's praise. Instead of getting enamoured by the writings, she asked the poet to write in reverence of God, not for her deeds. Not a grand palace, but a humble two-storeyed Maharashtrian 'wada' became the abode for this benign lady. She would not indulge in excesses of any kind, be it comfort or grandeur. Emitting such humility, the virtue of *temperance* can rightly be observed in her conduct. Baumgardner (2013) relates this virtue to self-control and self-discipline. Malcolm (1972) writes admiringly,

"... After her husband's death she never wore coloured clothes, nor any jewels except a small necklace; and, indeed, remained, amid every temptation, unchanged in her habits or character. Flattery even appears to have been lost upon Ahalya Bae ... It is, however, an extraordinary picture: a female without vanity ... a being exercising, most actively and ably, despotic power, not merely

with sincere humility, but under the severest moral restraint that a strict conscience could impose on human action ...” (pp. 193–194).

Malcolm, through these words, perfectly summarises her modest and self-regulated character. She deeply valued her life’s purpose, but also was not swayed in pride over its completion. Her effortless striking of a balance between submission and responsibility sets her apart from many. This extraordinary display of virtuousness and navigating a delicate balance between material growth and attainment of self with spiritual temperament led Malcom to revere her as an incarnation of a divine force leading the welfare of the state and its pupil to strengthen the overall well-being and foster flourishing.

7. Invigorating Collective Spiritual Consciousness

In the later days of her rule, she devoted much time to rebuilding the cultural heritage of India, for which the present generation is highly indebted to her. She did not use the state taxes for it but rather employed the revenue from her holdings. Through this measure, the all-round development of the region was ensured, with the state revenue going to routine welfare tasks and her personal income for the rejuvenation of religious sites and stay houses. The restoration of the Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi and the Somnath Temple in Gujarat are the two famous examples of her unfaltering commitment. Most astoundingly, Ahilyabai’s vision did not encapsulate just the area under her rule but the whole of the Indian landmass, thus covering the entire nation’s geography to promote cohesiveness among its people through comfortable pilgrimage (Sampath, 2022). She is viewed as a picture of cultural renaissance, inspiring other Indian queens and lady aristocrats of her time as well to contribute to “construction of temples, dharamshalas and riverside platforms” (Sharma, 1967, p. 116). The larger motive behind these actions was to reestablish the ancient value system of the country, which can guide future generations to well-being and development. Her visionary outlook and concern for the people coincide well with the seventh stage of Erikson’s (1963) *psychosocial theory of personality development* called Generativity versus Stagnation. According to it, an individual with a well-adjusted and mature ego finds fulfilment by involving oneself in generative tasks that provide direction to the younger generation. This stage is associated with the development of the virtue of care that aptly resonates with Ahilyabai’s motherly concern for the land and its people. She literally “gave herself to the future” in service of others, which is the hallmark of successful resolution of this stage of ego-development (Monte, 1995, p. 291).

According to Peterson and Seligman (2004), *humanity* is distinguishable from justice as the former reflects, “doing more than what is only fair—showing generosity even when an equitable exchange would suffice, kindness even if it cannot (or will not) be returned” (p. 37). Ahilyabai’s administration reflected this virtue in great depth. She was not just adamant on serving cold justice, but balanced it graciously with maternal care towards the people under her rule. Sharma (1967) notes that for her, “welfare of the people and her own well-being were synonymous. She loved her people just like her own children” (pp. 78–79). She is said to bestow the same regard and love to a househelp as she would to a family member. Construction of numerous kitchens to provide free food to hundreds of poor people, installation of water-providing facilities to travellers in the summer season, reconstruction of temples and dharamshalas along with other acts of charity made her an epitome of welfare and benevolence, thus, establishing her as one of the most selfless and humane ruler in history of India (Sampath, 2022).

8. **Wisdom through Self-transcendence for Social Welfare**

Wisdom is considered to be one of the foundational virtues (Baumgardner, 2013). It is a “multidimensional construct” which taps into various domains such as “rich knowledge of life, emotional regulation, acknowledgement of and appropriate action in the face of uncertainty, personal well-being, helping common good, and insight” (Jeste and Vahiaf, 2008, p. 199). Many cultures have recognised its significance in leading what is known as a ‘good’ life. Peterson and Seligman (2004) consider that such a virtue is cultivated in the face of distress, resulting in an enhanced understanding of life which can be shared with others for collective growth. We often seek advice from individuals we think are wise.

Tracing Ahilyabai’s journey from the early loss of husband and, later, other family members may paint a picture of despondency, unless we consider her inner sources of strength and the resulting *wisdom* she developed through those experiences. As discussed earlier, rather than grieving incessantly for these unfortunate losses, she gathered herself to create an enlarged perspective on the reason to continue living and not immolate herself. This decision required extensive maturity, strengthening her personality in the long run, and equipping her with the ability to act decisively for the greater good. Her actions in later years only reverberated this capacity through various means. She devoted herself to the service of people in her kingdom, and in later years, extended this nurturance to the rest of

the subcontinent. She is remembered not just as an ordinary ruler but as a righteous person, an excellent administrator, and a compassionate guide whom people would turn to in case of personal hardships as well (Sharma, 1967). In the last stage of Erikson's (1963) psychosocial theory of personality development, Integrity versus Despair, wisdom is regarded as the virtue which characterizes individuals who can develop a sense of wholeness by the end of their life i.e. those who are not afraid by the inevitability of death for they are satisfied by a well-lived life. Such individuals take pride in their integrity but are not attached to it. Ahilyabai's life exudes such an inspiring legacy soaked in timeless wisdom. She executed her duties whole heartedly without any vanity or regret.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) define transcendence as the "belief that there is meaning or purpose larger than ourselves" (p. 38). They thoughtfully explain it as a virtue which "reminds us of how tiny we are but that simultaneously lifts us out of a sense of complete insignificance" (p. 39). Baumgardner (2013) presents religion and spirituality as direct examples of transcendence as they "involve a belief in a higher power and a greater purpose for life" (p. 221). In the case of Ahilyabai, as discussed earlier, religion had a prominent place in her life. She was a devout worshiper of Lord Shiva and considered every action of hers to be his will at play. She didn't sign the royal orders with her name but instead wrote 'Shri Shankara' as a mark of devotion she placed in him (Sharma, 1967). The highly religious life fueled Ahilyabai's determination towards the welfare of people as she considered it a way of showcasing reverence to her deity. However, it was not limited to narrow aspirations to benefit people of only her faith. She treated every being with equanimity, resulting in people of all religions feeling blessed under her rule. Apart from the reconstruction of temples and dharamshalas, she built many mosques and provided houses to various Muslim saints and priests (Sharma, 1967), thus depicting values of a fair leader with true transcendence from personal ego-centric beliefs.

9. A Divine Offering of Devi's Grace

Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar is famously accorded the title 'Devi', which connotes the idea of feminine divinity in Hindu tradition. This divine aspect is considered equal to its masculine counterpart, with both representing complementary yet ontologically unified forces of existence. Traditionally, this duality is manifested in the forms of Shiva and Shakti, where Shiva symbolises the masculine aspect of divinity, and Shakti embodies the feminine counterpart (Zimmer, 1946). India has a very long and rich tradition of deity worship

in different feminine manifestations such as *Durga*, *Kali*, *Saraswati*, *Lakshmi*, and more. Each goddesses represents a distinct aspect of the social and inner world. This multifaceted portrayal of the goddess points to the limitless and all-encompassing nature of the feminine divine symbol. Ahilyabai, being referred to as 'Devi', holds significant symbolism where her persona and actions are considered in alignment with the qualities of the divine feminine. Examining this critically may result in differing opinions regarding whether the title is an exaggeration or a well-fitted attempt to recognise her contributions. We believe it to be an innocent action of gratitude by the people under her rule, for they identified the traces of divinity in Ahilyabai, which ultimately benefited them through development and social harmony. This needs to be understood in the larger context of the cultural and spiritual fabric of *Bharat*, where 'seva' (service) to common men and women is regarded as one of the highest virtues in *Sanatan Dharma*. Ahilyabai embodied this ideal in its highest sanctity, thus aptly justifying the title of 'Devi'.

From gently following her mother's footsteps in the temple to becoming a magnificent ruler, Ahilyabai came a long way. The journey personified Maslow's (1943, 1987) ideals of self-actualisation and self-transcendence authentically. She employed her highest potential in the fulfilment of duties, all with the temperament of a saint. Joshi (1978) credits her with reviving the wounded legacy of *Bharatiya civilisation*, giving the land its lost glory through pan-India temple-reconstruction projects ranging from twelve *Jyotirlingas* to four *Dhaams* and seven *Puris* (Sampath, 2022). Her contribution is one of its kind and deserves recognition. Nehru (1946) writes, "Some years after Plassey began the reign of Ahilya Bai of Indore in central India, and it lasted for thirty years (1765-1795). 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 organiser, highly respected during her lifetime, and considered as a saint by a grateful people after her death" (p. 279). Her life ended in 1795 as a result of gradual decay due to ageing (Sharma, 1967). Revisiting the words of Baillie, they seem more understandable as we come to an end. The resilience, compassion, leadership, and devotion she exhibited in a long life of seventy-five years serve as ample evidence of her self-actualised being.

As the people living in modern times struggle to locate the right figures for seeking inspiration, Ahilyabai's legacy shows a way forward. Her struggle after losses is natural, but the resilience is one of its kind, which holds the capacity to empower the succeeding generations, given we provide her that room in our discourses. Many people like her are

forgotten in the march of history, but the onus lies on us to resurrect them to the status they deserve. A growing nation gives due credit to its lost luminaries. For an ordinary person, her grace builds trust in righteous actions against all odds. She inspires people to work, unattached to the result, but rather absorbed in the honest intention for welfare. Her actions reiterate divinity, and rightly so; she was, in the eyes of her people, a Devi.

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