

RAJMATA AHILYABAI HOLKAR: A MORAL ARCHITECT OF GOVERNANCE AND EDUCATIONAL ENLIGHTENMENT

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Abstract. This paper explores the remarkable life and leadership of Rajmata Ahilyabai Holkar, the esteemed ruler of the Malwa kingdom during the 18th century. Her reign exemplified a harmonious blend of religious values, ethical standards, and educational advancements. Beyond her role as a political figure, Ahilyabai was a visionary leader committed to justice, compassion, and dharma (righteousness). Her governance style embodied a unique educational philosophy where leadership was grounded in service, inclusivity, and ethical accountability. Among her achievements were the establishment of temples, educational institutions, and charitable organizations, alongside the promotion of religious unity, support for women's empowerment, and infrastructure enhancement. Her reign serves as a quintessential illustration of values-driven leadership, honouring the integration of civic responsibility and spirituality. This paper illustrates how her approach continues to shape contemporary discussions on social justice, ethical governance, and transformative leadership by situating her life story within modern contexts of educational leadership and moral pedagogy. For educators, leaders, and policymakers striving to create humane and ethically robust institutions of governance and education, her legacy stands as a guiding light.

Keywords: Moral Leadership, Educational Reform, Dharma, Ethical Governance, Spiritual Ethics, Social Justice, Women's Empowerment.

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1. Introduction

Leadership necessitates a careful blend of intelligence, empathy, and ethical integrity; it transcends mere administrative efficiency, particularly in the realms of education and governance. Beyond addressing the immediate material needs of the populace, a leader's vision ought to fortify the moral and intellectual underpinnings of society. In this context, the life and legacy of Rajmata Ahilyabai Holkar, the esteemed monarch of the Malwa kingdom in the 18th century, serve as a compelling illustration of such integrated leadership. She was among the most revered leaders in Indian history during her tenure from 1767 to 1795, characterized by a distinctive amalgamation of justice, spiritual inclusivity, educational foresight, and public welfare.

In an era when patriarchal norms significantly constrained women's roles in public life, Ahilyabai Holkar emerged as a prominent figure. By embodying strength, wisdom, and moral integrity, she not only ascended to the throne but also redefined the very essence of leadership. Her reign extended beyond the mere governance of territory; it transformed into a form of moral pedagogy, a leadership approach that educated her subjects through the demonstration of ethical conduct, setting a standard, and acting with integrity.

She governed through consensus instead of coercion, relying on faith rather than intimidation—trust in duty, empathy, and righteousness. From constructing temples and dharamshalas to establishing schools, wells, roads, and rest areas, Ahilyabai's development initiatives were sustainable, inclusive, and deeply rooted in aiding the populace. Her decisions reflected her comprehension of the diverse social, religious, and cultural needs of her community. By promoting spiritual literacy, interfaith harmony, and support for both Vedic and non-Vedic traditions, she cultivated a socio-political environment where education, equity, and ethical conduct were not merely aspirations but tangible realities.

This paper examines Ahilyabai Holkar's governance through the lens of contemporary notions of educational leadership, including servant leadership, transformational leadership, and moral pedagogy. Her decisions and principles offer a concrete illustration of value-driven leadership within administrative and educational contexts. Transcending conventional queenship, Ahilyabai emerged as a moral architect, influencing both the physical landscape of Malwa and the inner lives of its citizens. Her reign exemplifies how leadership can ignite moral awakening on both individual and societal levels.

Utilizing primary sources, historical texts, and insights from scholars such as Kulkarni (1992) and Sharma (2008), this chapter will explore Ahilyabai's governance as an educational pursuit—a curriculum in practice that fused civic responsibility, justice, and spiritual values. In doing so, it bridges the political with the spiritual, the administrative with the philosophical, and the historical with the pedagogical. This analysis positions Ahilyabai Holkar as more than a mere historical figure; it establishes her as a timeless exemplar of educational leadership whose legacy remains critically relevant for contemporary educators, leaders, and politicians navigating a complex, value-lacking world.

2. Historical and Cultural Context

Born in the small town of Chaundi, located in the present-day Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra, Rajmata Ahilyabai Holkar was born in 1725. She emerged from humble beginnings to become one of the most renowned and respected rulers in Indian history. Her remarkable intellect, deep spiritual commitment, and steadfast moral integrity—rather than any hereditary claim—were the key factors that propelled her to prominence. Malhar Rao Holkar, a prince of the Maratha Empire and the founder of the Holkar dynasty, recognized her exceptional qualities at a young age. He saw her potential and facilitated her connection to the royal lineage by arranging her marriage to his son, Khanderao Holkar.

Ahilyabai's early life within the Holkar family was characterized by both political and personal education. Under the guidance of Malhar Rao, she was introduced to matters of governance, administration, and diplomacy, which was quite rare for women of her time.

However, tragedy struck when her father-in-law Malhar Rao, passed away in 1766, and her husband Khanderao, died in 1754. These losses could have marked the end of her public life, especially in the patriarchal society of 18th century India, where widows were often marginalized. Nevertheless, Ahilyabai defied societal norms by taking charge during a tumultuous period of political instability.

With the support of loyal ministers and soldiers, Ahilyabai ascended to the throne of Indore (Malwa) in 1767, despite facing opposition from male courtiers and religious traditionalists. The commencement of her reign coincided with a crucial juncture in Indian history, characterized by the decline of the Mughal Empire, the disintegration of centralized authority, and the emergence of regional kingdoms. The political landscape was marked by internal strife, foreign invasions, and administrative decay. Like many other states, the Holkar polity was vulnerable to instability and shifting loyalties.

Nevertheless, Ahilyabai tackled these challenges with a fundamentally ethical approach to governance that was rooted in traditional Indian values instead of resorting to coercion. The principles of dharma (moral duty), seva (selfless service), and nyaya (justice) were integral to her administrative philosophy. She prioritized the welfare of her citizens over reliance on force or expansionist strategies, thereby establishing a principled and effective system of governance.

Under Ahilyabai's reign, there was significant economic development, political stability, and cultural rejuvenation. She fostered patronage across various faiths and traditions, encouraged religious tolerance, and endeavored to uplift the marginalized and disenfranchised. Her decisions reflected a harmonious balance between administrative efficiency and spiritual wisdom, showcasing an innate comprehension of Indian philosophical and moral traditions, particularly those articulated in the Bhagavad Gita, Manusmriti, and Arthashastra.

Ahilyabai Holkar was a forward-thinking female ruler who adeptly navigated the socio-political dynamics of her time with exceptional clarity and conviction within this historical and cultural framework. She stands not only as a remarkable leader of her era but also as a timeless symbol of moral leadership and enlightened governance, owing to her legacy that intertwines Maratha resilience, spiritual statesmanship, and gendered defiance.

3. Governance as Moral Pedagogy

The era of Ahilyabai Holkar represented a profound experience of moral education rather than merely a political governance. Her administration was founded on principles, actions, and a continuous public dialogue rooted in civic participation, ethical obligations, and spiritual consciousness, alongside established laws and regulations. In this framework, the ruler acted as an educator, guide, and ethical exemplar while also upholding the law; Ahilyabai executed these responsibilities with remarkable commitment and foresight. Ahilyabai's governance was fundamentally anchored in her ability to translate theoretical concepts into effective administration. The principles of dharma (moral duty), nyaya (justice), and seva (selfless service) were all reflected in her policies. Throughout her reign, these served as practical tools for fostering a just and inclusive society, rather than being abstract spiritual notions. She instilled in her officials, pupils, and future leaders the significance of ethical leadership by consistently exemplifying a leadership approach that prioritized the welfare of the community over personal gain.

The establishment of public grievance redressal mechanisms was one of the most significant embodiments of her moral teachings. The iconic justice bell situated outside her palace stands out as the most prominent of these. Any citizen could ring this bell to draw her attention directly, irrespective of gender, caste, or social status. While it could have remained a mere symbolic act, Ahilyabai's court transformed it into a practical and educational instrument—a living testament to responsive governance, equality under the law, and accessibility (Sharma, 2010). It conveyed to her subjects that the populace was the ultimate accountability of the ruler and that justice was a fundamental right rather than a privilege.

The concept of transformational leadership posits that leaders can motivate change by exemplifying the values they wish to instill in others, which can be applied to analyze Ahilyabai's approach (Sergiovanni, 1992). Her leadership style emphasized relationships over hierarchy, prioritizing shared responsibility, ethical conduct, and mutual respect. Ahilyabai serves as a prominent illustration of Nel Noddling's ethics of care, which asserts that empathy, compassion, and attentiveness to the needs of others should form the basis of effective leadership (Noddling's, 1984). This compassionate methodology was reflected in Ahilyabai's everyday actions, which encompassed listening to petitions, inspecting public works, supporting educational institutions and temples, and fostering the craftspeople.

Moreover, Ahilyabai transformed the palace and courthouse into educational environments where moral values were not only discussed but actively practiced. She exemplified inclusion, social justice, and compassionate governance through her transparent financial policies, fair land distribution, and support for widows and orphans. These curriculum-based implementations of civic and moral education resonated with both the public and politicians. Thus, Ahilyabai Holkar's leadership can be interpreted as a "lived curriculum," a term in educational theory that describes how principles and lessons are embodied in daily life. Her life and reign provided a valuable guide for moral leadership, offering examples of both personal integrity and societal responsibility. Her governance did not simply rule over people; it nurtured hearts and minds, fostering a culture of ethical awareness that continues to influence modern discussions on educational leadership, ethical governance, and transformative teaching.

4. Patronage of Education and Intellectual Traditions

The establishment of schools and the allocation of financial resources were merely two facets of Rajmata Ahilyabai Holkar's contributions to education; she also demonstrated her profound philosophical dedication to social responsibility, ethical growth, and intellectual progress. During an era when caste, class, and gender constituted significant obstacles to education, Ahilyabai's vision surpassed these rigid constraints. She recognized the transformative potential of education for societal change, spiritual growth, and personal development.

Throughout the Malwa region and beyond, Ahilyabai actively promoted the establishment of Sanskrit pathshalas, gurukulas, and centers for Vedic learning. These institutions received generous funding, and educators and scholars were provided with regular stipends, housing, and access to academic resources (Kulkarni, 1992). However, her support was not confined to the upper castes or the traditionally privileged. She embraced scholars from various backgrounds and ensured that education reached marginalized groups, including women—an extraordinary position in 18th-century India.

Her educational approach was remarkably comprehensive. While the curriculum was grounded in scripture and classical literature, students also studied astronomy, politics, logic, ethics, administration, and agriculture—all essential for responsible citizenship and public service. Her belief that education should cultivate morally upright, academically proficient, and socially aware individuals was reflected in her multidisciplinary approach (Sharma, 2010). Ahilyabai perceived education as a means to develop character, prepare future leaders, and strengthen the moral fabric of society rather than as an end in itself. This integrated educational philosophy aligns with what contemporary theorists refer to as "holistic education," which emphasizes the intellectual, emotional, and practical dimensions of learning—the development of the mind, heart, and hands (Miller, 2000). Long before this framework was articulated in modern educational literature, Ahilyabai's initiatives laid the groundwork for such a vision.

Furthermore, Ahilyabai's patronage extended beyond formal institutions. She cultivated a vibrant intellectual atmosphere outside the court by actively supporting scholars, poets, philosophers, and artists. During her reign, education and creativity thrived, fostering an environment where discussion and debate were encouraged, and knowledge contributed to both spiritual understanding and practical governance. To merge spiritual endeavors with

academic activities, she commissioned the transcription of sacred texts, restored ancient universities and temples, and ensured that pilgrimage sites were equipped with libraries and study spaces. The educational patronage model established by Ahilyabai Holkar set a benchmark for inclusive, ethical, and purpose-driven education. Her commitment to preserving intellectual traditions while promoting moral and practical education was remarkably progressive for her time. Her legacy aligns with the principles of liberal, value-centered, and transformative education, as she regarded education as both a civic responsibility and a sacred obligation. For educators and leaders aspiring to create learning environments that nurture intellect, compassion, and integrity equally, her model remains an enduring source of inspiration.

5. Spirituality and Secularism: A Balanced Pedagogy

A remarkable and deep integration of intense personal spirituality with a notably secular approach to governance can be seen during the reign of Rajmata Ahilyabai Holkar. As a devoted Hindu, her life revolved around prayer, scripture study, and pilgrimages. However, her dedication did not lead to religious exclusion. By endorsing a pluralistic perspective of society that offered equal respect and support to various faiths, she set a powerful example for secular governance grounded in spiritual principles.

Ahilyabai was proactive in her commitment to religious inclusion rather than merely performative. She championed religious institutions across the Indian subcontinent. She commissioned the construction, renovation, and maintenance of hundreds of temples, including renowned sites such as the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi and temples in Ayodhya, Dwarka, Somnath, and Rameshwaram (Kale, 2004). However, her vision extended beyond sectarian boundaries. She allocated funds for the establishment and upkeep of Sikh gurudwaras and Muslim mosques, reflecting her deep respect for India's multireligious fabric.

Beyond infrastructure development, this approach to supporting diverse religious communities served as a model for interfaith dialogue, tolerance, and coexistence. Spirituality provided a moral compass that embraced both unity and diversity within her secular administration, rather than being wielded as a tool for division or control. Her actions illustrated to her subjects and officials that a ruler could embody both inclusivity and piety, remaining politically neutral while being spiritually anchored.

Paulo Freire (1970), an educational philosopher, later described Ahilyabai's comprehensive approach as a "pedagogy of dialogue and respect." Freire emphasized the importance of considering diverse perspectives, honoring the backgrounds of all individuals, and cultivating an inclusive and nurturing educational atmosphere. These principles were actively demonstrated during Ahilyabai's reign. Her inclusive religious policies not only promoted tolerance but also celebrated diversity, which is fundamental to peace in a multireligious society. They also fostered mutual respect, intercultural understanding, and a shared heritage.

Furthermore, in contrast to modern bureaucratic interpretations, her secularism was enriched by her own spiritual discipline rather than being disconnected from ethical considerations. She recognized that religion could cultivate empathy, moral clarity, and a sense of public duty when practiced openly and with humility. Consequently, her leadership transformed into a moral pedagogy where the principles of service, fairness, humility, and harmony exemplified religion rather than imposing it. Ahilyabai Holkar provided her people with a "lived curriculum" of pluralism by embodying such inclusive and respectful governance. Under her leadership, it was conveyed that true spirituality is inclusive rather than exclusive, and that a ruler's responsibility is to uphold and protect the spiritual value of all faiths, rather than favoring one over another. In doing so, she established secularism as more than mere neutrality; it represents ethical coexistence. Ahilyabai's legacy offers a vital framework in an era when sectarianism often jeopardizes national and educational unity. Her legacy illustrates that secular governance and spiritual depth need not be at odds; instead, they can collaborate to foster a society that is more inclusive, equitable, and compassionate in both governance and education.

6. Women's Empowerment and Gender Equity in Education

In the annals of women's empowerment, especially within the realms of social change and education, Rajmata Ahilyabai Holkar is celebrated as a pioneer. In the 18th century, a time when patriarchal norms severely restricted women's rights, literacy, and public involvement, Ahilyabai not only ascended to the throne but also emerged as a groundbreaking advocate for gender equality. Her leadership positioned women at the forefront of moral authority and intellectual progress, thereby redefining societal standards. Within Ahilyabai's court, women scholars, artists, and widows received support; many discovered safety and opportunities under her patronage. She actively encouraged widows to remarry,

a bold initiative during an era when widows were often ostracized or forced to lead austere and marginalized existences (Chitnis, 1993). Her philosophies advanced women's education in both practical skills and biblical studies, empowering them to achieve economic independence and intellectual growth.

Ahilyabai challenged entrenched gender stereotypes by taking on power and governing with compassion, fairness, and administrative acumen in a male-dominated society. Long before the term was popularized, her leadership embodied and contributed to feminist pedagogy. Her approach aligns with Bell Hooks (1994) educational philosophy, which asserted that education should foster equality, agency, and the dismantling of hierarchies. By creating inclusive social and educational spaces where women could thrive, lead, and learn, Ahilyabai achieved this goal. Her method of empowerment, rooted in compassion, inclusivity, and moral integrity, was transformative rather than confrontational. Consequently, Ahilyabai Holkar remains a luminous example of feminist leadership, inspiring educators and reformers to establish frameworks that emphasize justice, equity, and comprehensive participation of women in all aspects of society.

7. Ethical Governance and Civic Engagement

The core of Rajmata Ahilyabai Holkar's governance strategy was founded on moral accountability and community engagement. She advocated for a participatory framework that empowered village leaders and local panchayats to make decisions tailored to the needs of their communities, rather than centralizing authority within a monarchy (Kale, 2004). This approach ensured that governance was collaborative, contextually aware, and centered on the people, rather than being dictated by a higher authority.

John Dewey's (1916) concept of democracy as an experiential reality, where civic engagement serves not only as a political mechanism but also as a moral and educational journey aligns with Ahilyabai's decentralization of power. By placing local leaders in positions of responsibility and maintaining open channels for public feedback, she cultivated a culture of shared accountability and ethical citizenship.

Her moral leadership was further exemplified through her economic policies. Acknowledging the importance of sustainability and the dignity of work, she prioritized equitable taxation, agricultural advancement, and support for local enterprises and artisans. These

strategies resonate with contemporary principles in social justice education, which emphasize inclusion, equity, and ethical leadership. Through her transparent, compassionate, and community-oriented governance, Ahilyabai Holkar illustrated how leadership can be both democratically engaged and morally grounded, imparting enduring lessons for today's civic and educational leaders.

8. Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

The enduring influence of Rajmata Ahilyabai Holkar transcends her reign as a monarch and serves as a powerful source of inspiration for civic organizations, policymakers, and educational leaders. Her leadership was grounded in ethical principles, spiritual insight, and inclusive pedagogical methods—elements that remain critically important in the twenty-first century—rather than merely administrative success. Ahilyabai's life story offers a counter-narrative in today's educational landscape, where performance metrics, standardized assessments, and market-driven agendas often overshadow civic and moral development. In this context, education is perceived as a holistic and transformative journey. Her leadership style, which emphasized community empowerment, gender equality, interfaith harmony, and ethical contemplation, exemplifies values-based education. She demonstrated that governance should be utilized to promote human dignity, accountability, and communal welfare, akin to the role of education.

Ahilyabai's integrative approach, which emphasizes social justice, compassion, and participatory leadership while blending spiritual integrity with democratic principles, could serve as a paradigm for contemporary educational leaders. Long before modern pedagogical concepts emerged, her educational vision reflected deep moral consciousness, and her governance model exemplified service-oriented leadership. The Indian government continues to honor her legacy today by establishing university study centers, scholarships, awards, and statues in her memory (Sharma, 2010). These commemorations are more than mere symbols; they represent the growing recognition of Ahilyabai Holkar as a pedagogical icon whose life imparts timeless wisdom in the quest to create institutions that are inclusive, equitable, and ethically grounded. Ahilyabai's legacy compels us to rethink leadership in an increasingly polarized world—not merely as a position of authority, but as a moral duty to uplift, empower, and educate. Her life continues to serve as a timeless model for anybody looking to lead with compassion, wisdom, and integrity.

9. Conclusion

Rajmata Ahilyabai Holkar's reign stands as a compelling example of leadership rooted in moral integrity, inclusive governance, and educational vision. More than a capable ruler, she was a reformer and moral educator who understood power as a sacred trust to be used for the upliftment of all, especially the marginalized. By integrating dharma into every aspect of governance, she created a model that balanced justice with compassion, authority with humility, and progress with cultural preservation. Her governance was not limited to administration; it functioned as a form of moral pedagogy. Through policies such as the justice bell, equitable taxation, support for widows, and inclusive education, she turned her kingdom into a living classroom where ethical principles were not only discussed but practiced. She demonstrated that governance could be an instrument for shaping civic values and fostering social responsibility.

Ahilyabai's approach to education was comprehensive and inclusive. She invested in Sanskrit pathshalas, gurukulas, and centres for Vedic learning, while also promoting practical subjects such as astronomy, agriculture, and administration. This reflected her belief in holistic education—nurturing intellect, moral character, and practical skills alike. She ensured that learning was accessible to all, regardless of caste, gender, or background, anticipating modern ideals of inclusive and transformative education.

Her leadership was equally remarkable in its spiritual and secular balance. As a devout Hindu, she engaged deeply with her faith, yet extended respect and resources to all religious communities. By funding temples, mosques, and gurudwaras across India, she modelled a pluralistic vision where spirituality fostered unity rather than division. This interfaith respect remains a vital lesson in contemporary times. Ahilyabai also advanced women's empowerment in ways far ahead of her era. She not only governed effectively in a male-dominated sphere but also created opportunities for women to learn, work, and lead. Her support for widow remarriage and women's education challenged entrenched gender norms, aligning with principles later articulated in feminist pedagogy.

Her decentralised governance model empowered local panchayats and leaders, ensuring that decision-making was participatory and context-sensitive. This democratic approach resonates with modern principles of community-based governance and civic engagement, demonstrating that shared responsibility strengthens both governance and public trust. The enduring relevance of her legacy lies in its universality. She showed that leadership is not

about accumulation of power but about cultivating trust, dignity, and collective well-being. For educators, policymakers, and civic leaders, her reign offers a blueprint for integrating ethical values into institutions and fostering environments where justice, empathy, and inclusivity are central.

In a time when governance often struggles with polarization, inequality, and short-termism, Ahilyabai Holkar's life is a reminder that sustainable progress is achieved when moral principles guide public action. Her example urges us to see leadership as a moral calling, education as a means of holistic development, and governance as a partnership with the people. Her torch, lit more than two centuries ago, continues to shine—illuminating a path toward leadership that is principled, compassionate, and transformative. In both governance and education, her life remains a timeless model for leading with wisdom, humility, and an unwavering commitment to the common good.

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