

AHILYA BAI HOLKAR: PIONEER OF CULTURAL NATIONALISM AND CUSTODIAN OF SACRED INDIA

SUMAN YADAV¹, §

Abstract. This paper examines the role of women rulers, as active agents and safeguards of cultural identity. Numerous studies have examined how women have historically been positioned as symbolic bearers of cultural values, often entrusted with the responsibility of upholding cultural and religious norms. This study offers a counter-narrative to the traditional portrayal of women as passive bearers of cultural and religious values by foregrounding the exemplary figure of Ahilya Bai Holkar. Far from merely upholding inherited traditions, Ahilya Bai Holkar emerges as a proactive and visionary leader who consciously shaped India's cultural and religious landscape in the 18th century. Her reign is marked by the conservation of extensive temple building, the restoration of sacred sites across India, and a governance characteristics deeply rooted in religious values. These acts were not merely religious duties but strategic assertions of cultural gesticulation for the rise of a form of cultural nationalism led by a woman at a time when their social space was largely restricted to the domestic space. Ahilya Bai's charitable works including the support of pilgrims, scholars, and religious institutions encourage a sense of community and spiritual belongingness among the people beyond her region. Her legacy offers a critical perspective on how women could actively engage in political and cultural consolidation of Indian subcontinent. This study, therefore, repositions Ahilya Bai Holkar not as just a queen but as a cultural custodian and early cultural nationalist figure whose leadership challenges dominant narratives about gender, power relation and initiator of Cultural Nationalism in early modern India.

Keywords: Cultural Nationalism, Ahilya Bai Holkar, Women Rulers, Temples Reconstruction, Maratha Rule, Sacred Geography.

¹ Post Doctoral Fellow, Zakir Hussain Delhi College, JLN Marg, New Delhi - 110002, India.
e-mail: 17shph10@uohyd.ac.in

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1. Introduction

The geography of the Malwa Kingdom encompasses the western region of present-day Madhya Pradesh and shares its borders with Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Maharashtra. This region is sustained by sacred rivers such as the Narmada, Kshipra, and Shivana. Malwa has historically been known for its agricultural abundance and natural prosperity due to its fertile soil and a moderate climate. Malwa emerges not only as a fertile terrain but also as a symbol of sustenance and well-being for its people. Malwa has been shielded from natural calamities due to the legacy of its virtuous and noble rulers such as, Vikramaditya, the patron of art and culture King Bhoj, and the saintly and revered queen Lokmata Ahilya Bai Holkar (Javlekar, 2002, 9). From the time of Shivaji, the great Maratha leader, the tradition of offering political protection to all his subjects regardless of their faith became a hallmark of Maratha governance. His commitment to tolerance and inclusivity established a lasting precedent that influenced subsequent rulers, especially female rulers.

The Holkar State was established around 1727 when Malhar Rao Holkar was granted a territory of 28 villages and half of the Deepalpur Pargana, including Indore and Betwa (Gordon, 1977, 13-14). According to J.N. Sarkar, 'on January 20, 1734, Malhar Rao Holkar received hereditary Khasgi (Welfare Department) rights over nine villages, under the name of Gautami (16 June 1694 – 29 September 1761, first queen of the Holkar dynasty in Malwa) (Sharma, 1978, 806). The legacy of safeguarding cultural heritage was particularly evident in the Holkar dynasty. Earlier, Gautama Bai Holkar, the mother-in-law of Ahilya Bai Holkar, played a significant role in shaping Indian cultural and administrative traditions a legacy that Ahilya Bai Holkar further strengthened through her own rule. Together, their influence greatly contributed to the preservation and promotion of cultural and civic values in their era (Kotteswar, 2024, 4). The Maratha legacy was rooted in a deep sense of responsibility, to safeguard their territory while upholding Hindu cultural values, all the while ensuring a peaceful and non-violent relationship with their diverse subjects (1674-1818) (Cummings, 2017, 21). The transitional phase of cultural dominance during and after the decline of the Maratha Empire marked significant losses in cultural heritage. However, efforts toward cultural reconstruction persevered with remarkable dedication (Zore, 1998, 125). This legacy of cultural revival was notably sustained by visionary leaders such as Queen Ahilya Bai Holkar, whose commitment to restoring and preserving temples, public works, and indigenous traditions played a crucial role in safeguarding India's rich cultural fabric during a period of political upheaval.

2. Cultural Nationalism

Ahilya Bai Holkar, a distinguished leader from the Holkar state, can be considered as one of the most prominent female cultural nationalists in Indian history. Before exploring Ahilya Bai Holkar's legacy in preserving cultural heritage, national identity, and language amid pressures from distant cultural dominance, it is essential to first understand the concept of cultural Nationalism. Johann Gottfried Herder, has been described as the father of cultural nationalism (Schmidt, 1956, 407). Herder stressed on the cultural unity and brotherhood among the mankind. He firmly believed that man must overcome and discard the unnatural ambition after power if the spirit of humanity were ever to win a place in the affairs of the human race (Schmidt, 1956, 413). Herder saw nationality as an essential component for the development of humanity and regarded as the welfare of the individual as inseparably bound up with the welfare of the group. For instance, Ahilya Bai Holkar extended her support to religious communities by constructing pilgrimage routes and shelter houses, ensuring access and comfort for all individuals, regardless of social background. In doing so, she addressed a fundamental aspect of governance rooted in compassion and public welfare. Her actions reflect a broader vision of cultural unity that later framed in the idea of nationalist identity, wherein collective identity and shared history are central to fostering a positive self-concept and a cohesive group identity among her subjects.

Robert Blauner argues that, Cultural revivalist movements played a role to define anti-colonial struggle. They follow an inner necessity and logic of their own that comes from the consequences of colonialism on groups and personal identities; (Blauner, R. 1964: 402), they are also essential to provide the solidarity which the political or military phase of the anti- colonial revolution requires (Wilson, 1970, 47). As Blauner argues that these movements arise from an internal need to reclaim identity, shaped by the dislocation and disruptions caused by colonial rule. In the case of Ahilya Bai Holkar, her cultural initiatives represent an early form of such revitalization. At a time when colonial powers increasingly threatened Indian traditions, particularly with the promotion of Christianity and religious conversion, her determination in the early 18th century can consider remarkable. Her actions can thus be seen as a foundational expression of cultural nationalism, resisting the cultural erosion that would intensify under colonial rule. By restoring temples, promoting religious traditions, and patronizing Sanskrit and vernacular learning, she laid the groundwork for a cultural nationalism that sought to preserve India's spiritual and civilizational core, long before the formal rise of political nationalism. Her efforts exemplify

how cultural assertion became a powerful form of resistance and identity reclamation in the face of emerging colonial dominance. Woods argues that cultural nationalism centres on the revival and nurturing of a nation's unique identity rather than the pursuit of political self-rule, which is the focus of political nationalism. Instead of emphasizing a nation as a political entity, cultural nationalism envisions the nation as a moral community, rooted in shared history, values, and identity (Woods, 2014, 1). It aims to define a sense of collective cultural consciousness that unites people through a common heritage and vision for their future. Cultural nationalism frequently emerges early in national movements, sometimes preceding political nationalism, as communities seek to reclaim and define their identity. This ongoing dynamic highlights how cultural nationalism is integral to the evolving understanding of nationhood, emphasizing shared cultural bonds alongside or even prior to political autonomy (Hutchinson, 2013). Leerssen suggests that cultural nationalism emerged in late eighteenth-century Europe, where multiple developments in ideas, culture, and politics converged during this period (Leerssen 2014, 11). In India, this tradition found continuation through the women of the Holkar dynasty. Their leadership was characterized by a holistic vision of governance that emphasized the welfare of their subjects and demonstrated a determined commitment to preserving and promoting cultural heritage commitment to preserving and revitalizing India's spiritual and cultural heritage (Hazarika and Gogoi, 2023).

3. Ahilya Bai Holkar, the Illustrious Queen of the Malwa Kingdom (r. 1767-1795)

Born on May 31, 1725, in an esteemed and cultured family of Manakoji Shinde, Ahilya displayed exceptional intelligence, curiosity, and maturity beyond her years. Recognizing her remarkable potential, Manakoji ensured that she received a well-rounded education an uncommon privilege for girls during that era. He provided her with a nurturing environment for learning, ensuring she was educated in subjects that developed both her intellectual ability (Javlekar, 2002, 14). This thoughtful foundation significantly shaped extraordinary life of Ahilya Bai to lead as a wise, compassionate, and visionary ruler. Khande Rao, her husband was showing little interest in governance or military affairs, and distancing himself from education and state affairs (Memorial, 2017, 41). Ahilya Bai herself proved to be an exemplary wife marked by wisdom, compassion, and unwavering devotion. Her noble character and gentle strength had a lasting and transformative impact on everyone around her (Javlekar, 2002, 29). With her persistent efforts, Khande Rao soon began accompanying his father on military expeditions and he developed proficiency in martial

skills, marking a significant transformation influenced by Ahilya Bai's strength, wisdom, and love. The Pargana of Kumbher was granted to Ahilya Bai Holkar following the death of her husband, Sbandera on March 19, 1767, during the Battle of Kumbher. Ahilya Bai defended the city against the attacks by Raghunath Rao, showcasing her leadership and military acumen (Bhatnagar, 2020). For ten years, she guided the Holkar dynasty, reinforcing her legacy as a remarkable ruler (Sharma, 1978, 805). Ahilya Bai Holkar was a true embodiment of non-violence and sacrifice, known for her respect and tolerance towards other religions (Bhattacharya, 2015, 25). Despite enduring immense tragedies, loss of her husband, son, and brother-in-law, Ahilya Bai remained unwavering in her sense of duty and responsibility.

4. A Guardian of Temples and Traditions

Ahilya Bai Holkar established numerous charitable institutions, extending even to remote areas of the Maratha Empire. She facilitated Bengali pilgrims by improving the Grand Trunk Road (Calcutta-Gaya) and promoted a pilgrimage to Gaya, making it accessible to Hindus across the country (Sherekar, 2021, 103). In regions affected by Islamic invasions, she undertook the reconstruction of temples that had been destroyed, preserving India's spiritual and cultural heritage. Rebuilding a religious sensibility and the connectivity with the people across North India, she also contributed to the reconstruction of other prominent temples in North India, including those in Ayodhya, Mathura, Kashi, Allahabad, and Gaya (Glushkova, 2016, 18).

Somnath Temple in Kathlawed, Ahilya Bai Holkar oversaw the reconstruction of the Somnath Temple in Kathiawad, which had been destroyed by Mahmud of Ghaznavi (Cumings, 2017, 12). Ahilya Bai generously donated to the Namisharanya, in Hardoi District, Awadh, during the rule of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah (1780-1817) (Kibe, 1939, 1332). She initiated the construction of a road to Badrinath in the Himalayas, easing the journey for pilgrims, and also built shelters to distribute food to support their needs (Pinkney, 2016, 64). She protected the patron deity of Varanasi, rebuilt on the present site in 1777, gilded by the Rajput Singh in 1835 (Pati and Husain, 2023, 17). When her region faced threats, she showed remarkable courage and leadership, even organizing a women's army to defend her land. Throughout her reign, she exercised strict stewardship over the treasury, carefully managing resources to ensure stability. She instilled a strong sense of belongingness and cultural consciousness by emphasizing both military training and education in

them. To recognise the importance of empowering women not just within the household but also in the broader public sphere, she promoted learning that combined practical skills with cultural values. This approach developed a social awareness and their role in society, enabling women to contribute to both domestic and civic life (Bhalodia, 2012, 57). During her reign, she maintained strict control over the treasury, safeguarded the values of Hindu culture, and ensured its widespread propagation across the country (Gardner, 2024, 26). She actively facilitated the pilgrimage routes for Hindu devotees most notably by improving sections of the Grand Trunk Road (particularly the Calcutta–Gaya stretch) thereby easing access to sacred sites such as Gaya for Bengali pilgrims and others across India (Singh, 2023, 12) . These initiatives were beyond her immediate political territory and were part of a broader cultural idea aimed at safeguarding Hindu identity. By addressing the practical difficulties pilgrims faced in accessing religious sites, she sought to uphold and enable the public expression of religious sentiments (Trevithick, 1988, 48). Moreover, in regions that had witnessed the destruction of temples during Islamic invasions, she undertook extensive temple reconstructions, thus playing a crucial role in preserving India's spiritual and cultural heritage. Her efforts reflect an early assertion of cultural nationalism, rooted in religious restoration and community welfare.

5. Conclusion

It is important to highlight that Indian women, even those from deprived sections, historically found space to participate in administrative affairs. Their ability to lead, protect their regions, and uphold cultural values reflects a profound sense of belongingness and commitment to their heritage. This regional assertion of unity and identity eventually contributed to shaping a broader national consciousness, laying the groundwork for cultural nationalism and later in the larger context of India's freedom struggle.

Women from the Maratha rule actively participated in state affairs and were sometimes assigned separate territories, granting them virtual independence in economic matters and considerable autonomy in social decisions, as seen in the case of Jijabai mother of Shivaji, Ahilya Bai Holkar and Gautam Bai. Gautama Bai, wife of Malhar Rao Holkar, exemplified this agency by organizing a grand ceremony in 1775 to honor Malhar Rao's military victory, during which she was ceremonially weighed in gold and showered with gifts a traditional expression of appreciation and prestige. Women of the ruling class during this

period often received liberal education, typically through private tutors, to prepare them for roles in governance and cultural stewardship.

Ahilya Bai displayed extraordinary resilience and strength of character. Rather than mourning her personal losses or unfulfilled aspirations, she chose to channel her energies into constructive leadership, even seeking to influence her husband's outlook in positive ways. Deeply committed to preserving Hindu cultural values, she actively promoted their practice and reverence, fostering their growth and respect throughout the country. Her resilience and dedication not only safeguarded her people but also left an enduring legacy of strength, compassion, and cultural pride. Her initiatives reveal a deep and visionary understanding of the cultural threats posed by the emerging colonial regime, particularly the British policies promoting religious conversion. Recognizing the potential erosion of Hindu traditions, Ahilya Bai took decisive steps to preserve religious and cultural heritage. She focused on restoring and maintaining temples many of which had either fallen into ruin or had been destroyed—thereby safeguarding sacred spaces and ensuring the continuity of Hindu worship and identity. Through these efforts, Ahilya Bai Holkar not only asserted her authority but also emerged as a guardian of cultural and spiritual legacy in a time of significant transition. In true means she can be considered as a women ruler cultural nationalist of early modern India.

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