



The kingdom of Sikkim was founded by the Namgyal dynasty in the 17th century and was ruled by Buddhist priest-kings known as the Chogyal.

The braveheart Holkar

The human heart has always been stirred by tales of valour and adventure, and whenever we hear such stories, we cannot help but look up to those heroes who have chiseled their names onto the stone of history with the weight of their accomplishments. Such legends deserve to be celebrated and remembered for their bravery and all that they have done in the past to make the present better. Here's presenting the saga of one such warrior, **Ahilyabai Holkar**, who changed the course of history for the better.

WARRIORS of INDIA Part 2

Name: Ahilyabai Holkar

Born on: May 31, 1725

Died on: August 13, 1795

Position held: Queen of Indore

Noteworthy achievements: Transformation of Indore; construction of numerous forts, temples, roads, rest houses, etc., in Malwa and the rest of India

Biography to read/watch: Matoshree (book) by Sumitra Mahajan; Devi Ahilya Bai (movie)

The roots of a warrior

An epitome of gallantry and valour, Ahilyabai Holkar was born to a respectable Dhangar family in the small village of Chondi (present-day Ahmednagar), Maharashtra on May 31, 1725. Her father Mankoji Sindhia was the Patil (chief) of the village, who, in his free time, also homeschooled Ahilya since women then had no access to schooling or learning of any sort whatsoever. Though Ahilya greatly admired her father for being her guru, she didn't take such injustices of the society, especially towards women, without putting up a fight. Her passion to raise her voice against discrimination thus, often landed her in trouble. But little did she then know that her very strength of character and resolve to fight inequality would etch her name in the pages of history so deep that she would become an unforgettable and ineradicable part of it for eons to come. Her rise to the ranks of royalty, however, feels like something straight out of a movie. Legend has it that while on his way to Pune, Malhar Rao Holkar, the subedar of Malwa, made a stop in Chondi only to run into the eight-year-old Ahilya at the temple service feeding the underprivileged and hungry. Moved by her piety and righteousness, he, without any second thought, decided to ask her hand in marriage for his son. As such, Ahilya got married to Khande Rao Holkar at the tender age of eight in 1733. In 1745, she gave birth to their son Malerao Holkar, and in 1748, their daughter Muktabai was born. Having raised her children with the same spirit, in what is referred to as the first of many traditions that she was fated to shatter, Ahilya married her daughter to Yashwantrao Phanse, a brave but poor man with no royal lineage, an anomaly in the world of royalty. Ahilya's revolutionary actions, thus, were an early indicator of her rise to fame and had somewhat already cemented her fate to be the fearless queen of Indore.

The sword of a warrior

Her ascent to the throne, howbeit, was filled with thorns. In 1754, her husband died fighting during the siege of Kumher. Seeing her world fall apart thus, she decided to commit sati and end her suffering once and for all, but her father-in-law persuaded her to not give up. He helped her stand her ground and got her military trained as can be noted from her 1765 capture of Gohad fort (near Gwalior) during Abdali's invasion of India. Her good days, however, came with an expiration date. As the old ruler died in 1766, the kingdom fell like a pack of cards. To make matters worse, Ahilya's son Malerao, having ascended the throne post his

grandfather, too died a few months into his rule in 1767. Thus, as fate wiped her entire family, Ahilya, grieving yet undeterred still, picked up her sword and ascended the throne of Indore on December 11, 1767, in a bid to protect her kingdom, her people from the doom that awaited them. Though a section of the kingdom did protest her assumption of power initially, the soldiers of Holkar supported her leadership and made sure to stick by her side come what may. Along with Malhar Rao's adopted son Subedar Tukoji Rao Holkar, the head of military affairs, Ahilya, capable of handling both military and civic matters by now, thus, began managing Malwa in a highly sagacious and enlightened manner, to the point that she even reinstated many who opposed her rule at first. As a never-before-seen monarch, she made it a practice to hold public audiences on a regular basis to help address the grievances of her people, and was always approachable and available for anyone who wanted her assistance. Historical accounts further bear testimony to how she encouraged the prosperity of merchants, farmers, and cultivators in her realm by rejecting any sort of claim to their money, whether through taxes or feudal rights. Under her reign thus, trade flourished to no end, with merchants producing the best of clothes, and the farmers reveling in excess. To compound it, she transformed her capital Maheshwar into a hub of literary, artistic, and industrial achievements by opening doors to famous Marathi poets like Moropant, Shahir Ananataphandi,

etc., and further honouring and paying handsomely to the various craftsmen, sculptors, and artists who were otherwise looked down upon. Her efforts towards the empowerment of women and widows were revolutionary too. She made use of her power to let widows retain their husbands' wealth and adopt a son, things which were otherwise unthinkable in her time and age. On the military front, she launched several campaigns to rid her kingdom of thugs and invaders, at times personally leading her army into the battlefield. As such, when the whole Central India was facing a power struggle, Malwa was never once attacked under her administration. As a model of effective and benevolent government thus, her 28-year-long rule is marked as a golden age in the history of Indore, a time when order prevailed, and people prospered.

The legacy of a warrior

Her list of achievements, however, does not end here! Making progress a keyword of her rule and legacy, she transformed Indore from a tiny village to an affluent and attractive metropolis. She constructed forts and roads in Malwa, funded festivals, and served as a patron for many Hindu temples. Additionally, she erected and embellished numerous temples, ghats, wells, tanks, and rest houses outside of Malwa as well, extending all the way from the Himalayas to the south. In a pilgrimage centers. From Badrinath, Dwarka, Vishwanath to Puri, Gaya, Rameswaram,

every pilgrimage site in India, in one way or another, has a contribution from her. Most notable of all was her restoration of Kashi Vishwanath temple in 1780, 111 years after it was demolished by Aurangzeb. Her endless efforts to reform the Malwa kingdom, however, ended when she left for her heavenly abode on August 13, 1795, to be succeeded by her commander-in-chief and nephew, Tukoji Rao Holkar. Needless to say, thus, many poets and writers were inspired by her life, the way she ruled in a predominantly male-dominated society, and worked for the betterment of all, especially the marginalised. In one such instance, a recent one at that, former Lok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahajan published her book 'Matoshree' (2017) based on the life and times of Ahilya Holkar. Likewise, one can find her mention in an English poem authored and published by the Scottish poet, John Baillie, in 1849. British socialist and author, Annie Besant, too, has made several references to the queen of Indore in her works. Closer to home, the government of India issued a commemorative stamp in her honour on August 25, 1996. In the same year, Indore's leading residents established an award to commemorate her memory further and honour an outstanding public figure in her name every year.

Thus, cherished with deep reverence and often compared to the likes of Catherine II of Russia, Elizabeth I of England, and Margaret I of Denmark, Ahilyabai Holkar was indeed a woman ahead of her time, time that was forced to surrender and transmute at her whim, with a flick of her hand and a fling of her mighty sword!

