
**RAJMATA AHILYABAI HOLKAR: A VISIONARY
REFORMER AND HER LEGACY IN WIDOW SOCIAL
JUSTICE, WITH REFERENCE TO MADHYA PRADESH
WIDOW PENSION SCHEME**

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ABSTRACT

Ahilyabai Holkar or popularly known as the “Rajmata” is one of the most celebrated queens of the Malwa region. She is regarded as one of the most progressive ruler and social reformer in the Indian history. During her reign, lasting 28 years (1767–1795), she not only focused on the construction of temples to promote the religious devotion but her major contributions also include her contribution for the upliftment of the women in her reign specially the widows, Rajmata under-took significant steps for the upliftment of the women and the under-privileged. She was said to be the pioneer who stood out courageously against the oppressive customs of her time, she actively promoted widow re-marriage and challenged the “Sati Pratha”. This research paper will explore the contributions of Rajmata Ahilya for the welfare of the widows, her opposition to the “Sati” and steps for the empowerment of the women during her reign. This paper will also explore how Rajmata’s ideologies remained relevant across different periods of Indian history like during the colonial era, reflection of her thoughts in the Indian Constitution, and even in the recent contemporary time. Although there is no direct linkage between her ideologies with the Constitution of India and even with the current times, but her vision and ideas were way ahead of her times and their essence can be clearly interpreted through various constitutional principles and contemporary social initiatives.

Keywords: Ahilyabai Holkar, Widow, Sati, Pension scheme, upliftment of women

Introduction

“भारत के समूच सात इतिहास मे, मैं स्त्री अहल्यादेवी होलकर का स्थान अद्वितीय मानता हूँ”

आचार्य विनोबा भावे

(The quote written in Hindi is said by Acharya Vinoba Bhave and it roughly translates as “In the entire span of Indian history, I consider the place of Ahilyadevi Holkar, a woman, to be unparalleled.”)

In the 18th century India, the society was said to be patriarchal (heavily male dominated, males taking all the major decisions of the family and being the bread earner for the family) and deeply conservative.¹ There were strict social norms that were aimed to restrict the women’s freedom, like women’s were not allowed to step out of their houses without the prior permission of their husbands, they were only allowed to do the household chores, not allowing them to take part in the decision-making. The condition of women during the 18th-century was harsh, but for the widows, it was even more dire. They were forced to face intense marginalization, social exclusion, and economic deprivation, like they were pushed to live a life of saintly conduct, they were not allowed to take part in any social gatherings, they were not allowed to talk to any stranger men, they were even not allowed to eat anything sweet or savoury. Beyond these harsh restrictions, they were even forced to perform *Sati* (a practice of the self-immolation of widows on their husbands’ funeral pyres)² and the prohibition on widow remarriage was widely prevalent. In the midst of this oppressive social climate, Rajmata Ahilya emerged as a visionary and a symbol of social reform who openly challenged the outdated societal customs, safe-guarding the dignity of the widows.³

Ahilyabai Holkar was born in 1725 in a Maratha family in the village Chaundi (Maharashtra). She was born to the village Patil Mankoji Shinde and her father was also progressive as being a girl she was well-educated in her time; she was later married to Khande Rao Holkar son of the Subedar Malhar Rao Holkar.⁴ However, she became a widow at a very young age of 29 but

¹ R.H. Patil, *The Social Status of Indian Women of Different Periods in the Patriarchal Society*, 5(4) Research Ambition: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal 1-10 (2021).

² *Social Condition of Women During Eighteenth Century in India*, HistoryDiscussion.net, available at: <https://www.historydiscussion.net/history-of-india/social-condition-of-women-during-eighteenth-century-in-india/6043> (last visited April 28, 2025).

³ S.L. Kottewar, *Contribution of Ahilyabai Holkar in Social and Economic Development of Women*, 6(6) International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research 1-6 (2024).

⁴ *Ahilyabai Holkar*, PMF IAS (Mar. 25, 2025), available at: <https://www.pmfias.com/ahilyabai-holkar/> (last

despite the societal expectation from her to perform *Sati*, her father-in-law stopped her from performing sati and appointed her to a significant position in his council due to her intelligence, wit and abilities. Her personal experience as a widow informed her empathy and advocacy for other widows.⁵

Building on the foundations of *Rajmata*, contemporary India has taken several strides towards improving the conditions of the widows in the society. The oppressive practice like “*Sati*” was legally abolished, recognizing it as a regressive and immoral practice⁶, the Widow Remarriage Act was passed paving a way for the societal upliftment of the widows.⁷ Also today, both, the central government and the state governments (including Madhya Pradesh) have their own schemes relating to providing pension to the widows for their economic upliftment. This paper will explore *Rajmata*’s reforms for widows, and will also examine the current pension scheme for widows provided by the central government and by the state government of Madhya Pradesh.

Significance of this Study

The aim of this study is to shed light on the visionary contributions of Ahilyabai Holkar for the upliftment of the vulnerable groups, especially the widows. This research seeks to highlight that how her vision, ideas and thoughts related to dignity, inclusion and justice were way ahead of her time. Her legacy is not just historical, it’s still very relevant in the modern-day framework. Through this research I tried to interpret the ideologies of *Rajmata* showing their relevance even in the contemporary India. While much of the existing scholarship majorly focused on the contributions of *Rajmata* in the 18th century India, but this research goes a step further and is aimed to show how her vision and ideologies can still be traced through government policies and welfare schemes. Her vision is a living framework that continues to influence modern legislative and social efforts aiming at betterment of the marginalised

visited April 29, 2025).

⁵ Girish Pidadi, *Ahilyabai Holkar: A Journey from Widowhood to Sovereign Ruler*, Local Guides Connect (May 31, 2024), available at: <https://www.localguidesconnect.com/t/ahilyabai-holkar-a-journey-from-widowhood-to-sovereign-ruler/408635> (last visited April 28, 2025).

⁶ Afreen Afshar Alam & Suranya Sengupta, *Sati: A Journey from Implementation to Abolishment*, SSRN (Dec. 1, 2023), available at: <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4691814>.

⁷ Dr. Emmanuel Janagan Johnson and Shyamala, *Widow Remarriage: A New Dimension of Social Change in India*, 2(3) International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences 195–205 (2012), Research India Publications.

communities, including widows.

***Rajmata's* Defiance against *Sati* and advocacy for Widow welfare**

After the death of her husband, her father-in-law dissuaded her from performing *sati* and this act set a precedent for rejecting the mal-practice of *sati*. After the deaths of both her father-in-law and her son Malerao Holkar, *Rajmata* ascended the throne of Holkar dynasty, becoming the queen of Malwa. and as a ruler, she actively opposed the practice of “*sati*” in her kingdom. She even offered support and protection to the widows, ensuring that they were not coerced to perform *sati*.⁸ By rejecting such evil practices, she tried shifting the societal attitudes within her realm.⁹

Beyond challenging the practice of “*sati*”, *Rajmata* also introduced many drastic reforms that were considered as way ahead of her times, like allowing and encouraging widow re-marriage, providing economic and social support to the widows like providing them loans, land grants, vocational trainings, etc, so that the widows can live a dignified life.¹⁰ She even encouraged the widows to participate in the public life. She was an educated ruler, so she took the initiative of establishing schools to promote education for the women, including the widows.¹¹ She also played an important role in laying the foundation of the “*Maheshwari* handlooms” industry aiming to create employment for the women. She was so attached with the idea that she personally uses to train the women the art of weaving the saree and even she personally designed the first saree¹², her vision was to make the women self-independent.

In the contemporary India also, there are several centrally governed as well as state governed programs that focuses on the upliftment of the women in the society but these policies are majorly scattered. *Rajmata's* policies of social upliftment for the women are an example of a beautiful governance and serves as a model for the empowerment of women. While there are no direct links to the recent developments in this area, her ideologies remain highly relevant

⁸ Ruby Mishra, *Ahilyabai Holkar: A Legacy of Empowerment and Inclusivity*, Chintan India Foundation (Oct. 16, 2024), available at: <https://chintan.indiafoundation.in/articles/ahilyabai-holkar-a-legacy-of-empowerment-and-inclusivity/> (last visited April 28, 2025).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Supra* note 8

¹¹ Shawrina Salam, *Ahilyabai Holkar: The Brave Maratha Queen Who Championed Women's Education and Empowerment*, *Feminism in India* (Mar. 1, 2022).

¹² Rahul Patwa, "The Story of Maheshwari Handloom Sarees" (Maheshwar Handloom, 8 May 2023), available at: <https://bit.ly/432bbPB> (last visited May 13, 2025)

for the contemporary studies.

Linking the ideologies of *Rajmata* with the modern times

a. During Colonial rule

The ideologies of *Rajmata* related to social justice, women's empowerment, and economic inclusivity were way ahead of her times and resonates strongly with the modern times. Long before the colonial intervention, she was the one who openly opposed the regressive practice of *Sati* and took steps for the social upliftment of the widows by actively showing her support for widow re-marriage. Later during the British period, her ideologies saw a reflection when the Britishers abolished the "*Sati Pratha*" through the Regulation XVII of 1829 and even for breaking the age-old tradition that widows aren't allow to remarry, the Britishers passed a regulation "The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act" in 1856 which aimed at the social upliftment of the widows.

b. Post-independence & Indian Constitution

Post-independence, her ideologies can even be very well traced in the Constitution of India, like her commitments towards a dignified life for vulnerable groups, including widows in the society, equality and non-discrimination can be traced through Article-21, 14, 15, 17 and 19. Her commitments for education and equal work opportunities for women can be traced through Article-21A , Article 39 (a) and Article 39 (d) and other than these articles, Article 41 imposes a duty on the State that the State need to ensure public assistance for those facing unemployment, old age, sickness, and other hardships, aligning perfectly with the thought school of *Rajmata Ahilyabai*.

c. Present Day

In the present day, her legacy continues through various welfare initiatives for the widows like the pension schemes: "*Indira Gandhi Widow Pension Scheme*"¹³ (central) supplemented by the schemes of the state governments like the "*Mukhyamantri Kalyani Pension Yojana*"¹⁴ (M.P.).

¹³ Ministry of Rural Development, *Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme*, myScheme, available at: <https://www.myscheme.gov.in/schemes/ignwps> (last visited May 1, 2025).

¹⁴ Department of Social Justice and Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, Government of Madhya Pradesh, *Mukhyamantri Kalyani Pension Yojana*, myScheme, available at: <https://www.myscheme.gov.in/schemes/mkppy> (last visited May 1, 2025).

these schemes were designed to uplift the condition of the widows in the society, especially the widows belonging to the economically weaker sections. In the year 2009, the central government introduced the “*Indira Gandhi Widow Pension Scheme*” with an intention of providing financial assistance and social security to the widows falling under the poverty line, this scheme aimed to provide a pension amount of ₹ 300/ per month to the widows between 40-79 years and ₹ 500/- per month to widows who are 80 years and above. Similarly, the Madhya Pradesh government also introduced their scheme “*Mukhyamantri Kalyani Pension Yojana*” in the year 2018 through which the government grants ₹ 600/ per month to the widows in M.P. who belongs to the Below Poverty Line group. Here it is also important to understand that as per the conditions of the *Kalyani Pension Yojna* a widow can only avail the benefits from any one scheme and cannot get the benefits of both the schemes together.¹⁵ Several other Indian States like Uttar Pradesh¹⁶, Delhi¹⁷, Haryana¹⁸, etc, have also introduced their schemes for the welfare of widows. These schemes by the government recognises that the widows also have a “Right of Dignified life” in the society which was also the major idea of *Rajmata* that is to provide economic support to the widows so that they can be financially independent.

Challenges and Suggestions

While conducting the research for this paper, several challenges emerged when comparing *Rajmata’s* initiatives with the modern-day contemporary welfare schemes. *Rajmata’s* initiatives were effective because she personally oversaw their execution, ensuring that the benefits reach the intended recipients, but the modern days schemes like widow pension schemes often fail due to corruption and lack of awareness. Many widows in the rural areas still aren’t aware regarding such benefits.¹⁹ Then, Ahilyabai’s kingdom was small thus she has a strong governance and has a personal touch for the schemes, but if we look in the current situations, India is a big country and adding that personal touch in governance is impossible. Her efforts to reintegrate widows into society were groundbreaking, but today, not just in the

¹⁵ District Khargone, Government of Madhya Pradesh, *Chief Minister Kalyani Pension Scheme*, available at: <https://khargone.nic.in/en/scheme/chief-minister-kalyani-pension-scheme/> (last visited May 1, 2025).

¹⁶ Government of Uttar Pradesh, *Integrated Social Pension Portal (SSPY UP)*, available at: <https://sspy-up.gov.in/> (last visited May 2, 2025).

¹⁷ Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi, *Delhi Pension Scheme to Women in Distress (Widow Pension)*, available at: <https://www.myscheme.gov.in/schemes/dpswdwp> (last visited May 2, 2025).

¹⁸ Haryana Government, *Widow Pension Scheme*, available at: <https://haryana.gov.in/scheme/widow-pension-scheme/> (last visited May 4, 2025).

¹⁹ S.S. Singh, *Elderly Have Low Awareness About Welfare Schemes, Says India Ageing Report 2023*, *The Hindu* (Sept. 29, 2023).

rural areas but even in the urban areas, the widows are stigmatized.²⁰ Also, her reforms were inclusive that is for the widows of all the age-groups and holistic combining economic support, vocational trainings, social acceptance, and legal rights.²¹ Modern initiatives tend to be fragmented, focusing only on one aspect that is pension while other aspects like emotional support, social integration, job opportunities, etc. are often neglected.

Based on the challenges, the following recommendations can be proposed:

1. Creating awareness regarding the government schemes related to the widows to the masses so that everyone can avail the benefits.
2. The Madhya Pradesh government offers a monthly pension of ₹600, this amount is comparatively less if compared with states like Uttar Pradesh (₹1,000), Rajasthan (₹1,500), and Gujarat (₹1,250). The state government should revise the amount of grant based on the rising cost of living standards in the recent times.
3. The Madhya Pradesh government pension scheme is restricted only to the widows aged 40–79 years, excluding younger widows outside of its purview, *Rajmata* focused on an inclusive and holistic development of the widows irrespective of their age. The Madhya Pradesh government can expand the scheme benefits to the younger widows also ensuring alignment with the ideologies of *Rajmata*.
4. The government should try to adopt a holistic approach for the welfare of the widows like *Rajmata* did in her times by not just focusing on providing financial support, but by focusing on their holistic development.
5. Only Below Poverty Line (BPL) families are eligible in Madhya Pradesh to avail benefits of the scheme. This restricts access for many other widows who do not belong to the BPL status, but are need of some assistance.
6. The government should actively promote the ideas and contributions of *Rajmata*, especially her progressive efforts for the upliftment of widows. Integrating her legacy

²⁰ Madhurima Paul & Swapan Das, *The Silent Struggle: Psychological Impact of Widowhood on the Life of Women in India*, 10 International Journal of Science and Research Archive 304–315 (2023).

²¹ *Supra* note 11

into educational content, public awareness campaigns, and policy discourse can play a crucial role in transforming societal attitudes towards widows.

Conclusion

Ahilyabai Holkar is considered one of the most progressive queens in the Indian history, her reign was said to be transformative for widows, she took many transformative steps to enhance their living conditions by adapting a holistic development approach. She openly opposed the “*Sati Pratha*” during her time and was in support of widow remarriage. She laid an early foundation for the women’s rights movement in India by ensuring their economic and social rehabilitation. Her vision continues to resonate even today. While there may not be direct linkages between her ideologies and modern-day legal or welfare frameworks, the essence of her vision can clearly be interpreted through constitutional values such as equality, justice, and human dignity, and through the government economic support policies like the Indira Gandhi Widow Pension Scheme and the *Mukhyamantri Kalyani Pension Yojana*.

The *Indira Gandhi Widow Pension Scheme* and the *Mukhyamantri Kalyani Pension Yojana*, focus on help the widows by supporting them with a fixed monthly aid. However, there are still significant implementation gaps to create a large reach of the government programs. To align with the ideologies of *Rajmata*, it becomes important to look into the implementation of the programs and schemes closely. Additionally, Ahilyabai not only focused on providing economic assistance to the widows but she also encouraged them to participate in various skill-development programs and vocational trainings, ensuring their overall development and providing them with livelihood options. In the contemporary India, the governments majorly focus on providing financial assistance to the widows neglecting the other important aspects but *Rajmata*’s “Holistic Approach Model” can be served as a “Best Practice model” today. The government agencies and the private sectors can work in a partnership to create certain opportunities designed specifically for the widows.

Her ideologies have no direct connection with the current programs of the governments designed for the betterment of women in the society, but as India is evolving, its journey towards an equitable future should be based on the idea of “inclusion of everyone” and to achieve this goal it becomes important to incorporate the ideas of Ahilyabai Holkar in our policies related to women welfare. If we incorporate her beliefs in our policies and social systems today, it will be an honour to her memory and it will help improve women’s rights.