

The Many Histories of Women's Power

TNIE newindianexpress.com/magazine/2026/Oct/25/the-many-histories-of-womens-power

Dr Vikram Sampath

October 25, 2026

[Magazine](#)

Simone de Beauvoir's ideas remain important to understanding modern feminism. But they need not be the only lens through which we examine women's lives



Illustration for representation

When we speak of the history of feminism, the conversation often begins in the West —with Mary Wollstonecraft, the suffragettes, and Simone de Beauvoir, whose *The Second Sex* examined how society shapes the condition of being a woman. These contributions are indispensable. But they are not the whole story. India's past offers other histories of women who exercised intellectual authority, commanded armies or governed states, often centuries before modern feminism acquired its present vocabulary.

The Vedic seers Lopamudra, Gargi, Maithreyi, and Ghosha, rulers such as Didda and Kota Rani of Kashmir, Rudrama Devi of Warangal, Chand Bibi of Ahmednagar, and Rani Abbakka of Ullal all belong to this wider story.

One name that deserves a place in this conversation, but rarely receives the attention it merits, is Ahilya Bai Holkar, the 18th-century ruler of Indore. Married into the Holkar family while still a child, she benefited from the foresight of her father-in-law, Malhar Rao Holkar, who recognised her intelligence and ensured that she received an education unusual for a woman of her time. Alongside religious texts, she learnt warfare, accounting, statecraft, and administration. These lessons would prove consequential when personal tragedies thrust her into the centre of political life.

Her husband, Khande Rao, was killed in battle, leaving her widowed at 21. While his other wives committed sati, Ahilya Bai did not, partly because her father-in-law recognised her administrative abilities and considered her indispensable to the state. After Malhar Rao's death, her son Male Rao succeeded him but died within a year. The Holkar state was left facing a question that went beyond succession: could a woman claim the right to rule in her own name?

Her minister Gangadhar Yashwant Chandrachur advised the adoption of a male heir. Ahilya Bai refused to surrender her claim. Raghunath Rao, the Peshwa's uncle, considered marching against her with a large army. Ahilya sought the support of other Maratha chiefs and prepared to defend her position. According to accounts of the episode, she assembled around 500 women, had them trained in warfare and declared herself ready to lead them into battle. Her message to Raghunath Rao was pointed: making war on a woman might bring him disgrace, but no honour. The strategy worked and the invasion did not materialise.

But her achievement was not confined to the question of succession. During nearly three decades of rule, Ahilya Bai built an accessible and conscientious administration and a true welfare state. She heard and resolved grievances on a daily basis, maintained a relatively moderate approach to taxation and defended the rights of individuals to their property. Historical accounts record that she returned to widows property that the state had appropriated after their husbands died without heirs. At a time when women's economic security could be precarious, this was a consequential exercise of royal authority.

She understood power as carrying obligations. She saw herself as answerable to God alone for its exercise, and her religious devotion informed her sense of duty towards her subjects. But this sense extended beyond her human subjects. Accounts of her daily life describe food and water being provided for birds, stray animals, and fish near the Narmada ghats she visited for her ritual baths. Roads were lined with shady trees, and wells were dug at intervals to provide water to travellers.

Her legacy extended beyond Indore. She supported the construction and restoration of temples destroyed in Islamic invasions and attacks, pilgrim facilities, river ghats, and rest houses across the subcontinent. She encouraged artisans and weavers to settle in Maheshwar, helping establish a weaving tradition of the Maheshwari saris that continues to define the town.

The temples that she got constructed—from Srinagar, Haridwar, Kedarnath, Badrinath, Rishikesh, Prayag, Kashi Vishwanath, Naimisharanya, Puri, Rameshwaram to Somnath, Nasik, Omkareshwar, Mahabaleshwar, Pune, Indore, Srisailem, Udupi, Gokarna, Kathmandu—united the subcontinent in a unique, sacred

manner through a shared cultural geography. And all of this done with finesse and dignity, without conflicts and bloodshed, but from the quiet strength of character and soft power of diplomacy—negotiating and securing lands to build temples even from Nawabs of Awadh or Bhopal and the Nizam of Hyderabad. Much of this work was being done even as 18th-century India was marked by bloody wars of succession and expanding European power. It was also a century of dramatic political upheaval elsewhere. The American colonies declared their independence in 1776, and the French Revolution began in 1789. Ahilya Bai's world was very different from these. Yet the events unfolded within the same broad historical period, reminding us how selectively histories can establish which experiences become universal reference points.

It would be easy, and tempting, to call Ahilya Bai a feminist. But the label can tell us less than we might imagine if it becomes a substitute for understanding her own time. She left no manifesto for women's emancipation, but led by example, creating a unique Indic model of leadership. Her public works and institutions outlived her, and her memory remains vivid in Maheshwar. Her image is still carried in weekly palanquin processions to the temples associated with her patronage. Families continue to offer invitations to auspicious occasions at the darbar of Ma Saheb, while the Sahasralinga puja associated with her reign continues to this day. Such practices suggest the depth of the affection and respect she continues to command.

Simone de Beauvoir's ideas remain important to understanding modern feminism. But they need not be the only lens through which we examine women's lives. Ahilya Bai Holkar reminds us that women's power has taken different forms in different civilisations. The task is not to find a Western label for Ahilya Bai, but to understand her on her own terms—and to make room for her in the global history of women's power.

vikram.sampath@fihcr.com