

“For thirty years her reign of peace,
The land in blessing did increase,
And she was blessed by every tongue,
By stern and gentle, old and young.
Yea, even the children at their mother’s feet,
Are taught such homely rhyming to repeat.
In latter days from Brahma came,
To rule our land, a noble dame,
Kind was her heart and bright her fame,
And Ahilya was her honored name.”

Hello and welcome back to *World Herstory*, the podcast that discovers the lives and legacies of lesser-known, badass women from around the world and throughout history. I’m your host, Tabitha Bear, a traveling multimedia specialist with a passion for exploring the hidden tales of the amazing women who have helped shape our lives today.

In the vast canvas of 18th-century India, where tradition waltzed with transformation, Ahilya Bai Holkar emerged as a luminary, casting her indelible silhouette across the pages of history. In this episode, we’re going to dive into the rich legacy of Ahilya Bai, navigating through the corridors of her rule, sway with the intricate dance of women’s roles, and engulf ourselves in the complicated symphony of Indian-British relations during this epoch.

Ahilya Bai ascended to the throne after the death of her husband and son. Her reign, under the auspices of the Holkar dynasty, marked a chapter of strategic brilliance and benevolent governance. She was a sovereign with an artist’s soul, and not only ruled with wisdom, but became a poetic architect, sculpting the cultural landscape of the Malwa region.

In the intricate dance between tradition and progress, women in 18th-century India pirouetted through societal expectations, leaving an ethereal imprint on the socio-cultural stage. We’ll do our best to choreograph the narratives of women during this period, with Ahilya Bai Holkar as a prima donna, gracefully leading the ensemble. Her leadership becomes a sonnet of empowerment, echoing through the halls of time.

The 18th century witnessed a duet of Indian and British interests, a dance of diplomacy, commerce and cultural exchange. We’ll seek to understand the interaction between Indian rulers and the East India Company, analyzing the evolving rhythms that defined this complex relationship. The resulting cultural dynamics resonate through history, reshaping the identity of both nations.

We'll also dive into the Mughal and Maratha empires. Both stand as two formidable threads, each weaving its narrative of power, ambition, and conflict.

The Mughal Empire, once the zenith of cultural splendor, found itself ensnared in a tumultuous era marked by internal strife and external pressures. The decline of the Mughal authority provided fertile ground for the ascendance of regional powers, and amid this shifting landscape, the Maratha Empire emerged with a spirited dance of conquest.

The Marathas, under the strategic leadership of figures like Shivaji and later rulers, sought to expand their dominion, laying claim to territories that once fell under the Mughal sway. The confluence of these two empires resulted in a dynamic and often tumultuous interplay, marked by military engagements, territorial disputes, and strategic maneuvers that would shape the destiny of the Indian subcontinent.

The clash between Mughal and Maratha empires becomes a captivating chapter in the chronicles of Indian history, where the echoes of conflicting ambitions resonate through the corridors of time.

As we travel the verses of history, Ahilya Bai Holkar's life and reign illuminate the pages with wisdom and cultural opulence. Through the careful composition of archival melodies, historical ballads, and the delicate stroke of the brush, this episode endeavors to unveil the poetic forces that contributed pieces to the collage of 18th-century India.

The Mughal Empire, a radiant jewel in the crown of Indian history, traces its origins to the early 16th century when the formidable Babur, a descendent of Timur and Genghis Khan, laid the foundation for what would become one of the most splendid empires in the world.

Babur's victory at the Battle of Panipat in 1526 marked the establishment of the Mughal Empire in the Indian subcontinent. Under the rule of successive emperors, notably Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb, the empire reached its zenith during the 16th and 17th centuries.

Akbar, renowned for his policy of religious tolerance and administrative reforms, fostered a period of cultural flourishing known as the Akbari Renaissance. The architectural marvels of the Taj Mahal and the Red Fort, constructed during Shah Jahan's reign, symbolize the opulence and grandeur of the Mughal era.

However, by the late 17th century, the empire faced internal struggles, including religious tensions and economic challenges. The reign of Aurangzeb, marked by military campaigns and a strict adherence to orthodox Islamic principles, further strained the fabric of the empire.

The 18th century witnessed the gradual decline of the Mughal Empire, as subsequent rulers struggled to navigate the complex political landscape. The empire became increasingly decentralized, with regional powers gaining prominence.

The Nadir Shah's invasion in 1739, resulting in the sacking of Delhi, dealt a severe blow to Mughal prestige. The later Mughal emperors, often mere puppets in the hands of powerful nobles, struggled to maintain control over their territories.

As the 18th century unfolded, the Mughal Empire found itself grappling with internal disintegration, external invasions, and the emergence of ambitious regional powers, notably the Marathas and the Sikhs.

The once-glorious Mughal reign, which had spanned over two centuries, gradually faded into the pages of history. Nevertheless, the cultural legacy, artistic achievements, and architectural marvels of the Mughal Empire endure as a testament to a golden era that left an unforgettable mark on the Indian subcontinent.

The Maratha Empire, born amidst the rugged landscapes of Maharashtra, traces its origins to the late 17th century. Established by the visionary warrior-king Shivaji in 1674, the Maratha swiftly became a force to be reckoned with in the political kaleidoscope of India. Shivaji's military acumen and administrative reforms laid the foundation for an empire that would rise to prominence in the 18th century.

Under the leadership of Shivaji's descendants, particularly the capable leaders like Sambhaji and Rajaram, the Maratha Empire expanded its territories across the Deccan and Central India. The military brilliance of Shivaji's generals, notably the Peshwas (Prime Ministers), played a pivotal role in extending Maratha influence. The establishment of the Ashta Pradhan, a council of eight ministers, further streamlined governance, contributing to the empire's stability.

The zenith of Maratha power was realized during the rule of Shahu and the Peshwa Balaji Vishwanath in the early 18th century. Their strategic alliances and military campaigns saw the Marathas reach unprecedented territorial expanses, from the Deccan to the north, encompassing large parts of the Indian subcontinent. From 1720 - 1740, the Maratha Empire

grew from 3% to 30% of modern day India, just to give you an idea of how massive their growth was.

Amidst this backdrop, Ahilya Bai Holkar emerged as a luminous figure in the Maratha narrative. As the queen and ruler of the Malwa region, she personified effective governance and cultural patronage. Her rule, characterized by justice and benevolence, added a unique chapter to the Maratha legacy. Ahilya Bai's architectural contributions, including construction of temples and ghats, reflect the empire's vibrant cultural milieu.

However, the latter half of the 18th century marked a period of decline for the Maratha Empire. Internal conflicts, power struggles among Maratha chieftains, and external threats from the British East India Company hastened the unraveling of Maratha power. The Third Battle of Panipat in 1761 proved to be a catastrophic setback, where the Marathas suffered a significant defeat at the hands of Ahmad Shah Durrani.

In the aftermath of the Panipat, the Maratha Empire struggled to reclaim its former glory. The empire fragmented, with various Maratha chiefs asserting regional autonomy. The ascendancy of the British further diminished Maratha influence, leading to the eventual subjugation of its territories.

The Maratha Empire, with its rise and fall, remains a remarkable chapter in Indian history. While the peak of Maratha power is celebrated, the decline serves as a poignant reminder of the complex forces shaping the destiny of empires in the ever-evolving landscape of 18th-century India.

Ahilya Bai Holkar's rule, amidst this grand narrative, stands as a testament to the cultural and administrative richness that defined the Maratha era.

The rise and fall of the East India Company in the 18th century played a pivotal role in reshaping the political landscape of the Indian subcontinent, contributing significantly to the decline of both the Mughal and Maratha empires.

The East India Company, established in 1600, initially sought to engage in trade with the Indian subcontinent. However, over the years, its ambitions evolved beyond commerce. The company gradually transformed into a powerful political and military entity, establishing its presence along the Indian coastlines.

The East India Company became the largest corporation in the world. They accounted for half of the world's trade and even had over 260,000 troops - double the size of the British army at the time.

The Battle of Plassey in 1757, where the British East India Company secured victory over the Nawab of Bengal, marked a turning point. The subsequent Battle of Buxar in 1764 further solidified British control, granting the company significant territorial and economic concessions.

The Mughal Empire, already in decline during the 18th century, faced challenges from the East India Company's expansionist agenda. The company capitalized on the internal struggle within the Mughal administration and regional power strugglers, gradually encroaching upon Mughal territories.

The Mughal rulers, reduced to symbolic figures, became increasingly dependent on the British for support. The Company's systematic erosion of Mughal authority culminated in the formal end of the empire with the annexation of Delhi in 1803.

Similarly, the Maratha Empire found itself entangled in conflicts with the East India Company. The two powers clashed in the Anglo-Maratha Wars, with the pivotal Third Battle of Panipat in 1761 altering the power dynamics.

Although the Marathas initially resisted British encroachments, internal divisions and the superior military strategies of the British proved detrimental. The Treaty of Salbai in 1782 and the subsequent treaties further curtailed Maratha sovereignty, marking the beginning of the end for the once-mighty empire.

The East India Company's policies, characterized by economic exploitation, land annexation, and the imposition of unfair treaties, exacerbated the decline of both empires. The Doctrine of Lapse, introduced by Lord Dalhousie in the mid-19th century, enabled the annexation of princely states that lacked direct heirs, further diminishing indigenous powers.

The Company's economic dominance, coupled with its military might, tilted the balance in favor of the British, hastening the erosion of traditional power structures.

The East India Company's legacy endures as a symbol of colonial exploitation and the transformative impact of European powers on Indian history. Its activities significantly contributed to the political fragmentation and decline of indigenous empires. The subsequent

transfer of control from the East India Company to the British Crown in 1858 marked a new chapter in Indian history, leading to the formal establishment of the British Raj.

All this to say, the East India Company's ascent and consolidation of power were instrumental in reshaping the destinies of the Mughal and Maratha empires.

In regard to women and their roles...

In 18th-century India, the experiences of women were wrapped in complex traditions, restrictions and limited opportunities. Understanding the status of women during this era requires exploration into various facets, including education, societal norms, the practice of sati, and the scope of their aspirations.

Educational opportunities for women in 18th-century India were often constrained by prevailing societal norms. The majority of women, particularly in conservative households, had limited access - if any at all - to formal education.

However, in certain progressive circles, especially among the upper classes, some women did receive education in literature, music, dance, and sometimes even academic subjects. Royal courts and wealthy families occasionally patronized female poets, scholars, and artists, providing a glimpse into the intellectual potential that existed.

Societal norms during this period were deeply rooted in traditional structures that delineated distinct roles for men and women. Women were primarily assigned domestic duties, with their primary roles revolving around family, marriage, and child-rearing.

The joint family system was prevalent, and women often played crucial roles in maintaining familial bonds. However, these roles were defined within the parameters of patriarchal expectations, limiting women's agency in public affairs.

One of the most glaring and controversial practices of the time was sati, the ritual self-immolation of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres. While the prevalence of sati varied across regions and communities, its occurrence reflected the entrenched societal norms that subjugated women to the extent of self-sacrifice.

Sati was often associated with notions of honor, virtue, and societal expectations, making it a deeply complex and contested aspect of 18th-century Indian society.

Despite heavy societal restrictions, some women in the 18th century managed to carve out spaces for themselves, contributing to the arts, literature, and even political arenas. Notable examples include poets like Mirabai, whose devotional compositions transcended traditional norms, and Razia Sultana, who briefly ruled as the Sultan of Delhi in the 13th century.

In the 18th century, the Mughal princess Zeb-un-Nisa and our woman of the hour, Ahilya Bai Holkar, stand out as exemplars of women who wielded influence beyond the domestic sphere.

Women's aspirations during this period were often channeled through familial or marital success. While some managed to transcend societal expectations through art, literature, or political acumen, these opportunities were often exceptions rather than the norm. The 18th century laid the groundwork for evolving perspectives on women's roles, but the struggle for gender equality persisted as a complex interplay between tradition and societal progress.

In essence, the 18th-century Indian society imposed significant limitations on women's education, societal roles, and aspirations. However, the era also witnessed instances of resilience, where certain women transcended these limitations to contribute meaningfully to various spheres of life.

The dichotomy between tradition and the seeds of change planted during this period set the stage for the evolving role of women in subsequent centuries.

Fast forward to present-day India...

Women in contemporary India are increasingly participating in the workforce across various sectors. The growth of the technology industry, service sectors, and entrepreneurial ventures has provided more opportunities for women to pursue careers and economic independence. However, there are still challenges such as gender wage gaps and underrepresentation in leadership roles that persist and need attention.

Access to education for women has improved significantly. More girls are enrolling in schools and pursuing higher education, narrowing the gender gap in literacy rates. Education empowerment has contributed to changing societal attitudes and fostering a generation of women who aspire to professional success.

While women's representation in politics has increased, there is still a need for greater gender parity. Women have held significant political offices, including the position of the President and Prime Minister. However, women's political participation varies across regions, and efforts to ensure great representation continue.

India has seen legal reforms aimed at protecting women's rights and ensuring their safety. Legislation addressing issues such as domestic violence, dowry, and sexual harassment has been enacted. However, challenges remain in the effective implementation of these laws and in changing societal attitudes.

Women in India are actively participating in social change and activism. Grassroots movements and online campaigns have highlighted issues such as gender-based violence, discrimination, and the need for gender equality. Social media platforms have become powerful tools for advocacy and awareness.

Despite progress, women in India still face challenges. Gender-based violence, discrimination, and cultural expectations can impede their full participation in various spheres. Issues like female infanticide, child marriage, and unequal access to resources in certain regions persist and require ongoing efforts for eradication.

Family dynamics are evolving with changing societal norms. There is a gradual shift towards more egalitarian family structures, where women have greater agency in decision-making. However, traditional expectations related to caregiving and familial roles still influence many households.

Improvements in women's health have been notable, with increased awareness about maternal health, reproductive rights, and access to healthcare. However, challenges related to maternal mortality, female foeticide, and the healthcare disparities in certain regions remain.

The role of women in India today is marked by progress in various domains, including education, economic participation, and legal empowerment. HOWEVER, persistent challenges and disparities highlight the need for continued efforts to achieve true gender equality.

Women's empowerment is a multifaceted endeavor that requires not only legal reforms but also changes in societal attitudes, cultural norms, and economic structures. Ongoing advocacy, education, and policy initiatives are crucial for creating an environment where women can fully realize their potential and contribute to all aspects of society.

Before we continue our episode - we just wanted to let you know we are on the social media! You can find us @ world herstory on nearly every platform. We're also on Patreon - Patreon dot com slash world herstory. Don't forget to rate and review us, it gives us an ego boost when you tell us how much you love listening to my voice.

On May 31, 1725, Ahilya Bai Holkar was born in the village of Chondi in Maharashtra, India. Her early life was deeply influenced by the Maratha culture, and she displayed exceptional qualities that would shape her destiny.

Her father was the leader of their village and taught his daughter how to read and write. While no one knows for sure how Ahilya ingratiated herself into the Holkar family, the legend goes that she was eight years old, and was seen helping the homeless and hungry at a local temple. Malhar Rao Holkar was traveling through and saw her. He asked for her hand in marriage for his son. She was married in 1733 to Khanderao. She was eight and he was ten.

Her father-in-law was a military opportunist. She grew up going into battles regularly with her husband and father-in-law. As she got a little older, she was known to ride an elephant into battle wielding several bows and quivers.

Her mother-in-law, Gautama Bai, continued her education in politics, administration, and instilled a strong sense of values.

There isn't too much to say about her upbringing other than she was in multiple military campaigns and was a skilled warrior with the Maratha army. In 1754, while her husband Khanderao was inspecting his troops, he was killed by a cannonball. Her father-in-law, Malhar Rao, prevented her from committing sati - the practice of a widow throwing herself upon her husband's funeral pyre.

Moving forward, Malhar Rao continued to educate her in military strategy and entrusted her to run military campaigns on her own.

In 1766, Malhar Rao passed away leaving the Malwa region to Ahilya's son. Unfortunately, a few months later in 1767, Ahilya's son passed away, and there was no one left to rule - so Ahilya petitioned herself as the next best option.

The whole Maratha army supports her. She has fought alongside them, and led them through successful military campaigns, they trust her implicitly.

Now, her father-in-law and son's right-hand man steps forward and says, "Adopt me as your son and then I can rule the kingdom."

Ahilya was like, "Nah. Pass."

He allied himself with a neighboring kingdom and leader and borrowed their army to lead against Ahilya to fight for the throne. She found out about the army's encampment from her spies and rallies the Maratha army - you know - the entire army that is supporting her ascension to the throne? That Maratha army.

She shows up to the battlefield, with this army, and meets Mr. Right-Hand Man with her entourage of female bodyguards, and this guy completely back pedals.

He apologizes and says he was just trying to share his condolences regarding the loss of her husband and son. His borrowed army retreats, and he's arrested.

Ahilya was an accessible ruler throughout her thirty years. She held daily audiences and made sure she was available to anyone who wished to see her. She donated in excess to charity, and used the Holkar's stash of cash to fund her personal expenses, and not public cash.

How much cash are we talking about? Well, in 1750, the Holkar fortune was worth about \$1,924,150 USD. Today, that is worth \$92,222,724 USD. Ahilya was sitting on a mountain of coin and she built up her region.

Her capital city, Maheshwar, was an artist's paradise. She encouraged literature, art, music, and so forth. She was a massive patron of the arts and supported many artists, musicians, and scholars. Maheshwar even established a textile industry, which is now home to Maheshwar Sari's.

She invested heavily in infrastructure development and renovation projects. This included temples, roads, wells, ghats, et cetera.

She established a fair and impartial judicial system prioritizing justice and protecting individual rights. She focused on social welfare, supporting widows, orphans, and those who struggled economically.

And to no surprise, she funded women's education and women's rights.

Ahilya encouraged everyone to be the best version of themselves, and it created this amazing positive and supportive culture in her kingdom.

While she was involved in many military campaigns, during her rule she wasn't heavily involved militarily speaking. She prevented raiders from attacking her people and kingdom,

and often struck commerce deals with them so both sides could profit from business instead of both losing people in battle.

After she passed away on August 13, 1775, even Europeans noted the loss of her as a ruler. Her people were devastated because she cared so much for their well-being. For their progress. For the harmony of how amazing human beings could be.

And if you'll notice, we talked a lot about what was going on in India. Between the Mughal decline, the Maratha kind of hanging in there, and the East India Company making its way through the Indian subcontinent, there was bloodshed everywhere. There was famine, and drought and over 2 million civilians died in war-torn villages.

And yet, the Malwa region of Maratha thrived under Ahilya Bai's rule for thirty years.

There are statues and paintings of Ahilya Bai throughout India in honor of her memory. She's still fondly remembered as a feminist icon and fantastic ruler in Indian history.

This episode has taken us on a captivating journey through the intricate 18th-century India, where the destinies of empires were shaped by a complex interplay of power, politics, and cultural dynamics. As we reflect on the Mughal Empire, the Maratha Empire, and the formidable rise of the East India Company, the threads of history intertwine to reveal a landscape in flux, where tradition collided with transformation.

The Mughal Empire, once the radiant jewel of the subcontinent, found itself caught in the ebb and flow of internal strife and external pressures. The grandeur of its cultural legacy, embodied in architectural marvels and artistic achievements, became a poignant echo of an era in transition. The decline of the Mughal Empire set the stage for the emergence of regional powers, including the spirited Marathas.

The Maratha Empire, under the visionary leadership of figures like Shivaji and the administrative prowess of rulers like Ahilya Bai Holkar, danced across Deccan and Central India. However, the symphony of Maratha power faced discordant notes in the face of internal divisions and external conflicts, ultimately yielding to the forces of change.

The East India Company, a trading entity that transformed into a political, colonizing colossus, cast its shadow on the Indian subcontinent. Its economic prowess and military might reshaped the geopolitical landscape, contributing significantly to the decline of indigenous powers. The echoes of its influence still reverberate in the record of history, underscoring the transformative impact of European colonialism.

Amidst this historical tableau, Ahilya Bai Holkar emerges - as I keep calling her - as a luminary, a beacon of enlightened rule in 18th-century India. Her reign as the queen of Malwa, marked by benevolence, justice, and cultural patronage, stands as a testament to the potential for visionary leadership. Ahilya Bai's architectural contributions, her commitment to justice, and her resilience in the face of challenges paint a portrait of a ruler whose legacy transcends the bounds of time.

In the grand narrative of 18th-century India, where empires rose and fell, Ahilya Bai Holkar shines as a singular figure, embodying the ideals of leadership, compassion, and cultural richness. As we bid farewell to this episode, let Ahilya Bai Holkar's legacy inspire us to explore further the depths of history, where the lives of extraordinary individuals like her illuminate the path towards understanding the complex and vibrant tapestry of our collective past.

Thank you ever so much for listening - I'm Tabitha Bear - and this is World Herstory.