

Ahilyabai Holkar

Author: Sandhya Taksale

Illustrator: Priyankar Gupta


Level 4



A chance encounter (1733)

“Look at these beautiful horses and elephants! Who brought them here?” squealed Ahilya. Reluctantly, she tore her eyes away from the beautiful animals – it would get dark soon!

She hurried inside the temple and lit a lamp. Ahilya closed her eyes and bowed in prayer.



Little did she know that she was being watched by Malharrao. He was the brave and mighty Subedar, a senior Maratha noble, of the Malwa province. On his way to Pune, he had camped in the village of Chaundi in Maharashtra.

It was his horses and elephants that Ahilya had admired.

“She has something special about her. She would make a good bride for my son, Khanderao,” Malharrao thought. In those days, marriages happened early.



Off to Indore

Ahilya was the daughter of the village head, Mankoji Shinde. She hailed from a shepherd family. In those days, girls were not sent to school. Society considered the role of women as only managing the household and taking care of the family; educating a girl was not given importance. But Ahilya's father thought differently and taught her to read and write. After Ahilya and Khanderao were married, Ahilya went to Indore, which was in the Malwa province, as the Holkar family's daughter-in-law. The rest is history. She was destined to become a queen!

Who was Ahilyabai?

Three hundred years ago, Maharani Ahilyabai ruled the Maratha-led Malwa kingdom for 28 years (1767-1795 A.D). Her rule of Malwa in the 18th century has gone down in history as a model of benevolent and effective governance.

At that time, the Peshwas led the Maratha Empire to new frontiers. Peshwa is a word of Persian origin and means 'Foremost' or 'the first minister'. It was a title given to the prime ministers of the Maratha Empire. At its peak, the Maratha Empire extended from Tanjavur in Tamil Nadu to Peshawar, which is now in Pakistan. The northern frontier was held strong by the Shindes of Gwalior and the Holkars of Indore.





Malharrao was the founder of the Holkar rule. He is particularly known for being the first Maratha Subedar of Malwa in central India.

Ahilyabai ruled Malwa after him. She was a great queen. She restored temples which were destroyed in invasions and built ghats on the banks of the River Narmada. She took care of her subjects and was known as “punyashlok Ahilyabai”—a Sanskrit title for people of flawless character.

A tumultuous life (1754)

Ahilyabai was just 29 years old when tragedy befell her. The Marathas laid siege upon the Kumbher Fort in Rajasthan, which was then under the Rajput rule. Her husband Khanderao was hit by a cannonball and he died on the spot. It was all over in the blink of an eye. Ahilyabai was devastated. As was the custom of that time, she was prepared to be a sati. At that time, Hindu women were expected to practice Sati – jump in their husband's pyre to end her life along with him. It was wrongly thought that a woman's life was of no value if she didn't have a man to take care of her. *Sati is now banned in India.*



Khanderao had two other wives (Polygamy—having more than one wife – was also practised during those times) and they committed sati on his funeral pyre. However, at the last minute, a heartbroken Malharrao stopped Ahilyabai.

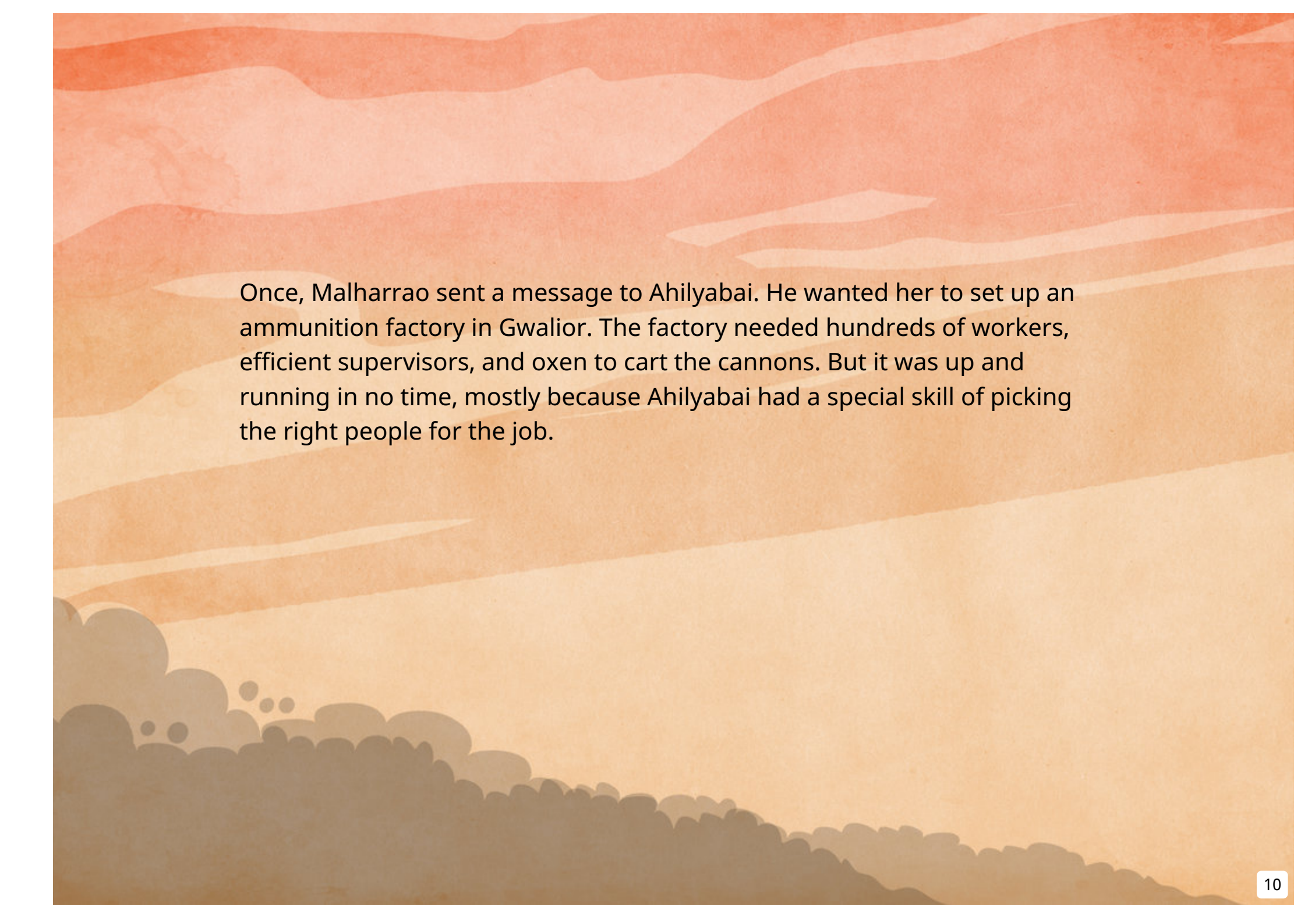
“I have lost my only son,” he told her. “Don’t jump into the pyre. Don’t leave us. Now you are like a son to me.” With his son dead, Malharrao now pinned his hopes on Ahilyabai. He knew that his daughter-in-law was cleverer than his son. And she would rule Malwa ably and wisely.





Taking over the reins

Malharrao decided that while he would go to battle, Ahilyabai would look after their kingdom. He began training Ahilyabai in defense and administration. He schooled her on the matters of the state through letters, when he would travel. On many occasions, according to Maratha custom, Ahilyabai had accompanied her husband to the battlefield and she was no stranger to the complexity of planning and waging wars.



Once, Malharrao sent a message to Ahilyabai. He wanted her to set up an ammunition factory in Gwalior. The factory needed hundreds of workers, efficient supervisors, and oxen to cart the cannons. But it was up and running in no time, mostly because Ahilyabai had a special skill of picking the right people for the job.



What did people say about Ahilyabai?

In his book, *The Discovery of India*, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru wrote – Ahilyabai’s “reign has become almost legendary as a period during which perfect order and good Government prevailed and the people prospered. She was a very able ruler and organizer, highly respected during her lifetime, and considered as a saint by a grateful people after her death.”

British historian John Keay called her “The Philosopher Queen”. John Malcom, an officer in British India, documented Ahilyabai’s life after her death. He said that she seems to be “one of the purest and most exemplary rulers that ever existed”.



Who will be the next Subedar?

Fifteen years after Khanderrao's death, Malharrao passed away. He had been Ahilyabai's biggest supporter. The Peshwas appointed Ahilyabai's son Malerao as the Subedar. He was 21 years old. However, the day-to-day administrative duties continued to be performed by Ahilyabai in her capacity as Malerao's guardian, or queen regent.

Sadly, Malerao could only be subedar for nine months. He suffered from a mental illness and in one such frenzied moment, he killed a weaver. Ahilyabai did not shy away from setting up an enquiry against her own son. It was proved that the weaver was innocent. Shocked and ridden with guilt, Malerao died soon after.

A lone ranger

After Malerao's death, Ahilyabai found her kingdom in grave danger. Gangobatatya, Ahilyabai's manager, conspired with Raghobadada Peshwe of Pune and invited him to Maheshwar to take over the reins of Ahilyabai's kingdom. Raghobadada was the uncle of Madhavrao Peshwe, the fourth Peshwa of the Maratha empire.

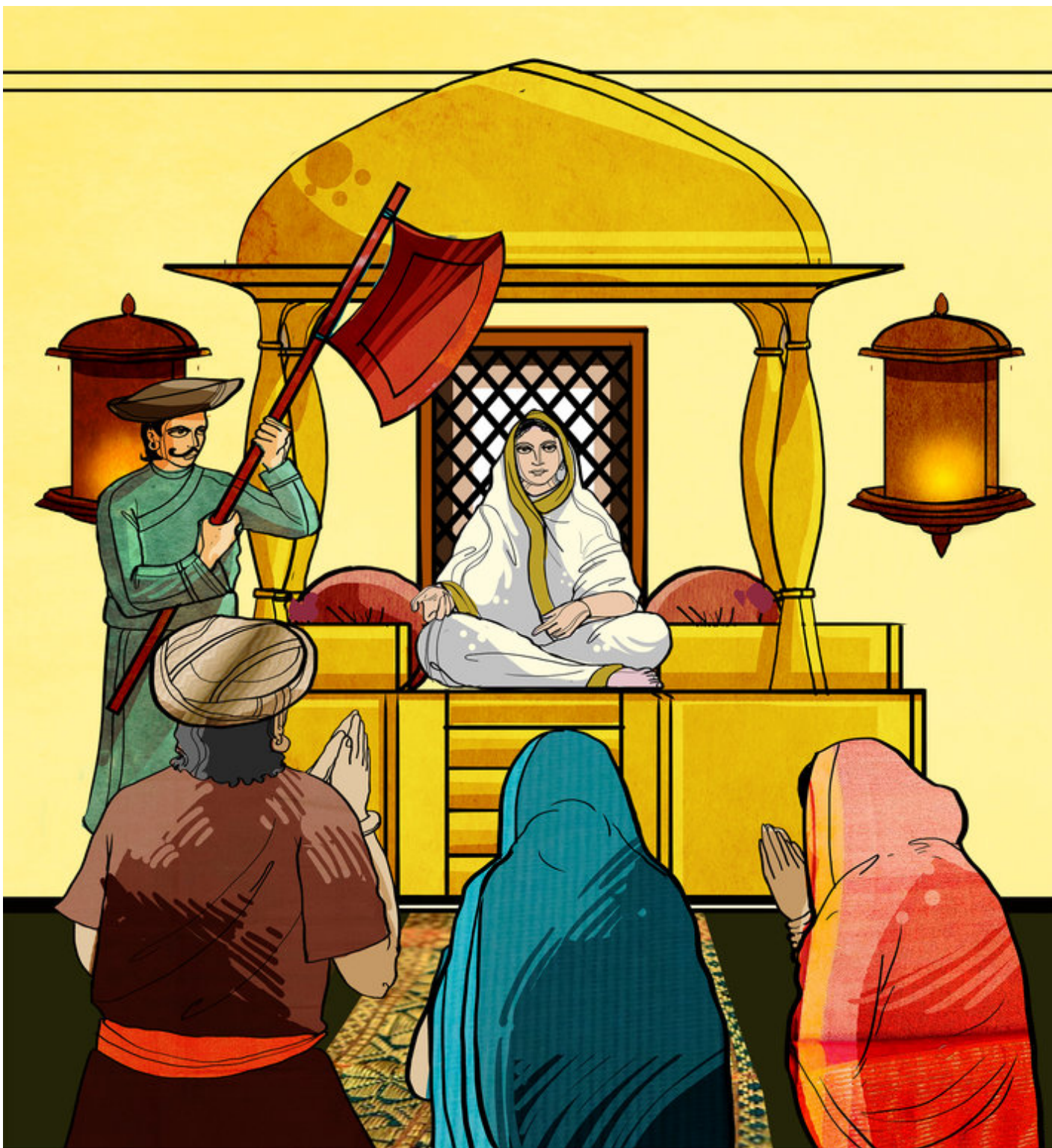




He had always dreamt of becoming the Peshwa and was deeply hurt when he failed to secure the position. When Gangobatatya reached out to him, Raghobadada jumped at this opportunity. He began preparations to go to Maheshwar, quietly and with great stealth. Once there, he planned to challenge Ahilyabai and take over the province of Malwa.



Ahilyabai had an extensive network of spies who kept her well-informed. She calmly and promptly appointed her loyal defense aide, Tukoji Holkar, as chief of army. She then wrote to Madhavrao Peshwe seeking permission to look after the administration herself. She also sent letters to other Maratha nobles requesting their support and the help of their armies. As Raghobadada marched on towards Maheshwar, Ahilyabai sent him a message, "Fighting you would not affect me, as much as it would affect your prestige if you lose to a woman." Raghobadada reached Ujjain. Ahilyabai set out to meet him and how! She headed a procession of her entire army, elephants and horses.



As she set out on this epic journey, people came out in support and admiration, to see their queen in all her strength and glory! This expression of love, respect, admiration and loyalty by the common people was the true measure of her success.

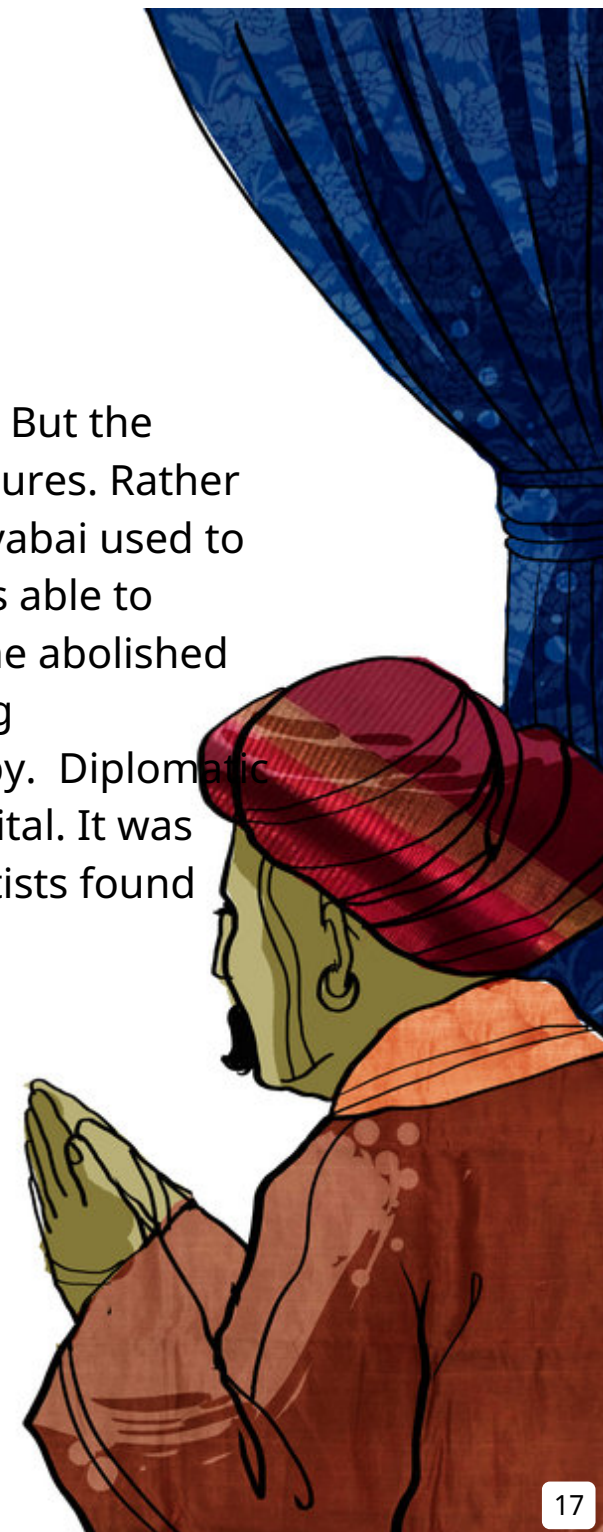
Madhavrao Peshwe instructed Raghobadada to return and permitted Ahilyabai to continue the administration of Malwa. She moved her capital from Indore to nearby Maheshwar, by the banks of the river Narmada.

Humility in prosperity

Ahilyabai was one of the richest rulers in the Maratha Empire. But the Holkars did not use their kingdom's wealth for personal pleasures. Rather than a palace, she lived in a humble two- storeyed wada. Ahilyabai used to hold court every day. Three hundred years ago, Ahilyabai was able to grant rights which even today women have to struggle for. She abolished laws that forbade widows from owning property and adopting children. During her time, trade grew, and farmers were happy. Diplomatic ties deepened. Art, music and literature blossomed in the capital. It was indeed an ideal kingdom! Weavers, artisans, sculptors and artists found support in Maheshwar.

Weaving integrity

Even today, Maheshwar is known for its fine cotton and silk cloth. Weavers found their roots in Maheshwar because of Ahilyabai's encouragement. She set up a textile mill there. So fine were the Maheshwari weaves, that prosperous officers in the Peshwa courts used to order them to Pune.



Looking beyond

Good leaders are able to plan for the future. Ahilyabai was one of the first few nobles to realise the danger of the British monarchy. She understood that the British fought differently from the Indians and recruited a French commander into her army. He trained four platoons in the European style of warfare.

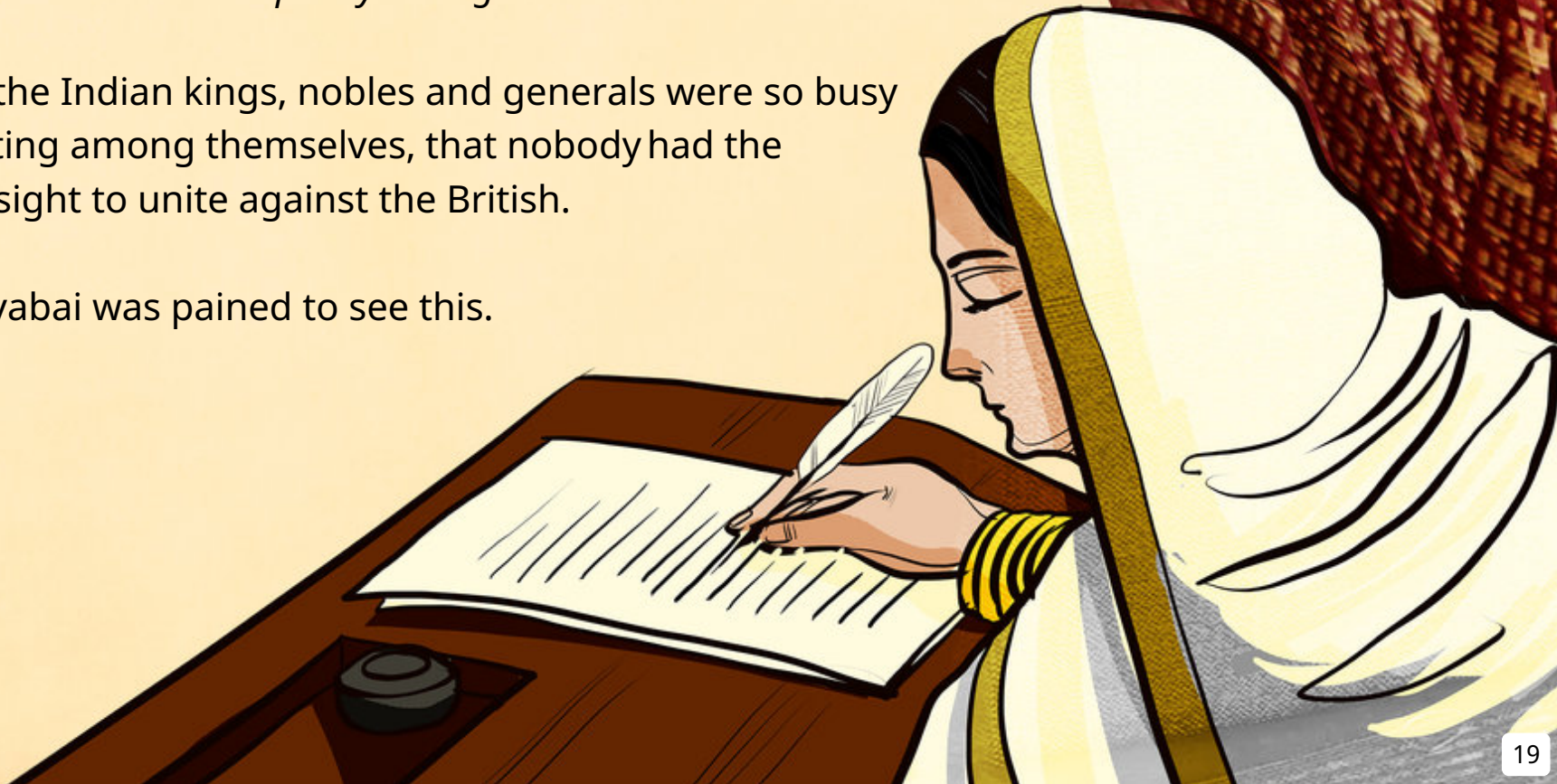


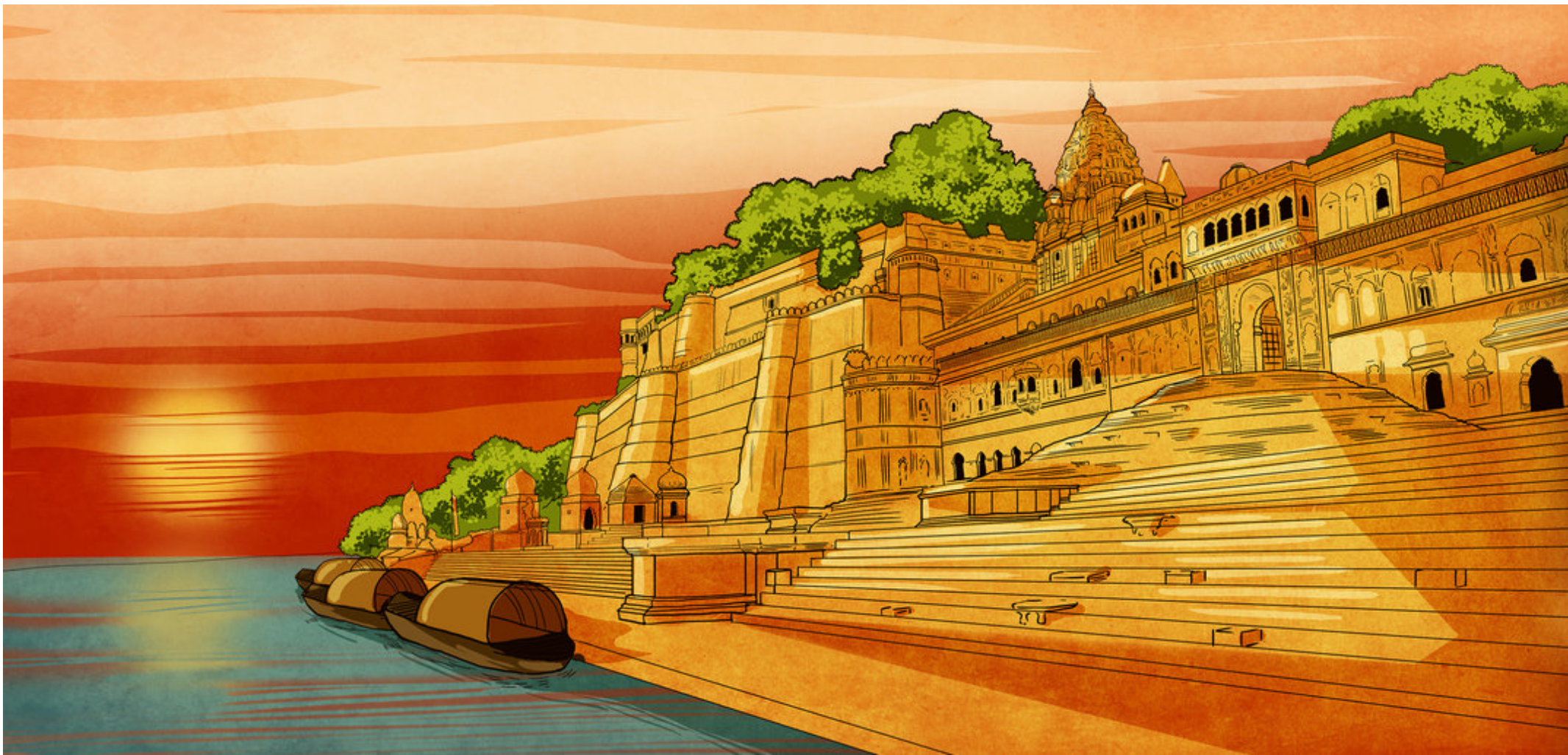
In 1772 she wrote to the Peshwas, warning them about the danger of getting too close to the British Monarchy. In her letter, she wrote,

"A tiger can be killed by using a trap or physical force but a bear has the capacity to hug us and tickle us to death."

But the Indian kings, nobles and generals were so busy fighting among themselves, that nobody had the foresight to unite against the British.

Ahilyabai was pained to see this.





An everlasting name (1795)

Ahilyabai passed away in 1795. She was seventy years old. To honour her legacy, the Indian government released a stamp with her name in 1996. An award in her name is given by a social organization in Indore to individuals working for public betterment. The airport at Indore is named Devi Ahilyabai Airport in her memory. The University of Indore is named Devi Ahilyabai Vishwavidyalaya after her.

For the people

Ahilyabai stood strong and people trusted her.

"I am bound to make my subjects happy. I am responsible for my actions. I am accountable to God for everything I do" reads the engraving outside her Maheshwar palace.



Story Attribution:

This story: Ahilyabai Holkar is written by [Sandhya Taksale](#) . © Pratham Books , 2018. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license.

Other Credits:

'Ahilyabai Holkar' has been published on StoryWeaver by Pratham Books. www.prathambooks.org

Illustration Attributions:

Cover page: [A woman standing by the window](#) , by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 2: [A girl worshipping an idol with lamp](#) , by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 3: [A Pillar by the wall](#) , by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 4: [A father teaching his daughter](#) , by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 5: [Lady in a saree and jewellery](#) , by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2018. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 6: [A golden palace with doors and windows](#) by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 7: [A crying Woman](#) , by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 8: [A man talking](#) , by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 9: [Many arriors on a battlefield](#) , by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 10: [A battlefield with light sky with dust](#) , by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 11: [Jawaharlal Nehru writing a letter](#) , by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license.

Disclaimer: https://www.storyweaver.org.in/terms_and_conditions



Some rights reserved. This book is CC-BY-4.0 licensed. You can copy, modify, distribute and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, all without asking permission. For full terms of use and attribution, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Illustration Attributions:

Page 12: [A prince sitting with his face covered](#) by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 13: [A silhouette of a man on a horse](#), by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 14: [A silhouette of men and a horse at night](#), by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 15: [An army on elephants](#) by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 16: [Many people sitting in front of the queen](#) by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 17: [A man standing with joint hands](#) by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 18: [A British flag with a man](#) by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 19: [A woman writing a letter](#), by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 20: [A golden palace by the river](#), by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license. Page 21: [Ahilyabai's indian postal stamp](#), by [Priyankar Gupta](#) © Pratham Books, 2017. Some rights reserved. Released under CC BY 4.0 license.

Disclaimer: https://www.storyweaver.org.in/terms_and_conditions



Some rights reserved. This book is CC-BY-4.0 licensed. You can copy, modify, distribute and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, all without asking permission. For full terms of use and attribution, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Ahilyabai Holkar

(English)

This is the story of Ahilyabai Holkar, a queen who ruled Malwa for 28 years. Read about this ruler who made history with her deeds.

This is a Level 4 book for children who can read fluently and with confidence.



Pratham Books goes digital to weave a whole new chapter in the realm of multilingual children's stories. Knitting together children, authors, illustrators and publishers. Folding in teachers, and translators. To create a rich fabric of openly licensed multilingual stories for the children of India and the world. Our unique online platform, StoryWeaver, is a playground where children, parents, teachers and librarians can get creative. Come, start weaving today, and help us get a book in every child's hand!