

## Leadership Style of Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar and Its Relevance to Contemporary Women Leaders

**Dr. Pritam P. Kothari**

Associate Professor & HoD of Management Studies, Hirachand Nemchand College of Commerce  
(Autonomous College), Solapur

**Dr. Rajni Y. Kshirsagar**

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Management Studies, Hirachand Nemchand College of Commerce  
(Autonomous College), Solapur

**Prof. Anita M. Saddalgi**

Assistant Professor Dept. of Management Studies, Hirachand Nemchand College of Commerce  
(Autonomous College), Solapur

### Abstract

Recent leadership research increasingly emphasizes ethics, diversity, sustainability, and emotional intelligence, particularly in the context of women's leadership. Indian history offers exemplary models, notably Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar (1725–1795), the ruler of the Malwa kingdom, whose governance reflected transparency, social justice, economic prudence, and people-centric administration. This study examines her leadership style and evaluates its relevance for contemporary women leaders in education, management, entrepreneurship, and governance. Using a descriptive-analytical approach based on secondary data, the research interprets her leadership through ethical, transformational, servant, and participatory leadership frameworks. It further analyses the challenges faced by modern women leaders and draws parallels between historical practices and current leadership demands. The findings suggest that Ahilyadevi Holkar's leadership philosophy offers enduring insights into ethical governance, inclusive development, and sustainable leadership, providing a valuable framework for nurturing effective and responsible women leadership in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** *Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar, women leadership, ethical leadership, transformational leadership, inclusive governance*

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### 1. Introduction

Leadership is a critical determinant of social, economic, and institutional development, shaping governance systems, societal progress, and ethical standards across civilizations. However, leadership discourse has historically remained male-centric, resulting in the marginalization of women leaders in both theoretical and historical narratives. In contrast, Indian history offers significant examples of women leaders who demonstrated exceptional administrative capability and visionary governance. Among them, Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar stands out as a distinguished ruler of the Malwa kingdom in the eighteenth century (Sardesai, 2002). Despite early personal adversity and complex political challenges, she emerged as a resilient and effective leader. Her governance emphasized ethical administration, empathy, justice, and fiscal discipline, while promoting agriculture, trade, and inclusive social development, thereby establishing a stable and people-centric governance model (Ranade, 1900). In the contemporary context, women are increasingly visible in leadership roles across education, corporate sectors, entrepreneurship, and public administration. Nevertheless, a substantial gender gap persists. Global reports indicate that women hold approximately 32% of senior management roles, while

in India, their representation in top leadership positions remains below 20% (World Economic Forum, 2023). Similarly, despite forming a large proportion of the teaching workforce, women occupy less than 30% of leadership roles in higher education (UNESCO, 2019). These disparities highlight ongoing structural and socio-cultural challenges, underscoring the need to draw lessons from historical models like Ahilyadevi Holkar to strengthen modern women's leadership.

## **2. Background of Study**

The background of this study is grounded in the evolving discourse on leadership, which has progressively shifted from traditional authority-based models to more inclusive, ethical, and people-centric approaches. Historically, leadership theories have largely been developed within male-dominated contexts, often overlooking the contributions and distinctive leadership styles of women (Eagly & Carli, 2007). However, contemporary research increasingly recognizes the importance of emotional intelligence, ethical governance, participatory decision-making, and social responsibility in effective leadership. In this context, revisiting historical examples of successful women leaders becomes essential to enrich leadership theory with diverse and contextually relevant perspectives. Indian history offers a rich repository of such leadership models, among which Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar stands out as a significant figure. As the ruler of the Malwa kingdom in the eighteenth century, she demonstrated remarkable administrative capability, resilience, and a strong commitment to public welfare despite socio-political challenges (Sardesai, 2002). Her governance emphasized justice, transparency, fiscal discipline, and inclusive development through the promotion of agriculture, trade, and social welfare, thereby establishing a stable and progressive state. In the contemporary era, although women's participation in leadership roles has increased across sectors such as education, business, and governance, a substantial gender gap persists in top positions due to structural and institutional barriers (World Economic Forum, 2023). This gap underscores the need for leadership frameworks that promote inclusion and empowerment. Therefore, this study draws on Ahilyadevi Holkar's leadership philosophy to bridge historical insights with modern leadership demands and to provide a value-based framework for strengthening women's leadership in the current socio-economic context (Northouse, 2021).

## **3. Scope and Significant of Study**

The scope of this study is centered on analyzing the leadership style of Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar through a descriptive and analytical approach using secondary data sources. It examines her governance practices within established leadership frameworks such as ethical, transformational, servant, and participatory leadership, and extends the analysis to contemporary contexts including education, management, entrepreneurship, and public administration. The study is conceptually delimited to leadership behavior, decision-making patterns, and socio-economic contributions, without engaging in primary empirical investigation (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013). It also focuses on the applicability of historical leadership principles to modern women leaders, particularly in the Indian socio-cultural environment, thereby bridging classical governance models with present-day leadership challenges. The significance of the study lies in its contribution to both theoretical and practical dimensions of leadership research. Theoretically, it enriches leadership literature by incorporating indigenous and historical perspectives, which are often underrepresented in mainstream leadership theories. Practically, the study provides valuable insights for women leaders by identifying key leadership attributes such as ethical governance, inclusivity, resilience, and people-centric decision-making, which remain relevant in contemporary organizational and institutional settings. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of role models in shaping leadership development and addressing gender disparities in leadership positions (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). By contextualizing Ahilyadevi Holkar's leadership within modern

frameworks, the study offers a robust foundation for developing sustainable, value-driven, and inclusive leadership practices.

#### 4. Objectives of the Study

- Examine the governance philosophy and leadership attributes of Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar through a critical review of historical and secondary sources
- Interpret Ahilyadevi Holkar's leadership practices in relation to contemporary leadership perspectives, including ethical, transformational, servant, and participative leadership
- Assess the contemporary relevance of her leadership principles in addressing women leadership challenges in education, management, and governance
- Develop conceptual insights and practical implications for leadership development and women empowerment based on the study's analytical synthesis

#### 5. Reviews of Literature

The scope of this study focuses on examining the leadership style of Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar through a descriptive and analytical approach using secondary data, with emphasis on interpreting her governance practices within modern leadership frameworks such as ethical, transformational, servant, and participatory leadership. It extends to contemporary domains including education, management, entrepreneurship, and public administration, thereby establishing a connection between historical leadership models and present-day leadership requirements. The study remains conceptually delimited to leadership attributes, governance practices, and socio-economic contributions rather than primary empirical validation, ensuring a focused theoretical exploration of leadership dynamics (Northouse, 2021).

The significance of the study lies in its contribution to enriching leadership literature by integrating indigenous historical perspectives into contemporary leadership theories, which have traditionally been dominated by Western paradigms. It highlights how leadership traits such as empathy, ethical conduct, inclusivity, and people-oriented governance often associated with women leaders align with transformational and servant leadership principles (Bass, 1985; Greenleaf, 1977). By drawing insights from Ahilyadevi Holkar's governance, the study provides a practical framework for modern women leaders to adopt value-based and sustainable leadership practices across diverse sectors. The study addresses a critical research gap by linking historical leadership models with contemporary leadership challenges faced by women. Existing literature largely remains descriptive and lacks integration with modern theoretical constructs, thereby limiting its applicability in current contexts. This study bridges that gap by evaluating Ahilyadevi Holkar's leadership through contemporary frameworks and assessing its relevance for leadership development, ethical governance, and women's empowerment in modern society (Singh & Bhandarker, 2019; Patil, 2018)

#### 6. Research Methodology

The research employs a descriptive and interpretative design, concentrating on a conceptual analysis of leadership based solely on secondary data. This methodology is suitable given the historical context of the topic and the study's focus on theoretical analysis rather than empirical validation. Data were gathered from an extensive array of secondary sources, encompassing historical records, biographies, archive documents, government publications, scholarly books, and peer-reviewed journal articles pertinent to Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar, leadership theories, and women's leadership. Furthermore, recent studies from esteemed national and international organizations were examined to contextualize the current issues faced by women in leadership. The investigation utilized text analysis to discern reoccurring leadership qualities, governance practices, and administrative principles manifest in

Ahilyadevi Holkar's reign. Themes and comparative analysis were employed to scrutinize these features, correlating historical leadership methods with modern leadership theories. A conceptual framework was established to integrate discoveries and delineate implications for leadership development, ethical governance, and women's empowerment.

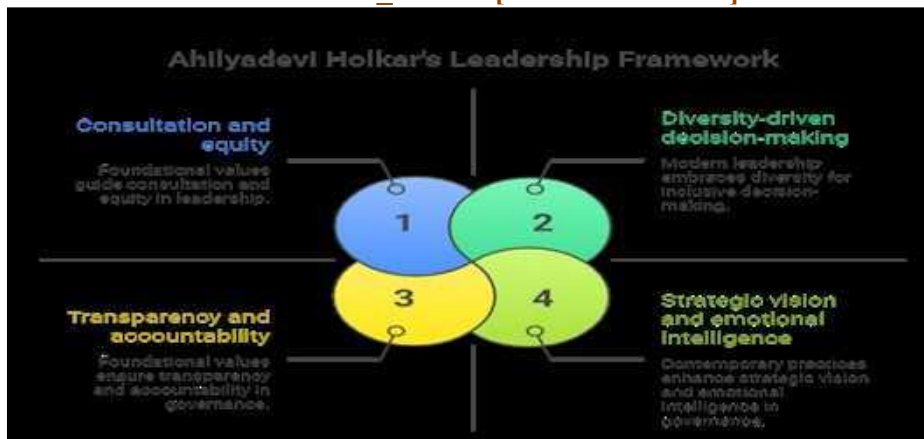
## 7. Discussion and Analysis

Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar (1725–1795) is recognized as one of India's most distinguished female rulers, who ascended the throne of the Malwa kingdom in 1767 during a period of political instability and patriarchal constraints. Governing from Maheshwar, she established a strong administrative system rooted in ethical governance, justice, and public welfare, while simultaneously promoting agriculture, trade, crafts, and infrastructure for socio-economic development (Patil, 2018). Her leadership was deeply influenced by principles of dharma, seva, and nyaya, which enabled her to create a stable, inclusive, and prosperous state. Historical studies highlight that her governance model reflected a balance between moral authority and administrative efficiency, making her reign a significant example of women's leadership in Indian history (Deshpande, 2016). Ahilyadevi Holkar's leadership style can be understood as an integrated model combining ethical, transformational, servant, and participative leadership approaches. She demonstrated integrity, fairness, and accountability, thereby strengthening public trust and institutional credibility. Her visionary outlook promoted economic development through support for agriculture, trade, and infrastructure, while her servant leadership orientation emphasized the welfare of marginalized communities, including women and the underprivileged (Yukl, 2013). Furthermore, her participatory governance approach involved consultation with ministers and local stakeholders, ensuring inclusive and collaborative decision-making. Such a multidimensional leadership framework enabled her to achieve sustainable development and social harmony, making her leadership style highly relevant in contemporary leadership discourse (Northouse, 2021).

The relevance of Ahilyadevi Holkar's leadership extends significantly to contemporary women leaders across sectors such as education, management, governance, and entrepreneurship. Her emphasis on ethical decision-making, inclusivity, and long-term sustainability provides a practical framework for addressing modern leadership challenges. In today's context, women leaders can draw inspiration from her approach to transparent governance, empowerment of marginalized groups, and participatory management practices to foster organizational trust and social impact (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Additionally, integrating her leadership philosophy into management education and leadership development programs can promote value-based leadership, enhance gender equity, and support the emergence of competent women leaders. This alignment between historical leadership values and modern leadership needs highlights the enduring relevance of her governance principles in strengthening contemporary leadership practices (Singh & Bhandarker, 2019).

The figure illustrates an integrated leadership framework based on the leadership philosophy of Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar and its significance for modern women leaders. The four interconnected elements demonstrate that effective leadership arises not from solitary attributes but from the dynamic interplay of ethical ideals, inclusive behaviors, governance structures, and individual leadership competencies.

### Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Linking Ahilyadevi Holkar's Leadership with Contemporary Women Leadership



The aspect of consultation and equity underscores Ahilyadevi Holkar's equitable and deliberative governance, characterized by decision-making informed by discussion, justice, and equal regard for various social groups. This value-oriented basis is advanced in contemporary leadership via diversity-focused decision-making, which prioritizes inclusivity, representation, and respect for varied perspectives, particularly pertinent in current organizational and institutional settings. The aspect of transparency and accountability demonstrates her dedication to ethical governance and moral obligation, fostering public trust and legitimacy. In the modern environment, these ideals manifest as accountable governance systems that require transparency, responsibility, and integrity from leaders.

## 8. Findings of the Study

- Initially, Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar employed a comprehensive leadership style that harmoniously included ethical, servant, transformational, and participative methods. Her administration was marked by ethical integrity, a focus on the populace, forward-thinking development strategies, and inclusive decision-making procedures.
- Secondly, current statistical data underscores the ongoing underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within education, management, and governance, notwithstanding their heightened involvement at lower and middle tiers. The persistent leadership gap underscores the significance of formidable historical female role models, such as Ahilyadevi Holkar, in tackling gender-based leadership inequalities.
- The leadership ideals exemplified by Ahilyadevi Holkar closely correspond with the qualities essential for modern women leaders, such as ethical decision-making, emotional intelligence, inclusion, resilience, and long-term strategic vision. Her leadership concept embodies the traits highlighted in contemporary leadership theories.
- The study concludes that embracing Ahilyadevi Holkar's leadership principles can improve ethical governance, social inclusion, and sustainable development in modern organizations. Her leadership paradigm provides a perennial framework that surpasses historical context and is relevant to contemporary leadership difficulties.

## 9. Conclusion

Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar epitomizes enduring ethical, inclusive, and visionary leadership. Her leadership exemplifies that government founded on ethics, empathy, equity, and service may attain sustainable growth and societal cohesion. Employing a cohesive leadership strategy, she effectively harmonized administrative efficiency with social welfare, establishing a standard for value-driven governance. Current statistical trends reveal that while women's involvement in leadership has risen over time, substantial disparities remain across all sectors. Ahilyadevi Holkar's leadership philosophy provides current women leaders with a culturally anchored, ethically grounded, and practically relevant framework for guidance. Her leadership ideals align closely with contemporary leadership

characteristics, including ethical integrity, inclusion, emotional intelligence, and sustainability. The study concludes that the amalgamation of historical leadership wisdom with modern leadership approaches can substantially enhance the empowerment of women leaders. Institutions may foster ethical governance, inclusive growth, and sustainable leadership development by drawing inspiration from the leadership legacy of Ahilyadevi Holkar. This combination enhances leadership theory and fortifies leadership practice, allowing women leaders to significantly impact organizational excellence and social advancement.

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