

# Textile Industry Patronage under Ahilyadevi Holkar: Historical Foundations of Madhya Pradesh's Handloom Sector to Develop Local Economy

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## Abstract

The study examines the role of Ahilyabai Holkar's textile patronage in promoting local economic development in eighteenth-century India. During her reign over the Malwa region from 1767 to 1795, Ahilyabai Holkar implemented governance policies that emphasized welfare, infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and support for artisanal industries. One of her most notable initiatives was the establishment and promotion of the Maheshwari textile industry in Maheshwar, which generated employment opportunities and strengthened regional commerce. By inviting skilled weavers from established textile centres and providing institutional support, she transformed Maheshwar into a thriving hub of handloom production and cultural activity. The study adopts a qualitative and historical approach using secondary sources to analyze the economic and social impacts of this initiative. Findings indicate that Ahilyabai's model promoted employment generation, women's economic participation, cultural preservation, and regional trade development. The paper concludes that her governance offers valuable lessons for contemporary policies focused on sustainable local economic development and heritage-based industries.

**Keywords:** *Ahilyadevi Holkar, Maheshwari textiles, handloom industry, local economic development, Madhya Pradesh, textile history, regional economy, employment generation*

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## 1. Introduction

The eighteenth century in India was marked by political fragmentation, administrative transition, and economic uncertainty. The weakening of the Mughal Empire created a fractured political landscape in which regional rulers assumed increasing importance. Within this volatile context, Ahilyabai Holkar emerged as an extraordinary ruler whose governance combined social welfare, administrative discipline, and economic foresight. As ruler of the Malwa territory from 1767 to 1795, she demonstrated rare statecraft and a developmental vision that continues to attract scholarly and policy interest (Malcolm, 1823). Her reign is especially significant because she transformed Maheshwar from a relatively modest settlement into a flourishing centre of commerce, culture, and textile production. Ahilyabai Holkar established a textile production base not merely as a cultural initiative but as a practical instrument of economic development and livelihood creation. Her intervention helped create employment for the poor, stimulated artisanal activity, and contributed to the growth of a prosperous local economy centred on what later came to be known as Maheshwari textiles (ProKerala, 2025). This industrial transformation arose from deliberate state patronage, careful economic planning, and strategic recognition of the productive potential of local craft traditions. The continuing relevance of this historical model is reinforcing the values and culture in Indian business (Gaikwad, 2014). The handloom industry remains one of the largest employment-generating sectors

after agriculture, sustaining millions of artisans and contributing substantially to the national economy (Livelihoods India, 2020).

## **2. Background of the Study**

The rise of Ahilyabai Holkar must be understood against the backdrop of eighteenth-century political instability. Born in 1725 in Chaundi village in present-day Maharashtra, she was the daughter of Mankoji Rao Shinde, a village headman. Her marriage to Khanderao Holkar brought her into the Holkar dynasty, one of the important Maratha ruling houses of the period. After the death of her husband in 1754 during the siege of Kumbher, and later after the death of her father-in-law Malhar Rao Holkar, she assumed increasing administrative responsibility. Historical accounts note that Malhar Rao prevented her from committing sati and instead prepared her for governance and political leadership, thereby shaping her later role as ruler of Malwa (Malcolm, 1823; Britannica, 2025). With the approval of the Peshwas, Ahilyabai formally assumed power in 1767 and established Maheshwar as her capital on the banks of the Narmada River (MP Tourism, 2025). During her approximately three-decade reign, Malwa experienced relative peace, administrative stability, cultural efflorescence, and commercial growth. Maheshwar emerged not only as an important political centre but also as a hub for literature, art, trade, and textile production (Sharma & Kamrah, 2025). This transformation is particularly remarkable because it occurred during a period when many other regions were facing disorder and conflict. She invested in roads, wells, bridges, forts, temples, and public resting places, thereby creating a conducive environment for movement, exchange, and commerce (MP Tourism, 2025). Her policies also reflected transparency, civic responsibility, and economic pragmatism. By strengthening agriculture, trade, public works, and artisanal production (India Foundation, 2025). She fostered a broad-based economy in which local development was linked to social welfare and commercial expansion (Organiser, 2024; CIS Indus, 2025).

## **3. Scope and Significance of the Study**

This study examines Ahilyabai Holkar's patronage of the textile industry in Maheshwar and evaluates its contribution to local economic development from a historical perspective. The scope of the study includes the political context of her reign, her developmental philosophy, the institutional establishment of Maheshwar's textile sector, the social and economic effects of handloom production, and the contemporary relevance of this model for sustainable regional development. The success of any business enterprises depends on the skill development and infrastructure available (Gaikwad, 2016). The significance of the study lies in its focus on textile patronage as a developmental strategy rather than merely a cultural or aesthetic phenomenon. In many historical accounts, royal support for craft production is discussed only in terms of heritage or elite consumption. This study interprets Ahilyabai's support for Maheshwari weaving as a form of economic intervention that generated employment, fostered artisanal specialization, improved local incomes, encouraged female participation, and created long-term regional identity.

## **4. Objectives of the Study**

- To examine the historical and political context of Ahilyabai Holkar's reign
- To analyze Ahilyabai Holkar's economic governance philosophy and development model
- To study the establishment and growth of the Maheshwar textile industry under her patronage
- To evaluate the employment, livelihood, and social impacts of the Maheshwari handloom sector
- To assess the relevance of Ahilyabai Holkar's textile patronage model for contemporary local economic development

## **5. Review of Literature**

Existing literature on Ahilyabai Holkar presents her as one of the most capable and welfare-oriented rulers of eighteenth-century India. Early historical writing, especially by Malcolm (1823), depicts her as an administrator of rare integrity, discipline, and public concern. Later reference works such as Encyclopaedia Britannica also emphasize her political leadership, moral authority, and governance capabilities in a period otherwise dominated by male rulers and military competition (Britannica, 2025). These sources establish the broad historical importance of her reign. Recent writings extend this understanding by analysing her role in regional development, trade promotion, and social reform. Studies and interpretive essays note that Ahilyabai advanced infrastructure, commerce, education, and public welfare while maintaining administrative accessibility and fair governance (India Foundation, 2025; Sharma & Kamrah, 2025). Such scholarship suggests that her statecraft reflected not only moral kingship but also a practical development orientation.

A growing body of literature focuses on Maheshwar and the textile heritage associated with her rule. These sources argue that Maheshwari weaving owes much of its organized growth and prestige to Ahilyabai's direct patronage. She invited skilled weavers from centres such as Surat and Burhanpur, created production support systems, and established demand through royal use and symbolic endorsement (Rural Handmade, 2024; Rangde, 2024). These texts interpret the emergence of Maheshwari textiles as a result of both state support and local artisanal skill. The literature on India's handloom sector further helps situate Maheshwar in a wider developmental context. The handloom industry is frequently described as labour-intensive, heritage-rich, and highly significant for rural and semi-urban livelihoods (Pogorelov, 2015; Livelihoods India, 2020). Recent market analyses also underline the rising global demand for sustainable and handcrafted textiles, making traditional weaving clusters more relevant in present-day discussions of cultural economy, tourism, and local enterprise development (Fortune Business Insights, 2024).

## **6. Research Methodology**

The present study adopts a qualitative, historical, and descriptive research design. It is based entirely on secondary data drawn from historical texts, institutional reports, policy-oriented web resources, contemporary articles, and documents related to Maheshwar, Ahilyabai Holkar, and the Indian handloom sector. The methodology is interpretive in nature and seeks to connect historical evidence with broader concepts of local economic development. The study relies on source triangulation by using classical historical material, heritage documentation, development commentary, and handloom-sector reports. Historical sources such as Malcolm (1823) provide the political and administrative background of Ahilyabai Holkar's reign; while contemporary institutional and sectoral sources help interpret the long-term economic significance of Maheshwari weaving. The analysis focuses on themes such as industrial patronage, infrastructure development, skill transfer, women's participation, livelihood generation, and regional trade formation.

## **7. Discussion and Analysis**

Ahilyabai Holkar's developmental role must be understood within the broader moral and administrative framework of her governance. Historical accounts highlight her concern for the welfare of the poor, her commitment to infrastructure development, and her efforts to ensure safe trade routes and mobility across her kingdom (India Foundation, 2025; MP Tourism, 2025). Her economic policies were closely integrated with social governance, reflecting a philosophy of inclusive and welfare-oriented administration. By providing security to traders and pilgrims and promoting transparent taxation policies, she created a stable commercial environment that encouraged trade and artisanal industries to flourish (Organiser, 2024; CIS Indus, 2025). This governance approach demonstrates that economic development was not treated as an isolated activity but as part of a broader ecosystem that combined infrastructure, security, and social welfare to stimulate regional growth (Rangde, 2024). One of the most significant aspects of Ahilyabai Holkar's

reign was the organized development of the textile industry in Maheshwar. Recognizing the potential of weaving as a livelihood-generating activity, she invited skilled weavers from Burhanpur and Surat two renowned textile centres to settle in Maheshwar and train local artisans (Holkar, 2025). The town's strategic location along the Narmada River further facilitated trade and the movement of goods, enabling Maheshwar to emerge as an important commercial hub (Vastraraag, 2025). Beyond symbolic patronage, Ahilyabai provided incentives, looms, workspaces, and institutional support for textile production, thereby ensuring the stability and growth of the industry (Rural Handmade, 2024). The Maheshwari textile tradition subsequently gained recognition for its unique silk–cotton blend, lightweight fabric, and designs inspired by the architectural heritage of Maheshwar, including forts, temples, and the Narmada landscape (REHWA Society, 2024).

The development of Maheshwari textiles had significant economic implications, particularly in terms of employment generation and livelihood creation. By bringing skilled artisans and establishing production networks, Ahilyabai created a sustainable occupational base for local communities (DNA India, 2025). The handloom sector continues to be one of the most labour-intensive industries in India, providing income opportunities for rural and semi-urban populations (Livelihoods India, 2020). In Maheshwar, textile production also stimulated ancillary economic activities such as cotton and silk procurement, natural dye production, transportation, finishing processes, and retail trade, creating a wider local economic ecosystem (Rural Handmade, 2024; Travel Setu, 2025). An equally significant dimension of this development was the participation of women in weaving activities. Ahilyabai encouraged women to engage in productive work, enabling them to contribute to family income and community welfare (CIS Indus, 2025). Today, women continue to play a central role in the weaving process, demonstrating the long-term social impact of her inclusive development policies (ABVP, 2024).

Maheshwar's transformation into a prominent textile and trade centre was further supported by broader infrastructural and administrative initiatives undertaken during Ahilyabai's reign (YourStory, 2017). Investments in roads, irrigation systems, public buildings, and trade routes strengthened commercial networks and increased market accessibility (Organiser, 2025). Her governance also contributed to urban development and economic prosperity in both Maheshwar and Indore, establishing them as major commercial centres in the region (Hindu Heritage Network, 2025). The association of Maheshwari sarees with royal patronage and aristocratic use enhanced their symbolic value and market reputation, positioning them as premium textile products (Gagan Handloom, 2025; Vastraraag, 2025). Although the handloom sector faced challenges after Independence due to declining patronage, competition from power looms, and supply disruptions (Business Standard, 2014), revival initiatives such as the REHWA Society and training programmes like the Handloom School have helped restore the craft tradition (Outlook Traveller, 2024). Contemporary policy support, GI recognition, and increasing global demand for handcrafted textiles indicate that the historical legacy of Ahilyabai Holkar's textile patronage continues to hold significant relevance for sustainable local economic development (ProKerala, 2024).

## **8. Findings of the Study**

- The study reveals that Ahilyabai Holkar's patronage of the Maheshwar textile industry was a strategic economic intervention rather than a purely cultural act. By inviting skilled weavers, facilitating production, and supporting market formation, she laid the foundation for a durable local industry that generated employment and regional identity.
- The analysis also shows that her broader governance model was central to the success of the textile sector. Infrastructure development, trade facilitation, security, and welfare-oriented administration created the enabling conditions in which craft production could flourish. Thus, the success of Maheshwari textiles cannot be separated from the wider developmental framework of her rule.

- Another major finding is that the textile sector contributed significantly to women's participation in the economy. Ahilyabai's support for women's agency and livelihood opportunities appears to have shaped the social composition of the weaving tradition in Maheshwar, where female labour remains highly significant even today.
- The study further finds that Maheshwari weaving generated multiplier effects through linkages with raw materials, dyeing, finishing, marketing, commerce, and tourism. This confirms that heritage industries can function as local economic ecosystems rather than isolated artisanal occupations.

## **9. Conclusion**

Ahilyabai Holkar left a lasting mark on governance, society, and economic life, and the development of Maheshwari textiles remains one of the clearest expressions of her visionary leadership. Her support for weaving in Maheshwar was not simply an act of royal patronage but a comprehensive development strategy that combined employment generation, social inclusion, infrastructure, skill formation, women's participation, and cultural preservation. The transformation of Maheshwar into a renowned textile and commercial centre demonstrates the power of integrated planning and enlightened patronage. The endurance of Maheshwari weaving across centuries, despite political transition, market competition, and structural challenges, testifies to the strength of the institutional and cultural foundation laid during her reign.

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