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Diplomatic Relations Of Devi Ahilya Bai Holkar With Contemporary Maratha Chiefs: A Case Study

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Abstract

During the long and eventful reign of Devi Ahilya Bai Holkar, the Maratha Empire transformed into a loosely held confederacy of several Maratha states. The most powerful among these states were the Peshwas of Pune, Bhonsles of Nagpur, Scindhias, Holkars, Puars and Gaekwads. The Peshwa Daftar in Pune was the most powerful and prestigious office in the Maratha Confederacy which acted as a glue for other Maratha states. Devi Ahilyabai maintained cordial relations with other Maratha states in order to preserve Maratha unity. The major events in Maratha politics during her tenure were Maratha resurrection, Assassination of Narayan Rao, Baarabhai Conspiracy, Raghunath Rao's rebellion and First Anglo-Maratha War. Devi Ahilyabai dealt with these political challenges through her policies.

Keywords: Baarabhai, Maratha resurrection, Diplomatic relations.

Research Methodology

The primary sources are analysed in this research with the help of interpretations and commentaries from secondary sources. The method of inductive reasoning is used in order to reach conclusion.

The most prominent Maratha statesmen in the last quarter of eighteenth century were Nana Phadnavis, Mahadji Scindhia and Devi Ahilyabai Holkar. Other prominent Maratha sardars included Janoji and Mudhoji Bhonsle of Nagpur and Sayaji Rao and Fateh Singh Rao Gaekwad of Baroda. Peshwa Madhav Rao recognized and sanctioned the succession of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar. This shows that the Peshwa enjoyed the status of 'primus inter pares' among the Maratha chiefs. He had the power to give legitimacy to succession if the succession is disputed or likely to be questioned. The tenure of Devi Ahilyabai started during the reign of Peshwa Madhav Rao (1761-1772). After the assassination of Peshwa Narayan Rao after his brief tenure of eight months, Raghunath Rao became Peshwa for five months before being ousted by Baarabhai. Baarabhai (twelve brothers) was a council of twelve Maratha statesmen headed by Nana Phadnavis who proclaimed Sawai Madhav Rao (posthumous son of Narayan Rao) as the legal Peshwa. Sawai Madhav Rao was the Peshwa for the most of the remaining term of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar.

The reign of Ahilyabai from 1767 to 1795 synchronises with the resurrection and revival of Maratha Empire after the devastating defeat in third battle of Panipat (1761). The most noted Maratha generals of this period included Huripant Phadke, Ramchandra Kanade, Shamsheer Bahadur, Govindpant Bundele, Mahadji Scindhia and Tukoji Rao Holkar¹. Devi Ahilyabai Holkar took the decision of making Tukoji Rao Holkar as the commander in chief of Holkar army which proved effective in expansion of Maratha power in this period.

The role of Ahilyabai in Maratha resurrection was as an administrator rather than military conqueror. She revived and reconstructed old desecrated temples and built new temples. She ran an efficient civil administration by promoting textile industry, trade and commerce and by maintaining law and order.

Ahilyabai maintained cordial relations with all the three Peshwas during her tenure – Madhav Rao, Narayan Rao and Sawai Madhav Rao. Her cordial relations with Peshwa Madhav Rao and his wife Ramabai played a crucial role in her succession². Peshwa Madhav Rao was an ardent supporter of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar. During the succession dispute between Raghunath Rao and Sawai Madhav Rao, Devi Ahilyabai sided with the later and opposed the former.

Mahadji Scindhia was one of the most significant statesmen in India during this period. Devi Ahilyabai Holkar helped Mahadji Scindhia on various occasions. Ahilyabai Holkar granted an interest free loan of thirty lakhs rupees to Mahadji Scindhia³. During her tenure, the Holkar-Scindhia relations were based on mutual trust, respect and cooperation. The Holkar-Scindhia cooperation played a crucial role in Maratha resilience in Central India during the First Anglo-Maratha war. This was possible due to the mutual respect and admiration shared by Mahadji Scindhia and Devi Ahilyabai Holkar. The financial support given by Holkar State to Scindhias was essential for military campaigns of Marathas against the East India Company.

Peshwa Daftar in Pune was the heart of Maratha sovereignty. This office was dominated by a regency council consisting of twelve Maratha statesmen known as Baarabhai. Nana Phadnis was the leader of this council and exercised power on behalf of the infant Peshwa. Nana Phadnis appreciated Devi Ahilyabai for her religious duties, courage and enterprise⁴.

Diwan Gangadhar Chandrachur objected to the succession of Ahilyabai Holkar and therefore requested Raghunath Rao to conquer the kingdom. As Raghunath Rao was also hungry for power, he directed all his troops towards Indore. Ahilyabai Holkar came to know from her spies that Raghunath Rao is marching towards Indore with fifty thousand soldiers. Ahilyabai gave military command to Tukoji Rao and asked help from Mahadji Scindhia, Gaekwad, Bhonsle and Dabhare. Ahilyabai Holkar also gained the trust and confidence of Peshwa Madhav Rao. When Raghunath Rao reached Ujjain, he found the armies of Scindhia, Gaekwad and Dabhare along with the Holkar army. Ahilyabai Holkar wrote a letter to Raghunath Rao stating that she had nothing to lose in case of her defeat but if the later gets defeated He will be ridiculed for the rest of his life for being defeated by a woman. Raghunath Rao stated that his purpose in Indore was to give condolence on the demise of late Male Rao Holkar. Raghunath Rao was advised by Tukoji to leave his army and proceed with the later to Indore. Raghunath Rao was welcomed by Devi Ahilyabai and he stayed in Indore for one month⁵. This incident showcases the diplomatic skills of Ahilyabai Holkar and how she averted such a severe political crisis in the very beginning of her rule.

¹ Nagrale, N.N. Ahilyabai and her benevolent administration. *Proceedings of Indian History Congress Vol. 40*, 1979. p. 701.

² Ibid. p. 703.

³ Ibid. p. 704.

⁴ Ibid. p. 705.

⁵ Javlekar, Arvind. *Lokmata Ahilyabai*. Ocean Books Pvt. Ltd, 2005. p. 45.

Ahilyabai Holkar sided with Peshwa Sawai Madhav Rao and Nana Phadnis during their succession dispute with Raghunath Rao. Raghunath Rao had signed treaty of Surat with East India company which started the Anglo-Maratha War. The military command of the Holkar army was under Tukoji Rao Holkar while Ahilyabai Holkar provided a sound administration in the kingdom during the first Anglo-Maratha war which lasted from 1775 to 1782.

Conclusion

Devi Ahilyabai Holkar has always been praised for her religious and charitable works but she also possessed statesmanship and diplomatic skills. Her civil administration was based on her idealistic and religious principles. But her diplomatic relations were a fusion of idealism and real politics. Her opposition to Raghunath Rao was based on idealism but the way she was able to corner and isolate such an able and experienced statesman and military leader was only possible through real politics. Devi Ahilyabai Holkar never declared her independence or sovereignty from the Maratha Empire. She took the position of Subahdar (Governor) which was originally given to Malhar Rao Holkar by Peshwa Baji Rao I. Her army commanded by Tukoji Rao I always obliged to the commands of the Peshwa. Her loyalty towards Peshwa shows her devotion to the unity and integrity of the Maratha Empire. The reign of Ahilyabai Holkar was the second golden age of Marathas which saw the rise of able statesmen and military geniuses such as Mahadji Scindhia, Raghunath Rao and Nana Phadnis. It was also the period where Indian states were being conquered or subjugated by East India Company. Ahilyabai Holkar was able to rule for over three decades in such political conditions shows her political resilience.

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