



Philanthropy, Governance, And Public Welfare In The Reign Of Ahilya Bai Holkar: An Analytical Study Of Khasgi Sanad (1771)

Amrit Raj^{1*}, Dr. Anil Kumar²

^{1*}Senior Research Fellow, Department of Historical Studies and Archaeology, Central University of South Bihar, Gaya, amritraj@cusb.ac.in

²Assistant Professor, Department of Historical Studies and Archaeology, Central University of South Bihar, Gaya, anilkr@cusb.ac.in

Citation: Amrit Raj et al (2024). Philanthropy, Governance, And Public Welfare In The Reign Of Ahilya Bai Holkar: An Analytical Study Of Khasgi Sanad (1771), *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1) 8233-8239

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.11331

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Ahilya Bai Holkar, the revered sovereign of the Malwa kingdom in central India, continues to be an enduring symbol of wisdom and benevolence. Her reign (1767 AD - 1795 AD) is widely celebrated for its exemplary governance, infrastructural progress, and unwavering commitment to public welfare. This article delves into her extraordinary contributions to the promotion of public welfare and philanthropic endeavours. It also underscores her visionary leadership. This study provides an explanation of the income and expenditure incurred during the stewardship of Ahilya Bai Holkar, as documented in the Khasgi Sanad, spanning various rituals, customs, the establishment of the orphanage, and the organisation of other religious activities within a single year, namely 1771 AD.

Keywords- Ahilya Bai Holkar, Khasgi Sanad, Holkar Dynasty, Hindu rituals, Philanthropy

Early Life and Administration

Ahilya Bai Holkar was born in 1725 AD, at Chondi, Maharashtra, into a humble Dhangar family. Despite her modest origins, she was married to Khande Rao Holkar, the heir to the Malwa throne, thus becoming part of one of the most influential dynasties of 18th-century India. However, her life took a tragic turn when her husband was killed during the battle of Kumher (initially known as Kubera), which was the part of Bharatpur state, in 1754 AD, leaving her widowed at a young age.¹ Undeterred by personal loss, Ahilya Bai remained a pillar of strength within the Holkar family. The situation grew more challenging following the death of her father-in-law, Malhar Rao Holkar, in 1766, a statesman and military leader who had expanded the Holkar influence across Malwa. The final blow came with the untimely death of her only son, Male Rao, who reportedly suffered from mental instability and took his own life.² In the face of such profound adversity, Ahilya Bai defied the conventional expectations of her time and ascended the throne, ushering in an era of just and enlightened rule that earned her a place among India's most revered monarchs.

If one is to describe Devi Ahilya Bai, the phenomenal queen of the Holkar Dynasty, the apt words would be found in the Marathi poem;

'Raj yogini Sati Ahilya Holkaranchi Rani, Ajun Narmada Jali Laharati Tichya Yashachi Gani'³

(This means that the waves of the River Narmada still sing the songs of success of Sati Ahilya, the queen of the Holkar Dynasty, who, despite being a queen, remained a hermit and a pious woman to the core).

Among Hindus, it is generally uncommon to confine females or compel them to wear veils, except in certain provinces where they have adopted this practice from their Muslim conquerors. The Marathas of rank, including Brahmins, have largely rejected this custom, with only a few exceptions, as it is not mandated by any religious institution. The principal exceptions are the higher classes of Rajput, particularly the Rajas and chiefs of this tribe, who appear to have embraced this practice to a significant extent under the influence of the Mahomedans. Evidence from numerous passages in popular Rajput tales suggests that their customs in this regard were different when Hindu rule prevailed over India.

¹ Sardesai, G.S. (1958). *New History of the Marathas*. Bombay: Phoenix Publications. Vol. III. p. 245.

² Kincaid, C.A. (1925). *A History of the Maratha People*. London: Oxford University Press. Vol. III. p. 172.

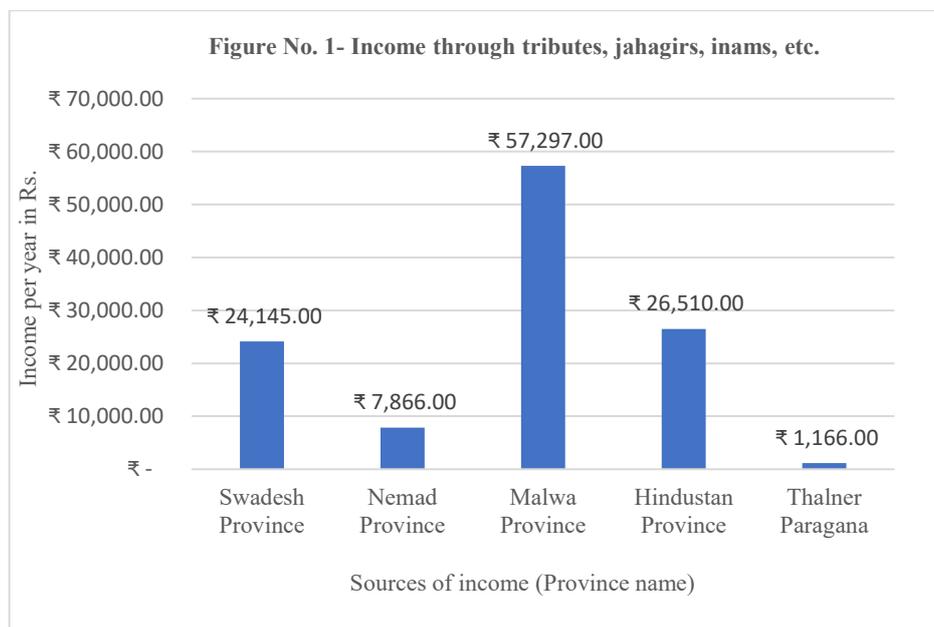
³ Vinita (2024). *E-Periodical Unheard Voices*. Social Studies Foundation. Year 4. Vol. II. p. 22.

“Ahalya Bai, therefore, offended no prejudice when she took upon herself the direct management of affairs, and sat every day for a considerable period, in open Durbar, transacting business. Her first principle of government appears to have been moderate assessment, and an almost sacred respect for the native rights of village officers and proprietors of lands”.⁴ She was deeply committed to the principles of justice and governance, ensuring that every grievance reached her ears directly. While she frequently delegated cases to courts of equity, arbitration panels, and her ministers for resolution, she remained ever-accessible to her people. Her profound sense of duty in administering justice was unparalleled, reflecting an unwavering dedication to fairness and righteousness. She was not only patient but also indefatigable in examining even the most minor disputes, meticulously investigating every detail whenever an appeal was brought before her. Her governance exemplified a rare blend of judicial prudence, compassion, and tireless commitment to the well-being of her subjects.

Ahilya Bai’s administrative skills were exceptional. She reorganized the revenue system, ensuring that tax collection was efficient yet fair to farmers. By employing competent officials and instituting a merit-based system, she set a standard for accountability.⁵ Her policies reflect a pragmatic blend of traditional governance and innovative strategies. Ranade has highlighted her approach to decentralization, which empowered local officials while maintaining centralized oversight. The success of Ahilya Bai in the internal administration of her domains was altogether wonderful.⁶

Income through the Khasgi Sanad in One Year (1771 AD) in the Stewardship of Ahilya Bai Holkar

During the administration of Devi Ahilya Bai (1767 AD –1795 AD), the kingdom’s revenue was generated through diverse sources, demonstrating her administrative prowess. Two primary sources of revenue were tributes and presents, which were meticulously documented in Sanads. These sources played a pivotal role in sustaining the kingdom’s economic stability. Income derived from grants, such as Inam or Jagir, was classified as tributes, embodying the kingdom’s allegiance and respect. This revenue generation encompassed various provinces and rulers. She honoured her highness with presents, acknowledging her justice and benevolent rule. These contributions not only bolstered the state’s financial foundation but also reinforced political alliances and cultural connections.

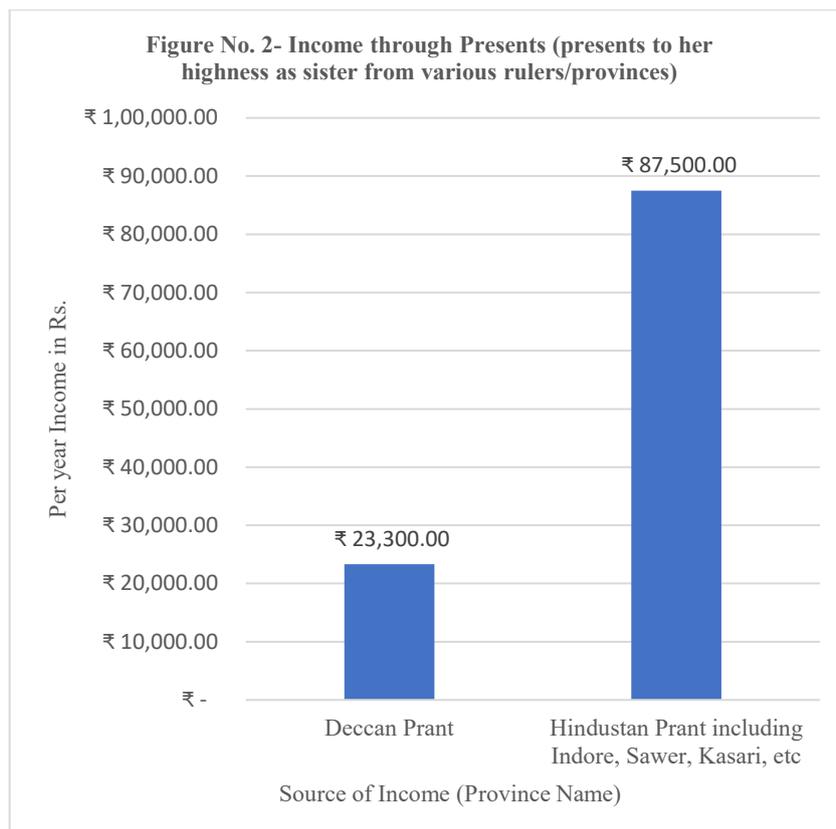


Source-computed by Excel
from the book 'Life and
Life's Work of Shree Ahilya
Bai Devi Holkar'.

⁴ Malcolm, J. (1824). *A memoir of Central India including Malwa, and adjoining provinces*. Second. Vol. I. p. 176.

⁵ Ranade, M.G. (1900). *Rise of the Maratha Power*. Bombay: Publications Division, Government of India. Vol. I. p. 212.

⁶ Malcolm, J. (1824). *A memoir of Central India including Malwa, and adjoining provinces*. Vol. I. p. 179.



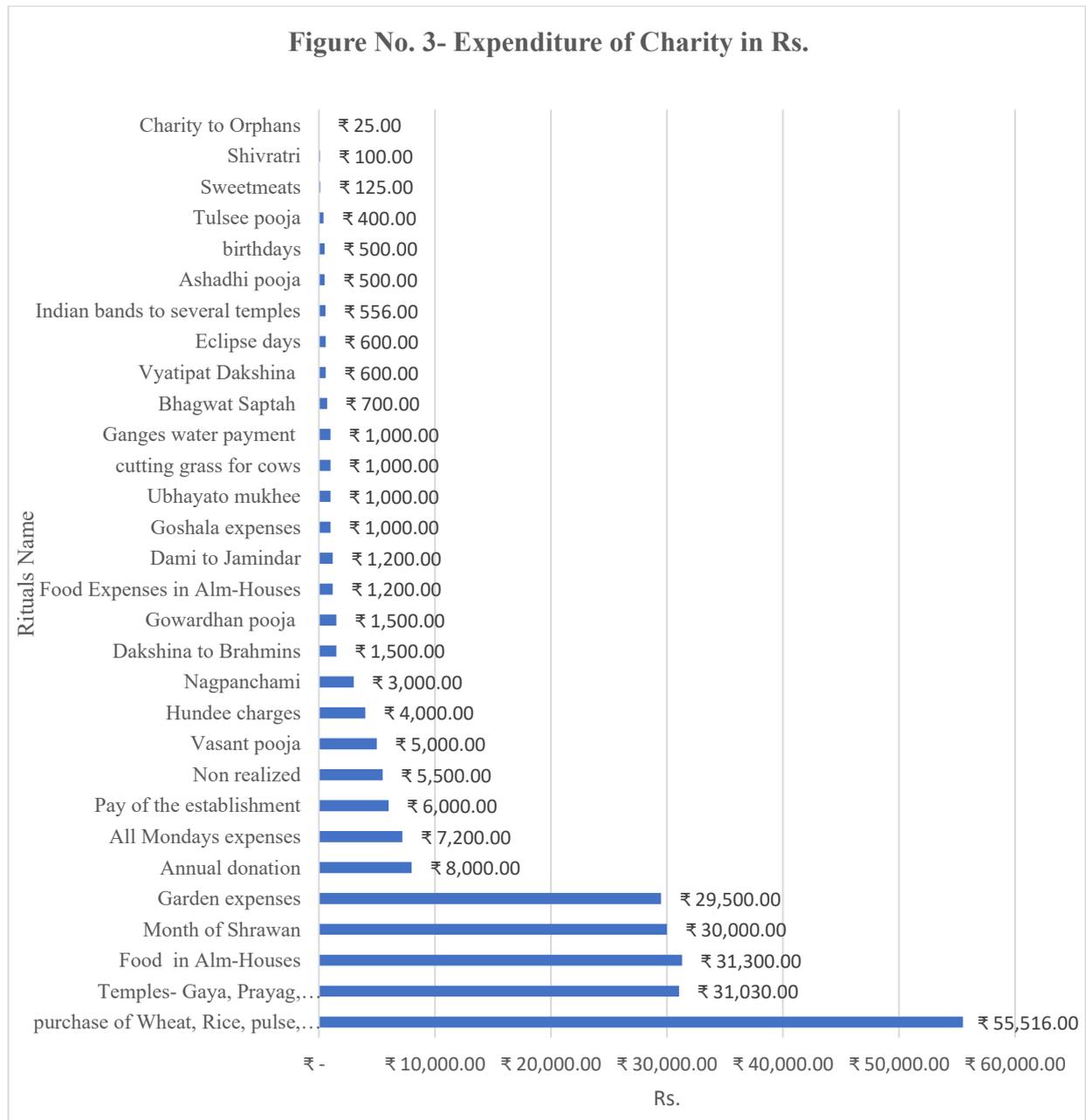
Source-computed by Excel from the book 'Life and Life's Work of Shree Ahilya Bai Devi Holkar'.

The data presents tribute and income contributions from various provinces and regions. Among the tribute sources, Malwa Province records the highest contribution at ₹57,297.00 (figure no. 1), followed by Hindustan Province at ₹26,510.00 and Swadesh Province at ₹24,145.00 (figure no. 1). Comparatively, Nemad Province and Thalner Paragana contribute significantly lower amounts at ₹7,866.00 and ₹1,166.00 (figure no. 1), respectively. Additionally, the income data highlights Hindustan Prant (including Indore, Sawer, Kasari, etc.) as the most significant source, contributing ₹87,500.00 (figure no. 2), which is the highest among all recorded entries. Deccan Prant also makes a substantial contribution of ₹23,300.00 (figure no. 2).

Overall, Hindustan Prant stands out as the most significant contributor, followed by Malwa Province, emphasizing the economic importance of these regions in revenue collection. The data shows a significant contribution to celebrating and organizing the different rituals, customs, and philanthropic works.

Expenditure in Charity in the stewardship of Ahilya Bai through Khasgi income per year

This comprehensive table offers a detailed analysis of Ahilya Bai Holkar's substantial financial contributions to religious, social, and administrative initiatives. It underscores her unwavering dedication to public welfare and profound spiritual devotion. A significant portion of her expenditures was dedicated to food security and charitable distributions, with ₹55,516 (figure



no. 3) Allocated for the purchase of essential food items like wheat, rice, and pulses, ensuring sustenance for both temple offerings and public feasts. Additionally, ₹31,300 (figure no. 3) was specifically designated for food expenses in Alm-houses, which played a crucial role in feeding the underprivileged, while another ₹1,200 was set aside for similar purposes. Recognizing the religious significance of the holy month of Shravan, she allocated ₹30,000 (figure no. 3) for rituals and food distribution, ensuring that devotees and saints were well provided for during this sacred period. Her commitment to religious and spiritual endeavours is evident from the ₹31,030 (figure no. 3) spent on maintaining and supporting temples in major pilgrimage centers such as Gaya, Prayag, Pushkar, Kashi, Vrindavan, Ayodhya, Dwarka, Badri-Kedar, and Haridwar, among others. Beyond temple restoration, she ensured the continuous upkeep of religious institutions by arranging permanent financial assistance for over 50 temples. Several religious festivals and rituals received dedicated funding, including Vasant Pooja (₹5,000) (figure no. 3), Nag Panchami (₹3,000), Gowardhan Pooja (₹1,500), Asadhi Pooja (₹500) (figure no. 3), and Shivratri (₹100). Additional allocations were made for Bhagwat Saptah (₹700), Vyatipat Dakshina (₹600), and special ceremonies held during eclipses (₹600), reflecting her deep respect for Hindu traditions. To further promote religious festivities, she funded Indian musical bands in temples (₹556) and provided donations on significant occasions such as birthdays (₹500) and Tulsi Pooja (₹400) (figure no. 3).

Apart from religious contributions, Ahilya Bai Holkar also focused on administrative and infrastructural expenses essential for the smooth functioning of temples and public services. She allocated ₹6,000 for the salaries of temple staff and administrative personnel, ensuring efficient management. Additionally, ₹5,500 (figure no. 3) was recorded as non-realized expenses, likely referring to unforeseen costs or unpaid dues. The

maintenance of temple funds was further supported through Hundee charges (₹4,000), while consistent donations were made annually (₹8,000) (figure no. 3) and on all Mondays (₹7,200), ensuring a steady flow of resources for religious and community activities.

Her philanthropic vision extended to environmental and animal welfare, recognizing the importance of sustainable infrastructure. She allocated ₹1,000 each for cow shelters (Goshalas) and grass-cutting for cattle, ensuring their well-being. Furthermore, she prioritized water conservation and environmental upkeep by dedicating ₹29,500 (figure no. 3) to the maintenance of gardens and green spaces around temples and public areas. Her commitment to the welfare of devotees was further exemplified by the construction of ghats along major rivers in Kashi, Ayodhya, Haridwar, Maheshwar, and Nashik, many of which still stand today as testaments to her foresight and architectural acumen.

Ahilya Bai Holkar also took significant steps to ensure food security for the needy by establishing food distribution centres in multiple locations, including Maheshwar. Even the smallest needs were addressed, such as the provision of sweetmeats (₹125) (figure no. 3) and water from the sacred Ganges (₹1,000) for religious rituals. Her charity works also extended to marginalized communities, as seen in her contributions to orphans (₹25) (figure no. 3) and financial aid to local landlords (₹1,200) (figure no. 3) to ensure economic stability.

Through her meticulous and farsighted expenditures, Ahilya Bai Holkar exemplified a rare blend of spiritual devotion, administrative acumen, and humanitarian leadership. Unlike many rulers who prioritized opulence, she directed state resources toward the collective well-being of her people, ensuring that every investment served a lasting purpose.⁷ Her patronage of religion was not merely symbolic; she saw temples and pilgrimage centres as social institutions that could uplift communities, offering shelter, sustenance, and spiritual solace to all, regardless of caste or wealth.⁸ Beyond religious patronage, her vision extended to sustainable infrastructure development- building ghats, food distribution centres, and charitable institutions that continue to serve millions even centuries after her reign, a testament to her enduring legacy of inclusive governance and social equity.⁹

Charity in different philanthropic works

According to Romila Thapar (1997), her architectural initiatives exemplify a synthesis of spiritual devotion and political acumen, as they reinforced her legitimacy as a ruler while contributing to cultural continuity.¹⁰ Joshi (1980) argues that her policies were ahead of their time, emphasizing human development over territorial expansion.¹¹ Chitnis (1992) highlights her role in promoting cultural nationalism, noting how her architectural projects reinforced a sense of collective identity among Indians.¹²

More than two centuries after her passing, Ahilya Bai Holkar's legacy endures through the numerous public structures that continue to stand as enduring testaments to her remarkable vision and contributions. While many of her works were closely associated with places of worship, they have also served the common people in various ways, remaining integral to their daily lives.

Her commitment to infrastructure development was extraordinary, extending far beyond the boundaries of her Malwa kingdom to various sacred sites across India. Recognizing the spiritual and cultural significance of pilgrimage centres, she undertook the construction and restoration of temples, Dharamshala, wells, and ghats, ensuring that travellers and devotees had access to essential facilities.¹³ From Badrinath and Kedarnath in the north to Rameshwaram in the south, and from Dwarka and Somnath in the west to Jagannath Puri in the east, her vision encompassed nearly every corner of the subcontinent. In total, she commissioned public works in over 40 locations, a feat rarely matched by any ruler of her time.¹⁴ Her unwavering dedication to temple restoration was particularly remarkable. She not only rebuilt revered shrines such as Kashi Vishweshwar, Somnath, and Verul but also ensured their long-term maintenance by instituting permanent financial support for more than 50 temples, safeguarding their spiritual legacy for future generations.¹⁵

Understanding the needs of pilgrims, Ahilya Bai Holkar undertook extensive public welfare initiatives, ensuring that spiritual travellers had access to essential amenities. She constructed well-equipped shelters at eleven major religious centres, offering weary devotees a place to rest during their journeys.¹⁶ Her architectural vision extended to the development of aesthetically designed and structurally robust ghats along significant rivers in Kashi, Ayodhya, Haridwar, Maheshwar, and Nashik, many of which stand resilient to this day, bearing

⁷ Sarkar, J. (1992). *Fall of the Mughal Empire*. Delhi: Orient Black Swan. Vol. IV. p. 312.

⁸ Mirashi, V.V. (1975). *Literary and Historical Studies in Indology*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. p. 221.

⁹ Eaton, R.M. (2019). *India in the Persianate Age: 1000–1765*. London: Allen Lane Penguin Books. p. 384.

¹⁰ Thapar, R. (1997). *Cultural Heritage of India: Insights from the Past*. Kolkata: Asiatic Society. pp. 203-228.

¹¹ Joshi, S. (1980). *Visionary Leaders of Medieval India*. Jaipur: Rajasthan University Press. pp. 62-90.

¹² Chitnis, K. (1992). *Cultural Nationalism in India*. Mumbai: Pragati Prakashan. pp. 143-165.

¹³ Sen, S.N. (1976). *Administrative System of the Marathas*. Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co. p. 189.

¹⁴ Dhare, R.C. (1984). *Sri Vitthal: Ek Mahasamanvay*. Pune: Shrividya Prakashan. p. 214.

¹⁵ Richards, J. F. (1993). *The Mughal Empire and Historical Legacy of India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 276.

¹⁶ Altekar, A.S. (1958). *State and Government in Ancient India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. p. 267.

testimony to her enduring legacy. In addition to infrastructure, she prioritized social welfare by establishing food distribution centres, most notably in Maheshwar, where the underprivileged could receive nourishment, reflecting her deep sense of compassion and duty as a ruler.¹⁷

Her commitment to public welfare extended to water conservation, as she constructed numerous wells, tanks, ponds, reservoirs, and cisterns, securing a sustainable water supply for communities. Through these enduring contributions, her legacy continues to shape lives and inspire generations.

Conclusion

Ahilya Bai Holkar's stewardship remains a shining example of enlightened governance, philanthropy, and spiritual dedication, leaving an indelible mark on Indian history. Her financial acumen, as reflected in the Khasgi Sanad documents, demonstrates her ability to harmonize economic responsibility with an unwavering commitment to public welfare. She directed state resources toward societal upliftment, ensuring that temples, pilgrimage centres, food security initiatives, and social institutions flourished under her stewardship. Her emphasis on food security, water conservation, and social welfare reflects an advanced understanding of sustainable governance long before such concepts became widely recognized. Even centuries after her passing, her contributions continue to shape lives, with temples, roads, and charitable institutions standing as living testaments to her vision. Her legacy is not just one of political leadership but of selfless service, righteousness, and deep compassion.

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