



# KASHIBAI

THE WOMAN OF HIGH STATUS









# Preface

*History remembers warriors, kings, and battles, yet in its quieter corners dwell figures of immense strength, wisdom, and grace. The Woman of High Status: Kashibai seeks to illuminate the philosophical depth and aesthetic brilliance of Kashibai, the first wife of Peshwa Bajirao I. Often overshadowed by the tides of history, Kashibai was a woman of profound dignity, embodying resilience, sacrifice, and an understated power that shaped the Maratha court.*

*This book is more than a historical recounting, it is an exploration of Kashibai's life through a philosophical lens, examining her quiet endurance, emotional depth, and unwavering commitment to duty. How does one find strength in silence? What does devotion mean in the face of personal loss? These questions echo through her story.*

*Complementing this introspection is a study of the era's fashion, a visual journey into the rich textures, colors, and intricate craftsmanship that adorned Kashibai and the noblewomen of her time. From nauvari sarees to paithani silks with golden zari, her attire was a reflection of both her status and identity.*

*Through art, history, and thought, this book pays homage to Kashibai, a woman who was more than a wife of a warrior—she was a queen of her own spirit.*

# What is the true essence of power? Is it the force of authority, or is it the quiet strength and resilience to endure?

*We shall examine Kashibai's ability to embody grace while holding significant influence in a male-dominated political landscape. Delve into the idea that true power often lies in a woman's ability to remain steadfast and composed, even when faced with turmoil.*

## **The Intersection of Power and Grace: Kashibai's Journey**

In the patriarchal world of the Maratha Empire, male rulers and warriors dominated the political stage. Kashibai at the time emerged as a woman of quiet yet profound power. The essence of her strength lies not in the plain force of authority but in her resilience and grace amidst adverse situations. Kashibai, as the first wife of Bajirao I, witnessed the complexities of politics and personal challenges, and proved that the idea that true power is not always loud or aggressive, but often lies in quiet endurance. Kashibai's ability to maintain her composure during difficult times—particularly when faced with Bajirao's relationship with his second wife, Mastani—showed her inner strength. Her grace in moments of unrest was a powerful form of resistance against societal expectations that aimed to limit her role to mere wife and mother. Instead, she held influence by supporting Bajirao's rule and protecting the legacy of the Maratha Empire, all while upholding the dignity of her position. People often misjudged her grace to be a passive trait but it always proved to be an active form of strength. Kashibai had the ability to navigate through different political landscapes with poise which demonstrated that power could be wielded not just through aggression but through strong will and emotional intelligence. One can't help but wonder if this went unnoticed due to her being a woman and the lack of credit which came with it. In a world where women were typically expected to be compliant, Kashibai's quiet influence and dignified leadership revealed that power is not always about control or dominance but about having the persistence to endure, adapt, and maintain grace through the challenges of life. She made it evident that power doesn't have a singular definition and isn't supposed to just be what's expected from you, but is what keeps you alive and well through the harshest of times. Her story is a great example of philosophical reflection on power: which does not merely lie in the force to dominate but the strength to remain steady. Kashibai's journey reflects the power possessed by not just her but many other Maratha women of that time, and that is what makes her story worth remembrance.





# How does a marriage between two powerful individuals reflect the merging of two realms — personal and political?

*Further, we analyze the relationship between Kashibai and Bajirao as both a personal union and a strategic alliance. How does the concept of partnership evolve when intertwined with governance and legacy?*

## **Marriage and Sovereignty: The Union of Hearts and Empires**

India's history has witnessed its preference of arranged marriages, often for the sake of personal gain or convenience, rather than love and commitment. The marriage of Kashibai and Bajirao I was not merely a personal union but also a strategic alliance that blended love, duty, and power. In the context of the Maratha Empire, where political and personal realms were often intertwined, their relationship reflected the merging of two spheres: the intimacy of one's heart and the risky domain of governance. Their union was built on mutual respect and love, yet also carried the huge weight of responsibility, as both the individuals understood that their roles extended far beyond just personal affection. Bajirao I, the powerful Maratha general, relied heavily on Kashibai for emotional support and stability throughout his rule, often so when faced with hardships. In turn, Kashibai's position of being his first wife granted her significant influence in the empire's political and administrative affairs. Kashibai's support for Bajirao's military campaigns and her role in maintaining the court's harmony were crucial in the building of Maratha power. However, their marriage seemed to also evolve into something more than just a political alliance. As Bajirao's role as a ruler grew, so did Kashibai's influence in shaping decisions that affected the empire's future. Her partnership with Bajirao came to go beyond traditional notions of marriage, as it embodied the idea of governance through mutual respect and shared responsibility. Their relationship became a symbol of how love and politics can coexist, shaping not only personal legacies but the future of a nation. The concept of partnership in this context evolved beyond the traditional idea of marriage. It became a fusion of personal bonds and political aspirations, where two powerful individuals could work together to build an empire while navigating the complexities of personal dynamics. Kashibai and Bajirao's union reflects the intricate balance between love and governance, demonstrating that sovereignty often requires the fusion of hearts and empires.

# Can a woman be simultaneously a nurturer, a leader, and a partner, or are these roles inherently conflicting?

*Contemplating Kashibai's multifaceted identity — as the wife of a ruler, the mother of future leaders, and a matriarch in her own right. How did she reconcile the traditional expectations of womanhood with the extraordinary circumstances of her life.*

## **The Role of a Woman: Wife, Mother, and Leader**

Kashibai's life offers a profound exploration of the multifaceted roles a woman can hold in a society that demands conformity to traditional ideals of womanhood. As the wife of Bajirao I, the Maratha general, she was expected to fulfill the duties of a loving spouse, supporting him emotionally and administratively in the complexities of empire-building. As a mother to his children, she was tasked with nurturing future heirs and ensuring the continuity of the Maratha dynasty. Yet, as a woman of influence in her own right, she also emerged as a leader, navigating the intricate political landscapes of her time.

The question arises: can a woman simultaneously be a nurturer, a leader, and a partner, or are these roles inherently at odds with one another? In Kashibai's case, the answer lies in her ability to harmonize these roles despite the tensions between them. She was not just a passive partner in her marriage but an active participant in shaping the decisions of the empire. Bajirao often sought after Kashi in times of hardships, making her a safety net for him to fall back on. As a mother, she bore the responsibility of nurturing future leaders of the Maratha Empire, balancing maternal affection with the rigorous demands of ensuring the survival and prosperity of her lineage. Being a ruler, most of Bajirao's time went towards looking after the empire, which resulted in Kashibai having to single handedly parent their children. It was an unspoken responsibility thrown at women at that time, unaffected by what their choices or wants were. Yet, her role as a leader was equally essential. Kashibai was deeply involved in the political dynamics of the empire, offering counsel to Bajirao and maintaining her influence in the court. In navigating these multiple identities, she redefined womanhood not as a singular role but as a complex interplay of strength, nurturing, and leadership. Her ability to reconcile these expectations speaks to the extraordinary nature of her life and the inherent strength of women who simultaneously embrace multiple roles without diminishing any of them. Kashibai's life is a testament to how a woman can lead, nurture, and partner, often without the need to sacrifice one role for another.





# How does grief shape the identity of a person? Can loss give rise to new forms of power and wisdom?

*Let's look at how Kashibai handled the tragic death of Bajirao, exploring the philosophical themes of loss, resilience, and the strength that arises from facing life's harshest realities.*

## **Suffering and Resilience: Embracing Loss and Finding Strength**

The life of a woman in olden times, and current even ; highly revolved around that of their husband's or of any pivotal man in their life. These men were also often the ones who dictated the life of women around them and stripped them off of their rights, not so subtly. Kashibai's life too, even after being a woman of rather high status, was more or less the same. The death of Bajirao I was a profound tragedy in Kashibai's life, yet it also became a focal point in her personal evolution. As the wife of a great warrior and ruler, Kashibai had long shared in the triumphs and challenges of the Maratha Empire. However, his untimely death thrust her into a new reality, one marked by grief, loss, and the need to navigate the complexities of both personal sorrow and political upheaval. A question emerges; how does grief shape the identity of a person, and can loss give rise to new forms of power and wisdom? Kashibai's response to this tragedy exemplifies the transformative power of resilience. Rather than succumbing to despair, as the fellow people would expect from her, she demonstrated remarkable strength by embracing her grief and channeling it into action. In a society where a woman's role was often defined by her relationship to men, Kashibai chose to redefine her role, not as a widow in mourning but as a matriarch who could guide the future of her family and the empire. She became a symbol of emotional and mental fortitude, leading her children through the uncertain times that came after Bajirao's death. Kashibai's journey reflects how loss can create space for new forms of power and knowledge. In the face of personal loss, she found her voice as a leader, understanding that resilience does not mean an absence of pain, but the ability to endure and grow through it. Her capacity to find strength in sorrow allowed her to become a source of support for those around her, proving that suffering, when embraced with grace, can give rise to deeper wisdom and a more powerful form of self-empowerment.

# Is fashion merely a reflection of personal style, or can it also be a form of political expression?

*Let's examine Kashibai's royal attire convey authority, reinforcing her power within the court and society. How does the act of dressing become an expression of control, identity, and legacy?*

## **Suffering and Resilience: Embracing Loss and Finding Strength**

Fashion is often viewed as a mere expression of personal style, but it can also serve as a potent tool for political expression and power dynamics. But is fashion merely a reflection of one's personal taste, or does it possess the capacity to shape political identity and influence? In the case of Kashibai, her royal attire was not only a symbol of her status but also a subtle yet powerful form of political expression that conveyed authority, control, and legacy. Kashibai's clothing was carefully curated to reflect her position as the first wife of Bajirao I, the Maratha general. Every garment she wore, from intricately woven silks to ornate jewelry, was a statement of her power and influence within the court. Far beyond mere adornment, her attire became a language through which she communicated her identity and strength. In the Maratha Empire, where rulers and their consorts were often judged by their appearance, Kashibai's fashion choices spoke volumes. Her attire reinforced not only her personal identity but also her role in the political landscape. By dressing in a way that signified both wealth and dignity, Kashibai reminded those around her of the immense responsibility she bore—not just as a wife, but as a key political figure. Her garments marked her as a figure of authority, a woman whose influence extended beyond the private sphere into the heart of the empire's decision-making. Furthermore, the act of dressing became an expression of legacy. By adhering to traditional Maratha styles while subtly incorporating personal elements, Kashibai wove together her individual legacy with the empire's broad cultural identity. Each choice in fabric, color, and ornamentation was a thread in the tapestry of her lasting impact on the Maratha dynasty. In Kashibai's life, fashion was far more than a reflection of personal style—it was a medium of political power, a tool of identity, and a testament to her enduring legacy within the Maratha Empire. Her ability to navigate the complex intersections of appearance, authority, and influence underscores how fashion can transcend aesthetics to become a force in shaping history.





# How do beauty standards impose expectations on women?

*Read into the tension between feminine beauty as an internal quality versus external pressure. Did Kashibai's attire and appearance serve her own sense of self, or was it dictated by societal ideals of femininity and royalty?*

## **The Burden of Beauty: Fashion and Feminine Expectations**

Beauty, especially within royal circles, often becomes both a personal expression and a societal expectation. In the context of Kashibai, her attire and appearance were not only shaped by her own identity but were also deeply influenced by the rigid expectations of femininity and royalty in the Maratha Empire. In Kashibai's world, as the first wife of Bajirao I, beauty was not just an aesthetic value but a political tool. Royal women were expected to embody an idealized form of femininity that reflected the empire's grandeur, with their appearance serving as a symbol of the family's power, wealth, and respectability. This creates a tension between external pressure and the internal nature of beauty within one's own self. Kashibai's elaborate garments and jewelry were not merely personal choices; they were dictated by the royal culture and the expectations of her position within the court. The exquisite fabrics, intricately designed sarees, and heavy adornments became a visual manifestation of her status, aligning her physical appearance with the image of the powerful Maratha queen. However, this beauty came with a burden. Now while Kashi's beauty undoubtedly held personal significance—helping her to express her role as Bajirao's consort and a powerful woman within the empire—she was also subject to the unspoken rules of royal femininity. These standards required her to present herself in ways that upheld both her personal dignity and the empire's expectations of grace, fertility, and strength. This tension between inner identity and external pressure raises broader questions about the nature of feminine beauty in royal settings. Is beauty something that reflects a woman's true self, or is it more about fulfilling the role imposed by society? In Kashibai's case, her beauty was likely both—a harmonious blend of personal choice and external expectation, where her attire conveyed both her identity as a woman and her role as a symbol of the Maratha Empire's power. Kashibai's life serves as a philosophical exploration of how women, particularly those in positions of power, navigate the complex interplay between internal beauty and external demands. While her physical beauty was shaped by the expectations of royalty, it also became a form of agency, a subtle way for her to wield influence and align her identity with the grandeur of the empire she helped sustain.

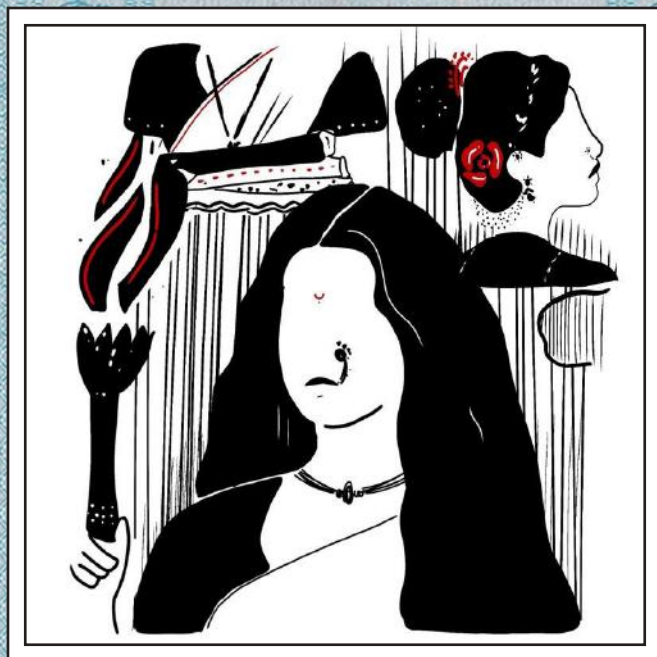
# Can the colors we choose to wear communicate more than aesthetics, embodying deeper cultural, political, and emotional meanings?

*Delve into the symbolism of colors in Kashibai's wardrobe, such as red, gold, and green, and reflect on how these choices connected her to her heritage, identity, and the broader power dynamics of the Maratha Empire.*

## **Color and Symbolism: The Philosophical Meaning of Fashion Choices**

Fashion is not just a mere aesthetic pursuit—it is a visual language that communicates deeper cultural, political, and emotional meanings. But do the colors we choose to wear carry more than just beauty? In the case of Kashibai, the colors in her wardrobe were laden with symbolism, representing her role in the Maratha Empire, her personal identity, and the power dynamics that shaped her world. Her attire was often infused with colors like red, gold, and green, each carrying profound meanings that connected her to her heritage and reinforced her authority. Red, for instance, was a color that symbolized strength, vitality, and royal power. As the wife of Bajirao I, red would have been a prominent feature in her wardrobe, linking her to both the vigor of the empire and the passionate strength of leadership. It also represented her role as a mother and a protector of the royal lineage. Gold was a color reserved for royalty, wealth, and divine connection. It signified not only her status as a queen but also her spiritual and cultural connection to the divine. In many ancient cultures, gold was associated with the gods, and by adorning herself in gold, Kashibai aligned with the higher realm. Green is often associated with nature, growth, health, and tranquility, evoking feelings of peace, balance, and renewal. It could reflect Kashibai's nurturing role as a mother and matriarch, while also symbolizing the flourishing of the Maratha Empire. In a political landscape defined by constant battles and shifting alliances, green could have also referred to the need for renewal and the hope for a stable future under her guidance. These colors, woven into Kashibai's wardrobe, were not just about fashion—they were visual expressions of her multifaceted identity. Through her choice of attire, she communicated her connection to the values of her social status, as a royal consort and matriarch. The symbolic meanings behind the colors she wore created a connection between her personal identity and the larger political & cultural currents of her time, reminding us that fashion can transcend aesthetics to become a tool of communication.





Is legacy something we create for ourselves,  
or is it something others perceive and  
impose upon us?

*Kashibai's legacy was shaped by both her actions and the historical narrative written by others. Discussing the tension between self-perception and external recognition, and how legacy is constructed over time.*

### **The Concept of Legacy: What it means to be remembered**

Legacy is a concept that intertwines personal achievements with collective memory. The question being, is legacy something we create for ourselves, or is it shaped by how others perceive and define us? This tension between self-perception and external recognition plays a central role in how we are remembered. In Kashibai's case, her legacy was shaped by both her personal actions and the historical narrative constructed by those who wrote about her life and role in the Maratha Empire. On one hand, Kashibai's legacy was defined by her actions—her leadership in the court, her support of her husband, and her strength as a mother and political figure. She played a crucial part in the survival and strength of the Maratha Empire, supporting military strategies, maintaining the integrity of her family, and raising future heirs to the throne. In this sense, she actively shaped her legacy by the roles she took upon and the choices she made in her lifetime. These actions solidified her reputation as a powerful woman in a male-dominated world. However, the creation of her legacy is also deeply intertwined with the narratives that others imposed upon her. Much of what we know about Kashibai comes from the accounts of male historians, who may have shaped her story to fit their own perceptions of women's roles within the empire. This historical lens has, at times, reduced her to the role of the dutiful wife and mother, focusing more on her relationship with Bajirao, rather than fully exploring her independent contributions to the empire's politics and culture. This tension between self-perception and external recognition raises the question of whether a person's true legacy can ever be fully understood. Is it the product of their own self-definition, or is it a reflection of how others have viewed and narrated their life? Kashibai's legacy demonstrates the complexity of this relationship, while her personal actions and decisions undoubtedly contributed to her lasting influence. In the end, legacy is an ever-evolving construct, one that is both self-fashioned and externally imposed. Kashibai's legacy, shaped by her own strength, resilience, and wisdom, continues to be redefined by the perspectives of historians, scholars, and the generations that come after. Her story reminds us that legacy is not static—it is a dynamic interplay between how we define ourselves and how others choose to remember us, shaping the way history remembers a person's contribution to the world.

## About Us

*Kashibai: Women of High Status is the culmination of a passionate journey of exploration and creativity undertaken by us; three students of Fashion Communication at NIFT. This coffee table book is an assignment that emerged from the study of Fashion Culture & Costume, a subject that encouraged us to delve into the rich tapestry of history and the intricate connections between culture, fashion, and identity.*

*Our research began with an in-depth exploration of the Maratha Empire (1674-1818), where we analyzed historical texts, consumed media, and studied the textiles and fashion of that era. Through this exploration, we were drawn to the character of Kashibai, wife of Maratha ruler Bajirao I. We found her life to be a profound source of inspiration, filled with rich philosophical questions that resonated with us on a personal level.*

*In this book, we have sought to capture the essence of Kashibai's life through a combination of hand-drawn illustrations and visuals that bring to life the textiles and clothing she might have worn. Every detail in the book—from the visuals to the philosophies we've developed—represents our collective effort and dedication. Through this work, we aim to provide a deep insight into Kashibai's life, her status, and the intricate relationship between fashion, identity, and philosophy during the Maratha Empire.*

*We hope this book serves as a tribute to the timeless influence of women like Kashibai, whose strength, grace, and wisdom continue to inspire generations.*





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