



Devi Ahilyabai Holkar: A great Diplomat & Administrator

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Why We Remember Ahilyadevi Even Today?

- **Devi Ahilyabai Holkar's** name is always taken with rare kind of reverence and also with titles like '**lokmata**', '**devi**', '**Punyashloka**', etc. All such titles were assigned to her by her subjects considering her benevolence, mother like love for them, caring nature, her justice and equality to all caste and creeds, her efforts for economic and cultural development. Many of us know about her dedication to Hindu religion and the renovation of temples and pilgrim places and rebuilding all major 'tirthsthanas' and 'jyotirlingas' and all major demolished temples in Bharat by invaders.

Family Background

- Ahilya, a clever child was born in the year 1725 on the day of Jeth Sud Saptami (Shake - 1647) in Chaundi village of Beed taluka of (Aurangabad district) Sambhaji Nagar of Maharashtra.
- Her father Mankoji Shinde was the Dhangar (Bharwad-shepherd) of this small village. From childhood, she had acquired skill in archery and horse riding along with 'sanskara' from her parents.
- Due to her extraordinary brilliance and agility, she stood out from all.

- After the request the wealthy Maratha king Madhavrao Peshwa to his friend subedar Malhar Rao Holkar, Ahalyabai's marriage was immediately fixed with Malhar Rao's son Khanderao.
- Malhar Rao and Gautamabai's son Khanderao was a little spoiled child due to excessive pampering. His parents hoped that getting a wife like Ahilya would improve Khanderao and his career would flourish. Ahilyabai - Khanderao's marriage took place in 1733. This marriage was celebrated with great pomp and show.



From Sati to Queen

- While the battle was going on at the Kumbheri fort, Khanderao was killed. Malhar Rao was deeply distressed by the untimely death of his only son, Khanderao. He stopped Ahilyabai from committing Sati. After his son's death, he considered Ahilyabai was his own son and started teaching her the lessons of politics. Ahilyabai gained a place as an important person in the Holkar dynasty even during Malhar Rao's lifetime



Invincible and Indomitable Spirit

- After four years, in 1766, **Malhar Rao also left this world**. A shining star of the Maratha Empire fell.
- Ignoring all her anguishes and sorrows, she preferred to live for the welfare of the people of Holkar Samrajya.
- Her son, **Malerao** too died at a very young age. Although, he was like his father and had not inherited any virtues from his mother or grandfather. It was a great shock for Ahilyadevi. She was mourning and her own Diwan sabotaged against Holkars.
- **Gangadhar Yashvant Chandrachud** made a plan to seize the property of Holkars with the help of **Raghunath Rao Peshva**. But as soon as Ahilyabai received the news from her spy named Shivaji Gopal, her fertile mind found ways to oppose the enemy and win the battle without facing it. She wrote letter to all neighbouring states demanding their help in her critical times.
- She could gather army of more than **seventy-five thousand soldiers** in no time.

Diplomacy –Victory Withour Sword



She wrote to Raghunath Rao warning him that “ if he attacked Indore, her army was ready to oppose and they would all be drowned in Kshipra River. Suppose he won, nobody would give him a credit for defeating a widow and if he was defeated by her, he will not be able to show his face to anyone anymore.”

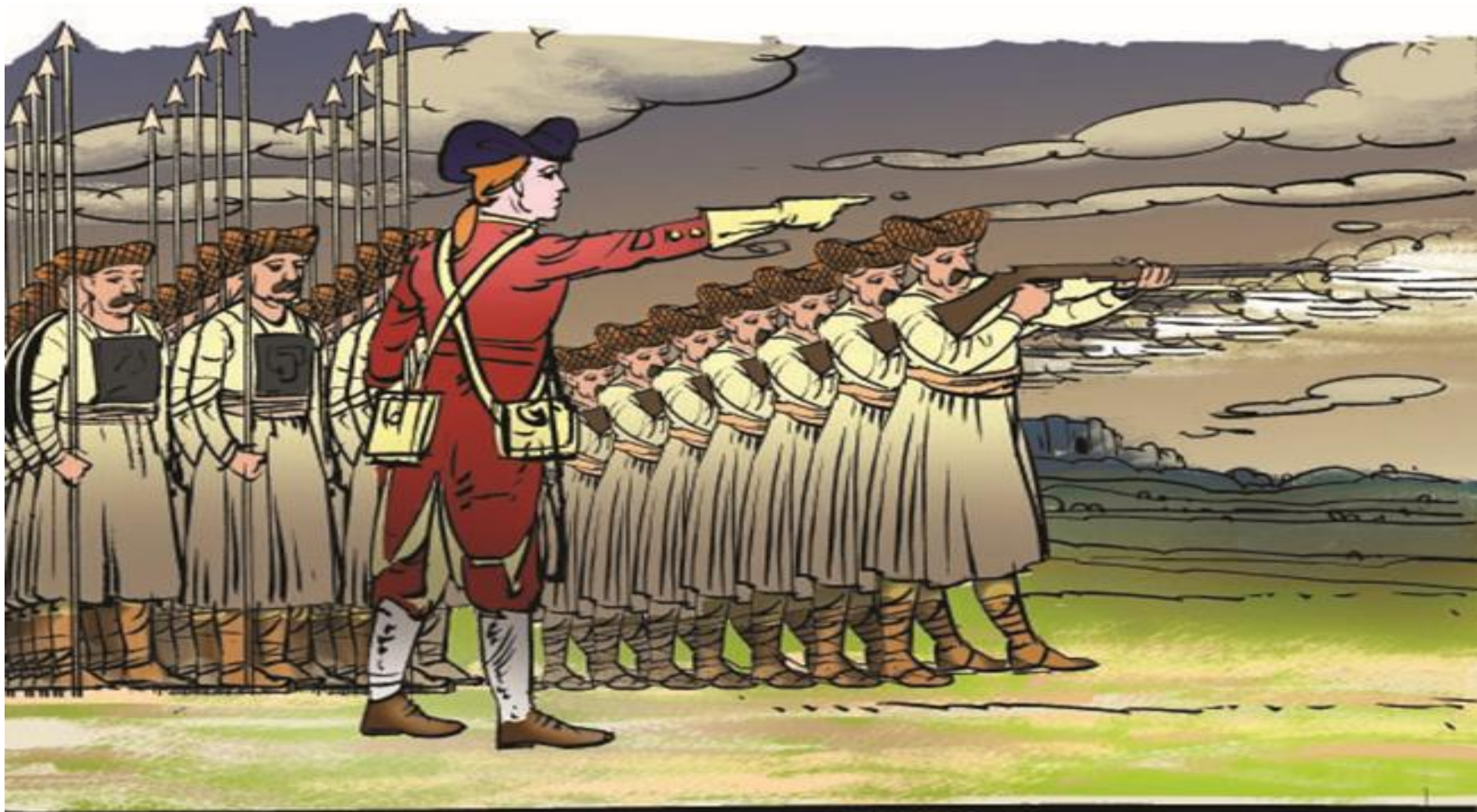
Raghunath Rao was advised from Gangadhar Yashvant, to make an excuse of a visit to console her for the loss of her only son Malerao.

No Warfare But Welfare

- It was not that Ahilyabai wanted to avoid war as she was afraid of defeat or she was not capable to fight. She was always of the opinion that Hindu Rulers should not fight among themselves as there were enemies from outside and they took benefit of internal fights.
- **John Malcom**, the British historian has appreciated Ahilyabai and her diplomatic moves, her concern for her subjects, her farsightedness and her decisiveness in times of crisis. In his work, "A Memoir of Central India," Malcolm praised her internal administration and her character as a ruler, acknowledging her as a "pious" and "pure" sovereign.

Military Competence & insight into political matters

- Ahilyabai knew that her Army chief- **Senapati Tukoji** was misusing and embezzling money of the state. She told him to show all expenses of the army.
- **Zero Tolerance to Violation of Rules** and mess in the financial affairs.
- Ahilyadevi herself established **Factory to produce cannons and cannonballs**. (Make in India-Self-sufficiency in defense sector)
- She never left Indore but she had all information of events in India. She had memorized the map and geography of Bharat.
- Ahilyabai hired an Englishman named **Colonel Loyd** to train her army including women.
- The purpose behind hiring a Westerner was that (1) that Englishman would stop claiming the jagir, i.e., someone else's jagir would stop going into the hands of a foreigner. (2) Since this Englishman was bound to the job here, he could not fight with any king or chieftain who was ultimately her own kinsman. (3) Being in the job, he would remain under her control.
- Thus, even in hiring Colonel Lloyd, an **important mark of Ahilyabai's political acumen and foresight** becomes significantly visible in the history of the Marathas.

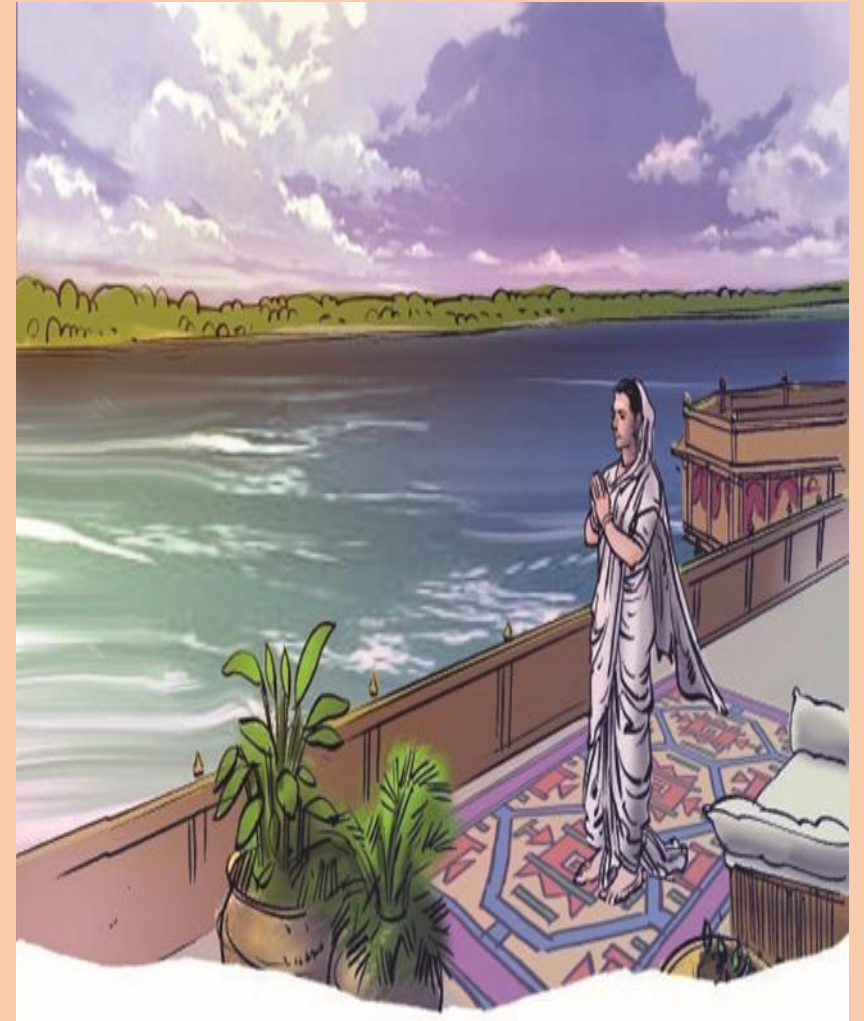


Finance / Recruitment /Transparency

- (1) They fixed the number of soldiers and officers with fixed salary.
- (2) The government provided the ammunition and other necessary weapons and equipment and other things from state's own money.
- (3) The uniform, weapons or other equipment were replaced only after a thorough inspection.
- (4) Colonel Lloyd was fixed a salary of Rs. 2000.
- (5) It was decided that only one battalion of the army was under a single Sardar.
- (6) Anyone who wanted to be recruited in the camp had to come to Maheshwar, go through complete physical examination, then he was given a place in the camp squad.
- (7) The number of cannons, bullock carts, ammunition and workers required were on records, their wages, were also fixed. Not a single penny of the state was wasted under her rule.

Development of Maheshwar

- Maheshwar was preferred as a Capital of Holkar State.
- Invited & patronized all types of traders. Jewelers, Scholars, Architects, artists and craftsmen.
- Developed Maheshwar as a cultural and trade center.- a business Hub.
- Ensured Safety and security not only to women but to traders who visited Maheshwar, hence trade flourished.
- Roads and Rest Houses, Wells, Ponds, built. Ease of doing business provided.

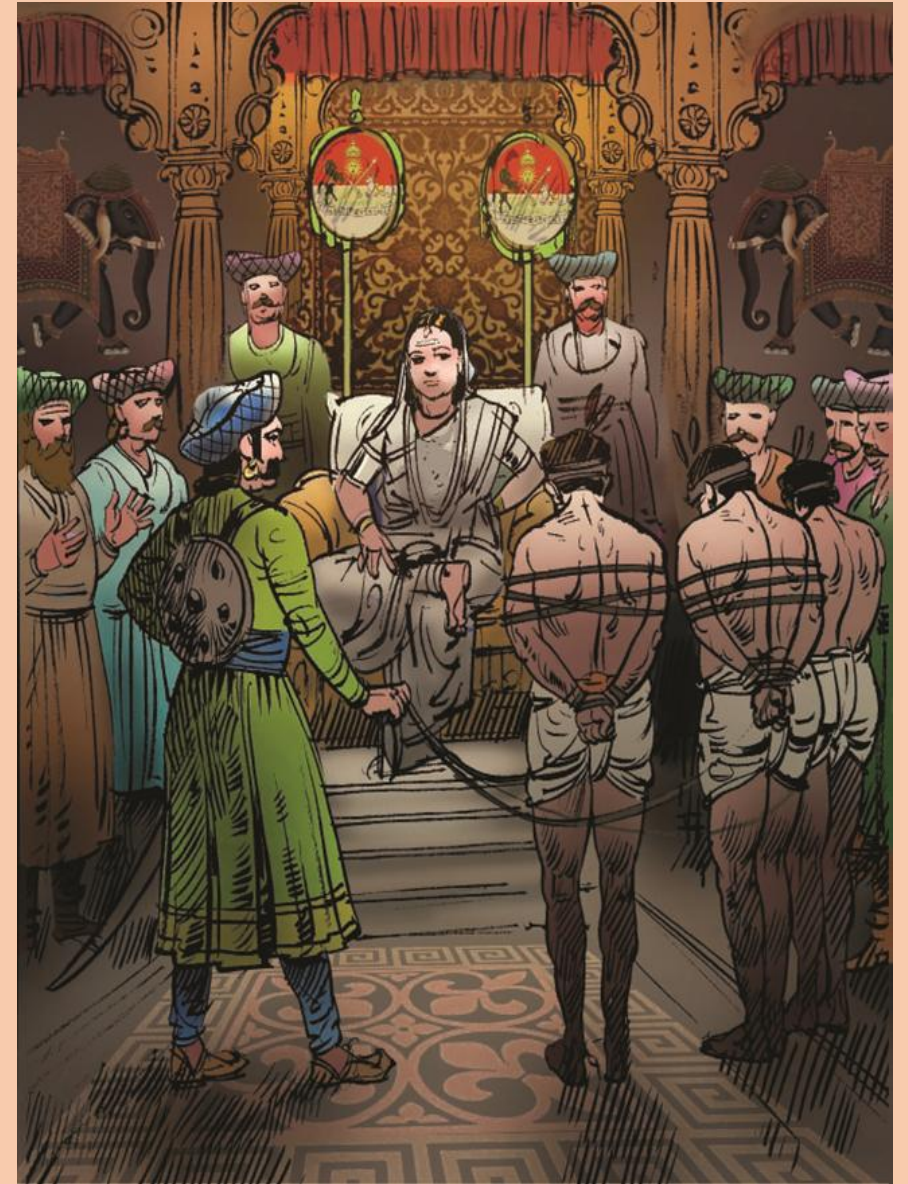


Preservation of Environment

- Ahilyabai was very much aware about the need of preservation of **environment, water conservation and preservation of Bio-Diversity. Best Irrigation System was developed in her times.**
- She built **many wells and ponds and reservoirs**. She also generated employment for youth. Her purpose was to maintain the **ecological balance, preserve biodiversity** as well as provide employment by deploying young men for such tasks.
- She deployed staff for spreading flour at the roots of trees for ants, for watering plants, for providing water to the travelers in summer, for feeding fish and birds.
- She also purchased land and kept them open for **feeding the cattle.**

Bhil Kavadi –Tax By Bhils

- She also knew about the troubles created by Bhils in the forest areas. After the development of Maheshwar, many traders travelled from various areas to Maheshwar.
- While crossing the forests, risk of loot by the Bhils, Wild Beasts.
- Ahilyabai knew how to kill two birds with one stone. She conversed with Bhils and came to know about their plight of Employment. They were looting travelers as they had no source of income.
- Solution –Double benefits



Women Empowerment

- 1. Weaving of Maheswari Sari- convinced males to allow women
- Encouragement of Women, Training,
- Women started working and Earning, confident and skilful
- 2. Female Battalion, trained by the Colonel Loyed, involvement of women in warfare
- Legal Reforms /
- 3. Provided Property Rights to Widows,
- Right to choose a heir.
- Made Rules & Regulations for women workers
- 4. Removed Dowry System

Communication & Correspondence

- Ahilyabai & Malhar Rao-Letters- Evidences
- Communication with Neighbouring States, Peshwas
- Deployed Postmen with facilities and handsome Remuneration
- Good Breed of Horses, Stick with Bell, Torch
- Stipulated Time, Delay not tolerated,
- Privatization- Padamsi Nancy Company
- Speedy Delivery of Messages –given importance for Good Governance

Social Reforms- Equality and Harmony

- No Observation of 'Pardhah Pratha' (Veil)
- Married Daughter to a Commoner- irrespective of his Family Background/ Caste
- She said – Bravery was his caste- जाती and fortitude was his 'Kul'-कुल
- Performed “कन्यादान” although she was a Widow- Revolutionary Act
- Invited and dined with servants and staff from all castes and creeds.
- Advised Poet 'Anantfandi' to write poems to exalt spirituality in people instead of writing 'शृंगार' poems.
- She threw away bulk of poetry written in praise of her and said there is no need to eulogize her.

Cultural Revival-

- Tradition of **Kotilingarchan Puja** at the Bank of Narmada, Revival of Spirituality and created **economic opportunities**.
- She built “**Brahmpuri**” – a rest house for brahmins in Kashi. Started a **Sanskrit Pathshalas**. Made scribes to write copies of Scriptures for every home. – act of spiritual revival amongst masses.
- She built roads from Kolkata to Kashi. She rebuilt the wrecked **Jyotirlingas** like Somnath, Mallikarjun, Omkareshwar, Vajjnath, Kashi Vishvanath, Traymabakeshwar, Ghrushneswar, Badrikedar, Mahakaleshwar, Rameshwar, Bhimashankar.
- She also developed infrastructure like wells, Ghaats on rivers, Kunds, annakshetras, and dharmashalas to facilitate the pilgrims as well as the scholars in all seven cities, **Saptapuries**- Mathura, Kashi, Ujjain, Kanchi, Haridvar, Dwarika and Ayodhya. She also developed and donated to **Chardham** so that all religious activities may continue even after her.

Words of Appreciation

M.V. Kibe writes in his *The Cultural Indian Empire of the Saintly Queen Ahilyabai Holkar*,

- “What Shivaji the great has done as a token, Devi shri Ahilyabai spread all over the country.”
- “Ahilyabai’s Rule was not merely about maintaining order and peace, it was about fostering a society, where happiness thrived. Her commitment to social Harmony was exemplary”
- Chinmayee Mule in her *Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar: Queen of Indomitable Spirit*
- To read my article at Indic Varta – <https://cisindus.org/indic-varta-internal.php?vartaid=897>

A Word of Gratitude

- I extend my gratitude to the *Devi Holkar Jayanti Organising Committee* for inviting me at the event of **tricentenary of Punyashlok Devi Ahilyabai Holkar** on her Birthday at IITGN.
- I thank all the authorities for providing me with an opportunity to share the work and contribution of Ahilyadevi 300 years ago.
- Thank you all for the patient listening.
- **Thanks a lot.**

