

Annual Leadership Lecture by:

Ms. Archana Garodia Gupta, Entrepreneur, Author, and IIMA Alumna (PGP 1988)

Breaking Barriers: *Leadership Lessons from History and Business*

The Ashank Desai Centre for Leadership and Organisational Development (ADCLD) at IIM Ahmedabad hosted its annual leadership lecture featuring Ms. Archana Garodia Gupta, an entrepreneur, author, and distinguished alumna of the PGP 1988 batch. Drawing on her multidisciplinary experiences, the session offered a compelling blend of historical inquiry, organisational leadership, and reflective insight, making a substantive contribution to contemporary discussions on inclusive and resilient leadership.

At the heart of the lecture was Ms. Garodia Gupta's research for her book "*The Women Who Ruled India: Leaders. Warriors. Icons.*," which profiles twenty women rulers across India's long and diverse history. The selection included both prominent and underrepresented figures—such as Ahilyabai Holkar, Didda of Kashmir, Rani Mangammal, and Rudrama Devi, each of whom confronted and redefined prevailing norms of leadership in their time. Archana, in her talk, analysed the leadership journeys of the women leaders and presented five key insights about leading and leadership. These included the importance of education and training, people-centric governance, cultivating inclusive networks of influence, long-term strategic planning, and ensuring continuity through succession.

The value of investment in education and training was highlighted in the fact that all the women leaders were educated and strategically prepared irrespective of their birth origins (royal or not). Using examples of different women leaders Archana shared how the women leaders, unlike their male counterparts, led through long-term planning, diplomacy, and people-centric governance rather than sheer militarism or spectacle. Many built alternative networks of influence, cultivated inclusive support systems, and embedded continuity through succession planning, practices that resonate with modern organisational design. Their leadership was frequently burdened by a heightened demand for performance and legitimacy, reflective of the double standards often applied to women in positions of authority. These historical narratives offered a compelling counterpoint to dominant leadership models focused on charisma or positional power.

In bridging history with present-day experience, Ms. Garodia Gupta also reflected on her tenure as President of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Ladies Organisation (FICCI FLO), India's premier women's business chamber (14000 plus members and 25 chapters). The distinctive feature of such a chapter is that everyone is a volunteer and the leaders do not have formal authority to demand performance. During her leadership (2015–16), the organisation expanded from 13 to 21 chapters, reaching over 14,000 women. A central focus of her presidency was institutional strengthening. She introduced internal accountability mechanisms, established consistent governance

models across chapters, and promoted measurable outcomes highlighting her belief that sustainable empowerment requires formal structures, not just symbolic inclusion. Her leadership practice at FICCI FLO was shaped by inclusivity, decentralised decision-making, and long-term capacity building. Rather than relying on individual charisma, she emphasized systems and support structures that empower others—a key differentiator in thinking about modern leadership effectiveness

By drawing together historical analysis, organisational reform, and personal reflection, the lecture made a strong case for reconceptualizing leadership beyond conventional paradigms. It reinforced ADCLOD's commitment to fostering evidence-based, inclusive, and ethically grounded leadership in complex institutional settings.

References:

1. Gupta, A. G. (2019). *The Women Who Ruled India: Leaders. Warriors. Icons.* Hachette India
2. Subramanian, L. (2019). *Book review: The Women Who Ruled India.* Deccan Herald. <https://www.deccanherald.com/features/book-review-the-women-who-ruled-india.html>
3. Madhira, N. (2019). *Book review: "The Women Who Ruled India: Leaders, Warriors, Icons" by Archana Goradia Gupta.* Asian Review of Books <https://asianreviewofbooks.com/the-women-who-ruled-india-leaders-warrior-icons-by-archana-goradia-gupta/>