

## **Gender, Nationalism and the Regent Queens in Colonial India**

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**Abstract:** Queens in power are “moments of passage” ( Fradenburg 8) and transition. The queen’s rule emanates from an unforeseen circumstance that every dynasty strives to eschew. This explicates the liminality of their political existence. Since queens are upstaged only in times of crisis, they play a significant role in eschewing internal crises and power struggles. Adverting to the idea of saving grace, queens enable the state’s transition from chaos to stability in the event of a king’s death. Agency sans official recognition was the mainstay of a queen’s politics. Queens thus acted as a buffer zone that usually worked towards validating the sovereignty of her husband or son. This paper is a comparative study of two regent queens to delineate how nationalist politics reconceptualized the ‘warrior queen,’ to suit their notions of gender and space. In contrast, pro-British queens remained ignored in the national discourses- neither criticized nor acknowledged. The reasons for the divergent reception of anti-British and Pro-British queens in later discourses by looking at the presence and absence of myths and legends about such queens have also been looked into. To clarify this idea, I have looked at Nawab Sikander Begum of Bhopal and Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi, who fought on different sides in the 1857 revolution. This paper tries to analyse how the queens who chose a militant response towards the British incursion could be called ‘warrior queens’ and those who chose a diplomatic strategy could be termed as ‘reformer queens’. The latter could be called so, not because warrior queens did not have reformist tendencies, but because the diplomatic strategies finally helped redefine queenship tradition in a way the former could not carry out successfully. This categorization is not absolute and did not come out from the intentions of these queens, but rather from the mode and consequences of their actions. The

paper works towards the inference that the difference between the warrior and the reformer queens in this respect is that, while Rani Lakshmi Bai, knowingly or unknowingly, was an agent of her culture and the ensuing nationalist discourse, Sikander made religion and culture, her agents, to rule the principality in her own right.

**Keywords:** Regent queens, Nawab Sikander Begum, Rani Laxmi Bai, Warrior queens, Nationalism, 1857 Revolution.

Unlike the usual suspects of colonial and nationalist enterprise – i.e., the subaltern, the prostitute, or the persecuted wife – the Rani is an elite colonial subject whose refusal to be restrained within the available paradigms necessitates a larger, multilevel project of representation. Neither entirely victim nor agent, the Rani is objectified by colonial and nationalist discourse to perpetuate sexually, culturally, and politically viable modes of traditional femininity (Singh 23).

The Colonial era in India witnessed nationalism and colonialism, the two competing axioms debating over the women question. Even as a trove of scholarship has addressed the myriad ways in which gender was transfigured in this period of conquest and subjection, the ranis in Colonial India attracted minimal scholarship. The reason for such an omission can be construed as stemming from the peculiar intersectional identity India's royal women held- elite, with an unofficial agency in accessing the premier man of the state and inaccessible to the British, owing to their confinement in the Zenana. For the same reason, the Ranis can be safely defined as an unregulated group who were often portrayed as illiterate, scheming, and wicked in the British discourse. But unlike colonialism, nationalism has creatively employed warrior queens in their narrative where the Ranis transgression for and within the tradition was valorized. On the other hand, there were reigning queens in Colonial India who often negated the colonial idea of India's deplorable treatment of women and the nationalist notion of women as only a cultural vessel of the nascent Indian nation. This paper looks at two Indian queens- Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi and Nawab Sikander Begum of Bhopal, to delineate how these queens deployed their agency in the 1857 Revolution and the ensuing representation of their life and politics in later discourses, both national and colonial.

It is easy to imagine why entrenched patriarchal traditions would seek to marginalise women's movements by calling them un-Indian. In fact, such a rhetoric seeks to disguise the indigenous roots of women's protest in India. This is not to argue that Western women's thinking or organisations have not influenced Indian feminists. Cross-fertilisations have been crucial to feminist struggles everywhere. But, given the history of colonial rule, the burden of authenticity has been especially heavy for women's activists in India (Loomba 271-72).

There is a conflict in public aspirations about the representation of queens in cultural discourses. There is a tendency to place women within an intermediary space - between that of tradition and modernity - in all of these narratives. For instance, representation of queens in nationalist discourses, certainly expects women rulers to be a concoction of both the Indian tradition and the emancipated modern selves. For instance, in Mahasweta Devi's biographical work on Rani Lakshmi Bai, she talks about why Rani was important to the people of Jhansi: "The Queen would sit behind a screen to one side of the court with Damodar Rao on her lap. She would carry out a few administrative tasks this way" (56). Devi effectively paints a picture of an able administrator, hidden behind the screen, inaccessible to Europeans and other male members of the Rani's court. Here, an emphasis on *Purdah* and seclusion foreshadow the anxiety of an indigenous female body being husbanded by a colonial male explorer, which became a trope in nationalist discourses. This symbolic significance attached to the queen's body and her chastity is emblematic of the discourse of nationalism. In this paper, I am trying to unravel the reasons and means by which biographers and historians tried to bring in this complex intersection of tradition and modernity in their re-presentation of regent queens.

By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a clear emergence of two groups of Indian princes and princesses who shared a porous distinction. Since the Viceroyship of Lord Dalhousie, this demarcation began to make itself concrete in its various expressions of loyalty and rebellion. One of the major colonial laws that broke loose such a division was the Doctrine of Lapse, a carefully designed law to arrest the dynastic continuity of different Indian kingdoms. This law had a part in the evolution and violent performance of the mutiny in 1857. But this mutiny had also seen, maybe for the last time in Indian history, warrior queens fighting against the British incursion into their sovereignty. The likes of Velu Nachiar of Sivaganga and

Rani Chennamma of Kittur preceded Rani Lakshmi Bai, and Begum Hazrat Mahal, a contemporary, fought alongside her in the 1857 revolution. Meanwhile, select princes from across the Indian subcontinent remained loyal to the British to protect their sovereignty. Among such princes was a regent Begum- Nawab Sikander Begum of Bhopal who, despite the absence of a male heir, ensured that her daughter became the next ruler, when she came of age. Sikander Begum's relationship with the British was a strategic diplomatic ploy that ensured continuity to the state of the Bhopal, way up to 1947.

“Feminist historians of India have begun to explore the multiple ways in which women became a crucial site for the political and cultural struggles between British colonialists and Indian nationalists. Each of these groups claimed to liberate women from the bondage of the other” (Loomba 272). Warrior queens are seminal to the nationalist narrative, even though their fight against the British incursion into their autonomy led to losing everything in their possession. Essentially, their single most important contribution remains lore to the emerging discourse of nationalism. On the other hand, the reasons behind the complex relationship that Indian nationalism and its discourses maintained with these loyal queens are not emphasized enough in the history of Independent India. They remain neither villainized nor valorized, thus orchestrating an easy erasure of their legacy. It is precisely at this juncture that this paper looks at these two categories of women rulers who had managed to emancipate and incarcerate Indian women in different ways:

The people of Jhansi realized that they could no longer let go of the precious, ephemeral freedom achieved under their beloved Rani Saheba. A woman whose vermilion bindi had been wiped off her forehead by widowhood, whose *mangalsutra* had been torn off her neck, whose fatherless son was deprived of his rightful inheritance, had not taken to fighting motivated by a desire for her own personal success. Nor was she resigned to her fate. Her self-confidence and conviction led her to take an active role and face the struggle head-on. The people also knew of the Queens boundless trust in them and were therefore inspired by her strength (Devi 175).

Devi's portrayal of Rani Lakshmi Bai is clearly an attempt to idealise Rani as a Hindu queen. Given her Marhatta lineage, it was only logical, though not inevitable. She is venerated

because of her elite status as a chaste widow queen in the Hindu society. One can trace the following patterns breaking down the portrayal of Rani by Devi into thematic units. One day, Nana Sahab and two of Rani Lakshmi Bai's other male playmates went riding the only elephant of Bajirao, and she insisted on riding as well. But they didn't let her. "Upset at her daughter's humiliation, Moropant said, 'It's not in your fate to have an elephant to ride. You're the daughter of an ordinary man! Manu (Rani) proudly replied, 'It is my destiny to have 10 of them'" (25). Myths that make up the story of the warrior queens are replete with hunting- a male bastion. In Hindu mythology, a seminal part of the making of an incarnation of God is his ability to tame or conquer a ferocious animal. Thus, in the case of Ayyappan, it was a tiger; for Krishna, the giant venomous snake. Likewise, Rani Laxmi Bai is also presented as having episodes of brave encounters with wild and ferocious animals.

The pervasiveness of powerful female figures-especially the figure of the mother- in the discourse of nationalism provides an important context for understanding the cooperation and complicity of women with such constructions. The image of 'motherhood', both in cultural representation of the nation as 'mother' and in women's roles as 'mothers of the nation' has been among the most powerful and exalted images of the feminine...(Sinha 331)

These warrior queens became appealing icons because of the ardent fervour with which they committed themselves to the functional role of women as a wife and a mother in Indian society. For instance, in the case of Rani Lakshmi Bai, Devi repeatedly eulogizes Rani for her motherly approach towards her realm and her son. Rani's public appearances were always with her son Damodar Rao. "The queen called for a public audience. She sat on the throne with Damodar on her lap... The Queen would walk around among the wounded and ask about their well-being, her stepmother reported. She would comfort them by affectionately stroking the injured, dress their wounds if necessary" (Devi 131-32). Thus, this quintessentially feminine aspect is an important criterion that qualifies Rani Lakshmi Bai as a representative national heroine. Thus, duty becomes a defining factor that qualifies these rulers to become icons in the nationalist discourse. In the biographical accounts of these queens, duty towards traditional values, customs, family, and the nation is highlighted to be as important as the battles they fought.

Disregarding caste and religion, Rani summoned and organized a women's troop. She would climb a wooden pole on the palace grounds and practice wrestling with women. Marking coconut trees with white for targets, pistol shooting was practiced on the palace grounds: sword-fighting and horse riding was also indulged in regularly (Devi 120). Simultaneously, there are instances recorded in Mahasweta Devi's depiction of the Rani, wherein she compensates for her unfeminine behaviour by constantly chanting the Puranas:

Her longing to go on a pilgrimage and shave off her hair in honour of her late husband was never to materialize because the English forbade her to leave Jhansi... Then she would eat and rest a little, and until three o'clock, write the name of Rama 1,100 times on tiny pieces of paper and stuff them into balls of whole wheat dough to feed to the fish in the sacred pond. Damodar helped his mother with great fervour in this activity. She listened to recitations of puranas and devotional songs until eight in the evening (80).

Another important facet instrumental in glorifying these queens over others is the fact that they fought a racially foreign enemy. According to Hindu kingship rituals, the primary duty of a Hindu king is to protect his kingdom and the social order, including religion and its practices. In those times, battles were fought with Hindu kings on both sides. Hence, the destruction of any state in those battles did not necessarily contribute to any change in the established Hindu culture and religion. It was considered an eternal process of change of guard, not as a threat to Hindu culture and society. On the other hand, a Hindu queen fighting a racially and culturally different colonial enemy signified a recourse to the ideals of Hindu kingship and explicates the popularity of Rani Lakshmi Bai in nationalist narratives.

Rani Lakshmi Bai, for instance, was a figure who simultaneously defied and defined the gendered discourse of nationalism. "Thus, the nation in the form of an abused or humiliated mother appeals to her sons and daughters, albeit often in differently gendered ways, to come to her protection and restore her honor" (Sinha 328). But in the case of Lakshmi Bai, as expressed in the national lore, instead of pleading with her sons and daughters, the queen led the assault against the imperial power. It demands special critical attention, as it reverses the gendered identities that form part and parcel of the nationalist project. The political and military acumen of the national female leader remains secondary to her gendered identity:

As an Indian woman relegated to a life of purdah, the Rani may have garnered sympathy, but as an Indian Queen who came out of the veil in rebellion against the British, she posed an interminable problem of representation and comprehension. As an Indian widow who had become sati or shaved her head and dedicated herself to a life of hardship, she may have excited a chivalric response, but as a royal widow who commanded troops and took British lives, she defied both rescue and reform. Thus, representations of the Rani complicate the often default reading of the native woman as a domestic matter relegated to the colonial context; she poses a real and symbolic threat to the nation, Britain, undermining both material and ideological foundations of the imperial project. (Singh 18).

On the other hand, Nawab Sikander Begum's soft power strategy ultimately helped maintain considerable autonomy in the state of Bhopal. Though the British intervened politically, culturally, and economically in the affairs of both states, these states managed to stay afloat in those politically turbulent times because of the strategies employed by the regent queen in Bhopal. These queens managed to instil regionalism over nationalism and preserved their states from being engulfed by the homogenizing tendencies of both the nationalist discourses and the imperial discourse of the British presidencies. It is owing to this successful strategy of simultaneously remaining aloof from both imperial and nationalist discourses and in making use of the benefits of both the colonial and national projects that this Begum requires special mention in history as the queen who redefined queenship, defying both the nationalist and imperial discourse:

"Indian women personified an Indian culture that had to be protected from the metaphoric rape imposed by colonialism. The British, on the other hand, used the model of the oppressed and abused Indian woman as an example of native depravity that could only be corrected through colonial rule" (Singh 73). So, in the midst of these contending narratives, where can we place Sikander Begum, who chose to write her own life sans the paternal backing of British colonialism and Indian nationalism? Begum defies the conventional understanding that we harbour about Indian Muslim women. Being a woman with agency, she not only dared to upend the patriarchal conventions of those times but also managed to question the colonial claims of the oppression of Indian women. She neither exhibited the gendered functional

identity of the Hindu nationalist project nor helped the British extend the claim that India is hostile to women's liberation. Begum occupied a space of resistance that was conveniently placed inaccessibly for the dominant discourses to tinker with.

“Finally, nationalist projects construct ‘women’ primarily through a heterosexual relationship to men that emphasizes a supposedly natural hierarchy between men and women” (Sinha 332). In the case of warrior queens, irrespective of being exceptional in their military skills, they believed in the conventional hierarchy of men over women, as is evident in their attempts to get the adopted male heir installed as the king. They never acknowledged their inherent right to rule the kingdom as capable queens. But in the case of the Begum of Bhopal, the line of succession passed on from mother to daughter. This unique passage of power was designed and legalized only in 1857 and was the result of the Begum's astute negotiations with the British. It became evident that to be loyal to the British doesn't necessarily mean the complete surrender of one's autonomy. Begum proved that loyalty to the British also initiated an understudied political apparatus of making the British accountable for rulers like Sikander's loyalty and political currency. Besides, Begum never defined herself in relation to males in the family- father, husband, or son. Instead, they managed to be autonomous individuals who flaunted their right to rule as female monarchs. When it comes to the Begums of Bhopal, the 107-year rule of these female monarchs has a fascinating uniqueness. Though they were appointed by the British as regent queens, the four Begums in succession inherited their right to rule from their mothers as opposed to regent queens elsewhere, who ruled on behalf of their minor sons or late husbands.

Most women glorified in the Indian cultural discourses are quintessentially figures who sacrificed their happiness, ambition, and life for their husbands and children. But the second Begum of Bhopal seems to have defied this age-old custom and set a precedent for Indian women. For instance, Begum Qudsia was the regent of Bhopal when Sikander was a minor. Later, Begum Sikander became the regent when her daughter Shahjehan was a minor. It was during Begum Sikander's regency that the rebellion of 1857 happened. Bhopal not only stayed loyal to the British, but also assisted the British in military expeditions with material and manpower:

Sikandar Begum had ruled Bhopal imperiously for sixteen years as Regent, acting on behalf of Shahjehan, the titular ruler. With her loyalty proven, Sikandar now mounted a campaign with the British to have herself recognized formally as the Begum of Bhopal, citing precedence of Muslim women who had been prominent rulers like Hazrat Ayesha and Queen Victoria, the Queen of England. Sikandar's demarche put the British in a dilemma because they could not be seen to renege on their own decision to appoint Shahjehan as the titular ruler while Sikandar acted as regent. On the other hand, Sikandar had proved her loyalty in an extreme crisis and had governed Bhopal into a highly progressive and successful state (Khan 48).

Shahjehan, daughter of Sikander, on whose behalf Sikander was ruling Bhopal, willingly deferred to her mother's decision to become the Queen herself. Thus, Sikander became the titular Begum of Bhopal, and her daughter Shahjehan became the heir apparent. This act of diplomatically wresting power from the British and the conservative Muslim community, although a watershed moment in Indian history, has seldom received the attention it deserves. This revolutionary act on the part of Begum Sikander was a seminal chapter in the history of the women's movement that remained unrecorded and unacknowledged. Sikander brilliantly plotted against the British gendered conception of headship and became the ruling monarch of Bhopal. This Begum not only dared to become the reigning monarch of the state but also managed to set a precedent for Indian women to dream beyond sharing power in a heterosexual familial setting, where women always have a secondary position. The reason why this glorious chapter in the history of the women's movement in India remains unrecorded is neither apolitical nor innocent.

Mahua Sarkar's study has "...argued that modern nationalist and liberal feminist historiographies of colonial India have largely been Hindu centric, and have discursively and materially rendered Muslim women as invisible, oppressed and backward, even while they were exercising all kinds of agency" (qtd. in Gupta10). Thus, including these momentous acts of revolution and liberation of these Muslim women rulers counter the nationalist discourse which favoured the meek Hindu women over the Muslim woman. So, eulogizing a Muslim ruler like Sikander Begum, her female ancestors, and successors, who were in complete control not only over their political and personal lives but also over the destiny of their principality,

defies the nationalist argument that Hindu women, with her traditional functional roles, need no further rescue or reform. Besides, the Hindu nationalist argument that the Muslim dark ages replaced the Vedic golden age of women finds itself baseless in the remarkable life and career of Sikander Begum:

As signifiers of the nation, women needed to be modern, but they could not mark a complete break from tradition. The woman of the anticolonial nationalist imagination, then was not necessarily a 'traditional' woman. She was more likely the 'modern-yet-modest woman who both symbolized the nation and negotiated its tension between tradition and modernity .... Nationalism constructed the "dynamic public roles" of the women "as a duty to the nation rather than as right" (Sinha 329).

Analysing the levels of dynamic behaviour shown by the regent queens in the public sphere of their state politics would unveil a gendered politics that would question the expected gender performance of these women rulers. For the warrior queen, it was mostly the agency they exercised as dynamic public figures of action, which was under the conception that it was their duty to serve and protect the nation. On the other hand, the Begum was dynamic in her public spheres not because she felt dutiful towards their respective states but because they considered it their right. So, the difference in the agency exercised by these two categories of queens emerges from their underlying driving forces- duty and right. It can be observed that these queens who acted on behalf of their duty were eulogized, or their actions were represented as stemming from a sense of duty. Though these warrior queens had the audacity to go out in public against the British, their actions were considered duty-bound to the time's customs and conventions. In the former case, these queens are portrayed as the selfless heroine of the national struggle for independence. In the latter case, Begum is a woman who was self-conscious of her rights as an individual, on par with her male counterparts. Nationalist projects demand that brave actions emerge from the collective agenda of national freedom and duty towards the state, not from self-assertion.

So, the difference between the reformer queens and the warrior queens in this respect is that when the warrior queens were knowingly or unknowingly agents of their culture and the ensuing nationalist discourse emanating from it, the reformer queens made religion and culture their agents to rule the principality in their own right. Although Begum came out of the *purdah*

at one point, she was quite cautious of the orthodox community she was ruling. After the rebellion of 1857, the British blamed the Muslims for the revolt:

Sikandar, with the wind in her sails, took advantage of British largesse towards her. Money, technical aid and political support poured into Bhopal. With the British ascribing greater blame to the Muslims for the mutiny, Sikandar Begum set forth to recover her own prestige before the Muslim community that had been tarnished by her perceived loyalty to the British. She went to the famous Jama Masjid in Delhi that had been contemptuously converted by the British as a stable for their horses. She ordered the closure of the stable, paid large sums for the renovation of the famous mosque and got down on her knees herself to scrub and purify the mosque. No one, not even the British, dared challenge the Begum in her efforts and she was able to regain her stature, in the eyes of her Muslim brethren, as a pious and courageous defender of the Muslim community (Khan 49).

This magnanimous act of retrieving the mosque lost to colonial vengeance was an attempt to reclaim her identity as a staunch Muslim in a Muslim state. The 1857 revolution was dubbed as a 'Mohammaden conspiracy,' with Bahadur Shah Zafar as the titular head of the rebellion. Being a Mughal successor state and the second most important Muslim state in Princely India, her calculated actions at refashioning herself as a strong Muslim devotee should be recorded as the brilliant employment of a religious card in her favour. Even though Sikander Begum was loyal to the British, she exercised considerable agency and autonomy that was absent in the warrior queens. For instance, even though the state of Bhopal was an ally of the British since its inception, Sikander Begum, who was a powerful ruler, "Once, as a teenager...had administered a public slap to the British Political Agent, Lancelot Wilkinson, when he had ingratiatingly touched her ear-ring" (Khan 44). This audacity to strike back diplomatically and otherwise at the British, nationalist religious, and other internal interventions and interferences makes the Begum a political icon lost to the selective tradition of remembering.

For the nationalists, women were an important cultural signifier. For instance, in the representations of warrior queens like Rani Lakshmi Bai, we find a tendency to place the transgressive acts of these queens to come out of the *purdah* and defend the state in the open,

as an act to protect one's culture and tradition. The warrior queens found their place in national history because they fought a foreign enemy who was depriving them of their resources and freedom and intruding into their culture and tradition. But Sikander Begum is neither valorized nor criticized in national history. So, at this juncture, we have to look at the interminable problem posed by the idea of regionalism in the nationalist narrative. Begum was essentially as committed as a Rani, to their respective principalities. They both exuded the same intention, when one remained loyal and the other fought against the British.

Upon further analysis, these two categories of queens are even more difficult to understand in binary terms of loyal and rebellious queens concerning their association with the British. The warrior queens transgressed the boundary set for women in conservative Indian culture. They questioned the taboos stipulated for Indian women by intruding into the male bastion of war and politics. To use these queens in the national discourse, they essentially had to be re-feminized on the lines of tradition and culture. So, for this, a duty-bound warrior woman was created to represent these queens in fictional and non-fictional accounts of these queens. On the other hand, Sikander Begum posed a more serious problem because her life and policies legalized and normalized women in power. Begum defied the paternal backing of the colonial government and the nationalist discourse. The warrior queen was used in nationalist discourse for the benefit of the nationalists. Begum used the benefits of being loyal to the colonial government to meet her specific political goals.

“Women ...had to carry the more complex burden of representing the colonized nation's 'betweenness' with respect to precolonial traditions and 'western' modernity. The nationalist project both initiated women's access to modernity and set the limits of the desirable modernity for women” (Sinha 329). This in-betweenness is nowhere more evident than in the lives and afterlives of these queens. Both these categories of queens had to bargain with tradition and modernity, the colonial government, and nationalist projects to safeguard their kingdom and the dynasty. Rani Lakshmi Bai, by becoming the icon of the nationalist movements, had to somehow concede her agency and status as a woman who dared to transgress the special boundary set for Indian women. She has been eternally caricatured as a woman who dared to transgress for the tradition, thereby arresting her only as a Hindu nationalist icon. She was never an icon of the emancipated woman but a woman who was cautious enough to be

traditional in her transgressive behaviour. On the other hand, the Begum efficiently defied the paternal backing of both nationalism and colonialism, thereby not only becoming a woman of agency and autonomy but also escaping the typical colonial discourse on Indian women as being deprived or plotting, thus becoming a relatively neutral presence in the nationalist discourse-neither valorized nor criticized. When Rani Laxmi Bai was variously used by both the discourse of colonialism and nationalism, Sikander Begum employed the discourse to her favour .

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