



Royal women in the Indian princely states (1885–1947): Political authority, social reform, and cultural patronage under British paramountcy

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Abstract

The princely states formed an important part of the political structure of colonial India, yet the role of royal women in their administration has received comparatively less attention than that of the princes and British officials. Between 1885 and 1947, several royal women exercised political authority either as sovereign rulers, regents, or influential advisers. They also contributed significantly to education, public health, social welfare, and cultural development. This article examines the contributions of selected royal women from Bhopal, Baroda, Mysore, Travancore, Cooch Behar, and Jaipur, namely Shah Jahan Begum, Sultan Jahan Begum, Maharani Chimnabai II, Maharani Kempnanjammanni Devi (Vani Vilasa Sannidhana), Maharani Setu Lakshmi Bayi, Maharani Suniti Devi, and Maharani Gayatri Devi. Using a descriptive and comparative historical approach, the study analyses autobiographies, administrative reports, gazetteers, government publications, and modern historical studies to understand how these women exercised authority within the constitutional framework of British paramountcy. The article argues that royal women were not merely ceremonial figures but active participants in governance and public life. Their initiatives in administration, education, healthcare, and cultural patronage contributed to the modernization of their respective states while preserving regional traditions. By bringing together examples from different princely states, the study highlights the important role of royal women in shaping late colonial India and addresses a gap in the historiography of princely governance.

Keywords: Royal women, princely states, British paramountcy, women's leadership, social reform, cultural patronage, colonial India

Introduction

The history of the Indian princely states has generally been written from the perspective of kings, colonial administrators, and political relations between the British Government and Indian rulers. While these studies have greatly enhanced our understanding of princely India, they often overlook the important role played by royal women in governance and public life. Between 1885 and 1947, several queens, regents, and maharanis participated actively in administration, social reform, education, healthcare, and cultural patronage. Their contributions demonstrate that political authority within the princely states was not exercised exclusively by male rulers.

At the time of Indian independence, there were more than 560 princely states spread across the subcontinent. Although these states remained under British paramountcy, they retained varying degrees of internal autonomy. Their rulers governed local administration while matters relating to defence and foreign affairs remained under British control. Within this political arrangement, royal women occasionally assumed direct authority during periods of minority rule, succession disputes, or administrative transition. Others exercised considerable influence through advisory roles, charitable institutions, educational initiatives, and cultural patronage.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also witnessed important social changes. Reform movements, expanding education, improvements in communication, and growing political awareness encouraged many princely states to modernize their administration. Several royal women responded to these changes by promoting female education, improving public health, supporting charitable institutions, and encouraging literature and the arts. Their

contributions reflected a balance between preserving traditional values and adopting new ideas suited to changing social conditions.

The princely states selected for this study—Bhopal, Baroda, Mysore, Travancore, Cooch Behar, and Jaipur—represent different regions of India and different forms of female authority. Shah Jahan Begum and Sultan Jahan Begum ruled Bhopal as sovereigns, an exceptional example of female leadership in South Asia. Maharani Kempnanjammanni Devi, better known as Vani Vilasa Sannidhana, governed Mysore as Regent and ensured administrative continuity during the minority of Maharaja Krishnaraja Wadiyar IV. Maharani Setu Lakshmi Bayi performed a similar constitutional role in Travancore. Maharani Chimnabai II of Baroda, Maharani Suniti Devi of Cooch Behar, and Maharani Gayatri Devi of Jaipur influenced public life through education, social reform, philanthropy, and cultural leadership.

By comparing these royal women, the article seeks to demonstrate that they were active participants in governance rather than passive members of royal households. Their work illustrates how women exercised leadership within the constitutional limits of British paramountcy while contributing to the social and cultural development of their respective states.

Historiography and Research Gap

The study of princely India has expanded considerably over the past few decades. Barbara N. Ramusack (2004) ^[8] has shown how princely states functioned within the larger political framework of the British Empire, while Ian Copland (1997) examined their relationship with colonial administration and the emergence of modern governance.

These studies provide valuable insights into the political history of princely India but primarily focus on male rulers and British officials.

Research specifically on royal women has also grown. Siobhan Lambert-Hurley's works on the Begums of Bhopal demonstrate how Muslim women could successfully combine political authority with educational and social reform. Janaki Nair's studies on Mysore highlight the role of the Wadiyar court in social and institutional development, while A. Sreedhara Menon has documented the administrative history of Travancore. The autobiographical writings of Sultan Jahan Begum, Maharani Chimnabai II, and Maharani Suniti Devi further provide valuable first-hand accounts of the ideas and experiences of royal women during the colonial period.

Despite these contributions, most existing studies concentrate on individual personalities or particular princely states. Comparative research examining royal women from different regions within the common framework of British paramountcy remains limited. This article addresses that gap by comparing the political authority, reform initiatives, and cultural contributions of selected royal women from six princely states between 1885 and 1947. Such a comparative approach helps to identify both regional differences and common patterns in women's leadership during the late colonial period.

Research Objectives and Methodology

The main objective of this study is to examine the political, social, and cultural contributions of selected royal women in the Indian princely states between 1885 and 1947. It also seeks to understand how these women exercised authority within the constitutional limits imposed by British paramountcy and how their initiatives contributed to administrative modernization and public welfare.

The study follows a descriptive and comparative historical method. It is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary materials include autobiographies, administrative reports of Mysore and Travancore, census reports, gazetteers, government publications, speeches, and contemporary records. Secondary sources include books, journal articles, and scholarly studies on princely states, women's history, and colonial administration. Information from these sources has been analysed comparatively to understand the different forms of leadership adopted by royal women in various regions of India.

Royal Women and Political Authority under British Paramountcy

British paramountcy created a political system in which princely rulers retained internal autonomy while acknowledging the supremacy of the British Crown. Within this constitutional framework, the authority exercised by royal women varied according to local traditions, succession practices, and political circumstances. Some became sovereign rulers, others served as regents during the minority of heirs, while many influenced governance through advisory and philanthropic roles. Their experiences demonstrate that women could exercise effective leadership despite the patriarchal structure of both Indian society and colonial administration.

Among the most remarkable examples were the Begums of Bhopal. The continued tradition of female rule in Bhopal was unique among the princely states and challenged

contemporary assumptions about women's political capabilities. Shah Jahan Begum, who ruled from 1868 to 1901, strengthened state administration, improved revenue management, and encouraged urban development. Her government invested in roads, public buildings, educational institutions, and religious architecture, contributing to the growth of Bhopal as an important princely capital. She also promoted literary and cultural activities, demonstrating that political authority could coexist with intellectual and artistic patronage.

Her successor, Sultan Jahan Begum (1901–1926), expanded these reforms through a more systematic approach to administration. She believed that good governance depended upon education, efficient institutions, and public welfare. In her autobiography, *An Account of My Life*, she emphasised that the welfare of the people was the first duty of a ruler (Sultan Jahan Begum 1910) ^[10]. Under her leadership, Bhopal improved municipal administration, reorganised public health services, strengthened local government, and expanded educational opportunities, particularly for girls. Her administration became an example of progressive governance within the princely states and earned recognition from both Indian reformers and British officials.

Royal Women and Political Authority under British Paramountcy

The authority exercised by royal women in the princely states differed according to local customs, succession practices, and political circumstances. While some ruled as sovereigns, others governed as regents during the minority of heirs or exercised considerable influence as advisers and patrons. Despite these differences, they shared a common commitment to administrative efficiency and public welfare. Their leadership also demonstrates that women could successfully manage state affairs within the constitutional limits imposed by British paramountcy.

The experience of Bhopal remains one of the most remarkable examples of female rule in colonial India. Shah Jahan Begum strengthened the administrative foundations of the state through improvements in revenue administration, public works, and urban development. She encouraged the construction of roads, educational institutions, public buildings, and religious monuments, giving Bhopal a distinct civic identity. Alongside these developments, she promoted literature and learning, reflecting the close relationship between governance and cultural patronage. Her reign showed that political authority and cultural leadership could reinforce each other (Lambert-Hurley 2007) ^[5].

Sultan Jahan Begum expanded these reforms with greater administrative discipline. She regarded education, sanitation, and efficient local government as essential responsibilities of the state. Municipal administration was reorganized, hospitals were improved, vaccination programmes were encouraged, and primary education received greater attention, particularly for girls. She also promoted teacher training and supported institutions that broadened educational opportunities for women. Her participation in educational organisations beyond Bhopal reflected a wider concern for the advancement of Indian society. As she observed in *An Account of My Life*, the prosperity of a state depended upon the welfare and education of its people.

A comparable example of effective female leadership is found in Mysore, where Maharani Kempananjammani Devi, popularly known as Vani Vilasa Sannidhana, served as Regent from 1894 to 1902 after the death of Maharaja Chamarajendra Wadiyar X. She assumed responsibility during the minority of the future Maharaja Krishnaraja Wadiyar IV, a period that required both political stability and administrative continuity. Working closely with Dewan Sir K. Seshadri Iyer, she ensured that Mysore maintained its reputation as one of the most progressive princely states in India.

The regency witnessed continued investment in public administration, irrigation, transport, and education. One of the most significant developmental initiatives associated with her regency was the Vani Vilasa Sagara Project across the Vedavati River, later named in her honour. The project reflected the Mysore government's emphasis on irrigation and agricultural improvement, which contributed to the economic development of the region. Educational institutions continued to expand during her regency, and support for girls' education reflected the progressive policies already taking shape in Mysore. She also encouraged charitable activities and maintained the Wadiyar tradition of supporting religion, music, and Kannada culture. Although many administrative initiatives were implemented through the Dewan, the Regent provided the political stability and royal support necessary for these reforms to succeed.

The administration of Travancore under Maharani Setu Lakshmi Bayi, who served as Regent from 1924 to 1931, presents another important example of women's political leadership. Her regency was marked by efforts to modernise administration while respecting constitutional traditions. She encouraged improvements in public health, expanded educational facilities, strengthened local administration, and supported judicial reforms. Travancore had already earned a reputation for progressive governance, and the Regent continued this tradition by giving attention to social welfare and administrative efficiency. Her policies reflected a practical approach to governance in which development and public welfare were regarded as essential responsibilities of the state.

These examples demonstrate that royal women were not merely symbolic figures within princely courts. Whether ruling directly, serving as regents, or working alongside experienced administrators, they influenced policy, supervised public institutions, and contributed to the stability of their states. Their authority was exercised within the constraints of British paramountcy, yet they retained sufficient autonomy to shape internal administration according to local needs and priorities.

Social Reform, Education, and Public Welfare

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed increasing concern for social reform across India. Questions relating to women's education, healthcare, child welfare, and public sanitation received growing attention from both reformers and princely governments. Royal women participated actively in these developments by establishing schools, supporting hospitals, encouraging charitable institutions, and promoting women's participation in public life.

Among the most influential reformers was Maharani Chinnabai II of Baroda. Although she was not the sovereign ruler, her close association with Maharaja

Sayajirao Gaekwad III enabled her to influence several initiatives relating to women's welfare. She believed that education was the foundation of social progress and consistently advocated greater educational opportunities for girls. In her book *The Position of Women in Indian Life*, she argued that women should receive education not only for personal development but also to contribute effectively to society.

Her interest extended beyond education to healthcare, vocational training, and women's organisations. She supported maternity services, encouraged the training of nurses, and promoted institutions that improved the social and economic position of women. Her ideas reflected an effort to combine Indian social values with modern educational opportunities rather than simply imitate Western models. Through speeches, public activities, and philanthropic work, she became one of the leading advocates of women's advancement in princely India.

Education also occupied a central place in the work of Maharani Suniti Devi of Cooch Behar. A daughter of the noted reformer Keshab Chandra Sen, she brought the ideals of the Brahmo Samaj into the royal court. She actively supported girls' schools and believed that educated women could contribute to stronger families and more progressive societies. Her autobiography provides valuable insights into the changing role of educated royal women during the colonial period. In addition to her educational work, she wrote books and encouraged literary activities, thereby contributing to the intellectual life of her state and beyond.

The commitment to women's education was also visible in the policies of Sultan Jahan Begum and Maharani Kempananjammani Devi. Although they ruled in different regions and under different political circumstances, both regarded education as an important instrument of social development. Their efforts demonstrate that educational reform had become a shared concern among several princely states during the late colonial period.

Cultural Patronage and Preservation of Indigenous Traditions

The contribution of royal women to the princely states extended beyond governance and social reform. They also played an important role in preserving regional culture, encouraging literature, supporting religious institutions, and promoting the visual and performing arts. At a time when colonial influence was becoming increasingly visible, many royal women sought to modernise their states without neglecting their cultural heritage. Their patronage helped strengthen regional identities while encouraging new educational and intellectual activities.

In Bhopal, Shah Jahan Begum combined administrative leadership with literary and architectural patronage. She supported scholars, encouraged the publication of books, and commissioned public buildings that reflected the artistic traditions of the state. Mosques, palaces, gardens, and educational institutions built during her reign became important cultural landmarks. Sultan Jahan Begum continued this tradition by supporting libraries, schools, and institutions that promoted both religious and secular learning. Her educational reforms were guided by the belief that cultural advancement and public education were closely connected.

A similar balance between tradition and progress is visible in the regency of Maharani Kempananjammani Devi (Vani

Vilasa Sannidhana) in Mysore. The Wadiyar rulers had long been recognised as patrons of Kannada literature, music, painting, and temple architecture. During her regency, this tradition continued alongside programmes of administrative modernisation. She encouraged educational institutions, supported religious and charitable activities, and upheld the cultural life of the Mysore court. Her support for public works, particularly irrigation and education, reflected the idea that economic development and cultural progress should advance together. The continuation of these policies during the minority of Krishnaraja Wadiyar IV ensured that Mysore retained its reputation as one of the most progressive princely states in India.

In Travancore, Maharani Setu Lakshmi Bayi similarly encouraged education, public institutions, and cultural activities while maintaining respect for established traditions. Her administration supported museums, libraries, and educational institutions that contributed to the intellectual life of the state. Travancore's achievements in literacy and public welfare during the early twentieth century were the result of long-term institutional development, to which the Regent made a meaningful contribution.

Maharani Suniti Devi made a distinctive contribution through literature. Her writings, especially *The Autobiography of an Indian Princess*, provide valuable insight into the changing position of women in princely India. Through her books, speeches, and educational work, she encouraged women to participate more actively in public life while remaining rooted in Indian cultural values. Her literary contributions make her an important source for understanding the experiences and aspirations of educated royal women during the colonial period.

Although Maharani Gayatri Devi became more widely known after Independence, her contribution before 1947 also deserves attention. In 1943 she established the Maharani Gayatri Devi Girls' School in Jaipur, one of the earliest modern institutions for girls' education in Rajasthan. The school reflected her belief that women should have access to quality education while preserving Indian cultural traditions. By limiting the discussion to her pre-1947 activities, the study remains within its chronological scope while recognising her early contribution to women's education.

Taken together, these examples show that cultural patronage was not separate from governance. Royal women regarded education, literature, religion, architecture, and the arts as important instruments for strengthening society. Their patronage helped preserve regional traditions while creating opportunities for intellectual and social development.

Discussion

The comparative study of selected princely states reveals both similarities and regional differences in the role of royal women. The Begums of Bhopal exercised direct sovereign authority, whereas Vani Vilasa Sannidhana in Mysore and Setu Lakshmi Bayi in Travancore governed as regents. Maharani Chimnabai II, Suniti Devi, and Gayatri Devi influenced public life mainly through education, philanthropy, and social reform. Despite these differences in constitutional position, all of them shared a commitment to improving the welfare of their people.

Another common feature was the importance they attached to women's education. Whether in Bhopal, Baroda, Mysore,

Travancore, Cooch Behar, or Jaipur, education was viewed as the foundation of social progress. Their initiatives included establishing schools, supporting teacher training, encouraging women's organisations, and expanding educational opportunities for girls. These efforts complemented the wider social reform movements taking place in India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Public health and welfare formed another important area of activity. Hospitals, maternity services, sanitation programmes, vaccination campaigns, and charitable institutions received encouragement in several princely states. These initiatives demonstrate that royal women understood governance not simply as the exercise of political authority but also as a responsibility towards public welfare.

The study also shows that British paramountcy did not completely prevent royal women from exercising leadership. Although the British Government retained control over external affairs and often influenced succession and political decisions, the internal administration of many princely states remained sufficiently autonomous to allow capable rulers and regents to introduce meaningful reforms. Their success depended upon administrative ability, cooperation with experienced officials, and public support as much as upon hereditary position.

Conclusion

The history of the Indian princely states cannot be understood fully without recognising the contribution of royal women. Between 1885 and 1947, they participated in governance as sovereign rulers, regents, advisers, reformers, and patrons of education and culture. Their work demonstrates that political leadership in princely India was more inclusive than is often assumed in traditional narratives centred on male rulers.

The experiences of Shah Jahan Begum, Sultan Jahan Begum, Maharani Chimnabai II, Maharani Kempananjammani Devi (Vani Vilasa Sannidhana), Maharani Setu Lakshmi Bayi, Maharani Suniti Devi, and Maharani Gayatri Devi illustrate different paths through which women exercised authority. They strengthened administrative institutions, promoted education, improved public health, supported charitable organisations, and preserved regional cultural traditions while adapting to the constitutional realities of British paramountcy.

By examining these royal women together, this article demonstrates that their contributions formed an important part of the political and social history of late colonial India. Their leadership challenged conventional assumptions about women's role in governance and left a lasting influence on the development of their respective princely states. Future research may extend this comparative approach to lesser-studied princely states and explore the relationship between royal women, local administration, and emerging nationalist movements.

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