

Women and Power in Medieval Indian Society

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Abstract:

Medieval Indian society is often remembered as an era when patriarchal norms tightened and women's public roles shrank – yet this oversimplifies a rich and complex reality. Across the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughal Empire, the Deccan sultanates, and Rajput kingdoms, numerous women exercised substantial political power, both formally as sovereigns and regents and informally as royal consorts, queen mothers, and courtly influencers. This paper examines the lives and careers of Razia Sultan, Queen Didda of Kashmir, Nur Jahan, Chand Bibi, Rani Durgavati, Rani Chennamma of Kittur, Ahilyabai Holkar, the Begums of Bhopal, Tarabai Bhosale, and Jahanara Begum, alongside lesser-known figures from South Indian inscriptions and Maratha records. It argues that women's power was not merely exceptional but structural – embedded in dynastic politics, succession crises, and the necessity of maintaining state legitimacy. At the same time, it acknowledges the ideological constraints such as purdah, sati, and patriarchal legal codes that framed these women's actions. The paper concludes that a balanced historiography must avoid both hagiography and victimhood, instead focusing on the strategic agency exercised within given social structures.

Keywords—Medieval India, gender, political agency, Razia Sultan, Queen Didda, Nur Jahan, Rajput queens, regency, purdah, patriarchy, historiography, queenship.

1. Introduction

The medieval period in India, roughly from the eighth to the eighteenth centuries, witnessed the consolidation of Islamic and regional Hindu polities, and with them, the codification of patriarchal norms. Texts like the Dharmashastras and Islamic jurisprudence prescribed female seclusion, child marriage, and male guardianship. Yet the same period produced a remarkable roster of women who sat on thrones, led armies, issued coins, and directed state policy. Their existence challenges any monolithic view of medieval Indian women as passive or oppressed. This paper explores the diverse modalities of female political power, analysing both the opportunities and the obstacles that shaped women's public lives, and argues that women's agency, though constrained, was a persistent feature of medieval statecraft. The stories of these women reveal not only the possibilities for female authority but also the structural limits imposed by patriarchal ideologies and the strategies women employed to navigate and sometimes subvert these constraints.

The Medieval Context: Patriarchy and Its Contradictions

Medieval Indian society was characterised by a complex interplay of patriarchal ideologies and practical political necessities. The Dharmashastra tradition, particularly the Manusmriti, prescribed women's subordination to fathers, husbands, and sons in different stages of life, and advocated child marriage and the ideal of pativrata, or wifely devotion. Islamic law, as interpreted in the subcontinent, also placed

women under male guardianship and encouraged seclusion, particularly among the upper classes. The practice of purdah, or veiling and seclusion, became increasingly prevalent during this period, especially among aristocratic and royal women. Sati, the immolation of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres, was practised in many communities, particularly among the Rajputs, though it was by no means universal. These ideological and social constraints significantly limited women's public roles and mobility.

However, the political realities of medieval statecraft often required the active participation of women. Dynastic continuity, succession crises, and the need to maintain alliances through marriage created opportunities for women to exercise power. Queens were frequently called upon to act as regents for minor sons, to mediate between factions, and to lead military campaigns when their husbands or sons were incapacitated. The political arena, though dominated by men, was not entirely closed to women of royal blood. These women were often well-educated, trained in martial arts, and well-versed in court etiquette and political strategy. Their authority was derived from their connection to the royal lineage, their personal qualities, and the exigencies of political circumstances.

Women as Sovereign Rulers

The most iconic female sovereign of medieval India is Razia Sultan, who ruled the Delhi Sultanate from 1236 to 1240. She was the first and only woman to rule that empire in her own right. Her father, Iltutmish, had designated her as successor, reportedly because he found his sons incompetent. The Turkish nobility,

unaccustomed to female rule, resisted fiercely and attempted to place her brother, Ruknuddin Firuz, on the throne. However, Razia's own mother, Shah Turkan, had effectively ruled as regent for Ruknuddin, demonstrating that women were already involved in governance. When Ruknuddin proved incompetent and his mother became unpopular, the nobles and the people of Delhi rallied behind Razia. She ascended the throne and immediately faced opposition from the Turkish military elite.

Razia dressed as a man, wore a tunic and cap, and rode an elephant in public to assert her authority and project a martial image. She led military campaigns in person, including a successful campaign against the rebels in Lahore and Multan. She issued coins in her name with the title al-Sultan al-Mu'azzam, meaning the Great Sultan, and had the khutba (Friday sermon) read in her name, both traditional markers of sovereign authority. Her reign was marked by administrative reforms, including the abolition of the iqta system in some areas and the appointment of non-Turkish officers to break the monopoly of the Turkish nobility. However, her efforts to diminish the power of the Turkish nobles alienated them, and they eventually rebelled. Her alliance with and later marriage to Altunia, a slave-general from Bhatinda, further alienated the nobles. She was defeated in battle and killed in 1240, but her legend endured as a powerful symbol of female capability.

In Kashmir, Queen Didda, who ruled from 958 to 1003, was the last ruler of the Utpala dynasty. She first acted as regent for her husband, Kshemagupta, who was weak and addicted to pleasures. After his death, she acted as regent for her minor son, Abhimanyu, and subsequently for her grandson, Nandigupta. She ultimately reigned as sovereign for twenty-three years, effectively ruling Kashmir from 958 until her death in 1003. Known as the Catherine of Kashmir, she was ruthless in eliminating rivals, executing captured rebels and exterminating their families. She poisoned her opponents, bribed officials, and used her intelligence and cunning to maintain power. Yet she stabilised the kingdom, built temples, and fostered cultural patronage. The Rajatarangini of Kalhana, the chronicle of Kashmir, portrays her with both admiration and ambivalence, reflecting the complex attitudes of medieval chroniclers towards powerful women. Similarly, Sugandha had earlier ruled Kashmir independently after her husband's death in 904, and Suryamati in the eleventh century held an independent estate even while her husband reigned. These examples from Kashmir demonstrate that the region had a notable

tradition of female sovereignty that persisted across dynasties.

In the Deccan, Chand Bibi, the regent of Ahmednagar from 1550 to 1599, famously defended the fort of Ahmednagar against Akbar's forces in 1595. She was the daughter of Husain Nizam Shah and the sister of Sultan Burhan Nizam Shah. When her nephew, the young Sultan Bahadur Shah, was threatened by the Mughal army, she took command of the defence. She dressed in men's clothing, rallied the garrison, and personally led the defence of the fort. She negotiated a tough peace with the Mughals, ceding territory but preserving the dynasty. She remained a respected figure in Mughal-Deccan relations and was known for her intelligence, diplomatic skill, and military leadership. Her tragic death at the hands of her own soldiers, who suspected her of betrayal during a later conflict, only added to her legend.

Warrior Queens and Maratha Women

Rani Durgavati of the Gond kingdom ruled for fifteen years and fought valiantly against the Mughal general Asaf Khan in 1564. She was the widow of King Dalpat Shah of the Gond dynasty. When Asaf Khan invaded her kingdom, she led her army personally, riding into battle on an elephant. Despite being wounded, she continued to fight until defeat was certain. She then killed herself with a dagger rather than surrender, and her martyrdom later became a touchstone of Rajput-Gond pride. Her story exemplifies the ideal of the warrior queen who preferred death to dishonour.

In the Maratha territories, Tarabai Bhosale (1675-1761) effectively led the resistance against the Mughals after the death of her husband, Rajaram I. She acted as regent for her young son, Shivaji II, and continued the Maratha struggle against Aurangzeb. She proved to be an able administrator and military strategist, maintaining the morale of the Maratha troops and expanding their territory. Ahilyabai Holkar of Indore (1725-1795) is another remarkable figure. She inherited the throne after the death of her husband and father-in-law. She administered her kingdom with exceptional skill, building roads, temples, wells, and dharamshalas (rest houses). She maintained a just and efficient administration, promoted trade and agriculture, and defended her territory against invaders. She is remembered as a just and pious ruler who brought prosperity to her people and embodied the ideal of benevolent governance.

Rajput Queens: Honour, Politics, and Agency

Rajput courts celebrated the ideal of the heroic queen, skilled in horsemanship, swordsmanship, and statecraft. Rajput princesses were trained from childhood in martial arts and could ride, hunt, and fight alongside their male relatives. Rani Karnavati of Mewar, though famous for the jauhar (mass self-immolation) she organised against Bahadur Shah of Gujarat, also sent a rakhi to the Mughal emperor Humayun, invoking his protection – a diplomatic act that shows her political acumen and her ability to leverage symbolic relationships for political advantage. Similarly, Jijabai, the mother of Shivaji, was the regent of the Maratha kingdom during his minority. She managed the estates, negotiated with other Maratha chiefs, and instilled in Shivaji the vision of Hindavi Swarajya. Her role extended beyond mere motherhood; she was a political strategist who shaped the destiny of the Maratha Empire.

The practice of jauhar, while tragic, also represented a form of agency for Rajput women, allowing them to choose death rather than capture and dishonour. It was a collective act of resistance that preserved the honour of the clan and the community. While modern historians often critique the practice as patriarchal, it was also a form of empowerment within the context of Rajput honour culture. The narrative of Padmini, the legendary Rajput queen of Chittor, has been the subject of extensive historical memory and literary tradition. While the historicity of the event is debated, the story illustrates the power of gender norms in constructing heroic memory and the enduring significance of women in Rajput cultural identity.

Women in South Indian Kingdoms

South Indian inscriptions reveal the presence of numerous Kshatriya women protecting their homes and hearths during dangerous times. Under the Pallava rulers, women from royal and rich families enjoyed high status in society and were also given property rights. In the Chola kingdom, women like Kundavai, the sister of Rajaraja I, administered districts, built temples, and exercised delegated authority from her brother. Inscriptions record that she managed the affairs of a group of villages and donated land and jewels to temples. In the Nayaka period, women served in various political capacities, often as regents or administrators. The Nayaka queens also contributed significantly to temple patronage, building gopurams, mandapams, and endowments for rituals. Queen Laksmamma, the wife of the Vijayanagara ruler Saluva Narasimha, is known from inscriptions to have made donations to temples, indicating her economic agency and religious authority. In the Kakatiya kingdom,

Rudramadevi (1262-1289) ruled as a sovereign in her own right, one of the few female rulers in the region's history. She successfully defended her kingdom against internal rebellions and external invasions and is remembered as one of the greatest rulers of the Kakatiya dynasty.

Women in the Mughal Empire

The Mughal period saw royal women exercising extraordinary influence. Royal women of the Mughal period were proficient in martial arts and social etiquette, besides being capable administrators, seasoned politicians, and artists. Nur Jahan (1577-1645) was the most powerful Mughal queen. She was the daughter of a Persian noble who had served in the Mughal court. After her marriage to Jahangir, she effectively became the power behind the throne, especially after Jahangir became dependent on alcohol and opium. She issued farmans (royal decrees) with her own seal, had coins minted in her name with the inscription "By order of Jahangir, Nur Jahan the Queen," presided over court sessions, and even led a successful tiger hunt and commanded military expeditions. She used her influence to appoint her relatives to key positions, creating a faction at court that challenged the traditional nobility. Her power was so great that contemporary European travellers, including Sir Thomas Roe, described her as the true sovereign, while Jahangir was merely a figurehead.

Jahanara Begum (1614-1681), the eldest daughter of Shah Jahan, wielded enormous influence at court, especially during the succession wars among her brothers. She was the favourite child of her father and acted as the chief queen (Padshah Begum) after her mother's death. She performed the duties of the chief queen, including presiding over official ceremonies and managing the imperial household. She reconciled Aurangzeb with his father during the succession crisis and acted as a mediator between the warring brothers. Her younger sister Roshanara also played a political role, supporting Aurangzeb's bid for power against their elder brother Dara Shikoh. These Mughal princesses were well-educated, wrote poetry, and patronised architecture – Jahanara was responsible for the Chandni Chowk in Delhi and the Jama Masjid in Agra. She also wrote a biography of the Sufi saint Moinuddin Chishti, demonstrating her intellectual and spiritual pursuits. Zebunissa, the daughter of Aurangzeb, was a poetess of considerable talent and a patron of learning, though her political ambitions were thwarted by her father's stricter religious policies.

The Begums of Bhopal

The Begums of Bhopal – Qudsia, Sikandar, and Shah Jahan – ruled for over a century from 1819 to 1926, modernising their state, building railways, and promoting education, while maintaining effective governance in a predominantly patriarchal environment. Qudsia Begum (1819-1837) took over the administration of Bhopal after the death of her husband, Nawab Nazar Muhammad Khan. She was a capable administrator who built roads, established police stations, and maintained law and order. Her daughter, Sikandar Begum (1844-1868), was a skilled soldier who led her army in person and modernised the state's administration. She also abolished the practice of sati in her state and promoted women's education. Her daughter, Shah Jahan Begum (1868-1901), was a prolific builder who constructed the famous Taj-ul-Masajid mosque in Bhopal and published a diary of her administration. The Begums of Bhopal represent a unique example of sustained female rule in medieval and early modern India, demonstrating that women could govern effectively and command the loyalty of their subjects.

The Imperial Zenana: Networks of Informal Power

Not all female power was formal. The imperial zenana (women's quarters) was a space of intense political networking. Queens, concubines, and mothers of princes could influence succession, appointments, and policies through their relationships with the king. The Mughal mahal was a microcosm of court politics, where alliances were forged and plots hatched. Nur Jahan's rise began as a favourite wife, but she transformed that personal influence into institutional authority. Similarly, in Vijayanagara, the antahpura (inner apartments) housed women who controlled vast dowries and could fund temples, inscriptions, and even military campaigns. The mother of the ruler often held a position of great honour and could influence decisions, as seen in the cases of Hamida Banu Begum, mother of Akbar, and Mariam Makani, mother of Jahangir. These women used their access to the ruler, their control over the household, and their patronage networks to exercise power indirectly but effectively. Women also acted as patrons of art, literature, and architecture, leaving a lasting cultural legacy.

Female Saint-Poets and Spiritual Authority

Female saint-poets like Mirabai (c. 1498-1547) exercised a different kind of power – spiritual and moral – challenging both patriarchal and orthodox religious structures through their devotional poetry. Mirabai, a Rajput princess, dedicated her life to Lord Krishna, defying her husband and her in-laws. Her songs, in which she addresses Krishna as her lover and

her husband, subverted traditional gender roles and asserted her right to a direct, unmediated relationship with the divine. Her devotion made her a beloved figure across India, and her poetry continues to be sung and cherished. Similarly, Akka Mahadevi (c. 1130-1160), a Kannada poet and saint, rejected worldly attachments and walked naked to express her renunciation, challenging social norms. These women derived their authority from their spiritual calling, which transcended the patriarchal constraints of the household and the court. They commanded respect and devotion from followers of all castes and genders, creating a sphere of influence that was independent of male patronage.

Constraints and Contradictions

Despite these impressive examples, women's power was always contingent and constrained. It depended on the absence of adult male heirs, the support of male nobles, and the ruler's personal favour. Purdah and seclusion restricted women's mobility and public visibility, making it difficult for them to assert authority without male intermediaries. Sati, or widow immolation, continued in many communities, particularly among the Rajputs, limiting the agency of widowed queens. Even a powerful woman like Razia Sultan found her legitimacy contested by nobles who were uncomfortable with female rule. Her adoption of male attire was a symbolic act to assert her authority, but it also highlighted the gendered nature of kingship. Legal texts like the Manusmriti and Islamic sharia placed women under male guardianship, though in practice royal women could circumvent these norms.

The historiography of medieval Indian women has often oscillated between celebrating these women as proto-feminists and dismissing them as exceptions that prove the rule. Some historians have criticised the "great woman" approach, which focuses on exceptional individuals and ignores the structural constraints that limited most women's lives. Others have emphasised the importance of understanding women's agency within the specific cultural and political contexts of medieval India. A more nuanced view sees these women as pragmatic actors who used the tools available – dynastic legitimacy, maternal influence, and religious patronage – to carve out spaces of authority. They were neither wholly liberated nor wholly subjugated, but negotiated their positions within patriarchal structures, sometimes subverting them and sometimes reinforcing them. Their achievements should be recognised not as proto-feminist triumphs but as examples of strategic agency exercised under historical circumstances.

Conclusion

Medieval Indian women were not uniformly powerless. The political arena offered avenues for agency to those born into or married into ruling families. While patriarchal ideologies constrained most women, a minority – often those with exceptional personal qualities or political luck – exercised real power, ranging from the formal sovereignty of Razia Sultan to the informal influence of Mughal princesses and the spiritual authority of saint-poets. Their stories remind us that gender and power are historically contingent; they were neither wholly liberated nor wholly subjugated. Understanding their lives requires us to look beyond modern feminist categories and appreciate the particularities of medieval statecraft, kinship, and honour. Their legacies, whether as sovereigns, regents, king-makers, spiritual leaders, or cultural patrons, remain an integral part of India's political heritage and continue to inspire contemporary discussions on women's leadership. The study of medieval Indian women and power thus reveals a complex landscape of possibility and constraint, agency and subordination, victory and tragedy – a landscape that defies easy generalizations and demands careful, contextualised analysis.

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