British colonial writers often transformed their belief in the educative powers of government into a romance about turning natives into political allies. In this version of the romance, political opponents could be cast in familial roles, particularly when they were women and subject to colonial and native patriarchy. When these women remained recalcitrant, however, the romance reached a crisis and transformed them into immoral or corrupt opponents and the paternal figure of the Resident into a cruel oppressor. A perfect example of this type of narrative was the case of the widowed queens or Rani of native Indian states whose territory lapsed to the British government between 1848 and 1856. The annexation of the central Indian state of Jhansi aroused popular interest in England when the heroic Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi rode into battle against British forces during the Mutiny of 1857. The Rani of three other states—Nagpur, Satara, and Sambalpur—less known and less celebrated, were similarly placed vis-à-vis the East India Company. Initially figureheads and regents for their adopted heirs, these Rani refused to be educated into obedient subjects. Instead, they launched a series of protests against the decisions of the East India Company regarding their estates, pensions, household expenses, and their customary right to adopt a son and heir. Departing from the usual focus on the silently victimized Indian widow, this episode in nineteenth-century history shows the upper-class widow as a politically militant
figure, in the midst of domestic chaos, and embroiled in a conflict about property.

After the annexations of their states, these widows became dependents of the Company which became responsible for the disposal of their property, allocation of their pensions, and regulation of their daily expenditure. Even though the British Resident was a potentially hostile figure, he personally supervised arrangements for the queens, maintained cordial relations with the ruling family, and often lived on the same estate. The negotiations between the widowed queens and the Resident thus became inevitably familial. He did his best to turn them into good daughters and loyal subjects in a family romance even as they defied the roles imposed on them. It is indicative of the convolutions of this family romance that even though the conflict over property and power had all the features of a marital dispute, the Ranis played on the popular designation of the Company as a father figure and described themselves as its daughters. Even their protests against the decisions of the Company are couched in the language of familial betrayal. For instance, when the Ranis of Nagpur complained to the Commissioner of Nagpur about the conduct of a British official who interfered with the organization of the women’s quarters, they said, “we are your daughters, and you are our father . . . we have no protector but you” (qtd. in Rahim 260). The Resident, however, assumed those responsibilities of the absent husband or Raja such as organizing the household and monitoring expenses. It is thus an incestuous economy in which good daughters could also occupy the place of obedient wives.

The language of civility, the invocation of familial relations, the address to the Company as protector are all conventions of the exchange between the Ranis and the Company that are quite consistently followed in the correspondence between the two. Yet the elaborate convention that, on the one hand, keeps in place the paternal structures of authority becomes, on the other, the vehicle for articulating the failure of paternal authority to guarantee the happiness of the good daughters and wives. As Michael Fisher has pointed out in the case of the remarkable Begum Samru, who became a powerful landowner and power-broker under Company rule, she “used kinship terms for her relationships with British officials,” though this was not reciprocal because in a ‘rational-bureaucratic’ system, the Company wanted to avoid reference to personal ties in public matters (“Becoming” 107). As I show in the final section of this chapter, the hero of the Mutiny, the Rani of Jhansi, maintains the language of familial civility in her pleas to the Company that her adopted son be recognized as
the new ruler. In that sense, the romance of good subject/paternal ruler is played by both sides. However, the subsequent actions of the Rani show decisively that there is a counternarrative that was equally visibly played out and that exposed the romance of indirect rule. In folklore and Hindi literature, the Rani became a symbol not of compliance, but its opposite: she was seen as a hero of the first war of independence against British rule.

Historical accounts of the annexations represent these women as victims of the self-interested policies of the Company and the uncompromising stance of Governor-General Dalhousie. Colonial accounts, on the other hand, represent the Ranis as obstructors of the true cause of justice who had to be summarily pensioned off, or else as disobedient daughters who were misled by bad advisors to make unjust demands in defiance of the paternal designs of the Company. Historians of the period have not sufficiently highlighted the implications of the Company’s frequent use of “doctrine of lapse,” a policy that denied to rulers the right both to inherit and administer their estates and to adopt heirs, specifically in the case of women rulers. These policies of annexation were critically assessed in light of the fact that the Revolt of 1857 was popularly understood as having been caused by Dalhousie’s ruthless annexation of Indian states during his tenure from 1848 to 1856.1

It is strange that these women should stay marginal to this history given that they brought to a crisis questions about takeover of territory, the definition of public and private property, the ideology of separate spheres, and class-based notions of gender and public power. Given their marginality, it is easy to forget that they were actors in a crucial episode in the establishment of British rule in India—the transition from indirect rule through Residents to direct annexation of territory by the East India Company. Administrative documents that record the suppression of women regents, or potential heads of state, can be read for the contradictions that they expose in the idea of benevolent rule. The rhetoric of social reform, bringing modernity to pre-industrial India, and the provision of a more humane and hence more civilized dispensation to the Indian woman were an essential part of the fantasy of good rule. The constant reminders that the British were snatching away the rights of the widows of princely states sat uncomfortably against this rhetoric. It worked against the notion that they were saviors of the Indian woman, a fiction that was central to their sense of themselves as benevolent rulers engaged in a civilizing mission. In reading the Ranis as potentially subversive, I am not suggesting that they presented self-conscious critiques of patriarchy or imperialism. It is important to
note, however, that their resistance to the quiet life of obscurity that was being forced on them projected them from a life of seclusion into a more militant public and political role.

The self-justification of the Company is a key to understanding the rhetorical and ideological battles between the Rani s and the Company. By the early nineteenth century British colonialism distinguished itself from other forms of conquest and from “Oriental Despotism” by its concern with rule of law and with due process. In British self-perception, one of the markers of their enlightened rule was their intercession on behalf of the widow, and the banning of Sati and other “barbaric” practices in British ruled states. This belief became so well established that it persisted into the late colonial period. Indeed, in 1894, William Lee-Warner, Political Secretary in the Bombay Residency, described “Native administrations” as conducted “in a different spirit from our own” and characterized by the fact that “infanticide, suttee, and the burning of witches continued to be practiced and honoured just over an imaginary border, long after their suppression within the territories governed by British law” (Protected Princes 19). Company officials were especially concerned that native rulers and their subjects, and the British Parliament and people perceive their negotiations with the queens as part of a larger “civilizing mission” undertaken with the consent of the governed.

The Gender of Good Rule

East India Company policies in eighteenth-century India were centered largely on deliberations about the ownership of land, the question being whether it rested with the Mughal emperor or with the landowner. It was believed that imperial authority was limited to rent, not ownership of property. Warren Hastings, Philip Francis (Supreme Councillor in Bengal 1774–80), and finally Cornwallis (Governor-General of India, 1786–93) are only the best known in a long line of policy makers who dueled with custom and usage and the authority of written texts among Muslims and Hindus to finally establish the primacy of English law in the matter of legislating land revenues and ownership of landed property. In a recent study of colonial ideology, Robert Travers argues for a more nuanced perception of the deliberate process by which the British under Warren Hastings, and before, negotiated between Mughal law, custom, local usage, their own sense of ‘ancient constitutionalism,’ and
their brand of Whiggish ideas. This process of engagement with Indian aristocracy and traditional scholars like maulvis and pundits on the question of land rights was a distinctive feature of indirect rule in India. For my purposes, the most striking aspect of these negotiations, which undoubtedly created great confusion and consternation, is that it was often women landowners whose rights were infringed by Company legislation. Thus it is they who publicly challenged the Company’s ideas about laws of inheritance, the place of women in segregated societies, and the ability of women to negotiate their claims to property.

Until very recently, this fact received scant attention in histories of the period even though the colonial record is full of pleas, protests, and petitions from women rulers of small states and women landowners. In demonstrating the kinds of judgments the Company courts were compelled to give for land disputes, the confrontation with women landholders reveals the elaborate rhetorical moves and fictions the Company was compelled to invent about protecting secluded women. An example of the nature of this clash over property between widows and the Company can be seen as early as 1776 in the case of Nauderah Begum, whose claim to her deceased husband’s property was disputed by his nephew, Bahadur Beg, even though she claimed full inheritance on the basis of a deed of gift and a record of the actual transfer of property. Bahadur Beg took his claim to the Company’s provincial council in the town of Patna where traditional Muslim legal scholars like the qazis and Muftis were asked to express their opinions, which they offered, arguing that only one-fourth of the property could be given to the Begum for her maintenance. The Begum refused to submit to the judgment of the Council and fled to a nearby Islamic religious compound, taking her documents with her. She then appealed to the Supreme Court in Calcutta to intervene. Chief Justice Elijah Impey’s subsequent judgment was less a defense of the Begum’s right to inherit property than a reprimand to the provincial court for having delegated its authority to Muslim qazis and muftis. Both English and native patriarchy thus tried to disinherit women and undermine their abilities. Evidence from the period indicates that women had been landowners, or had acted as proxies for sons or male heirs. Naudhera Begum’s actions suggest that she did have a sense of legal process and legal rights and was capable of functioning in the public sphere. Betty Joseph interprets the disqualification of female landholders from 1776 to 1789 as evidence that the ‘secluded woman’ of Oriental societies had become “the limit case for English law” since she could not be produced in court or exposed to the public eye (Joseph 144). Yet, as Joseph points
out, the Ranis of Rajshahi and of Burdwan, even though they were secluded, had been able to conduct the business of their estates and their correspondence with the Company and the courts through their agents. The Rani of Burdwan possessed enough insight into legal and bureaucratic processes to understand that there was tension between the commercial and legal wings of the colonial state, that is, between the East India Company and the Supreme Court, which she then astutely exploited in her petitions.6

In the case of Nauderah Begum, Elijah Impey of the Supreme Court intervened with a decision against the Company courts, invoking the ‘hapless widow’ in support of his argument. Striking the chivalric note which later became the keynote of Edmund Burke’s speeches against Hastings, Impey expressed horror at the oppression of the widow and the mistreatment she had received at the hands of Company officials. Both Impey and the Muslim legal scholars thus thought of Indian women as dependents, unable to act on their own, and hence unfit to inherit property. Criticizing Impey’s imposition of English law, George Bogle, the ‘Commissioner of Law Suits,’ argued in favor of Muslim law as interpreted by the qazis, and ironically, accused the English court of having subjected a ‘secluded woman’ to the mortification of having to appear in court! For both sides, the rhetoric of ‘saving the widow’ undergirded the argument for the humanity and superiority of the laws they supported (Travers 198–203). It is precisely this inflammatory rhetoric and these ideological positions focused on the figure of the disinherited widow that came to have such power in political battles for the next half century of colonial rule.

The inheritance of property became an even more contentious issue for widows of kings in the case of native states without male heirs. The ambiguity of the law and the great variety of local practices regarding widow remarriage, especially their right to inherit and retain the property of their deceased husbands, became a controversial issue among British and Indian reformers, culminating in the passing of the Hindu Widows Remarriage Act of 1856. In the Panjab, for instance, customary law allowed the Hindu widow to inherit property in the absence of male lineal descendents, but because she could then alienate her share for economic reasons, alarmed British officials felt it necessary to take action prohibiting the partition of land. British colonials were interested in keeping village communities intact by supporting traditional landowners, which often meant restricting the widow’s right to inherit or dispose of land.7 British jurists invoked custom, usage, scripture, and Victorian patriarchy in arbitrary ways to codify and make uniform a
diverse body of personal and property law and this argument between pre-colonial practices and Victorian legislation came to a head in the case of the royal widows. Even though these were royal widows rather than impecunious women fighting for their property, they managed to make the Company look like a persecutor rather than protector of the widows. The precedent of other annexations, especially Oudh, and disputes about inheriting estates that appear over and over again in the colonial record had made the protection of the widow a sentimental issue. The Ranis could and did play on this fact. The conflict over property also has to be situated in the context of British perception of the Ranis which was directed by Victorian ideologies of gender and their relation to private and public space. The annexations also brought to the fore the clash between these ideologies and the Ranis’ understanding of their rights and entitlements.

I present four case studies here, which are arranged so as to make clear the structural similarities between all four instances of the drama of annexation in the states of Satara, Nagpur, Sambalpur, and Jhansi. The Ranis in each of these states use similar strategies of resistance, play up their maternal or familial roles, and remind the British of their historical status as their loyal subjects. The polygamous Rajas of Nagpur and Sambalpur left four wives each, but the protests against the provisions made for them were usually led by the eldest and chief Rani. Inevitably, the British representatives suspected the Ranis of being disloyal, questioned their right to property, and commented on their immorality. As British colonial writings make clear, the Ranis were called upon to become regents or chose to become rulers, often against the political designs of the Company. Although each of these states had different historical and political circumstances, and the British no uniform relationship with them, their treatment of the Ranis was without exception the same: they were reduced to figureheads or considered incapable of ruling the state, pensioned off, and forced into retirement.

SATARA

The annexation of Satara in Western India became so controversial that it was discussed in British Parliament. The past political loyalty of Raja Pratap Singh had given the Company no reasonable excuse to take over the state. The eldest Rani Rajas Bai’s ability to rule was discussed both by the Raja and the Company. Rajas Bai entered the political stage
when the male line of the royal family died without leaving behind a natural heir in 1847, though he had adopted a son before he died. The fortunes of Satara had been uncertain for many decades before Pratap Singh was brought out of captivity and placed on the throne in 1819. The Raja and the Company signed a treaty of perpetual friendship and alliance, which promised sovereignty to the heirs and successors of the king. However, the Company took charge of military protection of his territory, his political relations, and general supervision of his administration. Pratap Singh retained the support of the Company until he became restless under his dependent status. Once Resident Briggs began to interfere in the administration of the state, relations between the Raja and the Company deteriorated rapidly. The Raja was deposed in 1839 and his younger brother Appa Sahib made king. The Rani’s troubled relationship with the Company was simply the aggravation of a long-standing conflict that had begun in the time of Pratap Singh, but again, it assumed its peculiar form only when a woman ruler entered the picture. The Rani was as disempowered by the injunctions of native patriarchy as she was by the British perception of women as unfit rulers. In a letter to his deputy Rungo Bapoojee, her husband, Raja Pratap Singh, writes:

As long as I am spared, there may be nothing very much to dread; but in the event of my death, my two Ranees will have to be guarded against all machinations, in consequence of their incompetency, as females, to understand affairs of state, and owing to the possibility of their being tampered with and imposed upon. . . . Whatever difficulty may arise with respect to the possibility of the Princesses being unfairly dealt with, you must be prepared, if you are alive, to grapple with and remove. You must be on your guard against any papers or oral communications which may purport to proceed from them, directly at variance with my own interests, or contradictory to their duties to me. You are fully aware that what is pretended to emanate from females or minors, is neither legal nor valid. (qtd. in Basu 295)

In pointing to the deceptions that can be practiced upon the Ranis, the Raja’s words emphasize the politically charged rhetoric of the helplessness of women rulers. According to both British and Indian patriarchal conceptions, the Ranis were incapable of holding political power and would not be able to understand affairs of state. Yet the fear that the widows of princely states could hold political power as regents or with the help of advisors convinced the British to neutralize them by giving
them pensions and forcing them into a life of retirement away from the political centers of their states.

Between the injunctions of native patriarchy and the assumptions of the colonial state, the Ranis seem to have been passive instruments in the war of succession. However, that is not how they appear in all historical accounts, some of which point out that people were struck by the Queen Mother’s confident presence when she rode her horse like a man; talked freely to men who approached her; and looked more in command than her son, the prince (Basu 22). The struggle for political power between Rani Saguna Bai and the Company took the indirect medium of negotiating a personal, religious, and customary right such as the right to adopt a son. But even though custom enjoins the adoption of a son who would succeed to the throne, the Rani actively campaigns from the position of the regent and queen mother. In her petitions to the Government, she pushes for sovereignty on her own behalf as much as for her son. At first, she seems to concede the demands of the British government, but then clings tenaciously to her own demands on the crucial question of adoption. In a letter to Major Stewart, Secretary to the Government of India, she asks for clemency from the British government, given that the reasons “which led . . . to the loss of our country are unknown to us poor women” (qtd. in Basu 289). In such a statement, the Rani uses the rhetorical force of their helpless female status at the same time that she asks for political power. She claims that she knows nothing about matters of state, but is in the peculiar position of being involved in every decision involving the state. In his cover letter, Major Stewart gives his own response to the Rani’s petition:

The above resolution has been the result of much deliberation on the Rani’s part, and may be considered entirely her own act and deed. To assure myself that she perfectly understood the contents, the paper was carefully read over and explained to her in my presence, after which she delivered it to me with her own hands, stating that she left the case entirely to the mercy and consideration of the British government. (Basu 290)

But though in this memorandum the Rani withdrew her claim to the throne, she insisted that the adoption of a son was a religious duty which she could not give up. In these negotiations with the Company, the Rani is both a helpless dependent and political antagonist, deprived of the power to make decisions but called upon to take a stand on political issues. The Resident, Major Stewart, is impressed by the Rani’s
strong resolve: “After considerable discussion on this subject, I left the Rani’s presence impressed with her conviction that her objections to disclaim the adoption of the boy are insuperable. She is passionately attached to him and will hear of no compromise by which the fact of adoption is called into question” (qtd. in Basu 290). The Rani uses maternal affection as a fundamental nonnegotiable right even if it goes against the political objectives of the Company. She presents herself to the Resident as a mother claiming her rights rather than as the ruler of a state in conflict with British rule. Both parties are aware, however, that the adoption of a son is a highly political issue.

The long conflict and the tense relations between the Company and the royal family of Satara takes on a new form when the Rani represents the conflict in familial terms, laced with expectation, betrayal, and appeals such as a daughter would make to a father or guardian. The overt paternalism of this relation might seem typical in the context of the protracted negotiations between the Company and the native rulers, but the correspondence between Dalhousie and the Rani enacts once again a family romance created by conditions in which a domestic woman might assume political power. In her letters to the Governor-General and Secretary of State for India, the Rani assumes the position of wronged subject, ill-treated ally, deprived mother, and legal petitioner. In her first letter, which was sent to the Government of Bombay and to Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for India, she writes of the betrayal of her confidence by the Company:

... and that Company, I was perfectly confident, would honourably render me assistance as an ally in case any wicked power through ill will should be inclined to deprive me of my sovereignty and would protect me like a turtle dove. Instead of this, I say, that Honourable Company was bent upon falling on their own ally and thus gratifying their greed like a cruel tigress that falls upon her own offspring to appease her hunger. (qtd. in Basu 273)

The Rani states the relation of filial dependence in which she stands to the Company and her expectation that they would protect her. At the same time, she also describes herself as a political ally of the Company. Her image of the turtle dove protecting her young frames her relationship with the Company as a question of familial affection rather than state diplomacy. Further, the Company is figured as a maternal and nurturing power that commits the unnatural act of turning on its own young. The Rani’s letter plays on the British rhetoric about its status
as a protective and dependable sovereign power with obligations of a feudal nature towards its dependants. Her political negotiations with the Company and their betrayal of their obligations to her are thus represented as a failure of personal, familial relations.

The expectations of the Rani of Satara were, not surprisingly, in conflict with what the Company was prepared to allow her when the question of a pension came up. In his minute of 7 August 1850, Dalhousie judged the expectations of the Rani to be too high. He acted on the advice of the Resident who suggested “that a stipend should be granted of Rs 5000 a month, which he considers would be sufficient for the maintenance of the whole family, although it would be far short of the Rani’s hopes and wishes” (qtd. in Basu 295). This wrangling over personal expenses and the household establishment has all the features of a family quarrel. However, it was also more than that because it implied control not only over the Rani’s household and domestic space, but also over all the marks of her social and political status.

The struggle over appropriate pension for the Rani of Satara thus did not remain a question of household organization, but in fact, took on a political color when it came up for discussion in British Parliament. The Satara controversy caused concern and consternation because the government was anxious that the British not appear as ruthless, despotic rulers. Questions regarding the justice of the annexation, the provisions made for the Rani, and concern for its influence on the people of India were raised by concerned members of Parliament. Sympathizers of the Company argued that the Rani’s complaint about the inadequacy of the provisions made for her was really a front for her grievance regarding the Company’s refusal to allow her to adopt a son. While the court considered the provisions made for her liberal, the Rani, “under the influence of her advisors,” rejected it as too meager for her needs. In this case, none of the Rani’s pursued the matter but accepted “the meagre and poor allowance on the execution of a renunciation of all claims” to the principality of Satara (Rahim 19). The Rani’s refusal to accept the offer of a pension was read as strategy, as rebellion, as an act of disloyalty potentially threatening to the British government. When the case of the Raja of Satara came up for discussion in the British Parliament, a member reported that the Rani had refused the stipend and insisted on putting forward her adopted son as the rightful heir of Satara. When another member asked if the money owing to the Rani had been paid to her, he responded that though the money had been repeatedly offered, she had refused to give a receipt for it (Parliamentary Debates 3rd series. 107: 1156).
In the case of the Central Indian state of Nagpur, Dalhousie’s dismissal of the chief queen Banka Bai’s claim to the throne restates both Victorian and Hindu orthodoxies about lineage and descent. When the conflict between the Government of India and the Rani’s escalated, Dalhousie is reported to have told Banka Bai that “she was not at all the representative of the Bhonsle family by any law, custom, or precedent, European, Maratha or Hindu” (Rahim 249). Of course, this was not an issue when the Company needed her as a quasi-figurehead—then they simply ignored traditional injunctions against a woman assuming political power.

Banka Bai of Nagpur became regent for her son Parsa Ji after the death of her husband Raghuji II, but was replaced soon after by the son of the king’s younger brother, Appa Sahib, who was supported by the Maratha chiefs. Appa Sahib lost favor with the British when he was found intriguing with other small states and kingdoms in the region. He was deposed and another maternal grandson of Raghuji II was adopted by Banka Bai and chosen as heir to the throne. He became Raghuji III, and in 1818, at the age of ten, was placed on the throne of Nagpur. By a treaty of 1826, “his territories were guaranteed to the Raja, his heirs, and his successors” (Rahim 218). Banka Bai was made the head of the regency and given charge of his person, the court, and his household. The British government controlled various departments in his name. A period of efficient administration followed, and the Raja seems to have stayed in the good books of the British for the next seventeen years under the “fatherly care” of Resident Jenkins, who wrote a very favorable report on the state of the kingdom and of the young king (Rahim 218).

In 1850, the then Resident Davidson stated that the Raja had not attended to business for years, had been taking part in irresponsible wars, and had brought the state to a condition of economic bankruptcy. This neglect was perceived in the standard images in which a ‘decadent’ aristocracy was portrayed in British official records. Making the usual colonial association between tyranny, sensuality, and indolence, Charles Jackson, a contemporary British official, quotes from a report of Resident Mansel from 1853 which states that the Raja of Nagpur was addicted to “the low pleasures of the harem,” where he spent his time absorbed in the “paltry conversation and the mean pursuits of the concubines” (qtd. in Jackson 21). He reports further that “a concubine, by name Janee, is spoken of as having led the Rajah into confirmed
habits of drinking about eight years since, so that now, when not ill, his drinking exceeds a bottle of brandy a day. Not a few disgraceful scenes have occurred at the palace while the Raja has been overcome with spirits, and generally it may be said that indisposition has thus grown into incapacity to discharge business in the thoughtful and earnest form becoming, for any continuance of time” (qtd. in Jackson 25). Instead of attending to matters of state, the Raja was said to have engaged himself in “the sports of wrestling, kite-flying, and cards, in singing and dancing, and in the intercourse of his dancing-girls” (qtd. in Jackson 25).

In a similar vein, William Lee-Warner, Political Secretary in Bombay in 1894, criticizing Lord Cornwallis’s reservations about British expansion in India, reiterates a moral and masculine idea of government upheld by the British and opposed to “despotism”:

In this policy he miscalculated the conditions of Asiatic society, and overlooked the consideration that Empires must rest on moral foundations . . . the development of good and progressive government required the counterpoise of a Church, a nobility, or free institutions, of which, except in the Panjab, hardly any germ existed. If despotism was the only possible form of Native government, it was essential that it should be beneficent; but the immoral influences of the Zenana, and of a Court surrounded by flattery and intrigue, were destructive of a wholesome “tone of empire,” and opposed to the idea of any duty or mission. (Lee-Warner, Protected Princes 97)

Both Jackson and Lee-Warner articulate a Victorian masculine idea of good government that is disassociated from the women’s world of luxury and indolence. But at the same time that the influence of women made a king unfit for martial and administrative duties, it was also a dangerous political influence feared by British administrators. Their suspicion of the zenana arose from the fact that queens and women of the household took active part in nominating a successor to the throne. As Indrani Chatterjee makes clear, matriarchs did have important political functions in the household through adoption and raising of children, and even involvement in political strategy.  

The question of Banka Bai’s continuing as regent arose when Raghujii III died in 1853, leaving behind four wives but no natural or adopted heir. The British Resident Mansel reported that it had been the Raja’s decision to forgo his right to adopt a son, but the chief minister to the king maintained that the Company had not responded to the king’s petitions to be allowed to adopt a son. Since successive Residents had
differed widely in their opinions about what should be done with the state of Nagpur, Mansel suggested a compromise by which the seventy-five-year-old Banka Bai would rule the country as she was “a superior woman of good feelings and good sense, and possessed high personal character” (Rahim 221). The Resident would not interfere, but would oversee the administration of the state, and the government would reserve the right to cancel the grant in the event of the Bai being too incapacitated to satisfactorily perform her duties. He also recommended the adoption of the grandson of a sister of the Raja, a young boy called Yashwant Rao Ahir Rao, who had received special attention from the late Raja. Banka Bai was to continue as Regent for a few years until he came into his own and was ready to take charge of the state. Mansel believed that such an arrangement “would conciliate the prejudices of the native aristocracy and would satisfy the people” (Rahim 222). Banka Bai, the widow of Raghunath II, was thus placed in the peculiar position of being both ally and antagonist (if she decided to assert her independent claim to the throne), both figurehead and powerful regent.

Dalhousie disagreed with Mansel’s recommendations and saw no reason to preserve the Bhonsle line or the state of Nagpur, especially as the strategic benefits to be derived from acquiring Nagpur were considerable. Geographically, it would connect Bombay and Calcutta, providing easier access to two of the major Presidencies. It would be a rich source of revenue and raw cotton that fed the British textile industry in Manchester. But with all his aggressively pragmatic beliefs, Dalhousie tried to conceal the expediency of the annexation by saying that “British rule was a blessing to the agriculturists, bankers, shopkeepers, and lower orders” and “would be preferred by all classes including nobles and even Ranas” (Rahim 225). The officials of the Company desired that popular opinion in India and England continue to perceive the Company as a benevolent ruler, and the best way to achieve this end was by a show of concern for the subject population of Nagpur. In order to take over the state, it was necessary to make the case that Nagpur was badly administered and that Banka Bai was unfit to rule.

When Dalhousie decided to annex Nagpur, he argued that succession was only possible through the male line, and Nagpur had none. Also, Banka Bai’s age, which had earlier earned her the respect of the British, now made her incapable of ruling. As Charles Jackson succinctly put it, the issue was not whether this lapsed dynasty should be reconstituted, but whether it should be reconstituted in favor of “an aged lady tottering on the brink of the grave, who from her age, sex, and Asiatic custom, would be dependent on those around her, or in
favour of a minor whose disposition and talents were unknown, and whose minority would itself produce all the evils of an Asiatic Regency” (Jackson 24). Jackson’s comments on Raghuji III make it clear that for these Victorian men, women were inimical to good rule: they were a bad influence on men in public life, and as rulers, they were susceptible to bad advisors. So while the British blamed “Asiatic” custom for making Banka Bai dependent on those around her, they did not recognize her as head of the family or as a capable ruler either. Liberal British rule is thus established at the expense of the Rani, who is now represented as unfit to rule, own property, or determine her expenses, and accused of making the indigenous organization of the court suspect and illegitimate.

When Governor-General Dalhousie disposed of the property of the Bhonsle royal family of Nagpur, he also offered the opinion that the provision made for the Rani was too liberal and more than that allowed to the Rani of the larger principality of Satara. Dalhousie decided that the Bhonsle property should be at the disposal of the British government, and “in order that it might not be appropriated and squandered by the Rani,” after allotting jewels, furniture and other personal property suitable to their ranks, the rest was to be sold, and the proceeds were to constitute a fund to benefit the Bhonsle family (Rahim 238).

As these measures were put into effect, the Rani, who had always been compliant, began a series of protests through letters and memoranda, against the annexation of Nagpur, against the denial of their right to adopt, the seizure of their private property, and the public auction of cattle that belonged to the estate of the Raja. In a memorandum to the Governor-General of 17 July 1854, they complained that scant regard had been shown for their feelings after the death of the Raja even though they had not violated any treaties and had always shown loyalty to the British government. In another memorandum, dated 2 September 1854, they complained about the sale of their cattle by public auction. The Rani disputed every point regarding the distribution of wealth and property. With the Governor-General’s approval, it was suggested that the accumulated treasure be used to pay off establishment expenses. Dalhousie’s argument was that the treasure was made up of public revenues and did not belong to the Raja. The Rani claimed that the treasure came from the personal property of the Raja. In his long description of the degeneracy and ineffectiveness of the young Raghuji, Jackson points to one vice more heinous than the rest: “The choicest amusement of the Rajah is an auction sale, when some unfortunate widow is ruled not to be entitled to her husband’s estate, or when some public defaulter is found to have made away with revenue collections,
just equal to the sum he paid five or six years before his situation of revenue collector to the Rajah” (Jackson 29). Jackson does not seem to note the glaring irony that this is precisely the charge leveled by the widows of Nagpur against the British government. Despite the obvious social and economic disparity between a “poor widow” and the widow of a princely family, the Ranis represented themselves as defenseless and the special responsibility of the state, using rhetoric similar to Jackson’s to emphasize the justice of their claims.

In the ensuing drama, the Ranis pledged undying loyalty to the British government but also waged a war of protest against the takeover of their property. Banka Bai threatened to burn down the palace if anything was removed from it, and the harassed Resident reported more than once that the Ranis were obstructing the reorganization of government. Matters came to a head when a protégé of the British was beaten up in the palace, leading to disturbances in the city. A military force was called out, and the Ranis were forbidden to meet friends or advisors of the late Raja. They alleged that a military force carried away jewels of the family worth two million pounds sterling. A European officer took up residence in the palace in order to suitably awe servants loyal to the Ranis. Dalhousie felt convinced that the insurrection had been organized by Banka Bai and communicated his displeasure to the Ranis through the Resident, who was enjoined to “show courtesy and forbearance which were due to their rank, sex and changed condition,” but to take recourse to “stringent and coercive measures” if they opposed him, and to disregard “the petulance and vexatious opposition the Ranis may offer” (qtd. in Rahim 243).

Giving up angry protests and appeals to the loyalty and political obligations of the Company, the Ranis decided to seek legal redress from the Board of Control and British Parliament. Their wakils canvassed for support among sympathetic members of British Parliament and were given assurances that the case of the Ranis and the cruelties that the Company inflicted on them would be taken up soon. In a memorial submitted to the court in December 1855, the lawyers asked for restitution of property and jewels belonging to the Ranis. They also maintained that they had a right to appeal to the Court as British subjects. Although Dalhousie’s response to Banka Bai’s letters reminded her that she was not a representative of the Bhonsle family, he added that “you will consider me as ever anxious to hear of your good health, and continue to gratify me from time to time with account of the same,” thereby preserving the elaborate civility with which he and the Ranis were waging this serious political battle (qtd. in Rahim 249). Dalhousie
expressed his annoyance at the deputation of wakils sent to England and forced the Ranis to recall them. The Ranis also sent a diplomatic mission to Nepal requesting the British Resident there (who had earlier been posted in Nagpur) to intervene and ease the hostility between them and the Governor-General. Suspicious of their intentions, Dalhousie informed them that they “have no right whatever to communicate with native courts” (qtd. in Rahim 251). The Ranis ultimately lost the battle of wills with the Governor-General, who dismissed their lawyers and imprisoned all the old advisors of the king who were suspected of anti-British activities.

SAMBALPUR

In the political jostling for power in Sambalpur in Western India, the Company directly and aggressively made the case that the Ranis were incapable of holding public office by invoking a suspicion of women in power, their advisors, and their predilection for rule by whim rather than through “law.” While the three other RANIS of the deceased king of Sambalpur remained compliant, the strategy of the eldest Rani was to actively resist the political plans of the Company. When Raja Narayan Singh died heirless in 1849, the title to the throne fell vacant as no immediate family member came forward to claim it. In the uncertainty and turmoil that followed the death of the Raja, the Rani assumed the management of the state. The British Agent Crawfurd reported that immediately after the death of her husband, the Rani placed his turban on her head to show that she had assumed his rights and authority (Rahim 75). Refusing to comply with British colonial agendas, the Rani demanded her rights in a memorial to the Deputy Governor of Bengal, saying that “there were certain usages according to which her husband left instruction to the effect that the eldest Rani be allowed to succeed to the vacant throne after his death, provided she conformed to the wishes and intentions of the government” (Rahim 73).

Sambalpur had been dependent on the turns of Company policy once it had been ceded by the Raja of Nagpur to the Company by the Treaty of Deogaon in 1803. The Company sporadically maintained direct control of the territory but kept in place a figurehead at other times. Ousley, the British Agent, claimed that the gradual takeover of the state would be accomplished with the consent of the Raja. He submitted a detailed report on the condition of the state in 1842 and recommended the annexation of Sambalpur by the British. In his report
he outlined the strategic and economic gains likely to accrue to the Brit-
ish by such a move. In contrast to the earlier view that the state would
be a liability to manage, Ousley pointed to the richness of the soil and
the industry of its people. However, the plan did not find favor with
the British high-command, which was more interested in accommodat-
ing the wishes of the Raja. Ousley visited Sambalpur in 1847–48 and
explained to the Raja the plan of introducing British administration by
gradual steps into the state. He was of the opinion that the Raja freely
gave his approval to this plan.

After the death of the Raja and in a manner typical of such annexa-
tions, records of that period ascribe the failure of the Rani as a ruler
to deficiencies in her character. Given the larger socioeconomic causes
for unrest in the state, the Rani can hardly be blamed for it. The British
Agent Crawfurd alleged that “having taken possession of her husband’s
personal property, she was secretly plotting with the help of wicked
men, in order to regain management of the affairs of the state” (Rahim
75). What follows upon this allegation were further rumors about the
Rani’s incitement of popular rebellion. She was said to be provoking
disturbances that would spread throughout the country if the British
government did not find a successor to the throne. Crawfurd observed
that “the eldest Rani was notoriously fond of power and was addicted
to intrigue” (Rahim 75). It was not difficult for the Resident to “per-
suade” the Rani that she should leave Sambalpur and go to live in
Cuttack on a pension. There were three other widows of the Raja, one
of whom had a ten-year-old daughter. While none of these surviving
relatives of the Raja were considered an immediate threat, Crawfurd
thought that they could become “the subject of intrigue and distur-
bance if they were allowed to remain at Sambalpur” (Rahim 76). They
were therefore dispatched, apparently with their consent, to their native
places or to some holy place.

It was tactically important for the British to send the Ranis into
retirement with a pension, provide for their daughters, and thus ensure
that all claims to the throne were permanently scuttled. In order to
accomplish this, the British decided to avail themselves of the services
of an old friend of the Raja’s family, Tribuhan Singh Deo, a strategy that
carried out political machinations through domestic means. Deo was
responsible for persuading the Ranis to retire, and taking care of the
provisions for them. For this he was rewarded by the British with a pair
of shawls for his loyalty to them. However, once the eldest Rani of Sam-
balpur was given her pension, she did not rest easy in her retirement
but presented a petition to the Deputy Governor of Bengal making four
requests: first, that there be a successor to the vacant throne (she was willing to conform to the wishes of the British government); second, that failing the first, a suitable settlement be made with her; third, that she be given an appropriate pension and permission to live in Sambalpur; and finally, that her own property be restored to her, as also the property of her husband, of which, according to Hindu law and custom, she alone was the proprietor. Most of her requests were rejected, the state of Sambalpur was annexed, and a British officer was appointed to look after its administration.\(^\text{10}\) Appointing a successor to the king was an undesirable step, not only because there were no worthy contenders to the throne, but also because the security and efficient running of the state were at stake. The point, therefore, is that given this peculiar political situation of a childless widow without heirs, the Rani’s demand for her own property could become a dangerous political claim. The question of succession blurred the distinction between a personal law and state law as one impinged on the other. Unlike the British government, the Rani saw herself as a possible successor or regent. This self-perception defined her as an independent, sovereign ruler and threatened the British idea of a governable woman and subject.

THE RANI OF JHANSI

I now return to the most spectacular example of a revolt by a widowed Rani against British authority in the story of the Rani of Jhansi. For the British, her assumption of the throne raised questions about a woman assuming political power, her loyalty as a subsidiary of the British, and her customary right to adopt a son. Literary representations of the Rani have been obsessed with her role as the most visible opponent of British rule. In her discussion of a sympathetic contemporary account of the Rani, in John Lang’s *Wanderings in India and Other Sketches of Life in Hindostan* (1861), Maria Jerinic points out that Lang’s sympathy for the “Ranee” is more as a woman, a private individual, than as a ruler. He portrays her as “the wronged wife of a loyal British subject” rather than a ruler deprived of a state in her own right (Jerinic 129). Jerinic sees this Victorian inability to accept rule by women as legitimate as ultimately a deflection of similar problems with the rule of Queen Victoria. Jerinic notes that in other historical accounts of the Mutiny, contemporary British commentators Walter Erskine and Charles Ball had difficulty giving the Rani of Jhansi the title of “queen” because in claiming political power “the Rani has overstepped her boundaries as
a native woman . . . only Victoria, a white woman sovereign, has the right to use this appellation” (Jerinic 128). Female political power created anxiety and fear in most British colonials, who saw it as a threat to empire and nation. Residents and other officials of the East India Company viewed good rule as inevitably masculine while they were suspicious of female influence of any kind.

The final actions of the Rani of Jhansi provide a dramatic instance of the failure of the romance of empire. She refuses to be domesticated into a good subject and pensioner of the British empire and rides into battle against British forces. It is significant, however, that before she decides to go to war, her letters to the British government use terms of negotiation similar to the other Raniis. She emphasizes the written and unwritten contract between the Company and the state of Jhansi when she points to the “favour and protection” of “a mighty power” that has been extended to Jhansi and “uniform and faithful attachment” of her late husband to the British government (Fisher, “Politics” 253). Her letters give a detailed description of the process by which her late husband adopted a son and successor just before he died. The Rani quotes the precedent of other native states which were allowed to adopt sons as successors by the Paramount power. She concludes one of her letters to the Marquis of Dalhousie by listing other central Indian states in which a widow was allowed to adopt a successor to the throne. She reiterates once again “the integrity and justice of the British government” (Fisher, “Politics” 258) and hopes that they would allow her to do the same. A third letter in this series from the Rani to Lord Dalhousie strikes a truly despairing note when she writes:

. . . if Jhansie is to be absorbed during your Lordship’s administration, the five thousand rusty swords worn by the people called its Army and its fifty pieces of harmless ordnance . . . will be delivered over to your Lordship’s Agent without any demonstration save that of sorrow—that valuable services should be requited by the confiscation of a puny Kingdom or Raj; which has ever been faithful to the paramount power. (Fisher, “Politics” 259)

The language of this letter keeps intact the civility and docility that is a feature of these exchanges. The Rani puts herself at the mercy of the British government and dutifully follows the script of obedient subject. However, as the conflict escalates, the Rani puts pressure on precisely those points that were most likely to undermine the British sense of themselves as benevolent. She restates the “gross violation and negation
of the Treaties of the Government of India . . . and if persisted in they
must involve gross violation and negation of British faith and honour”
(qtd. in Lebra-Chapman 38). She warns the British of resentment caused
among native princes by their hostile actions, and finally, she com-
ments on her own distress at the reduction of her “authority, rank and
affluence” and her state of “subjection, dishonor and poverty” (qtd. in
Lebra-Chapman 38). The Rani emphasizes that not only are the British
involved in dishonorable dealings with a widow whom they do not
protect, but that they are responsible for having impoverished her. She
makes the further unpalatable point that she has been a capable ruler
of Jhansi and that her competence as a ruler has been willfully ignored.
She also underscores the fact that she would have been the legal heir
of her husband even if he had not left a will. This claim by the Rani
points to the anomalous position of widows whose adopted sons and
heirs were very young, which meant that the Rani could rule as regents
even if traditional interpretations of customary law disallowed women
from becoming direct inheritors of the estates of their husbands. In the
Rani’s case, the usual British suspicion of the competence of women
rulers could not be substantiated, making their imperial intentions in
annexing Jhansi even more transparent. The Rani’s decision to ride out
into battle against British forces is the logical next step in her rebellion,
and it exposes the failure of the romance in which she was to play the
compliant daughter.

All contemporary and subsequent versions of her death emphasize
her heroism. General Rose, the leader of the British forces, called her
“the best and the bravest of the rebel leaders,” and Charles Ball, another
contemporary British observer, called her “an extraordinary female”
who shared all the dangers of the struggle when she was struck down.12

The prominence of the Rani of Jhansi in accounts of the Mutiny can be
further ascribed to the fact that she “challenged and disturbed all pro-
nouncements about the natural sexual, racial, and military superiority
of British men” (Paxton, Writing 142). In late-nineteenth-century British
colonial romances, the Rani assumes the burden of representing sexual
and political perfidy, Oriental deceit, and the eroticized racial other. Yet
delete these strategies of containment, romance writers represent that
Rani as a powerful figure who disrupts gender hierarchies, becoming a
historical anomaly with which the narrative structure of romances can-
not grapple (Paxton, Writing 163). In this extended study of the place
of Ranis in the British imagination, I argue that the Rani of Jhansi was
not anomalous, and that the disturbing questions about hierarchies of
gender that she raised by her final act of riding into battle against the
British were raised in other protests by royal widows throughout the nineteenth century.

The romance narrative of liberal colonial rule assumes the consent of the governed. British Residents and the Company were particularly concerned that the subject population and the Ranis recognize the superiority of British rule and obediently accede to it, thereby also becoming educated subjects of the empire. The protests by the Ranis not only give the lie to this liberal fantasy, but also posit an alternative concept of women’s status within Hindu and “despotic” monarchical systems. Unlike the Victorian administrators of the Company, the Ranis thought of themselves as rulers, owners of property, prominent in the performance of a customary religious and social duty such as the adoption of a son. In inscribing a history of protest by the widow queens, I rewrite the seamless narrative of British liberal rule. I show the conflict between the Victorian perceptions of separate sphere ideology and different upper-class Indian forms of patriarchy. In the fissure between the two lay the possibility of political protest, which found its most spectacular proponent in the Rani of Jhansi.