



# **CHITRA DIVAKARUNI BANERJEE'S THE LAST QUEEN: RANI JINDAN**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Rani Jindan Kaur, was the last queen of Punjab, daughter of royal dog trainer, Manna Singh Aulakh, youngest wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was the founder of the Sikh kingdom of Punjab that extended from Khyber Pass to Tibet and was also known as the Lion of Punjab for his fearless attitude. This paper studies the journey of Jindan, from Gurjanwala to Lahore ending in England through Nepal. It focuses on the events that transformed a simple peasant girl to a bride at the age of eighteen and then a queen that soon ends in stage where she becomes a widow at twenty-one and then a queen regent to her six year old son. It details the royal games that Jindan has to imbibe in order to survive and pave the way for her son to inherit the throne. It also describes the unconventional attitude of Jindan as a queen and her strong and inspiring personality that even the British cannot ignore.*

**Keywords:** *Queen, royal, inspiring, survival, personality.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Chitra Divakarui Banerjee in her novel *The Last Queen* has focused on Rani Jindan Kaur, the last queen of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. She is the daughter of the royal dog trainer and unlike the other queens, neither does she have a royal ancestral family background nor does she come to own as many jewels and coins like the other queens in the palace. But she is practical and understands the Sarkar like no other queen does. Divakaruni in an interview on the character of Jindan says she has focused on drawing Jindan with , “a more contemporary approach befitting the story of a person who comes from a solid peasant background”. She

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came empty ended and wanted love more than jewels and materialistic things from her husband as Chitra Divakaruni writes about her "She never cared to cajole gifts from her husband" (Divakaruni, 2021: 3). She claims the position of being the youngest and his favorite wife. She knows and understands him more than any of his other wives do.

The novel begins with the Maharaja's death that has changed everything for Rani Jindan, for now with his death she no longer enjoys the liberties she used to, instead she is viewed more as a threat. Life is a challenge for her, now she has to look after a year old son, Dalip and protect herself in a dangerous and wild world. Although she wishes he never leaves them alone and prays like she did for her son. "If Jindan wants something badly enough, she can make it happen" (Divakaruni, 2021: 3). When her son had bloody flux she prayed for twenty-four hours to Jhingar Shah and next morning her son felt better, but unfortunately the same does not hold true when she wants the Sarkar to come to life again.

As his favorite queen, she knows, he would prefer to die a heroic death, like drowning into the foaming water of the Ravi than to lie stuck and ailing in a stinking sickbed. She is the queen who has been 'Queen to him only for four years' (5) and yet she fathoms him like no other queen would.

Jindan belongs to a small village, Gurjanwala, where she stays with her brother, sister and mother. As a child she loves going to school, learns her tables, enjoys reciting from the Gurbani. Her father is described as a person who is not responsible towards the family and spends his time and money on unnecessary and unimportant matters. She draws inspiration from Guru Arjan Dev, who sacrificed his body and mind to the lord but did not change his religion as Jahangir's desired. Rani Jindan wanted to follow Guru Arjan Dev's footsteps in his unwavering sacrifice.

Once when she travels with her father to Lahore, she unexpectedly meets the charismatic Maharaja Ranjit Singh during a horse ride. Jindan is attracted to his power, aura and rare charisma. It's during the horse ride to Shalimar, that she is completely lost herself to him. The Sarkar perceives from the beginning that Jindan is unlike other women and therefore he chooses to discuss important matters with her not only because she can comprehend them but also because she is honest in her opinion, when she tells the Sarkar that, he paid a heavy price for losing many Sikh's on the battlefield to win over Laila, a horse from Sultan Yar Muhammad of Kabul.

In their first meet, he shares his daring adventures with her, in the second visit she gets to know him better and is able to feel his pain in her body, although only words are the medium. She is careful enough to sort all the information she gathers about him, little at a time, she



keeps compartmentalizing it in her memory. She is precocious and adept and does not consider herself equal to the 'lovely, high-born' queens. She is impressed by his humility.

The kind gesture by the Sarkar of saving Jindan from the clutches of the old queen has harboured a foolish hope in Jindan's mind and she can think of no man to marry other than the Sarkar. This is her invisible and blind minded devotion towards him. Finally, in the Gurudwara, she confesses her reciprocal love for him and is saved from marrying the old merchant and also from returning to Gujranwala.

Adding to her knowledge, she learns, the Sarkar's closest confidant and ambassador is Fakir Azizuddin, who has earned this because of his simplicity and no expectations. She makes it a point to remember this, "the Sarkar trusts those most who don't want anything from him" (Divakaruni, 2021: 30). At the very first opportunity she remembers to implement this during her time with the Sarkar. When she is asked what should the Sarkar gift her as their wedding gift she does not ask for pearls or jewels as is expected but rather requests for a smart and trustworthy maid.

The Sarkar has built a haveli -Mai Rani Jindan after she gave birth to Dalip. This is her own home and also her favorite place in the world. It is different from the palatial homes of the other ranis which bear majestic arches, precious stones and Mughal designs. Her's was built exactly the way she would have liked it, simple with plain yellow sandstone. Her Sarkar knew this. Coming from a family with hand to mouth existence and where sometimes her brother Jawahar has to steal food as they never had enough to eat. Since childhood Jindan desires to be a 'provider like her brother' and not just a mouth to feed. So even after she is the queen, she requests the Sarkar to allow her brother to continue with the job he had been doing in Lahore before she got married.

During the first conversation with Mai Nakkain, the eldest queen of the Sarkar, she is direct and makes an enemy out rightly, although her favorite queen Rani Guddan has taught her a life-long advise.

Fakir, the Sarkar's closest aide, mentions Jindan is the women whom the Sarkar had been searching all his life, someone who understands him and "loves Punjab as fiercely as he does" (Divakaruni, 2021: 40). She is also the beautiful women he has been searching for. Fakir has been her mentor and trained her to the manners of the court, in addition to keeping her informed about the growing threat of the British.

As the Granti recites the last lines, in her wedding to Maharaja Ranjit Singh's sword, she beleives "All my hopes have been fulfilled" (Divakaruni, 2021: 45) truly they have been for



from now onwards she will be Rani Jindan. Nonetheless she has to bear the rivalry of the other queens in the king's absence therefore her arrival as Rani Jindan to the Zenana is troublesome. She has to face the wrath and jealousy of the other queens mainly Mai Nakkain, who attempts to poison her apart from giving her a damp, small and windowless room.

Time and again she is reminded of her social status and the brief interest the Sarkar would take in her and soon seek other women. She has to face this too apart from the unending hatred of Mai Nakkian. She is treated more like a caged animal unable to see the day light of Lahore until the Sarkar returns to Lahore and when he would see her for the first time as his bride.

Through her maid Mangla, she believes the Sarkar has said, "She has the making's of a great Rani"(Divakaruni, 2021: 104). Her life has transformed from the grim room to the one in Khilawat Khana, with Mangla's assistance. She enjoys spending time with the king as he fills her with the durbar matters. The king is impressed with her intelligence and curiosity. As his queen, she has accepted, his first love to be his land-Punjab, then herself. She too vows not to let the British control and defeat Punjab.

She has been able to understand and remember the names of the British better than other enemies, the Sarkar has told her off. When it comes to heir to the throne, paradoxically, both of them are aware, it is only Kharak Singh, son of Mai Nakkian, who will have to deal with the cunning British after the King's death, while she would be banished to Gujranwala.

As his favorite queen she had never lied to him. She has always been honest with her opinion, views and understandings of the matters even if it may have caused a displeasure to the Sarkar. She is his only queen who shares and understands his dreams for Punjab. What further differentiates her from other queens is her nature of not being a tale -bearer of the torture she faced at the hands of Mai Nakkian. She claims she loves him too much that she couldn't afford to trouble her already over burdened Sarkar.

The Sarkar has been appreciative of Jindan's understanding and maturity. He says she knows when to remain silent and listen. Jindan wants to know and gather as much as she can about the Sarkar's world for she believes "knowledge is power".

Jindan has won the title of being the favorite mainly because the Sarkar views her differently from the other queens. She isn't greedy like them. Moreover she wasn't his first wife and it was a well known fact that Maharaja Ranjit Singh was attracted to beautiful women but he



promises her, "you aren't my first wife but I promise you this: you will be my last. The one who has filled my heart totally" (Divakaruni, 2021: 125).

From the time it was decided the Maharaja would marry Jindan, at eighteen years of age, Fakir has been her advisor and a fatherly figure to her, briefing her on political events and visitors at the durbar. Later on he shapes her mind on matters relating to discipline and education of her son. He plays an important role in the making of the Queen Jindan, guiding her in her thought process and decision making even after the death of the Maharaja.

If she has to survive amongst the other powerful queens then she has to learn to play the royal game, of putting up a mask, hiding the reality and waiting for the right time to attack. She learns it quickly. As the Fakir rightly points out, "You are not only a wife and a mother but a queen as well. And a queen who is a mother must play the royal game more skillfully because she has more to lose" (Divakaruni, 2021: 155).

The day she becomes a mother she declares it to be the happiest day of her life. When the Sarkar builds a mansion inside the qila named after her-Haveli Mai Jindan and her beauty is compared to Mumtaz and her Haveli to Taj Mahal, she looks back to her past to rejoice the journey travelled by a dog-trainer's daughter.

As a mother the astrologer's prediction about her son's future has made her unhappy.

At the Mehfil organized in Naunihal's Haveli after Jawahar has come to meet her and it also has him invited. Jawahar's misbehavior gives Mai Nakkian another chance to show her down in the Sarkar's eyes. Although Jindan is ready to accept a punishment for the sake of her brother. There is always a competition among the rani's to be in the good books of the Sarkar: it is a part of the royal games and Jawahar has been made a pawn in this game to defeat the Sarkar's favorite queen, Jindan.

The Sarkar has another stroke on his visit to Ferozpur for his long meeting schedules have disrupted his health. He is brought on bed to the qila and Rani Jindan has to bribe the Sheesh Mahal guards and request Dhain Singh to be at his side. Tradition has it that only Mai Nakkian has proved to be at his side and cure him in the past. Again it is a competition between her and Mai Nakkian. This time she has proved a better queen although with the help of the Sarkar. Even the Sarkar warns her that she should be smarter and not be taken in by the tricks and fall into the traps like the ones laid by Mai Nakkian. After the visit to the Golden Temple, the Maharaja gets another stroke. This proves to be the last stroke and leads to his death.



The future of the Last Queen is uncertain. How will she play the role of a young mother to a son who is barely ten months old? How will she prevent herself from falling into the traps of the experienced queens? Will they allow her to survive after the Sarkar in the Haveli? This is the end of her magical world and now she has to face the realities of the of the real world both as a mother and a widow.

Even while other queens and concubines are wailing and tearing their hair before the body of the Sarkar, she doesn't, knowing well, the Sarkar would have not approved of such behavior. The Sarkar's words reassure her of facing her problems rather than thinking of committing suicide like Guddan. She decides to live for her son. "You must be both father and mother to our son" (Divakaruni, 2021: 152). She promises to her son, "I'll live for you my heart. I'll protect you with, my last drop of blood. If I have to I'll kill for you" ( Divakaruni, 2021: 169). She realizes she has to live for herself too for she has barely 'touched the world'. Inexperienced in the royal ways and manners she has to take care of Dalip-the future Prince.

Once the Sarkar is dead, drastic changes are ordered specially for the ones who are not in the good books of Mai Nakkian. All of Jindan's guards are at once removed and she is not allowed to withdraw from the treasury. In order to protect herself and her son she has to escape with Dhain Singh's help to Kangra Hills, that belong to Suchet Singh, Dhian's brother. Staying in the qila is no longer safe. She has to leave behind everything that belonged to her including the Sarkar's most precious gift to her-Haveli Mai Jindan, Lahore-the city of her dreams. Safeguarding her son is her priority.

Thus begins her journey as a queen-unprotected by her king. Although away from Lahore and in Jammu, under the watch of Suchet Singh she enjoys watching her son grow she spends time with him, rides him Toofani, their horse. She has immersed herself in the simple pleasures of Motherhood. While away she learns Kharak Singh is dead. Naunihal is also dead owing to a tragedy. The question that now arises is Dhian's letter in which he has asked the Jindan to return to their right place, the seat of Lahore. She's afraid and does not want to be puppet at the hands of Dhian Singh. Circumstances are such that she is forced to return.

Finally after so many deaths followed by Sarkar's and his desendents, a time comes when Dalip is the heir to the throne and for Jindan, who now is the queen regent, to enter the Sheesh Mahal. Dalip occupies the throne amidst political turmoil. She remains different from the other queens. Her role as the queen regent has made her break all traditions and enter the durbar dressed in white to "stand tall behind's Dalip's temporary throne" ( Divakaruni, 2021: 220). She shows everyone though Dalip has inherited the throne at a tender age of five- is not alone. She never misses an opportunity to express to the court visitors- a mother's gratitude thereby creating a support base for her son. She has also made her presence felt during the



coronation ceremony of her son which again raises many eyes. She has not forgotten to veil herself appropriately. She has the charisma to address the Khalsa troops similar to the Sarkar- and expects and requests their bravery and valor to protect beloved Punjab.

The fact that Jindan -a woman who barely spent four years with her husband before he died is like any other women 'parched for love'. She has a lot of responsibilities and images to maintain but in spite of that finds herself seeking love and unconsciously attracted to Lal Singh, a courtier. At the same time she is aware as a queen and mother she cannot cross her limit-as it will ruin not only her image as Sarkar's faithful widow but also Punjab's fate. Love rules her heart and mind and soon she has to abort the child of Lal Singh for the fear of being labeled characterless. Chitra Divakarun Banerjee says in an interview about the character of Jindan " I wanted to present her to my readers in all her complexity and humanness — her courage but also her stubbornness, her devotion to Punjab and her son, but also her desires and longing for love, which led her into an amorous relationship, her strength in adversity but also her determination for revenge".

Her love for Lal Singh results in a drift from her son. She uses her political knowledge to her son's advantage to eliminate her enemies-Hira and Jalla and enter the durbar amidst standing ovation and chants of "Mother of Sikhs". The danger within has been defeated but a new problem arises in the form of the British. They have employed a method of blackening her name-by calling her 'Messalina of Punjab', after a promiscuous queen of their culture.

As Chitra Divakarun Banerjee opines about the powerful, fierce indomitable and patriotic character of Rani Jindan "Rani Jindan Kaur's story resonated with me because she was a very strong and charismatic woman who rose to power and battled against great odds, and I felt she would be an inspiration to women today". Thus an entire novel has rightly been dedicated to the character of The Last Queen-Rani Jindan.

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