

Corpus Regina: Nawab Sikander Begum of Bhopal and the Politics of Decoloniality

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Abstract: Colonial modernity is closely associated with corporeal redefinitions as much as with time-consciousness. Queenship is a concept that embodies a range of political and biological offices and is always on the move from one political office to that of the other, which is intimately connected to her biological relationship with the sovereign as a mother, wife or daughter. This transition characterises their existence as opposed to the stagnancy of a King's position. Given the complexity that queens as a political and cultural category exhibit, the peculiar colonial Indian setting adds to the intricacies attached to the queens. This paper attempts to study the reign of Nawab Sikander Begum of Bhopal to delineate the significance of her body in exercising sovereignty in theory and praxis. As the daughter of the late Nawab and the mother of the heir apparent, Nawab Sikander Begum (NSB) tied her biological relationship to the political office of the queen, thereby legitimising women's right to rule as regnant queen. I contend that Begum's employment of her body was seminal in the 'epistemic reconstitution' of headship that was increasingly getting consolidated by the united intervention of the British's gendered conception of sovereignty and the native's complicity in the abstraction of men's inherent right to rule. Besides, this paper will try to understand how this queen embarked on a decolonial trajectory by reconceptualising the queen's body and its significant potential for resisting normative gender performances in her principality. This paper strives to work toward the inference that the Nawab Sikander Begum used her body politically to advance her position in Bhopal's body politic.

Keywords: Queenship, Decoloniality, the body politic, Nawab Sikander Begum, Colonial Modernity

'Never will succeed such a nation as makes a woman their ruler.'

-Prophet Muhammad

'All of them feared cancer...Nawab Sikander Begum was suspected of having

died of cancer of the uterus, refusing to have herself examined.¹ She didn't die in a war and never gave birth to an illustrious prince. Then the question is, who is Nawab Sikander Begum and why pay her critical attention? Bhopal was a princely state in central India carved by Dost Muhammad Khan and thus ruled by Orakzi- the Pathan dynasty. Nazar Muhammad Khan and the subsequent rulers negotiated different treaty relationships with the British, thus becoming part of the subsidiary alliance system or indirect rule. Indirect rule considerably restricted the state's internal autonomy, and a political agent or a resident was a responsible figure in the affairs of the state. One of the fascinating features of this princely state is that female sovereigns ruled it for four consecutive terms, i.e. from 1820 to 1926, for 107 years. Nawab Sikander Begum, the second Begum of Bhopal, initially ruled as a regent from 1844 to 1860 before becoming the reigning Begum from 1860 to 1868. As the heir apparent, she was under the regency of Qudsia Begum, the first Begum of Bhopal. However, a treaty negotiated with the British and the *Ulema* stipulated that Sikander Begum's husband would assume the position of chief of the state upon their marriage.

Sikander Begum, upon her ascend to regency and later regnancy, was a harbinger of colonial modernity by building roads, hospitals, and schools. She established a modern judiciary, police department, and intelligence network and constituted a nominated parliament.² These steps toward patronising colonial modernity were her shrewd strategy to embark on a decolonial trajectory. Sikander Begum was garnering British support to make her a force to reckon with. Over time, she accrued enough political milestones to bargain with the British, thus making her an important colonial force shaping the colonial world. Even though she was a force to reckon with as a great administrator in Native India, her major contribution lies in the redefinition of colonial queenship.

The queen is a liminal figure who commands an intimate relationship with the monarch or heir apparent through marriage or motherhood. This liminality guides the representation of queens in portraits, sculptures, and accounts left by historians, officials, and literary figures. The queen's auto-medial chronicles exist in the form of books written by them, reforms they initiated, and the arts and architecture they commissioned and patronised tell a different narrative of transgression. It is in this context that I would like to explore women and sovereignty in colonial India. The queen's rule emanates from an unforeseen circumstance; every dynasty strives to eschew, explicating the liminality of their political existence. Since queens are upstaged only in crisis times, they are all the more potent icons of power and rule than the kings.

Adverting to the idea of saving grace, queens enable the transition of the state from chaos to stability in the event of a king's death. Their inherent liminal position eschews any hope of being officiated as regnant queens. Agency sans official recognition was the mainstay of the queen's politics. Queens thus act as a buffer zone that usually works towards validating the sovereignty of her husband or son. For instance, by accepting an in-married king/sovereign or

through regency, the queen is constantly negotiating war and peace. Queens, unlike kings, had always bargained with the passage that defined their position. Unlike Kings, who are a monolithic category invested with power to rule, queens are heterogeneous. Queen, as a term, eludes a definition for the same reason. These women are always in a state of transition and passage from queen consort to the regent to regnant to dowager queen mother. All these phases of the queen's course employ different kinds of power and agency. It is this transition that characterises their existence as opposed to the stagnancy of a King's position. This capability to move up or down in the hierarchy makes queens a complex political category in colonial India. On the other hand, regnant queens defy liminality and employ a carefully articulated political and cultural discourse to legitimise their rule.

The idea of women and nation had been intrinsically connected at least with the advent of colonialism. Almost every nation-state has expressed itself in terms of a feminine figure. One of the earliest instances was Britain represented in terms of the warrior queen Britannia. In most Western countries, and later, as a response to colonialism, the colonised states began to identify their nation as a female figure. But in a country like India, the figure of a warrior queen had been replaced with that of a duty-bound domesticated mother. This iconography has a far-reaching cultural significance. How come India comes to represent herself in the image of a meek and submissive 'Bharat Matha' who is pleading for help? This is not merely an Indian response to colonialism. Rather, the making of the meek Bharath Matha as the national icon had come into being at the united intervention of British gendered discourse on gender performances and India's conservative ideal of a woman's performative role. The British silent approval in the making and popularisation of the figure of Bharat Matha essentially had to do with their gendered conception of the nation. The British always expressed themselves in terms of masculine tropes while they considered the colonised as female. This gendered idea of conquest and colonisation was further approved by Indian endorsement of the same by resorting to represent themselves in terms of feminine power to represent their status as a helpless colonised state trying to resist colonial incursion into their sovereignty.

One of the major agendas in the colonial conquest was to civilise the Orient in the ways and manners of the Occident. Gender was the most important site of this civilising mission. A country united in culture and language is more easily conquered than a country with diverse cultures and languages. One of the difficulties that the British faced when they began their colonial mission in India was the multitude of cultural differences that they had to wade through. This had indeed impeded their civilising mission. So, it was why they tried to homogenise the diverse cultural identities into one. Their homogenising mission had found its prey in religion, as in the formation of the Hindu religion and identity as we know it today. Since it was the British who classified the various castes and religious denominations under the umbrella category of Hinduism,

another important milestone in the civilising mission of the British was to stabilise gender identities across the subcontinent. India, with multiple principalities, once flaunted numerous gender identities. These differences in gender identity and the expected performance are way more evident in the royalty of the time. In the case of royalty, we can see a multitude of gender identities as attested by different performative roles undertaken by women across the subcontinent. It includes women of the Travancore royalty who were bold and autonomous Attingal queens who ruled over an entire principality with authority and power to the meek and submissive Rajput queens and princesses who almost always were mere pawns in the game of war and rule. Again, there are other gender gradations as far as the performative role of these queens is concerned. Indian history abounds with warrior queens who rose to the occasion and fought for their states like Rani Laxmi Bai and Rani Chennamma of Kittur. There are also queens like the Begums of Bhopal who managed to stay in power, diplomatically tackling the gendered policies of the colonial government and the orthodox stipulations of the Indian Culture by patronising reforms.

So, it is at this juncture that I have decided to look at the British civilising mission and its impact on women rulers. As mentioned earlier, women rulers across time and place in India wielded different degrees of autonomy. The autonomous status of a woman ruler in India was contingent on time, place and culture. But with the advent of the British, it began to change. British, with gender as one of the important sites of reformation, began to draw out a plan to domesticate women into becoming a shadowy presence in the male-dominated world. In the name of reformation, what the British did was to extinguish the cultures that flaunted autonomous and free-spirited women. In place of these strong and able women who were once fearsome rulers and administrators, the British planted the 'feminine mystique'.³ The Indian royal women who were awarded the Order of Star of India are a case in point. Since time immemorial, except in cultures that followed matrilineal succession, men were the ones destined to rule. So, in the event of the death of the king or the minority of the heir apparent, there were instances where women ruled on behalf of their late husband or minor son. She had to give away the throne when the heir came of age. However, these queens ruled as if they succeeded the throne from their husband or father, as opposed to the British concept of regency. According to the British concept of regency, the queens were appointed as regents as opposed to the idea of natural succession. So, the intervention of the British in this custom of natural succession and the demand that the regency had to be approved and appointed by the British had a phenomenal impact on the autonomy of royal women. This British interference with the concept of regency had helped in denaturalising women as heads of state.⁴ So, it was with the British that women began to get appointed as regents as opposed to the natural succession. This policy considerably weakened women's position in culture and society, which

was already biased in favour of the male sex. So, the British used the cover of civilising missions and reforms to stabilise the female gender identity on the lines of British feminine mystique- which was essentially the meek and submissive, educated but domesticated woman. The British opposition to women's rule had to do with the fact that performance creates precedence. So, if women continued to rule as legitimate rulers who ruled in their own right, it would defy the British idea of headship and their gendered conception of performances. So, the British intervention with women's rule across the subcontinent had to do with their fear that female monarchs' performative role as reigning monarchs would, in turn, upend the gender hierarchy that was solidified for centuries in the West.

The process that started with the British policy continued with the nationalist discourse on women. For the nationalists' women were an important cultural signifier. So, discourse on nationalism and gender is carefully documented to disseminate a conservative outlook on what it is to be an Indian woman. For instance, in the re-presentations of warrior queens like Rani Laxmi Bai and Rani Chennamma in the respective biographical accounts, we find a tendency to place the transgressive acts of these queens to come out of purdah and defend the state in the open as an act to protect one's culture and tradition.⁵ So, there is an orthodox argument in the making of these narratives that places these transgressive behaviours as stemming from a desire to protect the tradition. This rather strange concoction of transgression and the tradition had to do with patriarchy's machination to eternally arrest women as subordinate to men in the gender hierarchy. Transgression, for her own sake, is potentially subversive.

The advent of British colonialism in India had numerous implications and impacts on varied aspects of Indian life- including its trade, culture, politics and religion. Among these, one big casualty is believed to be the emasculation of Indian kingship and queenship traditions. However, this paper illustrates this commonly held view that Indian princes who were part of subsidiary alliances were not mere pawns but active players shaping their world and beyond. One such example is the illustrious career of Nawab Sikander Begum in shaping colonial queenship. Colonial queenship can be explicated as the complex compounding or interaction of colonialism with Indian queenship traditions. As can be seen from multiple examples ranging from the lives of Attingal Ranis, Begum Samru to Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi and Begum Hazrat Mahal, queenship underwent radical changes in its ideation and practice across the Indian subcontinent. This paper studies the life, reign and career of Nawab Sikander Begum to illustrate that she was central to the project of reimagining queenship by inscribing women into the concept of sovereignty.

Corpus Regina: The Political Body of the Queen

The bodies of Indian queens who fought against the British, like Rani Laxmi Bai and Begum Hazrat Mahal, are deified on the one hand, while the queens who

followed a pro-British diplomatic stand remain ignored. Because the warrior queen's body is infused with so many cultural significations as the protector of culture and transgressing only for or within tradition. In this context, the body politics that pervades discourses about a queen and her life becomes a seminal parameter in understanding our acceptance or negation of these figures in history. Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum, the last Begum of Bhopal and Sikander's granddaughter, records her grandmother's achievement in the 1857 mutiny thus:

"And thus it came to pass that Sikander Begum proved herself equal to the emergency she was called upon to face, and showed that a woman, though born for the gentler duties of domestic life, may yet be endowed with qualities which render her as competent as any of her stronger brethren to lead and rule."⁶

A gendered reading encouraged and supported by cartesian dualism gave thrust to associating women with bodies and men with their minds and intellect.⁷ Given women have long been identified with their bodies, it is important to explore how they fashioned their bodies to enhance their agency. A queen's body is always preferred in discourses or representations over her mind. A queen's body is only significant if she produces an heir, sacrifices for the tradition, or safeguards the tradition. In objectification, annihilation or reproduction, a queen usually finds her body associated with or represented. It is in this context that Sikander warrants our attention. According to Theresa Earenfight, the agency has long been associated with women and power with men.

"While all of these terms, 'power,' 'agency,' 'influence,' and 'authority' are important and useful to describe the activities of queens, Theresa Earenfight has noted that we tend to use the term 'power' more often with kings and 'agency' with women, thus possibly diluting or tacitly underplaying their role".⁸

In this paper, I am trying to understand how a princess with no male heir used her body to her advantage and transmuted her agency to power diplomatically. It wouldn't have been much of a problem if Sikander had a male heir or adopted one. She does neither of them. Instead, she resorts to diplomatically converting her weakness, her gender, into an advantage. One of the significant ways in which she turns the tide in her favour is by courting the grace of Queen Victoria, her Empress, a woman.

"A thousand thanks to that God who loosened the country of Hindustan from the grasp of lawlessness...Her Majesty Queen Victoria has withdrawn Hindustan from the Honourable East India Company, brought it within her special jurisdiction, and given to great and small the glad tidings of justice and redress, in order that if anyone is suffering wrong at the time of the transfer of the aforesaid country, he may have

the opportunity of appealing to her Royal Court, where his rights will be meted out to him."⁹

Sikander's flattering eulogy of Queen Victoria should not be conceived as an attempt at sycophancy, but what is implied here is how Queen Victoria's ascension to the title of Empress of India can positively support the claims of royal women in India to power. Here, she universalises the gendered power struggle and, through the body of an English queen, tries to extend the rights of regnancy to Indian queens and princesses. In this context, supporting the rule of the maternal sovereign by the Begum is a tactical political strategy to write women into the concept of sovereignty, besides the fact that 'Queen Victoria took this paramountcy'¹⁰ seriously and regarded the Indian Princes as 'respectable representatives of indigenous interests. Victoria tried to secure the princes' loyalty and fidelity'.¹¹ It is important to note that the Begum was more likely to favour a female overlord than a male one so that she could effectively plead her case. This is evident in how she makes her case for a lifelong regency in 1854 and regnancy after the Indian mutiny in 1857. In the context of Queen Victoria's ascent to the English throne and having demonstrated to both the British and the people of Bhopal that Sikander and her mother are able rulers, thereby discrediting the view that Muslim women are leading a life of seclusion and backwardness and having made Bhopal a model state recognised by successive governors-general, Sikander asked a crucial question: why can't Bhopal have a female ruler?¹² She had appealed to the British Government to change two seminal decisions. She pointed out that the British recognised infant girls as titular rulers who should hand over the reins of power to their husbands upon marriage, which is an unfair practice.¹³ 'Unlike her own case, this condition should be expunged in the case of Shahjehan, whose husband should not be given executive powers and act merely as a non-executive consort like Prince Albert'.¹⁴ Here, her effective employment of the political office of a male consort is fascinating. In the words of Shahreyar Muhammad Khan, 'All along, Sikander artfully underlined her allegiance to Queen Victoria, implying that what was sauce for the English goose was sauce for the Bhopali gander'.¹⁵

The second request was that she be made regent for life, and Shahjehan succeeded only in her death. The British approved Sikander's choice of husband for Shah Jehan Begum and made her husband a non-executive consort. But her second demand wasn't approved, for it was a commitment the British made in public, and they couldn't renege on it.¹⁶ Instead, they extended Sikander's regency until Shah Jahan Begum became 21, not when she was married.¹⁷ Lifelong regency can be understood as a maternal grip on her daughter and a discursive strategy to wield agency in the name of her biological relationship with the late Nawab as his daughter and with the heir apparent as her mother. Again, in 1858, Sikander effectively cited the treaty with the British to her advantage and argued that,

"... the chief power in the state cannot be inherited by the children of

the chief, while the chief himself is alive. If the words heirs and successors, which repeatedly occur in the treaty, are to be allowed their full weight in Her Majesty's Court, then that order which declared me to be the chief on the death of my father ought to be upheld for my lifetime."¹⁸

The British who were put in an ethical quandary finally moved in favour of Sikander. When the British were ready to bestow upon her lifetime regency she demanded 'if she could be given the authority, there were no grounds to deny her the title of a regnant monarch or titular ruler.'¹⁹ Sikander's reasoning was flawless, and Shahjehan agreed to abdicate in her favour on May 1, 1860,

"Her Majesty's government recognised Sikander as the reigning Begum of Bhopal, Shahjehan as the heir apparent with Umroa Doulah her non-executive consort....At last, two years after Queen Victoria became Empress of India, the British government had formally recognised Muslim women's right to rule."²⁰

It is pertinent to note how she groomed Bhopal in the likeness of an Elizabethan England, inviting scholars-multilingual and multicultural-from across the field.²¹ This discursive strategy of invoking the images of a female sovereign is a significant political tool used by the Begum to unleash not only her female body but also that of the eminent female sovereigns in the British histories to her advantage in the context of sexist remarks of political agents like Col. J.D. Cunningham, Political agent at Sehore who commented that 'she laboured under the disadvantage as a ruler being a woman, and as a woman, of possessing some violence or at least impatience of temper'.²²

Dismantling power-sharing in a heterosexual setting is another important milestone achieved by Sikander through her body politics. Though the British appointed them as regent queens, the four Begums in succession inherited their right to rule from their mothers instead of regent queens elsewhere who ruled on behalf of their minor sons or late husbands. Sikander pioneered in officiating the office of a non-executive consort in Bhopal to efface the precedence of husbands taking over as rulers. Thus, she legally restricts the queen's council by effectively safeguarding the autonomy of female sovereigns in the state. The second Begum of Bhopal seems to have defied this age-old custom and set a precedent for Indian women to be ambitious and aspire beyond their heterosexual aspirations.

Colonial Queenship and its Decolonial Politics

Sikander was the Begum of Bhopal when the 1857 revolution broke out. When the mutiny of 1857 broke out, Bhopal erupted in rebellion.²³ Since the State was loyal to the British, mutineers camped in Bhopal, demanding the abdication of the Begum.²⁴ Along with the support of the Bhopali gentry for the rebellion, Sikander had to deal with the *Ulema* who called for *jehad* against the British

urging people to respond to Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar's call to free India from the British.²⁵ Even Qudsia her mother was against Sikander's stand to support the British. Sikander Begum not only pacified the rebelling mutineers with her shrewd strategy of appeasement. 'She then announced that loyal soldiers would be rewarded with increased salaries and special bonuses. This was the carrot that she offered to the soldiers, and predictably enough, it visibly abated their hostility. There were shouts of 'Sikandar Begum Zindabad.'²⁶ Sikander's foremost commitment was saving Bhopal and her dynasty from the wrath of the colonial government and the not-yet-organised anti-colonial struggle.

Sikandar Begum had ruled Bhopal imperiously for sixteen years as Regent, acting on behalf of Shahjehan, the titular ruler.

"With her loyalty proven, Sikandar now mounted a campaign with the British to have herself recognised formally as the Begum of Bhopal, citing the precedence of Muslim women who had been prominent rulers like Hazrat Ayesha and Queen Victoria, the Queen of England. Sikandar's demarche put the British in a dilemma because they could not be seen to renege on their own decision to appoint Shahjehan as the titular ruler while Sikandar acted as regent. On the other hand, Sikandar had proved her loyalty in an extreme crisis and had governed Bhopal into a highly progressive and successful state."²⁷

Shahjehan, daughter of Sikander, on whose behalf Sikander was ruling Bhopal, willingly deferred to her mother's decision to become the queen herself. Thus, Sikander became the titular Nawab Begum of Bhopal, and her daughter Shahjehan became heir apparent. This act of diplomatically wresting power from the British and the conservative Muslim community also redefined Islamic kingship ideas for two reasons:

"Muslim kingship practices are characterised by the supremacy of Islamic codes. Thus Muslim kings can't be regarded in the domain of law as an omnipotent sovereign answering the Austinian definition. A Muslim sovereign is bound by the sacred law of Islam. Unlike the western conceptions of kingship, it is the sovereignty of the law that reigns supreme over the absolute power of the king...Quran describes sovereignty as bestowed by Allah. In contrast to the divine rights theory where the kingship is hereditary and the king is God's representative on earth, Quran describes kingship as "Allah bestows sovereignty on whom He pleases and takes away sovereignty from which He pleases' (3:26)..."²⁸

Sikander, by demanding regnancy, negotiated with both colonial and Islamic law and reinforced through her success that Allah can, after all, choose a female sovereign. This revolutionary act on the part of Sikander was a seminal chapter

in the history of the women's movement that remained unrecorded and unacknowledged. Sikander brilliantly plotted against the British gendered conception of headship and became the ruling monarch of Bhopal. This Begum not only dared to dream of becoming the reigning monarch of the State but also managed to set a precedent for Indian women to dream beyond sharing power in a heterosexual domestic setting, where women always have a secondary position. The reason behind this glorious chapter in the history of the women's movement in India remains unrecorded and is neither apolitical nor innocent. Mahua Sarkar's study has '...argued that modern nationalist and liberal feminist historiographies of colonial India have largely been Hindu centric, and have discursively and materially rendered Muslim women as invisible, oppressed and backward, even while they were exercising all kinds of agency.'²⁹

The Begums of Bhopal, on the other hand, followed an altogether different strategy. Unlike Hindu kings, for whom Brahmin's power was limited to advisory and religious duties, Muslim monarchs had to be constantly approved by the religious authority. According to Von Kremmer:

"The only and exclusive source of sovereignty and power was election by the assembled community of Muslims. The successor to the throne went to the chief mosque... ascended the pulpit and delivered his inaugural address which was followed by election and homage ... for depositing a sovereign the people generally met in the chief mosque. Some man of position addressed the assembly when charges were formulated and made against the ruling Caliph and his deposition was declared in the interest of his Islam."³⁰

Despite the fact these Begums, at one point or another in their lives, came out of purdah, they were quite cautious of the orthodox community that they were ruling. After the rebellion of 1857, the British blamed the Muslims for the revolt and termed it 'a Mohammadan conspiracy.'³¹

"Sikandar, with the wind in her sails, took advantage of British largesse towards her. Money, technical aid and political support poured into Bhopal. With the British ascribing greater blame to the Muslims for the mutiny, Sikandar Begum set forth to recover her own prestige before the Muslim community that her perceived loyalty to the British had tarnished. She went to the famous Jama Masjid in Delhi which had been contemptuously converted by the British as a stable for their horses. She ordered the closure of the stable, paid large sums for the renovation of the famous mosque and got down on her knees herself to scrub and purify the mosque. No one, not even the British, dared challenge the Begum in her efforts and she was able to regain her stature, in the eyes of her Muslim brethren, as a pious and courageous defender of the Muslim community."³²

Nationalism also configured women's relations with public roles differently. 'Nationalism constructed the dynamic public roles of the women as a duty to the nation rather than as right.'³³ For the warrior queens,³⁴ mostly the agency they exercised as dynamic public figures of action was under the conception that it was their duty to serve and protect the State and culture. After all, Hindu sovereigns are duty-bound to defend their nation. Their sovereignty is conditional upon their ability to be the executive arm of the sacred laws. On the other hand, the reformer queens'³⁵ interaction and intervention with the public sphere were driven by their inherent right to rule. So, the difference in the agency exercised by these two categories of queens emerges from their underlying driving force- duty and right. This causative factor largely influenced their course of action and the nationalist literature that awaited them. Mostly these queens who acted on their duty were eulogised over the queens who believed that women too have the autonomous power and right to steer the state policy that would best guard their respective principality. So, the differential treatment of these queens by history alludes to the conflict that was raised by duty and right. A Hindu monarch is duty-bound and not guided by rights. Hindu kingship theories conceive the right of the monarch to rule as autocracy.

Muslim monarchs, as mentioned earlier, should get religious sanction to be the political head of an Islamic state. It was Allah and the *Ulema*, in extension, that legitimised their right to rule. The Orakzi-Pathan dynasty to which these Begums belonged were Sunni Muslims. For Sunni Muslims, the political head cannot be the religious leader either. The *Ulemas* are a vital religious institution from which the Muslim political authorities traced their authenticity and legitimacy. The Begums of Bhopal upended this Islamic convention and negotiated with the British colonial institution to consolidate their power and ensure the safety of their kingdom and dynasty. Seeking colonial sanction can also be interpreted as heresy since it is Allah who bestows sovereignty. The Begum's calculated and elusive negotiations helped them rule with ease, without attracting censure either from the *Ulema* or the British. So these queens can be seen revising the idea of kingship inscribed in the sacred texts of Hinduism and Islam. Thus, taking precedence from the English monarchy that proclaimed itself the head of the Church of England, these reformer queens negotiated with native and foreign kingship rituals to normalise women in power. This transgressive revisionism is a threat to the nation's gendered politics. That is why national histories favour duty-bound warrior queens over reformer queens who were motivated by the idea of individual or collective rights. Nationalist projects demand that brave actions emerge from the communal agenda of national freedom and not for the rights and autonomy of individuals. In other words, to be eligible for national recognition, their actions should be derived from duty towards the State and not from self-assertion.

Ultimately, nationalist projects define 'women' chiefly in terms of their heterosexual relationship to men, reinforcing a presumed natural hierarchy between sexes. In the case of warrior queens, irrespective of being exceptional in their military skills, they believed in the conventional hierarchy of men over women. It is evident in their attempts to get the adopted male heir, who was mostly a child, installed as the king. They never acknowledged their inherent right to rule the kingdom as capable queens. But in the case of reformer queens like Begums of Bhopal, the line of succession passed from mother to daughter. Thus, Nawab Sikander Begum of Bhopal knowingly or unknowingly subverted the traditional gender hierarchy and challenged the gender politics raised by the warrior queens. Sikander although defined herself in relation to males in the family- especially her father, she dismantled the heterosexual power sharing in a corporate monarchy³⁶ by disregarding her right to rule as coming from her deceased husband Nawab Jahangir Muhammad Khan who preceded her. Instead, she managed to be an autonomous individual who flaunted her right to rule as a female monarch. Most women in the Indian context are quintessentially figures who sacrifice their happiness, ambition and life for their husband and children. But the second Begum of Bhopal seems to have defied this age-old custom and set a precedent for Indian women to be ambitious and aspire beyond their hetero-sexual aspirations.

Conclusion

Foucault famously stated that modernity as a regime ensured the shift of focus from a healthy body to normative body.³⁷ The many identities seamlessly embedded within a colonial body was a site of resistance that often questioned and complicated normative bodies and normative identities. A queen's power emanates from her body and ends in her body. The queen puts her body to her advantage by marrying a king, producing an heir and ensuring a smooth transition of power. Sikander brings in an 'epistemic reconstitution'³⁸ and corporeal redefinition by asserting the female body's plastic and cultural aspects not for the singular benefit of her political ambitions but to elucidate that women are products of culture and hence could set a precedent to change the same culture that produces and reproduces feminine and passive selves. Sikander effaces the mind/body split that pervades Cartesian dualism and gendered discourses. She counters the primacy of mind over body in cultural and social discourses and asserts how the body can engender new precedents, power relations, sovereignty and patrifocal power equations. Sikander's primary tool was citing precedence and setting precedence. The paper argues here that, besides the theoretical premise of decoloniality as the 'epistemic delinking' and dismantling of the 'colonial matrix of power,'³⁹ decoloniality is also about a disclosure that coloniality was not the only force that shaped the colonial world. In an era where colonial knowledge production was afoot, Sikander understood the importance of creating precedence that went into the official records of the

British. This way, she facilitated 'epistemic reconstitution' and left it to the world to discover that coloniality was not the only power that shaped or continues to shape the colonial world. Individual assertions buoyed up by shrewd statesmanship forced the British to arbitrate with a female regent of a 17-gun salute state and yield to her demands. Decolonial modernity, in that case, was using the discursive strategies of modernity to upend the coloniality that pervaded the colonial world. This is a classic example of decoloniality, for here, the unequal alliance between the British and the Bhopal divulges that Bhopal is the superior partner upending colonial decisions. Sikander brings in a resistant facet to decolonial episteme by creating and dictating precedence.

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5. See biographies of Rani Laxmi Bai and Rani Chennamma for clarifications.
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34. Like Rani Laxmi Bai, Begum Hazrat Mahal etc.
35. Pro-British queens like the Begums of Bhopal who are termed reformer queens because they initiated several reforms that patronised colonial modernity.
36. Cooperate monarchy is an institution in which the king and queen rule in partnership.
37. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, Translated by A. M. Sheridan. Vintage Books, 1994, p.12
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