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Research Article

European Travel Accounts: Their Reliability in interpreting the Medieval Indian History

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ABSTRACT

The narratives of travel and exploration written by the European voyagers and merchant adventurers who visited India are of certain literary and historical value. For the first time, they brought the ordinary Europeans in contact with the peoples of the East and also made it possible for tradesmen to see through the new and unlooked-for splendours and glamour in the Indies. The common man found in the narratives of travel not only a romantic literature more fascinating than fiction but a call to personal adventure. By the sixteenth century the merchant capitalism had begun in Europe. Most of the European nations were establishing their ware-houses in the East. They were manned by men who after a few years of stay in India went back to their homeland and recorded their experience and published them. No doubt their account became an important source material for social history of this particular period. Though their descriptions retained their graphic quality, sometimes their judgement suffered from partiality.

Introduction

Travelling into medieval India, after their long sea journey, from the port city of Surat, through the Deccan, Berhampore, Madras and Masulipatnum on the eastern coat, the Bengal province, and Agra-Delhi (the seat of Mughal power), the travellers were confronted with radically different topography, climate, diseases, animal and plant life. They encountered strange living habits of the rulers and the ruled. These different traditions and customs stirred amongst these travellers a sense of novelty- 'variety and unbelievable strangeness'.[2] This 'otherness' highlighted India's uniqueness, inculcating awe and wonder, helping to build a 'marvellous topography' of Indian space. Where 'marvellous' was an explanatory and exploratory aesthetic that enabled the traveller to discover, wonder at, organize and define, and ultimately explain (away) India's novelty.[3]

Homesickness, the intimate shadow of wanderlust, affected all of them to some degree and became a predictable theme in their records and letters; most of the times, it resulted in comparisons and sometimes in partiality of judgement. The majority of the Europeans were driven by sheer greed, sometimes masked by an assumed missionary zeal or a taste for political intrigue, however, some were genuinely curious about the exotic cultures into which they had wandered, take for example Bernier, who starts his travelogue 'Great Mogul', with, 'The desire of seeing the world, which had induced me to visit Palestine and Egypt, still prompted me to extend my travels.'[4] These lines prove that he sought in the Indies not spices, nor gold, nor diamonds, but sheer knowledge.

Many of the Europeans, who came to India to settle down here, came with very little expectation of returning home. The fundamental purpose of their long journey may have been to proselytize or act as spice merchants. But many of them were enticed by India and over several decades they found that life in India offered them much more than what they could expect

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[2]Pramod K. Nayar, 'Marvelous Excesses: English Travel Writing and India, 1608-1727', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 44 No. 2, Apr., 2005, p. 213.
[3]*Ibid.,* p. 214.
[4]Francois Bernier, *Travels in Mogul Empire A.D. 1656-1668*, tr. Archibald Constable, Orient Reprint, New Delhi, 1983, p. 1.

back home. A lot of them entered into servitude with many Kings, particularly in the Deccan. They served as soldiers, advisors and mercenaries. Some of them were completely Indianised, wore Indian clothes, learnt the languages and ate Indian food. They married Indian girls and sometimes even converted to Islam. Time and again during the long history of India, the foreigners who had come to India with visions of transforming India had always themselves been transformed.

Literature Review

The historiography of the early modern period seems to have an abiding fascination with the moment of the face-to-face encounter between the European and his "other". European writings on South Asia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is mostly in a particular diagonal way, raiding them for 'facts' such as prices, wages, temperatures, the number of days it took for a caravan to travel from Surat to Burhanpur, or how the *hundi* (bill-of-exchange) functioned in the Mughal empire. The account of many number of travellers have been published by Hakluyt Society and a collection by Foster entitled *Early Travellers in India.* The Hakluyt Society contributes interestingly by presenting a strong historical content and context of all the authors.

Meera Nanda in her study of European travel accounts of the Mughal empire under Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, focuses mainly on the second half of the seventeenth century. These accounts were limited by cultural preconceptions, but they also stand in stark contrast to the Persian chronicles of the period - the key indigenous sources for the empire as a whole – for their information on trade and the economy, on political forms of organization, and on social life and religious practices.[5]

An interesting example of the persistence of an anti-orientalist attitude, very much influenced by the work of literary critic Edward Said, is the book by Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed*.[6] Here she takes up all the famous travellers like Purchas, Bernier, Manucci and Pietro Della Valle who came to India at that time and just amalgamates their views into one head.[7] This is mainly done in order to examine the European and British writing on India from 1600 to 1800. This book also charts out the transition of Britain from a trading partner to a colonial power and even mentions the foundation of the East India Company. Teltscher intends to recognize competing, historically dependent dialogue rather than a steady and static tradition of European representation.

Pramod Nayar interestingly points that not all the travellers had the freedom and independence to write their journals. There were certain guidelines for these writings. People like Francis Bacon and institutions such as the Royal Society of London made constant demands for accurate description of new places. Nayar quotes Bacon in 'Of Travel' (1625) with a veritable framework for the travel diary and the travelogue. 'The things to be seen and observed are, the courts of princes, especially when they give audience to ambassadors, the courts of justice, while they sit and hears causes; and so consistories ecclesiastic; the churches and monasteries which are therein extant; the walls and fortifications of cities and towns, and so the havens and harbours; antiquities and ruins; libraries, colleges, disputations….and to conclude, whatsoever is memorable in the places where they go.'[8]

Similarly, he talks about people like William Davison who listed the items to be specially observed by travellers. In his work 'Profitable Instructions' in 1633, he asks the travellers to organize the information into three groups: 'The Country', 'The People', and 'The Policy and Government.' The numerous natural histories compiled during this period provided narrative models for these travelogues. Natural history categorizes an otherwise unknown/unknowable and wild land into something more orderly. It was an attempt rhetorically to transform the land into an object of inquiry and control.[9]

However, as we see the travelogues, not all the travellers obliged by these instructions. It may so have been that there might have been such broad general framework or an outline but it was not mandatory to follow it as we see some works differing from such regulations.

E. F. Oaten has compiled all the accounts of the various European travellers in a chronological order. As mentioned above he has divided the travellers into three categories on the basis of those that belonged to the fifteenth, sixteenth and

[5]Meera Nanda, *European Travel Accounts during the Reigns of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb*, Nirmal Book Agency, Kolkata, 1994.

[6]Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed- European and British writings on India 1600-1800*, Oxford University Press, Delhi,1995.

[7]*Ibid.,* pp. 5-18.

[8]Pramod K. Nayar, 'Marvelous Excesses: English Travel Writing and India, 1608-1727', p. 215.

[9]*Ibid.*

seventeenth centuries and tried to show them as important witnesses to the social institutions of the nature and influence of Hindustan during that time. He has taken into consideration even the minute details are taken care of and the introduction is interesting as he tries to show the emergence of the importance of being a part of the Indian trade. He traces it back to the ancient period and discloses the fact that the real European knowledge of India began in 327 BC. His work lacks tact and insight and his work is for those who have to know nothing about the different European travellers who came to India.

Research Question

As we read them, it will be evident that they have written about all phases of Indian polity, society, economy; its court, its grandeur, the army and its strength, rivalries among the courtiers; administration, its strength and weakness; condition of the masses their poverty; about privileged class; main trade routes and by-routes; important cities and towns; manufacture; commodities and prices; land product and taxation.

However, some important questions that come across one's mind are whether these accounts are really reliable while interpreting, writing or re-writing the histories. Or to what extent can we depend on these sources? Did travel really free them from their biases or rather made them more extreme towards their perception about certain countries and customs? Was different interpretations of the same 'realities' possible?

Hence, one needs to keep in mind their different backgrounds, vocations, their tenure of stay, nationality and religion, while reading and analysing their accounts.

Reading of Sources, Results and Discussion

Father Monserrate (1580-1582), a Catalonian was admitted to the society of Jesus in 1558. He embarked for India in 1574 and was elected to accompany Father Acquaviva to Emperor Akbar's court in 1578. He was appointed tutor to prince Murad at Agra. His *Commentary*[10] is one of the earliest European accounts, in which he gives an objective account of the emperor's personality, court and administrative measures. As one reads his account, we realize a stark contrast in his writings. As he begins his journey in the court of Akbar, one finds him praising and appreciating the Emperor in every way possible. Monserrate seems to be in awe of the Emperor, as he describes him as;

"*This Prince is of a stature and of a type of countenance well-fitted to his royal dignity, so that one could easily recognise, even at the first glance, that he is the King."*[11]

However, by the end of Monserrate's account we can say that he is very critical of the Indian State and society and the Towns. While he talks about the towns in the city, he writes,

"they, appear very pleasant from afar ; for they are adorned with many towers and high buildings, in a very beautiful manner, But when one enters them, one finds that the narrowness, aimless crookedness, and ill-planning of the streets deprive these cities of all beauty.[12]

This kind of attitude can be a result of assuming that the Emperor could be proselytized. Akbar being an enthusiastic student of Comparative Religion, he invited to his court not only Christian missionaries, but Parsee and Jain teachers as well. Although we can find evidences of how Akbar showed interest in Christianity more than his own religion but he clearly understood that he could not have become a Christian without provoking a general rebellion of his subjects and demolishing the fabric of the Empire, the result of years of patient and painful effort.

Secondly, it is also to be noted that as commonly observed in Europe, the religion of the King was to be the religion of his subjects, was not particularly followed in India. The religion of the King could have been different than his subjects. Monserrate and the other missionaries were keen on converting the King as they could have misunderstood the society of the Indian subcontinent.

Therefore, such instances, helps us believe how these interpretation was incommensurable. In particular, travellers would

[10]Father Monserrate, *The Commentary of Father Monserrate S. J. on his Journey to the Court of Akbar*, J. S. Hoyland, Oxford University Press, London, l922.
[11] Monserrate, Father, *The Commentary of Father Monserrate S. J. on his Journey to the Court of Akbar*, J. S. Hoyland, Oxford University Press, London, l922., p. 196.
[12] Ibid., p. 219.

not be able to interpret what an indigenous culture was about, because a traveller's perspective was relative to his own culture. A traveller from the late sixteenth century would equally misjudge a medieval account. Even the modern historian cannot expect to understand properly what a Renaissance traveller saw. Of course, different travellers saw different things and, of course, they relied on their own initial assumptions.[13]

Subsequent travellers such as Ralph Fitch,[14] Sir Thomas Roe,[15] Edward Terry,[16] Pelsaert,[17] Peter Mundy,[18] Abbé Carré,[19] Sebastian Manrique,[20] Tavernier,[21] Bernier,[22] Manucci,[23] Pietro Della Valle[24] and also many others have left rich accounts of their travels and experiences in India.

Often we find these travellers comparing and contrasting India with their own countries or with those seen elsewhere, thereby producing added insight into the various descriptions. Thomas Roe was the knighted English ambassador, Edward Terry and John Ovington were chaplains, Francois Bernier and John Fryer were practicing medicine. Hence, naturally Bernier is quite known for his economic and political discourses, while Fryer was more inclined to write about India-specific diseases. Similarly, Terry and Ovington were more interested in religion and moral issues.

However, after Akbar none of the Mughal Emperors had any appreciable interest in Europe. Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb all admitted envoys from the trading companies or their rulers and displayed an intense interest in the types of presentations and gifts offered. Beyond this little notice was taken. In the historical writing of the period these curious foreigners were largely ignored despite their depiction in paintings of the Mughal Court.[25]

Conclusion

These travellers' narratives not only form the most delightful and entertaining reading, but are, from some points of view, absolutely unique among the documentary sources for the history of any country.[26] The value of the material furnished by them, when used critically, is beyond one's imagination. They are geographically accurate and historically useful, more so because they do not speak with a single voice. Instead, they engage in a debate among themselves concerning the validity of their observations.

They came, they saw, and, though conquest was reserved for a later era, at least they wrote. Their books vary in value from the political philosophy of a Bernier to the various market gossips, but there is not one of them who do not in some way increase our knowledge. Most of their records are simple and straightforward accounts of what they saw and heard in India. Along with that contacts with non-Europeans were intrinsically important, rather than just rhetorically important, for the development of Indian culture as well as European culture.

Hence, the following remark of Stanley Lane-Poole, though originally made in reference to the travellers of the seventeenth century only, may fitly be applied to all: "In such a cloud of witnesses of varied ranks, professions, and nationalities, truth, divested of insular or continental prejudice, may surely be found. The body of information furnished by their journals, letters, and travels, is indeed of priceless value to the historian of India."[27]

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[13]John-Pau Rubies, *Travels and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes 1250-1625*, pp. xvi-xvii.

[14]J. Horton Ryley, *Ralph Fitch England's Pioneer to India and Burma, his Companions and Contemporaries*, T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1899.

[15]Sir Thomas Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India 1615-1619*, ed. William Foster, Oxford University Press, London, 1926.

[16]Edward Terry, *A Voyage to East India*, J. Wilkie, London, 1655.

[17]Francisco Pelsaert, *Jahangir's India: The Remonstrantie of Francisco Pelsaert*, trs. W. H. Moreland and P. Geyl, Low Price Publications, Delhi, 2001.

[18]Peter Mundy, *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia, 1608-1667*, ed. Richard Carnac Temple, Second Series No. XXXV, Hakluyt Society, London, 1925.

[19]Abbé Carré, *The Travels of Abbé Carré in India and the near East 1672-1674*, 2 vols., tr. Lady Fawcett, ed. Charles Fawcett and Richard Burn, Hakluyt Society, London, 1674.

[20]Sebastien Manrique, *The Travels of Fray Sebastien Manrique 1619-1643*, 2 vols., tr. Luard C. Eckfora, Second Series No. LIX, Hakluyt society, London, 1927.

[21]Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, 2 vols., tr. V. Ball, ed. William Crooke, Oriental Books, New Delhi, 1977.

[22]Francois Bernier, *Travels in Mogul Empire A.D. 1656-1668*, tr. Archibald Constable, Orient Reprint, New Delhi, 1983.

[23]Niccolao Manucci, *Storio Do Mogor or Mogul India*, tr. William Irvine, Oriental Books, New Delhi, 1981.

[24]Pietro Della Valle, *The Travels of Pietro Della Valle in India*, 2 vols., ed. Edward Grey, tr. Georges Havers, Hakluyt Society, London, 1892.

[25]J. F. Richards, *The New Cambridge History of India: The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 324.

[26]E. F. Oaten, *European Travellers in India during the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Asian Educational Services, 1991, pp. 24-25.

[27]Stanley Lane-Poole, *Medieval India under Mohammedan Rule 712-1754*, Sushil Gupta, Calcutta, 1951, p. 294, quoted in E. F. Oaten, *European Travellers in India during the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, p. 1.

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