

Travelogues as Source of History: An Overview of Francis Bernier's Travel Writings

Anant Dadhich

Abstract

Travelogues may be claimed as records of history since they are written about and refer to some historical contexts, but to what extent and in what degree they truly reflect history and historical facts, has been a matter of research. History, as seen from the eye of a historian, may be found in a travelogue, and sometimes the latter could go across history since a travel writer simply records his experiences and impressions of that particular domain which he travels. Travelogues cannot be considered history since a traveller comes as an explorer not as a historian. He is mainly fascinated by excitement, pleasure and expedition to know the foreign lands. So when he records his experiences he writes a distinct genre of literature, travel writing and not history. And this genre has its own literary value in terms of entertainment and arousing the interest of readers for further travels and knowledge. Secondly, such travel narrations are highly affected by viewpoint and perceptions of the traveller. That is why they always sway between imagination and reality. Chandalia points out, "Though in all travel writing one thing that is common is that the focus lies on account of real or imaginary places. It may range from documentary to the evocative, from literary to journalistic and from humorous to serious." (149) In this way it becomes a matter of discussion on the part of the readers to filter facts and factual from travel writing.

On this behalf Francis Bernier's travel writings offer a good number of queries from the point of finding history hidden behind his own creative, descriptive and informative records of his impressions of India he visited during the 17th century. The period when the great Mughal Empire was fluctuating among some power centers headed by Dara, Aurangzeb, Murad and Sultan Suza, the sons of Shah Jahan. Discussing Amitav Ghosh's travel writing mainly his novels Bhattacharji comments about this perspective of travel writings. She writes, "Promontory descriptions of landscape are rarely found in his travel writing, but there is a sturdy promontory metaphor at the start of *In the Antique Land*, as Ghosh surveys a swathe of history from Alexander the Great to the crusades to more recent Asian and European events, the textual territory he will visit and conquer. Almost inevitably, he pairs books and travel, archaeology and history, for how else can we know the past but through books." (61)

Key Words : Mughal India, customs and conventions, socio-political affairs of the court, peasants

There have been many sources that construct history of the medieval times. Apart from the writings of the emperors and the court poets, there have been many travel narratives by foreign travelers during the 17th century which could be used as sources to build history. There came many European travelers during the Mughal era namely Father Anthony Monserrate, William Fitch, Ralph Fitch, William Hawkins, Nicolas Downtoun, John Jurda, Nicolas Withington, Thomas Coryat, Sir Thomas Roe, Edwaed Tarry, Pietro Della valle, Jean Baptiste Tavernier and Francis Bernier. Trivedi points out, "Many travellers came to India during medieval times. Though in their travel writings much of the political history is not found, but they throw light on the contemporary social and economical conditions of society." (642)

Francis Bernier happens to be one of the eminent European travellers of the 17th century. A physician by profession, and the writer of *Travels in the Mughal Empire*, Bernier arrives in India at a crucial time when the sons of Shah Jahan were engaged in a succession war. He arrived at Surat in 1658. He visited Ahmadabad, Agra, Bengal and then went to Kashmir. After that he went to Masulipatnam and Golconda and reached Surat again. Bernier reaches India at such a time when the Mughal Empire has been at the disposal of the legal heirs of Emperor Shah Jahan who lost all powers in his last times. In this way Bernier witnesses two important events of Indian history, the rise of Aurangzeb, and the fall of Shah Jahan. Trivedi writes, "The travel writings of Bernier has been quite extensive and interesting. He has not only described the behaviour patterns both of Indians and Mughals, customs and conventions, knowledge and its sources, main objectives and duties of life, and day to day tasks and assignments of common people, but also has tried to prove these facts by evidences." (661)

Bernier's *Travels in the Mughal Empire* is remarkable for its observations, critical insights and reflections on contemporary India. His account of Mughal India has also been important since he time and again compares India to Europe in the matters of land ownership, management of towns and cities, education and economy, law and order, living standards of common people, and society in general. His travel writings mainly focus on the Mughal dynastic succession followed by the reign of Aurangzeb. Bernier also writes that how Aurangzeb defeated his brothers to set his claim for the throne and imprisoned his own father. At the very outset of his travelogue, Bernier marks his itinerary through which he reaches India with a view to explore the world as a traveller. Following renaissance European people undertook voyages to evaluate, interpret, classify, and explore cultures of the world. These travellers were people from aristocratic backgrounds. They also belonged to different social groups, namely, traders, soldiers, ecclesiasts, and pilgrims. Smith underlines, "In Europe, three kinds of travellers emerged between the 4th and the 15th centuries, the scholar, the crusader, and the pilgrim." (1)

To explore the world, Bernier first went to Palestine and then to Egypt. He writes, "To see the red sea I set out my journey from the capital of Egypt, Cairo where I stayed one year, after which I travelled in a caravan, and then reached Swez city. After 17 days I reached Jeddha in the gulf. After a stay of 5 weeks in Jeddha, I firstly thought of going to Ethiopian capital Gondar but looking to the political turmoil I decided to go to India and reached Surat by sea through the way of Bab-el Mandeb." (2)

On reaching Surat, Bernier came to know about the present ruler of Mughal India; Shah Jahan who was born in the famous dynasty of Timur known for his conquests throughout the world. He says in his writings that the word 'Mughal' has been used for a particular class in India which is the ruling class. It is important to note that Bernier as a writer observes the diverse fabric of society in Mughal India. He writes that in Mughal India prestigious posts and honors in army and administration are not only given to Mughals, they are also given to foreigners living in India. Bernier observes, "Among the foreigners there are Irani, Turkish, and Arabs who equally get honorable seats and ranks in the army and general administration without any discrimination. The people known here as Mughals can be identified by their fair

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colour, and who follow the Muslim religion. The Christians of Europe may be identified by their white skin, and the Hindus by their wheatish complexion, and who by religion are idolaters.” (2) Bernier also comes to know that the present emperor Shah Jahan is about 70 years old having four sons and two daughters. The king has given four big Provinces to these four sons as their legal rights. But looking to the old age and the ailment of the emperor, all the four sons got engaged in politics of war for power which lasted for five years. Bernier writes that he himself saw some important events of the war. He also saw cities like Agra and Delhi. On way to these cities he was robbed, and finally he had to serve the Mughal Empire as a doctor for the sake of livelihood. He was appointed as physician to Prince Dara Shikoh. He also got the patronage of Danishmand Khan, a scholar and soldier of the Mughal court. In this way Bernier constantly lived with Mughals for eight years providing him a deep insight into the socio-political affairs of the court. That is why his travelogues are quite important to record events and incidents, both of court and the political affairs apart from social and economic conditions including the status of peasants and artisans, and their contribution to the economy.

Bernier has extensively described the important political figures of the contemporary times. These figures use to bear titles and ranks which enhance the excellence of the state. He writes about Dara, “He did not lack good attributes. He was soft spoken, witty, polite and liberal by nature. But he considered himself to be the most knowledgeable person of the world whom no one could dare to advise anything. He used to punish those who suggested him anything. Finally he lost all his friends and well-wishers, and killed by Aurangzeb.” (4) Bernier also talks about Suza, the son of Shah Jahan. As compared to Dara, he was a bit more polite and determined, and used to befriend the powerful kings and courtiers by giving them wealth. But his major weakness was his sensual behaviour and promiscuous use of concubines followed by losing power over politics. About Aurangzeb Bernier’s description is quite analytical who later became the last powerful ruler of the Mughal India. Bernier observes that like Dara and Suza Aurangzeb had not that nobility and courtesy of behaviour but he had the wonderful quality of taking decisions as per the need of the time. Bernier writes, “Aurangzeb was skilled enough to select such attendants who could help him with compatibility and loyalty. He used to reward such people whom he thought to be of his political use. He used to hide all his confidential matters and no one could have any idea about his secret plannings.” (6) About the status of women in the Mughal India, Bernier talks of some surprising facts, especially with reference to the women of royal family. The royal princesses were not allowed to get married on account of two reasons. Firstly, there had always been the suspicion that the royal son-in law might usurp the throne and imbalance the power structure. Secondly, no one was considered capable of matching the royal standards, socially and culturally. This led to clandestine love affairs in the *harem*. Bernier writes,

Whatever I write is history. And my main objective is to describe completely the customs and conventions of Hindustan. The idea of love carries fearsome consequences in Asia which is nowhere found in Europe. In France, such love affairs are merely matters of humor and laughter and fall in oblivion within a very short period of time. But in India the course of love never runs smooth and finally ends in utter destruction and tragedy. (8)

Bernier also talks of the Rajput kings and their specific place in the Indian history during the Mughal reign. He writes that Rajputs, who are the sons of the royal dynasty, are supposed to get trained in arms by the virtue of being born in Rajput family. Bernier writes, "During war times they intake excessive doses of opium. This would make them highly active and excited that they get engaged in war to the extent of killing and dying." (28) Bernier particularly talks of king Yashwant Singh of Marwar and Jai Singh of Alwar. Bernier also talks of Rajput queens that how they had great sense of honour and esteem of their name, fame and dynasty. They took pride in offering themselves into the pyres of their husbands. He records, "I could give many instances of such Rajput women who ended their lives into the flames of their husbands' pyres. All such incidences prove that how mind is affected by faith, hope, customs, conventions, beliefs and the notions of dignity." (29)

Bernier as a writer could also grapple with the fact that the Mughal rulers practiced communal harmony despite being Muslims by religion. Bernier points out, "It was not a surprising fact that despite being Muslims by religion and strict opponents of Hindus, the Mughal Emperors used to keep healthy relations with Rajput kings. Rajput kings were equally esteemed as the courtiers of the Mughal court and offered prestigious posts in the army." (28)

Looking to Bernier's preconceived western mindset, his observations regarding the issue of land ownership in Mughal India fall under investigation. He contrasted Mughal India to Europe stating the lack of private property in the former as the main cause behind adverse conditions of peasants. He observed that in the Mughal Empire, the emperor was the sole owner of the land which he used to distribute among his nobles and courtiers. Owing to crown ownership of land, claimed Bernier, it could not be inherited to further generations restricting the progress of production and innovations. This absence of private property forbade the emergence of a class of 'improving' landlords as present in Western Europe. Bernier writes, "Emperor, who is the sole owner of the land, lets out some land to his soldiers as income. This land is called *Jagir* in India and *Timar* in Turkey. But this land was given on the condition that the surplus had to be deposited in the royal treasury as tax. In this way people who own the land from the king, whether they are *Subedar*, *Izardar*, or *Tehshildar*, had merciless command over peasants." (142)

But these observations recorded by Bernier are doubtful since there are records of private ownership of land by farmers. In Rajasthan, tillers were the owners of the land and had the right of selling and purchasing land with least intervention of the king. Chatterjee writes, "The land tilled by farmers was called *Bapoti*, the inherited land. To prevent illegal occupation of land by anyone, the ruler granted legal registries to landowners. And all such registries were kept in revenue records, called *havalas*. The lands of all those who turned out to be defaulters and traitors were merged in the state capital." (590) Bernier was observing situations in India in stark contrast with what he saw in Europe. Trivedi writes, "Everyone had private property rights in India. Owners were free to sell, buy and mortgage their land with least intervention from the state. The concept of private property had been existing in India since ages." (663) In fact land ownership rules were quite complicated that Bernier failed to comprehend them in the cultural context of India. There has been a group of historians

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who project the fact that the Mughal rulers were concerned only with the agricultural production. Further, A R Kulkarni specifies that the Mughals never claimed exclusive ownership of the agrarian land and that they too reckoned private property in it. He interprets, "Europeans misunderstood the system of *jagir* transfers which led them to conclude that the king had the sole authority over the land." (26) The main thought behind Bernier's thesis was the better condition of farmers in Europe due to private property rights giving them ample opportunity to enhance production using scientific techniques. Contrary to this scenario, Bernier observes that the revenue collection system controlled by *Zamindars* and Governors of the Provinces had been so tyrannical in Mughal India that they never took note of production focusing only on tax collection. Habib clears the point, "The peculiar feature of the state in Mughal India was that it served not merely as the protective arm of the exploiting class, but was itself the principal instrument of exploitation." (83) That's why at some places in his travelogue he becomes a humanist writer and voices the grievances of the peasants. He says that on the one hand peasants have this mindset that why should we toil for those tyrants who come and snatch everything from us leaving nothing even for our subsistence? On the other hand *Subedar*, *Jagirdar* and *Tehsildar* think that why should we take notice of barren and infertile land and invest our time and money to make it cultivable. Since we don't know at what time the land could get slipped from our hands that neither we nor our descendants could get the fruits of our labour and capital. Therefore, the *zamindars* were never concerned for the peasants whether they die or abandon their lands. (144) Bernier thus substantiates this reason to be the main cause behind the gradual decline of the states of Asian subcontinent. Looking to such social conditions, he asserts that there is no middle state in India leaving only two major classes, the nobles and the peasants.

Bernier also talks of the lack of concern of the state for its people, peasants and artisans. He delineates, "There is no authority which could provide relief to the suffering peasants, artisans and traders. Therefore, there were no *Great Lords* or Parliament and judiciary as in France to prevent atrocities. Though few people are appointed for this purpose, but they lack power" (142) Due to these social inequalities and insecurities, people were forced to live under adverse conditions.

Bernier's travelogues contain much significance from the point of history because he not only visited the famous towns and cities of India but also collected information about people and productions related to agriculture, trade and commerce. Due to his considerable stay in India for eight years, he was also able to comprehend the administrative system and policies of the Mughal state along with the mindset of the people and their customs and beliefs with the view to bring out a sort of comparison to the European society. His descriptions about the political figures of India have been very close to history that they are often used by the historians. His delineations of Aurangzeb, Dara, Murad and Sultan have been written in the form of narratives containing humour and picturesque style arousing interest of the reader as found in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. His records of the succession war go in the form of interesting visuals, and present a picture of the Indian wars and battles where Rajputs and the loyal army consider death to be reward in the battlefield.

Binary opposition has been the key feature of Bernier's *Travels in Mughal Empire*. Keeping in view his perceptions and preconceived notions regarding polity and state it was not unnatural for him to bring out a contrast between the east and the west. While recording his various and varied experiences, he critiques Indian politics and administrative system and compares them to France of the contemporary times since it had started to sow the seeds of equality and democracy. This sense of social and political critique is found when he talks of the management of cities and towns, the habits and lives of people, the peasants, artisans and other poor classes. He also underlines the lack of science and rational approach in day to day affairs. Depictions of the royal courts with its luxurious ambience also fall under critique by him. However, his empathetic attitude for the suffering classes makes him a humanitarian thinker and writer. The recurrent and sympathetic descriptions of these classes reflect this approach and make him conclude that if these classes are appropriately protected by the state the living conditions would become better.

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