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Trends in the historiography of European travel accounts of South Asia: A study of three key publications

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Abstract

This paper examines three key publications in the historiography of European travel accounts of South Asia: Nicholas Dew's *Orientalism in Louis XIV's France*, Jean Pau Rubié's *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through the European Eyes, 1250-1625* and Sanjay Subrahmanyam's *Europe's India: Words, People, Empires, 1500-1800*. The paper argues that these works have had a significant impact on the way that European travel accounts are studied and interpreted. Edward Said's *Orientalism* is a seminal work in postcolonial studies. In this book, Said argues that European representations of the Orient are not objective or neutral but are instead shaped by the power relations between Europe and the Orient. Said's work has been influential in the study of European travel accounts, as it has led scholars to consider the ways in which these accounts are shaped by the author's perspective and the historical context in which they were written. Nicholas Dew's *Orientalism* is a study of the 'Orientalism before Orientalism', or the prehistory of Said's *Orientalism* which took shape when power relations between Europe and India were not the same as after colonisation. Jean Pau Rubié's work takes us back even further in reconstructing the prehistory of Orientalism to the days of Vijayanagara Empire. Sanjay Subrahmanyam's book focuses on the period 1500-1800 and includes a variety of European sources (Portuguese, French, English) to argue out how Said's founding work can be refined further to basically make the same point. The paper concludes by arguing that these three works have had a significant impact on the way that European travel accounts are studied and interpreted. These works have led scholars to consider the ways in which these accounts are shaped by the author's perspective, the historical context in which they were written, and the author's positionality.

Keywords: Historiography, European travel accounts, orientalism

Introduction

Travel literature as a source of *doing* history has always perplexed historians: while a great deal of apprehension remains about their reliability, their phantasmagorical nature of travel accounts reveals more about the travel writers' own psyche than the places and people they seek to describe ^[1]. Indeed, historians would show a great deal of hesitancy where the Supreme Court of India problematically relied upon eighteenth century travel accounts from the late Mughal period as evidence of Hindu worship at the site of Babri Mosque: a rather crude manifestation of what the historian Anne Laura Stoler has called as 'along-the-grain' kind of reading than an 'against-the-grain' in a landmark judgement ^[2]. In contrast, historians' use of travel literature has come in the last few decades to a full circle: they now seek to dissect and understand the very *location* of the travel writer himself. It is the same inversion that has come to describe the travel literature concerned about the subcontinent in the last two decades. The purpose of this essay is to explicate this development with regard to some key examples from the recent publications. The aim is not to be exhaustive, for that would require a lengthier study, but to highlight only a few of the important works.

Edward Said's classic *Orientalism* (1978) was a monumental publication in cultural studies and humanities ^[3]. While it elicited overwhelmingly positive responses—being also noted for its literary flair and passion—it also drew critical appraisals. Said famously defined Orientalism in three senses of the term: (a) specialists teaching, writing or researching about the Orient; (b) "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'"; (c) a Western project of

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dominating the Orient beginning in late eighteenth century. One can see that these definitions are seldom compatible with each other. In one sense, orientalism is defined as a transhistorical phenomenon starting from classical antiquity, in another sense it is defined historically as beginning at a definite period, i.e., the modern era. Critics of Edward Said pointed out these contradictions. For example, the starting point of Aijaz Ahmad's criticism was that Edward Said made Orientalism look primarily a textual exercise – indeed as the title of Said's other book is *The World, the Text* – while what gave European Orientalism a special destructive force was that it became merged with capitalist colonialism. took him to task for ignoring capitalist colonialism, which, in Ahmad's understanding, took Said away from defining Orientalism within the pretext of political economic factors^[4]. Further, Irfan Habib and Ibn Warraq defend Orientalism on grounds that it was not always negative and that it opened up several new areas of study which proved helpful in laying the foundations of modern academic practices^[5]. However, Nicholas Dew's book, significantly titled *Orientalism in Louis XIV's France*, ignores this kind of criticism. Instead, it highlights other limitations within Said's characterisation while retaining the concept of Orientalism. 'The "Orient" was always, of course, a floating signifier, with a wide range of referents, from the Islamic world to East Asia', Dew says^[6]. The chief among those is that Europe's relation to Asia was not always that of domination. In fact, just prior to colonisation, power relations between Europeans and Asians were not the same as after colonisation. Dew's book, therefore, is an investigation of precisely that period where individuals from different civilizations met on more or less equal footing:

We . . . need to remind ourselves that the period before the mid-eighteenth century was one of Orientalism before empire. That is to say that the power dynamics between the European commercial powers and the Ottoman, Safavid Persian, Mughal, or Qing empires were not, in this period, the same as those which would obtain from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century onwards^[7].

In that sense, the complaint against Said is that his understanding of Orientalism is based on nineteenth century Orientalism. What about Orientalism of the preceding two centuries? The subject matter of Dew's discussion is the French Orientalists from the time of Louis XIV. With support from important scholarly contributions like that by Raymond Schwab, Paul Hazard and others, Dew aims to recover Orientalism before Orientalism, that is 'baroque Orientalism'^[8]. In order to accomplish that, Dew focuses upon three important figures: Barthélemy d'Herbelot, Melchisédech Thévenot, François Bernier.

For Indian readers, Bernier's case will be most pertinent and sufficient to see what new insights Dew brings out. Bernier is regarded as such an important chronicler of the Mughal period that his book *Travels in Mogul Empire* has almost become a canonical account. Travel accounts by Bernier, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Jean Thévenot *et al.* were extensively used by eighteenth century Enlightenment *philosophes*. While writing his famous dispatches on India, Karl Marx also relied upon Bernier extensively for a description of the traditional Indian society that was being destroyed by the British. This became the basis of what Marx and Engels called as the Asiatic mode of production.

The other French traveller who was not so famous, Anquetil Duperron, was ignored by most nineteenth century commentators. Bernier's book was translated and republished several times during the nineteenth century. Hence, Bernier became the paradigmatic eye witness account of India.

Critics of Bernier point out not only his veracity or lack of facticity, but also his 'gaze' which presumably saw India as inferior. However, in a chapter on Bernier which assumes huge importance for historians of India, Dew goes on to show how in Bernier we find evidence of what came to be known later in the eighteenth century as 'universal reason', 'rationalism', etc. Bernier's journey, according to Dew, was not a result of free choice but a response to a life-threatening crisis in which he found himself for his support of the emerging heterodox materialist philosophy, especially that of his teacher Pierre Gassendi. Incidentally, Marx had also hailed Gassendi as the most systemic developer of Descartes' philosophy. Hence, what we have before us is a revision of the familiar tropes of an oriental gaze looking upon the 'inferior' other.

Dew radically forces us to see the 'universal' aspect of the new philosophical quest: he invites us to think of Bernier's condemnation of the superstitious beliefs of not only Indians but also fellow Parisians. In a chapter titled 'The Double Eclipse: François Bernier's Geography of Knowledge', Dew convincingly shows that while there is some weight in the traditional interpretation of Bernier's letters to the then French minister Colbert as being driven by a 'colonial gaze', one must also look at the peculiar circumstances which led Bernier to flee France in the first place. Bernier's journey from France began due to his support for heterodox thinking. Having been in trouble with authorities while setting out, Bernier's letter to Colbert was more of a settling of accounts than an invitation to colonial plunder. Further, the journey coincided with a solar eclipse in Paris in 1654, and its 'end' coincided with an eclipse in Delhi in 1666. Bernier condemns the superstitious and fearful attitude of commoners both in France and in the subcontinent. He wrote that 'since, all over the world, men have more or less the same temperament, and consequently the same bodily illnesses, they also have more or less the same maladies of the mind, the same thoughts, the same madneses, the same extravagances^[9].' According to Dew, this was the purported 'universal, true reason' at work because Bernier himself was a product of local (French) context. What Dew attempts is not only to show how Bernier defies the usual figure of an Orientalist who is equal in condemning superstition both in the East and the West, but that Bernier himself was a particular expression of a particular philosophy^[10].

It is insights like this which make Dew's book a very good one, which is also full of great many facts and secondary literature. However, the question arises: was Bernier's criticism of the superstitions not valid? It is a drawback of the historicist interpretation that it merely seeks to situate intellectual history in contexts and misses out on the truth value of the propositions.

Jean Pau Rubié's book *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through the European Eyes, 1250-1625* takes us further back from Nicholas Dew's Louis Quatorzieme orientalist^[11]. It's focus is not so much the Mughal Empire, but Vijayanagar and somewhat the Portuguese Goa, though the story begins with Marco Polo. Just like we highlighted in the Introduction, the book is less

about South India and more about European Renaissance culture. Although the context and examples are slightly different, nonetheless the emplotment remains the same. The triad of French, Islamic and Hindu characters is replaced merely by the Portuguese and other Latin characters. Here the subcontinent occupies a position different from both the urban civilizations of the New World, as well as the Chinese which presented the Western travellers and commentators challenges of a very different order. Just like with Bernier, Rubié's travellers find themselves in Vijayanagara grappling with an idolatrous civilisation which lied beneath the veneer of an Islamic polity. The very conception of India, therefore, proved difficult to be posited since that widespread diversity of the land defied universalization.

The key chapters are those dealing with Niccolò Conti, Ludovico de Varthema (ch. 3 and 4) and those summarising Muslim and European ethnographies of the Hindus (ch. 6 and 8). One important insight that emerges from nearly all studies of European travellers is that none of them had any unmediated, first-hand access to the subcontinent: their gaze was an 'impure' one, coloured by the Muslim gaze which can be regarded as an important precursor of modern Orientalism. Furthermore, the geographical knowledge of India even in this age continued to be that provided by the ancient Greek sources, especially Ptolemy's, keeping up with the Renaissance's central theme. Even the social description of the Vijayanagara society is marked by the antiquarian emphasis. The Brahmanas are thought to be the wise and intelligent philosophers not unsimilar from the Greek philosophers, differentiated by the priestly class. Caste system is assumed to have been a negation of slavery, establishing hierarchy without introducing slavery.

While ethnography started to emerge from these accounts, its relationship to history writing was yet undecided. It certainly played a role in history writing for a long time until modern, source-based history writing came to the fore much later. Iberian writers had the advantage that they had royal patronage of history writing. This translated in them writing dynastic histories of the Vijayanagara kings and consulted even the mythical stories by the Brahmins. The commonness of the European and Indian accounts is attested by not only the centrality of the kings but their exemplarity: the kings came to be seen through the lens of 'good' and 'bad'. The foreignness of these writers, for example, Nunes and Paes, translated to the fact that the histories he wrote had no links with local politics: his history writing can be considered to be secular. The story is also not a straightforward one of glory: the very success of the Vijayanagar rulers goes against them. Krishan Dev Raya is succeeded by a cowardly tyrant. Brahmanas are villainous in one instance and virtuous in another. The empire surpasses in some dimensions and fails in others. Thus, these Iberian writers foreshadowed modern history writing.

Writers like Nunes also help qualify orientalism, if orientalism is meant to be defined as western conception of the eastern societies. While they borrowed heavily from the European context, they also helped distinguish between different spheres of Vijayanagara society. For example, the three orders of the Feudal order came to be homologized with the three varnas of the Indian caste system. As Rubié surmises, "If we take 'orientalism' to mean an attitude by which the other (and, only circumstantially, the oriental other) is defined more in terms of one's own system of

power and identity than in terms of a genuine exchange, then it appears that, in the case of the Renaissance re-invention of the theme, 'orientalism' increased with distance, a distance which could be both physical and mental. That is to say that, rather than in the first-hand report of Nunes the merchant, it is in the summary of his account in the history of the vernacular humanist Barros, who was committed to an apology of the Portuguese empire, that orientalism took shape^[12]."

The hallmark of Rubié's book is that it brings to us some fresh sources and fresh perspectives. Just like Nicholas Dew pushes the orientalist enterprise further back in time and in a different power relations context, so does Rubié with the Iberian writers. And his explicit linkages of these travel accounts with both the texts from classical antiquity and later modern forms of writing which preceded history writing and anthropology. The main drawback could be that the book could have been shortened and made more lucid.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam's *Europe's India* is a very important contribution to the theme^[13]. Subrahmanyam rejects the critiques of Said's *Orientalism* and proceeds to add to the Saidian framework. His starting point is that the power/knowledge framework as provided by Foucault should be separated from Said's framework, because this framework has no relation with colonialism or empires. The book is divided into four chapters: Portuguese understanding of India, caste and Indian religion, James Fraser and colonial knowledge.

The Portuguese essentially tried to understand India, Subrahmanyam states, through the lens of Christianity: the "gentiles", as the Portuguese sought to call what later largely came to be called as Hindus, came to be seen as having a cosmopolitan sense just like the Christians in Europe, through pilgrimage (*Romaria*). Sanskrit was thought the Indian equivalent of Latin. The caste system, as we have noted above, came to be seen as an Indian equivalent of the feudal orders. The Portuguese tropes of imagining India, therefore, came primarily in terms of identity.

However, the danger with identification was that it risked losing out the special status accorded to Christianity. Hence, the difference was also emphasised. The practice of superstitions like using cow urine in rituals, sati (widow burning) etc, came to contrasted with Christian tradition. It was emphasised that the Indians had started off as Christians but later on lost their religion to corruption. The Jesuit missionary Roberto de Nobili, actually started posing like a Brahmin and followed their lifestyle and insignia, thus provoking the "querelle des rites" which resulted in Papal condemnation of the Jesuit practices. The Portuguese thus came close to producing a literature which could be regarded as (a) truthful in its face-value; (b) as an ideological distortion of a subcontinent which they regarded for further conquest; and, (c) as producing a distorted image of the South Asian culture which nonetheless provided the Portuguese with enough material to target the society for conquest.

With regard to the religion, the Portuguese came to understand the Hindus as possessing a religion. However, the recognition of their system as a religion implied that the very definition of religion had to be extended beyond the Abrahamic framework in which the Portuguese operated. Through these exercises, what the Portuguese gained was not only a knowledge of the other but also of the self. They

thus received the image of themselves as belonging to a larger European civilisation. The available tropes of understanding India were not only those of love and fear, but also that of ignorance. As Subrahmanyam writes: “European relations with and understandings of India in the centuries from 1500 to 1800 were the product of layered and intermittent conversations and distinct asymmetries in perception. Cultural translation was never a transparent matter in these contexts because the translators themselves were such complex and fraught actors, caught in webs both of their own making and produced by others ^[14].” In the sixteenth century, Europeans understood India with the yet undeveloped enterprises of ethnography and philology. India had either “gentiles” with no clear conceptions or the “despotic” Mughal state. In the following century, these attitudes became hardened, and in the eighteenth century they got codified with the coming of Enlightenment.

The problem with Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s book is that it resuscitates the Saidian framework which has been critiqued by numerous commentators. Subrahmanyam does precious little in showing how these critiques are misplaced or why the Saidian framework should be carried on. This is despite his own book displaying the evolution of European attitudes towards India in different directions.

We thus come to conclude this study of three key publications. First, the Saidian framework continues to inform history writing about travel accounts, even when it is explicitly disavowed. Almost every writer who begins writing on the subject must first grapple with the framework that he or she will use. It appears that Edward Said is still the biggest puzzle to be solved before any study of travel literature can take place. Second, travel writers’ presentations of what they called “facts” should not be taken at face value but must be qualified. Third, studies of travel writing are primarily studies of the cultural context, that is, Europe, from whose perspective they were written. Fourth, travel accounts help us locate the ideological frameworks of our understanding of late medieval and early modern society.

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