

Some Insights into Seventeenth Century Mughal India Based on Niccolao Manucci's *Storia Do Mogor*

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Abstract

In his book *Storia Do Mogor*, Niccolao Manucci discusses the social conditions, Hindu religion, manners, customs, description of Muslim weddings, funerals and their social norms and the society in general. He describes the economic life, industries and also the important towns and cities of India which were prominent tourist destinations in the seventeenth century Mughal India. In this paper we have made an endeavour to study an account of his journey from Surat to Delhi, during the course of which he travelled across Agra and Gwalior on his way to Delhi. While travelling across India he makes important observations regarding certain monuments, communities, customs, culture, cuisines as practiced in northern and central India.

Keywords: *Storia Do Mogor* (Story of the Mughals), Harem (women's quarters), Parsi Community, Sarais (inns/rest-houses), Paan (betel leaf), Pietra Dura (Persian art of inlay in stones for ornamentation of buildings), Gwalior gharana of music.

Travel writing is a literary form used by an author to express his cultural knowledge parallel to the experiences of other cultures in order to create an understanding of world cultures. It has always been an important source of history and has played a great role in the reconstruction of socio-political life of the world community. One cannot help agreeing with Kate Teltscher that "travel writing grants considerable license to its authors; its quasi-scientific status confers authority, while the public expectation of foreign outlandishness ensures that sensational stories are happily consumed" (William, 1908, p. 60).

Foreign travelers' representation of Indian society and their observations have been considered by some modern historians as very significant, simply because large gaps have been left by the indigenous writers, which

could only be filled by the information provided by the foreign travellers. It is also felt that sometimes the local writers are unable to notice and reflect the inherent finer nuances of the life and culture of India which were a very essential part of their being.

Many Europeans travellers came to India during the Mughal period like Jean-Baptist Tavernier, Finch, John Jourdain, Sir Thomas Roe, Peter Mundy (1608-1667), Jean de Thevenot (1666-67), Thomas Coryat, Robert Coverte, Francois Catrou, Angelo Legrenzi, and Francois Bernier etc. and have written extensively about the Mughals. These accounts are indeed very important in so far as they are not premeditated history. They do not try to make their accounts impressive by meaningless rhetoric and did not write to please or pamper the vanity of any sovereign, nor were they afraid of any ruler or Mansabdar. Hence, they wrote freely and fearlessly.

While it may be argued that foreign traveller's accounts cannot be relied upon completely and may appear to be prejudiced or coloured by their own beliefs and perceptions. However, Manucci's observations cannot be outrightly ruled out as irrelevant as he makes his way to India at a young age of fourteen years and lived his entire life in India gathering his knowledge about the Indian culture and developing a comprehension of it with each passing year. Thus, Manucci's work is reflective of the norms, beliefs, lifestyles, perspectives and opinions of the common population who were the subjects of the Mughal empire in the seventeenth century northern India.

Born in 1639 Niccolao Manucci was a Venetian traveller who reached India after he had run away from his native city at the age of fourteen in 1653. He arrived at Surat three years later in 1656. He reached Delhi when the Mughal court had made Delhi their capital and residence. After his arrival in India he settled down, disguised and took up variety of roles and occupations. In Delhi, he took up the work as an artilleryman in the army of Dara Shukoh, the son of Shahjahan (1628-58), who was involved in the succession dispute with his three brothers. Manucci accompanied Dara to Multan and Bhakkar, but in 1659, after Dara's execution by Aurangzeb he reached Delhi in disguise and then moved away eastwards towards Patna, Rajmahal, Dacca and returned to Agra. He then worked as a quack doctor, an artillery captain, an ambassador and finally a foreign correspondent and interpreter for his English masters. He died at Madras in 1717. He wrote his travel accounts *Storio Do Mogor*, a narrative of his journey through Mughal India. This work is an eye witness account of Mughal India encompassing last six years of Shahjahan's reign and that of Aurangzeb's complete rule.

The First Volume includes his initial experiences as a lay traveller from Surat to Delhi via important towns of the country such as Burhanpur - Sironj - Narvar - Gwalior - Agra. Storio Do Mogor reflects his perceptions of culture and gives an idea of the general atmosphere of 17th century Mughal India. An interesting aspect of his journey was his observation of the Indian society as he moved from Surat, where he landed from the ship until he reached the Mughal Capital and was able to seek employment with the Mughal Prince Dara Shikoh.

Catrou, the French historian of the Mughal Empire, wrote his work in 1705 after accessing original manuscript of Manucci written particularly in French, Italian and Portuguese. These original manuscripts of Manucci wandered from India to France, Italy, Holland and England and first came to light in a book form finally in Germany. William Irvine (1840-1911) translated this manuscript in English in 1908.

The journey of Manucci in India began from Surat which he visited three times; he says that "it lay on the banks of a large river at a distance of nine leagues from the sea" (William, 1908, p. 60). He was very pleased to see such a large river of sweet water full of ships. He describes it as the largest port in India, "resorted to by a great number of ships from different parts of Europe, Persia, Arabia, Mecca, Bassora, the coasts of Malabar and Choramandal, Massulapatao (Masulipatam), Bengal, Siam, Acheen, Queddah, the Maldives, Malacca, Batavia, Manilla, China and many other parts of the world" (William, 1908, p. 60). He considered the ships made in India superior to those made in Europe by virtue of availability of timber as he says that "on this river are built very fine lofty ships in a very short time, everything necessary being found, principally excellent timber; for which reason these ships last much longer than those made in Europe" (William, 1908, p. 60).

Thus Surat was a very important port at that time as also a place for ship building with good supply of quality timber and other materials. It had a very cosmopolitan global population as was witnessed by Manucci, he says Surat was inhabited by rich traders, Mohamedan, Hindu, English, Dutch and French. He further records the arrival of French in India and their construction of a Factory in Surat, which had only two Factories-one English and one Dutch when he first visited this port.

He further says that he was amused to see the greater number of the inhabitants dressed in white clothes it might have been due to hot and humid climate of Gujarat. He also reflects on the absence of purdah among

the Hindu women unlike their muslim counterparts of Persia and Turkey. He says "the women mostly Hindus, do not conceal the face as in Persia and Turkey, where women go about with their faces hidden" (William, 1908, p. 61).

He makes a very interesting observation about people spitting something red as blood "I was much surprised to see that almost everybody was spitting something red as blood" (William, 1908, p. 61). He imagined it to be a disease of some kind of broken teeth or gums "I asked an English lady what was the matter, and whether it was the practice in this country for the inhabitants to have their teeth extracted" (William, 1908, p. 61). The lady told him that it was due to a certain aromatic leaf called in the language of the country paan, or in Portuguese betele. The lady made him eat the paan and after eating it he felt as if his head swam to such an extent that he feared he was dying. It caused him to fall down the lady poured into his mouth a little salt and brought him back to his senses and informed him that everyone who ate it for the first time felt the same effects. Manucci also shares the recipe for making the bida of paan . He further highlights this distinct custom "it is an extremely common practice in India to offer betel leaf by way of politeness, chiefly among the great men, who when anyone pays them a visit, offer betel at the time of leaving as a mark of goodwill, and of the estimation in which they hold the person who is visiting them and it would be a great piece of rudeness to refuse it" (William, 1908, p. 62). Eating paan and offering it to guests is still a common practice in northern India.

Manucci has made observations regarding the Parsi community at Surat. He calls them worshippers of fire, who in former days were inhabitants of Persia, but were forced to leave Persia in order to avoid religious persecution with the advent of Islam in Persia. They sent an embassy to the Hindu prince at Surat, asking him to grant them permission to immigrate into his country and they were granted permission. Interestingly Manucci highlights the clause of permission put up by the Hindu prince to the Parsis reflecting the sanctity of cows for Hindus "they should neither slaughter cows nor eat cows' flesh" (William, 1908, p. 62).

He also talks about a very interesting religious belief of Parsis which seems like a superstition, he states that their religious belief is such that, if through misadventure anyone's house takes fire, on no account will he be allowed the fire to be interfered with or extinguished, it being, according to them, the greatest good luck and cause of rejoicing that he could have, he believing that his Gods have conferred on him a special gift and favour, in return for the adorations he has paid to them. And if ever, through negligence, the fire

goes out in any of their houses, a fire that all of them maintain with special care, there is great lamentation, much more than they would make if their nearest relation had died.

He lived in Surat for almost seventy five days and while leaving he said "I was much gratified at seeing such plenty in this place, for I had never had such a satisfaction since I left my Venice" (William, 1908, p. 63). Interestingly before Manucci reached Surat he had already travelled to Smyrna, through Asia Minor to the Persian court at Qazwin, Isfahan finally reaching Gombroon (Bandar Abbas) via Shiraz and Lar, on his way to Surat. This leads to believe that perhaps Surat was a significant port as compared to the ones visited by him as well as a thriving centre of trade in seventeenth century Mughal India. One can easily observe the elements of continuity from the seventeenth century to the twenty-first century in this port town of Gujarat. It continues to be a flourishing city which is famous for its cloth industry and still has a very vibrant spirit and a good number of Parsi population which has contributed to its prosperity (William Irvine, 1908).

From Surat, Manucci travelled to Delhi covering Burhanpur, Handiyah, Sironj, Narwar, Gwalior (Gwaliyar), Dholpur and Agra (Agrah). Burhanpur' was associated with the transportation industry as the city "served as a center of caravan routes connecting Agra with Surat" (Gokhale, 1972). Thus he found many saraes on the way. He says "for the use of wayfarers there are throughout the realms of the mogul on every route many sarais. They are like fortified places with their bastions and strong gates; most of them are built of stone or of brick" (William, 1908, p. 67). He mentions the amenities and security measures available to the travellers in these saraes. He says that the saraes are only intended for travellers, soldiers do not go into them. These were large enough to accommodate 800 to 1000 persons, with their horses, camels and carriages. They contain different rooms, halls and verandas with trees inside the courtyard and many provision shops; also separate quarters for the women and men who are the staff members and arrange the rooms and the beds for travellers. These were constructed at a convenient interval of one day's journey. This fact is also corroborated by the accounts of Peter Mundy, Finch and Dutch Traveller Francisco Pelsaert, in 'Remonstrantie', Jahangir's India'.

The gates of the saraes were shut down at sunset and in the morning at six o'clock, before opening the gates, the watchmen used to give three warnings to the travellers, crying in a loud voice that everyone must look after his own things. After these warnings, if anyone suspected that any of

their property was missing the doors were not opened until the lost thing was not found, by this means they used to make sure of containing any kind of thefts and the thieves if caught were strung up opposite the sarae. At the same time Manucci observes that the faujdars were to supervise the roads and should any merchant or traveller was robbed in daylight, they were obliged to pay compensation. In this manner the security of the belongings of the travellers was ensured. Mughals had taken special care of their tourists and traveller and had made its officials accountable for their safety and security (Mohd. Athar Ali, 2008)

The journey of Manucci continues and he reaches Gwalior (he spells it Gualior). He gives a vivid description of the Gwalior fort and says that the fortress is on the top of a great mountain, it is in the middle of a fertile plain, and thus there is no other high ground from which it could be attacked. He further says that all around this mountain are to be seen many balconies, lanterns, kiosks, rooms and verandas, in different styles of architecture, with Hindu sculpture, all of this making the view most agreeable and pleasant to the visitor.

The Gwalior Gharana which is extremely famous for its contribution to Indian classical music, finds testimony in the writings of Manucci. "In the town which lies at the foot of the hill, there dwell many musicians, who gain a livelihood with their instruments; and many persons maintain that it was on this mountain that the God Apollo first started Hindu music" (William, 1908, p. 69). It is interesting to note that since Macucci was an Italian, he was unaware of the Indian pantheon and hence he created a parallel with the Greek God Apollo.

From Gwalior he reached Agra or Akbarabad (built by Akbar). Manucci gives a very interesting detail regarding the city of Agra, he suggests that Akbar wanted to build the palaces in this city with copper and bronze, but since enough metal could not be procured to erect lofty palaces such as the king desired and also because these would not be habitable in the summers on account of high temperatures or in the winters from great cold, Akbar had to abandon the idea. This is again very significant as this plan of Akbar does not find mention in any of the contemporary literary sources.

He described the city of Agra as being situated in a great open plain on the eastern bank of the river Jamnah, which divides the city into two halves. The city was surrounded by many gardens. It was not walled, but nevertheless had great gateways in the principal streets. The fortress was placed on the bank of the river, with a ditch which could be filled with water from the

river. On both the sides the fortress was adorned with beautiful palaces for the royal family.

Manucci described Sikandra (near Agra) in the following words, "Although Akbar made little account of his soul, but took care to prepare a resting-place for his body with extreme magnificence. For the site he chose a garden on the road to Delhi" (William, 1908, p. 137). He describes the mausoleum as very large dome of great height, made all of marble adorned with many kinds of precious stones, the roof all glazed and enamelled in many pleasing colours. It seems that here he is referring to the Persian art of *Pietra Dura* that was employed to adorn most of the Mughal buildings from the time of Jahangir. Describing Sikandra he talks about drawings of certain figures which were inspired by the themes of Christian religion, like the Virgin Mary, Saint Ignatius and several other human figures, which symbolises Akbar's liberal and secular approach towards other religions. Manucci at the same time informs that Aurangzeb ordered a coat of whitewash to be applied on these wall paintings as the drawings of human figures were prohibited by Islam. This coat of whitewash must have been so flimsy or transparent that Manucci was able to see through these. He gives very interesting information here that these paintings were made only because they were novelties in those days and not on account of any religious affinity. This focuses on Manucci's appreciation of the works of Mughal art.

It is rather disappointing that Manucci has not given any detailed description regarding the Taj Mahal even though he was a close associate of Dara Shikoh and hence close to Shah Jahan. He has only made the following comment "Shahjahan gave orders for the construction of Taj Mahal's (Mumtaz Mahal has been described as Taj Mahal) mausoleum opposite the royal palace at Agra with great expenditure. It is in two stories, in the lower being deposited the body of his beloved wife. No one may see her tomb, for it is in charge of women and eunuchs" (William, 1908, p. 176)). This is yet another instance highlighting the tradition of *pardah* followed by the Mughals that even the grave of the Mughal queen was guarded by the women and eunuchs.

This journey comes to an end when he reaches Dihli (Delhi). Manucci tells that after the death of his beloved queen Taj Mahal, Shahjahan selected in Hindustan the city of Delhi in order to build there a new city as his capital, and thereby perpetuate his memory. He found the climate of Delhi better than Agra and used the ruins of ancient Delhi and Tughlaqabad for building

this new city. He gave it a new name Shahjahanabad- that is to say 'built by Shahjahan'.

Describing Delhi he further says that Shahjahan expended large sums in the construction of this city, which was on the banks of the river Jamnah and is in the shape of an imperfect half-moon. He said that Delhi had twelve gates and the walls of the city were built half with bricks and half of stones, at every hundred paces was constructed a strong bastion. The chief gates were the ones leading to Agra and Lahore. Describing Delhi, he says that within the city there are large and well built bazaars, where all kind of things were sold. The city on the eastern side had no fortification. In one corner of the city on the northern side was the royal fortress facing the east. In front of it between the fort and the river, a sufficient space was left for the elephant fights. The king used to sit on the window to look on, as likewise the women, but they were behind gratings. The fort was encircled by walls of large red stones. It had two gates leading into the city. Shahjahan planted two large gardens, one on the northern side the other on the southern side and in order to irrigate these he had constructed a deep canal from a river adjacent to the city of Sirhind, one hundred leagues from Delhi, Manucci says that this canal used to flow into the fortress and filled the water-channels, into which Shahjahan had ordered some beautiful fish to be thrown with gold rings in their heads. Opposite to the fort was the Royal Mosque where the king used to go every week to offer prayers, perhaps here he mentions about the Jama Masjid.

With regard to foreign travellers account, Romila Thapar is of the view that it must be remembered that the authors were foreign to India, and therefore looked on the country and its customs with alien eyes. The undertone of awe and bewilderment that creeps into their writings cannot be taken too seriously. But the details mentioned in Manucci's accounts can be corroborated through other sources available on Mughal India. For instance, regarding his bewilderment on betel leaf or paan Abul Fazal has observed that the Hindus had been using paan (tambula) since ancient times; he says that properly speaking it is a vegetable, but connoisseurs called it an excellent fruit. Bida or folded paan offered to a courtier by the king was a mark of royal favour which he received with the greatest courtesy. Normally too, paan was offered as a token of respect and goodwill and was duly received with courtesy. Amir Khusrau comments that it was an excellent fruit like the flower of a garden and it was the finest fruit of Hindustan. Thus from almost all the evidences available we can see that

Mughals made paan an institution and paan service an etiquette, which has lasted to this day. (R.Nath, 2008)

Similarly regarding Manucci's observations of the bazaars of Delhi and Agra, Abul Fazal mentions that Akbar instituted The Khush Roz (the happy day) or the day of the fancy bazaar, Meena Bazar on the third feast day(Friday) of every month. A bazaar exclusively for the ladies was held. The merchants of age brought articles from all countries. The ladies of the harem and other women attended it and there was brisk buying and selling. The king used such days to select articles which he liked and also fixed prices of the things. He utilised this occasion also to scrutinize the affairs of the harem people, and to arrange marriages of boys and girls. To such days, he gave the name of Kush-roz or the joyful days. Jehangir and Shah Jahan continued to follow the custom. Thus Mina Bazar was also institutionalised. (S.A.A.Rizvi, 2002)

Certain inferences can be derived from the observations of Manucci regarding seventeenth century Mughal India, firstly there are elements of continuity as far as customs and traditions are concerned and secondly we find that Mughals took special care of the tourists and travellers coming into their kingdom and gave them a warm welcome and significant freedom to explore and express. It is interesting to note that many of the monuments mentioned by him are still a living legacy and major tourist attractions even today. Some of Manucci's descriptions such as the musical traditions of Gwalior gharana, the religious beliefs of Parsi community, Surat as a flourishing commercial centre of Mughal India, the liberal approach of Akbar, the Mina Bazaars etc. appear to be factual and relevant. His long stay in India from 1653 to 1708 placed him in a position to appreciate things better than any other European could do. K. S. Lal's overall consideration of European travellers' representation of Mughals is: "They [travellers] might be guilty of hasty generalizations, but not of willful scandal mongering. The essentials in the picture of Mughal harem-life, as presented by them collectively, are interesting, informative, and by and large true. In short, European travellers in the Mughal Empire have left a factual picture of the life in the Mughal harem" (William, 1908, p. 204).

While critically assessing the writings of Manucci, a number of styles emerge ranging from the documentary to the evocative, from literary to journalistic, and from the humorous to the serious. Perceival Spear wrote "Manucci's picture of India is that of an impressionist's bold blending of colours, for accuracy of portrayal one must go to men like Thomas Roe, Tavernier, Gemelli, Carreri and for larger minded reflections to great

Francois Bernier". Some historians have called his work "chatty and gossipy" however, Manucci's work provides a significant picture of the general atmosphere of the country at the time of the Mughals in the seventeenth century as he was an acute observer and had an advantage in his very much longer experience of the country. His work has also been looked up as a "point of view of a man on the fringe of court and aristocratic society" which lends credibility to his account. Thus regarding seventeenth-century India, Manucci is one of the best possible sources and has rightly been called a "mirror of seventeenth-century India".

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