



INDIA IN PERCEPTION : AN INTEROGATION INTO EARLY TRAVEL NARRATIVES ON INDIA

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ABSTRACT

History is often based on narratives. Travel writing is one of the major sources of historiography. The account left by the early travelers mapped India in the mindscapes of the foreigners. Travel narratives have played a major part in rediscovering our past.

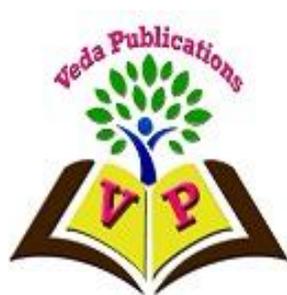
Travel writings are not merely accounts of a land left by the travelers. Often travel writings had specific goals to accomplish there were evident political aspirations behind travel narratives. The early travelers who were often sponsored by the Monarchs aimed at studying about distant places and to explore possibilities of acquiring wealth and territories. Travel writings convey a lot about the socio-economic ethos of the period in which it was written. Especially in an age which lacked easy modes of communication, travel writing was a major source to know about a distant place. Hence travel writings had a major role to play in 'mapping' nations.

The paper is an attempt to interrogate the representation of India in the early travel narratives. The paper centers around the accounts of travel writers like Alberuni, Ibn Batuta, Francois Bernier and Huien Tsang. The intention of the travel narratives and the Eurocentric notions which recurs in many of the travel narratives are subjects of examination in the paper. The politics behind the travel narratives is a matter which needs to be examined. The paper examines how the accounts of travel writers about India influenced the perception about India among people of other nationalities. It observes how India was mapped in history through travel writings

Keywords: *Travel Writings, India, Alberuni, Ibn Batuta, Francois Bernier, Huien Tsang etc.*

Citation:

- APA** Vijayan,B.L.(2017) India in Perception : An Interogation into Early Travel Narratives on India. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature- JOELL*, 4(1), 26-30.
- MLA** Vijayan,Bhagya Lakshmi. "India in Perception : An Interogation into Early Travel Narratives on India" *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature- JOELL* 4.1(2017):26-30.





TRAVEL NARRATIVES AS A MEDIUM OF MAPPING LANDSCAPES AND MINDSCAPES

History is a branch of study which greatly relies on narratives. We rediscover our own past through the accounts left by our forefathers. Being a branch of study which largely relies on documented evidences, history is greatly indebted to travel narratives.

Travel narratives were not merely accounts left by people who travelled across nations. Often travelers of the ancient ages had definite goals to accomplish. There were evident political aspirations behind travel narratives of ancient times. With the advent of geographical discoveries travel became a diplomatic venture for many rulers and still it continues to be so. The fifteenth – sixteenth centuries which witnessed the widening of geographical horizons was marked with state sponsored travels which often aimed to fulfil the colonial aspirations of the monarchs. Almost all the nations started extensive travel programs to explore the world and make commercial profits from it.

The early travel narratives often aimed at introducing the nations which they discovered to their own people at their home nations. The writers had to justify their own enterprises, to take possession of the new lands, riches and people for the monarchs, who had sponsored their undertakings, and to describe geographic and economic conditions in order to help those who were about to follow them. There were attempts to belittle the hardships and to overstate the possibilities of the future.

TRAVEL WRITINGS ON INDIA

India was one of favorite destinations of the travelers. Being so, there are numerous travel writings on India. Alberuni, Ibn batuta, Francois Bernier, Hiuen Tang, Fahiean, Megasthenes etc... are some of the few early travel writers who visited India and wrote about their experiences in India. This paper is an attempt to interrogate the representation of India in the early travel narratives. The paper centers around the accounts of travel writers like Alberuni, Ibn Batuta, Francois Bernier and Hiuen Tsang. The intention of the travel narratives and the Eurocentric notions which recurs in many of the travel narratives are subjects of examination in the

paper. The politics behind the travel narratives is a matter which needs to be examined. The paper examines how the accounts of travel writers about India influenced the perception about India among people of other nationalities. It observes how India was mapped in history through travel writings.

ALBERUNI'S OBSERVATIONS ABOUT INDIA

Alberuni was a Persian traveler who visited India during the attack of Muhamud of Ghazni. His book, Kitab-ul Hind gives a detailed description about the geography, religion, society, language and culture of India from his own perspective.

Alberuni observes that the 'hindus' are different in every respects. "They differ from us in everything which other nations have in common". He observes the linguistic differences in India. He says, 'If you want to conquer this difficulty, you will not find it easy because the language is of an enormous range, both in words and in inflections. Alberuni is of the view that it is difficult to learn Indian languages, especially because nobody could understand the different meanings of a word unless he understands the context in which it is used. Hindus boast of this enormous range of language, which is actually a defect.

He says that the languages in India are divided into a neglected vernacular one used by common people and a classical one used only by the upper and educated class. "Our tongue and ovula could scarcely manage to pronounce them nor could our ears distinguish them from similar sounds. It is therefore difficult to express Indian words in our writing. According to him, the Indian scribes are careless and does not take pains to produce correct and well collated copies. As a result their books lack originality and are often full of faults.

Secondly, they totally differ from us in religion. We believe in nothing that they believe and vice-versa. They are very fanatic toward foreigners and call them as 'Mlechas' i.e., impure and avoid all contacts with them. They avoid intermarriages and don't even sit or eat near foreigners. They don't encourage even the children, to contact with foreigners. They create a furious picture of the foreigners among the children and frighten them with foreigner's appearances, dressings etc...



Alberuni makes a critical observation about the nationalities. The Hindus believe that there is no country like theirs, no religion like theirs, no kings like theirs, no science like theirs. They are haughty, foolishly vain and self conceited and stolid. The ancestors of Indians used to acknowledge the greatness of scholars from other nations; he takes an instance from Varahamihira who praises the Greeks for their advancement in learning. However, the modern Indians are so self appraising that they don't acknowledge the greatness of scholar from other nations. If a Persian speaks about their achievements, the Indians condemn them to be liars.

Being such the state of things in India, Alberuni found it difficult to work his way into the subject. He points out that even the science of Hindus had no consistency. The so called scientific theorems of the Hindus are in utter confusion. He speaks about certain contradictions in Hindu philosophy and religion.

IBN BATUTA ON INDIA

Ibn Batuta was an Arabian traveler who visited India during the reign of Muhammad Bin Thughlaq. He was appointed as the Quasi by the emperor. His descriptions on the places where he visited are given in the book titled, *Kitab-ul-rehla*.

Ibn Batuta describes India as a place with plenty of opportunities for those who have necessary drive, resources and skills. He describes the colorful markets and crowded streets of India. The cities were densely populated and prosperous though they were disrupted by wars occasionally.

Delhi is described as a largest city in India with huge population. He served as the Quasi of Delhi under Muhammad Bin Tughlaq. He found Indian agriculture very productive because of the fertility of soil that enabled the farmers to cultivate two crops a year. The sub continent was well integrated with inter Asian networks of trade and commerce. He gives a good description of Indian trade. Indian products were in high demand. Certain varieties of fine muslin were very expensive that they could be brought only by the nobles and the very rich. The city of Daulatabad is also described in his accounts. There was a market place of male and female singers. He describes that trade facilities were well maintained. Almost all trade routes had inns and

guest houses. He was amazed by the efficiency of the postal system. He describes two kinds of postal systems, the horse post and foot post.

Ibn Batuta describes everything that excited and interested him. It can be seen that his descriptions are on the whole positive observation. He was fascinated by many things which he saw in India. Many of the things which he saw in India were unfamiliar to him and his countrymen.

"The betel is a tree which is cultivated in the same manner as the grape-vine; ... The betel has no fruit and is grown only for the sake of its leaves... The manner of its use is that before eating it one takes areca nut; this is like a nutmeg but is broken up until it is reduced to small pellets, and one places these in his mouth and chews them. Then he takes the leaves of betel, puts a little chalk on them, and masticates them along with the betel"

This is how he describes Beetal tree which is unfamiliar to his readers. This exemplifies the sense of wonder in batuta's descriptions.

The truthfulness of his descriptions is debatable matter among the scholars. There are observations that many of his account are fictional. However, his observations about India under Thuglaq seems to be genuine. He has given a vivid description of Muslim traders in the Malabar coast. There are opinions that being an Arabian traveler who wrote mainly for the Muslim audience, he might have exaggerated the dominance of Muslim traders at Malabar Coast. Batuta's descriptions give us a picture of India during the sultanate period.

FRANCOIS BERNIER'S OBSERVATIONS ON INDIA

Francois Bernier was a French doctor, philosopher and historian. He came to the Mughal empire in search of opportunity. He was closely associated with the Mughal court. His association with Prince Dara Shiko is mentioned in his book. He gives a clear picture of the Mughal empire in detail. The Mughal sultan and queens were unfamiliar to the foreign readers were introduced to the readers by him. The insurgencies and revolts during the period are explained in detail. He travelled to several parts of the country and gives a vivid description about the things which he saw. His writings were dedicated to Louis XIV, the king of France. He compared everything that he saw in India with that of the West.



He considered the east to be inferior to the west in every sense. He emphasized the superiority of the west. His representation of India works in the model of binary opposition. He considered India to be the inverse of the west.

He condemned the lack of private property in India. As the land was owned by the rulers, people were not encouraged to invest on the land and strive for progress. As an extension of this, Bernier described Indian

'Society as consisting of undifferentiated masses of impoverished people, subjugated by a small minority of a very rich and powerful ruling class. Between the poorest of the poor and the richest of the rich, there was no social group or class worth the name. Bernier confidently asserted: "There is no middle state in India."

This, then, is how Bernier saw the Mughal Empire— its king was the king of "beggars and barbarians"; its cities and towns were ruined and contaminated with "ill air"; and its fields, "overspread with bushes" and full of "pestilential marshes". And, all this was because of one reason: crown ownership of land. However, there are certain discrepancies in his accounts. None of the official documents suggest that the ruler was the sole owner of the land.

Bernier's description had a great influence among the western theorists from the eighteenth century onwards. Montesquieu developed the idea of oriental despotism from this. This established that the eastern rulers were despotic and ruled over the poor and downtrodden without having any regard for them.

Bernier also observes the social life of India. He describes Sati which was one of the common practices of India then. While some women embraced death while others were forced to die. He sympathetically describes sati committed by a twelve year old girl. He acknowledges women's participation in the agricultural and commercial activities. He mentions that it was unlikely that the women were confined to their private space at home.

HIUEN TSANG ON INDIA

Hiuen Tsang visited India during the reign of Harsha Vardhana. He was a pious Buddhist who came to visit sacred places of Buddhism and to collect sacred Buddhist texts. His book, Si-yu-ki gives a

description of India during the reign of Harsha. He praises the Indian people and the administration. "With respect to the ordinary people", he says, although they are naturally light-minded, yet they are upright and honorable. In money matters, they are without craft, and in administering justice, they are considerate...They are not deceitful or treacherous in their conduct, and are faithful in their oaths and promises. In their rules of government there is remarkable rectitude, whilst in their behaviour there is much gentleness and sweetness. With respect to criminals or rebels, these are few in number, and only occasionally troublesome."

Hiuen Tsang observes that the education of Indians was organized and began early. He describes five kinds of shastras which are (1) Grammar (2) Science of arts and crafts (3) Medicin (4) Logic and (5) Philosophy. Hien Tsang admired the love for learning among Indians. Kumbha mela at Prayag was another event which fascinated him. He appreciates the tolerance of Harsha who celebrated Hindu festivals in spite of being a Buddhist. He used to distribute all the surplus of his treasury during this mela every five years.

Scholars have observed certain discrepancies in his accounts on India. He says that robbery wasn't common in India; however, he himself was robbed many times. His descriptions are often exaggerated. Critics point out that being a foreigner, he might have misunderstood many things. He might have aimed to praise the Indian rulers too.

AN INTERROGATION INTO THE TRAVEL WRITINGS ON ANCIENT INDIA

It needs to be noted that the travel writing analyzed here belongs to four distinct periods in Indian history. Alberuni wrote about India before the era of Delhi sultanate He was the first muslim scholar to study India. It can be seen that Alberuni's accounts about India is marked by his own prejudices. It is notable that he use the term 'Hindus' for Indians. In fact, in the early ages, the word Hindu didn't had the religious connotation that we attribute to it today. The people who lived in the region that lies to the east of river 'Sindhu' was termed as Indians. He considered the Hindus to be a homogenous entity who were inferior to the Persians. He makes sarcastic observations about the attitudes of Indian scholars.



Indian science is described to be illogical and order less. His aversion to Indian philosophy, religion and culture and his own perception about the superiority of the Persians is evident in his writings.

Ibn Batuta describes India during the period of Delhi sultans. It needs to be noted that he was employed as a Quasi under Muhammad Bin Thughlaq. His descriptions are comparatively favorable. Many of the things which he saw in India were unfamiliar to him. He aimed to encourage other fellow travelers to explore India. There are observations that many of his descriptions were exaggerated versions and not based on realities.

Francois Bernier was the 'western traveler' who was under the allegiance of Louis XIV. His descriptions have sharp Eurocentric under tones. He compares everything in India with that in the west. As Edward Said observes, 'the west has created a dichotomy, between the reality of the east and the romantic notions of the orient'. The west observes the Middle East and Asia with prejudice and racism. This is quite evident in the writings of Bernier.

Hieun Tsang's writings are on the whole, positive observations in India. Being a Buddhist who was under the patronage of Harsha, his descriptions are likely to have aimed to please the ruler. Many of the troubles which he faced in India were not mentioned. His descriptions are often exaggerated versions of the realities.

The writings of the travelers helped to produce an image of India for the people outside the country. This was circulated through the published works of travelers. The travelers who wrote about the nations which they visited had well defined aims. Many of them worked under the monarchs and acted as their agents. Being so, they had certain obligations to fulfill.

The picture of India created by these writers further encouraged the colonial project to explore India and utilize her resources for commercial motives. The descriptions of the insurgencies and internal rebellions made it evident that the Indian rulers lacked unity and integrity. This made it further easier for the diplomatic west to find easy means to colonize the nation.

The inherent defects of Indian social system were keenly observed by the west. Everything that

was Indian was dubbed to be inferior and needed to be changed. The 'white man's burden' of civilizing the east was taken up as the mission of colonialism.

Thus it can be seen that the travel writing by the foreign travelers had an immense role in the later developments of India. It mapped India in the mindscape of the foreigners. The travel writings provided a picture of the socio-economic ethos of India before the foreigners.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that travel writing is a genre of literature which is of great importance. It acquaints a person with a different reality. Travel writing had prominent role right from the dawn of history. It is often a major source of historiography. Travel writing continues to have great contemporary relevance. It often introduces us to unfamiliar worlds. Being documented evidence, they too will form a part of documented history tomorrow. Travel writings have timeless importance. It maps nations in the mindscape of the readers.

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