MUGHAL ERA SINDH IN THE TRAVEL NARRATIVES AND ACCOUNTS OF EUROPEANS

Humera Naz

Introduction

There is an abundance of source material for studying the political history of Sindh during the Mughal era, which provides meticulous accounts of the politics and administrative achievements of the period but reveal very little about the lives of the common people. There are no accounts of the toil and sufferings of the common people because these might negate the praises showered by the court historians on their patron rulers. As a result, very rarely do historical accounts make any reference to the life and conditions of the masses. However there are incidental remarks about the social aspect of society in some compilations of non-political genre (such as hagiographic literature, biographical dictionaries, epistles, manuals, poetic expressions etc). The other source which may be used for studying the socio-economic and cultural history of the region are the accounts of European travelers who visited Sindh in that era.

During the sixteenth, seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a number of European travellers set out for India. Some, like Ralph Fitch, came in search of commercial opportunities, others, like William Hawkins and Sir Thomas Roe, came as ambassadors to represent their kings in the courts of the Mughal Emperors (r. 1526 - 1857 CE). Reports compiled by these diplomats, along with accounts by other non-English European travellers are preserved in print form. The reports diverge in content and quality. There is the dry, straightforward description of events by Fitch and the graphic account of W. Glanius, who narrates how his expedition was shipwrecked in Bengal and he and his companions were forced by hunger to rob graves for human flesh.[1]

These accounts are based on the European travellers' worldview and are therefore of limited use as sources for sixteenth or seventeenth century Indian history. Nonetheless these accounts do disclose the European

[1] See W. Glanius, *A Relation of an Unfortunate Voyage to the Kingdom of Bengala* (London, 1682).

travellers' observations about the land and people they came across in their eastward travels. They therefore, can be examined to find out how travellers from foreign lands viewed Indian civilization. These early European travellers belonged to what is known in history as the European age of exploration. Spain and Portugal were in the forefront of the age of exploration in the late fifteenth century, when their ships, carrying adventurers and traders set forth to make direct commercial contacts with the resource-rich countries of the 'orient'. In 1498, Vasco da Gama's fleet became the first European fleet to reach India. Hundreds of years prior to da Gama's expedition, Europe had already established commercial contact with India through the Arab traders and other intermediaries.[2] By establishing direct commercial links with India, the Portuguese saved the cost of relying on middlemen.

The British began exploration a century later. The British East India Company was set up in London in 1600 CE, in order to encourage commercial ties between England and India. At this time, the Mughals were the dominant political power in north India. By the 1580s, the Mughal Empire controlled much of the Indo-Gangetic Plain, parts of the Deccan, and parts of modern-day Afghanistan. The European travellers who visited north India came into contact with the Mughals and observed how the Mughal Emperors expanded their empire, so that it included more territory than the dominions of the preceding Indian dynasties. We find elaborate and interesting accounts of mughal era Sindh in the writings of the European travellers such as Walter Payton (1613 CE), Nicholas Withington (1613-1614 CE), S. Manrique (1640-1641 CE), Niccolao Manucci (1659 CE) and Alexander Hamilton (1699 CE). These seventeenth century European travellers offer descriptions of the distinct communities of Sindh, its fauna and flora, rivers, mountains, customs and institutions. In addition, there are some official letters written by those running the English Factory (1635-62 CE) which shed light on the contemporary commercial, social and political conditions of Sindh.[3]

[2] Mohan Mishra, Narottam Mishra, *India through Alien Eyes* (Darbhanga: Balboa Press, 2012), 82.

[3] Mubarak Ali, *The English Factory in Sindh* (Lahore: Fiction House, 2005), 4.

Sindh in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries:
Seen through European eyes

The travellers who visited Sindh may rightly be categorized according to their profession, such as merchants, missionaries, spies, envoys, administrators and adventurers etc. The first European to arrive in Sindh was a Portuguese navigator Fernão Mendes Pinto in 1537. In 1555, the Portuguese were invited by Mirza Isa Tarkhan (d. 1565) to help him against his rival (the native Samma rulers of Sindh). The Portuguese left Sindh after plundering Thatta and Lahribandar.[4] Unfortunately, most of the records of the Portuguese travellers, except for a few, have been lost. Same is the case with the Dutch. The accounts compiled by the Italian, Spanish, German, French and British travellers, have been better preserved. Their accounts vary according to their pursuits and professions. Merchants travelling through land and sea routes noted things that were of commercial interest, however, they also highlighted the economic conditions and geography of the region. The writings of the missionaries give interesting accounts of a social and religious nature. The adventurers' memoirs include information about different aspects of the land and people. These three categories of European travellers first visited Sindh during the Mughal era.

Nicholas Withington was not the first Britisher who visited Sindh (in 1612-1616) but the first one who wrote his memoirs. Before him, Anthony Starkey arrived in Thatta but unfortunately died shortly after his arrival, and there is no record of his voyage.[5] Withington was an employee of the East India Company, and he visited Sindh as an attendant of Captain Best. Best and his attendant had also been to Surat and Agra. They traversed Tharparkar, Hyderabad and Karachi districts in Sindh. Withington's experience of traveling to Sindh was not very pleasant, for he met with many misfortunes. In the course of his travels, he was robbed and kept hostage by a local chief. Later, he was released but was again robbed, this time, by his guides. Thus his accounts highlight the disorder and chaos prevalent in parts of Sindh during the early seventeenth century and reveal that the writ of the Mughals over the distant areas of their empire was not strong. Withington gives descriptions about the rich wild life of Sindh which included wild asses, red deer, foxes and other wild beasts. He paid toll tax

[4] Mubarak Ali, *Essays on the History of Sindh* (Lahore: Fiction House, 2005), 51.
[5] Sir William Foster, *The Early Travels of India 1583-1619* (Oxford University Press, 1921), 188-233.

for his camel to the Mughal authorities. He states that the Juno region (on the banks of river Indus, eight miles below Thatta) neither acknowledged Mughal authority nor collected any tax on behalf of the authorities. It was infested by robbers, who did not spare travellers. Whenever a Mughal army chased these robbers, they flew into the mountains.[6] Withington's description of his voyage, calls attention to the Mughal authority's failure to control law and order outside the main towns and to maintain the safety of the highways of commerce. Yet, his accounts about the kindheartedness and charity extended by the common people to an ill-fated and helpless foreigner are quite pleasing.

A prominent Portuguese missionary Frey Sebastian Manrique who was attached to the Bengal Augustinian Mission of Hugli was sent to Arakan (extreme north-eastern territory of Mughal India) by the Father provincial for India. He was engaged in missionary work during his stay in India in 1640-41 CE; and his work brought him to Sindh in 1641 CE during the reign of the emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628 - 1658 CE). He lived in Sindh for a month only, and then left for Jaisalmir. One of the purposes of his visit was to repair the church in Thatta. As a Roman Catholic missionary, he saw the practices of Hinduism as the delusions of a poor misguided section of humanity. Sorley remarks that "He is, however, an acute and accurate observer but is no stylist and...does not hesitate to borrow without acknowledgement from the works of other observers."[7] The seat of the Augustinian church was at Debal or Lahribandar in Sindh and he secured royal permission for the reconstruction of the churches and residences which were razed to the ground on the orders of Emperor Shah Jahan a few years earlier in 'Sinde' (Sindh).

Manrique's description of Sindh differs completely from the accounts of Nicholas Withington written twenty-seven years earlier. He describes his journey down the river to Bhakkar: "We sailed peacefully...keeping careful watch at night, finding as we advanced [in our journey] an abundance of

[6] H. T. Sorley, *Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit: His Poetry, Life and Times: A S tudy of Literary, Social and Economic Conditions in the Eighteenth Century Sindh*, Reprint (Karachi: Sindh Kitab Ghar, 1966), 69-71.

[7] Ibid, 72.

good cheap provisions in every place we anchored at."[8] He further mentions about the town of Bhakkar that there was considerable traffic there owing to the camel-trains that left every year for Persia, Khurasan and other distant places. The town was hemmed in by gardens and groves of trees, making the environment fresh and cheerful. He refers to Sehwan as an uncultivated territory, a spot notorious for pirates.[9] The native armed guards of Manrique's boat were so inexperienced with their matchlock guns that the pirates approached them on both sides. In the scuffle that ensued, one Hindu soldier died, who was incinerated on the bank of the river according to Hindu rites. Manrique write about these ceremonies with scornful contempt.[10]

Manrique's accounts further reveal that the merchants and traders, who received the Royal Decree from the Mughal Emperor or the provincial authorities, were exempted from custom duties.[11] When he arrived in Lahribandar, he had with him, a royal patent issued by Asaf Khan. The governor treated him in a friendly manner. He thrice placed the royal *farman* on his head and kissed it as many times. It indicates the significance attached by the governor to a letter from the imperial court, which the governor was at once able to identify from the writing and seal. It also seems that the law and order conditions had been much better in 1641 than at the time of Withington's visit. This proves that Shah Jahan had made utmost efforts to control lawlessness and to establish his authority over far away regions of his territory after the death of his father Jahangir.

Manrique also writes about the Christian missionary activities in Thatta. The church was renovated under the supervision of the Mughal governor of Thatta.[12] Manrique refers to Thatta as very rich, both on account of a fertile soil and raw material used for manufacturing of beautiful cloth which was exported to all parts of Asia and even to Portugal. Cattle were in such abundance that their skins were exported to various countries, used by the latter for making leather. The Portuguese called it 'Sinde leather'.

---

[8] F. S. Manrique, "Travels of F. S. Manrique 1629-43", in E. D. Maclangan (ed.), *Journal of the Punjab Historical Society,* Vol. 1 (1911-12): 231-232; See also C. E. Lenard and H. Hosten (eds.), Vol. 2 (Oxford: Hakluyt Society, 1927).

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid, 233-35.

[11] Ibid, 159.

[12] Ibid.

People used it as covering for their tables, cushions, quilts (called Sinde cushions) and to decorate their drawing rooms. In the city, there were a great number of foreign residents, and the harbour was visited by various vessels of different sizes, carrying all kinds of goods.[13] Manrique found many characteristics of Thatta, at that time the metropolis of Mughal Sindh, quite interesting, but his observations are mostly tinted by his religious biases. As a missionary he was much more interested in the conduct of the local people, rather than their economic activities. The city was, in his view, "a sink of iniquity in which unnatural vice flourished openly and catamites dressed as women paraded the streets."[14]

The Venetian adventurer, Niccolao Manucci is described by Irvine as 'a Pepys[15] of Moghul India'.[16] Manucci visited Sindh at a very young age and participated in the siege of Bhakkar in 1659 CE. Shortly after the death of his master Lord Bellomont, he was employed in the services of Prince Dara Shikoh. As an artilleryman he served the forces of Dara in the War of Succession with Aurangzeb. At that time he was around nineteen or twenty years old which is probably why, he recorded his experiences as a story or a romance. He compiled his memoirs long after the siege of Bhakkar. Manucci vividly gives an eye-witness account of this politically significant siege. According to his accounts, both armies gave tough fight to each other. He writes that Dara's fleet consisted of five hundred and seven boats, "loaded with supplies of food requisite for a beleaguered citadel", and eight cannons carrying shot of from 60 to 120 pounds besides light artillery, ammunition and other war equipment. He also mentions that there were twenty-two Europeans of different nationalities garrisoned in the fortress of Bhakkar and a force of two thousand men including Pathans, Sayyids, Mughals and Rajputs selected on the orders of Dara. Manucci was chosen as captain of the Europeans with double pay. Manucci also states

[13] Ibid, 159-160.

[14] Sorley, *Shah Abdul Latif of Bhitt*, 76.

[15] Samuel Pepys (1633-1703 CE) was an English naval administrator and Member of Parliament who is now most famous for the detailed private diary he kept from 1660 until 1669. This diary is one of the most important primary sources for the English Restoration period. It provides a combination of personal revelation and eyewitness accounts of great events, such as the Great Plague of London, the Second Dutch War and the Great Fire of London.

[16] Cf. Margaret Irvine (ed.), *Niccolao Manucci, A Pepys of Mogul India*, trans. by William Irvine **(**Delhi: Srishti Publications, 1999).

that Dara evacuated the fort to save it from famine and destruction.[17] The prices of scarce food items rose so rapidly that Manucci bought one chicken for thirteen rupees while two days before the evacuation, he bought two calves for six hundred rupees and paid one rupee for every ounce of butter.[18]

Besides accounts of a political nature, Manucci also sheds light on the socio-economic conditions of the region. He writes that the port of Lahribandar was full of ships from Arabia and Persia. The traders from these countries had brought with them dates, horses, pearls, incense, gum mastic, henna-leaves and precious stones to sell in the region. To take back home, they had purchased white and black sugar, butter, olive oil, cocos, white linen and printed cloth from Sindh. He mentions the existence of numerous English, Dutch and Portuguese factories in Sindh.[19] He also describes River Indus as "a very large river being formed of seven rivers which flow down from the interior of the country." [20] He further adds that the people of Sindh manufacture many kinds of white linen and printed cloth, which is exported to other countries. Though Manucci's accounts vividly describe the Mughal warfare techniques on the banks of river Indus, he does not provide any record of the society and culture of Sindh.

Another famous European who visited Sindh, Captain Alexander Hamilton was a Scot. He was a merchant, adventurer and traveller; was well-educated and spent a significant period starting from 1688 CE to 1723 CE in trading and travelling by sea and land to most of the trading countries and islands. The captain dedicated his work to the Duke of Hamilton. When he arrived at Lahribandar, he did not find it impressive. It appeared to him like a village of a hundred houses built of crooked sticks and mud, but having a large stone fort with four or five big guns mounted over it to safeguard the traders from being robbed by the Balochs and Makranis in the west and the Jams in the east. These accounts affirm that the Jams' predeliction for banditry had thrived for the last eighty years and that the later Mughal authority in Sindh was in no way better than the earlier one in maintaining law and order. Hamilton observed that the swampy nature of

[17] Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor* or *Mogul India (1653-1708)*, ed. W. Irvine, Vol. I (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1989), 353-354.
[18] Ibid, 354.
[19] Ibid, 59-60.
[20] Ibid, 56-57.

the land on the Indus delta and the rapid tides of the river provided the robbers protection, as it made pursuit of the looters quite difficult. It was in vogue to provide security to the camel caravans with a guard of one or two hundred horsemen; but in 1699 these guards were as unreliable as the guards hired by Withington in 1613 for his safety. Hamilton states, "But often these protectors suffer the *cafillas* to be robbed, pretending the robbers are too numerous to be restrained by their small force and afterwards come in share with the robbers."[21] Some other sources too corroborate Hamilton's accounts about the frequent robbing of caravans in the area.

Hamilton describes Thatta as "the emporium of the province, a very large and rich city". He was awestruck by the grandeur of the place where he stayed, describing it as "a large convenient house of fifteen rooms with good warehouses. The stairs from the street were entire porphyry of ten feet long, of a bright yellow colour and as smooth as glass."[22] He gives an elaborate description of the capital city, the port of Lahribandar and the means of transport used for carrying goods which were mostly bullock and camel carts. Dangan jo goth was a halting station for the travellers between Thatta and Lahribandar. The halt was meant to secure the caravans from being set upon at night. There were almost twenty little cottages which could be hired by travellers to spend a night in relative safety. Breed fowls, goats and sheep could also be sold or purchased in this place.

According to Hamilton, the Mughal governor of Thatta was lodged about six miles from the town with a force of eight or ten thousand armed personnel for checking attacks on caravans by robbers. He further writes that the Mughal governor was very kind and friendly towards the European travelers and welcomed and treated them as state guests. The governor not only treated him with great courtesy but also sent him some local goods as a token of friendship. Alexander Hamilton gives the details of his meeting with the governor of Thatta, highlighting his warm reception by the latter. The governor took him into his own pavilion chamber and chatted with him in private. Hamilton also presented some precious imported items to the governor. In return, the governor exempted him

[21] John Pinkerton, *A General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels in All Parts of the World: Many of which are Now First Translated Into English ; Digested on a New Plan*, Vol. 8, e-book (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1811), 304.
[22] Ibid, 305.

entirely from paying any kind of custom duty and tax on the import and export of goods.[23]

Then again, Hamilton states that the Europeans in Sindh could not seek justice at the local court. However, the Mughal governor allowed him to sell the wives, children or nearest relatives of his debtors if they failed to pay the dues. Hamilton also refers to Sindh as a country which "abounds richly in wheat, rice and legumes, and provender for horses and cattle; and they never know the misery of famine."[24] Sindh was a big manufacturer of a wide variety of cloth such as cotton and wrought silk known as Jamawaar, cuttanee, calico and jurries. All the varieties of cloth were very fine and soft. The weavers of Sindh also made very fine and cheap chintz and beautiful bed linen. However, the wooden dishes and tables were not as refined as in China. The exported goods were taken to China via Surat. Hamilton was greatly impressed by the ships and ferries that navigated the River Indus. These vessels had a wide range of size and capacity; the largest one could carry about 200 tons of weight.

The accounts of Hamilton are loaded with rich descriptions of the geography of this region. Hamilton describes the River Indus, highlighting in detail its strategic and geographical significance. He elaborates its vital role in inland navigation and the benefits it brought for the economy of adjoining regions such as Cabul (Kabul), Penjab (Punjab), Multan, Buckor (Bhakkar) etc.[25] Hamilton gives very interesting and unique accounts about the flora and fauna of Sindh such as the various species of fresh-water fishes, cattle, birds, horses, deer, antelopes, hares and foxes. He discusses the wild life and the hunting methods that were prevalent at that time.[26] The cultural life of Sindh is another remarkable aspect of the accounts of Hamilton. He personally attended several feasts, one on the occasion of sighting of the new moon in February, which according to him "exceeded the rest in ridiculous actions and expanse".[27]

Hamilton's accounts are very well-composed. They reveal that he was an acute and intelligent observer of the various things that he viewed in the

[23] Ibid,306.
[24] Ibid, 308.
[25] Ibid, 308.
[26] Ibid, 307.
[27] Ibid, 309.

course of his wandering career. He is the only European traveller whose accounts are contempraneous with the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb. He even witnessed a part of the period when the decline of the Mughal Empire set in after Aurangzeb Alamgir's death. Thus one may note the now absolute autocratic rule of the governor with his powers over taxes and administration of justice, maritime trade, and life in the town itself. At the time when Hamilton visited Lahribandar in 1699, the Kalhoras were beginning to assert their authority in upper Sindh. His accounts of lower Sindh are limited to the area near the port and the capital. He mentions that travelling in Sindh still required a great deal of courage. In the vicinity of towns, bands of highway robbers were ready to attack the caravans that carried merchandise, for there was insufficient security provided to them by the state. It was common to criticize the Mughal government for its incapacity to ensure the security of the wayfarers. However, in England, France and Germany, the situation was not very different. Travellers on horseback and stage coaches were often attacked and looted by bandits.

Conclusion

The European travellers who wrote their travel accounts apparently had good knowledge of geography and were well acquainted with all the proper terminology. They used with ease the local technical and official terms and also gave their own interpretations. For instance, Manrique refers to the terms *farmans* (royal decrees), *choquidares* (customs posts) *raza'i* (quilt), *firangi* (Europeans) etc.[28] Manucci employs the terms *barq andaze* (fast runner), river *Sindi* (Indus), *serais* (lodges for travellers). Hamilton uses the words *Cafilas* (caravans), *nabob* (Nawab-Governors), *Dangan Jo Goth* (Dangan's Village), *and kisties* (boats). Despite interesting and quite comprehensive compositions about their sojourns in Sindh by male authors, a feminine view of the history of Sindh is conspicuous by its absence. We know that some European ladies also visited Sindh during the Mughal era[29] but unfortunately we found no record left by them.

Nevertheless, the writings of the foreign travellers offer a fresh perspective on Mughal era India. They were sharp observers of the contemporary conditions as compared to the native historians, for they had a wider worldview, having travelled vast and varied regions of the world and having closely observed varying cultures and societies. As the local writers

[28] *Travels of F. S. Manrique*, 211-212 and 238-239.
[29] Dr. Raghunath Rai, *Themes in Indian History* (New Delhi: VK Enterprisess, 2011), 181.

generally occupied official posts or were engaged by the rulers to write historical accounts, their personal prejudices and interests and the need to please the rulers tinted their writings. The accounts of the European travellers, by and large remained free from the influence and pressure of the authorities.