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The Traveller as Historian

JOHN CORREIA-AFONSO

Travel is only one facet of man's life of adventure and that one term "adventure" implies many other wonderful things like courage, faith, selflessness, determination. But the most potent ingredient of adventure is hard to define: it is the spirit of the volunteer for dangerous tasks, for action involving risk. The capacity for adventure is innate in man, and it is manifested very easily by the child through efforts to climb out of the cradle and explore the mysteries beyond. And as the child develops into the man, his horizon widens, his ambition grows, and his courage sustains him through more arduous exploratory enterprises — be these to the distant Indies or to the moon!

There is another thing a grown man can do: he can, and he often has, set down an account of his journeyings. It is with such accounts that we are here concerned. They have a fascination of their own, and their lure is not difficult to explain. As an ancient English traveller put it: "The nature of man, by an inward inclination, is always inquisitive of forraine newes: yea, and much affecteth the sight and knowledge of strange, unfrequented kingdomes, such is the *instinct of his naturall affection*." To the man who cannot personally indulge his wanderlust, the stories of the peregrinations of others provide some relief and vicarious pleasure, broadening at the same time his intellectual horizon.

It is not the individual alone, however, that is influenced by the reports of great voyages, but also entire nations. History can tell us how the narratives of the audacious European travellers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries opened new vistas before the eyes of their fellow-countrymen, inspiring daring buccaneers and great empire-builders. And if warriors and merchants were moved by hopes of fresh conquests and trade, missionaries and scholars

were no less stirred by prospects of gaining new adherents to their faith and new knowledge of ancient civilizations.

EASTWARD HO!

There is a wealth of travel literature about India, and it goes back to very ancient times. The accounts of any country and of its people are of great interest to the historian of that country, for they enable him to know what impression they made upon the minds of such observers, and to estimate more accurately the part they played in the general history of the world. And where, as in the case of ancient India, the native sources of history fail him partly or altogether at some points, the writings of foreigners gain added value in his eyes.

The earliest foreign visitors who have left a record of their experiences in India are the Greeks, Scylax of Carianda being the first, it would seem, to write a book about the land in the sixth century B.C. The men who came before Alexander wrote mostly from hearsay, and appear to have been rather credulous; but the ambassadors of the Hellenistic kings who came after Alexander, and in particular the famed Megasthenes, had better opportunities of studying the country and getting first-hand information from its people, since their missions took them right into their midst. All the same, their ignorance of the local languages was a great handicap.

The Chinese travellers who visited India in the first centuries of the Christian era made a valuable addition to the classical accounts of the Greeks, and of the Roman writers like Pliny who borrowed from them. Three of these Chinese travellers — Fa-Hien, Hiuen-Tsang and I-Tsing — have left narratives which are preserved in their original form and have been translated into many languages. Their knowledge of Sanskrit brought them directly in touch with the local inhabitants. Though their main concern was with the state of Buddhism, they have also left information about the social, cultural, and economic conditions prevailing in contemporary India.

Passing over the Arab and Persian travellers, with just a bare mention of the great chronicler Ibn Batuta, something may now be said of the travellers better known in the West from the time of Marco Polo, surely the prince of medieval European travellers in

Asia. His long residence at Peking under a ruler who placed increasing trust in him, and the official missions which were confided to him in many parts of China, gave him unique opportunities for gathering reliable information about that country. But his observant character and retentive memory also enabled him to write in an informative and accurate manner about India, through which he passed on his way back to Venice. The *Travels* of Marco Polo was a work widely read and copied, and the forerunner of other accounts dealing with India such as those of John of Monte Corvino and Odoric of Pordenone.

There is no place here for a list of the great Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English travellers who came to the shores of India from the beginning of the Age of Discovery, and set down their observations and reflections. But a brief glance at English travel literature will not be out of place.

ENGLISH ABROAD

The pre-Elizabethan English travellers, whether they were sensational romancers or devout pilgrims, all shared a rather fanciful conception of the world, some idea of which may be obtained from ancient maps and legends of the "here be dragons" type. Shakespeare is too kind when he says through the mouth of Sebastian in the *Tempest*: "Travellers n'er did lie, though fools at home condemn them." How many of them told deliberate falsehoods is another question, but their accounts in general were not accurate, and these early travellers' tales offer little help to the historian.

The Elizabethan age glories in the first great English explorers, made famous in the pages of Hakluyt's *Voyages*, which has been rightly called the prose epic of the English people. Here the vitality and vigour, simplicity and straightforwardness of the narrative have produced a sonorous prose that echoes the exaltation of spirit that inspired their exploits and adventures. Here we have not secondhand reports, reconstructions, and fantasies, but the accounts of the very men who made the journeys and fought the battles, and in many instances the personal narratives of eye-witnesses of important events.

Hakluyt was primarily interested in creating a practical geography, yet as he generally refrained from tampering with the reports that came to him, and delivered the documents just as he

found them, his excellently edited *Voyages*, though they might not measure up to the standards of the modern scholar, provide his readers with a lot of historical data, and, what is more, with a wonderful sense of history.

Less known are the travel writers of the century that followed, the age of curiosity which produced the exuberant journals of men whose eyes were wide open to the astonishing world that was unfolding before them at a rapid pace and full of all kinds of promise. These men were not always detached and objective, by contemporary standards, but they could record well, with strength and clarity, and the facts before their eyes were often so strange as to render unnecessary any recourse to fiction.

The eighteenth century English travellers were more sophisticated and critical. Ambassadors and traders for the most part, the earlier ones wrote journals that could be witty or pedantic, but had a certain sensitiveness that made them very pleasant reading. This was a great age not only for travellers but also for "travel liars" whose practical creed was that "a traveller has a right to relate and embellish his adventure as he pleases, and it is very impolite to refuse that deference and applause they deserve"! Vanity, political and religious prejudice, sales value — these were the principal reasons for the travel lies of the eighteenth century. In the latter part of that century, however, began the second series of great explorers — men of the stamp of Thomas Cook — men of science who sought not wealth but knowledge.

Knowledge. That too is what the historian seeks about the past, and the traveller who is an acute observer and a faithful recorder can be his great ally. Can indeed the traveller play the historian? A traveller's tale is generally a synonym for a tall story, one to which no man of judgment will give credence. Indeed the literature of travel is a troublesome body of source material for history and has to be subjected to a careful process of critical evaluation.

OBSERVATION AND OBJECTIVENESS

The great value of travel accounts as evidence lies in the fact that the traveller, being generally a foreigner, takes notice of things which a native of the country is likely to pass over as too obvious and too familiar to be described, and these are sometimes just the things about which the modern historian wishes to be informed.

This may oftener be the case where the traveller belongs to a type of civilization entirely different from that of the people among whom he is sojourning. Some of the Europeans who travelled through the realms of the Great Mughal have left such detailed accounts of what they saw and heard that it is almost impossible to study the Mughal period without referring to them frequently, and this despite the existence of some excellent contemporary historians of the country.

But travellers' narratives, like other kinds of historical material, also have defects peculiar to themselves, necessitating the observance of special precautions for their proper employment. In the first place, the traveller, just because of that detachment from surroundings which gives his testimony such value, fails to understand much of what he sees, and his vision is coloured by his own culture, so that his report, even where it is substantially accurate, may mislead the reader. Secondly, in collecting his information he is generally driven — both by ignorance of the local language and lack of contacts — to rely far too much upon mere gossip, and stories sometimes fabricated for his consumption. The chances of making mistakes are further increased if the wanderings are recorded long after they have taken place, when the memory has grown dim and is replaced, consciously or unconsciously, by the imagination.

It has been wisely said that though everyone travels in these days, just as everyone reads, there are as few good travellers as there are good readers. What then should characterize the traveller, if he is to be of help to the historian? This is what one of the great travellers of our age, and a consummate mistress of style, Freya Stark, has to say in *The Journey's Echo*:

It is, I believe, a fallacy to think of travellers' qualities as physical. If I had to write a decalogue for journeys, eight out of the virtues should be moral, and I should put first of all a temper as serene at the end as at the beginning of the day. Then would come the capacity to accept values and to judge by standards other than our own. The rapid judgment of character; and a love of nature which must include human nature also. The power to dissociate oneself from one's bodily sensations. A knowledge of the local history and language. A leisurely and uncensorious mind. A tolerable constitution and the capacity to eat and sleep at any moment. And lastly, and especially here (in Arabia) a ready quickness in repartee.

Such a traveller will not be easy to find, but he it is that will be

able to leave behind a valuable record of observations and reflections that will help us to know and understand better the past, and not only the past of wars and treaties, but the social past, and the daily life of the people. For the good traveller tries to share, in however small a scale, the daily experiences of the people. He tries to be inside them, as a thread is inside the necklace it strings. The world, with its unknown and unexpected variety, is a part of his own leisure; and this living participation is what differentiates the traveller from the tourist, who remains separate, as if he were in a theatre, but not himself in the play, a part of whatever the show may be.

A NEW ROUTE

Such a traveller who was not a mere tourist, and whose wanderings are of special interest to people in Bombay, was the young Portuguese priest, Manuel Godinho, of the Society of Jesus, who came out to India in 1655 and, after doing good work there, was sent back to Portugal in 1662 by the Viceroy Antonio de Mello e Castro, on an important and arduous mission.

The character of that mission is well known to those who have studied the decline of the Portuguese power in India. In 1661 Portugal, threatened at home by the Spanish armies, and hard-pressed overseas by the rising power of the Dutch, concluded a treaty of alliance with England. But English help was only to be obtained at a price, and part of the price was "the Port and Island of Bombay in the East Indies, with all its rights, profits, territories and appurtenances whatsoever thereunto belonging."

The Viceroy was firmly convinced of the great value of the Port of Bombay, "with which that of Lisbon is not to be compared," and of the bad faith of the English who had rendered him none of the promised help. He accordingly refused to hand over Bombay to them on a number of grounds which are set forth in a letter of his to the King of Portugal of December 1662. Father Godinho was at that time already on his way to Portugal, possibly with a similar letter.

The account of his journey to Portugal, first published as early as 1665 and entitled *Relação do novo caminho que fez por terra e mar, no anno de 1663, o Padre Manuel Godinho*, is a very methodical and precise work, opening with a brilliant essay in the grand style

on the actual state of the Portuguese power in India, and neatly divided into chapters filled with historical notes and personal observations.

The Dutch and the Arabs having made the route to Persia unsafe for Portuguese ships, it was thought best that Father Godinho should embark at Surat, which was under the sovereignty of the Great Mughal. Accordingly on 15 December 1662, he set forth for that port from Bassein — which he describes in detail and it is at this point that the account of his dangerous expedition starts.

A couple of days' journeying brought the priest to Nargol, where he changed into soldier's clothes in order to enter Damaun without fear of recognition. At Damaun he disguised himself once again, this time adopting a Moorish habit that would not attract attention in the regions which he had to traverse. Soon he was in Surat, of which, as of Damaun, he gives very exact particulars. The descriptions are interspersed with enlightening accounts of his conversations with other wayfarers, such as a Brahmin on the road to Surat, and a French bishop on his way to the missions in the Far East.

It was only on 3 February 1663, that Father Godinho was able to set sail from Surat in an overladen merchantman. The remainder of his journey to Lisbon, if not of the same interest to Indian historians as the first lap, is certainly more exciting, and the stormy voyage to Persia and thence to Basra brought before the traveller's eye many a picture of his country's past glory.

Father Godinho's book is not only travel literature of historical value, it is also a literary masterpiece. Unlike the earlier travellers he expresses himself almost in a modern manner, perhaps a trifle florid at times, but full of a man-of-action's humour. He meant to give his countrymen an accurate picture of conditions in the East, and asserted that he would not write anything of which he had not been an eyewitness. Asseverations of this type are not always to be taken seriously, but Father Godinho seems to have meant what he said. For instance, he was inquisitive enough to sit up one night to watch the doings of some ascetical yogis, and his sharp eyes noticed that two out of the ten cannons at Gombroon bore the arms of Castille.

Particularly attractive in Godinho's book are the pictures he draws of the manners and customs of the regions traversed. "He

that would travel for the entertainment of others," says Dr. Johnson, "should remember that the great object of remark is human life." And Godinho, in his clear and incisive style seasoned with cheerful humour, is entertainingly informative with his descriptions of Arab brigandage and hospitality, of Hindu customs and Muslim festivals. In the words of J. Gerson da Cunha, he is "the best, and yet little known contemporary witness to the condition of Bombay and its surroundings" in the mid-seventeenth century.

Tales of travel can provide not only most delightful and entertaining reading, but also precious material for history. The observations and opinions of the travellers of long ago are for the intelligent a voyage not only through space and time, but through ideas as well. The many works by traveller-historians that are now available in scholarly editions should help to increase the knowledge and the pleasure that can be derived both from travel and from history.