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Sir Thomas Roe at the Mughal Court: Seventeenth Century English Cultural Assumptions

Submitted by Katherine Schwartz



Throughout his time at Emperor Jahangir's court, Sir Thomas Roe, the first official English ambassador to the Mughal Empire in India, complained about the Mughal people, saying that "my toil with barbarous unjust people is beyond patience," and that "we live in a Barbarous unfaithful place."¹ This type of writing is consistent with later characterizations of English superiority and of the Indian people under British control in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, from 1615 to 1619, when Roe was stationed in the Mughal court, England had little value in trade and no political or military power in the Mughal Empire. That Roe writes of the inferiority of the Mughal people from such a strong conviction of English supremacy tells us something important: that English culture even in pre-imperial times contained those elements and assumptions necessary for the later rise of Imperialism.

When Sir Thomas Roe was presented to the Emperor Jahangir, the Mughal Empire had been a major power on the Indian subcontinent for almost a century and controlled an enormous area of land.² Except for a fifteen year period where control was taken by Afghan nobles, the Mughal dynasty ruled on the Indian subcontinent

continuously, if only nominally, from 1526 until 1756.³ The Emperor Jahangir ruled from 1605 until 1627, and while he was not "a great general, a great organizer, or a great builder" as his predecessors had been, his reign saw expansion through conquest and he was a great patron of the arts, particularly painting and architecture.⁴

By the time the first part of what would become the Mughal Empire had been conquered, European traders, particularly the Portuguese, had been active in the Indian Ocean for twenty-eight years. However, the English did not establish official presence in the Indian Ocean until 1601, and it would take seven more years until they made contact with the Mughal Empire.

On December thirty-first in the year 1600, a royal charter was granted to "The Company of Merchants of London trading into the East Indies."⁵ The most important reasons traditionally given for this were the simultaneous feelings that England deserved a role in international trade and concern that England would be barred from participation in this lucrative commerce. Worries that Dutch presence in the East Indies would cut off England's participation in this profitable trade spurred the creation of the English East India Company and the subsequent

English voyages to the East Indies themselves. At first, the Company's voyages were short-term and experimental, but after the success of several fleets, the Company turned to joint-stock ownership, a more long-term, communal source of capital. The Company was active in some fashion from 1600, when it received its original charter, up until the 1620's.

On October fourth in the year 1614, during the debate on "sending an ambassador to the Grand Magore's court," Sir Thomas Roe's name was proposed.⁶ Apparently a man of "pregnant understanding, well spoken, learned, industrious, of a comely personage, and one of whom there are great hopes that he may work much good for the Company," Roe was also appointed official ambassador by King James I, indicating his mission's dual purposes of securing trade and privileges for the Company and strengthening Britain's position overseas.⁷ Sir Thomas Roe is by himself a fascinating character, and as the first royally appointed representative of England in the Mughal court, who also managed to leave behind a comprehensive journal, Roe looms large in the history of the English in India.

Sir Thomas Roe left England with a fleet led by Captain William Keeling on March sixth, 1615, and arrived after almost eight months at Swalley Hole near the modern city of Surat, on the northwest coast of the Indian subcontinent. Determined that his arrival to the Mughal Empire should be "an occasion of dignity and splendor," Roe did not leave the ship for a full week, mainly due to arguments over customs searches.⁸ Although he was told multiple

times that "it was the Custom of this Country that nothing could pass but by the Custom house, and there had to be searched," Roe refused to submit, saying that he "had thought that they had understood that free kings and their Ambassadors had been above ordinary customs" and he would by no means submit to this "Common and barbarous usage."⁹ After disembarking in late September 1615, Roe remained in Surat for approximately five weeks, finally making the journey to Ajmir, the current location of the court, where he was presented to the Emperor Jahangir on January tenth, 1616. Roe lived in the Mughal Empire until February seventeenth, 1619, during which time he followed Jahangir's court as it moved from place to place. Throughout the period, he labored to improve England's reputation among Mughal officials and tried desperately to obtain a royal farman, or contract, for permanent trade. Roe's efforts at the Mughal court are documented in a journal which he kept from 1615, when he left England, to 1619, when he departed the Mughal Empire. While it is a rich historical source, Roe's journal does present some problems. Roe's journal was intended to be an account of his expenses for his employers and, consequently, Roe tries to present himself and his actions in the best possible light. This paper focuses mainly on the subconscious cultural attitudes expressed in the journal, but Roe's work at the Mughal court is also reflected in the documents of the Calendar of State Papers, the works of Edward Terry, William Keeling, William Hawkins, and Thomas Mun, not to mention a broad range of histories about the Mughal Empire and the English East India

Company.

Roe's journal documenting his time in the Mughal court is a fantastic resource not only for the factual details it divulges but also because of the cultural assumptions that it reveals.

It has been documented by historians such as Michael Brown and Colin Mitchell that Roe was not writing with Imperialist aims in mind. Despite this lack of conscious intention, Roe's journal exposes elements of Roe's society, namely feelings about English superiority and the inferiority of exotic others, that became later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries integral parts of English Imperialist culture. These ideas, though, and the broader ideology that Edward Said terms Orientalism, are incongruous in a time where England was not a world power and really had very little overseas influence.

The English factors in the Mughal Empire in Roe's time were completely dependent on the emperor's favor. While England in the early seventeenth century possessed capable naval power, the English military was small, even by European standards, and inefficient and ill-equipped. However, Roe came to the Mughal court convinced that England was at least as powerful, if not more so, than the Mughal Empire. He claimed that he would restore the "King's Honor" by improving the general opinion of and respect given to the English or "lay my life and fortune both in the ground" in trying.¹⁰ To this end, Roe insisted on receiving the courtesy he thought he was due, based upon European treatment of ambassadors, even in the face of "the Custom of this Country," for example using

his own forms of reverence when meeting with Emperor Jahangir.¹¹ In his journal, Roe comes off as demanding, obstinate, and disrespectful of the emperor, the princes, and Mughal officials. In both formal communications with the Emperor as well as his daily interactions with the court, Roe tried very hard to assert England's prestige, repeatedly saying that he was the ambassador of a "Mighty Prince in league with him [Jahangir]."¹² Even after spending almost two years in the Mughal court, Roe asserted in a letter to James I that the English would "at last by our force teach them to know your Majesty is Lord of all the Seas and can Compel that by your power, which you have sought with Courtesy, which this King cannot yet see for swelling."¹³

At the same time that Roe exaggerated England's power and prestige, he denigrated the Mughal court for various perceived moral faults, one of these being excessive pride. When describing the Mughal court in a letter to George Abbott, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Roe claimed that "their Pride endures no terms of equality" and that they are characterized by "barbarous pride and Customs" and "dull ignorance."¹⁴ Near the end of his tenure in the Mughal court, Roe likewise bemoaned "the pride and falsehood of these people, that attended only advantage and were governed by private interest and appetite."¹⁵ Roe's negative evaluation of the pride of the Mughal people is connected with his conception of them as heathens. In their supposed arrogance they refuse to accept Christianity, in Roe's eyes the one true religion.¹⁶ Roe begrudged any "admiration of such a virtue in a heathen Prince," and complained

that “with envy and sorrow...we having the true vine should bring forth Crabs, and a bastard stock grapes.”¹⁷

Another facet of Mughal political life that Roe often complained about was court intrigue. As Roe wrote, “all the Policy and wicked craft of the Devil is not practiced alone in Europe; here is enough to be learned, or to be despised.”¹⁸ Roe stated as well that “all Cunning that the Devil can teach is frequent, even in the court, where is wanting no art nor wicked subtlety to be or do evil.”¹⁹ Roe recorded time and again instances of Mughal officials offering him verbal promises and not acting on them, which Roe takes as a sign of falseness. This continued, according to Roe, except for those times when he had presents to offer. Other forms of deception that Roe noted have to do with the Portuguese or their Mughal allies talking badly of the English in order to force them from the Emperor’s favor.

Roe complained strenuously about the practice of gift-giving within Mughal diplomacy. In Roe’s mind, this was yet one more manifestation of the Mughal people’s contemptible vanity and desire for wealth in the form of jewels and novelties. Roe’s thoughts about presents were established early on in his time in the Mughal Empire, as when he told the Governor of Surat that he “must not expect any [presents] from me in that kind: presents were for suitors.”²⁰ Two years later, Roe had occasion to lament how “Asaph Khan [an important Mughal official], for a sordid hope only of buying some toys, was so reconciled as to betray his son, and to me obsequious, even to flat-

tery; for the ground of all this friendship was that he might buy the Gold taken in the prize.”²¹ Asaph Khan’s greed, Roe concluded, consumes him to the point that he is willing to give up his honor, in Roe’s mind his very manhood, for a bauble. No Mughal official seems unaffected by such greed, even the Emperor Jahangir, whom Roe said “never takes any request to heart except it Come accompanied [by presents] and will in plain terms demand it.”²²

Roe’s actual position within the Mughal court is a striking foil to his sense of self-worth and national pride. In the eyes of the emperor, and also the Mughal officials, Roe was a subject of Jahangir, not an independent man with the powers of a king. Instead of being lavishly hosted by the Mughal emperor, for example, Roe was allowed nothing by Jahangir “but a house of Mud, which I was enforced to build half.”²³ Roe’s journal, when read carefully, reveals the extent to which his Mughal hosts viewed him as a subject. On October twelfth, 1617, Roe explained how he was taken by Asaph Khan, one of Jahangir’s primary advisors, to see Prince Khurram, the future emperor, about the treatment of English merchants at Surat. While trying to put Khurram at ease, Asaph Khan mentioned that the English “were his Subjects.”²⁴ This might appear to be a trivial incident, as Roe interpreted this as a phrase Asaph Khan “must use” when speaking with the prince, but it becomes more significant in light of Mughal diplomatic practices.²⁵ Men such as Roe were incorporated into the “rank and file of [Mughal] nobility,” and those who were “staying any length of time were expected to express an oath of loyalty to the emperor;

an envoy, in effect, served two masters while in a foreign court.”²⁶ These diplomats were regularly granted rank in the Mughal government and were rewarded with lands and titles if they enjoyed the emperor’s favor.²⁷ The ambassador’s subsequent duties included following the rules of reverence due to the emperor, which Roe tried to avoid doing, and also offering small, personal presents to the ruler “to formalize the oath of loyalty,” which Roe did, though perhaps with different intentions.²⁸ In all, these worked to underscore the foreigner’s subordinate status.

That Roe was considered a subject of the Emperor Jahangir, and thus of the Mughal Empire, can be seen elsewhere in his journal. As was custom among the Mughal emperors, Jahangir established what was essentially a personal cult based on devotion to the imperial throne. On August seventeenth, 1616, Sir Thomas Roe was inducted into this group, receiving a “medal of gold as big as sixpence” from Jahangir to signify his position as client of the emperor. This outwardly simple gift marked him as a member of the circle of nobles completely and utterly loyal to the emperor. Although Jahangir most likely knew that Roe would remain loyal to the English king, this ceremony and the social position that went with it signified that Jahangir expected Roe to be, at least outwardly, loyal and subordinate. Roe did not comprehend the significance of this gift but acknowledged its value in the eyes of the Mughal court, asserting “none may [wear the king’s Image] but to whom it is given.”²⁹

Roe’s journal also made it clear that

English trade was uncertain and devalued by the Mughal elite. Roe admitted on several occasions that the quality of English trading goods and presents were inferior, even recounting a story about how Jahangir, upon receiving gifts from Roe asked a Jesuit “whether the King of England were a great King that sent presents of so small value.”³⁰ Roe’s fears that England did not have the requisite goods to be seen as a valuable trading partner are validated by the fact that there is almost no mention of the English in writings by members of the Mughal court. Even Emperor Jahangir, in his personal journal, made not a single mention of the English as a group or Roe as an individual, despite Roe’s protestation that “[Jahangir] appointed me a place above all other men” and that the emperor “more esteemed me than ever any Frank [a general term for a European].”³¹

Roe’s belief in English superiority seems, in matters of trade, to equate to a feeling that England deserved to be given treaties securing permanent trading rights, fair treatment, and other similar indulgences. Initially, this was manifested in an immediate insistence that Mughal officials sign a farman guaranteeing what Roe considered to be reasonable treatment for the English. Roe’s idea of reasonable handling, though, included demands that could not be granted, such as freedom from customs searches. As early as October ninth, 1615, barely two weeks after landing at Swalley Hole, Roe was already complaining that “so base are our Conditions in this Port and subject to so many slaveries, such as no free heart can endure, that I do resolve either to establish a trade on free Conditions

or to do my best to dissolve it.”³² Roe’s trade negotiations demonstrate a sense that the English should be exempt from customary Mughal rules and procedures. On March twenty-sixth, 1616, Roe submitted a set of “Articles to his Majesty’s Consideration.”³³

On April third, Roe received notice from Asaph Khan that his demands had been found to be unreasonable, and he immediately jumped to the conclusion that this was merely a bluff, and that “the king had not seen them, or else” the message from Asaph Khan was only a “bribe, to which, even to base and sordidness, he is most open.”³⁴ Roe automatically assumed that, had they been seen by the emperor, he, as a just and noble person, would have agreed to them; the idea that the Mughal court did not value English trade enough to grant them special privileges did not enter Roe’s thoughts. Roe refused to compromise on any significant matter, even late in his embassy, and he accordingly failed in one of the main purposes of his embassy as his determined adherence to a treaty favoring England prevented him from obtaining any permanent agreement on trade. Roe’s long years of work in the Mughal Empire amounted to very little, financially speaking, and English trade was just as uncertain in 1619 as it was in 1615 when Roe first landed at Swalley Hole.

Roe’s journal reveals a fundamental loathing of the land, climate, and food of the Mughal Empire as well as of its people. Throughout, Roe complained that he endured nearly unbearable circumstances, being “every way afflicted- fires, smokes,

floods, storms, heat, dust, flies, and no temperate or quiet season,” and also being subject to illness.³⁵ When making his initial journey from Surat to the emperor’s court, Roe claimed that he was “so sick as at night I was past sense and given over for dead,” and that five other men were ill.³⁶ Only divine intervention saved him as “God raised [him]” from the brink of death.³⁷ In addition to mentioning instances of European illness, Roe also recorded epidemics among the Mughal people, including one in Agra that lasted for several months in 1616.³⁸

Roe frequently complained about the condition of Mughal territories while traveling. On his journey to Agra, Roe described “Brampore,” the home of Prince Parwiz, as “a miserable and Barren Country, the towns and villages all built of Mud, so that there is not a house for a man to rest in.”³⁹ On December twenty-sixth, 1616, while following Jahangir’s court, Roe noted that “we passed through woods and over Mountains, torn with bushes, tired with the incommodities of an impassible way, where many Camels perished... the king rested two days” during which time “thousands of Coaches, Carts and Camels lying in the woody Mountains without meat and water.”⁴⁰ Roe disapproved not only of the conditions of the road but also of the way the journey was handled, saying that “there was not a misery nor punishment which either the want of Government or the natural disposition of the Clime gave us not.”⁴¹ In sum, Roe claimed that the Mughal Empire “is the dullest, basest place that ever I saw, and makes me weary of speaking of it.”⁴²

Roe explains the cultural defects he perceives in the Mughal people by

retreating into the language of barbarism. To him, the Mughal people and their culture were uncivilized, crude, backwards, and brutal. That Roe equates barbarism with both brutality and with lack of culture is seen in his other writings. In a letter to King James I, he wrote:

Fame has done much for the Glory of this place... But the Government so uncertain, without written law, without Policy, the Customs mingled with barbarism, religions infinite, the buildings of mud (except the King's houses and some few others): that even this greatness and wealth that I admired in England (reserving due reverence to the Persons of Kings) is here, where I see it, almost contemptible...⁴³

Many of Roe's records of Mughal barbarism are of violence and physical savagery.

Early on, Roe noted that convicted criminals were sometimes put to death by being trampled by elephants, and that Jahangir "sometimes sees with too much delight in blood the execution done by his Elephants."⁴⁴ Instances of cruelty also provide convenient occasions for Roe to explicitly state the superiority of English customs. On March twenty-third, 1616, Roe wrote that Jahangir had "Condemned a Mogull on suspicion of felony... [and] sent him to me... for a Slave, or to dispose of him at my pleasure."⁴⁵ Roe replied that, though this was "esteemed a high favor... in England we had no slaves, neither was it lawful to make the Image of God fellow to a Beast" and so he would "use him as a servant, and if his good behavior merited it, would give him liberty."⁴⁶ Later

that same year Roe recounted another story of how Jahangir had condemned a group of thieves, and "there was no way to save their lives, but to sell them for slaves."⁴⁷ As in the earlier situation, Roe replied that he "would not buy them as slaves, only pay their ransom and free them" and in doing so would make sure that the Jahangir "should not be ignorant I had more mercy than he, and that a Christian esteemed the life of a Moore above money."⁴⁸ Interestingly, most of Roe's broadly disapproving comments concern the emperor Jahangir himself. Many of these focus on gender, presenting Jahangir as effeminate. Roe claimed, for example, that Jahangir was "gentle [and] soft" and repeatedly asserted that real power at court rested with Nur Jahan, Jahangir's consort, to the extent that the emperor had "yielded himself into the hands of a woman [Nur Jahan]" and so could not even control his family, let alone his country.⁴⁹

The views that Roe expresses, both directly and indirectly, are also seen in the writings of other Englishmen. Similar sentiments about English superiority can be found in the journals of contemporary Company employees, such as those of Edward Terry, William Hawkins, William Keeling, and Thomas Bonner, as well as in the descriptive and business writings of Company members like Thomas Mun, whose essay "A Discourse of Trade, from England unto the East Indies" is particularly peppered with expressions of religious prejudices.⁵⁰

In part, Roe's observations seem to have been colored by a set of assumptions about Asiatic regimes, an outlook that Edward Said has termed Orientalism. Although Sir Thomas Roe lived long before the Raj

and the height of the British Empire in India, his evaluation of the people of the Mughal Empire fits nicely into the “‘Oriental’ ideas” that Said suggests were integral to European stereotypes about Asia.⁵¹ Throughout his journal, and particularly in the letters he wrote to employers and acquaintances in England, Roe’s descriptions of the people he meets and the activities he observes display elements of “Oriental despotism, Oriental splendor, cruelty, [and] sensuality.”⁵² Roe frequently lamented, for example, the fact that the Mughal Empire is run with “no written Law. The King by his own word rules, and his Governors of Provinces by that authority.”⁵³ He also made sure to note, disapprovingly, the emperor’s sexual appetites, as when he mentioned that Jahangir had four wives and also that during festivals entertainment was provided by “whores” who “did sing and dance.”⁵⁴

In discussing such things as England’s prestige, his place in the Mughal court, the climate of the Empire, religion, greed, lasciviousness, despotism, and intrigue, Roe clearly positioned England and England’s civilization as superior to the Mughal Empire and its society. In stressing English superiority in his writings, Roe illustrates the fact that the key cultural ideas that allowed Orientalism and English Imperialism to flourish, and which kept it so powerful, were present in the English cultural mind even in the early seventeenth century. It is important to uncover these ideas in the time before English Imperialism became a real institution because these pre-existing attitudes informed how England interacted with and acted towards colonized

populations all over the world, even into the twentieth century.

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¹Sir Thomas Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to the Court of the Great Mogul, 1615-1619: As Narrated in His Journal and Correspondence*, Vol. 1 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1899), 460, 490.

²*Ibid.*, 106.

³*Ibid.*, 282.

⁴*Ibid.*, 100.

⁵John Keay, *The Honourable Company: A History of the English East India Company* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991), 9.

⁶“1-5 October 1614 (770)”, *CSPC: East Indies, China and Japan, Volume 2: 1513-1616*, 324-331.

⁷*Ibid.*, “1-20 September 1614”, 317-324; and *Ibid.*, “17-18 January 1615 (879)”, 363-376.

⁸Michael Brown, *Itinerant Ambassador: The Life of Sir Thomas Roe* (Lexington: The University press of Kentucky, 1970), 38.

⁹Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe*, 44, 48.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 46.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 44.

¹²*Ibid.*, 53.

¹³*Ibid.*, 497.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 310, 496.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 508.

¹⁶Roe was a very active Protestant, championing a pan-national Protestant Alliance. See: Brown, *Itinerant Ambassador*, 198-208; and also John Drury, *A Summary Discourse Concerning the Work of Peace Ecclesiasticall* (Cambridge: Printed by Roger Daniel, 1641).

¹⁷Ibid., 367.
¹⁸Ibid., 358.
¹⁹ibid., note 1
²⁰Ibid., 63.
²¹Ibid. The prize is presumably a pearl of high value, as mentioned on page 426.
²²Ibid., 201, 183.
²³Ibid., 134.
²⁴Ibid., 435.
²⁵Ibid.
²⁶Mitchell, *Sir Thomas Roe and the Mughal Empire*, 165.
²⁷William Hawkins was granted a rank of 400 zat in 1611, and, as Mitchell says, “in some instances, demarcating a visiting ambassador from the rest of the Mughal nobility is difficult.” Mitchell, *Sir Thomas Roe and the Mughal Empire*, 163, 165.
²⁸Ibid.
²⁹Roe, 244.
³⁰Ibid., 119.
³¹Ibid., 115, 257. The journal referenced is: Jahangir, *The Jahangirnama: memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India*, trans., ed., and annotated by Wheeler M. Thackston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Similarly, there is virtually no reference of any European in contemporary court histories, for example: Kami Shirazi and W.H. Siddiqi, *Waqa-i-uz-zaman: fath nama-I Nur Jahan Begam: a Contemporary Account of Jahangir* (Rampur: Rampur Raza Library, 2003).
³²Ibid., 68.
³³Ibid., 150.
³⁴Ibid., 156.
³⁵Ibid., 248. While Roe only makes a few references to the fact that the emperor had servants specifically to shoe the flies away, Edward Terry, his chaplain, Edward Terry,

his chaplain, states that the flies would “cover our meat as soon as it was placed on the table.” (Edward Terry, *A Voyage to East-India; Wherein Some Things are taken Notice of, in our Passage Thither...* (London: Printed for J. Wilkie, 1777), 117.

³⁶Ibid., 100, 86.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸ For a discussion of the diseases that afflict the Mughal people, see Terry, 225-231.

³⁹Ibid., 89.

⁴⁰Ibid., 368.

⁴¹Ibid., 393.

⁴²Ibid., 113.

⁴³Ibid., 120.

⁴⁴Ibid., 108.

⁴⁵Ibid., 150.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid., 305.

⁴⁸Ibid., 306.

⁴⁹Ibid., 293, 362.

⁵⁰Thomas Mun, “A Discourse of Trade, from England unto the East Indies, in *East Indian Trade: Selected Works, 17th Century: A Collection of Five Rare Works Republished from Originals in the Goldsmith’s Library of Economic Literature, The University of London* (Farnborough, Gregg, 1968).

⁵¹Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 4.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Roe, 110.

⁵⁴Ibid., 145.

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