



Narratives of French Travelers' and Adventurer's of Indian Education System

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Abstact

The French travelers and adventurers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries stated that Hindu philosophy, meteorology, Sanskrit language, literature, history and culture were taught by the Brahmans in schools. Indian education system has been a fascinating domain for the French voyager's observation who make compare and contrast with standard, knowledge and rationality of the Orient with Occidental world. Most of the travelers showed in their observations, a kind of superiority in terms of rationality and scientific knowledge of the west in comparison to east. These travelers highlighted a demeaning picture of Indian education system which according to them was based on sluggish, monotonous and irrational basis. The objective of this paper is to narrate the observations made by the French voyagers regarding Indian education system and its implications. Many firsthand French adventurers' records have been used in this paper in order to make an assessment of Indian education system by analyzing their records.

Keywords: Education system, Vedas and Sanskrit language, Benaras sanctuary, Brahman role, Occident vs. Orient, Orthodox religious implications, Corruptness, Sluggishness, Astrologers

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Benaras: Sanctuary of Education

Bernier and Modave said the town of Benares was considered the general school of the Hindus, but it contained “no colleges or regular classes, as in our universities, but resembles rather the schools of the ancients; the masters being dispersed over different parts of the town in private houses or gardens”.¹ The master taught only a small group of pupils. Modave further describes that the Brahman scholars are spread all over the city who give their lessons in the temple or in the garden of banias. The teachers have certain number of students under them, who left the teacher only after the education is completed. The teaching process goes on for 10 to 12 years. Modave felt the teaching methodology was not perfect and their sacred language was difficult to learn. The Masters have 3, 5, 7 and not more than 8 to 10 students under them. Modave goes on to say that manner of teaching is similar to the ancient methods of the Greek schools. The lessons were taught by the teacher in the sacred Sanskrit language. This long and painful study was absolutely essential, as all the religious and science books were written in this language.² Tieffenthaler describes about in Benaras in Allahabad, that “one do find here as one commonly believes, a college or public university, but the young boys learn with all the crossroads elements of the letters or of science, if someone studies further in-depth, the mysteries of the superstition of Gentils, pupils takes particular lessons in the house of the one who teaches them”.³ French voyagers’ observations present a disdain picture of school and university in Benaras as compared to the proper educational institutions formed after renaissance in Europe. The scientific and rational studies were promoted by the Europeans thus the

¹ Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire AD 1656-1658*(Trans.) Irving Brock and (ed.) Archibald Constable, Delhi :Low Price Publications, 1934; 1994., p. 334; Comte de Modave, *Voyage en du Comte de Modave 1773-1776*, edited by Jean Deloche, (Paris : Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1971). p. 277.

² Modave, *Voyage en Inde du Comte de Modave 1773-1776*, p. 278.

³ Tieffenthaler, Joseph, *Description historique et géographique de l’Inde* , 3 vols, (ed.) by Jean Bernoulli., Berlin (Londres:W. Faden, 1786-1789).. p. 228.

voyagers always questioned the irregularities and superstitions prevalent in the Indian education system.

Beneras attracted many other French travelers and adventurers. Duperron went there as he had the "intention of going to Cassimbazar, from there he returned to Beneras. It was this city that I wanted to deliver to me to the study of *Samskretan*. Though it was ruined and depopulated by continuous wars, I counted to still find there some of these Brahmans, whose school were so famous".⁴ Further this adventurer always thought of this and expressed his intention "to go to Beneras to seek and translate even Vedas, which are like the deposit of Indian antiquities".⁵ According to Duperron, if one does not get the chance to visit Beneras then one can know the doctrine of Hindus from the sacred books called Vedas. And it was French Colonel Polier who discovered the Vedas, not in Beneras but in Jaipur.

Modave said 'the city of Beneras is a sanctuary of the religion of the Brahmans, so I dare to employ this expression. It was here reunited all those of these caste which give up their business for entirely dedicating to the study of the religion. The sacred books are gathered there in greatest number in comparison to other places in India. But it was not easy to obtain the communication from it'.⁶ He further said that "Mr. Gentil said to me that he had a time to hope to get an authenticate copy of the principles....he found that five or six years of work hardly had been enough to satisfy his curiosity. He gave up this intention which owed, in addition, to cost him lot of money".⁷

The slow and long process of the Hindu education system was also noticed by Bernier, where in students had no spirit of emulation. He mentioned that during long period of ten years, "work of instructions proceeds slowly; for the generality of them are an

⁴ Anquetil Duperron, *Le Zend Avesta, Ouvrage de Zoroastre*, tome 1, Tilliard Paris, 1771. p. 37-38.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 369-370

⁶ Modave, *Voyage en Inde du Comte de Modave 1773-1776*, p. 277.

⁷ Law de Lauriston, *Mémoire sur quelques affaires de l'Empire Mogol 1756-1761*, Ed. Alfred Martineau, Paris, 1913. p.298

indolent disposition....Feeling no spirit of emulation, and entertaining no hope that honours or emolument, as with us, the scholars pursue the studies slowly".⁸ Tavernier said "I saw children of the Prince, who were being educated there by several Brahmans, who taught them to read and write in a language which is reserved to the priests of the idols, and is very different from that spoken by the people".⁹ Then he describes while entering the court of this college, he saw a double gallery in which two Princes were seated accompanied by many young nobles and numerous Brahmans, who were making different figures, like those of mathematics, on the ground with chalk.¹⁰ Thus while making comparison of the education system of Orient with the Occident, these French travelers tried to show the superiority of their rational teaching, teaching methodology and usefulness of material taught.

Law de Lauriston commented about the corruptness in the practices of Brahmans, he said that "their mythology of imaginations, ridiculous, infamies, coarse obscenities, the whole is due to the perverse spirit and corrupted of Brahman commentators; but since curiosity carries us to look further into and examine rigorously the religion of the Indians Gentils, that it is permitted to them to be informed of ours. The Bible which contains the old and new testimony is the base of our religion; all the books which are there are orthodox; that one translates it into Sanskrit, or another Indian language to be subjected for the examination by some doctors of the university of Benaras. I will say to them, you are in error, it is not necessary to take to the letter all that you read there, it is necessary all to take in a mystical direction, they are of types, emblem, allegories: yes! they will say to me, that is to say we here are of agreement, also take in a mystical sense which shock you so strongly in our mythology".¹¹ French voyagers have blamed the Brahmans for promoting the irrational and superstitious practices.

⁸ Bernier, *Travels*, pp. 334-35.

⁹ Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India, 1640-67*, (Trans.)V Ball, iii vols., New Delhi: Oriental Books, 1889; 1977 ,Vol.2, Book III, p. 183.

¹⁰ Ibid., Vol.2, Book III, p. 183.

¹¹ Guy Deleury, *Les Indes Florissantes : Anthologie des voyageurs français, 1750-1820*, Paris : Laffont, 1991, p. 709.

French travelogues tried to show a state of orientalism in the domain of education system. They also doubted Brahmans and their disciples's knowledge of Indian histories.

Modave inquired about the knowledge of the Indian scholars about their own history. He said "I re-examine the same people that Bernier depicted us...It is not that these people-here are curious to be informed like our Europeans. Perhaps there are not 20 people in Hindoustan who have a little knowledge extended from the history of their own country. Those which are at the head of the affairs attach to disentangle the actual interests without the any link to the vicissitudes which changed these interests. The reign even of Aurangzeb, though he forms a memorable time in the Hindustan, since he is, at properly to speak, the last sovereign who governed this empire with a full authority, is already not known more than that of those which make a particular study of history, and this memorable reigns which finishes in 1707 is actually of a date as old as the history of Charlemagne is it among us. I saw in this regard the things so extraordinary that they appeared to me unbelievable. It is of this major ignorance that the comes the surprisingly of which the scholars of the country being struck when they converse with Europeans who have a general and superficial knowledge of the affairs of Hindoustan. One passes easily at their eyes for a wonder of historical science. It needs hardly for that little memory and to name about the 10 or 12 successors of son of Timur Shah who established himself first in Hindoustan".¹² Lack of historical knowledge among the Indians was noticed by the French voyagers as they showed that Indian not just deficient in their universities but also unaware of their histories.

Vedas and Sanskrit Language: A Critique

Due to the dominance of Brahmans, religious literature was inaccessible to the common folk. Their knowledge of religion and philosophy made them the highest class in the caste hierarchy. The majority of the travelers gave a superficial information about these subjects. The holiness of the Vedas was maintained, as divided into four Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Atharva Veda and Yajur Veda.

¹²Comte de Modave, *Voyage en Inde du Comte de Modave 1773-1776*, p. 289.

They dealt with all sciences. The Brahmans have written their commentaries of which the first was called the Sastras, which gives knowledge of medicine and jurisprudence. There were many Upanishads as the base of Hindu philosophy. Brahmans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries could hardly explain these commentaries because they had insufficient knowledge of the Sanskrit language. Some of them learnt to read and recite without understanding the sense of these commentaries. There were 18 Purans or commentaries of the Vedas.

Mughal educational system lacked the desire to offer sustained encouragement to scientific learning, and this could have come through the establishment of academic institutions.¹³ The Hindus believed Sanskrit as a pure, holy and divine language, because vedas were revealed to them by God, through the medium of Brahma in Sanskrit. Bernier mentioned that all Hindu pupils were first taught Sanskrit language, which was difficult to attain as it needed a good control over grammar. Therefore, Bernier called this Sanskrit language as 'dead language' which was only comprehended by learned persons. Modave said "if one wants to compare this use of the (language) of Hindoustan with our inhabits of Europe, the Sanskrit will be Latin which is the language of the priests and of the scholars and the French will represent the Persian which is used by the courtiers and in the policies".¹⁴

Further Modave code Mr. Dow¹⁵ affirms "in his history of Hindustan that the Sanskrit is a factitious language created by the works of some Brahman scholars to narrow down the circle that they suitably judged the knowledge of the religion... brahmans manufactured this language roughly as our algebraist established their formulas".¹⁶ But Modave do not believe this idea as he thinks

¹³ M.Athar Ali, *Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb*, (Bombay, 1966; rpt. Oxford India,1997), pp.166-167.

¹⁴ Comte de Modave, *Voyage en Inde du Comte de Modave 1773-1776*, p. 408.

¹⁵ Colonel Alexander Dow, was an English East India company employee who in 1772 published a *History of Hindoustan*. His dissertation on the origin and the nature of Despotism, in Hindoustan that was criticized by Duperron, *Législation Orientale* . p. 211-232.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

that Sanskrit was an ancient language spoken by hindus. Modave mentions an anecdote that Akbar and Abul Fazl were curious to know the principles of Brahmans. Therefore they sent Feizi to Benaras to know the secret of Brahmans from old Brahman by being his disciple. But later Feizi was touched with the generous friendship and kindness of this old Brahman so he felt the remorse for the perfidy that he made to him.¹⁷ Feizi told the Brahman that Akbar and Abul Fazl were curious about the particular detail of the law of brahmans , so he had promised his Master to do all that he could require of him. But Brahmans told that the disciple have to take an oath to the master, who wanted nothing to be revealed to Akbar on his studies. Feizi returned to Akbar who had not being informed of what had passed between Feizi and the Brahman professor. But Modave is not certain till what extent that Feizi believed in oath which he made to the Brahman.¹⁸

It seems that Feizi had revealed to Akbar whatever he had learnt under the Brahmans at Benares. This emperor always supported the Hindus and openly protected their religion so much so that he adopted several practices of Hindus which were opposed to the Muslim law. During the reign of 50 years of Akbar, he tried to maintain peace and union among his subjects, notwithstanding the opposition of his belief in regard to religion and he was successful to extend the dimension of Mughal kingdom. Modave further said "There was some partisans of the Moslem law who, without stopping in the exclusive character of that of Brahma, did not fear to publish that Akbar, giving up the faith of his fathers, had kissed the sect of the idolaters. The intention of these excessively pious people was to make him odious, to what they could not succeed".¹⁹ Akbar ruled gloriously and peacefully during his entire reign, later he adopted the policy of 'Sulh-i-kul' or 'peace with all'. The reign of this great emperor was a perpetual succession of prosperity for Hindoustan. He extended of all the dimensions of the boundaries of his empire that included Kashmir, Gujarat and the provinces which were in the south-west of Agra until Narbeda. Akbar's

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 278.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 278.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 279.

successor Jahangir ruled for 22 years who also had the spirit like his father and contempt for the Muslim religion.²⁰ But his passion for drinking and liking towards women harmed his good qualities. He had a defect of unrestraint cupidity which was noticed by European travelers. As noticed that he had greed of the presents which he got as a prince, for example once he returned the presents of Thomas Roe, English ambassador as he found Atlas to be of no use to him.

Modave criticized the brahmans of hindu religion to neglect the study of the religion.²¹ Hindus were studying philosophy in which they had made little progress. Bernier mentioned that "they are of a slow and indolent temper, and strangers to the excitement which the possibility of advancement in an honourable profession produces among the members of the European universities".²² Bernier showed the superiority of the French education system wherein scientific and empirical knowledge was given, in comparison to unscientific and irrational Hindu educational system.

It was observed by Bernier that there were seven renowned philosophers in Hindoustan representing different sects.²³ Each of them was jealous and often disputed with each other. Pundits of each sect pretended that the doctrine of their particular sect was the soundest of all and mostly in conformity with the vedas. Sacred books given by these philosophers were based on common principles but explained in a manner totally different from each other. "Some say that everything is composed of small bodies which are indivisible, not by reason of their solidity, hardness and resistance, but because of their smallness and upon this notion they build many other hypotheses"²⁴ having vague explanations.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 280.

²¹ Comte de Modave, *Voyage en Inde du Comte de Modave 1773-1776*, 293.

²² Bernier, *Travels*, p. 336.

²³ Bernier, *Travels*, p. 326. These school of philosophy were: The Nyaya, founded by Gautama; The Vaiseshika, by Kanada; The Sankhya, by Kapila; The Yoga, by Patanjali; The Mimansa, by Jaimini; The Vedanta, by Badarayana and lastly was Buddha. (Bernier, *Travels*, ft.1, p.326).

²⁴ Bernier, *Travels*, p. 336.

"Others say that everything is composed of matter and form, but not one of the doctors explains him clearly about matter, and still less about form,"²⁵ He demonstrated the superiority of French schools, where they believed "educing form out of the power of matters".²⁶

Many irrational principles were criticized by Bernier that were formulated by the Hindu philosophers. He stated, "some maintain that light and darkness are the first principles, and in support of this opinion they make a thousand foolish and confused observations; alleging reasons disowned by true philosophy, and delivering long discourses which suit the ears of vulgar and illiterate".²⁷ He further mentioned that some "who admit privation as a principle, or rather the privations which they distinguish from nothing and of which they make a long enumeration, so useless and unphilosophical".²⁸ His scientific perspective rejected these irrational hypotheses, as he showed contempt to those who "pretended that everything is the result of fortuitous circumstances" as thoughts could only be believed by "ignorant and low babbler".²⁹

French travelers thought that scientific education was a significant way to subdue the prevailing superstitious practices and irrational customs in Hindoustan. Bernier cited Aurangzeb's resentment towards his teacher Mullah Sale³⁰ for not teaching him subjects necessary for kingship. Aurangzeb complained of his harassment as several of his precious years were wasted in studying irrational and unscientific subjects. He states that this "idle and foolish

²⁵ Ibid., p. 336.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 336. Bernier mentioned that some others "hold that all is composed of the four elements and out of nothing; yet they give not the least explanation concerning commingling and transmutation." (Ibid., p.326).

²⁷ Ibid., p. 337.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 337.

²⁹ Bernier, *Travels*, p. 338.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 154 ft 2. Mulla Shah, a native of Badakshan, was the Murshid or spiritual guide of Dara Shikoh, and was highly respected by Shah Jahan. He died in Kashmir about the year 1660.

proposition, the solution of which yielded no satisfaction to the mind, proposition that seldom enter into the business of life, wild and extravagant reveries conceived with great labour and forgotten as soon as conceived, whose only effect was to fatigue and ruin the intellect and to render a man head-strong and insufferable".³¹ Aurangzeb further criticized his tutor for not making him "acquainted with the distinguishing features of every nation of the earth; its resources and strength; its mode of warfare, its manners, religion, form of government, and wherein its interests principally consist; and, by a regular course of historical reading, to render me familiar with the origin of States, their progress and decline".³²

Aurangzeb condemned his tutor for not creating awareness of extraordinary talent of his ancestors that may have enabled them to achieve their extensive conquests. His tutor instead of teaching Indian languages taught him to read and write *Arabic* which was difficult to master in limited period of time.³³ Aurangzeb was upset with his tutor for "wasting the precious hours of my youth in the dry, unprofitable and never-ending task of learning words".³⁴ He had stated that "their philosophy abounds with even more absurd and obscure notions than our own...and their philosophers employ even more gibberish than our do".³⁵ Bernier showed that not only

³¹ Ibid., p. 160.

³² Bernier, *Travels*, p. 156.

³³ According to Aurangzeb, it would take more than ten to twelve years to completely master Arabic language. Aurangzeb criticized his tutor by stating that "you (tutor) acted as if it were chiefly necessary that he (Prince) should possess great skill in grammar, and such knowledge as belongs to a doctor of law." (Bernier, *Travels*, pp. 156-161).

³⁴ Aurangzeb criticized his tutor and stated that "O yes, you caused me to devote the most valuable years of my life to your favourite hypotheses, or system, and when I left you, I could boast of no greater attainment in the sciences than the use of many obscure and uncouth terms, calculated to discourage, confound and appall a youth of the most masculine understanding terms invented to cover the vanity and ignorance of pretenders to philosophy... If you had taught me that philosophy which adapts the mind of reason, and will not suffer it to rest satisfied with anything short of the most solid argument." (Bernier, *Travels*, p. 160).

³⁵ Bernier, *Travels*, p. 160.

the common masses of India lacked rational and scientific knowledge, but the Mughal monarch himself also complained against his tutor for not teaching him these essential subjects. It can be surmised that Bernier was a strong believer in scientific studies and rational knowledge that should be propagated throughout the world.

Later in the early eighteenth century, France became obsessed with the need for original Indian texts in their languages, and for accurate translations. French travelers' quest for Indian manuscripts played a pivotal role in their attaining proximity to Indian socio-cultural ethos. In their effort to collect Indian manuscripts, they came in contact with the Indian literati of Banaras, Faizabad, Agra, Jaipur and Lucknow. The acquisition and distribution of these manuscripts among European libraries played a major role in familiarizing the West with the rich cultural and literary heritage of India.³⁶ This curiosity was partially satisfied by eighteenth century French missionaries, administrators and adventurers who helped in the transfer of Oriental texts such as Indo-Persian manuscripts, Indian language and grammar books, Indian sacred texts and other intellectual books. This was termed as Renaissance Oriental.

Review of the Knowledge of Indian Astrologers

The European astrologers were more scientifically knowledgeable than the Indian counterpart. The French travelers and adventurers tried to critically review the knowledge of astrology in India. The Indians did have the idea of the mathematics and geographical features of the world as Tavernier saw that the Brahmans have two globes which the Dutch gave to them, when he tried to compare the geographical position of France upon it.³⁷ But Bernier believed that

³⁶ Rosie Llewellyn Jones, 'A Very Ingenious Man: Claude Martin in Early Colonial India. The 'Luckpeera' and 'Constantia', the two residential complex of Claude Martin show the blend of Indian and European architectural tradition which reached its zenith at the time of the construction of nawab's the Daulat Khana complex, Sheesh Mahal and Aina Khana buildings, pp. 156-159.

³⁷ Tavernier, *Travels in India*, Vol.2, Book III, p. 183.

the majority of Asian people were much infatuated with being guided by the signs of the heavens, which led to the highest limit of superstition as witnessed in their phraseology of the astrologers that, “no circumstance can happen below, which is not written above”.³⁸

Indian astrologers could predicted the exact hour for commencement of different actions like warfare between two armies; nomination of commanding officer, marriage date and beginning of any journey etc. Therefore no activity was undertaken without consulting the astrologers. Their advices were considered absolutely necessary even in the most trifling and trivial occasions like proposed purchase of a slave, or the wearing of the new clothes; planting of trees as done by king of Persia. These astrologers were acquainted with every transaction, public or private, and, with every project, common or extraordinary. Bernier compared the Indian astrologers with the European ones to draw the attention of the Frenchmen towards ongoing superstitious practices in France. He stated that in Europe “where the sciences flourish, professors in astrology are considered little better than cheats and jugglers,”³⁹and thus probably tried to give suggestions to Indian astrologers to depend on the scientific progress as made in Europe.

This French traveler mentioned that the market of the Indian cities were filled with mountebanks and jugglers, who remained seated in the sun, on a dusty piece of carpet, handling some old mathematical instruments and having open before them a large book which represented the signs of zodiac. These bazaar astrologers⁴⁰ were called ‘imposters’ by Bernier, as they attracted the attention of the passengers, by whom they were considered as infallible oracles. These jugglers fooled the poor people by

³⁸ Bernier, *Travels*, p. 161. Note: In times of Mughal rulers, royal astrologers performed a ceremony called *Sahet* for the Mughal kings and *omrahs*. This ceremony was performed in expectation of happy and successful activity. (Ibid., p.161).

³⁹ Bernier, *Travels*, p. 162.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 243-245. These bazaar astrologers were both mahometan and gentiles.

foretelling their future for a *payssa* (worth one sol) by reading their hands and faces. He pointed out that there were "silly women, wrapping themselves in a white cloth from head to foot, flock to the astrologers, whisper to them all the transactions of their lives and disclose every secret with no more reserve than is practiced by a scrupulous penitent in the presence of her confessor".⁴¹ He felt these ignorant and foolish people really believed that the stars have an influence on all happenings which the astrologers could control. Among these imposters, Bernier felt the most ridiculous were the half-caste Portuguese who were illiterate and who worked with old mannered instruments like compass, and, some old roman prayer books in Portuguese language with the European zodiac signs. Bernier concludes that the entire Asia was degraded by these imposters or so called astrologers. Even the kings and nobles granted large salaries to these crafty diviners. They never engaged themselves in the most trifling transaction without consulting them.

Indians believed in illusion regarding the matter of geography. Bernier mentioned that "They believed that the world is flat and triangular; that it is composed of seven distinct habitations, differing in beauty, perfection and inhabitants".⁴² They also believed that "the whole world is supported on the heads of a number of elephants, whose occasional motion is the cause of earthquakes".⁴³ He criticized these absurd notions attached to the geography believed by the Indians. Bernier said that the European astronomers gave the exactness in minutes of eclipses whereas Hindus had their own tables to foretell eclipse. These Hindus believed in irrational principles in contrast to the scientific principles prevalent in France. He had mentioned that these Hindus gave ridiculous reasons for occurrences of lunar or solar eclipse.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 244.

⁴² Ibid., p. 340.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 340.

Conclusion

Their assessment of the Indian education system highlighted the slow and long process of Hindu education system. The voyagers had made a comparison of the education system of Orient with the Occident; these French travelers successfully showed the superiority of European rational teaching, teaching methodology and usefulness of material taught. Indian education system in reference to Benaras had been highlighted by the many travelers, most of these voyages have criticized Oriental education system in comparison to Occidental. They have cited Aurangzeb's complaints regarding not teaching him the tactics and diplomacy of governance but rather forcing him towards orthodoxy education. This may probably reflect a suggestion to French state to made necessary education reforms. Further the travelers showed the superiority of French astrological knowledge in comparison to Indian but many travelers were impressed by Jaipur Raja's astrological observatory. After indepth examining first hand sources of French travelers and adventurers records one can understand their motives for exploration having preconceived political and religious motives. The sense of orientalism in regarding to Indian education system was witnessed in the observation of the French travelers and adventurers' accounts during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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