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2 **AN ANALYSIS OF THE TRAVELOGUE OF FRANÇOIS BERNIER AND HIS**  
3 **DEPICTION OF THE SUBCONTINENT .**

4

5 **INTRODUCTION**

6 The seventeenth century evolved with heavy hints of political turmoil, social variations, an  
7 everchanging economy and a few travelers noting every change during their sojourn in the  
8 subcontinent. The history of medieval India is usually characterized through the dynasties  
9 which ruled them, yet the mark it left in the global sphere was not just through the intimate  
10 histories within. It was through the lens of the travelers who extensively moved across the  
11 subcontinent, playing a role of either a dynamic persona or silent spectators as they jotted  
12 down the instances that will later connect the medieval history of India to the evolving  
13 historical thoughts on global stage. The seventeenth century France saw the salon of  
14 Marguerite de La Sablière becoming a space that would help in the development of the  
15 knowledge about *les Indes orientales* as texts related to India started originating there. This  
16 was because of an avid writer, François Bernier who took up residence in the salon after his  
17 decade long visit to India. In that salon of La Sablière and La Fontaine, Bernier spent another  
18 decade in composing, compiling and ultimately publishing his texts on Mughal India, which  
19 also earned him the title of “le Mogol” by his contemporaries in France and elsewhere. In the  
20 1640s, Bernier, nearly twenty years after his birth, left for Paris for his studies and came  
21 under the influence of the philosopher, Pierre Gassendi. Gassendi was often called a libertine  
22 and it was under him, that Bernier met other thinkers of his time and developed the empiricist  
23 and neo-Epicurean philosophy of his mentor. It was in the company of Gassendi that Bernier  
24 developed a fascination for natural sciences which he cultivated during his time in India as  
25 well. Bernier received his doctorate in medicine degree at Montpellier which would later aid  
26 him during his travels to India. Gassendi had always been keen of the ‘Orient’, a factor which  
27 pushed Bernier along with his love for travel to roam the world after the death of his mentor.  
28 This led him to journey across the world to come to India which was a lesser-known place for  
29 his French contemporaries. In 1658-59, he finally reached Surat as an independent thinker,  
30 visiting and travelling out of curiosity and not as a merchant or missionary which was  
31 prevalent during that time. On India, he had published four volumes of work out of which the  
32 first one was *Histoire de la dernière révolution des états du Grand Mogol*, which along with  
33 his letters and other works acted as a watershed moment for the engagement of early modern

34 Europe with the subcontinent.<sup>1</sup>His works marked the beginning of a long engagement of  
35 empiricism of Europe and the realities in the Mughal Empire. The India he landed at and  
36 subsequently wrote about was not barren, it was wealthy with an agrarian economy and a  
37 huge influential market of global trade. His arrival was however met with the moments of  
38 Mughal history when it was caught in between a brutal internal struggle for power. The  
39 strange beginnings of his travel impacted his political and cultural critique of the  
40 subcontinent, which Sanjay Subramanyam noted in his work as the “aliens” operating in  
41 zones of “contained conflict”.<sup>2</sup> His writings showed a political, commercial and cultural  
42 ethnographic account of India along with a mirror that would also relate to the political  
43 situation in an absolutist France during the time of Louis XVI.

44 While proceeding to view his writings, it becomes necessary to situate him within the Indian  
45 society and among his contemporary, “alien” Europeans. He was an observer of the period;  
46 however, his position is critiqued by his contemporaries like Nicolò Manucci, a Venetian  
47 traveler who had spent a long period of time in the subcontinent. He detested Bernier’s  
48 sudden fame due to his literary publications. In Manucci’s work, the *Storia del Mogol* he  
49 questions the methodology of Bernier and stated that the latter knew the Mughal empire only  
50 in a fugitive manner and on a superficial level. Every information provided by Bernier was  
51 supposedly acquired in the marketplaces of India, not believed in the courts of the kings and  
52 the princes or nobles. Further he accuses Bernier of knowing most of the things stated by him  
53 and not properly annotating Manucci for it; in the process he also describes the “slaving  
54 away” situation the Bernier was in during his stay at the library of his patron Danishmand  
55 Khan. Bernier was kept busy in several works of Danishmand that barely gave him enough  
56 time to have lived experiences of the empire.<sup>3</sup> The European knowledge production in India  
57 was not a monolithic orientalist structure; there existed several internal dynamics and clashes  
58 as the period was that of “contained conflicts” and not colonial domination as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

## 59 **THE MUGHAL COURT**

60 Before being involved in the library of Danishmand Khan, Bernier on his entry to the  
61 subcontinent was exposed to the succession struggle that occurred on account of Shah Jahan

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<sup>1</sup>Faith Evelyn Beasley, *Versailles Meets the Taj Mahal: François Bernier, Marguerite de La Sablière, and Enlightening Conversations in Seventeenth-Century France* (Toronto ; Buffalo ; London: University Of Toronto Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup>Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Three Ways to Be Alien* (University Press of New England, 2011).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 146-146.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 138.

62 being sick. During the fratricidal war, he met Dara Shikoh near Ahmedabad, who was on the  
63 run. Dara had suffered a huge defeat in 1659 and did not have any royal titles while retreating  
64 towards Sind. As he met Bernier, he convinced the latter to join his entourage to provide  
65 medical assistance. The association with Dara was brief, but it provided Bernier with deep  
66 insight in the working of the Empire during the seventeenth century. In his works, he  
67 mentioned the tragic finale of the prince as he was defeated by his brother Aurangzeb who  
68 stripped Dara of all glory during his final parade in the streets of Delhi. With the death of  
69 Dara, Bernier had to strive hard to create a position within the empire. Using his medical  
70 expertise and philosophical intellect, he secured his position by joining under Danishmand  
71 Khan, who was the Secretary of State for foreign affairs and later the treasurer of the Empire.  
72 Bernier was paid in his employment in return of translating intellectual pieces of work to  
73 Persian, along with educating the former on European works of astronomy, physics and  
74 anatomy.<sup>5</sup> This situated him in the internal court affairs of the Empire, where at times he also  
75 served as provider of medical assistance to the emperor.

76 He noticed in great depth the intricate details of the court under Aurangzeb and pointed out  
77 the various emissaries who visited. He mentioned the Uzbek Tartars being received with  
78 lavish gifts and materials embroidered with gold and silver, as they brought gifts from  
79 Central Asia. Bernier highlighted this diplomatic mission in his work and the necessity of  
80 maintaining etiquette which also remained a central factor in the court of Louis XVI in  
81 France. His mentioning was read in reference to the Ottoman Empire sending an ambassador  
82 to the French court to improve their strained relationships; however, the French could not  
83 determine the rank of the ambassador and hence could not decide on how to receive him. As  
84 negotiations happened through interpreters, it resulted in a ruckus and embarrassment. The  
85 French court did not follow the traditional Tartar etiquettes that needed to be followed. He  
86 utilized the context to critique the happenings of his own countrymen. In 1665, the  
87 representatives of the French *Compagnie des Indes* and Louis XVI, La Boulaye and Beber  
88 visited the subcontinent but considered themselves to be superior to the local customs. Hence,  
89 they refused to do the traditional *salaam* and wanted to give the gift directly to the emperor,  
90 sidestepping court norms. Bernier mentions that Persian ambassadors at times flouted the  
91 customs based on the Safavid superiority but the Europeans as merchants could not afford to  
92 do that. Bernier and Tavernier stated that it was a diplomatic failure and might have affected

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<sup>5</sup>Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire A.D 1656-1668*, trans. Archibald Constable, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 1916).

93 relations.<sup>6</sup> He was also instrumental in noting the political and philosophical ideology of the  
94 period and especially the way Aurangzeb ran the Empire. The strict stance of Aurangzeb in  
95 rebuking his former tutor for not teaching him practical lessons and instead, focusing heavily  
96 on language and literary based modules showed that there was need for pragmatic learning as  
97 Bernier explained the instance.<sup>7</sup>

## 98 **THE “ORIENTAL DESPOTISM” AND BERNIER’S ANALYSIS**

99 The way Bernier viewed the subcontinent can be assessed through varied lens. There are  
100 instances of his amazement but the one constant remained, was his surprise at the way the  
101 subcontinent functioned. The way he viewed the subcontinent was through the Oriental gaze  
102 where he drew comparisons of the happenings with the conditions in Europe. It was an  
103 ‘exotic’ view of the customs, rituals, practices, economy and politics as the traveler roamed  
104 the “unfamiliar” political, economic and cultural landscape of the subcontinent. One of his  
105 most influential writing and critic were his writings and correspondence with the Finance  
106 Minister of Louis XVI, Jean-Baptiste Colbert. It was in his “Letter to Monseigneur Colbert  
107 concerning Hindoustan”, where he spoke of an economic and political theory regarding the  
108 subcontinent which would influence European political thoughts and philosophy.<sup>8</sup> He  
109 recognized a paradox in the economic functioning of the subcontinent; it was an “abyss”  
110 which consumed a huge portion of the global gold and silver bullion and precious metals due  
111 to its enormous trade in the massive export of manufactured goods like silks, cotton and  
112 spices. But its imports from Europe remained relatively low. Bernier saw that despite the  
113 intense influx of bullion into the subcontinent, the general populace remained poor and there  
114 was the lack of the prosperous middle class along with the booming urban centers which  
115 were popular sights in the western world.<sup>9</sup>

116 Bernier attempted to find the root cause of the problem stating that it was the complete  
117 absence of private property in ownership of land as throughout the empire it was considered

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<sup>6</sup>Faith Evelyn Beasley, *Versailles Meets the Taj Mahal: François Bernier, Marguerite de La Sablière, and Enlightening Conversations in Seventeenth-Century France* (Toronto ; Buffalo ; London: University Of Toronto Press, 2018), 59-64.

<sup>7</sup>Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire A.D 1656-1668*, trans. Archibald Constable, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 1916).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 200-239.

<sup>9</sup>Sakul Kundra, “An Assessment of Francois Bernier’s Travel Account: A French Commercial Informer or a Critic of the French State?,” *Journal of History and Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (June 30, 2010), 26-27, <https://doi.org/10.46422/jhss.v1i1.3>.

118 to be the land of the sovereign.<sup>10</sup> Through his ideas of the economic declined society and  
119 political structure, he defined what would later be termed as ‘Oriental Despotism’. Even  
120 though in his letter he never used the word “despotism”, he termed it as “*la décadence des*  
121 *Étatsd’Asie*” where he wrote about the “oriental” monarch seen not just in Mughal India but  
122 also in Ottoman Empire. His understanding of Mughals was not detailed and he followed a  
123 top-down approach ignoring the sections of people in the middle and lower strata, including  
124 zamindars who were a defining aspect of the economy.<sup>11</sup> In the Mughal land grant system, he  
125 noted that land was given to the provincial governors on a non-hereditary and ad-hoc basis  
126 due to which they had to ulterior incentive to invest in welfare of peasants or agriculture.  
127 They functioned as tyrants to extract the maximum wealth through revenue which Bernier  
128 argues led to the impoverishment of peasantry, agricultural decadence, fertile lands changing  
129 into arid landscapes and desertion of several villages.<sup>12</sup>

130 In an attempt to locate the cause of money vanishing from circulation, he realized that  
131 merchants and artisans followed a certain superstition of burying their golds and silver as  
132 they believed that buried treasure with stay with them in their afterlives. Tavernier agreed to  
133 the existence of this custom as he notes that wealthy people in Assam would bury their  
134 fortune in the hopes of using it if they reincarnated. The people would be truly poor only if  
135 they did not have a secret stash of treasure buried in the ground. These customs of burying  
136 treasure in the ground led to the cash or bullion getting out of circulation in the economy  
137 which led to a crisis of liquid money and evident impoverished livelihood. Bernier was not  
138 just focusing on a travelogue but it was a way to warn the French. It reflected the emerging  
139 problem in France during that time when the French economy was crashing due to vanity and  
140 war led by Louis XVI and his absolutist regime. Instead of reinvesting the profits into trade  
141 or ships, the wealthy French bourgeoisie spent their money on buying social status. Louis  
142 XVI needed huge amount of cash to wage his wars due to which he made efforts to raise  
143 money by selling off official government posts, titles and estates or fiefs. The elevation of  
144 status would aid them in several ways like increase in their social standing, exemption from  
145 the enormous land tax or *taille* and extravagant lifestyles. Trade was considered to be of

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<sup>10</sup>Edward Farley Oaten, *Travel and Travellers in India, A.D. 1400-1700* (Kegan Paul Trench Trubner and Co. Ltd, 1971), 204.

<sup>11</sup>Joan-Pau Rubiés, “Race, Climate and Civilization in the Works of François Bernier,” ed. Marie Fourcade and Ines G. Županov, OpenEdition Books (Paris: Éditions de l’École des hautes études en sciences sociales, September 16, 2020), 61, <https://books.openedition.org/editionsehess/22612>.

<sup>12</sup>Edward Farley Oaten, *Travel and Travellers in India, A.D. 1400-1700* (Kegan Paul Trench Trubner and Co. Ltd, 1971), 205.

146 lower strata than true nobility and hence, merchants tried to buy their way to the top; securing  
147 which they would abandon mercantile practices. France was facing a crisis as the wealth and  
148 energy started getting soaked up. When Bernier narrated the foolishness of Indian merchants  
149 and their economic enterprises, he was also issuing a warning to France that money would be  
150 pulled out of the economy and hinder progress of nation. He also warned the ruler and  
151 Colbert that heavy taxation, absolutist policies and lack of private property would cause  
152 economic fragility as he pointed out in India.<sup>13</sup>

153 He proceeded to define the manufacturing units of the subcontinent and highly acknowledge  
154 the superior level of craftsmanship of the Indian artisans. He noted their ability to produce  
155 gold ornaments, textiles brocaded with silver or gold threads, miniature paintings and the  
156 luxurious fabrics that were produced even without the availability of formal training or  
157 western machinery. Bernier did not forget to bring to light the conditions in which they  
158 worked and severely critiqued the dismal state of affairs in the imperial workshops or the  
159 *karkhanas* and in the markets. He stated that they were treated brutally, not remunerated  
160 adequately and had to go through extreme physical hardship with long working conditions in  
161 order to stay employed. He also showed surprise over the complex caste system prevalent in  
162 India which divided on the basis of traditional occupation and birth while explaining the  
163 intricacies of this system of society.<sup>14</sup>The complexity of this oppression however led Bernier  
164 to translate it in a different way which was a socio-cultural judgement. He stated that they  
165 were “naturally indolent” even if they produced great handcrafted goods. Since these artisans  
166 lack the means and could not have upward social mobility, he labelled them in a Eurocentric  
167 manner. It remained a paradox in itself that he continued to praise the production of luxurious  
168 fabrics and brocades done by these craftsmen while labeling them as “lazy” as they did not  
169 work within the capitalist framework of Europe. He wanted to put forth the notion of the  
170 European being hardworking, industrious people due to their correct belonging to a “correct”  
171 religion and western civilization. Indians on the other hand may produce great items of export  
172 and have great rulers but intrinsically would be termed as “vile” or “indolent” based on the  
173 nature of their worship and lifestyle. This created the seeds of an Oriental view of the  
174 subcontinent which later crystallized during the colonial rule in India.<sup>15</sup>He is also judgmental

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<sup>13</sup>Sakul Kundra, “An Assessment of Francois Bernier’s Travel Account: A French Commercial Informer or a Critic of the French State?,” *Journal of History and Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (June 30, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.46422/jhss.v1i1.3>.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, 37-39.

<sup>15</sup>E. Vanina, “Roads of (Mis)Understanding: European Travellers in India (Fifteenth to Seventeenth Century),” *Indian Historical Review* 40, no. 2 (November 26, 2013): 279, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0376983613499678>.

175 regarding the administration of justice in the Mughal empire which he found to be dependent  
176 on the ruling elites. There was no recorded law or independent judiciary due to which even  
177 provincial governors could exercise their powers in cases of life and death rendering the  
178 accused to be entirely defenseless. He however agreed that even though the system was  
179 despotic and there was a scarcity of lawyers too, yet it prevented lawsuits from happening  
180 which was quite prevalent in France and finally stated that speedy injustice was better than  
181 tardy justice.<sup>16</sup> He assessed the spiritual landscape of India through the lens of European  
182 scientific rationalism where he critiqued both the Hindu and Islamic religious practices. In his  
183 letter to Monsieur Jean Chapelain, he described the ‘Superstitions, strange customs, and  
184 Doctrines of the Indous or Gentiles of Hindoustan’ which were used as evidence to state that  
185 there was no doctrine too strange or too improbable for the soul of man to conceive.<sup>17</sup> He did  
186 not believe in the Hindu faith in astrology and the supernatural to describe natural  
187 phenomenon. In this regard he talks of the solar eclipse in Delhi in 1666, which resulted in  
188 chaotic reaction among the populace in contrast to the scientific predictability that he had  
189 seen in Europe. He criticized the Hindu belief of the evil *deuta* or deity infecting the sun and  
190 other rituals followed like bathing in river or giving alms to priestly classes which he  
191 believed would just enrich them. He considered the bazaar astrologers to be imposters and  
192 cheaters who would prey on the gullibility of women and to his dismay, stated that even  
193 Mughal elites consulted them.<sup>18</sup>

194 Bernier directed his most severe critique against the then popular practice of “widow  
195 burning” or *satiprevalent* under Brahmanical traditions. Europeans even in earlier visits  
196 mentioned the practice but Bernier provided eyewitness accounts in his letter to Chapelain,  
197 which removed any aspect of devotion or romanticism that could have been attached to it.<sup>19</sup>  
198 He structured it as cruel manipulation as part of the patriarchal narrative and Brahmanical  
199 order. He condemned the notion that widows died out of devotion to their husbands and  
200 wanted to join them after death. He believed that it was due to the societal conditioning  
201 which was deeply entrenched and utilized by men to keep wives in subjection and prevent  
202 situations where the wife might poison the husband. He furthered his condemnation to the

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<sup>16</sup>Edward Farley Oaten, *Travel and Travellers in India, A.D. 1400-1700* (Kegan Paul Trench Trubner and Co. Ltd, 1971), 207.

<sup>17</sup>Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire A.D 1656-1668*, trans. Archibald Constable, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 1916), 300-350.

<sup>18</sup>Sakul Kundra, “The Charisma of Royal Authority and Popular Culture in the Mughal Period: Representations of Francois Bernier,” *The IUP Journal of History and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2010): 49-50.

<sup>19</sup>Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire A.D 1656-1668*, trans. Archibald Constable, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 1916), 300-350.

203 Brahmin priests who forced the act of self-immolation on the women even when they were  
204 unwilling participants to cement their material and physical authority.<sup>20</sup> There are however  
205 several layers in analyzing his criticism where different aspects of his thoughts are  
206 highlighted. He made clear documentation of his intervention in preventing the self-  
207 immolatory practice by threatening to revoke the children's pension if the wife died.<sup>21</sup>  
208 Through his, he brought forth the oriental view of the western world where he wanted to  
209 show that pragmatic intellect and European reasoning was necessary in order to counter the  
210 indigenous dogma which existed. This version of his understanding reverts one back to his  
211 concept of "Oriental despotism" where the subcontinent was viewed to ruthless, mindless and  
212 in need of European pragmatism. Another aspect that can be highlighted was the link of the  
213 critique of indigenous religious extremities to a covert critique of the western religious  
214 extremes especially in Europe. He developed parallel understanding of the Hindu worship of  
215 idols to the Catholic practices of venerating the images and made suggestions that the  
216 manipulative structure of priesthood in the subcontinent was similar to the functioning of the  
217 Catholic church in Europe. He spoke against Indian "gentilism" and propagated a view based  
218 on empiricism that would advocate for a world view that was beyond the fanaticism found in  
219 both Eastern and Western worlds.<sup>22</sup>

220 One of his deep analyses was based on the intellectual format of the subcontinent. He  
221 observed that the Hindu education system was unlike the formal colleges and universities as  
222 seen in Europe. His main critique was the huge amount of time spent learning a language like  
223 Sanskrit which was applicable only in elite circles and did not help in professional progress.<sup>23</sup>  
224 On a similar note, as stated in the works of Oaten, he even spoke of the time the tutor of  
225 Aurangzeb was chastised by the Emperor for wasting years on teaching language and Arabic  
226 when as a ruler he could have profited from practical arts of strategy, military, history,  
227 statecrafts and geography that would aid him during his rule. Through the example of  
228 Aurangzeb, Bernier wanted to point at the disconnected nature of education that was being

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<sup>20</sup>Sakul Kundra, "The Charisma of Royal Authority and Popular Culture in the Mughal Period: Representations of Francois Bernier," *The IUP Journal of History and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2010): 53.

<sup>21</sup>Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire A.D 1656-1668*, trans. Archibald Constable, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 1916).

<sup>22</sup>Joan-Pau Rubiés, "Race, Climate and Civilization in the Works of François Bernier," ed. Marie Fourcade and Ines G. Županov, OpenEdition Books (Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, September 16, 2020), <https://books.openedition.org/editionsehess/22612>.

<sup>23</sup>Sakul Kundra, "The Charisma of Royal Authority and Popular Culture in the Mughal Period: Representations of Francois Bernier," *The IUP Journal of History and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2010): 55.

229 taught to the princes which left them ignorant of the political and economic realities of their  
230 empire.

231 In terms of philosophy and sciences too, Bernier spoke with Hindu pandits and Muslim Sufis  
232 whose metaphysical understanding of the concept of God or universe felt inadequate to him  
233 and completely devoid of empirical thoughts. He did not believe in the anatomy, astronomy  
234 and other sciences as propagated during that time, dismissed explanations of various cosmic  
235 or natural incidents and considered them to be “extravagant follies” which he mocked.<sup>24</sup> He  
236 believed that the subcontinent and Empire was intellectually stagnated due to the despotic  
237 system which governed it and provided no incentive for scientific inquiry and based itself on  
238 religious establishments.

#### 239 **OTHER ASPECTS OF HIS WORK: FEMALE AGENCY AND CULTURAL** 240 **RELATIVISM**

241 His accounts were very different from those of his contemporaries including Tavernier  
242 because of his inclusion of the female agency in the court, in his writings. His writings were  
243 compiled in a Parisian salon run by a woman as aforementioned which allowed him to reside  
244 in an environment dominated by politically active women. His work did not focus on the  
245 passive stereotype of the “Oriental” women but highlighted the political and economic power  
246 of figures like Nur Jahan, Jahanara and Roshanara Begum. He noted the immense governance  
247 ability of Nur Jahan with intellect and judgement during a time when Jahangir was moving  
248 towards overindulgence and incapability of rule. He highlighted the huge wealth that  
249 Jahanara possessed along with her control over trade in Surat and periods where European  
250 merchants had to directly negotiate with her, along with the architectural patronages that she  
251 indulged in. He spoke of Roshanara and her role in orchestrating key ideas during the war of  
252 succession where she played an active role instead of just an observer. His descriptions of the  
253 *zenana* or the seraglio went against the European preconceptions of a site of sexual  
254 subjugation and lack of rights. Instead, it was portrayed as an artistic and economic hub  
255 partaking in trade and patronages. His description of the extravagant journey to Kashmir with  
256 the *zenana* showed that it was not restricted to hidden corners of the Empire.<sup>25</sup> This resonated  
257 with the intellectual sphere of France where women were participating slowly and showed

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<sup>24</sup>Sakul Kundra, “The Charisma of Royal Authority and Popular Culture in the Mughal Period: Representations of Francois Bernier,” *The IUP Journal of History and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2010): 50.

<sup>25</sup>Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire A.D 1656-1668*, trans. Archibald Constable, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 1916), 350.

258 that Indian women shared similar or even more agency than their counterparts.<sup>26</sup> He also  
259 expressed a cultural relativism relating to aesthetics, in his letter to François de La Mothe Le  
260 Vayer where he did not parallel Paris with Delhi or Agra, noting that architecture needed to  
261 match the climatic situation. The Parisian structures would be unfit in the subcontinental  
262 climate. On his visit to Taj Mahal, he stated that it did not conform to the Greco-Roman  
263 architecture revered in France but the strange layout was stunning and he was afraid his taste  
264 was getting “too Indian”. He considered it deserving to have place in European architectural  
265 texts and being “superior” than the pyramids of Egypt. He described the throne being  
266 embedded with diamonds, pearls and golds which transformed the emperor into a be-dazzled  
267 “small sun”. He paid similar attention to the superiorly painted cotton and silk fabrics used in  
268 imperial tents and by common people.<sup>27</sup>

## 269 CONCLUSION

270 In his seventeenth century travel work, there were several methodological errors, which was  
271 aided by his linguistic limitations. He learned Persian but that was able to connect him with  
272 the elites, leaving him unaware of the lived realities of the common populace and peasants or  
273 workers. The elite bias that he inculcated led to the error of stating there was no private  
274 property as he did not take into account the complex levels of hereditary and private  
275 ownership of land by zamindars and other classes. This led to him falsely creating a  
276 generalized idea that would provide the basis of “Oriental Despotism” which was utilized by  
277 the British colonizers.<sup>28</sup> Manucci’s critique also revealed the fact that Bernier’s  
278 epistemological sense was contested among his contemporaries as well.

279 Bernier, however should not be read only as a purveyor of colonialism and orientalism. His  
280 work extended beyond a simple travelogue, where the author just noted and observed. He  
281 engaged with his work on a critical and analytical basis, while also highlighting and showing  
282 appreciation to aspects of women agency, architecture and pluralistic composition of the  
283 subcontinent. His critical engagement exposed flaws in the Mughal state and acted as a covert

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<sup>26</sup>Faith Evelyn Beasley, *Versailles Meets the Taj Mahal: François Bernier, Marguerite de La Sablière, and Enlightening Conversations in Seventeenth-Century France* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

<sup>27</sup>Faith Evelyn Beasley, *Versailles Meets the Taj Mahal: François Bernier, Marguerite de La Sablière, and Enlightening Conversations in Seventeenth-Century France* (Toronto ; Buffalo ; London: University Of Toronto Press, 2018).

<sup>28</sup>E. Vanina, “Roads of (Mis)Understanding: European Travellers in India (Fifteenth to Seventeenth Century),” *Indian Historical Review* 40, no. 2 (November 26, 2013): 280-281, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0376983613499678>.

284 warning to the French empire about its dangerous trajectories; incited discussions in  
285 intellectual circles regarding the subcontinent and intertwined the subcontinental civilization  
286 with the western historical imaginations and political thoughts.

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