
Between Ethnography, Diplomacy and Logistics; Precursory Notes of Colonial Representations in Sir Thomas Roe's Journal

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Abstract

The Journal of Sir Thomas Roe is seminal for possessing the first instances of the British contact displaying tendencies that would realise colonising propensities. The paper engages with Roe's journal being on a diplomatic mission to the court of the Mughal emperor Jahangir for obtaining trading rights for the East India Company as a record of representations that essentialise the differences witnessed as of Alterity. Roe's observations are presented as travel narrative that engages the readership with vividness of commercial logistics, courtly affairs and intrigues and ethnographic aspects that even touch upon trivialities as curious instances. Roe's journal constantly displays a conscious effort of differentiation between the English and the Indian as contrasts. Roe representing the English character sets himself as essentially opposed to what he considers as despotic rule of the Mughal court and its corollary of slavery. The paper argues that this results from both the cultural misreading of Roe and his assumption of self-importance through his authority of authorship realised via a controlled narrative. His narrative details contrasts with alternative sources of the same historical incidences as found in Jahangirnama and brings into question the role of subjectivity in non-fictional texts. The findings reveal that Roe's propositions being as a blueprint for the British colonial presence through the East India Company also sets in precedence the cultural misunderstandings and creation of Oriental stereotypes leading to colonial essentialist representations.

Key Words: Sir Thomas Roe; Mughal; Colonial; Ethnography; Diplomacy; East India Company

Introduction

One of the tendencies that influenced the editors of travelogues for their collections of voyages which had been conducted in their preceding days or centuries was the minimality of vagueness and fancy (Nayar). Among others, utility and accuracy were considered very important for the choice of representing many adventurous sailors and travellers who crossed beyond the borders of known Europe and into Asia, Africa and what was considered the New World. John Pinkerton and his 17 volumes titled “A General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels in All Parts of the World” are no exceptions. Published between 1808 and 1814, the Scottish historian, antiquarian and poet, Pinkerton’s Volumes contained many travel adventures which for its times was considered useful for it provided much valued commercial logistics and cartographical details differing from many other editions and collections (Campbell). Among the many travellers Pinkerton represents, Sir Thomas Roe the British diplomat and ambassador to the Mughal court of Jahangir in seventeenth century India gets his place in the Eighth volume. Importantly, John Pinkerton’s inclusion of Sir Thomas Roe in his General Collection serves as a strategic historiographical choice, positioning Roe’s 1615–1619 journal concerning India referred as ‘Hindustan’, as an essential primary record for pre-colonial early British diplomacy and collection of logistics. Roe’s journal records valuable insight for filling the trajectory of British colonial presence in historical terms that impacted their psychology and approach to India as a colonising power that sustained itself particularly on the dissemination of discourse over the Orient as the Alterity (Said, “Orientalism”). In fact, through featuring Sir Thomas Roe, Pinkerton highlights a pivotal shift in British venture into India from haphazard merchant venture accounts as that of Alexander Hamilton to the advocacy of formal institutionalised establishment. Roe’s journal as a travelogue also provides high-quality narrative that details the foundational diplomatic manoeuvres between King James I and the Mughal Emperor Jahangir, the difference owing much to what Roe argued was circumstantial about the former’s sponsorship and essential about the later as a kind of people. As such, Roe’s account is prized not only for its vividness and literary merit but also for its meticulous documentation of the Mughal court’s complex bureaucracy, political intrigues, and cultural wealth, insights that were previously inaccessible to Western readership through other contemporarily available travelogues (Adams).

Also, Roe provides much details on the Indian populace and character that sets in precedence the aspect of colonial essentialising that would dominate much of the British scholarship and research over India in the succeeding centuries on the Renaissance model of the civilized and the barbarian (Heraclides and Dialla). Most significantly, Roe’s persistence and natural dignity for his contemporary readership would illustrate the origins of binary

positioning on the European kind instanced by the British East India Company as against the Indian (H. Clifford). Roe's contribution for the establishment of a permanent foothold for the British in India, makes the journal a valuable historical source for understanding the growth of colonial identity and mode of interaction with Indians as Alterity.

Diplomacy for Logistics

Apart from logistics, Sir Thomas Roe's travelogue had been important for his point of view and style were from that of a diplomat who was no less than a literary writer whose lively narrative displayed domesticity in its report bordering reconnaissance. Also, the peculiar and trivial details that Sir Thomas Roe intervenes his writings with, especially of courtly diplomacy makes his journal interesting and engaging. Beyond its diplomatic utility, Roe's journal derives its vivid quality from the seamless integration of peculiar and trivial anecdotes that humanize the monumental Mughal court, though as according to the narrator's view (Bennett).

Serving as the first official ambassador from King James I to the Mughal Emperor Jahangir with the primary goal of securing a permanent trade treaty for the English East India Company, Roe had the prerogative of representing the English crown and hence was a witness to much in the court. Henceforth his journal contains many interludes in between his diplomatic work, ranging from the comical sight of high-ranking nobles scrambling for gold-coated almonds tossed by the Emperor (Pinkerton 37) to the Persian Ambassador considered a juggler (Pinkerton 21) to Roe's own pious indignation over being told by a local officials to bow to a Chan he had met (Pinkerton 5) makes the dry political record into a rich ethnographic narrative (Banerjee). By documenting his late-night drinking bouts with Jahangir and the Emperor's obsession with paltry English curiosities like Irish greyhounds or a modified state coach (Pinkerton 24), Roe captures the "insubstantial pageant" of courtly life. These granular details allow the reader to move past the grandiosity of the Mughal state to observe the specific material and social eccentricities that defined the encounter, ultimately validating Pinkerton's choice to include the journal as a work of both high historical importance and profound human interest.

Pinkerton focuses on the Journal of Sir Thomas Roe as a masterclass in observational diplomacy, where the narrative's engagement stems from Roe's persistence in navigating a court of immense wealth. This highlights how Roe, as a royal ambassador, meticulously recorded the peculiar rituals of the Mughal court as a requirement beside acquiring commercial logistics, such as the Emperor's advice to Roe about the use of gifts to secure trade permits (Pinkerton 34) or Roe's unwillingness to put on the emperor's worn cloak that symbolised favour in the Mughal court, but seemed undignified to Roe (Pinkerton 26). Roe's refusal to accept the worn cloak, even only as a narrative, marks a moment of cultural

friction, signalling his attempt to establish English national dignity (Banerjee) as a differing space as he represented the Mughal court's custom's as an insubstantial pageant. By documenting his late-night drinking sessions with Jahangir and his frustration over poorly received gifts like the English coach, Roe provides an invaluable source that prioritizes the human and material eccentricities of the encounter as political inputs with commercial statistics ("Thomas Roe"), ultimately justifying his central placement in Pinkerton's collection.

A Colonial Blue-Print

In addition to his courtly observations, Roe's journal serves as a sophisticated logistical assessment of the British East India Company's viability in India (Bennett), focusing on the harsh realities of commercial infrastructure and the need of strategy to survive for profit. He warns against the logistical folly of maintaining expensive inland forts, famously advising that "if you will profit, seek it at sea, and in quiet trade," arguing that the overhead costs of a military presence would consume all margins of profit leading to ruin (Pinkerton 48–49). Roe meticulously details the logistical hurdles of the Surat port system (Adams), documenting the insufferable delays caused by local customs officials and the arbitrary seizure of goods under the law of the land.

He further evaluates the internal supply chain, noting the vast distances and risks involved in transporting goods from the interior to the coast, and critiques the unpredictability of the Mughal markets, where demand was driven more by the Emperor's capricious taste for novelties than by stable economic principles (Pinkerton 43). Ultimately, Roe's journal functions as a strategic manual that transitioned the Company from a model of erratic voyages to a structured, land-based commercial strategy centred on diplomatic immunity and maritime security. Very importantly Roe's journal moves beyond being a simple travelogue by offering a sophisticated logistical blueprint for the East India Company to function. For instance by identifying the Red Sea (Pinkerton 51) trade as key to Indian commerce and demanding a structured approach to indigo and cloth monopolies, Roe shifted the Company's focus from sporadic voyages to a permanent, land-based commercial presence.

His insistence that the English must seek profit at sea while securing monopoly rights on the ground illustrates a dual-strategy of maritime power and terrestrial economic diplomacy that would define British India for the next two centuries. Sir Thomas Roe's advice placed within Pinkerton's General Collection attains importance if looked past the interesting but trivial courtly anecdotes to the logistical doctrine that would shape the British colonial Empire in India. Roe's primary contribution to the East India Company was his understanding and rejection of the fortress model favoured by the Portuguese and Dutch. He

famously penned the Blue Water strategy well in 1616, stating, "Let this be received as a rule that if you will profit, seek it at sea, and in quiet trade; for without controversy it is an error to affect garrisons and land wars in India" (Pinkerton 50).

In Roe's journal, the Blue Water strategy would mark a shift from territorial conquest to maritime commercialism. Roe's rule provided a logistical blueprint for the British East India Company, contrasting with contemporary powers as the Dutch and the Portuguese focus on land wars and expensive inland forts that had led to their downfall. Pinkerton highlights this advice because it reflects a paradigm shift in commercial thought that had to be emphasised. Roe argued that the logistical folly of maintaining expensive land-based forts would inevitably consume the Company's capital, a prediction that proved historically accurate as the Portuguese Estado da Índia began to collapse under its own overhead, a vital point noted as Pinkerton by many later writers such as George Percy Badger the editor of Varthema's Travels, a travelogue similar as Pinkerton's. (Varthema Introduction, cii). Beyond military restraint, Roe provided a sophisticated analysis of identifying what was key for the East India Company's participation in the Indian socio-political economy. He realized that by dominating the maritime route between Surat and Mocha, the East India Company could bypass the need to export gold from England and instead generate money through inter-Asian freight and trade (Pinkerton 49–51).

Furthermore, Roe's assessment of the indigo and cloth monopolies was revolutionary for its focus on vertical integration. He warned the Company that they could not remain mere merchants subject to the capricious whims of Mughal governors (Hunt); they had to secure monopolies at the source, specifically in Biana and Sarkhej to stabilize prices (Pinkerton 50–51). This advice transformed the East India Company from a series of shipping voyages into a sovereign corporation with a long-term logistical footprint. (The Cambridge Economic History Of India, Vol. 2.). The outcome of Roe's persistence was the establishment of a permanent factory at Surat, which served as the logistical beachhead for the British in India for the next century. Henceforth, Pinkerton includes Roe not just for his engaging descriptions, but because his journal serves as the foundational document for the transition of British presence in India from maritime exploration to systematic colonial commerce.

The Stratagem of Conceptual Misreadings

However, it is not without faults that Sir Thomas Roe observed and interpreted the Mughal commerce and market system. His logistics were erroneous at times for Roe criticized Mughal administration's control over indigo and cloth as monopolies that suppressed free trade. Citing the Emperor and governors like Prince Khurram's manipulation of market access through royal rights (Pinkerton 7), Roe mistook the Mughal system of

economic governance giving raise to stereotypes of Asiatic monarchs being despotic. Modern historiography (The Cambridge Economic History Of India, Vol. 2. 169–70), questions Roe's assessment, suggesting it reflects an Orientalist bias by misinterpreting Mughal fiscal regulations and gift-giving as simple corruption or despotism, making his account less a neutral report and more a text shaping Western views of Indian governance. Roe's assessment of indigo and cloth monopolies serves as a classic example of commercial Orientalism. (Said, "Crisis") While Roe viewed the intervention of Prince Khurram in the market as an arbitrary violation of natural trade, these actions are associated within the feudal land grant of Jagirdari system (The Cambridge Economic History Of India, Vol. 2.).

In this view, the Mughal state was not lawless, but rather a highly centralized fiscal entity where the monopolies Roe critiqued were actually standardized state-managed regulations (Banerjee) intended to stabilize a complex agrarian economy. Roe's inability to find an English-style landed gentry led him to erroneously conclude that the Mughal emperor was a tyrant who owned all property. Roe's observations were more often misreadings characterized by a series of fundamental interpretative errors stemming from his attempt to reconcile Mughal governance with European political theory and discourse. His observational record that the Mughal Emperor was the sole proprietor of all land through the Jagirdari system, has been proved incorrect by highlighting the complex, stratified layers of the coexistent Zamindari and Milkiyat systems as private property rights that Roe simply overlooked. Similarly, Roe misread the Escheat System a specific bureaucratic recovery of state debts from deceased nobles as a universal lack of inheritance laws, thereby framing the Empire as a lawless state of slaves (Pinkerton 52). This Eurocentric lens even distorted his view of Jahangir's religious pluralism, which Roe dismissed as mere atheism, and also his portrayal of courtly gift-giving as mere bribery, that clearly presented difference in the symbolic values of politico- cultural performance (Foster). These however were not just observational errors but structural misreadings that served to justify English commercial expansion by portraying a logocentric binary positioning (Cixous) of the Indian marketplace as an arbitrary despotism in need of Western contractual stability.

A comparative reading of Sir Thomas Roe's journal and the Jahangirnama (Rogers and Beveridge) exposes a profound disconnect between English diplomatic ambitions and Mughal imperial reality. While Roe's accounts in Pinkerton's Collection detail his tireless efforts to secure a formal trade treaty against what he perceived as a despotic and monopolistic administration, the Jahangirnama suggests a degree of imperial indifference, frequently relegating Roe to the status of a mere provider of rarities rather than a sovereign ambassador (Rogers and Beveridge). This is best exemplified by the famous miniature painting contest (Bellégo) where Roe saw an opportunity to assert English artistic

superiority, Jahangir's court artists neutralized this claim by producing copies so perfect that Roe himself could not identify the original (Pinkerton 11), thereby demonstrating Mughal mastery over foreign imports.

Ethnographic Narrative in the First Person

As mentioned earlier Roe's narrative seemed self-centric in a collective manner that might have appealed to his readers (Djenar et al.). Roe's characterization of the Mughal court as a system of universal slavery that primarily stemmed from his misinterpretation of the Escheat System, wherein the emperor Jahangir reclaimed the estates of deceased nobles to settle state debts, was directed towards his readership as undesirable difference in the Alterity. For Roe's English sensibilities, the lack of a hereditary landed aristocracy and the absolute subservience of the Mansabdars signified a total absence of security of property and individual liberty, leading him to conclude that the nobility were merely slaves to a singular tyrant (Veevers). Roe reacting in the first person specifically failed to grasp the cultural nuances of the term *banda-i-dargah*, as slave of the court, which in the Mughal context was a prestigious title of loyalty and proximity to power rather than a mark of social degradation. As argued by framing the Mughal state as a kingdom of slaves in his journal, Roe effectively constructed the foundational idea of difference between the European as distinct from the Oriental, a narrative used to justify future British intervention as a supposed mission claimed to bring contractual law and establish the ideal of liberty as alien to India (Wilson).

In his journal entries, specifically those documenting his interactions during the Darbar sessions, Roe displaying a sort of self-centeredness bordering ego-mania, describes the Mughal nobility as slaves who existed in a state of servile fear, a perception in particular fuelled by witnessing the escheatment of the late Zulfikar Khan's estate. Roe notes observing with horror as the Emperor's officials seize a noble's wealth (Pinkerton 32), an act he recorded as the rapine of a tyrant, failing to understand it as a standard fiscal reconciliation of state-issued military funds. He further records his frustration with Prince Khurram, the future Shah Jahan, whom he characterizes as a proud master of a slave-governed market, simply because the prince exercised provincial monopolies over indigo and cloth to fund his own administrative apparatus. (Pinkerton 39) Roe's observations seem not only to unsettle him for his presence in Jahangir's court but add on to the anxiety of the European perception concerning the modes and functioning of the Indian politics, market and economy. The many specific encounters, as preserved in Pinkerton's General Collection, repeatedly illustrate Roe's tendency to equate centralised Mughal bureaucracy with a lack of moral or legal legitimacy, thereby framing the Mughal political economy as a chaotic oriental anomaly rather than a structured imperial system.

Roe's ethnographic rendering of common Indian life is more of a strategy of contrast, where he documented the poverty and barbarity of the landscape to heighten the perceived moral and civilizational superiority of England for his readership (Banerjee). Moving beyond the court, his journal depicts a countryside suffering under pure despotism, describing roads infested with outlaws and large stretches of land left as jungle or barren because commoners lacked the incentive of private property to cultivate them (Pinkerton 2–5). He characterized the Indian people as barbarous and unfaithful, often focusing on bizarre habits (J. Clifford) and what he perceived as a lack of written law among the populace.

Further on Roe's narrative of the Indian populace is characterized by a "rhetoric of neglect," where he describes the Indian countryside as a site of desolation and lawlessness (Pinkerton 41). For instance, in his travelogues between Surat and Ajmer, Roe depicts the commonality as living in mud cottages and suffering under the constant threat of highway dacoity (Pinkerton 12), which he attributed to the total lack of civil justice outside the Emperor's immediate presence. The anxiety of Roe though individual turns collective as a vital logistical record and a document of early British diplomacy in India directly connected to the East India Company. His diplomacy contending with other European powers for trading rights in India manifests as praxis for the East India Company, a curious combination of logistics and ethnography, theorising through his advice on the practice of strategical engagement.

Conclusion

The impact of Sir Thomas Roe and his journal set in precedence the terms of nuanced and strategic engagement that the British would adopt through the East India Company. Aiming to secure commercial interests primarily, the aspects of political and military engagement as Roe proposed were set secondary. This as a long-standing policy of the British in India tended to maintain an argument of distinct neutrality, a paradoxical aspect for a colonising power. The overwhelming engagement of Roe with the Indian character as stereotypical would lead on to colonial essentialising of alterity. Roe's journal characteristically differs in form and style that moves on assume the superiority of British culture, civilization and race over the Indian based on character and essence rendered through ethnographic means. Apart from the importance of diplomatic details and commercial logistics, Roe's approach would be representational for the future British engagement with India dictated by the terms of difference of character. The mode of Roe's narrative likewise indicated the compulsion and anxiety of engaging the Alterity which was precursory to later colonial engagement with colonised India as a place of profit and threat. Apart from the logistics of commerce and political power, the cultural misreadings and erroneous interpretations taken at face value as diplomatic details would entail political calculations

and judgements of British interaction and engagement with India. This essentially moving into moral grounds of character reformation, for British colonialism's reconciliation to justify its presence in India resulted in the argument of White man's burden. The findings in the paper establish this relation between Roe's ethnographic rendering of Mughal India and rule with that of later British Colonial tendency to benignly colonise. Roe's Journal thus stays between ethnography, diplomacy and logistics providing a blueprint as in terms of a direct advice to the British East India Company and as such remains precursory to the realisation of colonialism both as practice and theory.

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