

François Bernier's Encounters with Oriental Despotism

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Introduction

François Bernier was baptized on September 26, 1620, in the parish of Joué, Anjou, France. His parents were cultivators of the soil holding their lands in lease from the Canonry of St. Maurice at Angers. Between 1647 and 1650, Bernier traveled through Germany, Poland, Switzerland, and Italy.¹ In the summer of 1652, he passed an exam in physiology, matriculated from the University of Montpellier, got his degree as Doctor of Medicine, and left for Paris. From there, Bernier traveled to Syria, Palestine, Persia, and the Timurid Empire² in the subcontinent, and did not return to France until 1669-70. On April 25, 1670, Bernier received the requisite license to have his account of the subcontinent published, which appeared in print by the end of that year. Bernier also visited England in 1685, and breathed his last on September 22, 1688, in Paris.

By far his longest stay was in the subcontinent, where he spent about ten years having arrived at the port of Surat in Gujarat late in 1658 or early in 1659. Bernier's *Travels in the Mogul Empire: AD 1656-1668*³ is a source familiar to students of the history of the

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1 The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) had just ended and Europe experienced a peace brought about by sheer exhaustion.

2 The Mughals thought of themselves as Turks and descendants of Amir Taimur and looked down upon Mongols as uncouth savages.

3 François Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire: AD 1656-1668*, trans. Irving Brock, revised and improved edition, Archibald Constable (London: Archibald Constable

subcontinent. Our purpose here is to analyze this highly instructive primary source as an encounter with ‘what an older and less inhibited generation of scholars would have called an oriental despotism’⁴ and from it derive an understanding of the culture of power of the subcontinent under Timurid rule.

Culture is a composite phenomenon influenced by geography, climate, technology, governance, historical experience, economics, thought, and social structures. It affects our perception of reality, shapes our ethics, conditions our attitude towards power, and determines the character of authority. The culture of power is the aggregate of the behavior of all individuals and groups that exercise, or have exercised, power through the state over a historically significant period. It is the human expression of the evolution of the state and a major determinant of the behavior of the state and its officials towards each other and the population governed. The phenomenon can also be defined in less opaque terms as the principal emanation of the historical experience of governance.

The culture of power also reflects the experiences and responses accumulated by human efforts to overcome and exploit objective limitations on, and opportunities for, subsistence and growth. Thus, the phenomenon is at most marginally modified by religion or ideology. Instead, the culture of power modifies religion or ideology to reflect and further manifest itself. For this reason, regions and countries with similar ideologies and religions can develop divergent cultures of power while countries with different ideologies and religions can develop convergent cultures of power.⁵

The term ‘oriental despotism’ is certainly a Euro-centric construct that generalizes about the nature of state-power in the non-European world. Insofar as generalizations go, however,

and Company, 1891; reprint, Karachi: Indus Publications, n.d.), p.5. (page citations are to the reprint edition).

4 Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p.315.

5 For example, the English and the Prussians, both Germanic peoples, developed very different political habits. On the other hand, the Czarist system of Russia bears greater resemblance to the Ottoman, Safavid, or Timurid despotisms than it does to Habsburg, Hohenzollern, or Scandinavian monarchies.

'oriental despotism' is accurate and expresses the historical truth that until the advent of modern totalitarianism the vast majority of hyper-centralized and despotic states were to be found in the 'orient'. One of the most vigorous and empirically sound expositions of the exercise of power by the state in the pre-modern world is Karl Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*.⁶ This work, published about forty years ago, builds a model of state behavior that explains, more or less, what Bernier saw and felt in the course of his stay in the Timurid Empire. The model, however, suffers from the limitation that as Wittfogel cites examples from Hawaii and Mesoamerica in an effort to prove the link between the hydraulic mode of environmental exploitation and the rise of despotism, the label 'oriental' is somewhat misleading. A possible substitute, which is free from racial stigma and is not Euro-centric, that can be used to describe a centralized state headed by a dominant or omnipotent executive ruling through a class of appointed servants is the continental bureaucratic empire.

The Travels

Bernier's account of the Timurid Empire is divided into three main parts. The first deals with the war of succession between the sons of Shahjahan, the second with important events after the war, and the third comprises the letters he wrote to various individuals concerning the conditions of the subcontinent. Bernier himself became a physician in the service of the emperor and soon thereafter performed the same function for Danishmand Khan, a Persian merchant who had been elevated by Shahjahan to the post of paymaster of the army and given a *mansab* of three thousand.⁷ Impressed by the high-sounding titles held by the service-nobility, which, along with the emperor and the royal household, constituted the ruling class, Bernier came to know that, in fact, the grand-eloquent expressions of power originated in a profound insecurity:

6 Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven: Carl Purington Rollins Printing Office of the Yale University Press, 1963).

7 For a general description of the *mansabdars* or rank-holders see Abul Fazl Allami, *A'in-i Akbari*, trans. H. Blochmann (Calcutta: Calcutta Madrassah, 1873; reprint, (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2003), pp.229-30 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

The reason why such names are given to the great, instead of titles derived from domains and seigniories, as usual in Europe, is this: as the land throughout the whole empire is considered the property of the sovereign, there can be no earldoms, marquisates or duchies. The royal grants consist only of pensions, either in land or money, which the king gives, augments, retrenches or takes away at pleasure.⁸

To belong to the ruling class

...it is enough if a foreigner have a white face and profess *Mahometanism*; in contradistinction to the Christians of Europe, who are called *Frangis*, and to the Indians, whose complexion is brown, and who are Gentiles.⁹

This establishes, right at the beginning of the *Travels*, that the nature of state power in the subcontinent is very different from that of Europe. The ruling class is a racially and linguistically distinct colonial minority within which the Timurid Emperor is supreme and constitutes the only legitimate source of promotion and wealth.

The insecurity created by the existence of an omnipotent executive had the effect of preventing the growth of moral relationships within the ruling class. Bernier describes the characters of Shahjahan's four warring sons and from that it is manifest that their will to power overrode all other considerations. However, that is not to say that things were any better in neighboring states such as Golkunda. There, the king entrusted the day-to-day running of the administration to a Persian commoner named Mir Jumla, whom he elevated to the rank of vizier. As vizier, Mir Jumla proved very able and quickly used his power to amass great wealth which was derived, in part, from 'diamond mines which he farmed under feigned names'.¹⁰ He also filled 'every important office at court' with his relatives and partisans and eventually aroused the 'jealousy of the King of Golkunda', who came to regard him 'as a dangerous rival' and began to plot the vizier's destruction.¹¹ Upon being informed of his imminent fall from favor the vizier wrote to Aurungzeb, sought his protection, and hatched a conspiracy to bring about his king's downfall with Timurid assistance. Of course, none of the principal

8 Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, p.5.

9 *Ibid.*, p.3.

10 *Ibid.*, p.17.

11 *Ibid.*, p.18.

actors involved in the unfolding drama of either the war of succession or the crisis in Golkunda could conceive of the state as an impersonal entity having institutional interests greater than the macabre ambitions of those that wielded, or aspired to wield, power.

After the war of succession was settled in Aurungzeb's favor, his brothers were duly dispatched to the hereafter and Shahjahan found himself a prisoner, normalcy was restored. Bernier now had the opportunity to meet members of the new court and foreign emissaries and gained introductions with relative ease owing to his position as court physician and his association with Danishmand Khan, who managed to secure the new emperor's favor and ultimately rose to the position of Governor of Shahjahanabad (Delhi). One of his encounters was with an Uzbek delegation to the Timurid court:

During their stay I paid them three visits, having been introduced as a physician by one of my friends, the son of an *Usbec*, who had amassed a fortune at court. It was my design to collect such useful particulars concerning their country as they might be able to supply, but I found them ignorant beyond all conception. They were unacquainted even with the boundaries of *Usbec*, and could give no information respecting the Tartars who a few years ago subjugated China. In short, I could elicit by my conversation with the ambassadors scarcely one new fact.¹²

Bernier was clearly hoping that the Uzbek ambassadors would be able to brief him on the conditions of their country, its history, geography, and relations with other states. On each of these counts, he was disappointed, though he did learn that the Uzbeks loved eating horseflesh and *pulow*.

For the Timurid Emperor, the presence of foreign ambassadors, who were maintained at royal expense, served an ornamental value:

The *Great Mogol* is in the habit of detaining all ambassadors as long as can be reasonably done, from an idea that its becoming [to] his grandeur and power, to receive the homage of foreigners and to number them among the attendants of his court.¹³

12 *Ibid.*, p.121.

13 *Ibid.*, p.128.

This attitude towards ambassadors is an important manifestation of the culture of power and may help explain why the Timurids never sent emissaries to the European countries that initiated and sustained contact with the subcontinent. The Timurids identified the sending of ambassadors as 'homage' while the Europeans saw the maintenance of official representatives as an operational imperative of doing business. The Dutch, Bernier recounts, were highly active and sent an embassy to Aurungzeb with the purpose of enlightening the emperor with

...some knowledge of their nation, in order that a beneficial influence might thus be produced upon the minds of the governors of seaports, and other places, where they have established factories. They hoped that those governors would be restrained from offering insult, and obstructing their commerce, by the consideration that they belonged to a powerful State, that they could obtain immediate access to the King of the *Indies* to induce him to listen to their complaints, and to redress their grievances.¹⁴

Bernier, however, had better luck with a visiting Ethiopian delegation and managed to record 'a great deal of useful information'.¹⁵

Bernier was also quick to perceive and assess the fundamental structural contradictions that afflicted the continental bureaucratic empires in the orient that he encountered. The royals princes, upon whose intellectual and moral capabilities the success or failure of the state ultimately rested, were:

Entrusted from infancy to the care of women and eunuchs, slaves from Russia, Circassia, Mingrelia, Gurgistan, or Ethiopia, whose minds are debased by the very nature of their occupations; servile and mean to superiors, proud and oppressive to dependants.¹⁶

When the royal princes emerged from the fantasy world that was the seraglio, they were quite 'ignorant' of the requirements of government and deficient in both rationality and morality.¹⁷ Bernier goes on to observe of these living embodiments of oriental despotism:

14 *Ibid.*, p.129.

15 *Ibid.*, p.142.

16 *Ibid.*, p.144.

17 *Ibid.*

A pack of dogs will engage their thoughts and affections, although indifferent to the suffering of so many poor people who, compelled to follow the Monarch in the pursuit of game, are left to die of hunger, heat, cold, and fatigue. In a word, the Kings of Asia are constantly living in the indulgence of monstrous vices, these vices varying... according to their natural propensities, or to the ideas early instilled into their minds. It is indeed a rare exception when the *Sovereign* is not profoundly ignorant of the domestic and political condition of his empire. The reins of government are often committed to the hands of some *Vizier*, who, that he may reign lord absolute, considers it an essential part of his plan to encourage his master in all his low pursuits, and divert him from every avenue of knowledge. If the scepter be not firmly grasped by the first minister, then the country is governed by the King's mother...and by a set of eunuchs, persons who possess no enlarged and liberal views of policy, and who employ their time in barbarous intrigues; banishing, imprisoning, and strangling each other, and frequently the *Grandees* and *Vizier* himself. Indeed, under their disgraceful domination, no man of any property is sure of his life for a single day.¹⁸

The insecurity of private property occupies a central position in Bernier's letter to Jean Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683), Louis XIV's finance minister, which deals with the geography of the subcontinent, trade 'and final absorption of gold and silver in that country; its Resources, Armies, the administration of Justice, and the principal Cause of the Decline of the States of Asia'.¹⁹ After informing Colbert of the commodities in demand in the subcontinent and the agricultural base of the economy, Bernier asserts that the Timurid Emperor

...constitutes himself the heir of all the *Omrahs*, or lords, and likewise of the *Mansabdars*, or inferior lords, who are in his pay; and, what is of the utmost importance, that he is proprietor of every acre of land in the kingdom, excepting, perhaps, some houses and gardens which he sometimes permits his subjects to buy, sell, and otherwise dispose of, among themselves.²⁰

The size of the Timurid Empire, though imposing, masks the fact that the amount of arable land in the country is not as great as might be expected while

18 *Ibid.*, pp.145-146.

19 *Ibid.*, p.200.

20 *Ibid.*, p.204.

...even a considerable portion of the good land remains untilled from want of laborers; many of whom perish in consequence of the bad treatment they experience from the Governors. These poor people, when incapable of discharging the demands of their rapacious lords, are not only often deprived of the means of subsistence, but are bereft of their children, who are carried away as slaves. Thus it happens that many of the peasantry, driven to despair by so execrable a tyranny, abandon the country...²¹

The taxes extracted at such a terrible human cost are either farmed out to the service-nobility with a portion paid into the public treasury, which is treated by the emperor as his privy purse. The predatory nature of the ruling class created conditions inimical to the development of the productive base, in spite of the fact that the Timurid Empire was 'an abyss for gold and silver'.²² A great portion of the bullion flowing in from abroad was used for jewelry and luxuries while the rest was 'buried at great depths in the ground' by merchants and artisans as well as government servants fearful of reprisals from an ever-grasping apparatus.

There can be little encouragement to engage in commercial pursuits, when the success with which they may be attended, instead of adding to the enjoyments of life, provokes the cupidity of a neighboring tyrant possessing both the power and inclination to deprive any man of the fruits of his industry. When wealth is acquired, as must sometimes be the case, the possessor, so far from living with increased comfort and assuming an air of independence, studies the means by which he may appear indigent.²³

The impact of pervasive insecurity, ruinous as it was to agriculture, artisanship, commercial endeavor, and capital accumulation, also had a deleterious impact upon the production of knowledge:

A profound and universal ignorance is the natural consequence of such a state of society as I have endeavored to describe. Is it possible to establish in *Hindoustan* academies and colleges properly endowed? Where shall we seek for founders? or, should they be found, where are the scholars? Where [are] the individuals whose property is sufficient to support their children at college? Or, if such individuals exist, who would venture to display so clear a proof of wealth? Lastly, if any persons should be tempted to commit this great imprudence, yet where are the benefices, the employments, the

21 *Ibid.*, p.205.

22 *Ibid.*, p.223.

23 *Ibid.*, p.225.

offices of trust and dignity that require ability and science and are calculated to excite the emulation and the hopes of the young student?²⁴

Bernier ascribed the decline of the states of Asia, in both relation to Europe and what he believed was a better condition in ancient times, to the absence of private property rights and the lack of autonomous institutions that could lawfully challenge the state and mitigate the more evil effects of governance in continental bureaucratic empires. Bernier declared in his letter to Colbert 'How happy and thankful should we feel, My Lord, that in our quarter of the globe, Kings are not the sole proprietors of the soil'²⁵ and observed that in Egypt too the negligence of governors had resulted in a decline in the total area of cultivated land.

One class whose omnipresence and wealth impressed itself upon Bernier were the astrologers:

The majority of Asiatics are infatuated in favor of being guided by the signs of the heavens that, according to their phraseology, no circumstance can happen below, which is not written above. In every enterprise they consult their astrologers...no commanding officer is nominated, no marriage takes place, and no journey is undertaken, without consulting Monsieur the Astrologer. Their advice is considered necessary even on the most trifling of occasions; as the proposed purchase of a slave, or the first wearing of new clothes. This silly superstition is so general an annoyance...that I am astonished it has continued so long...²⁶

The rapacity of the service-nobility, the studied indigence of the men of private wealth, the fatalism and superstition of rich and poor alike, and the absence of moral relationships within the ruling class, are just some of the effects produced when a society endures the uncontrolled and arbitrary exercise of state-power for historically significant periods. The ruling class, however, suffered from its own set of fear-complexes that originated in the adversarial relationship between the Timurid state and those it had subjugated. Bernier writes that the Timurid Emperor

...is a foreigner in *Hindoustan*, a descendant of Tamerlane...who, about the year 1401, overran and conquered the *Indies*. Consequently

24 *Ibid.*, p.229.

25 *Ibid.*, p.232.

26 *Ibid.*, p.161.

he finds himself in a hostile country, or nearly so; a country containing hundreds of *Gentiles* to one *Mogol*...he is under the necessity of keeping up numerous armies, even in times of peace. These armies are composed either of natives, such as *Rajpous* and *Patans*, or of genuine *Mogols* and people who, though less esteemed, are called *Mogols* because [they are] white men, foreigners, and *Mahometans*...It should be added, however, that children of the third and fourth generation, who have the brown complexion, and the languid manner of the country of their nativity, are held in much less respect than new comers, and are seldom invested with official situations.²⁷

The service nobility 'are generally persons of low descent' and the emperor 'raises them to dignities, or degrades them to obscurity, according to his own pleasure and caprice'.²⁸ The soldiers are paid regular salaries while the artillery, already outdated by the French standards of the day, is managed by Europeans and consists of about seventy pieces of brass cannon, whereas the 'total amount of troops in *Hindoustan* is almost incredible'.²⁹ The elite of the armed forces were the heavy cavalry and it is known from the *Ain* that the *mansabdars* and tributaries maintained some two hundred thousand cavalymen.³⁰ In addition to these forces, some forty thousand soldiers were enlisted as footmen, musketeers, artillerymen, and 'rocket bearers', one-fourth were deployed with the emperor, while the remainder were stationed in garrisons.³¹ The news-writers³² sent out by the emperor to inform him of the level of military preparedness and local conditions, observes Bernier, often existed in a state of 'disgraceful collusion' with the local governor 'so that their

27 *Ibid.*, p.209.

28 *Ibid.*, p.212.

29 *Ibid.*, p.219.

30 Abul Fazl Allami, *A'in-i Akbari*, trans. H. Blochmann, p.233.

31 *Ibid.*, 225. The figures given by Bernier are the same as those given in the *Ain*. There were also unspecified masses of armed retainers and irregulars maintained by zamindars and tax-farmers. Abul Fazl puts the number at about four million four hundred thousand.

32 *Ibid.*, pp.245-246. Abul Fazl declares that 'Keeping records is an excellent thing for a government' and provides a brief description of the functions and procedures pertinent to the news-writers of *Waqia-Nawis* appointed by the emperor in the departments of state and the provinces.

presence seldom restrains the tyranny exercised over the unhappy people'.³³

Bernier's *Travels* as a guide to the Culture of Power of the Subcontinent

Bernier's *Travels* provide us the main outlines of the culture of power of the subcontinent. What struck Bernier the hardest as being different about the Ottoman, Safavid, and Timurid empires, were the absence of private property in land and the manifest insecurity of other forms of wealth. Bernier confirms that the emperor held the status of universal landlord, first remarked upon by Megasthenes in the context of the Maurya Empire some 2,300 years ago, and describes a country ruled by an armed minority of color-conscious Caucasian settler-colonists from Central Asia whose political habits reflected nothing more than the combination of the will to power and expediency. Bernier perceived that the omnipotence of the supreme executive rendered his appointed servants insecure. These officials had been delegated considerable discretionary power and were often stationed hundreds of miles away from the imperial court and their insecurity drove them to abuse their power and exercise it in an arbitrary, capricious, and self-aggrandizing manner. The common people, upon whom power was exercised in the emperor's name by the militarized bureaucratic establishment, responded through concealment, evasion, flight, bribery, servility, or rebellion. Society, in other words, was torn between unwilling obedience and latent hostility on the one hand, and violent outbursts directed against the apparatus on the other. Under these circumstances the wealth that flowed into the subcontinent from abroad in the form of gold and silver bullion, and the agricultural surplus brutally extracted from the peasantry, were dissipated in an orgy of hedonism and militarism or, quite literally, buried in the ground. Bernier identifies with chilling precision the cumulative impact of

33 Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, p.231.

these behavioral patterns on education and scientific development in the subcontinent, though it would yet take about a century for the knowledge gap between the West and the rest, of which the *Travels* provide a useful and highly instructive glimpse, to make itself felt in military and political terms.

What makes the *Travels* such a fascinating study is that it was during Bernier's lifetime that France made the transition from a feudal order in which the monarch ruled by carefully manipulating and balancing the interests and rivalries of a powerful landed aristocracy to a pattern of governance similar in many respects to the continental bureaucratic empires of Asia and North Africa in which the ruling class came to comprise the appointed servants of the state. The old landed aristocracy 'became a decorative appendage of the King',³⁴ was stripped of its judicial and military functions, and succumbed to 'the spreading tentacles of royal bureaucracy'.³⁵ The French trading classes and bourgeoisie were 'heavily dependent on royal favor, subject to royal regulation, and oriented towards the productions of arms and luxuries for a restricted clientele'.³⁶ Since the French king could not afford to pay his servants permanent fixed salaries, he resorted to the sale of offices, which also had the advantage of enabling the king to run his establishment without recourse to the Estates-General.³⁷ In 1665, Colbert urged Louis XIV to abolish the practice of selling offices as it was diverting resources away from commerce.³⁸

It was under Louis XIV that the process of monarchical centralization reached its height and 'elevated the king from *primus inter pares* to being both *solus* and *solaris*'.³⁹ The

34 Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, p.40.

35 *Ibid.*, p.43.

36 *Ibid.*, p.57.

37 *Ibid.*, p.59.

38 *Ibid.*, p.60. The request was denied.

39 T. C. W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe 1660-1789* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.40.

conspicuous consumption encouraged by Louis XIV at Versailles served the admirable purpose of causing the nobility to spend themselves into dependence on royal pensions, which, in 1683, totaled 1.4 million *livres* and consumed 1.2% of state revenue.⁴⁰ In this way, the French nobility came to resemble the *omrahs* of the Timurid Empire who Bernier describes as often being driven into debt by the court custom of giving the emperor presents. That said, the French State, except during the radical phase of the French Revolution, never sought to establish itself as the sole proprietor of land and capital, sustained a large class of lawyers, actively encouraged the arts and sciences through the establishment of academies, scholarships, colleges, universities, and did not dispossess its servants of their wealth when they died. Furthermore, the centralization of political power in Continental Europe was a function of the gunpowder revolution, mercantilism, and modernization through enlightened despotism. It is entirely in consonance, therefore, with the spirit of his age that Bernier dedicated the *Travels in the Mogul Empire* to Louis XIV.

In the final analysis, Bernier's account is substantially accurate, at places extraordinarily prescient, and has withstood the test of time. He displays an acute interest not only in the facts themselves, but also in the conditions that have led to their existence. In his account we can see the emergent rationality of a Europe on the verge of fundamental transformation, standing at the threshold of the Age of Reason, having borne witness to the reproducible miracles of the Scientific Revolution, cognizant of, among others, Descartes, Galileo, Copernicus, Pascal, Bacon, Machiavelli, and engaged in a serious, sustained, attempt to understand alternate civilizational realities. A lesson that can be learned from Bernier is that states that fail to evolve the necessary mechanisms for the exercise of power in a rational and moral

40 *Ibid.*, p.41.

manner operate at a potentially fatal disadvantage in relation to those states that attain greater success in this crucial area – a lesson that the present-day educated elite of the subcontinent, enraptured as it is by crisis of state, would do well to heed.