



SIR THOMAS ROE IN INDIA

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Abstract:

The mission of Sir Thomas Roe to the Court of Jahangir was not only a remarkable episode in the life of a remarkable man, but an event of high importance in the history of both England and of India. .(1)

KEY WORDS:

Sir Thomas Roe , motivations , ideas and knowledge.

INTRODUCTION:

Man since antiquity, has been an inveterate traveller. Only the motivations for travel have changed with times, In ancient times the main motivations for travel were trade, pilgrimage and conquest. However, the contact amongst people were very intensive even several thousand years ago. There was a great deal of interchange of ideas and knowledge between India and West Asia and the Graceo Roman civilization which was further strengthened by Alexander’s conquest of the north western part of the Indian sub-continent.(2)

Emperor Asoka did send emissaries to Sri Lanka, Burma and South East Asia for the spread of Buddhism. Many foreign visitors like Megasthenes, Fa-Hien, Hiuan Tsang, Ibn-Batuta, Al-Beruni and Marco Polo came to India with a new spirit of enquiry. Much of our knowledge about the History of India is based on the accounts and records left behind by these travellers and envoys.

The medieval ages paved the way for the Renaissance which furthered the spirit of enquiry. Travel became the means of acquiring culture in Europe. Francis Bacon, one of the great representatives of the spirit of Renaissance epitomized travel thus, “Travel in the younger sort is part of education, in the elder part, a part of experience.”(3)

The tradition of the Grand Tour which was started in the 17th century by the aristocracy of Europe was more firmly established in the 18th and the 19th centuries by the emergence of the affluent mercantile class.

During the medieval ages, in India several British traders and adventurers visited the Mughal Courts. The most prominent of them was William Hawkins, a representative of the newly formed East India Company, who arrived at Jahangir’s Court in 1609, bearing a letter of commendation from King James. (4)

Hawkins was able to acquire a footing in the court of Jahangir who called him the “English Khan”. This English Khan was able to persuade the Emperor to grant a Commission for an English factory at Surat but under the presence of the Portuguese Viceroy the grant was withdrawn and Hawkins was continually stymied by the Portuguese.

The emperor had no naval ambitions and therefore did not intend being a part of the tussle between the European powers. Hawkins, thus had to leave Agra empty handed in 1611 A.D. He was followed by Paul Canning and William Edwards, but they made little impression at the Court, with Portuguese playing cornet at the imperial Durbar.

Between 1601-1613 A.D. merchants of the East India Company took twelve voyages to India but

did not meet with any fruitful gains.

However, the balance of power began to shift in favour of the British after a period of time. In the naval battles that ensued between the British and the Portuguese in 1612 and 1615, the Portuguese fleet were worsted by the Britishers. "Most of their vessels were burnt by the English," notes Jahangir in his memories in the first ever mention of the British in a Mughal Chronicle. (5) A hundred years before the English company was founded, Almeida, the first Portuguese viceroy of the Indies, had written to Lisbon "the greater the number of fortresses you hold, the weaker will be your power; let all your forces be on the sea...." (6)

The naval victories of the British raised their stature in the eyes of the Emperor. Furthermore, the antagonisation of the Mughals by the Portuguese paved way for British advancements and made the timing of Sir Thomas Roe's visit opportune in the Indian Sub-continent. This in fact proved to be the turning point in the History of India and of Great Britain.

Sir Thomas Roe was born at Layton in 1580 A.D., the son of Robert Roe. At a young age he joined the Esquire of the body of Queen Elizabeth. Equipping a couple of penances, he set sail in February, 1610, on a voyage of discovery to Guiana, reaching England again in July, 1611.

However, due to the death of his patrons, Roe's fortunes experienced a dip and soon the offer of the East India Company came his way for an assignment in India.

Roe was undoubtedly a good choice to be the British ambassador to the Mughal Court as besides being a aristocrat, he was also a friend of the British Royal family and was well educated. He was of a pregnant understandings, well spoken, learned industries and of a comely personage.(7) He was the first Ambassador, Hawkins having been a mere trader bearing letters. (8).

Roe and his men arrived at Surat on 18th September, 1615. From Surat he and his men set out for Ajmer and on the way called on Prince Parvez at Burhanpur. There he refused to perform the 'Kornish' the custom of Mughal obeisance on the ground. Roe was determined not to humble himself before the Prince like a slave. Roe infact sent a case of spirits for Parvez on which the Prince feasted too well to keep his appointment with the ambassador for a private interview that evening. From him Roe obtained a forman authorising the English to establish a factory in that city. (9).

The monarch to whom he was now introduced is known to history by the high sounding title of Jahangir ("World Grasper or Conquerer of the World"). He was uniformly kind and courteous to the ambassador; and his gracious behaviour on this occasion greatly pleased and encouraged Roe, who notes exultantly that he was treated "with more favour and outward grace.... then ever was showed to any Ambassador, either of Turkee or Persian or other whatsoever." (10) It was therefore that Roe was able to impress the emperor who in turn showed his personal esteem and liking for the ambassador.

Roe often attended Jahangir's drinking parties and writes about a party he attended "When he could not hold up his head, he lay down to sleep, and we all departed." (11).

Despite such easy camaraderie with Jahangir, Roe soon found that there were other persons to be reckoned with whose good will it was not easy to secure. He discovered that the conqueror of the world was himself a slave of a woman- his consort; Nur Jahan. Besides her father Itmaddaula and brother Asaf Khan alongwith Prince Khurram were personages to be reckoned with. Hence even after three years of negotiations, he was not able to make any headway with the trade treaty concessions that he hoped to extract from the Emperor. The Emperor did not commit into treaty with a far off country. The most he could secure was an Edict from Shah Jahan (who was the Governor of Gujarat) towards the close of 1618, granting trade concessions, but forbidding the British from purchasing or constructing any buildings and from carrying arms. He wanted a treaty but he never got it. (12) – instead what he got was a "farman for Suratt". Farmans, however, favourable were of little use as they were liable to be superceded at any moment by fresh commands in contrary sense.

Thus, for the present the English envoy was forced to fall back on the role of a spectator. Matters however, took shape due to the extortions by local officials at Surat and consequently two farmans were signed by the Prince- authorizing the residence of English at Surat and their free passage inland. These Roe gladly received, and dispatched to Surat. Soon however, Roe's prospects started becoming gloomy and roe blamed his discomfiture on the manipulations of the Jesuits, and on the antagonism of Shah Jahan and Asaf Khan.

"The Portugall pursues us heere with virulent hatred", bemoaned Roe. He also had by now ran out of gifts and presents befitting the royal durbar which further proved to be a handicap.

Roe gamely dissembled. "My master knew he (Jahangir) was Lord of the best part of Asia, the richest Prince of the East. That to send his Majestic rich presents, were to cast peerless into the sea, the mother and store-house of them, that therefore his Majestic thoughts, it unnecessary."

Roe stayed in India until February 17, 1618, altogether nearly 3 and ½ years. At Ahmed Nagar, Roe took formal leave of the monarch to whom he had been accredited, receiving from his a letter to King

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James full of compliments of good usage of the English, also a general farman for a reception and continuation in his dominions.” (13)

Even though he did succeed with all his demands, he procured a satisfactory grant and the two farmans went a long way in carving the British fortunes in India. With these achievements Roe sailed from Surat in February, 1619.

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