

Five Travelers

by Nishant Batsha

The history of India is in many ways a history of travelers. Some of these travelers came aboard tall-masted ships in the name of trade. Others arrived prepared for battle, with weaponry and armies that stretched behind them for miles. And still others, like the artist Jan Serr, came to be inspired by a subcontinent so different and so unlike any other place.

Truthfully, prior to the conveniences of modern travel, most visitors to India came as a mix, or as a result, of other categories. The curious could only come as a result of the conqueror. The conqueror carried with him a healthy amount of curiosity. The relationship between travel and event is so enmeshed that it becomes possible to pick four travelers and through them, find a history of India.

Al-Bīrūnī

“We must form an adequate idea of that which renders it so particularly difficult to penetrate to the essential nature of any Indian subject. . . . First, they differ from us in everything which other nations have in common.”
(Al-Bīrūnī, *Alberuni's India*, 17).

In the early eleventh century, Abū al-Rayhān Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Bīrūnī (973–1048), commonly known as Al-Bīrūnī, sat down and wrote a history of India. He did so after watching, in horror, the pillaging of the country.

Al-Bīrūnī was born in 973 in Khwarezm, near modern-day Khiva in Uzbekistan. His birth coincided with the nadir of the Samanid Empire, an empire that had made Bukhara and Samarkand—and to a lesser extent, Khwarezm—areas of intense learning in the arts, sciences, and humanities. In this milieu, Al-Bīrūnī studied both mathematics and astronomy (his astronomical data was calculated with such accuracy that in 1749, the English



astronomer Richard Dunthorne used it in determining the acceleration of the moon). He too was a man of letters. Though his mother tongue was Khwarezmi, he was fluent in Persian, Arabic, and later, Sanskrit, and had a basic understanding of ancient Greek.

In 955, however, the local rulers of Khwarezm declared their independence from the Samanids. Al-Bīrūnī was most likely connected to the Samanid power structure, as he left the city of his birth to continue his scientific studies in Gorgan, approximately 250 miles northeast of Tehran. In 1012, he determined it safe enough to return to Khwarezm. In 1017, however, his life would be changed with the city's conquest by Mahmud of Ghazni.

In modern times, Mahmud of Ghazni is known for his raids across northern India. More controversially, he is used as historical leverage in Hindu-Muslim conflicts for his supposed destruction of the Somnath temple in Gujarat (several historians have thrown into doubt whether the temple was in fact destroyed by Mahmud).

At its peak, Mahmud's empire stretched from modern-day Iran, through Uzbekistan, and into Pakistan. Though he never formally conquered northern India, he would routinely raid the country for plunder.



The spoils of war found their way into the arts. Most famously, Mahmud of Ghazni picked up the patronage of Ferdowsi from the Samanids to allow him to complete his epic poem, the *Shahnameh*. In Al-Bīrūnī's case, Mahmud took him to the capital city of Ghazna, where he was to be a scholar in the court. Al-Bīrūnī most likely accompanied Mahmud on his raids into India. Of these raids, Al-Bīrūnī would write, "Mahmud utterly ruined the prosperity of the country, and performed there wonderful exploits, by which the Hindus became like atoms of dust scattered in all directions, and like a tale of old in the mouth of the people" (*Alberuni's India*, 22).

The raids, however, allowed Al-Bīrūnī to travel throughout India and meet Indian scholars brought to Mahmud's court. He became the first Muslim scholar to make a serious attempt at mastering Sanskrit, a feat that would not be repeated for another 500 years in the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar. The result of his travels and studies was the *Ta'rikh al-hind*, the "History of India" (most famously translated from Arabic into English in 1888 by Edward C. Sachau as *Alberuni's India*).

In writing his compendium, he found of Indians that "in all manners and usages they differ from us to such a degree as to frighten their children with us, with our dress, and our ways and customs"

(*Alberuni's India*, 20). And yet, despite this magnitude of difference, he was drawn to the subcontinent. In it, he found the subjects that had interested him most: religion and astronomy. Indeed, the *Ta'rikh al-hind* is filled with topics as varied as the heavenly bodies and the transmigration of the soul. Alongside his favorite subjects, he too wrote on geography, medicine, literature, laws, and customs.

In her photographs, Jan Serr introduces us to a curious facet of Indian life: the animals that roam the streets and alleys with lackadaisical freedom. She shows us a life studded with dogs, pigs, cattle, and water buffalo. It seems as if most eyes are drawn to animals in India—even Al-Bīrūnī's. In a brief digression on the geography of India, he writes:

“the *ganda* [rhinoceros] exists in large numbers in India, more particularly about the Ganges. It is of the build of a buffalo, has a black scaly skin, and dewlaps hanging down under the chin . . . I have myself witnessed how an elephant coming across a young *ganda* was attacked by it.” (*Alberuni's India*, 204)

Throughout his *History of India*, whether in descriptions of animals or the nature of the *Brahmin*, the reader encounters his dual sense of India's difference and wonder. As it turns out, such feelings were not limited to travelling scholars, but also to emperors.



Babur

“From the time of the Apostle until this date only three padishahs gained dominion over and ruled the realm of Hindustan. The first was Sultan Mahmud Ghazi . . . The second was Sultan Shihabuddin Ghuri . . . I am the third.”
(Babur, *The Baburnama*, 329)

Mahmud of Ghazni's raids into Northern India left local kingdoms in disarray. Into this milieu stepped in Mu'izz ad-Din Muhammad (1149–1206), Sultan of the Ghurid Empire (also known as Muhammad of Ghori). He sought to establish a South Asian foothold of his Central Asian kingdom. He was initially successful, making it as far as Bengal in eastern India. Unfortunately, in 1206, he was assassinated near the modern city of Jhelum in Pakistan as his caravan stopped for evening prayers.

Into the power vacuum stepped Qutbuddin Aibak (ruled 1206–1210), a slave lieutenant of Muhammad of Ghori. Given the South Asian portion of the empire, Aibak made Delhi his center of power and was declared the Sultan of Delhi. Construction on the Qutb Minar (photographed by Jan Serr on p. 29) began during his reign. Aibak met an early demise while playing polo in Lahore. His successor, Iltutmish (ruled 1210–1236), took control of the sultanate and finished the Minar.

Until 1526, Northern India was ruled by what is now known as the Delhi Sultanate. Five dynasties controlled the sultanate, beginning with the Mamluks (Aibak's dynasty) and ending with the Lodis. Their end was brought about by yet another Central Asian.

Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur (1483–1530) was born prince of Fergana in the region known as Transoxiana (the area runs roughly along the eastern border of modern Uzbekistan cutting across to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan—not too far from where Al-Bīrūnī hailed). His family occupied the throne of the Timurid dynasty founded by Amir Temur (1336–1405), known in the west as Tamerlane. Though he occupied the throne of Samarkand at twelve years of age, competition for the throne was fierce. Too many family members were seeking too few positions of power.

He left his homeland and moved south through modern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and onwards to Afghanistan. By 1526 he had reached India and in the same year defeated the Lodi dynasty and founded the Mughal Empire.

The Mughal Empire would last until 1858, when it was formally abolished by the British. Before its abolition, however, the Mughals would leave their mark on everything from architecture, to poetry, to law and custom, and even to food.

Curiously, Babur also left a written account of his life at a time when few people in any part of the world took the time to write down their autobiography. Eschewing Persian—the language of culture and literature—he wrote in his native Chagatai Turkish. His memoirs provide a first-hand look into the life of the founder of one of the greatest empires India has ever seen. And of his first experiences in India?



“Hindustan is a place of little charm. There is no beauty in its people, no graceful social intercourse, no poetic talent or understanding, no etiquette, nobility or manliness. The arts and crafts have no harmony or symmetry. There are no good horses, meat, grapes, melons, or other fruit. There is no ice, cold water, good food or bread in the markets. There are no baths and no madrasas. There are no candles, torches, or candlesticks.” (*The Baburnama*, 352).

And yet, there were redeeming factors: “The one nice aspect of Hindustan is that it is a large country with lots of gold and money” (*The Baburnama*, 353). Beyond gold and money, when Jan Serr’s eye was drawn to the weavers of Varanasi, she found another aspect of India that Babur loved dearly. “Another nice thing,” he wrote, “is the unlimited number of craftsmen and practitioners of every trade. For every labor and every product there is an established group who have been practicing that craft or professing that trade for generations” (*The Baburnama*, 354–5).

Despite his mixed feelings about a country so unlike the place of his birth, he stayed. His last entry in his memoirs was as mundane as any other day. When recording the events of the year 936 AH (1529–30 CE), he wrote: “On Tuesday the third of Muharram [September 7], Shihabuddin Khusraw came from Gwalior . . .” (*The Baburnama*, 461). He continued on, speaking of Khusraw’s petition for clemency on behalf of another, which he granted. The paragraph would be cut short by Babur’s untimely death at age 47. He would leave behind an empire so famous that in the court of his great-great-great-great grandson there would arrive a visitor from as far away as France.

François Bernier

“Monsieur, I know that your first inquiries on my return to France will be respecting the capital cities of this empire. You will be anxious to learn if Delhi and Agra rival Paris in beauty, extent, and number of inhabitants. I hasten, therefore, to gratify your curiosity . . .” (Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, 239–40).

In the nearly 120 years before the French visitor would arrive in India, the Mughal Empire underwent vast changes. Following Babur’s death came the rule of his son, Humāyūn. Humāyūn’s rule was divided into two sections: 1530–1540 and 1555–56. In between, he managed to lose the kingdom to an upstart general from Babur’s army, Sher Shah Suri. Sher Shah ruled North India from 1540 until his death in 1545. In those five years, he managed to introduce changes that would last until the modern day. While the *rūpya* had existed prior to his rule, Sher Shah introduced the modern *rūpiya*: a standard silver coin of 178 grains. This standardized coin would eventually evolve into the modern rupee. Additionally, he extended and rebuilt India’s oldest trade road—the Grand Trunk Road— from Chittagong in modern Bangladesh to Kabul in modern Afghanistan. After his death, his son Islam Shah would rule. Seeing that the son lacked the ruling graces of his father, Humāyūn descended from his outpost in Kabul and reclaimed the throne for the Mughals.

Following Humāyūn’s death came the reign of Akbar (ruled 1556–1605). It should be noted that Mughal succession more or less followed Turkic principles. The throne did not pass to the first-born male, but instead to the son who could seize the throne for himself. This typically involved building alliances in the court and killing any other brothers/potential claimants to the crown. Akbar was known for his eclectic religious views, expansion of the empire to the furthest reaches of Bengal, and abilities to govern a multi-religious society. From there came the rule of his son Jahangir (ruled



1605–1627), followed by his son, Shah Jahan (ruled 1628–1658). Shah Jahan was and is perhaps most well known for the mausoleum he built for his wife, Mumtaz Mahal. The Taj Mahal, located in Agra, remains as the quintessential image of India for many in the west.

Shah Jahan's rule passed to Aurangzeb Alamgir (ruled 1658–1707). Aurangzeb was a fierce expansionist and ultimately drained the Mughal treasury in his expeditions into the southern Deccan plateau. However, at the height of his powers, he ruled over nearly 1.2 million square miles and approximately 150 million inhabitants. While his great-great grandfather, Akbar, was known for his religious tolerance, Hindu nationalists have painted Aurangzeb as a ruler who abandoned such policies for a more pious outlook. Such comparisons and conclusions are not without their controversies, but it is worth noting that modern India often views Akbar as “the great” and Aurangzeb as “the terrible.”

Such a large kingdom attracted travelers from across the globe. One of those travelers was the French physician and philosopher, François Bernier. Bernier (1625–1688) began his professional career as a medical doctor. During the 1640s, he was known for his association with the philosopher (and competitor of Rene Descartes) Pierre Gassendi. Above and beyond his medical talents or philosophical associations, Bernier is remembered for his travels around the world. He began this career by visiting Poland in 1648. In 1656, he sailed for Cairo. After spending a year there, he sailed onwards to India. For twelve years, Daneshmand Khan employed him as a physician. Khan held a high position in the Mughal court and provided Bernier access to the court. Perhaps more importantly,



Khan's money and status allowed Bernier to travel freely in Aurangzeb's India. After his return to France, he published his accounts in 1670. Europe was soon aflame with his travelogue: an English edition was printed in 1671, followed by editions in Dutch (1672), German (1673), and Italian (1675).

In a letter to François de la Mothe le Vayer, a friend of Bernier and a man of letters, Bernier compared the imperial cities of Delhi and Agra to the (pre-Haussmann) Paris of his home. Upon visiting Agra, he said of the Taj Mahal that “it is possible I may have imbibed an Indian taste; but I decidedly think that this monument deserves much more to be numbered among the wonders of the world than the pyramids of Egypt” (*Travels in the Mogul Empire*, 299).

The eye is often drawn to even the most quotidian architectural flourishes found in India. Jan Serr's camera points us to the magnificent marble grillwork of northern Indian mausoleums,

tombs, and mosques. Such attention to detail did not escape Bernier. When touring the “fine houses” of Delhi, he wrote that “five or six feet from the floor, the sides of the room are full of niches, cut in a variety of shapes, tasteful and well proportioned, in which are seen porcelain vases and flower-pots” (*Travels in the Mogul Empire*, 248).

But alas, he found it hard to unreservedly recommend India to the traveler. “You may judge from what I have said,” he wrote, “whether a lover of good cheer ought to quit Paris for the sake of visiting Delhi . . . In Delhi there is no middle state. A man must either be of the highest rank or live miserably” (*Travels in the Mogul Empire*, 252). Perhaps, then, one must leave Delhi—to the Blue Mountains, perhaps.

Richard F. Burton

“The sun is sinking in the splendour of an Indian May, behind the high horizon, and yet marvelous to relate, the air feels cool and comfortable. The monotonous gruntings of the frequent palanquin-bearers—a sound which, like the swift’s scream is harsh and grating enough, yet teems in this region with pleasant associations—inform us that the fair ones of Ootacamund are actually engaged in taking exercise.” (Richard F. Burton, *Goa, and the Blue Mountains; or, Six Months of Sick Leave*, 279)

1757 was a monumental year in Indian history. In that year, the British East India Company, one of the first joint-stock companies ever chartered, defeated the Nawab of Bengal, Sirāj ud-Daulah, in the Battle of Plassey. With that victory, the Company asserted the right to collect revenue on behalf of the Mughal emperor. The Company, whose governmental charter allowed them to raise an army, continued its expansion across the subcontinent for nearly a century.

In the early-to-mid-nineteenth-century, the Company began to deviate from using India as a territorial treasury. Under the banner of liberalism, they legislated against what they saw as Indian backwardness. This was perhaps best exemplified by the “Minute on Education” by the Whig politician and historian Thomas Babington Macaulay. In his Minute, he wrote that it was the duty of the British to establish a system of education that would create “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.”

In 1857, however, there began a rebellion led by several potentates against the East India Company. Angered by the Company’s cultural legislation and imperial expansion, they rallied around the ailing and ineffective Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah II. The British response was swift and violent—the rebellion was crushed. In its aftermath, the British disbanded the East



India Company, and Queen Victoria announced that India would be ruled directly as the British Raj. Any territories not formally annexed by the British were to be ruled indirectly—any rajas would be hand-chosen and laws and regulations were to be first vetted by foreign officials.

Fifteen years before the 1857 Rebellion, a young Richard Burton arrived in India. He had recently been expelled from Trinity College at University of Oxford for attending a steeplechase in violation of the college's rules. Burton joined the East India Company army and arrived in Bombay in 1842. He would stay in the country until 1849.

His military career began in Baroda (now known as Vadodara) in Gujarat. In 1844, he was transferred to Sindh, where he was appointed to the Canal Department of the Sindh Survey. Burton had always loved languages. By the end of his life, he was known to have mastered twenty-five languages, ranging from Asante to Hebrew to Urdu. Using his knowledge of Urdu and Hindustani, he would regularly dress up as "Mirza Abdullah" and would tour the Sindhi countryside. He even took lessons in Indian wrestling, horsemanship, and Sufi religious studies.

In 1846, a cholera epidemic hit Sindh and Burton fell ill. The medical board granted him two years of sick leave at the hill station of Ootacamund (now known as Udhagamandalam, but more



popularly known today and in Burton's time as Ooty), a popular sanitarium for ailing army officers. Instead of taking a direct steamer to the hill station, Burton took a small goods vessel that travelled from port to port. This allowed him to access the Portuguese colony of Goa on India's western coast. He made his way from Goa to the Malabar Coast and finally to the Nilgiri Mountains (the Blue Mountains), where Ooty is located.

His account ranges from a critique of the imperial decline in Goa to a judicious ethnological account of the natives of Malabar. What he shares with Jan Serr, however, was a taste for travel outside the bounds of simple comfort. Serr's photographs show us a slice of daily life in Indian cities. She seems to eschew the air-conditioned tour bus to photograph the beautiful in the quotidian. Burton, with his love for travelling off the beaten path, had nothing but contempt for the walled-off ailing British in Ooty. His distaste could be found in his summary of daily life: "You dress like an Englishman, and lead a quiet gentlemanly life—doing nothing" (*Goa, and the Blue Mountains*, 289).

Indeed, he was most comfortable on the road. On one expedition his guide "pointed out what he considered the great lion of Calicut. It is a square field, overgrown with grass and weeds and surrounded by a dense grove of trees. Fronting the road stands a simple gateway. . . . we had half

an hour to waste, and were not unwilling to hear a detailed account of old Calicut's apocryphal destruction." (*Goa, and the Blue Mountains*, 181). And so his travelogue went: adventures in and out of the western part of India. He, like Jan Serr, sought out daily life, and found it.

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165 years after Burton's journey arrived our fifth traveler to India, the artist Jan Serr. The four travelers who came before Serr singled out certain parts of the Indian landscape that intrigued them the most: animals, craftwork, architecture and design, and daily life. These same elements can be found as visual inspiration in Jan Serr's work. History and the traveler remain enmeshed: details that were recorded by the pen are here caught by the photograph.

At every point in India's past, there have been travelers who have either instigated or recorded their sliver of history. Some were lucky enough to do both. Indeed, through four travelers it was possible to trace nearly seven hundred years of the subcontinent's past. In a way, each traveler built upon the voyages and history that came before him. That is perhaps the nature of travelling: to explore all that is new that has been seen for generations.



For the travelogues cited in this essay, see:

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Zahīr-ud-Dīn Muhammad Bābur, *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (1996; repr., New York: Modern Library, 2002).

Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, A.D. 1656-1668*, trans. Archibald Constable (1891; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1914).

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For more on the history of India, see:

Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot, *India Before Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

For more on the images:

The photographs accompanying this essay are by Jan Serr, for more information about them, see "Photograph Locations," pages 139-141.