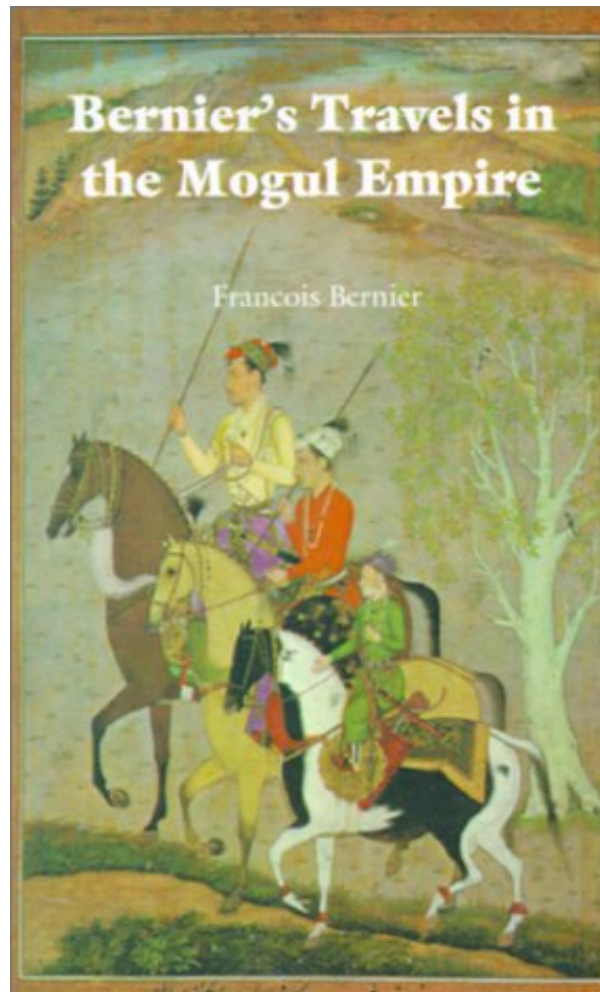


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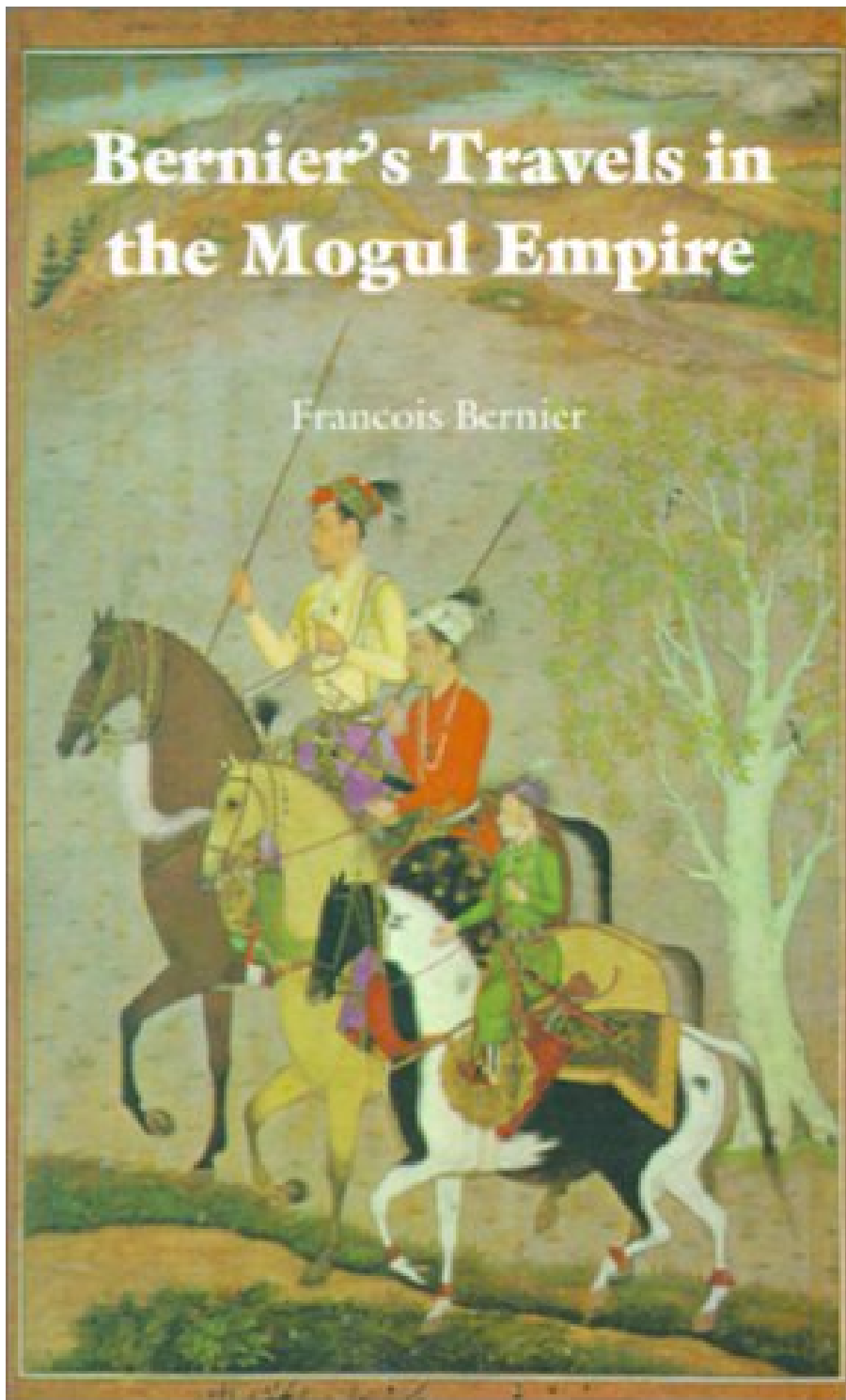


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A shrewd observer of the hollow Raj

By Mike Daplyn

In some ways Francois Bernier was one of the world's great accidental travellers. A trained physician and a pupil of the leading French philosopher Gassendi, he set out in 1656 intending to explore Ethiopia but having got as far as the coast of Eritrea he found the interior was convulsed by civil war and too dangerous to venture further. Being by then more than halfway to India, he embarked for there as the next-best really strange destination - only to be robbed by bandits shortly after landing and then forcibly enlisted by one of the combatants in yet another civil war, and on the losing side at that. It all came out well in the end, though. Abandoned by his foundering overlord, the Mughal prince Dara Shekoh, he found protection and a well-paid job in court society with Daneshmand Khan, one of the supporters of the Emperor Aurangzeb, the eventual victor in the succession wars of 1656-1660. That gave him the freedom to travel north India from Kashmir to Bengal for 10 years in the last heyday of the Mughal Empire, before it collapsed from its own internal flaws and European expansion.

The result is a series of observations which are invaluable for anyone with a serious interest in Indian history and society. Other European travellers in India in the 1650s-60s wrote about their experiences, notably Bernier's fellow-countrymen Chardin and Tavernier and the Venetian mercenary soldier Manucci, but Bernier had the advantages of a scientifically trained mind and the special access granted by his professional skills as a physician. The latter brought him at times even within the walls of the imperial harem when some court lady's illness failed to respond to local treatments. His view was of course largely restricted to the court and the 'urdu' (from the same Turkic root as the English 'horde'), the rolling army of military and civil administrators, soldiers, huntsmen, provision merchants and prostitutes (to name but a few categories) that roamed India in the wake of the Emperor as he travelled his domains. That makes his view incomplete, though not less valid regarding what he did observe, though at times his detailed analysis of court intrigues can only be appreciated by an enthusiast for political detail.

Bernier saw the Mughal empire still at its height. Within a hundred years it was a ghost, its fragmented provinces falling one after another to the Europeans (the British as it happened, but it could easily have been the French); two hundred years later it was extinguished even in name. For the modern reader, in some ways the most interesting parts of his narrative are those where he notes the weaknesses of the outwardly imposing structure. He notes the heavy reliance of the Muslim emperors on the military support of the Hindu Rajput lords - support Aurangzeb later forfeited by his Islamic bigotry - and comments on the obsolescence of Mughal military institutions. In the mid-17th century Europe was on a flood tide of military innovation, and Bernier's comment that the empire could be conquered by 20,000 troops of the quality France was currently committing in Flanders was probably accurate, even for the empire under Aurangzeb. In the next century Stringer Lawrence, de Bussy and Clive won their battles with far smaller numbers. Some of the commentary is implicit, especially in the analysis of the succession struggle between the sons of Shah Jahan during which Bernier himself arrived in India. Civil war was by no means unknown in 17th-century Europe, but was no longer a normal feature of dynastic succession. Nations that squander their time and resources in struggles over which individual or group will rule are at a severe disadvantage compared to those that can manage an orderly succession of power - a point apparent to anyone who has compared modern Pakistan and India.

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