New Worlds: Frontiers, Inclusion, Utopias

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1492 in the Other Indies: Shifting Centers, Creating New Peripheries

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By 1492, when Columbus landed in Hispaniola, Europeans knew a fair amount about India. At least, they thought they did. They had gotten their information from Pliny and Marco Polo, from Munster and Mandeville. They knew Indian spices and other commodities, but what they knew of India was more intended to fulfill expectations than to conform to a scientific ethnology of the sort that post-Enlightenment enquiry might provide. Even those who had been there tended to repeat Pliny's fantasy observations of India because they were addressing an audience that had expectations of India, a sense of what it was like. Indian religious practice was a primary interest, as it had been to Marco Polo, who made ample disparaging comments about the idol-worshipping Hindus and about the Syrian Christian community in India, calling them heretics and referring to others he encountered as descendants of St. Thomas' murderers. But Columbus was committed to vastly expanding the Christian community in India, though that may have been a device to secure funding from the deeply religious Queen Isabella.

The fantasy image is probably best expressed by one of the earliest Europeans to visit India, the Franciscan monk Odoric of Pordenone, who was sent eastward from Venice in 1318. Landing in western India, on the outskirts of Mumbai, he traveled across the country, concluding his time in India at Puri, where the great Cart Festival of the god Jagannath was in progress. He reported that "the people put the idols [as he calls them] on chariots, and the King and Queen and all the people drew them from the temple with song and music and a great company of virgins."[1] He also observed that "many pilgrims also put themselves under the chariot wheels, to the end that their false god may go over them."[2] That is not entirely inaccurate, though he did report that at Quillon, a port city on India's southwest coast, a monstrous idol, half man, half ox, gave responses out of its mouth and demanded the blood of forty virgins.

Odoric's account served as a basis for the embellishments provided by John Mandeville, probably a Frenchman, though his identity remains as mysterious as the observations he

1 John Mandeville. *Three Travels of Sir John Mandeville; with three narratives, in illustration of it, from Hakluyt's "Navigations, Voyages & Discoveries"* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1905), p. 333.

2 Ibid.

recorded about his travels, which began in 1322. They were widely consumed, including by Columbus, whose notions about India were significantly shaped by the exotic sense that Mandeville provided. Mandeville's imagery, both verbal and visual, is vivid, though many today, probably correctly, doubt that he ever left Europe. Nonetheless, his writing shaped a European vision of India.

By the late fifteenth century, however, travelers seem to have had a different vision of India, one far more practical and less exotic. The Arabs and Jews who settled in Spain and Portugal probably played an important role in this change because their co-religionists had extensive contact with India. Muslims rose to positions of considerable prominence on India's west coast, that is, the Malabar Coast, and Jews had been living there for several centuries, engaged in trade, as letters from the Cairo Geniza show. But what, in fact, would Columbus have seen if he had actually landed in India? He probably would have found himself on the west coast. There, at ports such as Calicut, Cochin, and Quilon, he would have seen ships from Arabian ports and from China and Southeast Asia, long part of a trading network, a proto-world system that was very much in place long before the age of European capitalism and the world system that Wallerstein proposes. He would have seen an India that was intimately connected with the world that, to India, mattered—that is, the realms that border the Indian Ocean. He would have seen a racially and religiously diverse India. In fact, religion and race were more categories imposed on India by Europeans than they were indigenous modes of thought.

From even before the common era, we have ample evidence of trade across the Indian Ocean, a network that extended from the eastern African coast to the South China sea, trading spices, textiles, ceramics, and gold, among many other commodities. The connection with Europe was considerably more limited, and had been since late Hellenistic and Roman times, when trade was documented both by means of Roman goods, for example, at the Indian port of Arikamedu, and by the Greek sea captain's record known as the *Periplus of the Erethryian Sea*. But after the second century or so, Indian goods reached European markets largely overland or through intermediary Arab traders. While India was engaged in a network of trade, the Eu-

ropean engagement with the east was much more focused, as in the case of Venetian trade with the western part of the Ottoman Empire, and that relatively late in the period.

India, on the other hand, served as a fulcrum in the vast trade network not only because it is approximately the halfway point between China and East Africa but also because it has an enormous coastline, some 7,200 kilometers, and still more if we think of an integral India prior to partition in 1947. India's special advantage was that its coastlines faced both east and west. In other words, there were ports facing China and Southeast Asia on one side and other ports facing the Arab world and East Africa on the other side, all facilitating a systemic exchange of goods. There is ample evidence for extensive trade across the Indian Ocean, such as shipwrecks dating as early as the ninth century that carried magnificent ceramics from Tang Dynasty China; Indian textiles found across Southeast Asia; and written records of expeditions, some hostile, as was the eleventh-century Indian Chola Dynasty attack on Sumatra intended to gain better trading conditions, and the voyages of the late fourteenth/early fifteenth-century Chinese mariner Zheng He, who traveled in fleets that were enormous by any standard and in ships that would have accommodated all three of the ones Columbus used for his initial voyage.

But it was more than goods that were exchanged. India exported religious traditions, at least to large parts of the Indian Ocean: Buddhism to the whole region to the north and east—that is, to China, Korea, Japan, and across Southeast Asia; and Hinduism—essentially the worship of Vishnu and Shiva—to parts of Southeast Asia. India's religious traditions were not, however, exported westward, probably because there were well-established religions in West Asia, namely Judaism and Christianity and, after the seventh century, Islam. To Southeast Asia, India exported a script, often used in inscriptions for Sanskrit, an Indian religious and legal language, and occasionally for writing indigenous languages, such as Malay. In the West, neither Sanskrit nor Indian scripts were adopted, doubtless because already there were scripts and the necessary legal and accounting tools for writing in place. When I say "exported," I should note that these were willingly adopted, at least by the elite, who had lacked the power associated with a written language.

Is all that sufficient to suggest that India functioned as a center, and the rest of the Indian Ocean as a periphery? Most definitely not. Competing powers formed the Indian Ocean system. China was certainly a major exporter of luxury items, particularly ceramics; Suvarnadvipa, almost surely the huge Indonesian island of Sumatra, exported spices nowhere else then available; and from ports in the Arabian Sea came aromatics such as frankincense and myrrh. I thus wonder if we might think not of a system dominated by a single power or region, as Wallerstein's world system required, but might rather find a more useful model in Christaller's Central Place Theory, which sees multiple centers interacting with surrounding areas. That is certainly what Columbus would have observed if he had gotten to India.

In turn, what did India know about Europe? Very little, because India's attention was largely turned eastward, across the Indian Ocean. To India, Europe was a peripheral region that mattered little. There were few commodities and almost nothing in the way of visual material that Indians wanted to import from that area. So can we understand the relationship between India and Europe in the terms that Castelnuovo and Ginzburg present? Not really, because they focus on very limited geographic regions. When thinking about India and Europe, the vast system that Wallerstein proposes seems a better model, although in terms of world systems, Europe is largely excluded from the system in which India played a central role. That system was focused almost exclusively on the Indian Ocean. In other words, from the perspective of India, the Italian Renaissance mattered little, if at all, although intellectually attuned Indians, like intellectually attuned Europeans, were driven at about the same time by a strong curiosity, testing the environment in which they lived in order to gain control over it, making it one that was human-centered, not god-centered, a present not controlled by a mythical religious past. That is certainly what Columbus would have observed if he had gotten to India.

If Columbus had reached India and landed at the port of Calicut, he likely would have encountered other Europeans, as Michael Pearson suggests. And soon thereafter, certainly by 1498, when Vasco da Gama reached the port of Calicut, the Portuguese began continuous contact with India. We know something about the Portuguese there both from Portuguese accounts and also from the account of Ludovico di Varthema, a Bolognese adven-

turer who is probably best known as the first non-Muslim to enter Islam's holiest city, Mecca. While in Mecca in 1503, he offered his services to the Muslim King of the Deccan, as he described the Sultan of Bijapur, to cast artillery to fight the Portuguese—a ruse, since he had no experience casting cannons. The Portuguese were mightily feared and strongly detested because in the previous year, 1502, Magellan had managed to massacre a whole shipload of pilgrims either going to or coming from Mecca. And in retribution for the 1500 killing of Portuguese in Calicut, the Portuguese attacked the city, inflicting devastating casualties, all because the Portuguese had demanded exclusive trading rights with the ruler of Calicut, rights that were more or less granted but circumvented by Arab and other traders who had engaged with India for vastly longer than the Portuguese.

Beyond the coastal city-states such as Calicut, Goa, and Cochin, Columbus, if he had reached India, almost surely would have ventured inland to the much larger kingdoms, specifically to Bijapur, Vijayanagara, and Mandu. Likely he would have started with Bijapur, the kingdom whose sultan Ludovico di Varthema sought to aid just eleven years after Columbus first reached the New World. As an independent kingdom, Bijapur was only recently established, founded in 1490 by the Muslim Yusuf Adil Shah. Almost immediately, Yusuf Adil Shah would have needed several things. First he would have required a fort in which his palace could be located. Even in its present ruined state, it is clear that the Bijapur fort rivals the structures of Sintra or Seville. He also would have needed a mosque, because in an Islamic kingdom, the ruler's name must be read aloud during the Friday noontime prayer, a legitimizing gesture. And he probably would have begun to put together an atelier of painters, not so much because he was a connoisseur of fine art but rather to document his rule. Nonetheless, Yusuf was in fact something of a connoisseur, for it is often stated, though without any evidence I know, that he invited artists, as well as poets, from Turkey, Persia, and even Rome, part of a longstanding tradition that extends back to the time of Darius and Xerxes, who imported leading artists to demonstrate their ability to attract the very best available. Columbus, had he reached Bijapur, also would have found considerable religious harmony, quite distinct from the Spain he left behind. Yusuf, for instance, had a Hindu wife, the mother of his successor

1. Mosque at Vijayanagar, 1439. Photo by the author.

When Vasco da Gama set out for India, he claimed that conversion was one of his two goals. As a member of his crew said, when asked what brought them to India: “We seek Christians and spices.” Or, in the words of Portuguese kings, the voyages they sponsored were intended to “serve God and make a profit for ourselves.” Portuguese intervention in conversion, however, was little needed in India. Long before the time of Columbus and Vasco da Gama, a Christian community flourished in India, one said to have been established by St. Thomas the Apostle. In other words, unlike in Portugal and Spain, Indians of diverse religious communities lived in relative harmony.

That is attested by the Kingdom of Vijayanagar, which Columbus almost surely would have visited after spending time in Bijapur. He would not have been the first European to spend time in Vijayanagar; the Venetian Niccolò de’ Conti had been there in 1420 or 1421. Niccolò, whose observations were recorded by the pope’s secretary, presents Vijayanagar as a Hindu city, but a mosque at Vijayanagar (Fig. 1) shows that there were Muslims there, too. That mosque, which bears a dedicatory inscription dated 1439, had been provided by the Vijayanagar king Deva Raya, who also provided a slaughterhouse for his Muslim sub-

jects. Most of the spectacular remaining religious monuments of Vijayanagar are Hindu temples, provided by the king and potentially considered royal structures, while the structures of other religions would have been more modest. As Philip Wagoner argues, however, Vijayanagar was deeply transformed by its interaction with Islamic culture.

From Vijayanagar, Columbus almost surely would have gone to Mandu before returning to his ships at Calicut, or wherever he docked on the Malabar coast. There, Ghiyas-ud-Din of the Khilji dynasty was ruling, although he was succeeded in 1500 by his son Nasir-ud-Din. If he had been properly hosted, as surely he would have been, Columbus would have stayed in a beautifully constructed stone residence, among the earliest surviving residential structures remaining in India. Among these is the Jahaz Mahal, probably built by Ghiyas-ud-Din Khalji, and the building commonly called Baz Bahadur's Palace, which contains an inscription indicating its construction by Ghiyas-un-Din.

By 1500, when Nasir-ud-Din succeeded his father, the kingdom was stable, and the sultan could pursue the support of painting, a luxury art, rather than architecture. The luxury proclaimed in the single surviving manuscript from Mandu at this time was, remarkably, food. That manuscript, the *Nimat Nama*, written and illustrated between 1500 and 1510, is essentially a recipe book, a listing of ingredients—without measure, however—for preparing the sultan's favorite dishes (Fig. 2). I am struck by two things. First, although many imported spices are used in the preparations, imported from parts of Southeast Asia, not a single food from the New World is included. There are no potatoes, no tomatoes, no chili peppers—all things we would today consider essential to Indian cuisine. Was the sultan here resisting these imported goods, which by this time were almost surely known in India? Or was he breaking from tradition by commissioning a manuscript that documented the present, the everyday? For this is the earliest secular manuscript in India of which I am aware. Second, it is hard to avoid recognizing the diverse appearance of the sultan's attendants in the manuscript. The range of skin colors in this painting from the manuscript (Fig. 2) and from just about every other painting in it underscores the diversity of those who are highly placed, to say nothing of the population at large, probably a predominantly Hindu population under this Muslim sultan. How different that state of affairs

2. Folio from the Nimat Nama. Painted in Mandu, c. 1500-1510. © The British Library Board. IO Islamic 149, f.100v.

was from Spain and Portugal, something that probably would have intrigued Columbus, who sailed from Palos de la Frontera the very year Jews and Muslims were expelled from Spain and just four years before Portugal expelled Jews and Muslims, in both cases creating a homogeneous Catholic population.

But at least Columbus would have found manuscripts on paper to be familiar. Paper came to Europe and India at just about the same time. In Europe, paper had been around since at least the late eleventh century, when it was known in Spain, probably imported and used by Muslims and Jews who knew it from Arabia, where it had been introduced by the Mongols. In India, too, evidence of paper also dates to the eleventh century, when Jewish merchants on India's west coast imported it from Egypt and Arabia. And, of course, Columbus maintained his journals on paper, journals that probably would not have been economically feasible if he had had to use parchment.

The *Nimat Nama*, that paper manuscript from Mandu, represents a major change in India's written tradition. Until this

work, every surviving illustrated manuscript in India was religious in nature. In the *Nimat Nama*, we have for the first time around 1500 a secular work, one that records the here and now, not the world of gods and heroes. If this does not mark a renaissance—a term that is perhaps too geographically specific—it does, like Columbus, represent a concern with the present.

Thus, one way to think about the global changes that took place about 1500 is as a rise in curiosity, one that challenged established tradition. For India, I see that sense of curiosity most clearly manifest in the products of the Mughal Dynasty, whose rule was largely centered in north India beginning in 1526. Babur, the first Mughal ruler, maintained a record of his response to things he observed, the *Babur Nama*. His grandson, Akbar, who ruled from 1556 to 1605, commissioned a court chronicler, Abul Fazl, to maintain a record of his reign, a work known as the *Akbar Nama*. A magnificent illustrated version, probably the royal copy, is today in the Victoria and Albert Museum; it was illustrated by leading artists in Akbar's court atelier and serves as more than a record; it satisfies the sultan's curiosity, one manifest even more apparently in the realm of religion, where he invited leaders of India's diverse religions, including Jesuit priests, to meet with him, and whom he interrogated with an intense curiosity. He also had Persian translations rendered of important Hindu texts, some of these illustrated, so he could better understand the religion of the Hindu majority he ruled.

Jahangir, Akbar's successor who ruled from 1605 to 1627, inherited a well-established kingdom, and so had even more time to pursue his curiosity. He was a master connoisseur and even claimed in his memoir:

> As regards myself, my liking for painting and my practice in judging it have arrived at such a point that when any work is brought to me, either of deceased artists or those of the present day, without the names being told me, I say on the spur of the moment that it is the work of such and such man. And if there be a picture containing many portraits, and each face be the work of a different master, I can discover which face is the work of each of them. If any other person has put in the eye and eyebrow of a face, I can

> perceive whose work the original face is, and who has painted the eye and eyebrow.[3]

Though a bold claim, it certainly indicates Jahangir's sense of connoisseurship. His curiosity is manifest in the paintings he commissioned, such as one of the dying Inayat Khan. Even though Jahangir describes him as one of his closest subjects, the dying man's appearance was so strange to Jahangir that he dispatched artists, as he says, to draw his likeness. And when exotic animals were brought to court, such as a zebra, Jahangir tested the stripes to be sure they were not painted, and had Mansur, the artist in his atelier who specialized in animal paintings, record the zebra's appearance. Similarly, he documented a turkey that had been brought from the New World. And when he was depicted imagining a world that extended far beyond his own realm, the painter showed him attended by various figures, including James I of England even if Jahangir's gaze is focused on a Sufi saint, not the king of England.

I see this sense of curiosity, of imagination, as essential to an awareness of a world that goes beyond the commodities of trade. It is a marker of liberation from a present rooted entirely in the past; it is an individual's assumption of power over the present, even over the future. More embracing than the term renaissance, curiosity, I think, stands at the threshold of modernism and, in many ways, shapes it.

3 Alexander Rogers, trans, Henry Beveridge, ed., The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri or Memoirs of Jahangir (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1909), vol. II, p. 20

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