

## RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Foreign Travelers and The Cultural Landscape of Mughal India

**Dr. Farid Ahmadzai**

Kabul Institute of Historical Research, Afghanistan

Received: 09 July 2026 Accepted: 04 August 2026 Published: 01 September 2026

**ABSTRACT**

The Mughal Empire constituted one of the most significant political and cultural formations of early modern South Asia, and the accounts of European travelers provide an important, though inherently mediated, body of evidence for examining its cultural landscape. This study critically analyzes the representation of Mughal culture in the writings of foreign travelers, with particular attention to political practices, religious institutions, intellectual exchange, courtly culture, and European perceptions of Indian society. The research adopts a qualitative historical-analytical methodology based exclusively on the selected works of Roe, Rubiés, Sharma, Smith, Tavernier, Truschke, Vanina, and Wink. Rather than treating travel narratives as transparent descriptions of Mughal society, the study evaluates them as interpretive documents shaped by linguistic limitations, cultural assumptions, political interests, and the travelers' positions within the societies they observed. The findings indicate that foreign travelers simultaneously preserved valuable observations about Mughal institutions and reproduced interpretive distortions arising from European conceptual frameworks. Their writings reveal the cultural plurality of the Mughal court, the importance of Persianate political culture, interactions between Sanskrit and Islamic intellectual traditions, and the contested interpretation of religious practices. The study concludes that travel accounts are most productive when read comparatively and critically rather than as independent factual records.

**Keywords:** Mughal Empire, foreign travelers, cultural landscape, travel narratives, European perceptions, Persianate culture, religious pluralism, intellectual exchange, historiography.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The Mughal Empire developed a complex cultural order in which political authority, religion, language, intellectual exchange, and courtly practices interacted across diverse regional and social environments. The cultural landscape of Mughal India therefore cannot be reduced to the institutions of the imperial court alone. It also included relationships between Persian and Sanskrit intellectual traditions, religious encounters, administrative practices, artistic and social customs, and the ways in which visitors interpreted these phenomena. Foreign travelers are particularly significant to this inquiry because their writings preserve observations produced from perspectives

external to the Mughal social and political system.

European travelers did not constitute a homogeneous group. Their purposes, backgrounds, periods of residence, access to the court, and intellectual assumptions varied substantially. Sir Thomas Roe, for example, encountered the Mughal court in the context of diplomatic representation, while Tavernier approached India through the experiences of a traveler and commercial observer. Bernier's descriptions generated later historiographical debate concerning the accuracy and character of his representation of the Mughal Empire (Rubiés, 2000). Vanina similarly emphasizes the possibility of

misunderstanding in European representations of India, making the question of interpretation central to the use of travel narratives as historical evidence (Vanina, 2019).

The central research problem is therefore not simply what foreign travelers wrote about Mughal India, but how their writings constructed an understanding of Mughal culture and what can be learned from the relationship between observation and interpretation. The study aims to identify recurring cultural themes in the selected writings, examine the intellectual and political assumptions underlying foreign descriptions, and evaluate the evidentiary strengths and limitations of travel literature.

A particularly important dimension concerns religion. Descriptions of Akbar's religious discussions and the 'Ibādat-khāna demonstrate how foreign observers could interpret Mughal experiments in religious dialogue through categories that did not necessarily correspond to the conceptual vocabulary of the Mughal court (Smith, 1917). Consequently, the foreign traveler's account must be considered both a source of information about Mughal society and an artifact of cross-cultural interpretation.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The selected literature demonstrates that the study of Mughal culture through foreign accounts requires a multidisciplinary approach combining travel history, political-cultural analysis, religious history, and historiography. Roe's account provides an important diplomatic perspective on the Mughal court during the early seventeenth century. His observations are valuable because they emerge from direct engagement with imperial political institutions, but they also reflect the objectives and limitations of diplomatic observation (Roe, 1899). The court is consequently represented not merely as a cultural environment but as a political system that had to be understood in relation to European diplomatic interests.

Tavernier provides a different perspective. His *Travels in India* expands the observational field beyond narrowly diplomatic concerns and contributes to the broader European construction of knowledge about Indian society (Tavernier, 1889). His account is useful for identifying the kinds of social, economic, and cultural details that attracted European observers. The contrast between Roe and Tavernier illustrates an important methodological principle: the meaning of a travel narrative is partly determined by the traveler's purpose and position.

Rubiés provides an explicit historiographical intervention by questioning what Bernier actually said and examining how his account of the Mughal Empire should be profiled and interpreted (Rubiés, 2000). This approach is particularly significant because it discourages historians from treating travel narratives as uncomplicated records of fact. Instead, the traveler's conceptual vocabulary, selective observations, and retrospective interpretation must be considered.

Vanina's examination of European travelers similarly places misunderstanding at the center of analysis. The notion of "(Mis)Understanding" indicates that European encounters with India generated knowledge while simultaneously producing distortions (Vanina, 2019). This perspective complements Rubiés by emphasizing the interpretive distance between the observed society and the observer.

Sharma's work shifts attention toward Persian and Mughal political culture. It demonstrates that Mughal political culture should be understood within a sophisticated Persianate intellectual and institutional framework rather than merely through European categories of monarchy and administration (Sharma, 2001). This provides an essential theoretical counterbalance to foreign travel accounts.

Truschke's analysis of Sanskrit at the Mughal court further expands the cultural framework by demonstrating the significance of intellectual encounters between Sanskrit traditions and the Mughal imperial environment (Truschke, 2016). The Mughal cultural landscape was therefore characterized by interaction rather than a simple opposition between Islamic and European worlds.

Smith's discussion of Akbar's "House of Worship" contributes specifically to the religious dimension of this literature. The 'Ibādat-khāna illustrates the importance of examining Mughal religious policy through historical context rather than imposing a simplistic binary between orthodoxy and secularism (Smith, 1917). Finally, Wink's discussion of religion and politics places Mughal religious practice within the wider relationship between imperial authority and religious institutions (Wink, 2024).

Collectively, these studies reveal a gap in approaches that isolate travel narratives from the broader cultural structures of Mughal India. The present study addresses this gap by placing foreign accounts into dialogue with scholarship on Persianate political culture, Sanskrit intellectual exchange,

and Mughal religious politics.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This research employs a qualitative historical-analytical methodology. The study is based exclusively on the eight references supplied for analysis and does not introduce external documentary evidence. The methodological objective is interpretive rather than statistical: the research examines how foreign travelers represented Mughal culture and compares those representations with the cultural and intellectual frameworks identified in the selected scholarly literature.

The analysis follows a comparative source-reading framework consisting of four interconnected dimensions: observation, representation, contextualization, and critical evaluation. First, observation refers to the cultural, political, religious, and social phenomena described by travelers. Second, representation concerns the language and interpretive categories through which those observations were transformed into written accounts. Third, contextualization evaluates those descriptions against the political and intellectual structures of Mughal society identified by the scholarly literature. Fourth, critical evaluation considers the limitations created by cultural distance, selective observation, and the traveler's purpose.

The first analytical category is political culture. Roe's diplomatic experience provides evidence of the imperial court as a highly organized political environment, while Sharma's analysis supplies a broader framework for understanding Persian and Mughal political culture (Roe, 1899; Sharma, 2001). This comparison allows the study to distinguish between what travelers observed and the deeper institutional meanings of those observations.

The second category is religious culture and interaction. The 'Ibādat-khāna represents a particularly significant case because it demonstrates the Mughal court's engagement with multiple religious and intellectual traditions. Smith's account provides an important basis for examining this phenomenon and for understanding why European observers could interpret Mughal religious initiatives through frameworks that differed from indigenous political and intellectual categories (Smith, 1917).

The third category is intellectual and linguistic exchange. Truschke's work on Sanskrit at the Mughal court

demonstrates that the cultural environment of the empire involved exchanges extending beyond Persianate and Islamic traditions (Truschke, 2016). This dimension is essential for avoiding a narrow definition of Mughal culture based solely on European observations or imperial political institutions.

The fourth category is cross-cultural representation. Rubiés and Vanina provide the principal interpretive framework for examining how European travelers constructed knowledge about India (Rubiés, 2000; Vanina, 2019). Their approaches suggest that misunderstanding should not automatically invalidate a source. Instead, the misunderstanding itself may reveal the conceptual assumptions through which Europe encountered Mughal India.

Finally, Wink's discussion of religion and politics is used to connect cultural practices with imperial authority (Wink, 2024). The methodological framework therefore treats culture not as an isolated category but as an integrated system involving political legitimacy, religious discourse, intellectual exchange, and social observation.

### **4. RESULTS**

The analysis identifies four principal findings concerning the cultural landscape represented through foreign travelers' writings.

First, foreign accounts reveal the institutional complexity of the Mughal court, but their descriptions are strongly influenced by the observers' purposes. Roe's diplomatic position directed attention toward imperial authority, court procedures, political negotiation, and relations with European representatives (Roe, 1899). Tavernier, by contrast, contributes a broader travel perspective. The difference indicates that "Mughal culture" was not represented uniformly. Each traveler selected aspects of society according to his practical interests and intellectual expectations.

Second, the study finds that European travel narratives provide evidence of cultural encounter but cannot be interpreted as culturally neutral records. Rubiés' analysis of Bernier demonstrates the importance of examining how a traveler's language and conceptual structure shape his description of the Mughal Empire (Rubiés, 2000). Vanina's emphasis on European misunderstanding reinforces this finding. Consequently, apparent

contradictions between European accounts should not automatically be treated as evidence that one traveler was correct and another incorrect. They may instead reflect different positions, experiences, and interpretive frameworks.

Third, the Mughal cultural landscape emerges as plural and interactive rather than culturally isolated. Sharma's treatment of Persian and Mughal political culture establishes the significance of Persianate traditions, while Truschke's analysis of Sanskrit at the Mughal court demonstrates intellectual engagement across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Sharma, 2001; Truschke, 2016). This challenges interpretations that conceptualize Mughal culture exclusively through either Islamic imperial identity or European descriptions of India.

Fourth, religious interaction constituted an important component of Mughal cultural politics. The 'Ibādat-khāna illustrates an imperial environment in which religious ideas could become part of political and intellectual experimentation. Smith's account is particularly important because it documents the historical significance of Akbar's "House of Worship" and provides a basis for interpreting the institution as part of the broader religious-cultural environment of the Mughal court (Smith, 1917). Wink's discussion further connects religion with imperial politics, indicating that religious practices should be examined in relation to questions of authority and governance (Wink, 2024).

The overall finding is that foreign travelers' writings are simultaneously historical evidence and constructed representations. Their greatest value lies not simply in the factual details they record but in the comparative picture that emerges when their observations are tested against scholarship on Mughal political culture, intellectual exchange, and religious institutions.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings have significant theoretical implications for the historiography of Mughal India. Most importantly, they support a contextual approach to travel literature. A traveler's account should neither be accepted uncritically nor dismissed because of cultural bias. Instead, its evidentiary value depends upon identifying the relationship between observation, purpose, language, and interpretation. This approach transforms travel narratives from simple descriptive sources into complex documents

of intercultural knowledge production.

The contrast between Roe and Tavernier demonstrates the importance of positionality. Roe's diplomatic context encouraged attention to political authority and courtly negotiation, whereas Tavernier's travel experience produced a different observational emphasis (Roe, 1899; Tavernier, 1889). Their accounts therefore complement one another but should not be treated as interchangeable. The difference also demonstrates why a single foreign narrative cannot adequately represent the cultural diversity of Mughal India.

The findings concerning religious culture raise a related issue. The 'Ibādat-khāna cannot be understood solely through a European conceptual framework of religious tolerance or intolerance. Smith's historical discussion demonstrates that Akbar's institution was associated with a particular Mughal context of religious and intellectual engagement (Smith, 1917). Wink's treatment of religion and politics further indicates that religious activity existed within relationships of imperial authority. The implication is that Mughal religious culture should be analyzed as simultaneously theological, political, and institutional.

The study also confirms the importance of Persianate and Sanskrit intellectual traditions. Sharma's analysis demonstrates the institutional significance of Persian political culture, while Truschke's study reveals the role of Sanskrit knowledge at the Mughal court (Sharma, 2001; Truschke, 2016). These perspectives complicate foreign descriptions that may implicitly organize Indian society according to European binaries. Mughal culture was produced through interaction among multiple intellectual traditions, and foreign travelers encountered only particular portions of this wider system.

A further implication concerns the concept of cultural misunderstanding. Rubiés and Vanina demonstrate that European accounts may contain interpretive distortions (Rubiés, 2000; Vanina, 2019). However, distortion does not make a source historically useless. The categories through which travelers misunderstood Mughal society provide evidence about the intellectual world of early European observers themselves. Thus, the source has a dual value: it documents aspects of Mughal India while also documenting the formation of European knowledge about India.

The principal limitation of the study is its dependence on a

relatively small selected corpus. The supplied references also represent different genres, periods, and observational positions. Consequently, the findings should not be generalized to every European account of Mughal India. Another limitation is that the analysis is based on published works rather than a systematic comparison of manuscript variants or multilingual primary sources. Future research could address these limitations through larger comparative datasets involving travelers from different European regions and closer examination of Persian, Sanskrit, and vernacular sources alongside travel narratives.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Foreign travelers provide an indispensable but complex window into the cultural landscape of Mughal India. Their writings reveal significant dimensions of courtly life, political authority, religious engagement, intellectual exchange, and social observation, but these representations were shaped by the travelers' purposes, cultural assumptions, and positions within the Mughal environment.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that Mughal culture cannot be adequately understood through foreign narratives alone. Roe and Tavernier illustrate different observational positions, while Rubiés and Vanina demonstrate the interpretive problems inherent in European representations. Sharma and Truschke broaden the cultural framework by emphasizing Persianate political culture and Sanskrit intellectual exchange. Smith's examination of the 'Ibādat-khāna and Wink's analysis of religion and politics further establish that religious culture was closely connected to imperial authority and intellectual interaction.

The principal contribution of this study is therefore methodological as much as historical: foreign travel accounts should be read as mediated cultural representations rather than transparent descriptions. Their historical significance increases when they are compared with wider political, intellectual, and religious contexts. Such an approach makes it possible to distinguish observation from interpretation while preserving the valuable evidence contained within these narratives.

Future research should expand the comparative corpus, incorporate multilingual indigenous sources, and examine differences among European travelers according to period, nationality, profession, and access to Mughal institutions.

Such research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Mughal India was observed, represented, and intellectually reconstructed through cross-cultural encounters.

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