

# ACCOUNTS OF WILLIAM FINCH ABOUT MUGHAL PERIOD

(SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JAHANGIR PERIOD 1608-1611)

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## ABSTRACT

*One of the most interesting and useful narratives dealing with the reign of Jahangir is that of William Finch, who landed with Hawkins at Surat on 24<sup>th</sup> August 1608, and stayed in India for nearly four years, observing the manners and customs of the people there and describing many aspects of Indian life in a way that had no precedent in the writings of other travelers. Nothing is known of his early life except that he was a native of London and servant to Master Johnson in Cheapside. After his association with the East India Company we have a full account of his life and achievements. This association dates from the year 1607 when he was appointed agent to an expedition sent by the Company, under Hawkins and Keeling, to treat with the Great Mughal. On 12<sup>th</sup> July 1609, Finch, still at Surat wrote to Hawkins, congratulating him on his appointment as “Captain over 400 horses etc.”*

On 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1609, one of the ships of the Company called the Ascension foundered near Surat, but fortunately there was little loss of life. Robert Coverte, one of the crew of the ill-fated vessel, paid tribute to the generosity of Finch who did all he could to help them. He is said to have “courteously” gone “to the Governor, and acquainted him with our distresse, who (as here after we found it to be true) was bribed by the Portugals.” The incidents which befell Finch at Surat and elsewhere are all recorded in what Boies Penrose calls “his extremely interesting Journal” which Samuel Purchas, and later, Harris and others, published in their collections of voyages and travels. Some additional light is thrown on Finch’s career by other journals and letter of the time.

Finch left Surat to join Hawkins at Agra, which he reached on the 14<sup>th</sup> April 1610. Here he had to encounter “tempting offers to attach

himself permanently to the service of Jahanghire”. Finch, however, resisting these temptations, remained with Hawkins for more than a year. He was soon chosen by Hawkins to proceed to Biana to buy indigo. Finch, who boldness sometimes bordered on rashness, made a mistake that had its repercussions on Hawkins, then engaged in seeking royal favor at the Mughal Court.

Finch’s narrative of his travels as it has come down to us is divided by Purchas into two parts, the first which deals with Sierra Leone and Sokotra and the second with India. Although the first part has all the literary and historical qualities of the second, we are here concerned only with Finch’s impressions of India and matters relating to these impressions. In the second part of his narrative Finch gives a wonderful description of India, remarkable for its vividness and accuracy of observation. This sets

him apart from other travelers who have so far been considered in this study and reveals his originality of outlook and his aesthetic appreciation of Indian art and architecture.

Finch, besides noting down the historical and scenic importance of a place, also recorded the articles of commerce it was famous for. Thus at Malwa he found that the place was remarkable for its great production of opium. Those engaged in its manufacture gave the heads of poppies two or three scratches, causing a white fluid soon turned to a reddish colour.

The manufacture involved a great deal of toilsome effort for a small profit; for the heads were small and dropped their tears very sparingly. Finch enquired the price of opium. At Sironj he found many betel gardens and at Gwalior several houses entirely cut out of the main rock, in which a part of the trading people killed. At the entrance of the north-east gate of Fatehpur Sikri, he saw "a goodly bazaar (market place) of stone, half a mile long, being a spacious, straight-paved street with faire building on either side."

He described Khanwa as a small country town, famous for the quantity of Indigo it produced. Ujjain was even more famous than Khanwa for the manufacture of indigo, for the former was exceeded by none in the production of this commodity unless it was Biana itself. He further stated that, "the Biana kind was worth from 40 to 60 mamudies per maund, while the Sarkhej one could be procured at half the price. There was yet another coarser variety obtainable at Jambusar and Vorodea (Barodā) for 15 to 20 mamudies.

The reason why Finch deals elaborately with manufacture of indigo in India is that it was one of the most important commodities imported into England by her merchants from Aleppo. When, however they first opened direct relation

with India, they began to search for markets where they could purchase indigo for direct export to their country. Sir Thomas Roe managed to prohibit private trade by the company's servants in indigo, "because it was considered an important commodity for Export to Europe. But that was when saltpeter, indigo, pepper and other commodities constituted the main items of import into England. After 1678 the position changed. Textile goods of various kinds, hitherto a mere "side-line" of the company's business, almost monopolised the import trade, relegating indigo and the spices to a corner."

That topography, not Indian history, was Finch's main concern is evident from the numerous inaccuracies in his historical accounts in contrast to the painstaking minuteness with which he delineates places, forts and castles. Not all historical allusions, however, are incorrect. Finch either relied upon what he himself saw or upon what other communicated to him. Reliance upon hearsay in most cases marred the authenticity of his account.

Thus while his account of the Deccan war and his various allusions to it are authentic, being based on what the author himself saw, his history of Salim Shah Sur forcing Humayun to flee to Persia for aid is evidently confused. Similarly, his notices of the Emperor's daily life and daily leaves are valuable, but so recent an event as Prince Khusru's rebellion is related with numerous inaccuracies, and there is hardly any justification for his relation of ignorant bazār gossip that prisoners in the fort of Ranthambhor were brought to the top of the wall, made to drink dishes of 'milk,' and then dashed upon the rocks. It is evident from an examination of these facts that Finch wrote down what he was told, without caring to verify the intelligence communicated. But if the journal is purged of all these inaccuracies, there still remains much that, to historians, is valuable, authentic and reliable.

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Finch's greatness and claim to fame today lie not in the abundance of historical materials his narrative furnishes, but in his powerful descriptions of the north Indian cities he visited. In a sense, moreover, these descriptions of the north Indian cities he visited. In a sense, moreover, these descriptions are of considerable historical value. They reveal India's strength and weakness; - the prosperity of a certain class of men and the abject poverty of certain others. The magnificence of the castles and the abundance of all sorts of foodstuffs in the markets are monumental evidence of the incredible plenty, prosperity and culture of the Indians those days. But these are, at the same time, "incontestable evidence that the lower strata of society consisting of the tillers of the soil, labourers, and mechanics lived very miserably... That they were treated like helots is the observance of many reliable travelers.

It was these people who used to sell themselves and their children as slaves in times of scarcity in Gujarat, Bengal and throughout the Deccan." Finch's references to Indian thieves and beggars support this argument. But for descriptions of India's poverty in the 17<sup>th</sup> century there are better authorities than Finch. Some of these are Sir Thomas Roe, Hawkins, Pyrard, Della Valle, Linschoten and Frederick.

Finch's narrative have been generally laudatory. W.H. Moreland pointed out that, "Finch was careful to note details which interested him, and I can trace no sign of prejudice in his journal." E.F. Oaten observed that it, "contains a good deal of useful information on the subject of the daily levees which Jahangir used to hold." Robert Sencourt read in Finch's discourse "a more deliberate attempt to give an impression of the country" and considered Finch "the first Englishman to express an interest in the admirable and curious designs of Indian buildings. Sir William Foster pointed

out that it was "a most valuable contribution to our knowledge of the dominions of the Great Mogul in the early years of the seventeenth century." Puchas describes his narrative as "a good dish" and says that it is "supplied in substance, with more accurate observations of Men, Beasts, Plants, Cities, Deserts, Castles, Buildings, Regions, Religious, than almost any other, as also of Waies, Wares, Warres." Indian writers though not so lavish in their praise, are still eulogistic of the traveller's narrative. Beni Prasad in his History of Jahangir considers it "chief valuable for the excellent descriptions of cities, towns, buildings, and roads. In fact, all authoritative writers on Mughal India have used materials furnished by William Finch, especially those materials which deal with Mughal architecture.

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