

# UNRAVELLING THE 'WONDER' IN I'TESAMUDDIN'S 'THE WONDERS OF VILAYET'



Dr. Amrita Satapathy

Assistant Professor

School of Humanities, Social Sciences & Management

Indian Institute of Technology Bhubaneswar

[asatapathy@iitbbs.ac.in](mailto:asatapathy@iitbbs.ac.in)



# THE 'GAZE' THAT WAS.

- The gaze directed towards lands in the east in the early travel writings was often one of 'curiosity' and 'wonder'.
- “Of the customs in the isles around India; / of the distinction between idols and simulacres; / of three types of pepper growing on one tree; / and of the well that changes colour each hour of the day” (The Travels of Sir John Mandeville, cited in Nigel Leask, p. 120).
- 'Curiosity' and 'wonder' were imperial constructs.



# THE 'GAZE' REDEFINED

- The later period from 1700-1830 brought a new dimension to the very ethos of travel writing.
- It also saw the appearance of the **utilitarian** traveller.
- “Knowledge (personal learning and experience) - including adventure, curiosity, self- realization, fame and prestige, and freedom from social constraints” (Helms, 1988, p.67).
- The ‘**interplay**’ between the observer and the observed.
- Indian travel literature to 18th century Britain - “related to human curiosity and to a travel writer’s desire to mediate between things foreign and things familiar, to help us understand that world which is other to us” (Blanton, 2002, p. 2).



# MIRZA SHEIK I'TESAMUDDIN'S 'WONDER'

- I'tesamuddin highlights the concept of 'orientalism in reverse'.
- He can be seen as a cultural interlocutor.
- Thus the book comes across as a more secular and multicultural thwarting the imperialist agenda of laying claim to a "historically insular all-white England" (Fisher, 2008, p. 17).
- For I'tesamuddin, the travel to England, though politically charged becomes one of '**rihla**' and '**talab al-'iln**' i.e. travel in search of knowledge, in the true Muslim spirit. And his gaze on *vilayet* is well informed, and percipient and not corrosive unlike the Europeans.
- The book exhibits, "the eighteenth-century aesthetics of travel writing" with the right amount of "'dazzle' and freshness of first impressions", minus the "'intimate distance' derived from a fast, fleeting survey of a foreign country" (Leask, 2008, p. 160).



# LANGUAGE OF WONDER

- I'tessamuddin is a Muslim, a Bengali and an Indian but not a colonized subject, in the strict sense of the word. He is fondly referred to as '*vilayet* Munshi'.
- He has his own interpretations for words that are foreign to him- England is ***vilayet***, the Urdu or Hindi location for a foreign land; especially (a name for) England, Britain, or Europe, the English were ***firinghees*** (a term of disparagement akin to the word ***mlechcha*** or a debased foreigner). English dancers were beautiful like ***houris***, the police chief was ***kotwal***, performers with antics were ***habshi***, monetary denominations were interpreted as ***asharfi***, English shows and spectacles were ***tamasha***, colleges like Oxford were like a ***madrassah***, a royal court is ***darbar*** and a royal meeting is a ***majlis***.
- It is interesting to note that I'tessamuddin exoticizes the West through language.



# COUNTER WONDER AND 'DISCOURSE OF CURIOSITY'

- He is as much a spectacle for the West as the West is a spectacle for him. It is a sort of “**counter wonder**”- It was the height of summer, so I would go out dressed in pyjama-trousers and a long, loose shirt with a cummerbund which held a dagger; a shawl thrown over the shoulder; turban; and gilt-embroidered shoes. Many were pleased with my costume but others thought it was effeminate. (2001, p. 54)
- It is ‘**discourse of curiosity**’ in reverse.
- Thus, the book is the product of a “wide eyed discovery of a new world, where almost everything evoked wonder” (Trivedi, 2003, p. 171).

“Within a couple of months everyone in the neighbourhood became friendly. The fear which some had felt vanished completely, and they would now jest with me familiarly. The ladies of the bazaar approached me and, smiling, said, ‘Come, my dear, and kiss me!’” (2001, p. 55).



# CONTINUED.

- I'tesamuddin seems to be an object of the English feminine gaze as much as they are an object of his gaze (Indian, Muslim and male)- “Vilayet is the emporium of beauty, where women of surpassing loveliness are common, and wealthy and virtuous ones are not hard to find” (2001, p. 79).
- It is evident from his words that “his idea of others is as much constructed as their view of him” (Schurer, 2011, p. 144). He writes, “The English had never seen an Indian munshi before, but only lascars from Chittagong and Dhaka, are were consequently unacquainted with the clothes and manners of an Indian gentleman” (2001, p. 54).



# UNMAKING THE 'WONDER'

- Use of first person narrative:

“...The English had never seen an Indian dressed as I was. They considered me a great curiosity and flocked to have a look. The friendliness of the English and, more particularly, the sight of their lovely women dispelled the sorrow of solitude and cheered me greatly. They continued to stare at my clothes and countenance, while I gazed at their astonishing loveliness. How ironic that I, who had gone there to enjoy a spectacle became a spectacle myself.” (2001, p. 53)

- Rationalising culturally comparative societies:

“...I merely wish to say that each nation has its own peculiar customs and practices, and so the food of one country will be pleasant to the taste of its natives, but to foreigners it may be unpalatable. We should remember in particular that between your manners and customs and ours there is the difference of East and West.” (2001, p. 140).





# THE CONNOTATION OF WONDER IN I'TESAMUDDIN

- Thus I'tesamuddin redefines the connotation of 'wonder'.
- When he visits the "Madrassah of Oxford" he opines that "persons with scientific interests may study their external forms and an ignorant mortal...may gaze at them and marvel at the diversity in nature and civilization" (64).
- His use of the word 'marvel' is not one of innocent naivety. He is as Kaiser Haq points out, "curious about alien cultures and is a good observer possessed with an engaging descriptive ability" (2001, p. 11).
- The 'wonder' becomes a state of liminality.
- His wonder of *vilayet* makes him a 'participant-observer', which enables him to navigate deftly the cultural distance.



# NARRATIVE OF WONDER

- *The Wonders of Vilayet* qualifies as what Jonathan Sell terms as a ‘**narrative of wonder**’.
- It is *curiositas* reconstructed, ethnologically, historically and geographically.

“The English...spend their time in studious and creative pursuits. They engage in researches in science, medicine and technology, make scholarly studies in fields like history and philosophy, seek means to improve efficiency of factories and machinery, and write books so that mankind may benefit from their discoveries...” (2001, p. 126)



# WONDER, VISION AND DOUBLE VISION

- I'tesamuddin's 'wonder' eventually translates into a vision.
- He is a visionary who is able to augur the inevitable rise of colonialism and formation of British India- "And is it surprising if a country whose soldiers and noblemen are affected, luxurious and effeminate is subdued by a brave war like people?" (2001, p. 135).
- His sense of wonder translates into a double vision where his inquisitiveness transforms into an enlightenment.
- "The wise men of Vilayet say that the acquisition of worldly wealth is necessary to make life pleasant and easy, while education increases one's knowledge and wisdom and enables one to show the right path to those who seek advice." (2001, p. 125)



# BALANCING 'WONDER'

- I'tesamuddin is not the ambivalent traveller who oscillates between the two polarities of East and West, trying to vindicate his world view. We do not find in him “the inner incompatibility of empire and nation.” (Anderson, 2006, p. 93), which so much defines the colonial traveller.
- It strikes a balance between the romantic aesthetical association of ‘wonder’ and the ideological conception of intellectual curiosity- “The wise men of Vilayet say that the acquisition of worldly wealth is necessary to make life pleasant and easy, while education increases one’s knowledge and wisdom and enables one to show the right path to those who seek advice.” (2001, p. 125)



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# THANK YOU

## Questions?

