ABSTRACT

Since the publication of Edward Said's Orientalism, much work has been done on the European perception of the Asian World, on how the colonizers viewed the culture and society of the colonized, and how their perception carried connotations of power and control. Beyond generalized impressions however, very little has been written on how the Asians viewed the Europe and the Europeans and more importantly, how their perception of the European 'other' shaped the course of their interaction with the European merchants and traders before the intrusion of colonialism. The present study is concerned with exploring the relations between the European merchants and the Mughal court from the perspective of the Mughals.

One of the important problems that this work seeks to explain is the Mughal perception of the European, since they first came to India mainly as merchants and Company servants, and established their factories and settlements at different places in the Mughal domain. Following from this, we also explored the nature of Mughal response to European 'presence,' and seek to, unravel the connection between perceptions and policies, that is, the extent to which Mughal perception of Europeans shaped their commercial policy responses toward them. The expansion of European trade in India that ultimately led to India's subjugation by the English East India Company, was crucially facilitated by a concessional (practically 'Free Trade') policy of the Mughal rulers. We have sought to investigate as to why the Mughal rulers favoured the European merchants. The idea of a merchant body
working as a pressure group was not new to the Mughal ruling elite, but in the case of such European companies, the response was far from appropriate. The Mughal perception of the European merchants not only explains their largely favourable policy towards the European merchants and traders, but also provides important clues to the Mughal commercial policies towards them, as well.

The other problem that this study is concerned with is to understand the nature of Mughal reception to European science and technology. This is an important problem to explore because their reception of European scientific knowledge and technology crucially influenced technological development in India. Irfan Habib locates the reasons of the Mughal ‘indifference’ to European technology in the economic position of the Mughal nobility. He also explores the possibility that the fairly sizable amount of merchant capital which existed could have been a source for investing in new technology, and hence that, left to itself, Indian society capitalist development would have soon followed. If this did not happen, it was because, says Habib, “the agrarian exploitation pursued successfully by the Mughal Empire made its economy immune, by and large, to the temptations of imitating European technology until it was too late.” A. J. Qaiser has however, enumerated several important sectors in which interaction with the Europeans crucially led to the development of technology in Mughal India such as artillery, ship-building, and in subsequent period, such as in glass technology, artillery, clock-making etc. It still remains an intriguing problem of Indian history as to why the Mughals showed an unusual lack of interest in European science and technology.
However, the Mughal attitude towards European science can not be branded as entirely indifferent, and hence it becomes necessary to examine the ‘selective’ process in their acceptance of European science. The Mughal India’s lack of capacity to generate growth of science and absorb scientific ideas received from external sources has been dubbed as an ‘ideological failure’ by Irfan Habib and more generally as a ‘cultural failure’ by M. Athar Ali.

As is well known, by the seventeenth century European physicians and surgeons had made far-reaching developments in medical science. This was probably not lost to the Mughals as well, for European physicians were employed not only by the Mughal Emperors but also by the members of the nobility. The question that this provokes is one of discrimination in reception; the lack of reception of European science was not complete or total, and we need to see the basis on which aspects of western sciences were accepted, rejected or treated with gross indifference.

Another important aspect that this study has attempted to bring out is the cultural dimensions of the interactions between the Mughal court and the Europeans. This includes their perception of Christianity and the religious beliefs of the Europeans. Indeed, Mughal court created an atmosphere for a mutually enriching dialogue between Islam and Christianity over theological and metaphysical issues.

It is a curious problem that despite interaction with Jesuit Fathers and other European envoys about European geography, who also provided maps and Atlases, no effort was made by the Mughals to enhance their knowledge of the geography of Europe. It is one of our aims to investigate the nature of their perception of
European geography, and the reasons for their casual indifference for the continent.

When two civilizations interact, they create a dialogic process of immense potential. However, what one civilization can learn from the other depends on their mutual perceptions. Often unequal relations of power convert the dialogue into a monologue, thereby disrupting the creative potentialities that such an encounter provides. Equally importantly, appreciation of mutual differences can thwart the dialogic process, and cause to construct the ‘other’ in hostile and irreconcilable terms. Scholars have indeed studied the European encounter with the colonized world in several richly documented and theoretically enriching studies. However, these studies look at the encounter from the European perspective, often after the establishment of colonialism. My study, on the other hand, reverses the ‘gaze,’ as it were, and looks at how the Mughals perceived the Europeans before colonialism.