THE MUGHAL WORLD

India’s Tainted Paradise

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Chapter One

THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE
The Land

THE OVERWHELMING REALITY of India for the Mughals when they first arrived was the broiling sun. “Three things oppressed us in Hindustan,” writes Babur, “its heat, its violent winds, its dust.” Sometimes, says Badauni, it got “so extremely hot . . . that the very brain boiled in the cranium.” Moans Bernier: “I have been reduced by the intenseness of the heat to the last extremity . . . My parched and withered body has become a mere sieve, the quart of water which I swallow at a draught, passing at the same moment through every one of my pores, even by the ends of my fingers. I am sure that today I have drunk more than ten pints . . . My body is entirely covered with small red blisters, which prick like needles . . . I feel as if I should myself expire before night. All my hopes are in four or five limes still remaining for lemonade, and in a little dry curd which I am about to drink diluted with water and with sugar.”

The summer heat was made worse by dust-storms. “It gets up in great strength every year in the heats . . . when the rains are near,” writes Babur; “so strong and carrying so much dust and earth that you cannot see one another. People call this wind andhi, the darkener of the sky.” Says Pelsaert, “In April, May and June the heat is intolerable, and men can scarcely breathe. More than that, hot winds blow continuously, as stifling as if they came straight from the furnace of hell. The air is filled with the dust raised by violent whirlwinds from the sandy soil, making day like the darkest night that human eyes have seen or that can be grasped by the imagination.”

The monsoon brought some relief. “The climate during the rains is very pleasant,” concedes Babur, but adds that it had its own miseries. “During the rainy season you cannot shoot, even with the bow of our country . . . the coats of mail, books, clothes, and furniture, all feel the bad effects of moisture.” Says Ovington: “The whole Hemisphere then is most sullenly Dark, and the Sky overcast with the thickest weighty clouds, so that the Earth seems rather inclosed within a huge ocean of Water, than only a few watery Clouds, whose black and lowering Aspect is so very melancholy, that it gives the fairest representation imaginable of the terrors of a second universal Deluge. Sometimes in
The Land and the People

Three or Four Hours time, such showers fall from these full Clouds, that the Currents run along the Streets, swelled to that height, that they are scarce fordable on Horse-back. After this Excess in July the Showers gradually decrease, the Horizon clears up like the first dawning of the Day, ‘till at length the heavens are all over Bright, and the benighted Sun displays his vigour and banish’d Rays again.”

The most pleasant season in India were the winter months from November to February, but Pelsaert grumbles about it too, for in winter the poor burned cow-dung outside their houses to keep warm: “The smoke from these fires all over the city is so great that the eyes run, and the throat seems to choke.” And, says Linschoten, “winter endeth with thunder and lightning”, heralding not the blessed rains, but the dreaded dust-storms. Manucci would not even acknowledge the season of winter in India. “As for winter,” he says, “they do not know in India what that means;” there was only “the less hot season”.

The heat was not just physical discomfort; it sapped energy, desiccated the spirit. “The excessive heat makes a man powerless, takes away his desire for food, and limits him to water-drinking, which weakens or debilitates his body,” says Pelsaert. Physician Bernier however noted some advantages in the Indian climate. “Few persons in these hot climates feel a strong desire for wine, and I have no doubt that the happy ignorance which prevails of many distempers is fairly ascribable to the general habits of sobriety among the people, and to the profuse perspiration to which they are perpetually subject. The gout, the stone, complaints in kidney, catarrhs and quartan agues are nearly unknown; and persons who arrive in the country afflicted with any of these disorders, as was the case with me, soon experience complete cure. Even the venereal disease, common as it is in Hindustan, is not of the virulent character, or attended with such injurious consequences, as in other parts of the world. But although there is a greater enjoyment of health, yet there is less vigour among the people than in our colder climates; and the feebleness and languor both of body and mind, consequent upon excessive heat, may be considered a species of unremitting malady, which attacks all persons indiscriminately.”

If men did not thrive in the tropical climate, vermin did. “The abundance of flies in those parts doe . . . much annoy us; for in the heate of the day their numberlesse number is such as that we can be quiet in no place for them,” writes Terry. “They are ready to cover our meate as soon as it is placed on the table; and therefore wee have men that stand on purpose with napkins to fright them away as wee are eating. In the night likewise we are much disquieted with musquatoes,
like our gnats, but somewhat lesse. And in their great cities there are such aboundance of bigge hungrie rats that they often bite a man as he lyeth on his bed.”

HEAT APART, THE most remarkable fact about India for the Mughals was the sheer crush of people. The vast concourses of people he saw in India astounded Babur. “As far as Bengal, as far indeed as the shore of the great ocean, the peoples are without break . . . The population of Hindustan is unlimited,” he writes. Says Jahangir about Agra: “The mass of people is so great that moving about in the lanes and bazaars is difficult.”

Moreland estimates that the total population of India in 1600 was about 100 million, while Kingsley Davis gives a figure of 125 million, and Irfan Habib of 142 million. The annual rate of growth of the population in Mughal India was low, probably only about 0.14 per cent. A surprisingly large number of Mughal Indians lived in urban centres, about fifteen per cent according to Irfan Habib, which was higher than the percentage of the urban population in contemporary Europe, and higher even than that of India in the nineteenth century. The great cities of India had a population of between a quarter-million and a half-million, according to Moreland.

These figures are rough appraisals, and the possible margin of error is wide. We do however have a fair estimate of the number of villages and towns in the Mughal empire. According to Nizamuddin Ahmad, an officer of Akbar, the Mughal empire in his time had 120 large cities and 3200 townships (qasbas), each controlling between 100 and 1000 villages; according another source, Aurangzeb’s empire (excluding Bijapur and Golconda) had over 400,000 villages. Not all these villages were inhabited, a village being, in the Mughal parlance, merely “a specific area of land”, whether populated or not.

Villages, even towns, were ever in flux in medieval India, appearing and disappearing with bewildering rapidity. “In Hindustan hamlets and villages, towns indeed, are depopulated and set up in a moment,” Babur notes. “If the people of a large town, one inhabited for a few years even, flee from it, they do it in such a way that no sign or trace of them remain in a day or a day and half. On the other hand, if they fix their eyes on a place to settle, they need not dig water courses or construct dams, because their crops are all rain-grown, and as the population of Hindustan is unlimited, it swarms in. They make a tank or dig a well; they need not build houses or set up walls—khas-grass abounds, wood is unlimited, huts are made, and straightaway there is a village or a town!”
The Land and the People

What was true of villages and towns was in a sense true of great cities too. Cities did not of course disappear overnight, but they sometimes became derelict almost overnight, a worse plight. India was dotted with forlorn ruins, monuments of a people who did not care for the past and had no thought of the future. Typical was the fate of the great city of Fatehpur Sikri that Akbar built at the height of his power. William Finch, who arrived in India in 1608, just three years after Akbar’s death, found Fatehpur already a ghost city. “It is all ruinate,” writes Finch, “lying like a waste desart, and very dangerous to passe through in the night, the buildings lying waste without inhabitants; much of the ground beeing now converted to gardens, and much sowed with nill and other graine, that a man standing there would little thinke he were in the middest of citie.”

The sight of crumbled monuments and desolate cities, with their unmistakable odour of the decay of civilization, saddened even the casual visitor. “Nothing is permanent, yea, even the noble buildings—gardens, tombs, or palaces—which, in and near every city, one cannot contemplate without pity or distress because of their ruined state,” laments Pelsaert. “For in this they are to be despised above all the laziest nations of the world, because they build them with so many hundreds of thousands, and yet keep them in repair only so long as the owner is alive and has the means. Once the builder is dead, no one will care for the buildings; the son will neglect his father’s work, the mother her son’s, brothers and friends will take no care for each other’s buildings; everyone tries, as far as possible, to erect a new building of his own, and establish his own reputation alongside that of his ancestors . . . If all these buildings and erections were attended to and repaired for a century, the lands of every city, and even village, would be adorned with monuments; but as a matter of fact the roads leading to the cities are strewn with fallen columns of stone.”

The monuments that survived best were those that were preserved by nature itself, not by man, and among them were the great cave temples of Ellora, a well-known site even in Mughal times. Aurangzeb used to picnic there with his family. And so did many Mughal nobles. Says Mustaid Khan, a courtier of Aurangzeb: “[There] is a place named Ellora where in ages long past, sappers possessed of magical skill excavated in the defiles of the mountain spacious houses for a length of one kos (3.2 kilometres). On all their ceilings and walls many kinds of images with lifelike forms have been carved . . . In all seasons, and particularly in the monsoons, when this hill and the plain below resemble a garden in the luxuriance of its vegetation and the abundance of its water, people come to see the place. A waterfall a hundred yards
in width tumbles down from the hill. It is a marvellous place for strolling, charming to the eye.” The monuments themselves were however in a state of “desolation in spite of its strong foundations”, notes the Khan.

THE MUGHAL CITIES are the true memorials of Mughal culture, at once thriving and decrepit, magnificent and squalid. “There is no city or town which, if it be not already ruined and deserted, does not bear the evident marks of approaching decay,” says Bernier. The neglect of their own monuments by the Mughals is surprising, for they, unlike Hindus and the Turko-Afghans, had great dynastic pride, a fine sense of history, and were moreover fastidious about their environment, being connoisseurs of beautiful things and the good life. Yet Jahangir had let Fatehpur Sikri run to seed, and Shah Jahan had no qualms about demolishing Akbar’s palace complex in Agra. Moreover, they were indifferent to town planning, even to the layout of the imperial citadels, so that although many of the individual structures in the Agra and Delhi forts are magnificent, the buildings do not harmonize well with each other.

Beyond the citadel, the cities were a chaotic jumble of wretched hovels and stately mansions, royal avenues and mean, twisting lanes, parodying the transience and the awful inequity of Mughal society. In urban planning it has been downhill in India since the Mauryan age, possibly even from the time of the Indus Valley Civilization. “They (Mughal cities) appear very pleasant from afar; for they are adorned with many towers and high buildings, in a very beautiful manner,” says Monserrate. “But when one enters them, one finds that the narrowness, aimless crookedness, and ill planning of the streets deprive these cities of all beauty.” Says Pelsaert: “The city (Agra) is exceedingly large, but decayed, open, and unwalled. The streets and houses are built without any regular plan.”

Promiscuous, random clusters of mud and thatch slums disfigured the face of Mughal cities like festering scabs. Even in the mansions of amirs, “externally there [was] nothing to delight the eye,” says Monserrate, for though they had gardens, ponds and fountains within, they were hidden behind high walls, to provide privacy for women. “If a traveller has seen one of these cities, he has seen them all,” concludes Monserrate.

“Most towns in Hindustan are made up of earth, mud, and other wretched materials,” says Bernier. He saw Agra and Delhi not as cities proper, but as cantonments, deriving their “chief support” from the
The Land and the People

presence of the army. "The population," he says, "is reduced to the necessity of following the Mogul whenever he undertakes a journey of long continuance." Thevenot, a Frenchman in India in the mid-seventeenth century, reports that more than eighty per cent of the estimated 400,000 population of Delhi was transient with the imperial court, so that when the emperor moved out of Delhi, its population shrank to some 65,000. The influx of troops or pilgrims could also dramatically, though temporarily, alter the population of towns. "These cities resemble any place other than Paris; they might more fitly be compared to a camp, if the lodgings and accommodations were not a little superior to those found in the tents of armies," comments Bernier.

A pleasing feature of Mughal cities and towns was the abundance of trees in them. "Both in their villages and cities are usually many faire trees among their houses, which are a great defence against the velence of the sunne," says Terry. "They commonly stand so thicke that, if a man behold a citie or towne from some conspicuous place, it will see me a wood rather than a citie." Says Careri, an Italian traveller in India towards the close of the seventeenth century: "They live in low Houses, with Trees about them, so that their Cities at a distance look like Woods."

agra and Delhi, and for a short while Fatehpur Sikri, were the primary Mughal capitals, and they were great metropolises. "Agra and Fatpeore are two very great cities, eiher of them much greater than London and very populous," says Ralph Fitch, an English merchant who was in Fatehpur in 1584. "Betweene Agra and Fatpeore are 12 miles (12 kos actually: 37 kilometres), and all the way is a market of victuals and other things, as full as though a man were still in a towne, and so many people as if a man were in a market." William Finch says of Agra: "It is spacious, large, populous beyond measure, that you can hardly passe in the streets . . . "

Agra, the Lodi capital (founded in 1505 by Sikandar, the father of Ibrahim) was taken over by Babur as his capital after the battle of Panipat, but the city really came into its own only with Akbar, who demolished the Lodi fort and erected a great new citadel in its place, which took some 15 years to build and cost about 3.5 million rupees. But even before the fort complex was completed, Akbar shifted to Fatehpur, where he lived for fourteen years, and then moved on to Lahore for the next fourteen years, returning to Agra only towards the close of his reign.

Jahangir loathed Agra. "The air of Agra is warm and dry," he
writes; "physicians say that it depresses the spirit and induces weakness. It is unsuited to most temperaments, except to the phlegmatic and melancholy, which are safe from its bad effects." Only elephants and buffaloes could thrive in Agra, Jahangir believed, and he avoided living there as much as possible. Shah Jahan lived the longest in Agra, and he extensively rebuilt the citadel there, tearing down most of Akbar's sandstone buildings to erect his own marble-and-gilt palaces. Later, his vanity still not sated, he moved to Delhi to build a new capital there, Shahjahanabad, where he lived for nine years, before moving back to Agra. It was only with Aurangzeb that Delhi became the prime Mughal capital.

Agra was dominated by its citadel, an immense complex of 2.4 kilometre circumference, built on a low swell of land on the western bank of the Yamuna. "It lyeth in the manner of a half-moon, bellying landward," observes William Finch. The royal apartments were on the riverside ramparts, overlooking a sandy maidan, where parades and elephant fights were held. "Internally . . . the fort is built over like a city with streets and shops, and has very little resemblance to a fortress," says Pelsaert, "but from the outside anyone would regard it as impregnable." Its walls, about nine metres thick at the base, rose to a height of about 21.5 metres, and were girded (except on the riverside) by a deep, broad moat filled with water drawn from the Yamuna.

Next to the moat, on the western side, was a large garden, and beyond it the great royal square, where the main roads of Agra converged. The royal square, which doubled as a bazaar, was the hub of the city, and it was here that the great amirs on guard duty at the citadel pitched their tents.

The two principal streets of Agra ran straight from the royal square as far as the eye could see, flanked by shopping arcades. The arcades, flat-roofed and single-storied, housed "open shops, where, during the day, artisans work, bankers sit for the dispatch of their business, and merchants exhibit their wares," reports Bernier. "Within the arch is a small door, opening into a warehouse, in which these wares are deposited for the night. The houses of the merchants are built over these warehouses, at the back of the arcades: they look handsome enough from the street, and appear tolerably commodious within; they are airy, at a distance from the dust, and communicate with the terrace-roofs over the shops, on which the inhabitants sleep at night." These were the residences of middle class merchants. "The rich merchants," Bernier notes, "have their dwellings elsewhere, to which they retire after the hours of business." Princes and nobles usually lived in mansions outside the city.
The Land and the People

Apart from the two main streets, Agra had five secondary streets, "not so long nor so straight as the two principal ones, but resembling them in every other respect", and from these streets branched innumerable haphazard lanes, "built at different periods by individuals who paid no regard to symmetry," says Bernier. "Amidst these streets are dispersed the habitations of Mansebdars, or petty Omrahs, officers of justice, rich merchants, and others; many of which have a tolerable appearance . . . Intermixed with these different houses is an immense number of small ones, built of mud and thatched with straw, in which lodge the common troopers, and all that vast multitude of servants and camp-followers who follow the court and the army."

Agra was not as extensive as Delhi, and was in fact even smaller than Lahore—it was "in every respect much inferior to Lahore," says Coryat. Agra, says Bernier, "wants the uniform and wide streets that so eminently distinguish Delhi. Agra has more the appearance of a country town . . . The prospect it presents is rural, varied, and agreeable; for the grandees having always made it a point to plant trees in the gardens and courts for the sake of shade, the mansions of Omrahs, Rajas, and others are all interspersed with luxuriant and green foliage . . . Such a landscape yields peculiar pleasure in a hot and parched country, where the eye seeks in verdure for refreshment and repose."

As befitting the imperial capital, Agra was also an international mart. "All the necessities and conveniences of human life can be obtained here, if desired," says Monserrate. "This is even true of the articles that have to be imported from distant corners of Europe. There are great numbers of artisans, iron-workers and goldsmiths. Gems and pearls abound in large number. Gold and silver are plentiful, as also are horses from Persia and Tartary. Indeed, the city is flooded with vast quantities of every type of commodity."

THE DECLINE OF Agra began when Shah Jahan shifted the capital to Delhi, one of the oldest city sites in India. Six (or fourteen, according to some) cities preceded Shahjahanabad, and here the British too would build their capital, New Delhi, the eighth city. All these many Delhis lie in a triangular area of about seventy square miles (about 18,138 hectares) called the Delhi Triangle, bounded on the west and the south by the stark Aravalli Range and on the north by the Yamuna River. The city straddles the eastern end of the corridor between the Himalayas and the Great Indian Desert, and is well placed strategically to defend the heartland of Hindustan lying to the east.

Legend places the fabled Mahabharata city of Indraprastha in the
The Land

environ of Delhi, near Purana Qila. "Delhi," says Abul Fazl, "is one of
the greatest cities of antiquity. It was first called Indrapat." The name
Delhi is believed to be derived from Raja Dhilu of the first century B.C.,
but more than a thousand years would pass before Delhi would gain
any historical prominence. There is no mention of Indraprastha or
Delhi in any of the ancient accounts of India; not even Fa Hsien or
Hsuan Tsang refers to it, though in Ptolemy there is a mention of a
town called Daidal, which some believe could be Delhi. At the close
of the twelfth century, Delhi was the capital of Prithviraj, a Rajput
monarch, and it was from him that the Turks wrested the city and
made it their capital, the first of the identifiable historical cities of
Delhi.

Early in the fourteenth century, Alauddin Khilji built the second
city of Delhi; a couple of decades later, Ghiyasuddin Tughluq built the
third city; his son Muhammad built the fourth, and Firuz, the next
ruler, built the fifth. Then for about a century there was a lull, till
Humayun, inspired by a visit to Gwalior, began to build Din Panah,
the sixth Delhi. On Humayun's expulsion from India, Din Panah was
taken over and rebuilt by Sher Shah. In the mid-seventeenth century
Shah Jahan built the seventh city just north of Din Panah, and two and
a half centuries later, the British, shifting their capital from Calcutta,
built the eighth city.

Looming over Shah Jahan's Delhi was the Qila Mubarak, Auspicious
Fort, which would later be known as the Red Fort. The medieval
traveller, arriving in Delhi from Agra, would enter the citadel through
its southern gate, which Bernier found rather plain, except for two
large stone elephants, with the statues of Jaimal and Patta, the Mewar
heroes, on them. The gate, says Bernier, opened into "a long and
spacious street, divided in the midst by a canal of running water. The
street has a long divan, or raised way, on both sides . . . five or six feet
high and four broad. Bordering the divan are closed arcades, which run
the whole way . . . It is upon this long divan that all the collectors of
market-dues and other petty officers exercise their functions without
being incommode by the horses and people that pass in the street
below. The Mansabdars or inferior Omrahs mount guard on this raised
way during the night." The other principal gate of the fort, the Lahore
Gate, also opened into an arcaded street, but was flanked by shops
instead of offices. "Properly speaking, this street is a bazaar, rendered
very convenient in the summer and the rainy season by the long and
high arched roof with which it is covered," observes Bernier. "Air and
light are admitted by several large round apertures in the roof."

Besides these main streets, there were several small streets in the
The Land and the People

citadel, leading to the "many divans and tents in different parts of the fortress, which serve as offices for public business", to the workshops of artisans, and to the "splendid" garden alcoves where the amirs mounted guard, notes Bernier. As in Agra, the royal apartments were on the eastern ramparts of the fort, overlooking the Yamuna. Water for the city was tapped from the Yamuna 116 kilometres up-river, at Kizirabad, and brought in by a canal called Nahr-i Bihisht, Stream of Paradise.

Delhi was an overcrowded city, teeming with men and cattle. "There is no house, by whomsoever inhabited, which does not swarm with women and children... the streets are crowded with people," says Bernier, most of them "poor, ragged, and miserable beings". Both Delhi and Agra had extensive suburbs, and beyond them were the camps of the great amirs, which often grew into satellite townships, like Jaisinghpur and Jaswantpur outside Shahjahanabad.

Like all medieval cities, Delhi and Agra were fire traps. "Most part of the city (Agra) is straw houses, which once or twice a year is burnt to the ground," says John Jourdain, an early-seventeenth-century English trader in India. In Delhi "more than sixty thousand roofs were consumed this last year by three fires, during the prevalence of certain impetuous winds which blow generally in summer," notes Bernier. Even royal residences sometimes got burnt down, as happened to Akbar's palace in Lahore. In Delhi once, when a fire broke out "on a day when there was a high wind blowing... in the twinkling of an eye it spread to the buildings constituting the private residence of Prince Shah Shuja," reports Inayat Khan. The prince personally rescued many of his women, but some seventy-five of them perished in the fire, "and the buildings containing the Prince's jewels, property and wardrobe, together with all the adjoining offices, were reduced to a heap of ashes."

AGRA, DELHI AND Fatehpur were Mughal capitals only in a formal sense, for the imperial capital was in effect wherever the emperor was encamped for some length of time, as the entire governmental machinery moved with him, with all the essential records and treasures. In this sense, Lahore was the western capital of the empire, and Aurangabad, the southern capital. "Lahor is one of the greatest cities of the East," says Finch. "This city is second to none, either in Asia or in Europe, with regard to size, population and wealth," writes Monserrate. "It is crowded with merchants, who gather there from all over Asia... There is no art or craft useful to human life which is not practised
there. The population is so large that men jostle each other in the streets." This was the scene in Akbar's time. Three generations later, Bernier found the city in ruins: "There are still five or six considerable streets, two or three of which exceed a league in length; but not a few of the houses in there are tumbling to the ground."

Another prosperous city in Mughal India was Ahmadabad in Gujarat, a great trading centre. The city was, says Withington, "very near as bigge as London." Jahangir heartily detested Ahmadabad. "I am amazed to think what pleasure or goodness the founder of this city could have seen in a spot so devoid of the favour [of God] as to build a city on it," he writes. "Its air is poisonous, and its soil has little water, and is of sand and dust . . . Its water is very bad and unpalatable, and the river, which is by the side of the city, is always dry except in the rainy season. Its wells are mostly salty and bitter, and the tanks in the neighbourhood of the city have become like buttermilk from washermen's soap . . . Outside the city, in place of green and grass and flower, all is an open plain full of thorn-brakes."

Surat, also in Gujarat, was the most prosperous port in the Mughal empire, which yielded, according to Thevenot, an annual revenue of 1.2 million rupees to the imperial treasury, before Shivaji's raids scared trade away and ruined the city. Even if the actual revenue was only half of this, as Moreland estimates, Surat was a rich city. But it was a typical traders' town, and was, for all its wealth, grubby and mean-looking, with narrow, crooked streets and mud-and-bamboo tenements, though along the river-front there were a few grand mansions and warehouses of the local merchant princes and the establishments of the English, Dutch, Turkish and Armenian traders. "The private Houses are built with Mud mixt with Cows Dung, and small Brush-wood broke; there are not above a dozen good ones belonging to French, English, Dutch and Mahometan Merchants," says Careri.

"The Streets [of Surat] are some too narrow, but in many places of convenient breadth; and in an Evening, especially near the Bazar, or Market-place, are more populous than any part of London and so much throng’d, that 'tis not very easy to pass through the multitude of Bannians and other Merchants that expose their Goods," says Ovington. The city had a large floating population—"the seasons render it unequal," notes Thevenot. "There are a great many all the Year round; but in the time of the Monsson, that is to say, in the time when Ships can go and come to the Indies without danger . . . the Town is so full of People, that Lodgings can hardly be had, and the three Suburbs are full." A puzzling sight for travellers in Surat were the hospitals for cows, horses, insects, flies and so on maintained by pious Jains.
The Land and the People

Outside the Mughal empire, the most prosperous city in India in early Mughal times was probably Bijapur, of which Asad Beg, Akbar's courtier, has left a vivid account. Bijapur would, in a few short decades of Mughal-imposed wars, lose its prosperity and joyous spirit, so that by the time Tavernier got there in the mid-seventeenth century, the city had become a shabby and joyous town. "Visapur is a great scambling city, wherein there is nothing remarkable, neither as to public edifices, nor as to trade," writes Tavernier. "The King's palace is a vast one but ill built."

Hyderabad, another great Deccani city, had a somewhat different reputation. Founded in 1591 by Muhammad Qutb Shah for his favourite wife Bhagmati, a Hindu, the city was originally called Bhagnagar, but was later renamed Hyderabad, after Bhagmati's Muslim name, Haider Begum. "That woman," scoffs Khafi Khan, "established many brothels and drinking shops in that place, and the rulers [of Golconda] had always been addicted to pleasure and to all sorts of debauchery ... so the city got an evil name for licentiousness."

BEYOND THE SCATTERED cities and towns, India in Mughal times was largely a wilderness, with clusters of villages here and there. The countryside was sparsely populated. Forests encased even the imperial cities of Delhi and Agra, and wild animals—and wild men—roamed their environs. "The whole kingdom is as it were a forest," says Terry, from his knowledge of the Malwa-Gujarat region. But others, travelling in other parts of the empire, had other views. Says Pelsaert: "Trees are plentiful round the city, but very scarce in the open country; even four or five trees usually mark the site of a village."

There was not much cross-country traffic in Mughal India. Even along the regular trade, military or pilgrim routes, the quality of roads varied, and often there were no roads at all. Mughal India could, however, boast of one of the finest roads in the medieval world, the renowned Agra-Lahore highway. Thomas Coryat, the peripatetic British eccentric travelling around the world on foot, who had seen the best and the worst roads of Asia and Europe, says of the highway in the time of Jahangir: "The most incomparable shew of that kind that ever my eies survaid." Terry, who had not seen the road, describes it by hearsay as "one of the rarest and most beneficell works in the whole world." Tavernier, in India during the reign of Shah Jahan, also found the highway admirable, though he noticed the signs of neglect too. "From Lahor to Delhy, and from Delhy to Agra, is a continual walk set on both sides with fair trees, an object most pleasing to the sight," he writes; "but in some places the trees are decayed,
and there is no care taken to plant others in their stead."

This was an old highway, probably the same as the arterial road that in Maurya times had stretched from Patna to the north-west frontier. Under the Mughals, work to restore the highway—it was the Mughal lifeline to Kabul—was begun by Babur himself, who ordered, as he states in his memoirs, that "at every 9th kurih (about 29 kilometres) a tower was to be erected [on the highway, where] ... 6 post-horses were to be kept fastened; and arrangement was to be made for the payment of post-master and grooms, and for horse-corn."

Nothing is known about the state of the highway under Humayun, but Sher Shah during his short reign did much to improve it. "On both sides of the highway Sher Shah planted fruit-bearing trees, such as also gave much shade, that in the hot wind travellers might go along under the trees; and if they should stop by the way, might rest and take repose," reports Abbas Khan. The next major improvement came under Jahangir, who states in his memoirs that he planted avenue trees from Bengal to the Indus, and "ordered that from Agra to Lahore they should put up a pillar at every kos, to be sign of a kos, and every three kos make a well, so that wayfarers might travel in ease and contentment." Bernier confirms this, noting that there were, on important roads, "small pyramids or turrets [called kos-minars], erected from kos to kos, for the purpose of pointing out the different roads. Wells are also frequently met with, affording drink to travellers, and serving to water the young trees."

Except for the Agra-Lahore highway there were few good roads in Mughal India, and most of the overland travel was over rough tracks, which often disappeared altogether in forests and ravines. "Here are no beaten roads or mending of high wayes," complained the English traders of Surat in a letter to London in 1666, "but the first carts that travail must cut them anew with their wheeles, that make it very tedious and troublesome travelling in the first of the year." Peter Mundy travelling from Allahabad to Varanasi in August 1632 found the highway "very badd ... for the abundance of water, bad way and uneven ground". During the monsoon, rains wrought havoc even on the best of roads, turning them, as Sleeman noted in 1835, into watercourses. In south India there were hardly any roads, notes Tavernier. "From Golconda southwards ... carts were practically unknown, and pack-animals or porters were the only means of transport by land," writes Moreland.

THE ABSENCE OF roads was an impediment to the growth of trade
and the integration of the empire, but it did not matter much to the common people, who travelled, if at all they travelled outside their habitat, on foot. For the affluent, the commonest mode of transport was the ox-cart—not the creaky, wobbly carts of goods transport drawn by emaciated oxen, but luxury carriages drawn by well groomed white oxen—majestic animals “almost six Foot high”, according to Thevenot—the symbol of status and wealth in Mughal India, fit even for the emperor to ride in. Sir Thomas Roe once saw Jahangir and Nur Jahan returning from an evening joy-ride in an ox-cart, with the emperor himself as the carter. “They have white Oxen there, which are extraordinarily dear, and I saw two of them which the Dutch had, that cost them two hundred Crowns a piece,” says Thevenot; “they were really lovely, strong and good, and their chariot that was drawn by them, made a great shew.”

“Carriages and manner of travelling in India,” says Tavernier, “is more commodious than anything that has been invented for use in France or Italy.” Confirms Ralph Fitch: “They have many fine cartes, and many of them carved and gilded with gold, with two wheeles, which be drawen with two little bulls about the bignes of our great dogs in England, and they will runne with any horse, and carie two or three men in one of these cartes; they are covered with silke or very fine cloth, and be used here as our coches be in England.” The cart bulls, says Mandelslo, “express’d as much mettle as we could have expected from the best Horses in Germany.” Says Tavernier, “They will travel upon the trot twelve or fifteen leagues a day for sixty days together.” After half a day’s journey, they were fed two or three balls of wheat kneaded with butter and “black sugar”. Carts were dismantled for taking across rivers or while crossing difficult terrain.

Carriage oxen of good breed were expensive—Tavernier once paid 600 rupees for a cart with two oxen, but considered it well worth it. Travellers could also hire carts, at the rate of one rupee a day “more or less”, says Tavernier, but they usually had problems with the casual ways of carters, who, says Peter Mundy, “dooe and demand what they list, goe, come, sett out and Remaine when and where they please.” A cart would normally seat four, or sleep two. Horse-drawn carriages were also known, but were rare; Monserrate once saw Akbar riding in a two-horse chariot, sitting cross-legged on a seat covered with scarlet rugs. Jahangir sometimes favoured a European style coach-and-four (the replica of a carriage presented to him by Roe), though usually the emperor and the grandees travelled in palanquins or in howdahs mounted on elephants.

The palanquin was a covered divan carried on poles by men, in
The Land

which the traveller lounged on cushions—"a sort of little couch six or seven foot long, and three broad, with balusters round about it," notes Tavernier. "A kind of cane, called bamboue, which they bend like an arch, sustains the covering of the palanquin, which is either of satin or cloth of gold; and when the sun shines upon one side, a slave that goes that side, takes care to pull down the covering." Another slave carries "at the end of a long stick a kind of target of osier, covered over with gentile stuff, to preserve the person that is in the palanquin from the heat of the sun." Palanquins would normally cover about twenty to thirty miles a day, and travelling in them "is as easie and pleasant as that of our Chairs in the Streets of London, but far surpasseth them in point of State and quick dispatches of a Journey," says Ovington. Palanquin bearers were professionals, not ordinary coolies, and were nimble enough to hold the couch steady while travelling over rough tracts. They were paid at the same rate as the traveller's armed escorts—"not above four rupees a month," says Tavernier, though if the journey was over sixty days, the pay would be over five rupees.

Those who could not afford carts or palanquins, rode buffaloes or oxen—or horses, ponies, mules, donkeys or camels. Most people simply walked, usually travelling at night, to avoid the heat of the sun.

A major impediment to overland travel in India was the near total absence of bridges over major rivers. The only substantial bridge in the Mughal empire was the Bridge of Ten Arches at Jaunpur constructed early in Akbar's reign, and it is probably this bridge that Finch describes as "a stone bridge of eleven arches, over a branch of the Gemini [Yamuna]." Pontoon bridges were maintained at major riverside cities when the state of the river permitted it, and small streams sometimes had bridges over them. Armies crossed rivers at fords or on temporary boat-bridges, usually taking several days to cross and suffering many casualties in accidents. Ferries plied at river crossings, but the poor often swam across on inflated goat skins tied to their stomachs, pushing their children ahead of them in clay pots. Manrique says he had to cross streams "on big earthen pots", lying on his "stomach on the jar, covering its mouth, and so cross by paddling with hands and feet". Navigable rivers were few in India, and river transport was largely confined to the Indus and the Ganga-Yamuna system, which were used for military as well as commercial transport. Only in Bengal were boats used extensively for "travelling... especially in the rains", says Abul Fazl.

Travel across the countryside was hazardous, though the experiences of travellers varied greatly. Terry, for instance, says that Indians "in general are very civil, and we never had any affronts or ill usage from
them, if we did not first provoke them," and Thevenot believed that "there was not so great danger upon the Roads, as some would have us believe." On the whole travel in Mughal India seems to have been no more—and no less—perilous than in medieval Europe. Highwaymen infested the roads in India, as they did in Europe. "A man can travell no way for out-lawes," says Hawkins. Says Tavernier: "Whether it be in a coach or a palanquin, he that will travel honourably in the Indies, must take along with him twenty or thirty armed men, with bows and arrows some, others with muskets." The escort was partly for show—"sometimes for more magnificence they carry a banner"—but mainly for security. River travel was equally risky; Tavernier, for instance, was warned that if sailors discovered the he carried money, they were likely to capsize the boat and retrieve the money later.

People usually travelled in groups and under guard, sometimes in caravans of two or three hundred carts. When attacked, the caravan would form a circle, says Withington, "bringinge our cammells round about us in a ringe and makinge them sitt downe . . . and soe were within them as in a forte, plyinge our bows and arrows." According to Withington, thieves could sometimes be bought off. Bandits had their own code of conduct, and usually avoided harming men of religion—Thevenot was once told to take a minstrel with him for protection on the road, and Badauni was once freed by robbers when he told them that he was just returning from the hermitage of a saint. Similarly, highwaymen seldom molested women. But then, there were women bandits too on the road, and they showed no mercy to men—Thevenot says that these women would entice the unwary traveller with some sad tale or other, get on the horse behind him, garrotte him, and flee with his goods.

The danger on the road was not from brigands alone. Travellers, especially traders, were oppressed by local authorities with all sorts of illegal exactions. "When you are delivered from the peril [of highwaymen], you fall into the hands of . . . [customs officers] or publicans," says Manucci. "These take what they please unjustly and by force, and if they know that anyone has money on him, they rob him, cut his throat, and bury him." Prominent persons usually carried dastaks (passports), which cleared their passage through the hands of local officials.

A GREAT CONVENIENCE for the traveller in Mughal India were the caravanserais in towns and along the highways, usually at the end of each day's journey. Building serais as a charitable act was a custom
among Hindus and Muslims, and some of best serais in India—such as
the massive Begum Ki Serai of Jahanara in Delhi—were built by private
charity. “For their workes of charite many rich men build Sarraas, or
make wells or tankes neere to high-ways,” says Terry. But most of the
serais were built and maintained by the state and served an
administrative purpose as well, as junctions of the royal communication
and intelligence grid. Soldiers were not allowed to billet in serais, and
the periods of stay for different categories of travellers were regulated,
to prevent people from turning serais into residences, though foreign
traders were permitted stay for longer periods by paying a monthly
rent.

Serai were essentially fortified enclosures where the traveller could
camp in safety, but the nature of the structure and the conveniences
available in it varied from place to place. British ambassador Norris
found the serais in the Deccan deplorable. “A square of about 100
yards & on each side of the square are doores like a College wch leads
to a little apartment wch ye first comer may take as he pleases,” writes
Norris. “They are very dirty & nasty, fit for nobody but carters & camel
drivers. About ye midle of ye square stands a little mosck.” Finch on
the other hand found the serai at Chapraghata “a goodly castle than an
inne to lodge strangers; the lodgings very faire of stone, with lockes
and keyes, able to lodge a thousand men.”

Usually serais were built around a central courtyard, with arcaded
chambers all round, but sometimes they were, as Tavernier states,
merely enclosures of walls or hedges, within which fifty or sixty
thatched huts were arranged. Serais provided only bare accommodation;
travellers had to bring their own bedding and in most places had to
cook their own food too, though sometimes cooks were available.
“Passengers my have roome freely, but must bring with him his
Bedding, his Cooke, and other necessaries wherein to dresse his meate,”
says Terry. Some serais were reserved for particular communities. If
accommodation was not available in a serai, travellers could hire tents.

Sher Shah is reputed to have built some 1700 serais, “and in every
serai he built separate lodgings, both for Hindus and Musulmans, and
at the gate of every serai he had placed pots full of water, that any one
might drink,” says Abbas Khan, “and in every serai he settled Brhamans
for the entertainment of Hindus, to provide hot and cold water, and
beds and food, and grain for their horses; and it was a rule in these
serais, that whoever entered them received provision suitable to his
rank, and food and litter for his cattle, from Government. Villages were
established all round the serais. In the middle of every serai was a well
and a masjid of burnt brick; and he placed an imam and a muezzin in
every masjid, together with a custodian and several watchmen; and all
these were maintained from the land near the serai."

The serai gates were closed at sundown, says Manucci, and the
official in charge would call out "that everyone must look after his
belongings, picket his horses . . . , above all that he must look out for
dogs, for the dogs of Hindustan are very cunning and great thieves."
In the morning, before the gates were opened, travellers were asked to
teach their belongings, and if anything was found missing, gates were
opened only after it was found.

In Rajasthan serais were few, and in the Deccan mosques and
temples were the common resting places of travellers. "The townes and
villages are built of Mudd, soe that there is not a house for a man to
rest in," says Roe of his experience while travelling from Surat to
Burhanpur. Villagers were usually hospitable towards travellers, says
Withington, who once found refuge in a village after he was robbed on
the road. Where there were no resting places, people camped in the
open, often under trees. Sometimes particular trees attained a reputation
of their own as resting places, like the famous banyan tree near the
town of Hardoi in Uttar Pradesh, which had so vast a spread that in
1856 two regiments of soldiers are reported to have encamped under
the shade of its branches.