

ISLAM AND HINDUISM IN THE EYES OF EARLY EUROPEAN TRAVELLERS TO INDIA

Religion was an important identity marker in the early modern world. Whether in the East or the West, people distinguished themselves, among other things, with their adherence to a particular religion. In Europe, after Reformation in the early sixteenth century, the religious identities had got more sharpened and the Christian world was divided between the Catholics and the Protestants. Reformation strongly influenced the religious identities of European travellers and when they came into contact with the Indian religious beliefs and practices, they were “confronted with their own struggle for orientation. . . . and the pattern for describing foreign religions was [thus] the pattern of differences between Catholicism and Protestantism.”¹ While in India, Hinduism and Islam were the two dominant religions, though there were other minor religious denominations, like Budhists, Sikhs, and Parsees etc.

The article is mainly concerned with the European representations of Islam and Hinduism in India. Focussing on the sixteenth and seventeenth century travel accounts of Europeans to India, it argues that these perceptions were strongly shaped by their belonging to Christian faith and their experiences of Europe. Most of European travellers considered Christianity as the only true religion and passed judgements on the Hindus and Muslims from a pure Christian perspective. They did not speak about them “without consigning them to eternal perdition.”² This perception naturally resulted in their biased understanding of Indian religions. It is also a fact that some travellers were devoted missionaries and one of the principal motives of their travel to India was to convert the local population to Christianity. It cannot be denied that early European travellers at places provided valuable first-hand information about the religious practices of Indians. However, their general perceptions were full of religious prejudice and revealed their lack of knowledge and understanding of Indian religions.

Hindu Beliefs and Practices

Hinduism was a totally new faith for the early European travellers. Some believed it to be a distorted image of Christianity.³ William Norris, English ambassador to Emperor Aurangzeb’s court, observed that he had the opportunity of discoursing with the learned Brahmans and he was now convinced “beyond all contradiction that Christianity was formerly planted here & you may most clearly Trace ye footsteps & very foundations of it in ye Traditions they give you of Their Religion.”⁴ However, a large majority considered it as a totally different religion. And then attempts were made to make it comprehensible for the general European readership.

European travellers of the seventeenth century used their knowledge of the Bible and the classics to understand and explain Hinduism.⁵ They argued that the Hindus

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were the ancient 'Gentiles' of the Old Testament,⁶ whose heathenism had become totally repugnant to the Jews. These ancient people retained their heathen doctrines, especially their idolatry, and later when Islam emerged, refused to be converted to Islam. Edward Terry, an English traveller, has drawn a parallel:

As anciently among the Jewes, their priesthood is hereditary; for every Bramins sonne is a priest, and marries a Bramins daughter. And so among all the Gentiles the men take the daughters of those to bee their wives which are of their fathers tribe, sect, and occupation; for instance, a merchants sonne marries a merchants daughter. And every mans sonne that lives by his labour marries the daughter of him that is of his own profession; by which means they never advance themselves.⁷

Another countryman of Terry, Robert Covert believed that the Hindus 'naturally descended from the Gentiles'.⁸ Thomas Bowrey, an employee of English East India Company, also maintained that they were "indeed the ancient Gentiles, . . . the seed of those who revolted from Moses, forgetting God to worship a molten calfe."⁹ Thus it was natural that the most common term for the Hindus coined by European travellers was 'Gentoo' or 'Gentile' which was "a corruption of the Portuguese *Gentio*, 'a gentile' or heathen, which they applied to the Hindus."¹⁰

The second line of argument regarding their origin stemmed from the Greek knowledge of India. Alexander the Great's expedition in India had resulted in a small corpus of literature about Indian society and culture. The Greeks had recorded their encounter with some "sects of 'Brachmanes' or 'Gymnosophits' who cultivated recondite learning and lived austere lives,"¹¹ and thereupon, serious attempts were made to establish some nexus between Hindu doctrines and Greek philosophy. It was presumed that the concept of transmigration of souls in Hinduism influenced the Pythagorean doctrines. An educated Italian adventurer, Pietro Della Valle, while describing a hospital for birds in Cambay, explained that "the Indian Gentiles, who, with *Pythagoras* and the ancient *AEgyptians* (the first Authors of this opinion according to *Herodotus*) believe in the Transmigration of Souls, not only from Man to Man but also from Man to brute beast, conceiving it no less a work of Charity to do good to beasts than to Men."¹² Henry Lord, one of the earliest Europeans to study and write on Hinduism, reported that Plato and Pythagoras still enjoyed "an honoured mention amongst the people."¹³ Valle even went on to compare them with ancient nations. He believed that the Indians "resembled" Egyptians particularly when it was known that the two nations had old commercial ties, through "Southern Ocean." He also expressed the view that the red and saffron colour so popular amongst the Indian women and religious persons, in fact amongst all the "Gentiles" dated back to the time of Alexander the Great.¹⁴ However, it was obvious to even a cursory observer that seventeenth century Hinduism was entirely different from the ancient Greek ideas and there was little resemblance between the two. Some then advanced the notion that the present day Brahmins had forgotten their ancient learning and degenerated into present state. According to Terry, the Hindus were "a very silly, sottish, and an ignorant sort of people who are so inconstant in their principles, as they scarce know what the particulars are which they hold."¹⁵

For most of European travellers of the period, Christianity provided the normative function to judge other religions. Lord, while dedicating his work to the Archbishop of Canterbury, has thus justified his treatise on Hindusim: “[Having] espied two sects rebelliously and schismatically violating the divine law . . . and with notable forgery coining religion according to the mint of their own tradition, . . . I thought it my bounden duty . . . to apprehend them and bring them before your Grace, to receive both censure and judgement.”¹⁶ At another place Lord was more emphatic: “Wherein as in all other heresies, may be gathered, how Satan leads those that are out of the pale of the Church, a round in the maze of error and Gentilism.”¹⁷ A Jesuit, N. Pimenta, wrote that “though wonderfully attached to certain superstitious practices, they [heathens] will not be less devoted to the true Religion, when converted.”¹⁸

European travellers mainly focussed on three dominant areas of Hindu religious practices: their idolatry, their caste-system and their doctrine of transmigration of souls. Idols and idol-worship of the Hindus was a strange sight for European travellers who used an obscure term, ‘pagodas,’¹⁹ for both the Hindu temples and the idols placed in them. Some used it for describing idols while for some it was a temple. According to the Dutch merchant, Jan Huygen Van Linschoten, it represented “false and divelish idols.”²⁰ While the English adventurer, Thomas Herbert, wrote that “many deformed Pagodas are here worshipped; having this ordinary evasion that they adore not Idols, but the *Deumos* [demons] which they represent.”²¹ According to John Ovington, chaplain and employee of English East India Company, the word pagoda “borrows its Name from the *Persian* word *Pout*, which signifies Idol; thence *Pout-Gheda*, a Temple of False Gods, and from thence Pagoda.”²² Linschoten also used the term for Hindu temples: “. . . houses of Diuels [Devils] which they call Pagodes.”²³ French diamond merchant, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier wrote that “the idolaters of India have, both in the towns and country parts, a great number of temples, large and small, called pagodas, where they go to pray to their gods and make offerings; but many of the poor people who dwell in the forests and mountains, far removed from villages, take a stone, and rudely trace a nose and eyes with yellow or red colour upon it, and all the family then worship it.” He then described four most famous temples at Jagannath, Benares, Mathura, and Tirupati.²⁴ Another of his countrymen, Jean Thevenot believed that they had “Pagods with Figures of Monsters, that can excite nothing but Horror instead of Devotion, unless in those who are deluded with the Religion.”²⁵ Valle believed that idol-worship of the Hindus concealed some latent meanings which he was unable to decipher. He remarked that a few idols were shown to have been riding different animals with whom “the foolish and ignorance humans” associated absurd stories, but he believed that their old wise men had concealed some “Natural or Moral philosophy and History” in them and those grotesque idols had some symbolic meaning. Such “monstrous” but meaningful “figures” existed among ancient Greeks, Egyptians and Romans.²⁶

Many European travellers maintained that, the Hindus worshipped countless gods and goddesses. They generally failed to appreciate Hindu pantheism. Italian adventurer, Niccolao Manucci expressed his bewilderment by pointing out that every Hindu admitted the existence of a God and still called many things such as Water, Air and Sun as God. They seemed to be totally, incapable of discovering

the truth but concealed their incompetency and waywardness by giving it the name of “infallible science” or expressing the view that “God is a spiritual substance widely diffused.”²⁷ Tavernier also ridiculed the Hindu gods and goddesses when he wrote that “in this gross and pitiable ignorance the idolaters, like the ancient pagans, regard their gods as men, and even bestow wives upon them, thinking that they love the same things as those in which men take pleasure.”²⁸ Valle ridiculed their rituals by recording that

And, indeed, the greatest part of their Worship of their Gods consists in nothing but Musick, Songs & Dances, not only pleasant but lascivious, and in serving their Idols as if they were living Persons; namely in presenting to them things to eat, washing them, perfuming them, giving them *Bettle*-leaves, dyeing them with Sanders, carrying them abroad in Procession, and such other things as the Country-people account delights and observances.²⁹

Monsieur Duquesne, commander of a French Naval Fleet, related that if being asked for “their senseless superstitions and ridiculous follies they readily answer, that they received them from their Ancestors, in whose Example they Glory in, without the least desire of being better inform’d.”³⁰

European travellers explored in detail the Hindu caste-system. Valle believed that there were eighty four castes³¹ while Tavernier numbered them as seventy-two.³² Gemilli Careri, an Italian adventurer, recorded that the Hindus were divided into eighty-four sects or tribes; each of which had its peculiar ceremonies and trade or profession to which their children rigidly adhere to.³³ According to some, there were four principal castes. The first caste, that of Brahmins, was “the successors of the ancient Brachmanes or philosophers of India, who specially studied astrology.” They studied the ancient Hindu scriptures. They were considered as the most noble of all because “it is from among the Brahmins that the priests and ministers of the law are selected.” However, as “the majority of them are ignorant and consequently very superstitious, those who pass as the most intellectual being the most arrant sorcerers.”³⁴ Norris also believed that they were “as expert & cunning in all ways of Gain as any sort of men in any Nation & I believe could outwit & over reach any Jews or European Brokers.”³⁵ The second caste is that of Kshatriya, who were “warriors and soldiers” and were the only group among the Hindus who were “brave, and distinguish[ed] themselves in the profession of arms.” Hindu Rajas and Rajputs of India belonged to this sect. However, all the Kshatriyas were not warriors and “it is only the Rajputs who go to war, and who are all cavaliers; but as for the Ketris [*khatris*] they have degenerated from the bravery of their ancestors, having quitted arms for merchandise.”³⁶ The third caste was that of Banias,³⁷ who “attach themselves to trade, some being Shroffs, i.e. money-changers or bankers, and the others brokers, by whose agency the merchants buy and sell.”³⁸ Trade was largely monopolised by this caste as Muslims preferred military career to trade.³⁹ According to Lord, “nothing is bought but by the mediation of these, who are called Banians.”⁴⁰ They were even involved in the overseas trade as the Banias, particularly of Gujarat carried on trade in Java, Sumatra, Borneo, and the Philippines in the East, and Persia, Arabia, and Ethiopia and East Africa in the West.⁴¹ They were so adept in trade tactics that according to Tavernier “they could give lessons to the most cunning Jews.”⁴²

According to the English physician, John Fryer, the “chief Pleasure” of the Banias was to “Cheat one another, conceiving therein the highest Felicity.”⁴³ They used to begin their children’s training in such tricks from an early age. They “teach them arithmetic, which they learn perfectly, using for it neither pen nor counters, but the memory alone, so that in a moment they will do a sum, however difficult it may be. . . . If anyone gets in a rage with them they listen with patience, without replying, and withdraw coldly, not returning to see him for four or five days, when they anticipate his rage will be over. They never eat anything which has enjoyed sentient life, and they would rather die than slay the least animal, not even excepting an insect or vermin, being in this respect very zealous observers of their Law.”⁴⁴ Lord also labelled them “as people innocent and harmless because they will not endure to see a fly or worm, or any thing living injured, and being stuck bear it patiently without resisting again.”⁴⁵ The fourth caste was that of Sudras,⁴⁶ who, according to Tavernier, fought in war but with this difference that Rajputs rode the horses while Sudras fought on foot.⁴⁷ According to French traveller, Francois Bernier, they were artisans and labourers.⁴⁸ However, Careri wrote that they were not allowed to enter the houses of other tribes, or to touch others. He believed that “as they go along the streets, if they will not venture to be Beaten, must cry *Po, Po*, that the other Gentiles may take care their very Shadow does not touch them, which would Defile them, and they would be forced to Wash.”⁴⁹

According to European travellers, the Hindus rigidly followed this caste system. Valle observed that each caste had a “particular name” and “a special office” and vocation which could never be changed. There were only four “principal” castes which stood sub-divided into different professions.⁵⁰ Norris related the incident of an accidental fire which consumed large number of houses and recorded that “ye people here are soe very silly & Tenacious of their customes yt not a man would give a helping hand to save his own house if it did not belonge to his cast{e} to do it.”⁵¹ For many Europeans of the time, this rigid caste system was responsible for their disunity and consequent enslavement by the Muslims. Tavernier believed that “the idolaters have no union among themselves, and that superstition has introduced so strange a diversity of opinions and customs that they never agree with one another. An idolater will not eat bread nor drink water in a house belonging to anyone of a different caste from his own . . . Among these idolaters a caste is, so to speak, what a tribe was among the Jews.”⁵² Valle also testified that “they are so scrupulous that even amongst the Indians themselves one of more noble Race not only neither eats, nor makes use of the same Clothes or Vessels, nor communicates in any thing with one less noble, but also endures not to be touch’d by him; which if it fall out by chance that he be, he must purifie himself from the defilement by washings and other arrogant Ceremonies.”⁵³

As the Christian doctrines of Salvation and Saving of the Souls necessarily entailed that Christians should strive for propagating their religion, it seemed strange to European travellers that Hinduism did not accept in its fold adherents from other faiths. Valle while commenting on this practice wrote that the Hindus did not believe in converting a follower of “false” religion into their own. Their concept of “saving his soul” lay in the belief that if he was to be forgiven by God, he would be duly purged of his sins on his death and be re-born as a Hindu.⁵⁴

Hindu concept of transmigration of souls was another important area of European representation. As there was no comparable idea in Christianity, they described it in detail. Tavernier explained it thus:

It is one of the articles of belief of the idolaters that the souls of men on leaving their bodies after death are presented to God, who, according to the life the owners have led, allots them other bodies to inhabit, so that the same person is several times reborn into the world. And God sends the souls of men of evil life, degraded in their habits and plunged in all kinds of vices, after being separated from the bodies, into the bodies of inferior animals, such as asses, dogs, cats and others, in order that they may perform penances for their crimes in these infamous prisons. But it is believed that the souls which enter the bodies of cows are supremely happy, because these animals are regarded as divinities. If a man dies with a cow's tail in his hand, that will suffice, it is said, to render him altogether happy in a future life.⁵⁵

From the concept that the human souls could enter the bodies of animals arose this belief that they should not slaughter animals or eat their meat as they could be "guilty of the death of some one of their relations or friends who may be doing penance in one of these bodies."⁵⁶ Their veneration of animals, particularly cow, was also frequently commented upon by European travellers. Coverté saw a cow "adorned with a belt of gold and many jewels, her head bedecked with garlands and flowers" and worshipped by the Hindus who used to justify it by saying that

She was the mother of beasts, and brought them, milk, butter, cheese, and the Ore to till the ground, and lastly, her hide did make leather to make them shoes. Moreover, they say, she is blest by the Mother of God, to be honoured above all beasts.⁵⁷

European travellers' depiction of Hindu religious beliefs and practices suffered from a very basic weakness. None of them seemed to have an access to Hindu scriptures. They were not only ignorant of Sanskrit in which main Hindu scriptures such as Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagvad Gita etc. were written, they did not seem to have studied even any translation of these sources. Despite this clear handicap, they had the audacity to pass sweeping judgements on Hindu religion. It has exposed their ignorance and resulted in obvious distortions. They failed to appreciate the pantheistic philosophy inherent in idol-worship practices and were unable to recognise the philosophical implications of Hindu concept of transmigration.

4.3 Muslim Beliefs and Practices

Unlike Hinduism, Islam was a known religion for the Europeans of the period. With the perpetual rivalry and all out wars with the Ottoman Empire for the past many centuries, Islam posed a serious threat to the West and the 'bloody Turk' had become synonymous with a Muslim. In the words of Phillips Seymour, "in the Ottoman Turks, the Europeans encountered a new set of barbarians whom they could fear but could not overcome."⁵⁸ Then the medieval legacy of Muslim-West relations had also strongly influenced the European perceptions of Islam in the seventeenth century.⁵⁹ Moreover, according to a medieval legend, Prester John⁶⁰

could be an ally of the Christian world in its struggle against Islam.⁶¹ This struggle seemed inevitable because as Maxim Rodinson has pointed out “in the Middle Ages, Islam had been considered a schism, a kind of perversion of Christianity.”⁶² Writing as late as 1695, a biographer of Prophet Muhammad could still say about Muslims that they were “a scourge unto us Christians, who, having received so holy and so excellent a religion through His mercy to us in Jesus Christ our Lord, will not yet conform ourselves to live worthy of it.”⁶³ Thus one is inclined to agree with Seymor Phillips that “in the broadest sense, European views of Asia were colored by a form of ‘orientalism’, which was the result of the accumulated experiences and perceptions of both classical antiquity and medieval Europe.”⁶⁴

European travellers to India arrived with such a mindset in which a judicious and fair study of Islam was quite impossible. Rather, one of the dominant motives for the early voyages was the holy wish to defeat Islam. As for the Portuguese, Islam was not a distant threat but it “represented something menacing, formidable and vigilant on the doorstep,”⁶⁵ and the voyages of discovery in the fifteenth century were motivated by “a desire to rid Europe of the threat of Muhammedan invasion.”⁶⁶

European travellers to India generally used the term ‘Moor’ for the Muslims of India. It originated with the Spaniards and Portuguese, who contacted the Moroccan Muslims, the original conquerors of the Iberian peninsula. In the words of Alden, the centuries of “embittered relations between the followers of Christ and those of Mohammed led Iberians to develop contemptuous attitudes towards dark-skinned peoples whom they encountered overseas and whom they derisively and generically labelled as *mouros* or Moors.”⁶⁷ In later centuries, the Muslims whom the Portuguese met with on their voyages to India and to other coasts were alike styled *Mauros* and this Portuguese term later passed on to Hollanders and Englishmen.⁶⁸ Some researchers believed that Moor was originally a Greek word meaning black or dark and this name was given to the black races, particularly in Africa. Later, the name began to be readily used for uncultured people. When in the 15th century, Portuguese reached India, they called all the Muslims they met there as Moros or Mourros.⁶⁹

A hostile attitude towards Islam is quite visible on the part of European travellers of the seventeenth century who visited India. For Francois Bernier, Islam was a “pernicious code, established by force of arms and still imposed upon mankind by the same brutal violence.” He suggested that “to counteract its baneful progress,” the Christians of Europe should strengthen the hands of missionaries so that “this abominable imposture can be effectually destroyed only by the special and merciful interposition of Divine Providence.”⁷⁰ While guiding the French government on the issue of establishing trade with India, he categorically stated that “get it clearly in your head that they are Muhammadans and we Christians and that in consequence they hate us at least as much as we hate them.”⁷¹ The Jesuits were particularly devoted to their mission of converting the Muslims to Christianity. Fr. J. Xavier, one of their most important Fathers, wrote: “it would be no small advantage to me to die trying to undeceive them from their false law and way.”⁷²

The seventeenth century European travellers, because of their strong anti-Muslim legacy, did not make a serious attempt to understand Islam, despite the fact that there existed many commonalities between the two religions.⁷³ In fact their religious prejudice made them “incapable of seeing Muslims as men of character.”⁷⁴ The fact of the matter was that these travellers were also handicapped by two obvious limitations. Firstly, for a vast majority of them, Christianity was the only norm or yardstick with which they judged other faiths. Consequently, they failed to divest themselves of their prejudices and focussed on dissimilarities, rather than similarities between Christianity and Islam. Secondly, these travellers had no idea of a pluralistic society nor was the notion of religious co-existence acceptable to them. They considered it their religious duty to convert non-Christians to Christianity, but the Muslims resisted these efforts and rather successfully which added to their bitterness. The Jesuits, in particular, showed their frustration in their failure to proselytise the Muslims. Fr. Xavier has written “we deal with Moors, who agree with us about all that concerns the nature of God; and we come into conflict with them about that which we cannot prove with reasons, but only with miracles.” One reason for their failure was the steadfastness of the Muslims to their faith as the same Father commented that “your scruple about communicating such a book [Quran] to us is amusing, when we here are dealing from morning to night with these Moors about their things, so much so that even the bread we eat seems to have been kneaded with the water of Mahomet’s Alcoran.”⁷⁵

European travellers have also highlighted schisms in Islam. Some of them recorded that, like Hindus, the Muslims were also divided into different groups. According to Tavernier, “the diversity which exists among the Musalmans consists not only in the different explanations which they give of their Koran, but also in the different opinions which they entertain regarding the first succession of Muhammad. From this cause two sects, entirely opposed to one another, have sprung; the one calling itself the Sunnis is followed by the Turks, the other the Shias, which is the sect of the Persians.”⁷⁶ However, some travellers failed to understand the nature of the differences of the two sects. Bernier, one of the most educated and who travelled widely in India and stayed here for many years, stated that one of the sects is “that of the Turks, called by the Persians *Osmanlous* or Followers of Osman, whom the Turks believe to have been the true and legitimate successor of *Mahomet*.”⁷⁷ John Marshall, an English adventurer, believed that Shia meant an enemy and there were two sorts of them: one who called themselves by the name of Shia believed that Ali and Muhammad were great prophets and “the other of the Charriarry [*charyar*, Four Friends] no prophets.” The other group, according to Marshall, was called “Rofsee” who believed in the prophethood of Ali.”⁷⁸ Terry and Bernier testified that the divisions between different groups of the Muslims were quite sharp and intermarriages among the Muslim occupational castes were as impossible as among the sub-castes of the Hindus.⁷⁹

Some of the Muslim practices recorded by European travellers also showed their ignorance as well as contempt of the Muslim faith. Fryer recorded that “*Mahomet’s Tomb*” was in “*Juddah*.”⁸⁰ John von Twist, an employee of Dutch East India Company, wrote that the Muslims commemorated the memory Hasan

and Husain who were servants of Muhamamd and Ali and were killed by Indian heathens near Coromondel coast.⁸¹ John Marshal narrated this fantastic story that Yazid, son of Muawiyah, poisoned Hasan, while Hussain fought against Yazid and killed him. . . . “that day in which hee killed Azeed [Yazid] is kept to this day by the Moores, . . . in a merry manner.”⁸² Terry believed that the Muslims usually shaved off their head “reserving only a lock on the crown for Muhammad to pull them into Heaven.”⁸³ Valle named the Muslim place of worship as “a *Meschita*, or Temple of the Mahometans,” where the people were engaged in “ridiculous and foolish devotions.” According to Valle, “within the *Meschita*, in a narrow dark place by a wall’s side, is a kind of little Pyramid of Marble, and this they call *Pir*, that is *Old*, which they say is equivalent to Holy: I imagine it the Sepulchre of some one of their Sect accounted such.” He believed that some Muslim rituals resembled those of Hindus because the Gentiles being more numerous and ancient in Cambaia, ‘tis no wonder that some Rite of theirs hath adhere’d to the Mahometans.”⁸⁴ Linschoten ridiculed the Muslim ritual of prayer and wrote that when they entered their mosques, “they fall flat [on the ground] upon their faces, and so with their armes and handes lifted up Make manie counterfeit faces.”⁸⁵

Some European travellers recorded that the Indian Muslims did not follow what they professed. According to one observer: “they lack what is best, the truth. The law, the worship of God, everything is Mahomet’s; but they keep their law very little in what runs counter to their appetites. Wine is forbidden them, and they drink it to excess; and unless they get drunk, they fancy they have not drunk.”⁸⁶ John Marshal also related that “there is a custome amongst the Moores which they call *Tora* [*torna*, to break], which breaks their Law Sarra [*Sharia*], as when . . . before a Nabob [*Nawab*] or Governor, a person is accused of Theft, although there are not witness sufficient required by the Law, yet if the Nabob or Governor are satisfied that the person be guilty or hath a mind that hee shall be punished, hee will say, ‘Although here is no evidence sufficient for your conviction according to Law, yet you are guilty and shall be punished.’”⁸⁷ In short we come across a biased picture of Islam and Muslims in the European travel writing of the period.

Popular Religious Festivals and Ceremonies

The Muslims celebrated two Eids: one known as Eid-ul-Fitr, at the end of their Holy month of Ramazan when they broke their fast and the other known as Eid-ul-Azha, when they sacrificed a goat, cow or camel etc. in memory of the sacrifice of Prophets Abraham and Ismael. The European travellers interpreted them variously. According to Fryer, Eid-ul-Fitr came “at the end of their *Ramazan* or *Lent*, which is always the first New Moon in *Novemeber*; . . . so is it celebrated when it concludes, with the highest Expression of Joy and Solemnity.” He then recorded that it was a festival “when, all Malice apart, the *Moors* embrace one another, and at the sight thereof make a Jubilee, by firing of Guns, blowing of Trumpets, Feasting and Praying very devoutly.”⁸⁸ Fryer also recounted that “The New Moon before the New Year is the Moors AEde [Eid-ul-Azha].” On this day Governor and other members of his “House” who could purchase a sacrificial animal sacrificed a “Ram or a He-Goat” in remembrance of the sacrifice of Isaac whom they called “Ishauh” and “sprinkled the blood on the sides of their Doors.”⁸⁹

Another festival of the Muslims was *Muharram* when they commemorated the martyrdom of Hussain, grandson of their Prophet. While recording some Muslim practices the European travellers showed their ignorance of Muslim faith. Von Twist wrote that the Muslims celebrated an annual day of Janse and Jawzee (Hasan and Hussain), in commemoration of two brothers so named, servants of Muhammad and Ali, who having travelled to the Coromondel Coast to make pilgrimage and earn absolution, were surrounded by a multitude of heathens, gentiles and Brahmans, and besieged in a fortress where they took refuge, their water being contaminated by a lizard, which Muslims consider an exceedingly unclean animal.⁹⁰ Fryer's account is more elaborate. He wrote that the Muslims "solemnized" ten days mourning for two of their "champions" who died of thirst "fighting against the Christians. The day was remembered by displaying "jars of water" everywhere, while fully armed "Moors" ran here and there furiously and danced wildly. On the last day "a couple of coffins" [*Taziyas*] were carried to the river in order to "put them afloat" with loud cries.⁹¹ Norris believed that the Muslims observed "ye Death or funeral of Mahomett ye Grand Impostor." According to him, they carried a well decorated coffin in procession through out the night. The processionists, while "beating their chest and mumbling prayers," took a round of the town and finally laid the coffin to rest in some mosque and then after sunset broke their fast of thirty days.⁹²

Diwali was an important festival of the Hindus which came in the autumn and was attributed to the divinities like Lakshmi, Bhavani and was also celebrated in memory of Krishna's slaying of the demon Naraka, and the release of 16,000 imprisoned maidens. It was generally regarded as the feast of lamps or illumination. For Ovington, it was "their Grand Festival Season."⁹³ Hedges wrote that "In October they begin their yeare with great feasting, Jollity, Sending Presents to all they have any busyness with, which time is called *Dually*."⁹⁴ Fryer recounted that Diwali was a "a great Day of Celebration to their *Pagan* Deities, when they are very kind-hearted, presenting their Masters with Gifts, as knowing they shall be no Losers, and Entertain one another with mutual Mirth and Banquetting."⁹⁵

Another important Hindu festival was Holi which was a kind of spring carnival in honour of Krishna and the milkmaids. William Hedges, an employee of English East India Company, likened it to Roman carnival⁹⁶ while Fryer saw it as their seed-time.⁹⁷ Valle observed that in this festival "the people dance round fires (a relic, probably, of sun-worship), sing licentious and satirical songs, and give vent to all sorts of ribaldry against their superiors." He found it similar to the Roman Saturnalia. The Hindus observed it with much enthusiasm on the eve of spring season "dancing through the street, and casting orange water and red colours in jest one upon another, with other festivities of Songs and Mummeries."⁹⁸ Fryer's comments were more explicit: "*March* begins with a Licentious Week of Sports and Rejoycing, wherein they are not wanting for Lascivious Discourse, nor are they to be offended at any Jest or Waggyery."⁹⁹

The European travellers also mentioned the festivities of Muslims and Hindus during solar and lunar eclipses. On such occasions the Muslims were found much worried. They played noisy instruments and made a great noise. They also said

special prayers. The Hindus fasted, washed and purified themselves during the time of eclipse and also bestowed alms to the Brahmans.¹⁰⁰

Terry described the practice of selecting burial places on the part of Muslim Kings and nobles. He wrote how almost every Muslim belonging to nobility selected, in his life time, some good place preferably near “Tank” or “spring of water” for his burial, erected a tomb and planted trees and flowers thereon. Sikandra, a village three miles from Agra, was such a place. King’s father Akbar selected it and lay buried there while the present King desired to be interned “beside him.”¹⁰¹ However, most descriptions of European travellers centred on Hindu burial and funeral rites. Manucci recounted that the Hindus did not bury their dead in temples but burnt them in an elaborate ceremony. On the death of a person, all the “earthen vessels” were broken and the inmates left the house never to return till the home had been cleansed by “rubbing over with cowdung.” The female relations “stood in circle with bare stomach” and wept for the dead by beating themselves with their hands, simultaneously singing mourning songs. After the mourners had taken three rounds the dead body was given a bath and dressed in new clothes. Grounded sandal-wood was pasted on the fore-head and the body made to lie in an open coffin. Four Brahmans then carried the coffin to the burning ground where the body was burnt. Then the mourners returned to have a feast under some palm-tree. Near relatives and brothers of the deceased gave gifts to the widow. On the tenth day only widows mourned collectively and “cut off the piece of gold” attached to the neck of the deceased’s widow.¹⁰² Valle described that the Hindus covered the dead body in red cloth and carried it to burning ground on the shoulders of two persons “like a sack.” The wooden “funeral pile” was made in the form of a bed in which was placed the naked dead body with the face and feet towards the sea or river. Hands and feet were anointed and a coal of fire was put in the mouth. First of all fire was set at the throat and then to the whole pile beginning with the head. The mourners continued to stir the fire and blow it with the help of a cloth, the body thereby consumed by degrees. The ashes and the unburnt bones were left there. The burning ceremony took place only in the morning at a fixed time.¹⁰³ Dequesne recounted that the corps was carried on a bier which was “cover’d with Callico, and strow’d round with *Bannany* Leaves, to the Place where it is to be burnt.” It was “attended with a Mournful sound of Trumpets.” The relatives cried and beat their breasts with such passion that often they collapsed, some relatives stayed to “comfort his Children.” After washing, a group of mourners placed “small quantities of Rice on the Funeral pile.” They then took “four little pieces of wood, and putting one on each hand, a third at his feet, and a fourth at his head. . . . lay it [the corpse] on the Funeral pile” which was then covered with “straw and cows dung,” and the mourners set it on fire. The trumpet was kept blowing till the body was fully burnt. Duquesne also added that “if the Corps is to be interr’d, the grave is made with steps to go down, and a rising at the bottom, on which it is seated cross leg’d; the relations strew flowers and ashes on’t, and then cover it with earth.”¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

It is a fact that European travellers of the seventeenth century have provided detailed descriptions of religious beliefs and practices in India. As far as Hinduism was concerned, they tried to comprehend it through their knowledge of the Bible

and the classics which had little resemblance with the contemporary Hinduism. They depicted the idol-worship of the Hindus as the worship of demons and showed their strong disapproval of it. For them, the rigid caste-system of the Hindus was a bane of their society and was a cause of being in subjugation. They, because of their strong anti-Muslim legacy, did not make a serious attempt to understand Islam, despite the fact that it had many basic beliefs common with them and was quite close to Christianity. For most of the travellers, Christianity played the normative function and the faith of the 'Others' was judged on that yardstick. Their biased attitude and lack of knowledge of the area, its people and their practices led them, at times, to attribute fantastic notions and fanciful stories about the religious beliefs and practices of the Indians.

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- ⁵⁹ According to Marshall and Williams, "medieval approaches continued to exercise a powerful influence throughout the seventeenth century." *Great Map of Mankind*, 8.
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- ⁷³ According to Ansari and Esposito, "no two civilizations of the world have as much in common as the Islamic and the Western. For one thing, they essentially belong to the same religious tradition, typified *par excellence* by the Patriarch Abraham. They adhere to a number of similar notions about the ultimate reality which contribute to shaping their world views. They affirm monotheism, profess belief in revelation, in Prophets, and in scriptures. They uphold man's dignity as an essentially spiritual being who occupies a distinct position in God's scheme of things. They subscribe to a universal morality which comprises concern for righteousness, justice, compassion and benevolence. Also, contrary to common perceptions, each civilization has benefited from the other and is benefiting even now in countless ways." *Muslims and the West*, xiv-xiv.
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- ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 108. The correct position is that the Muslims commemorate on the 10th of Zilhijj, a Hijri month, and not on the day of new moon the sacrifice offered by the Prophet Ismael and not his brother Isaac. Also see, Mundy, *Travels*, 197.

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