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17th century Delhi Through the Eyes of a Frenchman

AUTHOR [Namit Arora](#)PUBLISHED **15 July 2021** [BOOKMARK](#)

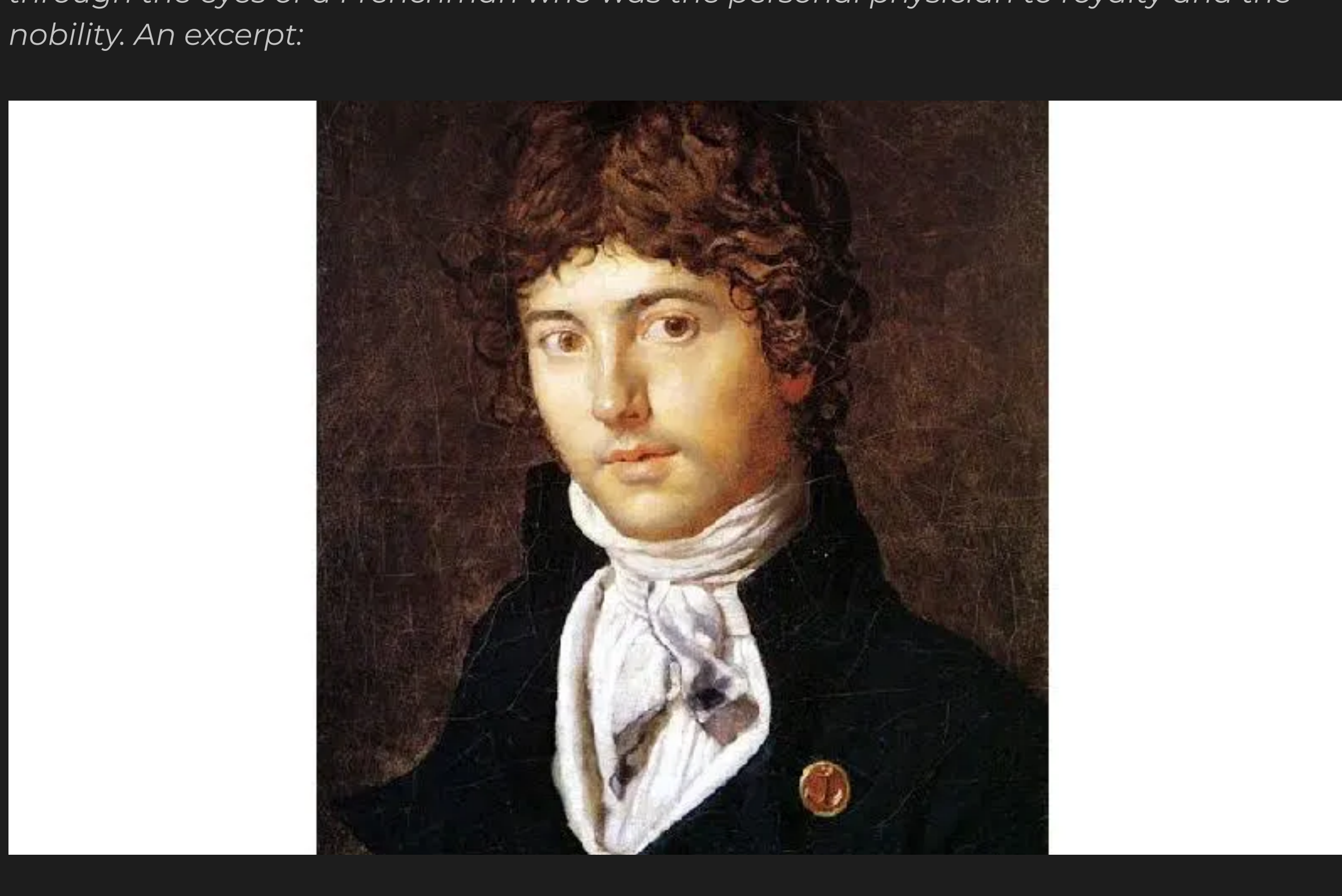
How does one rediscover India's lost cities and cultural roots and yet go where no one has gone before? How do you turn the clock back 5,000 years and still keep it fresh?

For Namit Arora, this impossible challenge started with a "life-transforming experience" in 2004, when he backpacked across India – 110 destinations in 20 states. *Indians: A Brief History Of A Civilization (2021)* emerged from this soul-stirring adventure.

In this book, Arora chooses six ancient sites and alternates them with chapters on major travellers who chronicled their time in ancient India. Using an interesting combination of archaeological travel writing and narrative history, he journeys through India's lost worlds, the people who inhabited them, their beliefs and customs, their struggles and their legacy, in the extremely layered cultural mosaic of India.

Amazingly, Arora connects dots across an arc of 5,000 years, bringing a distant and unfamiliar past right up to the doorstep of the present. He hopes his book will serve as a key to a deeper understanding of ourselves as Indians.

In a chapter titled Francois Bernier's India, Arora takes us back to 17th century Delhi, through the eyes of a Frenchman who was the personal physician to royalty and the nobility. An excerpt:



'The heat is so intense in Hindoustan, that no one, not even the King, wears stockings,' writes Frenchman Francois Bernier (1625–88) in a letter to a friend back home in the 1660s. For over six months, 'everybody lies in the open air without covering—the common people in the streets, the merchants and persons of condition sometimes in their courts or gardens, and sometimes on their terraces, which are first carefully watered'. Bernier, a medical doctor, was then in Aurangzeb's employ in Shahjahanabad, the new capital of the Mughal Empire in Delhi.

Eager to see the world, Bernier had left France in 1654 and spent a few years in Syria, Palestine and Egypt, from where he made his way to Surat, Gujarat, in 1658. He stayed in India for twelve years, starting as the personal physician of Dara Shikoh, Emperor Shah Jahan's eldest son. He was in Delhi during the bloody war of royal succession that saw Aurangzeb prevail over his three brothers and imprison his father Shah Jahan—a saga Bernier documented in extensive detail in a letter to a friend.

Bernier then worked for a nobleman in Aurangzeb's court, Daneshmand Khan, secretary of state for foreign affairs and grand master of the horse. In his letters to people back home, later published as *Travels In The Mogul Empire*, Bernier warmly refers to Khan as 'my Agah', 'the most learned man of Asia', 'whose thirst for knowledge is incessant', and who devotes his afternoons to 'philosophical studies...Astronomy, geography, and anatomy are his favourite pursuits, and he reads with avidity the works of Gassendi and Descartes'.

In his letter, Bernier criticizes Europeans who complain that the buildings in the Indies 'are inferior in beauty to those of the Western world, forgetting that different climates require different styles of architecture; that what is useful and proper at Paris, London or Amsterdam, would be entirely out of place at Delhi'. 'In these hot countries,' he explains, a beautiful house is capacious, 'airy and exposed on all sides to the wind, especially to the northern breezes'.

He adds, 'A good house has its courtyards, gardens, trees, basins of water, small jets d'eau in the hall or at the entrance, and handsome subterraneous apartments which are furnished with large fans, and on account of their coolness are fit places for repose from noon until four or five o'clock, when the air becomes suffocatingly warm... no handsome dwelling is ever seen without terraces on which the family may sleep during the night.'



Bernier then describes the typical interiors of fine houses, their carpets, painted ceilings and flower pots. He describes the beauty of a few public buildings in Delhi, such as the Jama Masjid and the Caravanserai (demolished in the nineteenth century), as grand as the Palais Royale in Paris—the rendezvous of the rich Persian, Usbek, and other foreign merchants'.

– 'I think it may be safely asserted, without disparagement to the towns in our quarter of the globe, that the capital of Hindoustan is not destitute of handsome buildings, although they bear no resemblance to those in Europe.'

The Taj Mahal, he thinks, 'deserves much more to be numbered among the wonders of the world than the pyramids of Egypt'.

Bernier estimates the population of Delhi as not 'greatly less' than that of Paris. '[Besides] the Omrahs [noblemen], the city never contains less than thirty-five thousand troopers, nearly all of whom have wives, children, and a great number of servants, who, as well as their masters, reside in separate houses', he notes.

'The uniform and wide streets that so eminently distinguish Dehli [sic]' from the old Mughal capital Agra, 'are crowded with people... and, excepting a few carts, unincumbered with wheel carriages'. 'Omrahs and Rajas ride thither, some on horseback, some on majestic elephants; but the greater part are conveyed on the shoulders of six men, in rich Palekys, leaning against a thick cushion of brocade, and chewing their bet-lé, for the double purpose of sweetening their breath and reddening their lips.'

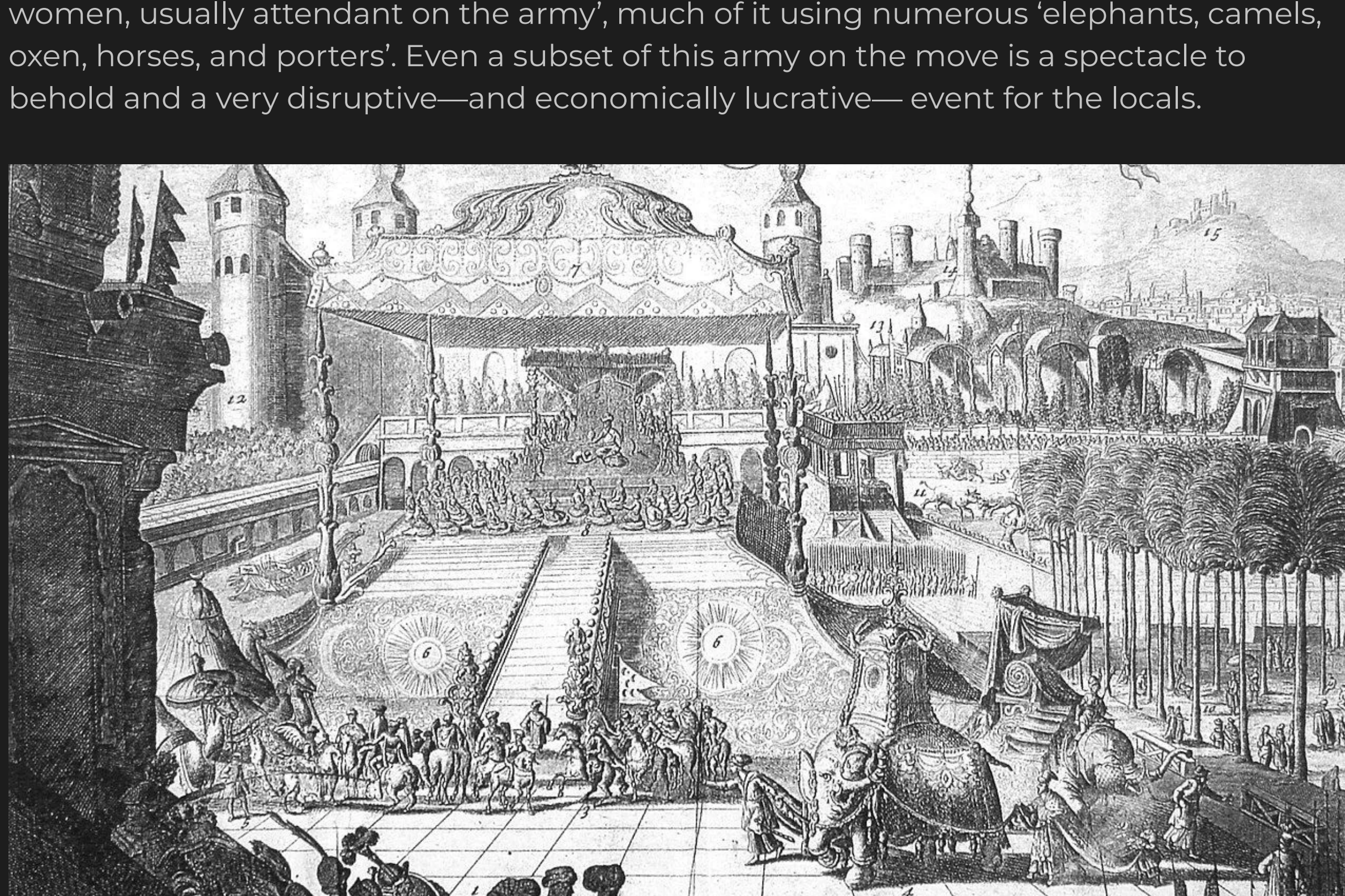
In the summertime, a major fruit market sells expensive 'dry fruit from Persia, Balk, Bokara, and Samarkande; such as almonds, pistachios, and walnuts, raisins, prunes, and apricots; and in winter... excellent fresh grapes, black and white, brought from the same countries, wrapped in cotton; pears and apples of three or four sorts, and those admirable melons which last the whole winter'.

Babur, who began the Mughal Dynasty, would have loved this market. He had terribly missed grapes and melons from Bukhara and Samarkand. He had tried to grow a few on the Indian soil and even had some success with it. In *Baburnama*, his urbane memoir, he writes, 'To have grapes and melons grown in this way in Hindustan filled me with content.' Clearly, he and his descendants weren't able to grow on Hindustani soil all of the grapes and melons they missed.

'To be considered a Mogol, it is enough if a foreigner have a white face and profess Mahometanism,' writes Bernier. The term 'Mogol' includes Persians, Turks, Arabs, Uzbeks and their descendants. The Persians are mostly Shia, the rest mostly Sunni.

He contrasts the Mogols with others of darker complexion, the largest being the Gentiles (i.e., not of an Abrahamic faith), who have 'the languid manner of this country'. There are many ethnic and religious groupings but no 'Indian' identity. A hierarchy exists in which the Mogols heavily dominate the best imperial positions, besides a few Hindu Rajputs.

The cavalry at the king's disposal, including 'those in the provinces, forms a total of more than two hundred thousand horse' and 'two, or even three hundred thousand infantry'. This includes 'servants, sutlers, tradesmen, and all those individuals belonging to bazaars' who convey 'the immense quantity of tents, kitchens, baggage, furniture, and even women, usually attendant on the army', much of it using numerous 'elephants, camels, oxen, horses, and porters'. Even a subset of this army on the move is a spectacle to behold and a very disruptive—and economically lucrative—event for the locals.



Bernier describes the opulence of the emperor and his courtiers, their grand processions, jewelled costumes, the audience hall at Red Fort with its peacock throne and lavish furnishings of silver, gold brocade, silk and satin. He observes 'the base and disgusting adulation which is invariably witnessed there' and 'the vice of flattery [that] pervades all ranks'.

– *She describes the luxurious but cloistered lives of women in the Seraglio. Whereas Shah Jahan invited singing and dancing girls there, 'often detained the whole night, and amused himself with their antics and follies', Aurangzeb doesn't do so.*

Bernier writes that Aurangzeb 'is more serious than his father' and 'anxious to appear a true Musulman'. His 'extremely liberal' and erudite brother Dara Shikoh, who translated the *Upanishads* into Persian, had called him a 'Nemazi', or "that Bigot," that ever-puritanic one'. But Dara too had many flaws. Bernier thinks he was 'very irascible; apt to menace; abusive and insulting even to the greatest Omrahs' and undervalued 'the opinions of the wisest counsellors'. Whereas Aurangzeb possessed 'a sounder judgment, and was more skilful in selecting for confidants such persons as were best qualified to serve him with faithfulness and ability' and 'whose talents for government [his father] always entertained a high opinion'.

The common man's life, however, is very different. 'In Dehli there is no middle state. A man must either be of the highest rank or live miserably.' In Paris, 'seven or eight out of ten individuals seen in the streets are tolerably well clad, and have a certain air of respectability; but in Dehli, for two or three who wear decent apparel, there [are] seven or eight poor, ragged, and miserable beings'. All in all, he tells his friend, 'I may indeed say, without partiality, and after making every allowance for the beauty of Dehli, Agra, and Constantinople, that Paris is the finest, the richest, and altogether the first city in the world'.

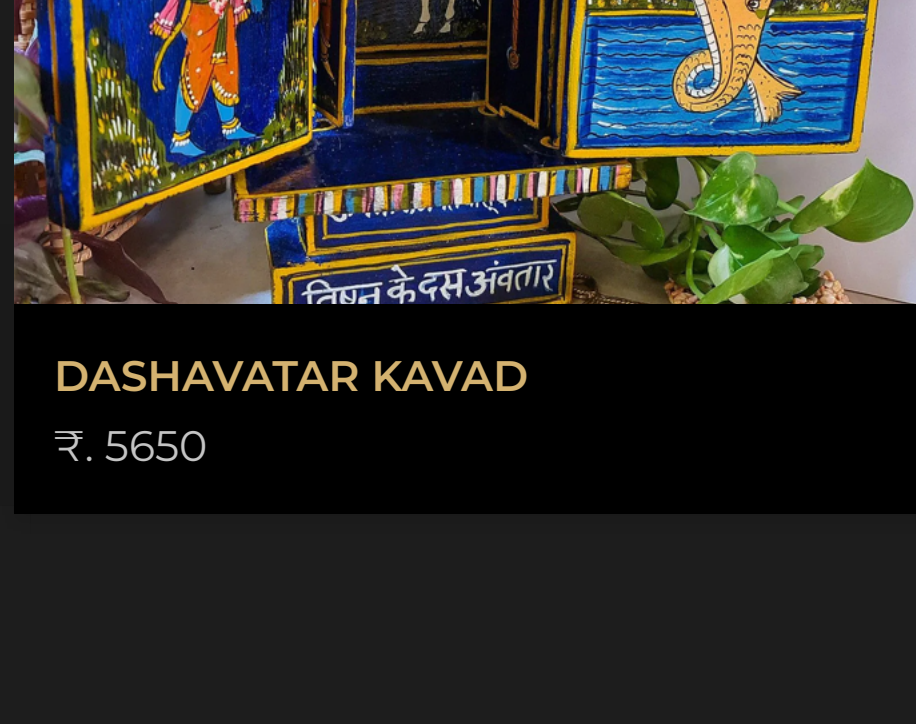
Among the things he misses from home is bread. Bakers 'are numerous,' he writes, 'but the ovens are unlike our own, and very defective. The bread, therefore, is neither well made nor properly baked'. Liquor is forbidden, 'equally by the Gentle and Mahometan law', but secretly consumed. Wine is rare, and those imported by the Dutch 'are so dear that, as we say at home, the taste is destroyed by the cost'. Only a few Christians 'dare openly to drink' a tippie called Arac, which is 'harsh and burning'.

Excerpted with permission from 'Indians: A Brief History Of A Civilization' by Namit Arora, and published in Viking by Penguin Random House in 2021.

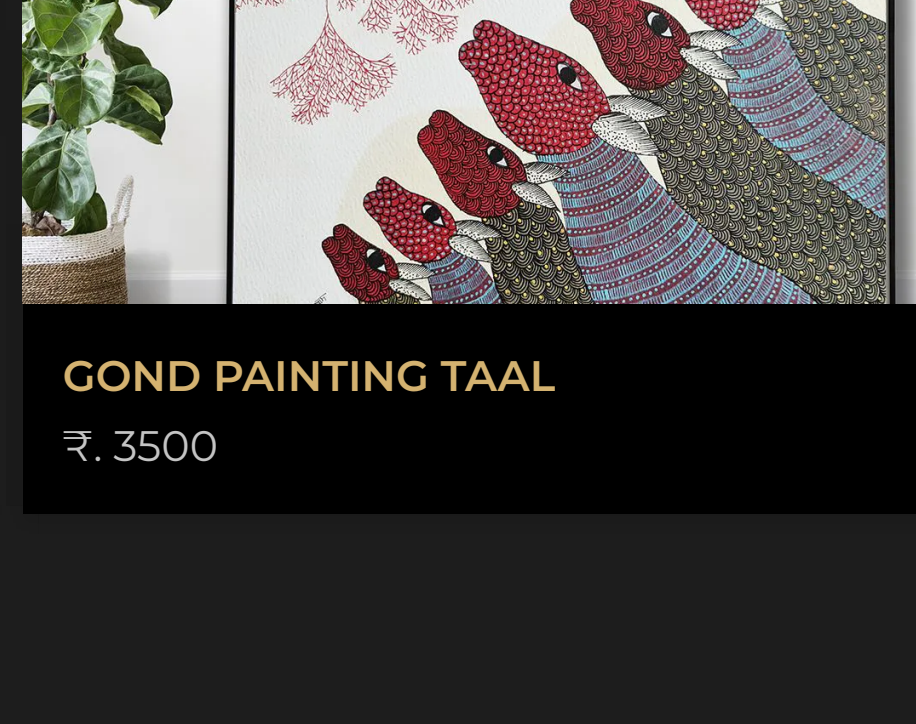
Cover image: A painting from Padshahnama depicts Prince Aurangzeb facing a maddened war elephant named Sudhakar

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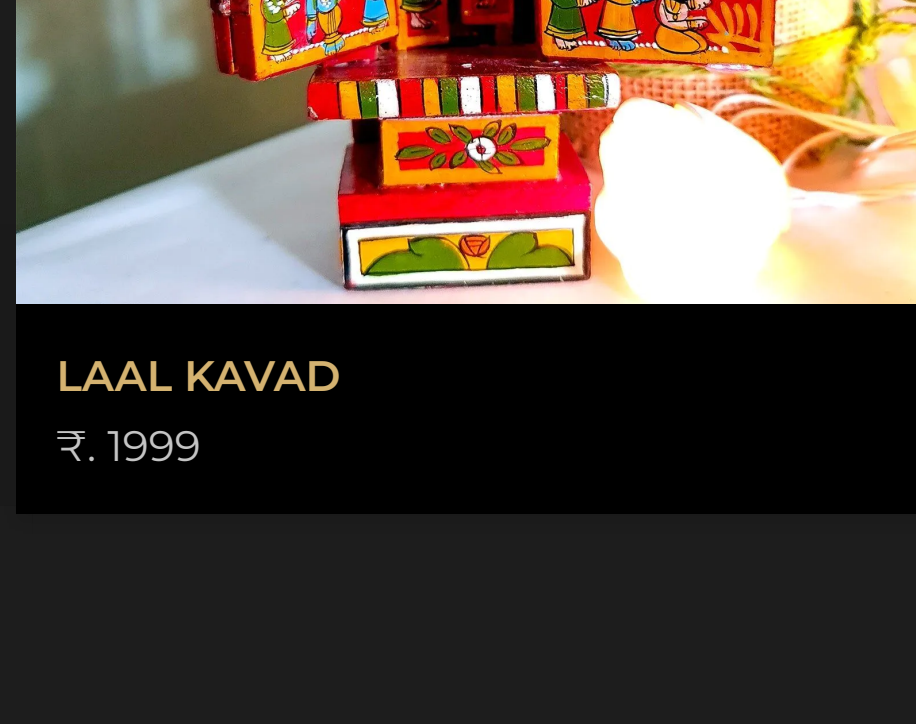
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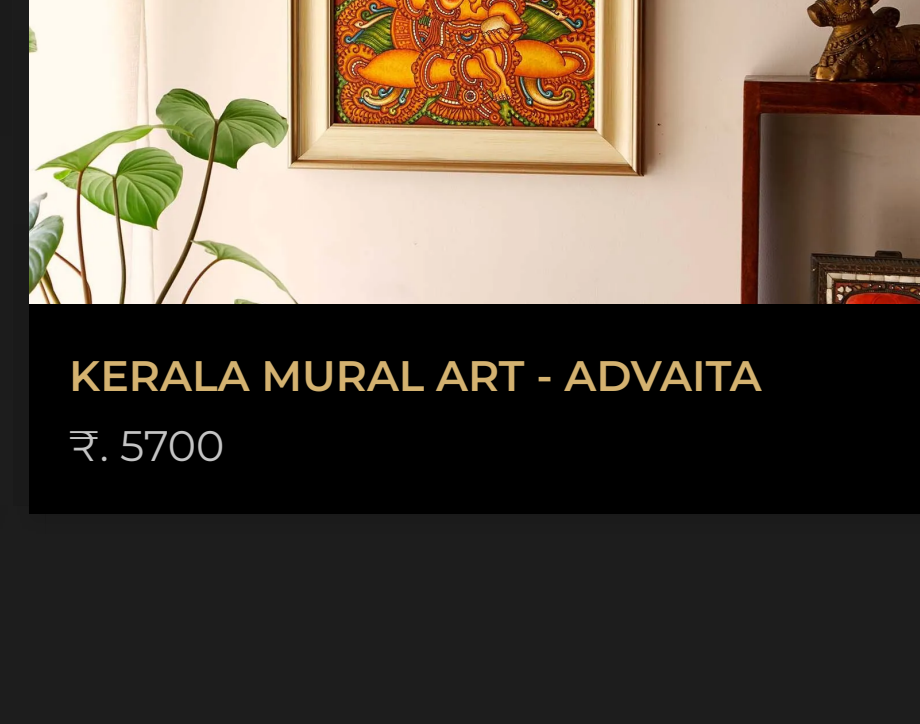
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