

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# French Travellers and Adventurers' Retrospect of Idol Worship, Sanctity of the Ganga and Divinity of Cow

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**Abstract:** The 17th and the 18th-century French travellers' and adventurers' perceptions about the Hindu socio-religious beliefs, practices, and myths have always been a relatively un-researched but fascinating area. This article, based on a study of their memoirs (both translated and un-translated), purports to analyze their perceptions of and observations on three specific aspects of the Hindu socio-religious world in North India during the Mughal period, namely, idol worship, reverence of cow, and Ganga. Objective of this article is to comprehend French travellers' vision towards identity formation of idol worship, its sacredness, and the practices attached to promulgate its belief among Hindus in northern India during the period of research. One discerns the unexplored reasons for devotional proliferation of idol worship, their propagators, and means adapted to glorify its principles. Further, the article intends to examine the discourse of dissemination of superstitious practices attached to Hindu doctrine of metempsychosis in regard to cow being revered as a sacred animal. An attempt has been made to scrutinize the sanctified effects of sacred water of river Ganga as well as its relevance in the life of the Hindus. One tried to research the French perspective about reasons given by Hindus to consider Ganga as the most revered river and elucidated by varied myths, illusions, and sagas to consider it as a symbol of purity. Similar rituals practiced at Jagannath temple in Puri are explored in order to analyze them through French travellers' eyes. Efforts are made to reflect how European Western culture comprehend the Orient's varied socio-religious beliefs and "superstitious" ideologies in relation to Hinduism practiced in northern India.

**Keywords:** French travellers and adventurers, Idol worship, Divinity of Cow, Holy Ganga, Jagannath temple, Social taboos, superstitious beliefs, Mughal Empire, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries

The memoirs of French travellers and adventurers, who came to India in large numbers in the 17th and the 18th centuries, give us valuable insights into how Europeans in general and the French in particular perceived and comprehended the Hindu socio-religious world. Idol worship, central to popular

Hindu practice, attracted their special attention. The retrospect of these Christian voyagers regarding idol worship and its fabrications is a sententious theme which has not been fully researched until now. In the travel literature during this period, French travellers' orientation over Indian religious identities and symbols

(Cow and Ganga) has not been comprehensively examined. Michael H. Fisher's works, *Visions of Mughal India* and *Beyond the Three Seas: Travellers' Tales of Mughal India*, give a superficial overview of few French travellers' observations that lacks an in-depth analysis on religious domain. A rather patchy work on the encounters of these travellers with the Oriental world was written by Michael Harrigan in the book, *Veiled Encounters: Representing the Orient in 17th-Century French Travel Literature*. Other noteworthy works of Meera Nanda, H. K. Kaul, Vincent Rose, Kate Teltscher, Edward Farley Oaten, Jean Marie Lafont, and Rehana Lafont have not fully researched the theme under study.<sup>1</sup> In order to fill this lacuna to some extent, this article aims to bring forth the French travellers' perspective on social taboos and other notions associated with popular Hinduism during the Mughal rule.

The objective of this article is to discern how the French travelers viewed the practice of idol worship, its sacredness, and the means adopted to popularize it. In particular, it ascertains the reasons for devotional proliferation of idol worship, their propagators, and means adopted to glorify its principles. Further, the article intends to examine the discourse of dissemination of superstitious practices attached to Hindu doctrine of metempsychosis in regard to cow being revered as a sacred animal. It also tries to scrutinize the sanctified effects of river Ganga's water as well as its relevance in the life of the Hindus, followed by researching varied myths, illusions, and sagas why Hindus consider it as a symbol of purity. The rituals performed at the Jagannath temple in Puri, Orissa, as noticed and remarked by the travellers, will also be discussed in this article. A comprehensive study has been made to examine the varied facets of Indian socio-religious perceptions with special reference to the superstitious practices in relation to scientific rational attitude of many French travellers and adventurers, that is, Francois Bernier was inspired by the philosophical teachings of Pierre Gassendi, scientist and philosopher, which emphasized the demystification of the phenomena of the universe by scientific observations (Ray, 2003, pp. 159-186). Bernier (1891) also gave knowledge on

astronomy, geography, and anatomy to his *Agah* or Danechmend Khan and translated for him recent discoveries of Harveus and Pecquet in anatomy and also philosophy of Gassendi and Descartes.

This study is limited to the French travellers' and adventurers' perspective due to unavailability of many translated versions and these adventurers were more critical of Hinduism in comparison to its other European counterparts. Many un-translated French memoirs are explored to examine their perceptions about Hindu mythological taboos. Thus, this article stands apart from the preceding works and fills the gap to showcase their unexplored understanding of Hinduism. Analysis of the French travellers' and adventurers' records were analyzed theme-wise rather than chronological, as it quips to provide a comprehensive critical assessment.

### **Idol Worship: Its Implications**

Idol worship is fundamental to Hindu religious practice and experience. Through idol worship, Hindus realize and experience for themselves some part of the truth about unity of all creation preached through Hinduism (Bajaj & Srinivas, 2004, p. 4). But French travellers and adventurers questioned and criticized the principles of idol worship of the Hindus. They remarked that many idolaters were unaware of the existence of the Supreme Being. While describing the faith of the Hindus, François de La Boullaye-Le Gouz said,

Ram is God and the first of being, who otherwise resides in the heart of common men. It is he who gave them the sacred law which is observed by them since 120,000 years for generations. They greet each other by uttering Ram Ram (which values much in their custom) and address a Hindu as Ramji if they do not know his name. This word in French, signifies a servant of Ram, but in their language it means a servant of God or more precisely a Deist. Next to God, they recognize Sita, the wife of Ram, then Lakshman, Krishna, Bagwati, Laxmi, Hermand and other saints in succession. (Gouz, 1653, p. 156)

Pierre-Olivier Malherbe is of the view that the real purpose of the Brahmans was to propagate idol worship. He remarked that Brahmans performed thousands of fraudulent practices to make the people believe that the idols or the pagoda [temple] speak (Holtz, 2012, p. 35). Malherbe further related that the Brahmans themselves confessed to him that they propagated and performed such rituals only to earn their living by cheating the innocent religious minded folks. They have challenged the common belief that Brahmans were chief spokesmen of Hinduism.

Christians and other Abrahamic people considered idol-worship of the Hindus as the colossal manifestation of error. It is the visible symbol of their state of error, further accentuated that Christians and others refer to idol-worship by the pejorative term of «idolatry;» and they feel a sense of revulsion against «idolatry» (Bajaj & Srinivas, 2004, p. 4). These travellers were the frontrunners in promoting similar beliefs. Whether they were influenced by Christian missionaries is uncertain, but many of them were influenced by the scientific orientation of French philosophers. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1889, Vol. 2, Book III, p. 149) highlighted the fact that the «idolaters» in India also worship creatures such as cows, apes, and different «monsters,» although they acknowledge one infinite God, «all-powerful and all-wise, creator of the heaven and the earth, who is omnipresent. They call him in some places *Permesser* or *Parameshwar*... (He further wrote) that the idolaters have heard that circle is the most perfect of all figures. So, they started believing that God has an oval figure. Therefore, in the pagodas they place oval pebbles, which they obtain from the Ganges and adore as God (Tavernier, 1889, Book III, p. 149). He strongly criticized this practice as a «foolish idea and that even the wisest among the Brahmans will not listen to any argument against it», as probably that helped them to propagate idolatry (Tavernier, 1889, Vol. 2, Book III, p. 150). He added that the Brahmans are so superstitious that they always keep oval stones suspended from their neck and press them against their bodies while they pray. Tavernier went on to say: «[A]ncient pagans personified their gods, and even bestowed wives upon them, thinking that they enjoy

the same things as those in which men take pleasure» (1889, Vol. 2, Book III, p. 150).

Jean Mocquet (1645) spoke about «illogical» religious beliefs attached to a hot water spring in Goa towards Pagoda [temple], rather than trying to decipher the scientific reasons behind it. He described the religious practice centered on this spring in this manner:

[A]long the riverside...they [Hindus] construct large and spacious steps where the *Gentiles* [Hindus] come every year, from 2 or 300 leagues distance, to bathe[bath] at certain times and sometime nearly 1,00,000 men, women, children assemble there, eating abundance of fruits in this river, and believe that at the end of the year they will again come to the river. But Satan deceives them, for there are always someone or other who neglect the security, and drown themselves out of Pond devotion.» (Mocquet, 1645, p. 297)

In a similar vein, Francois Bernier (1891 year) also registered his criticism of certain Hindu rites and beliefs associated with eclipses. He was an eyewitness to such rites performed by the Hindus in Delhi during the 1666 solar eclipse [he mentioned seeing another eclipse in France in 1654]. He believed that solar eclipse is a natural phenomenon which can be scientifically explained and predicted and has no evil attachment to it. This explains his criticism of the Hindus performing such rites; he called them «deluded people» who «continue to plunge, mutter, pray and perform their silly tricks until the end of the eclipse» (Bernier, 1891, p. 302) (p. #).

Tavernier (1889, Vol. 2, Book III, p. 193) recorded another rite that he witnessed during a solar eclipse: the Brahman announces the auspicious hour of eclipse in advance so that the idolaters will break all earthen vessels used in their household and leave not one piece whole. This causes a terrible noise in a town. These Gentiles threw silver pieces into the river; gave alms and old clothes as present to the Brahmans in this absurd ceremony. Bernier (1981) stated that even the ruling kings of India, the great Mughals, «permitted these ancient and superstitious practices to be continued without disturbing the

*Gentiles* [Hindus] in exercising their religion” (p. 302). Bernier revealed the mysterious justification given by the Vedas for practicing these superstitions during eclipse-ceremony.<sup>2</sup> He believed that these rituals were introduced by the Brahmans to get alms and numerous presents by duping the people before the ceremony began. This was corroborated by Gouz (1653, p. 154) who wrote about the ways in which Brahmans get the alms and respect by propagating irrational Hindu practices in their daily lives. He observed that the Hindus washed their bodies every morning in nearby river and came with joining hands to make benediction to the Brahmans of their caste. These Brahmans who sat near the river put a sacred mark with their thumb on their forehead and put some grains of rice on it. These Hindus offered some handful of rice in the Brahmans’s bag as offerings whereas the rich people gave double the amount of presents to them as these Brahmans performed this custom at their place.

Tavernier’s account testified as to how the foreign visitors were amused to witness different customary habits of worship of the idolaters. He said while entering the *pagoda* [temple],

[T]hey join their hands together and carry them to their foreheads, then they approach the idol waving them and repeating many times (the words) Ram ! Ram ! i.e. God! God! When close to it they sound a bell thrice, which is suspended from the idol itself, different parts of the face and body of which have previously been smeared with various colours. Some carry bottles of oil, with which they anoint the idol. But that the pilgrims may believe the god takes them. . . . When a pilgrim goes to the pagoda to be cured of some malady, he takes, according to his means, a representation in gold, silver or copper, of the diseased member, which he presents to his god; he then begins to sing, this all the others do also after their offerings. (Tavernier, 1889, Vol. 1, p. 211)

Bernier (1891 year) and Law de Lauriston [French Governor] blamed and criticized the Brahmans for supporting and promoting idolatry. Lauriston in a critical connotation stated that,

[I]n India, it is quite worse, to the truth, the instruction, one can say, still adds to the weakness of the human spirit; or for well to say, idolatry which appears is due to ambition of Brahmans who, not being idolaters themselves, since they know what is the reason, are much more culprits than the people, by the criminal error in which they enjoy to maintain it; with all the abominable stories that they forged, by multiplying the figures of the attributes; this blindness is the angular stone of their authority which puts them at range to grow rich and live delightful at the expense of the creatures which they subjected. (Deleury, 1991, p. 708)

When Bernier (1981) questioned the concept of idol worship, a famous *pandit* of Benaras replied that they “indeed honour the various idols in their temples, yet these statues are not god themselves but merely their images and representations. And we pay respect only for the sake of the deities they represent, and we offer our prayer, not to the idols, but to the deities” (p. 342). He further mentioned that “these images were installed in the temple because they believed that prayers were offered with more devotion when an image is placed before the eyes which helps them to concentrate; but the fact we acknowledge is that God alone is absolute, and that, he only is the omnipresent lord” (p. 342). This reply made a distinction between representation of an idol and an image, as the image reflects deity rather than the God himself. Other pandits gave divergent answers totally different from each other. Yet the overall explanation received to justify idol worship must not have satisfied the rational mind of Bernier.

Another French adventurer, Jean-Baptiste Chevalier (2008, p.35) once received an invitation from the king of Assam to accompany him to the festival of the great sacrifice to goddess *Kamakhya* in a much revered pagoda that attracted every year pilgrims in large number. Large numbers of animals were immolated at the altar of the goddess. In the past, “it was not only animals that had their throats cut, but also a man and a woman, which was a part of the ceremonials” (Chevalier, 2008, p. 35). All

the governors of the provinces and the chiefs of the villages had to provide their share for the ceremony and send to the pagoda every three years. Chevalier asked the temple priests, learned folks, and the king about the origins, motives, and circumstances of this ceremony, who replied that the goddess demanded from the "king of Assam... that such sacrifices be done for her glory, simultaneously warning him that as long as he and his successors faithfully executed this order, the kingdom would enjoy all kinds of happiness and prosperity" (Chevalier, 2008, p. 37). If this ceremony is not abided by, then all kinds of diseases would befall the kingdom whose inhabitants would suffer unimaginable scourges, besides plague and hunger. The grandfather of the king, who was free from ghastly superstitions, was the first one to abolish these practices. Chevalier remarked that such a ceremony brought large amount of money and food to the temple priest. The temple, he testified, is of enormous size and perhaps the richest of the world judging by the quantity of the gold that has been accumulated there for centuries. The king makes vows during times of calamity to the goddesses to help him overcome the disaster and after achieving peace presents golden animals as those immolated during the great sacrifices, in the same shape and resemblance (Chevalier, 2008, p. 40). Thus, the traveller found that a great share of the state expenses was dedicated to the temple. There were many golden animals in the temple like elephants, rhinoceros of medium and even small sizes, and large quantities of life sized replicas of other species. This entire collection as a whole represents a treasure of great value (Chevalier, 2008, p. 41).

Joseph Tieffenthaler (Bernoulli, vol.1, 1786), missionary cum adventurer, noted a superstitious customs related to idol worship in the province of Allahabad. He said,

"behind this Souterraine cave and a thick tower, located at a height, on the way which led to Ganga, a long and extremely sharp axe was suspended to a cord, which was being used to behead those who wanted to sacrifice themselves before the idols. Others explaining differently said, that these devotees, lay down on the axe loophole and cut the throat, or slice

their body into two. Others still, ensure that it was a long and extremely sharp cutting to split the body in two parts" (Bernoulli, vol.1, 1786, p. 225).

Tieffenthaler also described the superstitious belief of such self-sacrifices for attainment of fortune in the heaven. He said that in a village of Caschipour,

"where preserved formerly sharp and heavy axe was suspended by a cord, to which subjected the voluntarily neck of those who looked at this kind of death like a greatest happiness, thinking that they (their souls) would pass then into better bodies and would enjoy an abundant fortune. In the hope of larger happiness in future, they readily allowed the fatal fall of the iron on their neck, which they put under the cord the release and the blow of which was appalling, separating immediately the head from the trunk." (Deleury, 1991, p. 229)

Tieffenthaler mentioned that Aurangzeb removed such an iron placed at the Ganga river where the people performed such self-sacrifices but this ancient superstitious custom could not be abolished totally. Later it was seen that the people drowned themselves in this river with a large stones hung from their neck (Bernoulli, vol.1, 1786, p. 229).

While explaining the extremities of idolatry, Tieffenthaler observed that the people engraved the marks of a deity on their hands with hot iron in a region of Gujarat. He said,

those among the Hindus, who come here for pilgrimage engrave on their arms four marks, with a hot iron on which four figures are engraved; to know, a Nymphée (flower of Lotus), a crown, a shell, and the snake of Krishna. (Bernoulli, vol.1, 1786, p. 298)

The symbol of Mahadev or Shiva deity was also noticed by him when the pilgrims engrave on their arms the marks of the 10 incarnations of God (Deleury, 1991, p. 401). In regard to Ajmer region, Tieffenthaler wrote,

the abominable worship of idols is practiced here with all its force. One sees temples raised out of stone there, with a great expenditure, and of an architecture which is not to scorn, devoted I do not know to which Gods, of them they adore the statues which were formless, horrible, smeared of oil, butter and red soil. (Bernoulli, vol.1, 1786, p. 326)

Lauriston talked about the corrupt practices of the Brahmins related to idolatry. He said,

it comes only that of the licentiousness of the Brahmins, who have the charge of the temples or pagodas, of which the most interior part is often visited by women, daughters of devotees who come either with desire to achieve something or have some prayers or offerings to make...one could push the reasoning longer than one had made to justify the Indians of the idolatry of which accuse them. They adore Brimh (God) and his attributes under the figures of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, the creator, conservator and destructor; Brimh is worshipped by a thousand names, it is not certainly idolatry. But at the same time the Indians attribute divinity to fortune, fame, good, bad, peace, war, love, hatred, courage, fear, virtue, defects, shame, modesty, prudence, sun, moon and such others and worship them. (Deleury, 1991, p. 708)

The Lauriston believed that Indian mythology was filled with horror and obscenities.

### **Enigmatic Doctrine of Metempsychosis: Cow the Sacred Animal**

In the ancient times, there were several migrations into Indian subcontinent. Pastoralism, nomadism, and animal sacrifices remained characteristic features in the lives of the Indians for several centuries until sedentary field agriculture became the mainstay of livelihood. Many writers wrote that cow worship with seeing a special sanctity in her and striving for her protection is another highly exalted form of idol worship (Bajaj & Srinivas, 2004, p. 4). This perception is due to cow's usage in giving milk,

supportive in agriculture, and divine sanctity attached with Hindu religion. While D. N. Jha's *Holy Cow: Beef in Indian Dietary Tradition* (2002) and *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (2009) cited evidences of Indians of ancient times eating the flesh of cow or bull in domestic rites, rituals, and ceremonial welcome of guests; use of thick cow fat to cover the corpse and to serve in funerary rites; as well as other non-ritual and ritual slaughter of cattles. For early medieval period, Jha showed some texts that forbade cow-slaughter while other evidences enumerated it as a minor sin (Jha, 2009). Through historical sources, he dispelled the Hindutva myth that the practice of beef-eating was introduced during Islamic rule in India. Finally Jha (2009) concluded that the holiness of the cow is a mere myth as its flesh was very much a part of the early Indian non-vegetarian food regimen and dietary tradition, which underlines a fact that beef eating was not Islam's baneful bequeathal to India or have challenged that stereotyped Muslims image as beef-eaters. This view of practice of killing a cow and beef-eating during ancient India was referred to also by other scholars such as R. L. Mitra (1969), P. V. Kane (1973), and D. D. Kosambi (1956); while on the contrary, Michael Witzel (1997) gave evidence of cow being treated as riches as Vedic people fought for them and associated them with Goddess. Lastly, Jha, in an interview, suggested that post-Mauryan period onwards the Brahmanical attitude towards cow-killing begun to change as cow began to be looked upon as "holy" (Mahaprashasta, 2015).

On the other hand, according to the French, veneration of cow was associated with the identity of Hindus. Several of them described the doctrine of metempsychosis of soul in the Hindu caste system. As Jean de Thevenot, traveller, mentioned:

Brahmins believe in the metempsychosis or transmigration of the souls in new and more or less noble bodies, according to the merit or the demerit of the actions they performed during their life. And several people of the other castes follow this opinion of Pythagoras. They believe that each soul must thus make several transmigrations, but they do not determine the number of it, this is why, there are some who do not kill any animal. (Sen, 1949, p. 190).

Bernier (1891) further observed that:

The doctrine of the transmigration of souls secured the kind treatment of animals, by leading to the belief that no animal can be killed or eaten without incurring the danger of killing or eating some ancestor, than which a more heinous crime cannot be committed. It may be also that the Brahmans were influenced by the consideration that in their climate, the flesh of cows or oxen is neither savoury nor wholesome except for a short time during winter. (p.327)

Augustin Hiriart mentioned about the caste system in India where he observed 60 kinds of Gentiles [Hindus]. Though they did not mix up with each other or dine together, they all accept the dynamic God, idol worship, and refrain from consuming beef (Ronciere, 1905, p. 194). Antoine-Louis-Henri Polier (2001), an adventurer, discussed the significance of cow in Hindu mythology where he said, "in general cow is the animal of considerable importance in mythology, and after man, it is one of the first forms of animal intended to the regeneration" (2001 Vol.1, p. 397). He gave the reference of a cow Kamdeva/Kamadhenu/*Cambdeva*, the divine-bovine goddess, described in Hindu mythology as mother of all cows, having miraculous powers to fulfill all desires of its owner (2001, Vol.1, p. 256). He described the story of Jamadagni, [the Brahman who belonged to royal family but led a life of hermit who passed his time in devotion and austerity] who was the possessor of this divine cow gifted to him by Lord Indra which was believed to be produced by Samudra manthana. This cow had the power to save his master from all misfortunes and accidents. Kamadhenu supported his master by fighting against the oppressive king who wanted to steal her forcibly but who ultimately faced dire consequences of his deeds as his whole retinue was butchered by Kamadhenu's miraculous power (2001, Vol.1, p. 282-284). Cow was considered to be sacred as both this animal and God was offered some portion of food before being consumed by the Hindus (2001, Vol. 1, p. 426). Such fables of the cow's spectacular powers seemed to be weird imagination of the Indians for these French travellers, who viewed

it as merely as an ordinary beast whose flesh satisfied their appetite.

Dubois (1906, p. 634) also mentioned that Kamdhenu, besides providing abundance of milk and butter, could deliver any other thing to anybody who invoked her with sincere faith and devotion, was held in high esteem by the Hindus. Referring to the extravagant fables in Hindu sacred books about this ascetic cow, he said this cow

furnished not only milk but all the victuals necessary of an entire army. A neighbouring prince heard of this wonderful animal and conceived the plan of carrying her off by force...but the cow, as brave as she was fruitful, charged the prince's army and completely routed it! (Dubois, 1906, p.507)

Bernier (1891 year) corroborated the story.

Tavernier explained the theory of idolaters that souls of men on leaving their bodies after death are presented to God, who according to the life of 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 separated from the bodies, into the bodies of inferior animals, such as asses, dogs, cats and others, in order that they may perform penance for their crimes in these infamous prisons. (1889, Vol. 2, Book III, p. 158).

They believe that the souls which enter the bodies of cows are supremely happy because these animals are regarded as divine.

Another strange belief was that if a man dies holding the tail of a cow, it renders him happiness in his next life (Tavernier, 1889, Vol. 2, Book III, p. 158). Bernier (1891, p. 326) corroborated that eating cow or peacock flesh is considered illegal, and imagined how holding a cow's tail could enable the Hindus to cross the river which separates this life from the next. He further compared the belief with the faith of Egyptian shepherds that they could safely pass the river Nile, holding the left hand of a buffalo or an ox. Abbe Dubois described the practice in the funeral ceremonies of Brahmans:

[T]he cow is led up to the sick person, who takes her by the tail, while the *purohita* [priest] recites a *mantram* praying that cow may lead the dying Brahmin by a happy road to the other world. The latter makes a present of the animal to some other Brahmin, on whose palm he pours few drops of water as a token of the gift. Such gifting of a cow is called *godana*, which is mandatory if one wishes to cross the river of fire and arrive Yama-loka, or the kingdom of Yama, the king of hell, without any hindrance.. Those who made the *godana*, when they reach their last hour, find on the banks of this river a cow which helps them to cross the river safely without being touched by flame. (Dubois, 1906, p. 483)

Tavernier (1889, Vol. 2, Book III, p. 169) further observed that if a cow happens to be sick, she is taken to the side of a river or a tank but if she dies in the premise of a house, then Brahmins impose fines upon [the owners of the house] them. The idolaters believe that if men perform virtuous actions such as pilgrimages or giving of the alms during their lifetime, after death their souls pass into the bodies of some powerful Rajas or other rich persons, who enjoy the pleasures of life as a reward for the good deeds of their previous life (Tavernier, 1889, Vol. 2, Book III, p. 159). Tavernier said some of the foolish idolaters bury their treasures during their lifetime as seen in the kingdom of Assam, so that if their souls enter after death, the body of any poor and miserable mendicant they can have recourse to the money, which they buried, at the time of their need. This was the reason pointed out by Tavernier and Bernier (1891) as to why much quantity of gold, silver, and precious stones are buried underground in India (Tavernier, 1889, Vol. 2, Book III, p. 159).

Many other French travellers and adventurers have also mentioned repeatedly about the Hindu belief of sanctity of cow. The custom of respecting a cow is justified in yet another way:

they prefer her before other animals because she furnishes them more food, by means of her milk, than all the rest put together; and that she brings forth the ox which is so useful to the world, seeing he makes it subsist by his

labour and feeds men by his pains ( Sen, 1949, p. 91).

Bernier (1981, p. 326) wrote that the cow may more probably be owing to her extraordinary usefulness, as being the animal which supplies them with milk and butter (a considerable part of their aliment), and which may be considered the source of husbandry, consequently the preserver of life itself. Bernier observed that owing to the great deficiency of pasture land in the Indies, it was difficult to maintain large number of cattle and gave a warning to Indians that if meat is consumed in similar quantity as that in France and England, then the country will remain uncultivated. He also wrote that Mughal rulers such as Jahangir and Aurangzeb, at the time of scarcity of cattle, were requested by Brahmins, to issue an edict to forbid the killing of beasts of pasture for a certain number of years. Anquetil Duperron (1778) said the cows are respected and oxes are not eaten in India. He gave two reasons for its justification. Firstly, India, being hotter than Europe, has less fatty and less nourishing pastures compared to the needs of the animals proportionately. So they are less in number than those of the regions of cold and temperate climate. Moreover, the oxen in India are employed for ploughing and cartage. If they are eaten as in Europe, their number will be insufficient to the number needed for the work of ploughing in India. Secondly, the meat of an ox is too heavy to digest in this climate. The French rarely ate any of them in Bengal, though the English consumed some in their trading posts and sometimes in Calcutta. The quarter of the colony perished in two years of dysentery. Hindus do not eat oxen due to religious faith (Deleury, 1991, p. 722).

Boullaye le Gouz (1653, p. 144) reiterates the same observation that the Hindus do not eat a cow or a buffalo and have the belief that these sacred animals are dear to Ram. Buffalo is used to pull carts and the cow's milk is pure. They believe

Ram is their legislator, whom they accept as God, who has prohibited them to eat and kill it [cow/buffalo] for political necessity, because the horses do not value anything for them... some Hindus have lots of superstitions, they believe that the spirit of happiness can persist

in the body of these animals: Some Hindu ladies wash their face with the urine of cow, which the Muslmans make a mockery of. According to an ancient belief, this is excellent for eyesight. Supported either by medicinal or by religious point of view, this traveller links himself to their belief. (Gouz, 1653, p. 164)

François Martin (1609/2009) said the Gentiles [Hindus] love their animals whom they greet in the morning, “[T]hey respect buffalos and the cows; for this cause do not kill them. The waste materials of these animals are considered pure and saintly” (p. 81). Eating beef is considered to be a heinous offence and there is no hope for persons consuming it to be readmitted in the caste by any purifying ceremony or even by spending of huge amount of money (Dubois, 1906, p. 43). Abbe Dubois (1906) described occasions where Muslims use beef to insult the Brahmins. He wrote when the last Muslim Prince of Mysore aimed to proselytize the whole peninsula, “he began by having several Brahmins forcibly circumcised, compelling them afterwards to eat beef as an unequivocal token of their renunciation of caste” (p. 634).

Dubois went on to describe the hatred of the Brahmins for consuming beef and their abhorrence of Europeans who eat it. He was amused by the superstitious attachments to eating of beef. He said,

[T]o eat the flesh of a cow is an ineffaceable defilement. The bare idea of tasting it would be abhorrent to any devout Hindu. This invincible repugnance, based as it is now solely on the superstition which places the cow among the Hindu deities, had most probably at first a much more sensible, but not less forcible motive, namely self-interest.... [This animal had large number of usages in tilling; for transporting agricultural and commercial products; providing milk and its products] another motive besides that of preserving the species of these valuable animals and that is the indigestible nature of beef. Indeed in a climate where the organs of the stomach are so much weakened by excessive perspiration, the habitual use of heavy food would have soon destroyed the health of the people... [Thus he knew many Europeans had left

eating meat for this reason as eating it could lead to indigestion.] to kill a cow-according to the principle of Hindu Law- is not only a crime, but an awful sacrilege, a deicide, which can only be expiated by the death of the offender; while to eat[ing] of the flesh of a cow is defilement which cannot be purified. (Dubois, 1906, pp. 190-194)

The belief in the theory of metempsychosis forbade many castes to eat the flesh of animals. Boullaye le Gouz (1653) affirmed that the “caste of Katris and of Dalfis can kill and eat all kinds of animals excepting cow and ox” (p. 164). Bernier (1891) noted that the Hindus have great respect for the cows and peacocks, and there is a hospital in Ahemdabad for sick animals. Tavernier (1889) gave a warning that one “must be careful not to kill a bird, or any other animal in the countries of Rajas, where the idolaters are the masters” (p. 58). He further elaborated the consequence of such act by describing an instance. He wrote that when a Banian killed a peacock in a territory of Gentile [Hindu] king, he was punished not only by seizing his money but was also tied up to a tree and whipped for three days so severely that the poor fellow died.

Lauriston (1913b) observed that a large number of Brahmins do not eat any living being. Their abstinence from all type of meat is derived from the doctrine of reincarnation.<sup>3</sup> At the same time there are many Gentiles, including Brahmins, who eat several kinds of fishes, the meat of sheep, and other wild beasts, though certain territorial and aquatic animals are protected by one or other castes. The *holalkores* or *Parias* are the only ones who are allowed to eat all types of meat but they are looked upon as impure. These distinctions made Lauriston (1913b) to believe that the system of this law had less aspects of religious justification but surely it propagated policies for conservation of animals. There are some sacred animals like cow, ox, calf, and certain wild birds. He said that the Brahmins who are non-vegetarians, in many circumstances, are permitted to eat the flesh of animals sacrificed by them. But if anyone from another caste touches their dish, the food has to be cooked again. Brahmins, considered to be the highest caste, did not mingle with others.

In spite of this superiority, if decided in the favor of the Brahmans, one finds some of them serving the families of the castes inferior to them, as the rich merchants and bankers, as well as the rajahs considered it to be an honor to eat nothing which is not prepared by a Brahman. (Lauriston, 1913b, p. 246)

The Brahmans sometimes interpreted the doctrine of the legislature in such a way as to make the people accept the theory of transmigration which, depending on their deeds, made them attach a kind of excessive pride for the happiness of the country such as making ambitious projects like building of temples or digging of ponds that would carry their name (Lauriston, 1913b, p. 256).

Boullaye de Gouz (1653) described various reasons which lured Hindus to convert their religion and also specified the methods adopted by them, with the help of a cow, to return to their original religion. He stated that

[T]he Hindus are converted into Musulmans on the territory of the prince who professes the law of Mahomet, for several considerations. The first to have all the good parental, according to the ordinance made by Muslim princes. The second to escape punishment for adultery and murder, as the Moslems forgive all such kinds of crime to those who embrace their religion. When a Hindu repents being converted to Christianity, Islam or Judaism, he comes to the Brahman and the head of his caste and cries for mercy for the apostasy, they receive him, and order him sometimes besides other penitence to give certain quantity of barley to a cow after making it fast for three or four days. After the cow digests it, to hang its excreta and to eat it, as if the barley which passed through the entrails of the cow has the quality to purify his body and heart. (p. 156)

Abbe Dubois (1906) gave details of the ceremony regarding the readmitting of the guilty in the caste. The whole thing seemed to be weird and superstitious to him. He wrote that the person to be readmitted into the caste

is compelled to crawl several times under the belly of a cow. Finally to complete his purification, he is made to drink the *panchagavia*<sup>4</sup>. ...signifying literally five things or substances derived from a cow, namely, milk, curd, ghee, dung, and urine<sup>5</sup>, which are looked upon as the most efficacious objects for purifying any kind of uncleanness.... [He often saw] superstitious Hindus following the cows on pasture, waiting for the moment when they could collect the precious urine in brass vessels, carrying it, while still warm, to their houses....[they] wait to hold it in their palm, drinking some and rubbing the rest on their faces and heads. [Amused by their superstition, he commented that] rubbing it in this way supposedly washed away all external dirt and drinking it cleansed all internal impurity. (Dubois, 1906, p. 43)

Thus, the French reviewed the status of a cow in Hindu system as the most sacred animal for not just providing milk products for consumption but also the excreta for cleansing purposes and regaining of one's lost religion.

### **Illusory Sanctified Effects of Water of the Ganga**

The Ganga is not any ordinary river, as it is considered a symbol of purity and virtue by the Indians. Steven Darian (1978, pp. 31, 135) wrote that the Hindus believe it to be the holiest of all sacred waters found all over India as it has generative powers of giving birth, restoring life, and conferring immortality. It is venerated in all Hindu religious literature and people would swear an oath by the sanctity of the river (Darian, 1978, pp. 152-153). The river Ganges is considered as sacred or divine due to two factors: firstly the river has generative power of a mother, and secondly, it has the power to purify (Lauriston, 1913b, p. 16). The devotees throng to the river just to take a holy dip which is supposed to absolve them of their sins. These ideologies, reflected in Hindu mythology, were noted by the French voyagers, most of whom accepted the water to be sacred. Tavernier (1889, Vol. 2, p. 179) described the

ardent desire of Hindus to drink Ganga-water which seems to have a cleansing effect of their sins. He went on to emphasize on the Brahmans' belief of its sanctified effect, who not only use it in the temples but also sell the same to make immense money. He said, "every day large number of the [Benaras temple] Brahmans are to be seen going to the clearest part of the river [Ganga] to fill round, small-mouthed, earthen pots, which hold about a bucketful, with this water. When they are full they are taken to the chief priest, who directs the mount to be covered with a very fine cloth of fire-colour, in three or four folds, upon which he applied his seal.... (Regarding the profits made by Brahmans by selling Ganga water he said) the Brahmans carry this water at the end of a stick, flat like a lath, from which has six small cords, and to each of them one of these pots is attached. They rest themselves by changing the shoulder frequently, and they sometimes travel three or four hundred leagues of country with this load and then sell it, or make a present of it, but only to the richest persons, from whom they expect liberal reward" (Tavernier, 1889, Vol. 2, p. 179).

Tavernier (1889) was probably amused by this firm belief, which seemed irrational to him, regarding the purifying effects of Ganga water. He observed that they were ready even to spend large sums for it during the marriage ceremony of their children. He said, "some of these idolaters, when they celebrate any festival especially when their children are married, drink this water at a cost of 400 or 500 ecus" (Vol. 2, p. 179). Further, he observed that Ganga water was brought from long distance in earthen vessels by Brahmans as it was considered sacred and drunk with religious beliefs that, "as the waters comes from so far and the Chief Brahmin charges a certain tax on each pot, which is round and holds as much as one of our buckets, there is sometimes 2000 or 3000 rupees worth of it consumed at a wedding" (Tavernier, 1889, Vol. 2, pp. 253-254). Thus, the revered water of Ganga played a sacred role during varied phases of life, that is, birth, wedding, and death (Darian, 1978, pp. 61).

Further, Tavernier (1889, Vol. II, p. 179) said the prime reason of water of Ganges is so highly esteemed because, as the Indians believe, it never becomes bad

and engenders no vermin. However, the traveller was doubtful of this fact as numerous bodies were constantly being thrown into the Ganges. Thevenot said that Gentiles, before making any pilgrimage, get themselves purified by taking bath in river Ganga in Allahabad (Sen, 1949, p. 93).. He further said that the people are being extremely devoted to their religion, hardly questioned or understood the act as they accept "everything they see and approve all actions that make any show of devotion, never minding to find out whether it be true or false" (Thevenot, 1687, Vol. III, p. 66). Drinking of Ganga water gave Ronciere (1907) calm sleep. Thevenot (Sen, 1949) said, "the Great Moguls drink commonly the water of the Ganges, because it is much lighter than other waters, and yet I have met with those who affirm that it causes fluxes, and the Europeans boil it first" (p. 69). Since ancient times, the Ganga has always been an important symbol of spirituality in India. Its water is used in many ceremonies and daily rituals such as birth, wedding, and death. Due to assumed cleansing properties of Ganga to purify both soul and body, Dubois (1906) compared the water of sacred rivers of different regions stating the "inhabitants of Colchis and other peoples living near the river Phasis credited its water with the same virtues, while those of the Nile were considered equally efficacious amongst the Egyptians" (p. 200).

The French found that there are several water carriers in Hindustan who distributed sacred water of Ganga in northern India. They draw it from a particular place in Benaras with great festivity. This water has sanctifying virtue which erases all the sins (Modave, 1971, pp. 185, 534). Comte de Modave further said, "there are six to seven thousand Brahmans in Benaras out of total 40 thousands inhabitants whose principal occupation is to distribute the sacred water to the devotees who come to seek it from all parts of Hindustan" (p. 298). One draws from a tank filled up with this water. It is blessed and devoted by a great number of ceremonies. The Hindus have this "superstitious" belief but in reality it is a lucrative and profitable fraud practised by the Brahmans. Tavernier (1889, Vol. II, p. 198) described the Brahmans' business on charging tax on each of these pots, considering it came from a great distance

and have sanctity as it was filled by the Grand Brahmans of Jagannath themselves from the clearest water in the river and marked with their own seal, supposed to provide guarantee of pureness.

Modave (1971) stated that even if this water is sold at a cheaper rate, the Brahmans made immense profits. To transport this water to far distance, several thousands of men were employed each year. Many of them are from Benaras. They have two baskets attached in beam to a bamboo and covered with peacock-tails and streamers. These baskets contain five flasks to hold the water. Many Hindu domestic servants of the French testified the joy they experienced to visit these holy caravans. They greet each other reciprocally by shouting *Bambolla* or *Ram Ram* which is a sacred exclamation being uttered in honor of Brahma (Modave, 1971, p. 185). François-Xavier Wendel informed that Ganga is greatly respected and oaths are taken in the name of this river “to swear by the Ganges is, according to them, to commit oneself in a manner which one cannot fall to fulfill without committing the most severe betrayal and sacrilege, followed by an infallible punishment” (1979, pp. 131).

The travellers had diverse observations regarding the source of the Ganges. While referring to the irrational beliefs of the Hindus related to the sacredness of Ganga, they do not know its origin and course for certain. Modave (1971) stated that they do not climb the mountain from where it originates. They believed that the place of its origin is named *Kupelle*, “it is an opening in the mountains at the 34 degree of latitude by which Gange enters the plains of Hindustan. They claim that this opening represents the head of a cow” (p. 388). He described that a “missionary of Fezabad, who made a particular study on the topography of Hindustan, on the real source of the Ganga, claimed it to be at the centre of the dreadful mountain that surrounds Tibet...he assigned the precise place in the mountain between Kashmir and Kasgar, approximately 40 degree of northern latitude [Modave did not know its longitude]” (Modave, 1971, p. 388). Thus, he is of opinion that it is difficult to ascertain the source of origin due to geographical limitations. Modave noticed, while passing through Ganga, how the Hindus expressed their joy and

devotion towards it, the “Brahmans washed to purify themselves with great festivity reciting long prayers aloud. The majority of my people were from Benares; yet however, they accepted sprinklings (of the water) from the Brahmans with much respect and satisfaction” (Modave, 1971, p. 534). Thus, Modave highlighted the fables, spread by the Brahmans, that are connected with the source along with the sanctifying effects of Ganga water.

In everyday life, however, the sacred Ganga water was consumed with restraint by the idolaters as it had a price attached to it. Tavernier compared this water to prestigious muscat of Europe which is offered in a stingy manner to the guests, he said “it is drunk only at the end of the repast, as we drink hypocras or muscat in Europe, each guest receiving a cup or two, according to the liberality of the host” (Tavernier, 1889, p. 180). During the marriages of the Gentiles, consuming Ganga water was considered to be prestigious and sacred, as Tavernier said when “bridegroom gives them to drink the more generous and magnificent he is esteemed... there is sometimes 2,000 or 3,000 rupees worth of it consumed at a wedding” (1889, Book II, p. 198). In Hindu mythology, Ganga is placed in the matted hairs of Lord Shiva (Polier, 2001, p. 193) which also seems to be nothing more than an eldritch fiction for these travellers.

Later Father Tieffenthaler even questions the Sangam of three rivers at Allahabad, Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati called *Triveni*. He said “Thus since Saraswati is neither a small river, nor a stream, and that it mixes neither with Gange nor with Djemna, one should not give to the confluence the name of a junction of 3 rivers” (Bernoulli, 1786, p. 227). Overall the concept of holy water of Ganga seems to be a myth in the eyes of French, as their travelogues and memoirs are highly critical of the superstitious notions attached to it by the Hindus.

### **The Irrational Rituals Observed at Jagannath Temple in Orissa**

The temple of Jagannath at Puri, in Orissa also evoked interest in the minds of several French travellers like Bernier (1981), Thevenot (1949),

and Tavernier(1889) who wrote extensively about it. Tavernier (1889) explained in great details the temple, its physical structure, its idols with their ornamentation, revenue of the pagoda, number of disciples visiting it annually, and the taxation imposed on them which was spent for feeding the poor and for support of the pagoda.

According to Thevenot ((Sen, 1949), the way the famous idol of the pagoda of Jagannath is inhabited by Gentiles was no less fantastical from the point of religion. He told that “a faquir intending to invent some new spell of devotion that was never seen before, and which might cost him a great deal of pains, resolved to measure with his body, the extent of the Mughal empire...the pretext he had for so doing, was that once in his life he might be present at the Feast of *Houly*... he had a kind of novices to wait upon him and serve him” ((Sen, 1949, p. 95). He made his journey by lying down once then marking its length thus repeating this process continuously to travel a great distance. He received all imaginable respect showed to him in the places he passed through and was loaded with so much charity that he was obliged to distribute the money amongst the poor, who in hope of getting the alms, followed him in his journey.

Bernier (1981) severely criticized the Brahmans for propagating and performing irrational rituals and using different dubious tricks during religious ceremonies to satisfy their sexual lust. He found many fanatic religious devotees, full of wild notions, throwing themselves in front of heavy wheel procession of the Lord Jagannath which eventually crushed their bodies. This act was based on totally irrational belief that it was a “heroic or meritorious act of self-devotion as these victims believed that Jagannath will receive them as children and recall them to life in a state of happiness and dignity” (p. 305). He blamed the Brahmans vehemently who encouraged and promoted these gross errors and superstitions, for economic gains. Bernier (1981) also revealed duping tricks used by these wicked men to satisfy their sexual desires. They presented a “beautiful maiden as bride of Jaganath who will sleep with the lord, and she was commanded to inquire from the god if the year will be fruitful...but in the night one of these imposters enters the temple from

the back gate and enjoys the unsuspecting damsel” (p. 305) and made her believe whatever was necessary to be said next morning as if that were the words of Jagannath. Thus, Bernier described the sly tricks used by priests to lure young maidens in bed which might also have reminded him of the countless salacious stories about the sexual exploits of catholic clergies (Stuurman, 2000).

Bernier (1981) created awareness among the French audience about the dangers of priest-craft, practiced either by a Christian clergy or a Hindu Brahman. Thevenot ((Sen, 1949)) said that all sorts of superstitious and illogical practices were performed near the Pagoda of Jagannath, by the Brahmans for self-interest. Bernier (1981) further criticized idol worship by giving description of the Jagannath: “a superb wooden machine is constructed...with grotesque figure, nearly resembling our monsters which we see depicted with two heads, being half man and half beast, gigantic and horrible heads, satyrs, apes and devils” (p. 304). Bernier thus believed that idol worship practiced by the Indians is devoid of any common sense and, is totally unworthy. Dubois (1906) described the system of procuring wives for their idols in the temple of Tirupati and Jagannath. Huge temple feasts are organised where “Brahmins, who preside over the ceremonies, go about among the crowd and select the most beautiful women they can find, demanding them from their husbands or parents in the name of Venkateswara [deity of Tirupati]” (p. 601). Some husbands refuse to deliver their wives as they doubted the intention of the Brahmans, using their common sense that the stone idol of god does not need wives and so they indignantly refuse to bow to the demand of these hypocritical rogues while “others feel delighted at the honour conferred upon them by so great a god in condescending to ally himself with their family and do not hesitate to deliver their wives and even their daughters into the hands of his priests” (Dubois, 1906, p. 601).

In the 18th century, Law de Lauriston (1913b, p. 252) remarked that the ceremonies of their worship in the big temple of Djagonat (Jagannath), where all the Indians go for pilgrimage, seem to remind the pilgrims of the ultimate truth that the caste distinctions are created by mankind only. There, the Brahmans,

the ploughmen, the merchants, from different castes present their offerings, eat and drink together, giving the idea that in the eyes of the god all men are equal. On 6<sup>th</sup> June 1757, Anquetil Duperron (1771) visited the temple of Jagannath which was many thimbles away from the sea. He said this place is famous for three big pagodas wherein the domes could be visible from a distance of eight or 10 miles by the vessels making on route to Bengal. Towards the territory, a multitude of small pagodas accompanied by wood and ponds of freestone, form in this city an avenue very suitable to nourish the devotion of the pilgrims and to entertain the sight of a traveller. He then described the architecture of these three pagodas as well as the idol of the Jagannath. Bengalis of all castes, except *parias*, were allowed in this temple, but they were neither allowed to take their meal and to sleep in the other two pagodas. Duperron himself was denied entry to the interior of these pagodas as he did not have enough money to bribe the Brahmans who would allow him to do so. This proves the disparity between the rich and poor for obtaining permission of entering a temple. Abbe Dubois' (1906) accounts very clearly brought to the limelight that "superstitious" beliefs and corruption were prevalent in the temple of Jagannath and elsewhere. He gave instances of vivid scenes of self-inflicted death, which according to him were deplorable and were enough to highlight the fatal effects of Hindu superstitions.

## Conclusion

The foregoing discussion brings to light the observations and perceptions of the French voyagers about the irrational and absurd customs attached to idol worship. They were amused by different Hindu sacred practices of offering to their respective deities blaming the Brahmans as being culprits for promoting these in the Orient for self-gain. The Occident travellers were also critical of the ridiculous irrational beliefs attached to offering of the body parts of the devotees to their deity in order to please him. Not just the concept of metempsychosis attached to the sacred cow was held in contempt by these voyagers but at the same time the Hindu belief of sanctified charisma of holy water of the Ganges amused them

although some historians challenged the myth of holy cow openly. Another prospective of their criticism of the superstitious aspects of Hindu religious doctrine, may have been inspired by their zeal to promote Christianity in India, similar to those of contemporary European missionaries voyaging to India. It is also possible that their rational and scientific approach, an impact of the European renaissance, urged them to question and criticize the irrational, aberrant, absurd, and superstitions as well as the ridiculous customs and practices of the Orient world.

## Notes

- 1 Merra Nanda's *European Travels Accounts during the reign of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb*; H. K. Kaul's *Travellers India An Anthology*; Vincent Rose's *The French in India: From Diamond Traders to Sanskrit scholars*; Kate Teltscher's *India Inscribed, European and British Writing on India 1600-1800*; Edwary Farley Oaten's *European Travellers in India, During the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century*; Jean Marie Lafont and Rehana Lafont's *The French and Delhi: Agra, Aligarh and Sardhana*.
- 2 Bernier (1891) explained the reason behind the eclipse. According to Vedas, he said, "that there were certain *Deuta* (whole body of inferior god, an incarnate divinity extremely malignant and mischievous very dark, black and every impure and very filthy) takes possession of the Sun, which it blackens to the colour of ink, infects and obscures; that that the Sun, which is also a *Deuta*, but of the most beneficent and perfect kind, is thrown into a state of the greatest uneasiness, and suffers a most cruel agony while in the power of and infect by this wicked and black being; that an endeavour to rescue the sun from so miserable a condition becomes the duty of every person; that this important object can be attained only by means of prayers, ablution and alms; that those actions have an extraordinary merit during the festival of the eclipse, the alms then bestowed being a hundred times more valuable than alms given at any other time" (1891, pp. 303-304). Thus, Bernier tried to show the irrational and duping tricks of Brahmans to get alms and ablutions from the Hindu masses.
- 3 Law de Lauriston (1913b) said that if some one shows to Brahmans using a microscope that insects in the fruits and milk, they reply that it is an error on your part, that the object seen in the glass and not in what they eat. p. 245.

<sup>4</sup> These French travellers and adventures highlighted the use of cow dung by Indians. They suggested that cow dung was used in houses to clean by smearing the floors regularly. The cow dung ashes were used by devotees of Shiva to besmear their forehead, arms, and various other portions of the body. While urine of a cow or disgusting liquid in *pancha gaval* to obtain remission of any sin, was an absurd idea for Europeans.

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