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Porters and Palanquin Carriers in India in 17th Century traveler's Account

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Introduction

Travelling has often been the most sought after field to be studied for the medieval period by the researchers but that has been restricted to the routes and mode of transportation. Even in transportation it is only the means of conveyance that has been studied and the humanistic approach towards the carriers and porters, as individuals, have often been ignored. Pioneered work for this period on Routes, transportation and other related facets have been dealt in detail by Jean Deloche in his work “Transport and communication in India Prior to the Steam Locomotion, Volume 1”¹. What you do not get from this book is information about the experiences of travel parties and the process of travelling. Joan-Pau Rubies work, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes 125-1625* (Cambridge University Press, 2000) is a fresh perspective on the experience and significance of the travel account of the European travellers. Rubies has emphasised the significance of travel account as important source to construct the social history of the region. The first hand knowledge provided by the traveller, though always needed to be cross-checked, often gives you insight to understand the cross-cultural aspect and not mere with the sense of otherness. Sanjay Subhramanyam and Muzaffar Alam’s *Indo-Persian Travels in the age of Discoveries, 1400-1800* (Cambridge, 2007) also accentuate

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¹ It is a translated work from French published in 1993 by OUP.

the concept of the importance of travel and their accounts in form of travelogues, diaries, journals etc. that highlight the very basic nature of the process of travelling and encountering of the cultures, that affected both at the same time. In both, Rubies and Subrahmanyam, the perspective of travellers has been called attention to as they were giving narratives of their encounter that were more inclusive in nature but here also we do not get much on the porters and their lives.

Collectively, these people in history have been called coolies by the European traders in the region of Asia during 16th Century. Though there were different names for these porters in different regions of the Indian subcontinent, which I will discuss later in this paper. But by the colonial period porter or coolie became their identity. Recently in Lok Sabha, Suresh Parbhu while presenting the railway budget (2016) stated that the colonial legacy of calling them as coolie should be abolished and they be called as Sahayak (helper). This change is because the coolie word is considered to be pejorative in many part of the world because it is associated with the lowly waged immigrant workers.

In this paper, I try to look at their presence in the history of travel and route through European traveller's accounts. The earlier literature that has been produced on the lives of porters and coolies is more or less about the modern phase when they were sought after as a labour mostly as indentured labour, particularly during colonial period, for plantation and in railways. Their role in forming unions and giving them structure to fight for the rights have often been the focal point of the discussion but that is more or less associated with the indenture labour whereas what we see in the earlier time through our records that they were free to pursue their business as per their condition.²

Research Methodology

Travelling has always been a theme for discussion among academicians and particularly in those times when there were no

² Lot of work on indentured labor in particular has focused upon the journey of the poor people taken on distant islands for plantation. Recent work is that of Gaiutra Bahadur who wrote the journey of her grandmother in a book titled *Coolie woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2013). Cecil Foster in his book, *They called me George: the untold story of the black train porters* (2019), have focused upon their roles in the making of new Canada.

proper roads and infrastructure. This doesn't mean that it was altogether absent but depending on the terrain and topography of the region the meagre infrastructure was available of which porters and palanquin carriers were parts of.

My foremost focus to gather information on porters and palanquin carriers is on the primary source in the form of travelogues, journals and diaries written by the European Travellers. Europeans can be classified as company officials, private traders and explorers.

European traveller's account needs to be critically analysed as they were unaware of the language and culture of the Indian subcontinent and that is why it becomes even more necessary to crosscheck or substantiate the information with native data imperial or regional.

European travellers' account are imperative to understand the infrastructure and travelling process of the time as they were constantly moving from one place to another for their respective works. Most of them noted down the narrations about the region and the people of the region that they were traversing through, things that they found interesting or noteworthy of. On the contrary the imperial and the regional document of the region were more focussed upon the important administrative and economic aspects. For natives such information might have been trivial and were not worthy of mentioning but for the travellers they were exotic. Travellers often gave comparative analysis of the system with their own nation. In this light it is very important to go through the work of the Europeans account, though carefully.

Porters and Palanquin carriers

During 17th Century India the means of transportation was usually used to be pack animals but at times human portage was also requisite as per the situation of the topography or requirements

of the traveller. On many occasions travellers, who used to decide on palanquins, required carrier who would bear them all the way to their destination and along with them few more to carry the luggage of the traveller. They were also required on the route where there are many river crossing because porters were supposed to carry all the merchandise on their heads or shoulders while crossing the river, as in such circumstances it was not feasible to cross them on ox or cart. In the same way in the rainy season also the porters and palanquin bearers were in demand. Those who could afford, having a coolie was very important as it was not easy for people to bear their loads easily on the routes, particularly for traders and merchants. Banarsidas, a merchant from Jaunpur, gave a picturesque account of one of his travels where Banarsi and his friends hired a coolie, *Bojhia*, for their load but no carriage. While moving towards Patna from Agra they gone astray and unluckily found themselves in a Jungle where their coolie got scared and ran away. He stated that “he threw down the luggage he was carrying and ran away into wilderness; we had no choice but to carry the load ourselves. We divided into three bundles, one for each of us. But the journey now became an ordeal. We tried to ease our burden by constantly shifting the weight from head to shoulders, but this was hardly of any help.”³ Running away of a coolie is a bit odd because they were kind of folks who were aware of such situations while travelling or possibly the baggage was too heavy for him, as from the account we notice that three of them were struggling with their own luggage which they gave to that one pitiable Coolie and also afterwards when they finally reached the main road they hired two porters instead of one to carry their luggage forward.

Francois Martin gave widespread description of his *Cafila* that included many porters and palanquin carriers. William Methold writes about these bearers that “porters who carry the palamkeenes (palanquins), a litter so contrived every way as to carry a man, his bed and pillowes, which eight of these porters will carry foure of those leagues in a day, which are 36 of our miles, supporting it on their bare shoulders, and running under it by turnes, foure at a time; from which continuall toyle, aggravated by the extreme heate, ther shoulder are become as hard as their hoofes.”⁴ He further, while

3. Banarsidas, *The Ardhakathanak, Half a Tale, A study in the interrelationship between autobiography and history*, Tr. By Mukund Lath, Rupa & Co, Delhi, 2005.p. 207

4. Methold, *rom Relations of Golconda in the early seventeenth century*, Ed. By W.H. Moreland, Haklyut Society, London, 1931, p. 19.

giving particulars concerning the wages of diverse workforce, stated that the palanquin bearers don't get more than one penny per day and that too without allowance of diet.⁵

One expression that has extensively used for Palanquin bearer is 'Kahaar', used by Peter Mundy for folks who carried water or other objects on the edge of the bamboo stick that they used to hold on their shoulder. While unfolding his journey from Agra to Patna he recorded that “A Cahare is a fellow that on a peece of Bamboe which layes on his shoulder, will carry att either end there of well ½ a Quintall, with which hee will travell 25 or 30 miles a daye, for hee goes a kinde of an easie leaping pace, or as it were gently runninge, The Bamboe yeildinge and bendinge att evry stepp, soe that they carry more steddie then any other kinde of Invention that I knowe. They are most comonly imployed for carryeing of Chinae, Christall, or any curious brittle ware, Also of meat and drinck or any liquid thinge. Any Greate man when he travells hath many of theis Cahares along with him, for the purposes aforesaid.”⁶

John Fryer (1673) gave interesting narration in relation to the Coolies, Palanquin boys and their obligation stated that “we might recite the Coolies, Duties, and palankeen Boys; by the very Heathens esteemed a degenerate Offspring of the Holencores⁷ (Hataalkhor, “one who eats food slain according to the Muhamadan ritual” a term applied euphemistically to the sweeper or scavenger caste).⁸ He further stated that “On the shoulder of the Coolies they load their provant, and what moveable necessary. The Duties march like Furies, with their lighted Mussals (a torch) in their hands (they are Pots filled with Oyl in an Iron Hoop, like our Beacons, and set on fire by stinking Rags). Ambling after these a great pace, the Palankeen-Boysn support them; four of them, two at each end of a Bambo, which is a long hollow Cane, thick, light, and strong, arched in the middle (which is done in cases while it is growing)

5. Martin, Francois , p. 27.

6. Mundy, Mundy, Peter. Travels of Peter Mundy, In Europe and Asia, 1608-1667. Vol. II. Second Series No. XXXV, the Hakluyt Society, Kraus Reprint Limited, Germany, 1967 p. 115.

7. Frayer, A new account of East India and Persia being nine years' travels 1672-1681, Ed. William Crooke, Vol.1, Pp 97.

8. Ibid, Pp 82

where hangs the Palankeen, as big as an ordinary Couch, broad enough to tumble in;”⁹

Thevenot, on his journey from Surat to Golconda, mentioned of hiring peons because the route was quite difficult and the journey arduous. He stated that “..for this JourneyI entertained two *Pions* in my service, to whom I gave two Crowns a piece by the month, and two pence half penny a day for Board-wages (as the custom is,) these Men are always by the sides of their Masters Chariot or Waggon, that they may hold it up in bad way if it is heel'd; when comes to any place to bait at, they'll do anything out of the Kitchen; but they will not venture to dress Meat, which those of their sect would not eat.”¹⁰

Later on he gave narrative of the peons that how they basically are armed and what all duties they performed excluding cooking. He mentioned “In short, They are in all things else very serviceable; they'll buy what is necessary, looks after their Masters things exactly, and stand sentinel all night long; they are Armed with Sword and Dagger, and have besides the Bow, Musket or Lance, and are always ready to fight against all sorts of Enemies.”¹¹

He furthermore stated the community which they are part of, “There are of them both Moors and Gentiles of the tribes of the Raspoutes; I took Raspoutes, because I knew they served better than the Moors, who are proud, and will not be complained of, whatsoever foppery or cheat they may be guilty of.”¹² On this trip he was not travelling alone but along with a party that hired 14 peons and 10 Wagons.

Porters, Coolies and peons were the general expressions that were used for the hired labour for carrying baggage by the Europeans. Careri had also used one more word that is *Begar* whom he had hired at Goa for his journey to the imperial camp (Mughal Camp of Aurangzeb) at Galgala. He also reported that the porter

9. Ibid. Pp 97.

10. Thevenot, Thevenot and Careri. Indian Travels of Thevenot and Careri. Ed.S.N.Sen, New Delhi, 1949 p. 101.

11. Thevenot, Pp. 101-102.

12. Ibid. P. 102.

that he had hired was not only for carrying his necessities but also utensils for dressing of meat.¹³ He further mentioned that the porters, which he hired, were Gentile and ate nothing, which was given to them by our travellers. “The idolater (who were the porters) would eat none of it (large fruit cut by Careri), for they will not taste anything that is cut by us, tho’ starving for hunger; and I was told some of them had been so obstinate, as to continue five days without eating on this account.”¹⁴ He was carrying all thinking that nothing would be available on his way to Galgala. Though he was to be covered this entire journey with that one porter that he had hired and one interpreter, there is no mention of any cook along with him. This indicates that the porter was also dressing the meat for the master, which a dissimilar picture given by Thevenot regarding the porters not doing any kitchen work. He after crossing the town hired other porters and they were Gentils, about whom he gave quite different picture from others about the porters and coolies. He found them to be rather lazy and stated that “to carry my Luggage to *Ponda*, which was twelve mile off, I took three Gentils; and was force'd against my Will to make use of a cudgel upon them, because they will never do good Service either for fair Words, or Mony, but run away as soon as they can; and on other side, when they Thrash'd, they will Load themselves like Asses.”¹⁵

Not many travel-account have recorded the wages given to these porters and coolies but few like Thevenot, we have seen above giving two crown a piece per month.. He amounted that to be in crown whereas Careri, while hiring few porters to carry him in an *Andora*¹⁶ (because he was not well enough to walk) recorded that

13. Careri, Thevenot and Careri. Indian Travels of Thevenot and Careri. Ed.S.N.Sen, New Delhi, 1949 p. 207.

14. Ibid. P. 208.

15. Ibid. p. 208.

16. Kind of Palanquin.

he hired four porters in “15 *Pardaos*,¹⁷ which are worth six Crowns of *Naples* a Month.”¹⁸ However he did not talk about how many days he had hired them, as he only wanted to visit places in Goa that he had not seen earlier. Abbe Carre noted that he gave three rupees to his coolies for the entire journey from Goa to Bijapur.

Francois Martin, who was the governor of Pondicherry, was asked by the authorities to go to Surat in 1681. He provided a captivating account of his passage, in which he mentioned about the Number of Porters, Coolies and Palanquin bearers, who were part of his entire *Cafila*. He found them to be quick and covering a good distance, an average of about 27 miles per day. But to evade the exhaustion and distress, they were travelling mostly during night. At times they were taking more time at halting points to get rest and strength back to cover the subsequent journey. He found to be little empathetic towards the palanquin bearers and porters and had given an antidote to one of the palanquin carrier who was bitten by the snake at Magalgiri, where he had halted to visit some temples. In spite of travelling in a very adverse weather and on a difficult terrain he asked his porters and palanquin bearers to keep moving and for that he promised to give extra payment.

Abbe Carre also had hired their facilities all through the long route from the western port of Surat up to the eastern port of St. Thome, even to reach to Surat from Broach he had availed the service of a cart and 6 Peons. He when left Surat for Bassein acquired the service of two Kanarese servants and some coolies apart from the palanquin carrier. Again from Chaul to Goa he availed 8 physically powerful palanquin carriers and some coolies for his luggage. When left Bijapur for Golconda, was rendered with 40 peons just to escort for the night, by Khwaja Abdullah, the governor, but after reaching Nathan Carre had returned them back but still had twenty five person of his own, which is a large number

17. Pagoda, a gold coin prevailed western part of India. Though he did not mention it to be of gold or silver, because later on portuguese started minting them in Silver with same name.

18. Careri, p. 269.

for a single person. He might have hired so many for the reason that there was constant threat of brigandage and soldiers, who might have badly treated the travellers on the route.

Not all have given the version of their rapport with servants and coolies, not even mentioning the chores of the porters except the number of peons and carriers that they had hired. Fryer gave description of their number, diet and task and was even thoughtful, at times, towards them. Fryer recorded number of servants including Peons (Moor Peons), Guides and 8 Coolies for the service when was in Bombay and with all the provision he moved towards Thana. This was the time when there were unvarying armed forces in action from both the sides, Mughals and Sivaji. In such circumstances of pillage and struggle between the powers the availability of provisions including porters and palanquin carriers must have been difficult. Fryer even hired an Ox on the demand of the porters who were complaining of excessive load¹⁹ and time to time tried to persuade them so that they put up with the trouble of the terrain and at times to cool them down, he gave them Arrack in small amount.²⁰ He, while talking about the teething troubles of the terrain through which they were traversing²¹, stated “The Coolies providing themselves with Staves, distrusted not only their own Legs, but the Ground they went on, it having forsaken many a tall Tree around us; some holding by the mouldring Earth with half their Roots bare, others half buried in Pits they never grew in, lay expecting their quondum Neighbours downfall.”²² He also has mentioned about their diet being rice and seeds of grass and at time when they could not avail any of these, the coolies had to eat the fresh figs at a place. Abbe Carre too, very sympathetically narrated the tough lives of the porters and Coolies, while traveling from Goa to Bijapur, which was a very difficult terrain and when he saw many porters and coolies taking loads on their head and covering

19. Fryer, A new account of East India and Persia being nine years' travels 1672-1681, Ed. William Crooke, Vol.1, Pp 310.

20. Ibid. pp 319.

21. Fryer was moving along the Avapa foothpath, about 6 mile S of Nana pass.

22. Ibid. pp 317.

the same backbreaking journey, he enquired from his own servants about them , to which they replied that these people are of same cast as of theirs and “carrying heavy burdens, and that they dwelt on the coast near Goa, and gained their living by taking dried fish, coco-nuts, arracks, and other comestibles, to sell in Bijaour. They were paid two and half ecus, however great the wight.”²³ But they also opined that wages they get is sufficient for them as they hardly spend anything on themselves for their provisions, as they get dried fish and rice very cheap in this part of country and apart from that they managed to get stuff free of cost in the villages they pass by or make lodging at. He himself gave three ruppes, about one and half eucs to his own servants for their journey from Bicholim to Bijapur. Carre, while comparing French and Portuguese, also mentioned about that how courteous he was with all the people, whom service he had taken, and how Portuguese acted slightly better than a tyrant. He mentioned one of the Portuguese fidalgo, whom he accompanied while crossing the River in dantivara en route from Bassein to Surat, that how he didn't like that Carre had appointed Portuguese Christian as personal servants and giving all of his servants same food as he himself consumed. He stated “Seeing that I gave my people the food left over, he informed me that it was not fair to the Portuguese that Frenchmen like myself should employ Christian Servants from their lands, because afterwards they were unwilling to enter their service. He also said I did wrong in giving my people the same food as I had myself; all that was necessary for them was a little toddy and some cumquots, such as he gave to his own people.”²⁴ While referring about Portuguese he stated “On the other hand the Portuguese exacted service by force and in a manner little better than tyranny, so that these miserable Christian died of hunger, and showered curse on them when out of their presence.”²⁵ The whole time he had been exceedingly critical of the Portuguese to an extent that he said he had no empathy or endorsement for their manner of living and he also charged them for getting their ladies married to the French or the other national in order to use them

23. Carre, *The travels of the Abbe Carre in India and the near East 1672 to 1674*, Vol. 3, Tr.By Lady Fawcett, Ed. By Sir Charles Fawcett and Sir Richard Burn, p 226.

24. Carre, *The travels of the Abbe Carre in India and the near East 1672 to 1674*, Vol. 3, Tr.By Lady Fawcett, Ed. By Sir Charles Fawcett and Sir Richard Burn, Pp. 729.

25. Ibid.

however on the contrary he was of towering opinion about the English, be it their navigation management or their administration in India.

From Carre's account one thing is also evident that he or any other traveller, who was travelling with their belongings and servants, kept changing or hiring the carriers/ coolies/ porters at different intervals or posts. Perhaps the carriers were only willing to serve in the areas that were known to them or were of well acquainted with and hence travellers who were embarked for longer routes used to avail their service for short distances and had to hire another lot for further journey. Carre mentioned, on same route from Bassein to Surat, that at Tarapur he had to stay to change the carriers for his baggage²⁶ again at Rajapur he stayed for two days to change his palanquin and baggage coolies. This also gets proven by the account of Carrei, where he hired a porter at Goa and then another after crossing the town to go to Galgala. Along with porter he had also hired an interpreter, but while on his way back to Goa he gave account of being alone and not understanding the language of the locals. This suggest that the porter and the interpreter, that he had hired were only till the camp and while coming back they did not accompany him or he might not have got any other interpreter or porter to go along with him towards Goa. Another explanation can be that the Galgala was an imperial camp now, where most of the opportunist, whether traders, merchants, or artisans, would have preferred to render their service rather going back. Banarsidas, though never made very long journey apart from Agra-Patna route, had also given the instances where these Coolies were not hired for the entire journey. Banarsida, while on his journey from Agra to Patna, had hired only a carraiage at Firuzabad till Shahzadpur and from there they covered the route on foot till Patna but hired a porter for their load.²⁷

Many a time the travellers have had discussed about the escort that they hired and not the Coolies or porters. Is it possible that escorts used to carry some of the luggage or were they only for

26. Ibid. Pp 730.

27. Banarsidas, p. 206.

security purpose? Many Nairs have been reported to be hired as escorts in the southern part of India by many travelers like Carre and Pyrard Laval.

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