



## “VISIBILISING” WOMEN: FRENCH TRAVELLERS’ MEMOIRS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN OF MUGHAL INDIA

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**Abstract** French travellers and adventurers’ of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries visiting Mughal India had a long agenda. Of this, the one that ignited their fancy was the world of women hidden by well-guarded *harem* enclosures. What they could not watch with their eyes was envisioned by fantasies unbounded. The lucid tales of royal women’s tragic rendezvous with strange men, the fearful surveillance by eunuchs and matrons guarding the entry and exit points of seraglios, and the whispering bazaar gossips all are concocted in such a way as to catch the fancy of even a reader of today. This paper, drawing upon a variety of accounts penned by French travellers, seeks to examine royal Mughal women’s status and their role as members of the powerful Mughal Empire. Additionally, and more importantly, these narratives, as the paper shows, reflect upon social dichotomies shaping and moulding women’s lives. Interestingly, these dichotomies have shown unprecedented resilience as they continue to mar women and gender issues up to the present day. Of these, prevalence of prostitution and adultery on the one hand and the strict enforcement of veiling for women and restrictions on their mobility are of prime significance. These accounts also narrate the worst social ill, i.e. female slavery and bondage. This paper, drawing upon primary sources, some of which are used here for the first time, brings together these scattered travel accounts and then proceeds to present an assessment of these narratives on gender politics and women’s status, including romance in their lives.

**Keywords:** French travellers, Mughal princesses, Mughal seraglio, women in Mughal India, Mughal women in travelogues