

## Freedom Day (South Africa): Celebrating the Birth of a Democratic Nation

Freedom Day, observed on April 27, marks a historic milestone in South Africa's journey towards democracy and equality. On this day in 1994, the country held its first democratic elections, allowing citizens of all races to vote for the first time after decades of apartheid. The occasion honours the sacrifices of those who fought for justice, human rights, and freedom. It is a moment of national pride, reflection, and unity, reminding South Africans of the importance of inclusivity, reconciliation, and progress. Freedom Day celebrates not just a political victory, but the enduring spirit of a nation committed to building a fair and democratic future.



The wedding procession of Dara Shikoh, with Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb behind him.

## #RAGMALA The Story Of Devi Asavari

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any of you may be familiar with the story of Devi Asavari, but for those who are not, let me share her fascinating story and its connection to Indian classical music. And most importantly, why she is depicted in ragamala paintings as a blue-skinned woman adorned in animal skins and playing with snakes? A strikingly similar portrayal to Lord Shiva, but in female form. Devi Parvati, feeling lonely in Kailash, longed for a companion. She asked Lord Shiva, to create someone like a sister, with whom she could share her thoughts and emotions. Lord Shiva agreed but warned that Devi Parvati would have to take full responsibility for her. Without hesitation, Devi Parvati accepted. Thus, Lord Shiva created Asavari, a female version of himself, possessing all the traits in a woman's form. Devi Parvati eagerly welcomed Asavari, bathing, clothing and feeding her. However, she soon discovered a troubling trait, Asavari's hunger was insatiable. No matter how much she ate, she remained unsatisfied, causing a food shortage in Kailash. Overwhelmed, Parvati decided to seek Shiva's help. But as she set out, Asavari cunningly trapped her within the cracks of her own heel. When Lord Shiva inquired about Devi Parvati, Asavari feigned ignorance. However, Shiva, seeing through the deception, confronted her. Realizing her mistake, Asavari released Parvati. Enraged, Parvati demanded Asavari's exile, feeling heart-broken that she had failed in her promise to take care of her. Lord Shiva, understanding Devi Parvati's distress, forgave her and vowed to reform Asavari, preparing her for marriage. When Devi Parvati lamented, "had she been well-mannered, I would have been her friend, and cared for her." Lord Shiva wisely responded, "If you cannot handle people at their worst, then you have no right to have them at their best." Raga Asavari has two forms, Shuddh Re Asavari and Komal Re Asavari. This raga is often described as evoking deep paths, envy and ultimately surrender to the divine. It is known as Raga Nat-Bhairavi in Carnatic Music, and Aeolian mode or natural minor in western music. Some of the songs sung in this raga are Zara Zara Behakta hai, Tinka Tinka, Roshni Se, Sajjan re Jhoot mat bolo, Jaudu Teri Nazar.



Niccolao Manucci.



lot of what we know of Mughal history has been pieced together from royal chronicles, and travellers' accounts. Niccolao Manucci was an Italian adventurer who spent most of his life in India, during which he documented the Mughal reign in an epic work called *Storia do Mogor*. Read on for the story of his fascinating life. Historians know more about the Mughal dynasty than any other dynasties. One reason is that apart from the royal chronicles, there are a number of independent accounts of their lives and times written by foreign travelers. By the 16th century, India had seen many European travelers, who came here for trade, employment and evangelisation. A large number of them spent time in the Mughal kingdom mainly because it was more prosperous.

One such traveler was a man named Niccolao Manucci. He was an Italian artilleryman, employed in the services of the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh, who was eventually defeated by his brother Aurangzeb. His narrative spans across various aspects of life, including Hindu rituals, Muslim ceremonies such as weddings and funerals, and the societal norms that govern interactions. Manucci's writings provide a comprehensive portrayal of India's economic landscape, highlighting the

thriving industries, the bustling towns, and the significance of cities within the subcontinent. Notably, his observations during the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb shed light on the fusion of European influence and South Asian artistic expression, showcasing the dynamic cultural exchange prevalent during that period. He skillfully articulates the intricate tapestry of India's social fabric, offering valuable insights into the lives of its people and the historical context in which they thrived.

There are some illustrative anecdotes and descriptions of his travels which provide vivid insights through the daily lives of people over different regions of the Indian subcontinent. He discussed the diversity of dress and appearance of the people. The majority of Hindus wear white clothes whereas muslim wear a variety of clothes of different colours. With respect to economic life, he discussed the industry along with the importance of trades of various groups in India. He thought Indian-made ships were better to their European counterparts because of the ample availability of timber and other necessary materials. In the realm of political life, he describes the challenges which are faced by the Mughal empire which includes the rise of Maratha confederacy along with Sikh rebellion.

Manucci encountered various sarais while travelling from Surat to Delhi. He took notice of the facilities and security measures available to travelers at these sarais. Specifically, strict regulations were adopted to protect the well-being of tourists and travelers, with officials held accountable for their safety and security. Manucci's documents reflect the recognized Gwalior

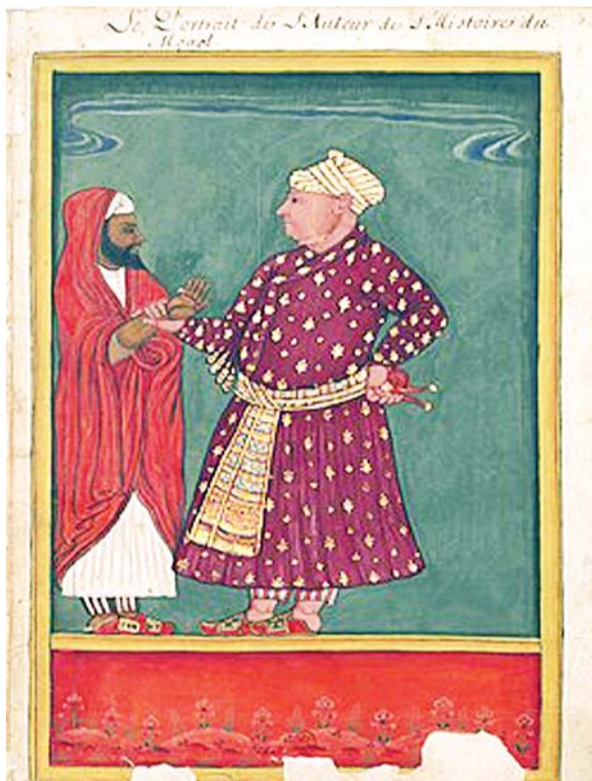
# Niccolao Spoke Some Truth And Many Lies

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## #NICCOLAO MANUCCI



Painting from *Storia Do Mogor* by Niccolao Manucci, 17th century.



Manucci feeling the pulse of an Indian patient.

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Manucci made observations about the Parsians (Parsi), saying that they were worshippers of fire. He also discusses a fascinating religious belief among Parsis, whereby if someone's house catches fire accidentally, they are forbidden to interfere or extinguish it under any circumstances. They believe that such an event represents a sacred blessing from the gods in return for their devotion, which they have shown. Manucci goes on to highlight a special custom in India where it was customary to offer betel leaf or paan to guests as a show of courtesy. It would be deemed extremely rude to decline such an offer. Accounts from other authors, such as Abul Fazal, who also mentioned the old Hindu custom of using paan, corroborate Manucci's description of this practice. Amir Khusrau also regarded paan as the best fruit in Hindustan, praising it as a beautiful fruit similar to a garden flower.

According to Manucci, he was offered the chance to join Aurangzeb's army but he decided to flee instead. In his memoir, *Storia de Mogor* (or *Story of the Mughal*), Manucci paints a fabulous picture of his life and casts himself as the long-suffering hero and Aurangzeb as the evil villain, his arch-nemesis. But can we believe him blindly?

Time obscures the past from the present; therefore, it is the historians who must squint and puzzle out the blurry events of history. First-hand accounts of travelers provide useful insights into life during an era. But travelogues like the *Storia*

are also often full of completely fabricated details, which make the job of historians much harder!

Consider Marco Polo, one of the most iconic figures in history, an Italian merchant who visited the Mongol courts and traveled the length and breadth of the Silk Road. He is probably the most famous traveler in history and a common figure in school textbooks. But did you know that when he saw rhinos, he thought they were really ugly unicorns?

Niccolao Manucci was no different. His memoirs are full of factual errors and colourful lies. But through the work of scholars, it's possible to piece together some key details. Manucci was born in 1638 in Venice and came to India when he was just 17. He landed in Surat and was employed by Dara Shikoh. After Shikoh's defeat, he worked for the Rajput king Mirza Raja Jai Singh, but this stint too did not last long. Manucci's travels and quests for employment took him from all over India, from Kashmir to Bengal, and Goa to Madras (present-day Chennai).

The Italian tried to move to Goa, probably to be closer to other Europeans, but despite multiple attempts, he was never able to successfully plant roots in the Portuguese enclave. Instead, he worked for other Muslim rulers in Lahore and then the Deccan. Because he was Italian and thus unaligned with any particular power in the subcontinent, he was able to move freely between kingdoms and rulers. But his constant jumping back and forth between European and Indian employers soon meant that he wore out his welcome with both. And so, in the 1680s, Manucci fled to the south.

It was in the south that Manucci finally settled down. He was close friends with the founder and governor of Pondicherry, Francois Martin. And he developed a good working relationship with the English East India Company, using his experience to act as their intermediary with the Nawab of Arcot. He married, grew wealthy and built two houses, one in Pondicherry and one in Madras on St. Thomas Mount (or Parangi Malai, meaning 'foreigner's hill'). He also earned a reputation as a physician, combining stray bits of Siddha, a medicinal tradition native to South India, that he had learned from local practitioners and whatever tricks that had worked for him over his many decades in India. Because he had no formal training, he was more quack than doctor, but that didn't seem to stop him from garnering some level of success.

It was when he was in Madras that he began writing his epic work, *Storia do Mogor*. As he finished each volume of the book, he would send it by ship back to Europe to be published. He might have written even more if not for a personal tragedy struck. In quick succession, he lost his wife, Elizabeth, as well as his close friend, Francois Martin. Ironically, his self-proclaimed nemesis, Aurangzeb also died around the same time. Manucci himself probably passed away in Madras around 1720.

The five volumes of the *Storia* are a fascinating view into the 17th-century world of India, but without scholars and historians who quietly piece together the truth, they would be as unreliable as weather forecasts of the rain!

rajeshsharma1049@gmail.com



Pondicherry in the late 18th century.

## #JEFFREY HUDSON

# The Queen's Dwarf and Soldier of Fortune

Hudson's desire for honour led to a fatal turning point. He was challenged to a duel by a man named Crofts. Hudson, armed with a pistol, killed his opponent

Jeffrey Hudson, often remembered as the 'Queen's Dwarf', was born in England in 1619. His father worked as a butcher and Hudson was born noticeably smaller than average. According to popular belief at the time, his short stature was caused by an incident during his mother's pregnancy when she was said to have choked on a pickle. While such explanations reflected early modern superstition, historians today believe that if Hudson had been born in modern times, he would likely have been diagnosed with a pituitary gland disorder affecting growth.

By the age of seven, Hudson's life took a dramatic turn. He came to the attention of George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham, who took him into his household. During the 17th century, keeping court dwarfs was a common form of aristocratic entertainment and a symbol of wealth and status. When King Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria visited the Duke, Hudson was presented to the Queen in a theatrical display; he emerged from inside a large pie as a surprise gift.

Hudson soon became a favoured member of Queen Henrietta Maria's court. He was often seen alongside a much taller courtier named Evan, a contrast famously captured in a painting by Anthony van Dyck titled *Queen Henrietta Maria with Sir Jeffrey Hudson*. Despite being treated as a curiosity, Hudson received a good education, performed in court entertainments, and was given a per-



sonal servant, fine clothing, and even a horse, an extraordinary privilege for someone of his stature.

As he grew older, Hudson became increasingly determined to be taken seriously. He accompanied royal missions, including a journey to seek a midwife for the Queen. On his return voyage, the ship was commandeered by pirates, marking one of many dangerous episodes in his life.

In 1642, the English Civil War broke out, and Hudson supported the Royalist cause. Rejecting his role as a novelty, he joined the fighting and was eventually given the title Captain of Horse. In battle, he earned respect for his courage, insisting on being treated as a soldier rather than a "little lord" or court amusement.

After fleeing to France, Hudson's desire for honour led to a fatal turning point. He was challenged to a duel by a man named Crofts. Hudson, armed with a pistol, killed his opponent and reportedly showed no remorse. Although he won the duel, he lost his freedom. He was imprisoned, though his life was spared due to the Queen's

intervention, and he was eventually sent back to England.

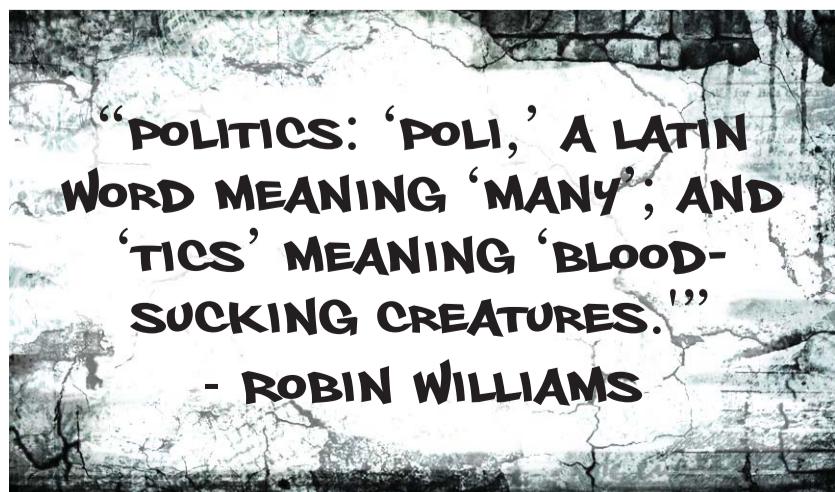
Misfortune followed him still. During another voyage, his ship was raided, and Hudson was captured and taken to North Africa. He was sold into slavery in Algiers, where he spent years in bondage. During this time, Hudson experienced a growth spurt, meaning he was no longer physically unique in the way that had once defined his life.

Eventually rescued, Hudson returned to England after the Restoration of King Charles II. He went back to London hoping to receive compensation for his service and suffering. However, instead of honour, he encountered suspicion. During the hysteria of the Popish Plot, Hudson was arrested due to his Catholic faith and imprisoned once more.

Jeffrey Hudson died in 1682. Despite a life spent in royal courts, on battlefields, and across continents, he was buried as a pauper, without ceremony or splendor. His story remains one of the most unusual of 17th-century England, a man who fought relentlessly to be seen not as a curiosity, but as a person of dignity and honour.



## THE WALL



## BABY BLUES



## ZITS

