



DOMINIK KULSEN

Nature's Brilliant Colours

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All about Natural Coloured Diamonds

Jean Baptiste Tavernier (1605-1689)

Traveller and Diamond Expert

The French traveller and diamond merchant Jean Baptiste Tavernier was born in Paris in 1605, the son of a Protestant Flemish cartographer. Surrounded by geographical maps of distant lands, Tavernier developed a desire to travel at an early age.

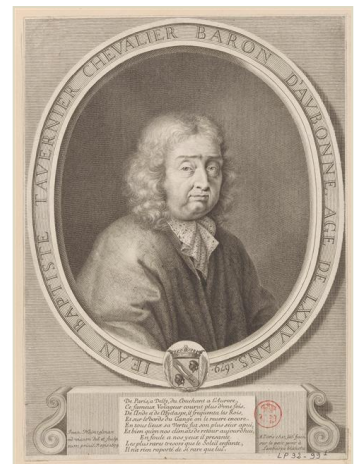
Thus, Tavernier made six trips to Persia and India between 1630-1668, sponsored by Cardinal Mazarin and King Louis XIV. In Paris, between 1676 and 1679, Tavernier published an account of his experiences and adventures under the title of *Les Six Voyages de Jean Baptiste Tavernier en Turquie, en Perse et aux Indes* (Jean-Baptiste Tavernier's Six Voyages to Turkey, Persia and India).

Tavernier, a man who possessed alert intelligence and an accurate sense of observation, enjoyed an excellent reputation as a diamond merchant and expert both in his homeland and among the Oriental princes of his time. Tavernier's reports provide information on travel routes, the origins of precious goods, the practices and participants involved in the gem trade in India and Europe, the characteristics of the oriental trade, and, especially, information about the variety of precious stones.

At the age of 22, he had travelled much of Europe and experienced the Thirty Years' War, serving under Colonel Hans Brenner. A half-year's stay in the household of the Viceroy of Hungary, Brenner's uncle, and brief contact in 1629 with the Duke of Rethel (France), and his father, the Duke of Nevers (France), Prince of Mantua (Italy), familiarized Tavernier with court life; these experiences would be invaluable to him in later years. One of Tavernier's first military experiences occurred in 1629 during the defence of Mantua in 1629 when he served under Colonel Walter Butler.

The First Voyage (1630-1633)

In 1630, Tavernier had seen Switzerland, Germany, Poland, Hungary, France, England and the Netherlands and was now eager to travel to the Orient. He left Colonel Butler and joined two French priests on a mission to the East, reaching Constantinople in 1631. Eleven months later, he traveled through Tokat and Erzurum (Turkey) and Yerevan (Armenia) to Persia. The farthest point of the trip was Isfahan (Iran). His return journey took him to Baghdad (Iraq), Aleppo (Syria), Alexandretta (southern Turkey), Malta and Italy. He reached Paris in 1633.



Jean Baptiste Tavernier (1605-1689).



J.B. Tavernier, portrait by Nicolas de Largillière; Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig.



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Map of the "Gani Coulour" region in southeast India from 1676 to 1679, according to Tavernier. The dotted lines show his route.
Photo: National Library.

The Second (1638–1643) and Third (1643–1649) Voyages

In September 1638, Tavernier left on his second journey that took him from Aleppo to Persia and from there to Agra and Golconda in India. His visits to the court of the Grand Mogul and the diamond mines laid the foundations for Tavernier's later success as a senior trader dealing in valuable jewels and precious goods.

His third voyage (1643–1649) led Tavernier to Java (Indonesia). Little is known about the subsequent trips taken between 1651 and 1668, but they went no further than India.

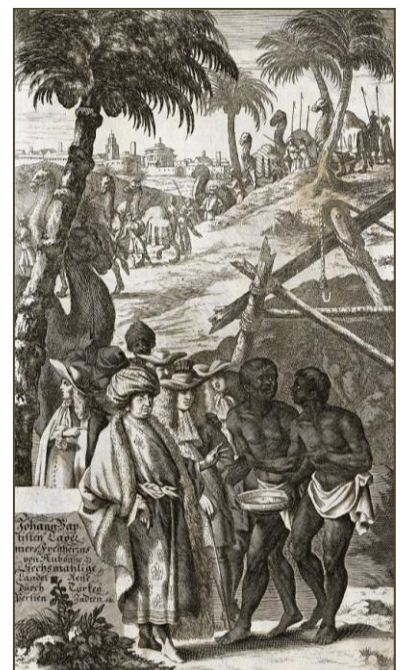
17th Century Diamond Trade in India

The discovery of sea routes to India in the 16th and 17th centuries helped develop relations between Europe and the subcontinent. Information entered Europe through the Portuguese crown servants, merchants and missionaries. The number of European travellers to India increased steadily and their travel accounts corrected, expanded and put into concrete terms what was then known about India.

Whereas Jehan de Mandeville's travel accounts (1357–1371) emphasized the unimaginable riches of India, Duarte Barbosa, agent of the Portuguese crown in Cannanore (South India), describes, as early as 1510, specific sites where precious stones, diamonds and pearls were to be found as well as cities with thriving gem trades.

Many merchants travelled by sea under the protection of large trading companies such as the Dutch Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or the English East India Company. Tavernier, however, as an independent businessman, chose to travel by the land and water ways that led to the Mediterranean by way of Lahore (Pakistan) and Kandahar (Afghanistan) or via the Persian Gulf to Aleppo.

In his wake, he led servants and interpreters, as well as agents who scouted the jewel markets for him. In the East, he joined the trade caravans travelling in the direction of Persia and India. Once in India, Tavernier travelled with various companions, perhaps a fellow French jeweller, for example, in the customary manner, using carriages, sedan chairs and baggage carts.



Copperplate engraving on frontispiece:
Tavernier trading diamonds with the natives.



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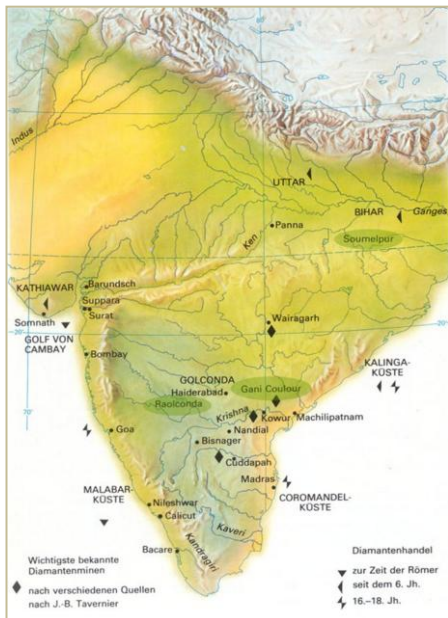
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Gemstone Markets and Diamond Mines

The main attractions for European traders in India were the numerous jewellery and gemstone markets in cities such as Patna in the state of Bihar and Dhaka (Dacca), the capital of Bangladesh. Tavernier reported that more than 2 000 people were employed in jewellery production. During his trip through the Ganges Plains (1665-1666), he himself spent more than 11 000 rupees, probably for jewels and precious stones. In the 17th century, and in addition to the large jewellery markets, it was also possible to buy diamonds directly at the mining sites.



Deposits and trade centres in India. Drawing: Burns Graphics, London; the three mines visited by Tavernier are shown.

Tavernier was not, as he believed himself to be, the first European to visit the Indian mines; he was, however, the only one who gave detailed descriptions of the diamond sites. He gave a detailed account of the diamond mines of Ramulconeta (Raolconda) and Quolure (Gani Colour) in the south of the subcontinent and of Soumelpour in the Northeast. At that time, these mines were owned by the ruler of Golconda, Abdullah Shah Kuthb, and that of Bijapur, Ali Adil Shah.

They awarded licenses for the mining of diamonds to local dealers who, in exchange, had to pay a daily fee and a tax on all profits. The rough or polished stones were offered for sale to gem dealers and jewellers on-site.

Tavernier provides vivid descriptions of the gem trade with foreign traders. One evening, for example, an Indian businessman came to see him in his lodgings. After the men had become acquainted, the dealer offered Tavernier a set of ruby rings. Although Tavernier felt the stones were too small, he still bought one of the rings in the hope that he might later be offered more valuable stones.

He also expressed an interest in larger specimens. When the two men next met, the diamond dealer took off his turban, let his hair down, and pulled out a small cloth in which he had wrapped a 48.50 ct diamond. He gave the diamond to Tavernier to examine; after examining the diamond closely, Tavernier bought it the following day.

So, actual trading was held in private. Tavernier first had to demonstrate his professional skill with the rubies before he was offered the precious diamond. This episode also shows how important contact with Indian traders was for European traders if they wished to buy diamonds in India.



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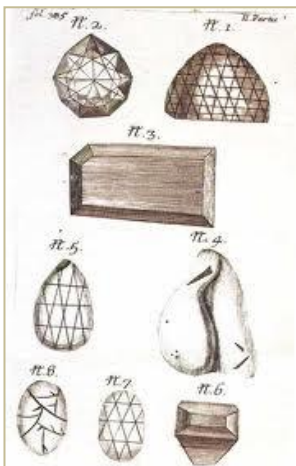
At the Court of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb

Tavernier traded not only diamonds in India but also valuable exported luxury goods from Europe. He paved his way to the highest ruling circles of India by first giving gifts of the finest materials and craftsmanship.

He maintained particularly close trade relations with the provincial governor of the Mogul empire in Gujarat and later in Bengal, Shaista Khan, as well as with the reigning ruler of the empire, Muhammad Aurangzeb Alamgir (1618-1707).



Muhammad Aurangzeb Alamgir (1618-1707).



Engraving from *The Six Voyages...*
Photo: H. Josse, Paris.
No. 1 Great Mogul / No. 2 Florentine
No. 3 Great Table

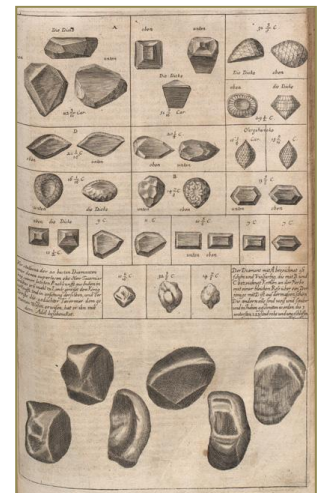
In 1665, Tavernier was allowed the honour of admiring the jewels of the Grand Mogul. He sketched and described the presented pieces in a meticulous manner. Among them were the Great Mogul, a 280 carat diamond, and the Great Table, from which the *Darya-i-Nur* and the *Nur-ul-Ain* were probably cut.

The Tavernier Blue

Tavernier also sold stones in India to, for example, employees of the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, who "improved" their salaries by smuggling diamonds. He also brought home large numbers of precious diamonds, gems and jewellery from his journeys, including twenty large diamonds weighing between 30 and 50 carats.

Even at the court of Versailles, whose splendour and luxury were unparalleled in Europe, no one had ever seen anything like it.

Among them was the unique diamond, called the *Tavernier Blue*, now known as the *Hope Diamond*. In 1669, Tavernier sold this exceptional diamond to King Louis XIV, for 220,000 pounds, which at that time corresponded in value to 147 kg of gold. Contrary to legend, however, Tavernier did not steal the stone from a statue of the goddess Sita-Rama, but found it in a tributary of the Coleroon, in south-eastern India.



Engraving of the 20 diamonds Tavernier sold to Louis XIV in 1669. National Library of Paris, Photo: Hubert Josse, Paris.

Sources:

Der Diamant. Mythos, Magie und Wirklichkeit. Karl Müller Verlag, Erlangen 1991.

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