Theme 5: Through the Eyes of Travellers

Early life:

- * **Born** in 973
- *Place: Khwarizm in present-day Uzbekistan.
- *Well versed in **several languages**: Syriac, Arabic, Persian, Hebrew and Sanskrit.
- *Familiar with the works of Plato and other **Greek philosophers**
- *Taken to Ghazni as a hostage,by Sultan Mahmud

Life in Ghazni:

- * Developed an interest in India.
- *Sanskrit works on astronomy, mathematics and medicine had been translated into Arabic from the eighth century onwards.
- *Punjab became a part of the Ghaznavid empire,
- *Al-Biruni spent years in the **company of Brahmana priests** and scholars, learning
 Sanskrit, and studying religious and philosophical texts.
- *He **travelled** widely in the Punjab and parts of northern India.

Traveller-Al-Biruni and the Kitab-ul-Hind

The Kitab-ul-Hind

- *Written in Arabic,
- *Language: Simple and lucid
- * It is a voluminous text, divided into 80 chapters
- * On **subjects** such as religion and philosophy, festivals, astronomy, alchemy, manners and customs, social life, weights and measures, iconography, laws and metrology.

Distinctive structure in each chapter, beginning:

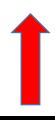
- 1) with a question,
- following this up with a description based on Sanskritic traditions
- 3) Concluding with a **comparison** with other cultures .

Several "barriers" - obstructed understanding.

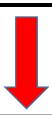
The **first** barrier- language. According to him, Sanskrit was so different from Arabic and Persian that ideas and concepts could not be easily translated from one language into another.

The second barrier -he identified was the difference in religious beliefs and practices.

The **third** barrier - The self-absorption and consequent insularity of the local population.



Al-Biruni and the Sanskritic Tradition



Description of the caste

- *He looked for parallels in other societies.
- * In ancient Persia, four social categories were recognised: those of knights and princes; monks, fire-priests and lawyers; physicians, astronomers and other scientists; and finally, peasants and artisans.
- * He attempted to suggest that social divisions were not unique to India.
- * At the same time he pointed out that within Islam all men were considered equal, differing only in their observance of piety.

Al-Biruni adopted distinct strategies – to handle these barriers:

- *He depended almost exclusively on the works of Brahmanas,
- *Often citing passages from the Vedas, the Puranas, the Bhagavad Gita, the works of Patanjali, the Manusmriti, etc., to provide an understanding of Indian society.

Al-Biruni disapproved of the notion of pollution

- * He remarked that everything which falls into a state of impurity strives and succeeds in regaining its original condition of purity.
- * The conception of social pollution, intrinsic to the caste system, was according to him, contrary to the laws of nature.



In real life the system was not quite as rigid e.g categories defined as antyaja - were often subjected to social oppression, they were included within economic networks.

Early life:

- *Place of birth: Tangier, Morocco
- *Family: the most **respectable and educated family** known for their expertise in Islamic religious law of shari'a.
- *His idea of life: **considered experience** gained through travels to be a more important source of knowledge than books.

Ibn Battuta

As a traveler:

- *Book of travels called Rihla, written in Arabic
- *Details of the book : provides details about the **social and cultural life** in the subcontinent in the 14th, century
- *1332-33- **pilgrimage trips** to Mecca, and had already travelled extensively in Syria, Iraq, Persia, Yemen, Oman and a few trading ports on the coast of East Africa.
- *Stay in Delhi Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq, appointed him the **qazi or judge of Delhi**.
- *In 1342 to proceed to **China** as the Sultan's envoy to the Mongol ruler.

Stay in China:

- *He travelled **extensively** in China.
- * Going as far as Beijing,
- *Decided to return home in 1347.
- *His account is often compared with that of Marco Polo,

Observations while travelling:

- *About new cultures, peoples, beliefs, values, etc.
- *Travelling was also **more insecure:**attacked by bands of robbers several times
- *He preferred travelling in a caravan along with companions,
- *He was an inveterate traveller who spent several years travelling

Travel in the sub-continent - 14th, century

- *Travelled extensively through these lands, visiting sacred shrines,
- *Spending time with learned men and rulers, often officiating as qazi
- *Enjoying the cosmopolitan culture of urban centres where people who spoke Arabic, Persian, Turkish and other languages, shared ideas, information and anecdotes.

Ibn Battuta and Indian cities

- *Full of exciting **opportunities** for those who had the drive, resources and skills.
- *They were densely populated and prosperous
- *Crowded streets and bright and colourful markets that were stacked with a wide variety of goods.
- *Delhi as a vast city, with a great population, the largest in India.

Ibn Battuta and the Excitement of the Unfamiliar

Description of a bazar:

- * Places of economic transactions, but also the hub of social and cultural activities.
- *Most bazaars had a mosque and a temple
- * Spaces marked for **public performances** by dancers, musicians and singers.
- *Towns derived a significant portion of their wealth through the appropriation of surplus from villages.
- *Indian textiles, particularly cotton cloth, fine muslins, silks, brocade and satin, were in great demand.

A unique system of communication

- *Special measures to encourage merchants.
- *Trade routes were well supplied with inns and guest houses.
- * Efficient **postal system** which allowed merchants to not only send information and remit credit across long distances.
- * But also to **dispatch goods** required at short notice.

- * A **Frenchman** a doctor, political philosopher and historian.
- * He came to the Mughal Empire in search of **Opportunities.**
- *He was in India for **twelve years**, from 1656 to 1668,
- *Closely associated with the Mughal court, as a physician to Prince Dara Shukoh, the eldest son of Emperor Shah Jahan,
- *And later as an intellectual and scientist, with Danishmand Khan, an Armenian noble at the Mughal court.

Comparing "East" and "West"

- *Frequently **comparing** what he saw in India with the situation in Europe.
- *What he saw in India as a **bleak situation** in comparison to developments in Europe.

François Bernier A Doctor with a Difference

- * Works were published in France in 1670-71
- *Translated into English, Dutch, German and Italian within the next five years.
- *Between 1670 and 1725 his account was **reprinted** eight times in French.
- * By 1684 it had been reprinted three times in English.

A different intellectual tradition:

- *Comparing and contrasting what he saw in India with the situation in Europe in general and France in particular.
- * **Focusing** on situations which he considered depressing.
- * His idea to **influence policy-makers** and the intelligentsia to ensure that they made what he considered to be the "right" decisions.

Bernier and the "Degenerate"

East

Book : Travels in the Mughal Empire

- *Contains, Detailed observations, critical insights and reflection.
- * Discussions trying to place the history of the Mughals within a **universal framework.**
- *Has compared Mughal India with contemporary Europe, emphasising on the superiority of the latter.
- *His representation of India works on the **model** of binary opposition, where India is presented as the inverse of Europe.
- *He also ordered the perceived differences hierarchically, so that **India** appeared to **be inferior** to the Western world.

Consequences of crown ownership of land

- *Landholders **could not pass** on their land to their children.
- *They were averse to any long-term investment in the sustenance and expansion of production.
- *Prevented the emergence of the class of 'improving" landlords
- *Uniform ruination of agriculture,
- *excessive **oppression** of the peasantry
- * Continuous **decline** in the living standards of all sections of society, except the ruling aristocracy.

The question of landownership

- * Lack of private property in India
- *He was a firm believer private property
- * Crown ownership harmful for both the state and its people.
- *This had disastrous consequences on the economy and society.

Description of Indian society

- *Consisting of **undifferentiated masses** of impoverished people, subjugated by a small minority of a very rich and powerful ruling class.
- *Between the poor and rich- no social group
- *Bernier confidently asserted: "There is no middle state in India."

View from Mughal official documents:

- *The state was **not** the sole owner of land
- *The land revenue made by the ruler on his subjects for **the**protection he provided rather than as rent on land that he owned.
- *Land revenue demands were often very high.
- *This was actually not a rent or even a land tax, but a tax on the crop

Bernier and Indian society

Influence on Western theorists

French philosopher Montesquieu- developed the idea of oriental despotism, according to which rulers in Asia enjoyed absolute authority over their subjects,

*Subjects were kept in conditions of subjugation and poverty, arguing that all land belonged to the king and that private property was non-existent.

Karl Marx -the concept of the Asiatic mode of production

- * He argued that in India before colonialism, **surplus** was appropriated by the **state.**
- *This led to **the emergence** of a society that was composed of a large number of **autonomous and (internally) egalitarian village communities**. *The imperial court presided over these village communities, respecting their autonomy as long as the flow of surplus was unimpeded.

This was regarded as a stagnant system.

Social reality

- *Artisans had no incentive
- *Manufactures were in decline.