

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**,
- 2) following this up with a **description** based on Sanskrit 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 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 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 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.

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.

Ibn Battuta

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.

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.

Bernier and the “Degenerate” East

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.