Theme 5

Through the Eyes of Travellers: Perceptions of Society

(c. Tenth to Seventeenth Century)

The theme focused on the accounts of three men: Al-Beruni, Ibn Batuta and Francois Bernier.

Three Travellers of the Medieval Period

Traveler Name	Al-Biruni	Ibn-Battuta	Francois Bernier
Travelled Date	11th Century	14th Century	17th Century
Their Country	Uzbekistan	Morocco	France
Their Book	Kitab-ul-Hind	Rihla	Travels in the Mughal Empire
Language of Book	Arabic	Arabic	English
Visited during King's Reign	Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni	Sultan Muhammd bin Tughlaq	Mugal Emperor Shahjahan & Aurangzeb
Wrote About	•Social & Religious condition •Indian Philosophy Astronomy •Metrology •Judiciary •Historical knowledge •Caste system	•The coconut & the Paan •Indian cities & agriculture •Trade & commerce Communication & postal system •Slavery.	Sati Pratha Ownership of land, Kinds of town the Imperial Karkhanas Mugal Artisans
Authenticity of Work	Authentic	Not Authentic	Authentic

- The accounts of the foreign travellers are helpful in reconstructing the history of India from 10th to 17th century.
- Most of the travellers came from vastly different social and cultural environment. Hence, they were more attentive to everyday activities and practices. These were taken for granted by indigenous writers.
- Their difference in perspective makes their accounts interesting.

RAJPUT DYNASTIES

Tomaras	Early twelfth century-1165
Ananga Pala	1130-1145
Chauhans	1165-1192
Prithviraj Chauhan	1175-1192

EARLY TURKISH RULERS 1206-1290

Qutbuddin Aybak	1206-1210
Shamsuddin Iltutmish	1210-1236
Raziyya	1236-1240
Ghiyasuddin Balban	1266-1287

Iltutmish's tomb

KHALJI DYNASTY 1290-1320

Jalaluddin Khalji	1290-1296
Alauddin Khalji	1296-1316

TUGHLUQ DYNASTY 1320-1414

Ghiyasuddin Tughluq	1320-1324
Muhammad Tughluq	1324-1351
Firuz Shah Tughluq	1351-1388

Alai Darwaza

SAYYID DYNASTY 1414-1451

Khizr Khan	1414-1421

LODI DYNASTY 1451-1526

Bahlul Lodi	1451-1489

Firuz Shah Tughluq's tomb

- Their accounts deals with affairs of the court, religious issues, architectural features and monuments.

Al- Biruni

- Al-Biruni was born in 973, in Khwarizm (present day Uzbekistan).
- He was a learnt man and well versed in several languages such as Syriac, Arabic, Persian, Hebrew and Sanskrit.
- He has learnt the Arabic translation of Greeks philosophers like Plato.
- Mahamud Gazni invaded Khwarizm in 1017 and brought Al- Biruni with him to Gazni.
- When the Punjab became a part of the Ghaznavid Empire, Al-Beruni who also followed Gazni and settled there. Where he got a chance to learn Indian texts on Indian religion and philosophy.
- He came into contact with local Sanskrit scholars.

Kitab- ul -Hind

- The accounts of Al-Beruni came to be called Kitab- ul -Hind or Tahkik-e-Hind. The Kitab-ul-Hind was written in Arabic language and was divided into 80 chapters.
- It dealt with subjects such as religion and philosophy, festivals, astronomy, alchemy, manners and customs, social life, weights and measures, iconography, laws and metrology.
- Al-Beruni has adopted a mathematical approach. He begins each chapter with a question followed up with a description and comparison of cultures.
- Scholars viewed this method is result of his mathematical orientation.

Making Sense of an alien world: Alberuni and the Sanskritic tradition.

The barriers that Al-Beruni observed in understanding the Indian society

- Al-Beruni discussed several barriers that obstructed the understanding of Indian society.
- The first barrier was the language: To him Sanskrit was so different from Arabic and Persian.
- The second barrier was that Al-Beruni identified was the difference in religious beliefs and practices.
- The third barrier was the self-observation and consequent insularity of the local population. He depended mainly on the works of Brahmansa and often quoted from the Vedas,the Puranas,the Bhagavad Gita,the works of Patanjali,and the Manusmriti.

Al- Beruni's description of the caste system

- Al-Beruni tried to explain the caste system by comparing it with other societies.
- He said that in ancient Persia, there were four social categories: Knights and princes, monks, fire-priests and lawyers, physicians, astronomers and other scientists.
- He tried to understand that social divisions were not unique to India.
- He pointed out that within Islam all men were considered equal and difference was based on only the observance of piety.
- He described about the four varnas such as Brhamana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra.
- But he did not accept the Brahmanical notion of pollution.
- He said that everything which falls into a state of impurity strives and succeeds in regaining its original condition of purity.
- The sun cleanses the air, and the salt in the sea prevents the water from becoming polluted.
- According to him, the notion of pollution which was intrinsic to caste system was against the laws of nature.
- Al-Beruni's description of the caste system was deeply influenced by his familiarity with

normative Sanskrit texts which laid down the rules governing the system from the point of view of the Brahmanas.
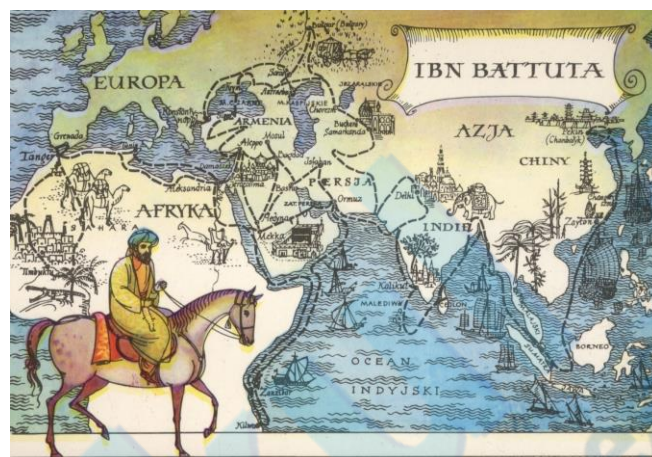
Ibn Battuta

- Ibn Battuta was an African traveller who came from Morocco.
- He was born in Tangier. He learnt literature and other scholarly works at his young age.
- He considered that knowledge gained through travels is more important source than books.
- He loved travelling, and went far off places, exploring new worlds and peoples.
- Before his visit to India, he had made pilgrimage to Mecca and travelled extensively in Syria, Iraq, Persia, Yemen, Oman and a few trading ports on the coast of East Africa.

Ibn Battuta's visit to India

- He set off his travel to India in 1332-33 and reached Sind in 1333.
- He was able to get the reputation of the sultan of Delhi; Muhammed bin Tughlaq.
- The sultan was impressed by the scholarship of Ibn Battuta and appointed him as the qazi or judge of Delhi.
- He remained judge for many years. The sultan appointed him as his ambassador to China.
- During his journey to China, he also visited Malabar Coast, Maldives, Bengal, Assam and Sumatra.
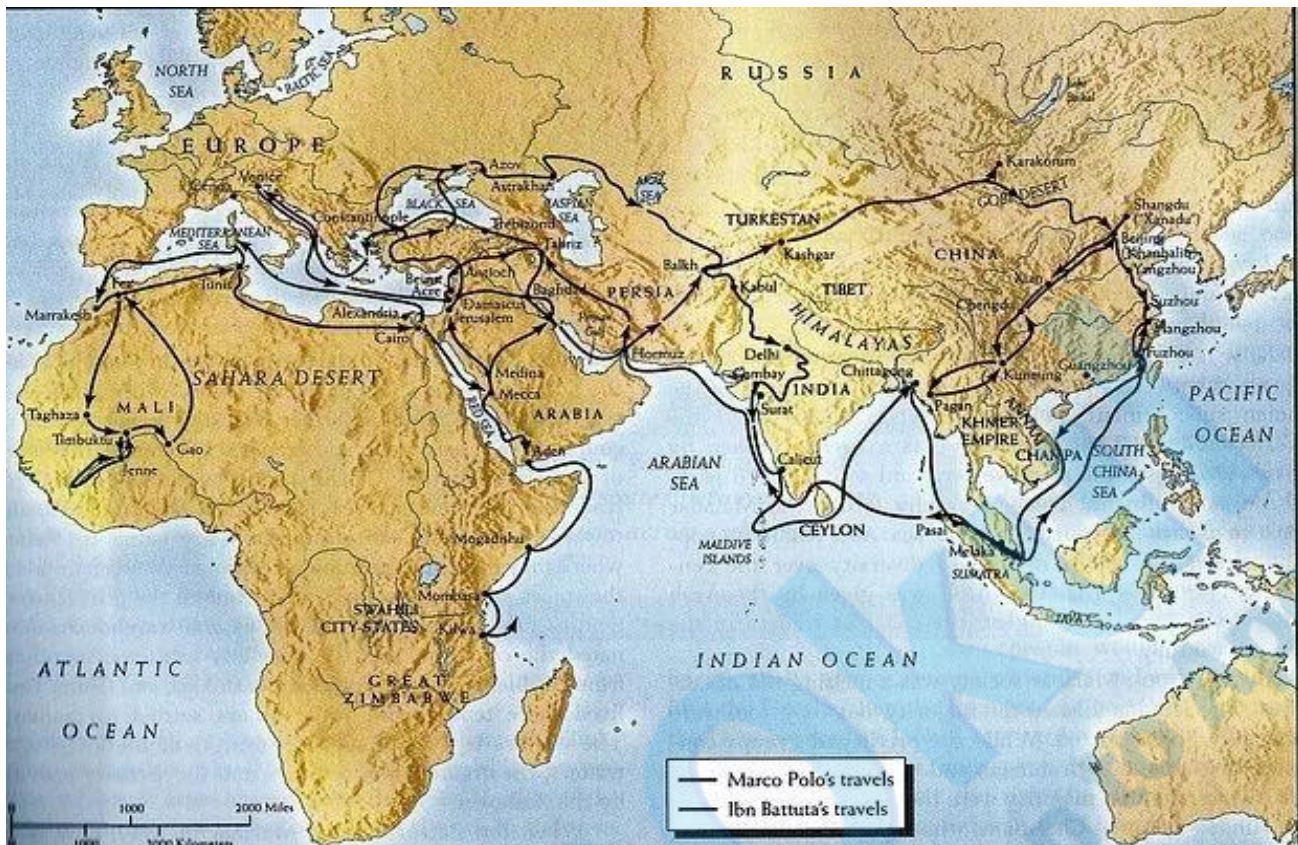
Rihla
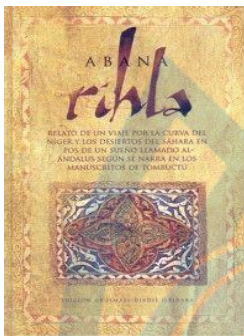
- Ibn Battuta's book of travels called Rihla was written in Arabic provides the social and cultural life in the subcontinent in the 14th century.
- He carefully recorded his observations about new cultures, peoples, beliefs, values etc.

Ibn Battuta and Indian cities

- Ibn Battuta found cities in the subcontinent full of exciting opportunities for those who are able and have resources and skills.
- The cities were densely populated and prosperous. Cities were disrupted during wars invasions.
- His account said that streets in many cities were crowded and bright and colourful markets were with full of many varieties of goods.
- He described Delhi as a vast city, with a great population, the largest in India.
- Bazaars were not only places of economic transaction but also the hub of social and cultural activities. Many bazaars had mosque and temple with spaces for public performances by dancers and singers.
- Ibn Battuta noted that the cities obtained its wealth from villages.
- This was because of the agricultural production with two crops a year.
- He says that there was a great demand for Indian textiles like cotton cloth, fine muslins, silks, brocade and satin.
- He further says that certain varieties of fine muslin were so expensive that could be worn only by the nobles and the very rich.

A unique system of communication

- Almost all trade routes were well supplied with inns and guest houses.
- Ibn Battuta was amazed by the efficiency of the postal system.
- The Postal system was of two kinds.
 - One was called uluq(horse post) and the other was dawa(foot post)

- This system enabled merchants to send information, remit credit across long distances and to dispatch goods required at short notice

Francois Bernier

- Francois Bernier was French by birth and doctor by profession.
- He was a political philosopher and historian.
- He came to the Mughal Empire in search of opportunities.
- He lived in India for twelve years from 1656 to 1668.
- He was a physician to Prince Dara Shukoh, the eldest son of Emperor Shah Jahan and intellectual and scientist with Danishmand Khan, an Armenian noble at the Mughal court.
- Bernier travelled to different parts of the country and wrote accounts based on his own observations and compared the social conditions in India with the situations in Europe.
- He dedicated his works to Louis XIV, the king of France.
- His works were published in France in 1670-71 and translated into English, Dutch, German and Italian. Later his account was reprinted number of times.

Travels in the Mughal Empire
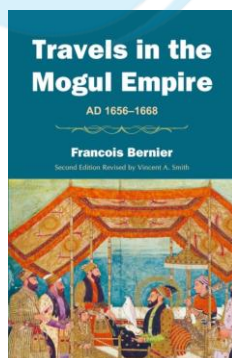
- Bernier's Travels in the Mughal Empire provides a detailed observations and critical insights.
- He constantly compared Mughal India with contemporary Europe.
- He emphasized the superiority of the European society.

The question of landownership

- According to Bernier, one of the fundamental differences between Mughal India and Europe was the lack of private property in the Indian society.
- He had a firm belief in the virtues of private property.
- Crown ownership of land was harmful for both state and its people.
- He thought that the Mughal Emperor owned all land and distributed it among the nobles.

- He argued that lands under the crown ownership could not be passed on to their children.
- So, they were averse to any long-term investment in the sustenance and expansion of production.

- The absence of private property prevented the emergence of the class of 'improving' landlords as it was in Western Europe to maintain and improve the land.
- It had ruined the agriculture and oppressed the peasants and the living standards of all sections in the society declined except the ruling aristocracy.

Bernier's description on the social condition of India

- Bernier described Indian society as consisting of undifferentiated masses of a very rich and powerful ruling class.
- There was a wide gap between the poorest of poor and richest of the rich. He says "There is no middle state in India."

Bernier's description on the Mughal Emperor and his subjects

- Bernier described the Mughal Empire as the king of "beggars and barbarians".
- Its cities and towns were ruined and contaminated with "ill air" and its fields "overspread with bushes "and full of "pestilential marishes".
- He attributed all these problems to the crown ownership of land.
- Bernier says that there was the practice of crown ownership of land and no private ownership of land or private property.
- But none of the Mughal official documents show that the state was the sole owner of land.
- According to the official chronicler of Akbar's reign Abul Fazl, the Mughal Emperor collected only the remunerations from the people for the protection given by the state and no rent was collected.
- Bernier regarded the remuneration as land revenue since it was very high sometimes.

The idea of Oriental despotism

- Bernier's descriptions of landownership influenced western theorists from the 18th century onwards.
- For instance, the French philosopher Montesquieu used Bernier's account and developed the idea of Oriental despotism.

- According to this idea in Asia (the Orient or the East) the kings enjoyed absolute authority over his subjects and owned all lands.
- There was no private property. All people except King and nobles struggled for survival.

The Concept of Asiatic mode of production

- Karl Marx further developed the idea of Oriental despotism as Asiatic mode of production.
- Marx observes that before colonialism, surplus production was appropriated by the state.
- This led to the emergence of a society that was composed of a large number of autonomous and egalitarian village communities.
- The imperial court respected these villages as long as the flow of surplus was continued. Marx regarded this as a stagnant system

A more complex social reality

- Bernier's descriptions occasionally hint at a more complex social reality.
- Artisans had no incentive to improve the quality of their manufactures.
- All profits were appropriated by the state. Manufactures were everywhere declining.
- At the same time, he agreed that vast quantities of the world's precious metals flowed into India, as manufactures were exported in exchange for gold and silver.
- He also mentioned that there existed a prosperous merchant community engaging in long distance trade.

Mughal cities

- During the 17th century about 15 percent of the population lived in towns.
- Bernier described Mughal cities as "camp towns", which were dependent upon imperial patronage.
- There were all kinds of towns: manufacturing towns, trading towns, port-towns, sacred centres, pilgrimage towns etc.

- The existence of towns indicates the prosperity of merchant communities and professional classes.
- Merchants had a strong community or kin ties and were organized into their own caste –cumoccupational groups.
- In western India these groups were called Mahajans, and their chief, the sheth.
- In urban centres such as Ahmedabad the chief of the merchant community who was called nagarsheth collectively represented the Mahajans.

Urban professional classes

- Urban groups included professional groups such as physicians (hakin or vaid), teachers (pundit or mulla), lawyers (wakil), painters, architects, musicians, calligraphers, etc.
- While some depended on imperial patronage, many made their living by serving other patrons while still others served ordinary people in crowded markets and bazaars

Use of Slaves

- Slaves were openly sold in markets. Like any other commodity, slaves were exchanged as gifts.
- When Ibn Battuta reached Sind, he purchased "horses, camels and slaves" as gifts for sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq.
- There was considerable differentiation among slaves.
- Some female slaves in the service of the Sultan were experts in music and dance.
- Female slaves were also used to keep a watch on his nobles by the sultan.

- Slaves were used for domestic labour. Ibn Battuta noted that men and women slaves carried palanquins or dola.
- The price of slaves particularly female slaves required for domestic labour, was very low.

The Practice of Sati

- Bernier has provided a detailed description of sati in his account.
- He mentioned that while some women seemed to embrace death cheerfully, others were forced to death.
- He also noticed the child satin which a twelve-year old young widow sacrificed.

Women Labourers

- Women labour was crucial in both agricultural and non-agricultural production.
- Women from merchant families participated in commercial activities.
- Therefore, it seems unlikely that women were confined to the private spaces of their homes.

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