

CHAPTER 5

THEME FIVE

Through the Eyes of Travellers

Perceptions of Society (c. tenth to seventeenth centuries)

1. Through the Eyes of Travellers

- The chapters talk about the different accounts given by different travellers who came to India from different parts of the world in the medieval period. The accounts that survive are often varied in terms of their subject matter. Some deal with affairs of the court, while others are mainly focused on religious issues, or architectural features and monuments.
- The focusses on the accounts of three men: Al-Biruni who came from Uzbekistan (eleventh century), Ibn Battuta who came from Morocco, in northwestern Africa (fourteenth century) and the Frenchman Franc'ois Bernier (seventeenth century).

1.1 Al-Biruni and the *Kitab-ul-Hind*

- Al-Biruni was born in 973, in Khwarizm in present-day Uzbekistan.
- In 1017, when Sultan Mahmud invaded Khwarizm, he took several scholars and poets back to his capital, Ghazni; Al-Biruni was one of them.
- He gradually developed a liking for the city, where he spent the rest of his life until his death at the age of 70.
- Al-Biruni spent years in the company of Brahmana priests and scholars, learning Sanskrit, and studying religious and philosophical texts

1.2 The *Kitab-ul-Hind*

- Al-Biruni's *Kitab-ul-Hind* was written in Arabic
- It is a voluminous text, divided into 80 chapters on subjects such as religion and philosophy, festivals, etc.
- Generally (though not always), Al-Biruni adopted a distinctive structure in each chapter, beginning with a question, following this up with a description based on Sanskrit traditions, and concluding with a comparison with other cultures.

2. Ibn Battuta's *Rihla*

2.1 An early globe-trotter

- Ibn Battuta's book of travels, called *Rihla*, written in Arabic, provides extremely rich and interesting details about the social and cultural life in the subcontinent in the fourteenth century.
- This Moroccan traveller was born in Tangier into one of the most respectable and educated families known for their expertise in Islamic religious law or *shari'a*.
- Travelling overland through Central Asia, Ibn Battuta reached Sind in 1333.
- To meet Muhammad bin Tughlaq, he set off for Delhi, passing through Multan and Uch. The Sultan was impressed by his scholarship, and appointed him the *qazi* or judge of Delhi.
- He was ordered in 1342 to proceed to China as the Sultan's envoy to the Mongol ruler.
- He travelled extensively in China, going as far as Beijing, but did not stay for long, deciding to return home in 1347. His account is often compared with that of Marco Polo, who visited China
- Ibn Battuta was attacked by bands of robbers several times. In fact he preferred travelling in a caravan along with companions.

3. Franc'ois Bernier A Doctor with a Difference

- Among the best known of the Portuguese writers is Duarte Barbosa, who wrote a detailed account of trade and society in south India.
- French jeweller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier travelled to India at least six times.
- Some of these travellers, like the Italian doctor Manucci, never returned to Europe, and settled down in India.

- He was closely associated with the Mughal court, as a physician to Prince Dara Shukoh, the eldest son of Emperor Shah Jahan.

3.1 Comparing “East” and “West”

- Bernier travelled to several parts of the country, and wrote accounts of what he saw, frequently comparing what he saw in India with the situation in Europe.
- He dedicated his major writing to Louis XIV, the king of France, and many of his other works were written in the form of letters to influential officials and ministers
- Bernier’s works were published in France in 1670-71 and translated into many other languages.
- Unlike the accounts in Arabic and Persian, which circulated as manuscripts, Bernier’s work was reprinted many times.

4. Making Sense of an Alien World Al-Biruni and the Sanskrit Tradition

4.1 Overcoming barriers to understanding

Each traveller adopted distinct strategies to understand what they observed.

Al-Biruni, for instance, discussed several “barriers”

- The first was language. 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 self-absorption and consequent insularity of the local population according to him, constituted the third barrier.
- Al-Biruni 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.,

4.2 Al-Biruni’s description of the caste system

- Al-Biruni attempted to suggest that social divisions were not unique to India.
- He noted that 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.
- 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.
- The categories defined as *antyaja* (literally, born outside the system) were often expected to provide inexpensive labour to both peasants and zamindars.

5. Ibn Battuta and the Excitement of the Unfamiliar

5.1 The coconut and the *paan*

His description of the coconut and the pan shows Ibn Battuta’s strategies of representation. These are the two kinds of plant produce that were completely unfamiliar to his audience.

5.2 Ibn Battuta and Indian cities

- Ibn Battuta found cities in the subcontinent full of exciting opportunities and which were densely populated and prosperous.
- He described Delhi as a vast city, with a great population, the largest in India. Daulatabad (in Maharashtra) was no less.
- Most bazaars had a mosque and a temple, and in some of them at least, spaces were marked for public performances by dancers, musicians and singers.
- Historians have used his account to suggest that towns derived a significant portion of their wealth through the appropriation of surplus from villages.
- He also noted that the subcontinent was well integrated with inter-Asian networks of trade. Indian textiles, particularly cotton cloth, fine muslins, silks, brocade and satin, were in great demand. Ibn Battuta informs us that certain varieties of fine muslin were so expensive that they could be worn only by the nobles and the very rich

5.3 A unique system of communication

- Almost all trade routes were well supplied with inns and guest houses.
- The postal system used to send information and remit credit across long distances, and also to dispatch goods at short notice.

6. Bernier and the “Degenerate” East

- Franc’ois Bernier was far more occupied with comparison.
- Bernier’s *Travels in the Mughal Empire* is marked by detailed observations, critical insights and reflection.
- His representation of India works on the model of binary opposition, where India is presented as the inverse of Europe.

6.1 The question of landownership

- He thought that in the Mughal Empire the emperor owned all the land and distributed it among his nobles, and that this had disastrous consequences for the economy and society.
- This perception is found in most travellers' accounts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
- Owing to crown ownership of land, argued Bernier, landholders could not pass on their land to their children. So they were averse to any long-term investment.
- It had led to the uniform ruination of agriculture, excessive oppression of the peasantry
- Bernier described Indian society as consisting of undifferentiated masses of impoverished people,
- Between the poorest of the poor and the richest of the rich, there was no Middle class.

Mughal's Account:

- For instance, Abu'l Fazl, the sixteenth-century official chronicler of Akbar's reign, describes the land revenue as "remunerations of sovereignty", a claim made by the ruler on his subjects for the protection he provided rather than as rent on land.

Ideological application of Bernier's Narrative:

- Bernier's descriptions influenced Western theorists from the eighteenth century onwards.
- The French philosopher Montesquieu, for instance, used this account to develop the idea of oriental despotism, according to which rulers in Asia (the Orient or the East) enjoyed absolute authority over their subjects.
- This idea was further developed as the concept of the Asiatic mode of production by Karl Marx in the nineteenth century. It was regarded a stagnant system.

Actual situation

- At one end of the spectrum were the big zamindars, who enjoyed superior rights in land and, at the other, the "untouchable" landless
- In between was the big peasant, who used hired labour and engaged in commodity production, and the smaller peasant who could barely produce for his subsistence.
- Bernier drew oversimplified picture of landownership.

- There were all kinds of towns: manufacturing towns, trading towns, port-towns, sacred centres, not just camp towns

6.2 A more complex social reality

- **Bernier** felt that artisans had no incentive to improve the quality of their manufactures, since profits were appropriated by the state.
- He conceded that vast quantities of the world's precious metals flowed into India, as manufactures were exported in exchange for gold and silver. He also noticed the existence of a prosperous merchant community, engaged in long-distance exchange.
- Merchants often had strong community or kin ties, and were organised into their own caste-cum-occupational bodies. In western India these groups were called *mahajans*, and their chief, the *sheth*.
- *The mahajans* were collectively represented by the chief of the merchant community who was called the *nagarsheth*.
- Other urban groups included professional classes such as physicians (*hakim* or *vaid*), teachers (*pundit* or *mulla*), lawyers (*wakil*), painters, architects, musicians, calligraphers, etc.

7. Women - Slaves, Sati and Labourers

- When Ibn Battuta reached Sind he purchased "horses, camels and slaves" as gifts for Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq.
- Some female slaves in the service of the Sultan were experts in music and dance, and Ibn Battuta enjoyed their performance.
- Female slaves were also employed by the Sultan to keep a watch on his nobles.
- The price of slaves, particularly female slaves required for domestic labour, was very low
- Women's lives revolved around much else besides the practice of sati. Their labour was crucial in both agricultural and non-agricultural production.
- Women from merchant families participated in commercial activities, sometimes even taking mercantile disputes to the court of law.

Bernier on Sati

- Not surprisingly, Bernier chose the practice of sati for detailed description.
- He noted that while some women seemed to embrace death cheerfully, others were forced to die.

Exercise

Level – 1

1. Al-Biruni generally adopted a distinctive structure in each chapter where the description was based on which of the following traditions?
(a) Sanskritic (b) Persian
(c) Arabic (d) None of the Above
2. The term “Hindu” was derived from an Old Persian word that referred to the region which lied to the east of which of the following rivers ?
(a) Sindhu (b) Sone
(c) Ganges (d) Saraswati
3. Find the false statements:
(a) Al-Biruni and Ibn Batuta were written in Arabic
(b) Al-Biruni had written Kitab-ul-Hind
(c) Rihla was written by Ibn Batuta
(d) Al-Biruni Kitab-ul-Hind and Rihla were biographies
4. Accounts of which of the following two travellers are compared with respect to the information related to China?
(a) Ibn Batuta and Marco Polo
(b) Marco Polo and Bernier
(c) Duarte Barbosa and Fa Hien
(d) Bernier and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier
5. Franc’ois Bernier, a Frenchman, was associated with whom among the following during his visit to India?
1. Dara Shukoh 2. Danishmand Khan
3. Humayun
Select the correct answer using the codes given below:
(a) 1 and 2 only (b) 2 and 3 only
(c) 1 only (d) 3 only
6. Bernier’s account of travels was different from the other accounts in Arabic and Persian in which of the following manner?
(a) Covering the social condition
(b) Section on trade and commerce
(c) Getting reprinted many times
(d) None of the above
7. Which of the following statements is correct with respect to Al Biruni’s perception of the social divisions in India?
1. Al-Biruni disapproved of the notion of pollution.
2. Al-Biruni attempted to suggest that social divisions were unique to India.

Select the correct statement using the code given below:

- (a) 1 only (b) 2 only
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1 nor 2
8. Francois Bernier noticed that goods manufactured in India were exported to the world in exchange of which of the following commodities?
(a) Horses (b) Slaves
(c) Gold and silver (d) wheat
 9. The term ‘antyaja’ referred to which of the following?
(a) A form of occupation
(b) a form of social division
(c) A form of agricultural practice
(d) A form of festival
 10. The description of coconut and the pan was an unfamiliar description by which of the following foreign travellers?
(a) Francois Bernier (b) Jesuit Roberto Nobili
(c) Duarte Barbosa (d) Ibn Batuta

Level – 2

11. He was a traveler who came to India during reign of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq. He was born in Tangier into one of the most respectable and educated families known for their expertise in Islamic religious law or shari’a. The above description is about which of the following travelers?
(a) Megasthenes (b) Ibn Batuta
(c) Thomas Roe (d) Nicolo Conti
12. Which of the following places was/were visited by Ibn Batuta?
1. Malabar 2. Maldives
3. Sri Lanka 4. Assam
5. China
Select the correct answer using the codes given below:
(a) 1, 2 and 4 only (b) 2, 3, 4 and 5 only
(c) 1, 2 and 5 only (d) 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5
13. Consider the following statements:
1. Italian doctor Manucci visited India 6 times before going back to Europe.
2. French traveller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier came to India once and never returned back.
Which of the statements given above is/are correct?
(a) 1 only (b) 2 only
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1 nor 2

14. Which of the following statements is/are correct with respect to the work of Al-Biruni?

1. Unlike the other travellers, Al-Biruni did not find language to be the barrier.
2. Al-Biruni depended almost exclusively on the works of Brahmanas.

Select the correct answer using the codes given below:

- (a) 1 only (b) 2 only
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1 nor 2

15. Consider the following statements:

1. Delhi was presented as the second largest city of India after Daulatabad in the deep south.
2. Delhi was known for its great population

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only (b) 2 only
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1 nor 2

16. The strong community or kin ties among the merchants, called mahajans, was especially present in which of the following regions of the Indian subcontinent?

- (a) Western (b) Southern
(c) North east (d) Northern

17. Which of the following textile materials were exported from India to the world and were in great demand, as per the accounts of Ibn Batuta?

1. cotton cloth
2. brocade
3. Satin
4. muslin
5. silk

Select the correct statements using the codes given below:

- (a) 1, 2 and 4 only (b) 2, 3, 4 and 5 only
(c) 1, 2 and 5 only (d) 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

18. The postal system, as described by Ibn Batuta, but used for which of the following purposes?

1. Send information
2. Remit credit
3. dispatch goods

Select the correct statement using the code given below:

- (a) 1 only (b) 1 and 3 only
(c) 1, 2 and 3 only (d) 2 only

19. Find the incorrect statement

- (a) Jesuit Roberto Nobili had translated many Indian texts into Portuguese languages
- (b) Duarte Barbosa wrote a detailed account of trade and society in North India.
- (c) Both Duarte Barbosa and Jesuit Roberto were Portuguese writers
- (d) Portuguese writers wrote detailed accounts regarding Indian social customs and religious practices

20. The Travels in the Mughal Empire was written by

- (a) François Bernier (b) Hien Tsang
(c) Nicolo Diconti (d) Manucci

21. Which of the following is/are among the common observations in travellers' account of India?

1. In the Mughal Empire the emperor owned all the land and distributed it among his nobles.
2. Owing to crown ownership of property, there were disastrous consequences.

Select the correct answer using the codes given below:

- (a) 1 only (b) 2 only
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1 nor 2

22. Consider the following statements:

1. Bernier observed that landholders in India could not pass on their land to their children.
2. Bernier's observation of the state as the sole owner of the land was also validated by the Mughal official document.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only (b) 2 only
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1 nor 2

23. Which of the following travellers outrightly viewed against the existence of the 'middle class' in India?

- (a) Ibn Batuta (b) Megasthenes
(c) François Bernier (d) None of the above

24. Abu'l Fazl was the official chronicler of which of the following Mughal emperors?

- (a) Akbar (b) Aurangzeb
(c) Humayun (d) Jahangir

25. The concept of the Asiatic mode of production was developed by who among the following thinkers?

- (a) Emile Durkheim (b) GH Mead
(c) Karl Marx (d) Max Weber

Answers

Level-1

1. (a) 2. (a) 3. (d) 4. (a) 5. (a) 6. (c) 7. (a) 8. (c) 9. (b) 10. (d)

Level-2

11. (b) 12. (d) 13. (d) 14. (b) 15. (b) 16. (a) 17. (d) 18. (c) 19. (b) 20. (a)
21. (c) 22. (a) 23. (c) 24. (a) 25. (c)

Explanations

Level – 1

1. **a** Generally (though not always), Al-Biruni adopted a distinctive structure in each chapter, beginning with a question, following this up with a description based on **Sanskritic traditions**, and concluding with a comparison with other cultures.
2. **a** The term “Hindu” was derived from an Old Persian word, used c. sixth-fifth centuries BCE, to refer to the region east of the river Sindhu (Indus). The Arabs continued the Persian usage and called this region “al-Hind” and its people “Hindi”
3. **d** Both the books Al-Biruni and Ibn Batuta were written in Arabic. Al-Biruni had written Kitab-ul-Hind while Rihla was written by Ibn Batuta.
These were the travelogue that gave an account of their travels to India
4. **a** Ibn Batuta travelled extensively in China, going as far as Beijing, but did not stay for long, deciding to return home in 1347. His account is often compared with that of Marco Polo, who visited China
5. **a** Francois Bernier, a Frenchman, was a doctor, political philosopher and historian. He was 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.**
6. **c** Unlike the accounts in Arabic and Persian, which circulated as manuscripts, Bernier’s work was reprinted many times.
7. **a** Only the first statement is correct
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.
Al-Biruni attempted to suggest that social divisions were not unique to India.

8. **c** Francois Bernier conceded that vast quantities of the world’s precious metals flowed into India, as manufactures were exported in exchange for gold and silver. He also noticed the existence of a prosperous merchant community, engaged in long-distance exchange.
9. **b** The categories defined as *antyaja* (literally, born outside the system) were often expected to provide inexpensive labour to both peasants and zamindars
10. **d** The description of the coconut and the pan shows Ibn Battuta’s strategies of representation. These are the two kinds of plant produce that were completely unfamiliar to his audience.

Level – 2

11. **b** The above description is about Ibn Batuta. He was a Moroccan traveller who was born in Tangier into one of the most respectable and educated families known for their expertise in Islamic religious law or *shari’a*.
12. **d** Ibn Battuta proceeded to the Malabar coast through central India. From Malabar he went to the Maldives, where he stayed for eighteen months as the *qazi*, but eventually decided to proceed to Sri Lanka. He then went back once more to the Malabar coast and the Maldives, and before resuming his mission to China, visited Bengal and Assam as well. He took a ship to Sumatra, a
13. **d** Both the statements are incorrect.
- Some of these travellers, like the Italian doctor Manucci, never returned to Europe, and settled down in India.
 - French jeweller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier travelled to India at least six times.
14. **b** **Only the second statement is correct**
Al-Biruni, for instance, **discussed several “barriers”**. **The first was language.** Sanskrit was

so different from Arabic and Persian that ideas and concepts could not be easily translated from one language into another.

Al-Biruni 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.,

- 15. **b** Ibn Batuta described **Delhi** as a vast city, with a great population, the largest in India. Daulatabad (in Maharashtra) was no less
- 16. **a** Merchants often had strong community or kin ties, and were organised into their own caste-cum-occupational bodies. In western India these groups were called *mahajans*, and their chief, the *sheth*.
- 17. **d** Ibn Batuta noted that the subcontinent was well integrated with inter-Asian networks of trade and commerce, with Indian manufactures being in great demand in both West Asia and Southeast Asia, fetching huge profits for artisans and merchants. **Indian textiles, particularly cotton cloth, fine muslins, silks, brocade and satin, were in great demand. Ibn Battuta informs us that certain varieties of fine muslin were so expensive that they could be worn only by the nobles and the very rich**
- 18. **c** The postal system, as described by Ibn Batuta, was used to send information and remit credit across long distances, and also to dispatch goods.
- 19. **b** Once the Portuguese arrived in India in about 1500, a number of them wrote detailed accounts regarding Indian social customs and religious practices. A few of them, such as the Jesuit Roberto Nobili, even translated Indian texts into European languages.

Among the best known Portuguese writers is Duarte Barbosa, who wrote a detailed account of trade and society in south India.

- 20. **a** Bernier's **Travels in the Mughal Empire** is marked by detailed observations, critical insights and reflection.

- 21. **c** **Both the statements are correct.**

Most travellers thought that in the Mughal Empire the emperor **owned all the land and distributed it** among his nobles and that this had **disastrous consequences for the economy and society**.

This perception was not unique to Bernier, but is found in most travellers' accounts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

- 22. **a** **Only the first statement is correct.**

Owing to crown ownership of land, argued Bernier, **landholders could not pass on** their land to their children.

Curiously, none of the Mughal official documents suggests that the state was the sole owner of the land.

- 23. **c** Bernier confidently asserted: "There is no middle state in India."
- 24. **a** Abu'l Fazl, the sixteenth-century official chronicler of Akbar's reign, describes the land revenue as "remunerations of sovereignty", a claim made by the ruler on his subjects for the protection he provided rather than as rent on land
- 25. **c** The idea of oriental despotism was further developed as the concept of the Asiatic mode of production by Karl Marx in the nineteenth century.