

12th Standard History

Through the Eyes of Travellers Perceptions of Society

- Many foreign travellers visited India during medieval period. They came to India for several motives.
- Most of the travellers who came to India wrote their accounts.
- The accounts of these travellers dealt with various aspects. Some travellers accounts deal with the affairs of the court whereas few accounts are focussed on religious issues.
- Some travellers create about the contemporary style of architecture and monuments, whereas other depicts the social and economic life.
- The travellers who visited India presented the true picture of Indian civilisation in their accounts.
- Al-Biruni, a great scholar of central Asia, came to India in the 11th century. He arrived India during the invasion of Mahmud of Ghazni.
- Al-Biruni was bom on 4 Sept. 973 at Khwarizm in Uzbekistan.
- Al-Biruni was well-versed in many languages. Languages such as Arabic, Persian, Hebrew and Sanskrit were known to him.
- Al-Biruni's most outstanding work 'Kitab-ul-Hind' was written in Ghazni and was concerned India. It was also known as Tarikh-ul-Hind and Tahqiq-ma-lil-Hind.

- Al-Biruni has thrown a light on caste system prevailing in the Hindu society.
- According to Al-Biruni's description India's economic condition was very good.
- Al-Biruni's real name was Abu-Abdullah Muhammad. He was fond of travelling and wanted to increase his knowledge by establishing his contact with the people of different countries.
- He travelled thirty years of his life.
- The great traveller of Morocco died in 1377, but the account written by him 'Rihla' is of immense wealth.
- After returning to Morocco in 1354 he (Ibn Battuta) was ceremoniously welcomed by 'Sultan', Abu Iram.
- Sultan Abu Iram appointed Ibijuzayy to help Battuta to compile his account 'Rihla'.
- Rihla was written in Arabic. In it describe whatever he saw in India.
- Undoubtedly 'Rihla' is considered as an invaluable source of Indian History in the 14th century.
- Francois Bernier was a French traveller who came to India in 17th century.
- Francois Bernier was a great French doctor, philosopher and an historian who remained in India from 1656 to 1688 and wrote his famous book entitled. "Travels in the Mughal court".
- Francois has given great detail about Indian Kharkhenas. Town, land ownership system and social evil, i.e. sati system.

- Abdur Razzaq the great Iranian scholar came to India in 15th century. He was born in 1413 and was appointed the Qazi of Samarqand under Shah Rokh Khan.
- Abdur Razzaq stayed in the court of Vijayanagara empire Deva Raya II from 1442-1443 and gave a vivid description about the Vijayanagara kingdom.
- Duarte Barbosa was a Portuguese official in south India, who travelled Vijayanagara Empire during the reign of Krishna Deva Raya in 1518.
- Among the other important travellers who came to India in medieval period were Antonio Monserrate, Peter Mundy, Jean Baptiste Tavernier, Francisco Pelesart and Nikolo Muncci.

Our knowledge of the past can be enriched through the descriptions of social life provided by travellers who visited the sub-continent. Generally, they recorded everyday activities and practices of common men along with the descriptions of the kings. Al-Biruni, Ibn Battuta and Francois Bernier were three famous travelers who visited the sub-continent from 11th century to 17th century.

Al-Biruni and the Kitab-ul-Hind:

- Al-Biruni was born in 973 at Khwarizm in present day Uzbekistan.
- He was well-versed in different languages like Syriac, Arabic, Persian, Hebrew and Sanskrit.

- In 1017 with the invasion of Khwarizm, he arrived in Ghazni as a hostage. But gradually developed a liking for the city and interest for India.
- When the Punjab became a part of the Ghaznavid empire, he travelled widely in the Punjab and other parts of Northern India.
- He spent years in the company of Brahmana priests and scholars by learning Sanskrit and studying religions and philosophical texts.
- Al-Biruni wrote 'Kitab-ul-Hind' in Arabic, in a simple and lucid manner.
- It is a voluminous text including 80 chapters covering subjects like religion, philosophy, festivals, astronomy, alchemy, manners and customs, social life, weights and measures, iconography, laws and metrology.
- Al-Biruni was familiar with translations and adaptations of Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit texts into Arabic. However, he was also critical about the ways in which these texts were written, and clearly wanted to improve on them.

Al-Biruni's View About Indian Society:

- According to Al-Biruni, Sanskrit was so different from Arabic and Persian that ideas and concepts could not be translated easily from one language to another.
- Al-Biruni tried to explain the caste system by comparing it with other societies. He tried to suggest that social divisions were not unique to India.
- Al-Biruni depended on the Vedas, the Puranas, the Bhagavad Gita, the works of Patanjali, the Manusmriti, etc.

- Sanskrit texts laid down the rules of caste system from the point of view of Brahmanas, but in real life the system was not quite so rigid.

Ibn Battuta and his Book Rihla:

- Ibn Battuta wrote the book 'Rihla' in Arabic. This book provides extremely rich and interesting detail about the social and cultural life in the sub-continent in the 14th century.
- Ibn Battuta went to far-off places, exploring new worlds and peoples.
- Before coming to India, he travelled extensively to Syria, Iraq, Persia, Yemen, Oman, Mecca and a few trading ports on the coast of East Africa.
- When he came to Delhi, Muhammad-bin- Tughlaq was the Sultan of Delhi. The Sultan was impressed by his scholarship and appointed him the 'qazi' or judge of Delhi.
- He visited Bengal, Assam, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Sumatra and China.
- He meticulously recorded his observations about new cultures, peoples, beliefs, values, etc.
- Travelling was not secure at that time. During his travel, Ibn Battuta was attacked by bands of robbers several times and was severely wounded.
- Ibn Battuta spent several years travelling through North Africa, West Asia, parts of Central Asia, the Indian sub-continent and China and recorded extensively his experiences.

Battuta's Description of Indian Society:

- In the 14th century, Indian sub-continent had its contact from China in the East to North West Africa and Europe in the West. Ibn Battuta

travelled through these lands and arrived at Delhi in the 14th century after visiting sacred shrines, meeting with rulers, learned men and people who spoke Arabic, Persian, Turkish and other languages. He shared ideas, information and anecdotes.

- While describing Indian society, Ibn Battuta explained the unfamiliar things like coconut and paan in a unique way.
- Ibn Battuta found the cities of India densely populated and prosperous. According to him, Delhi was the largest city in India. He also had the same view for Daulatabad (in Maharashtra).
- The bazaars (markets) were the places of economic transactions and also the hub of social and cultural activities. There were masjids and temples to offer prayers and also some bazaars marked with spaces for public performances by dancers, musicians and singers.
- Ibn Battuta found Indian agriculture very productive because of the fertility of the soil where farmers tend to cultivate two crops a year.
- Indian manufacturing flourished due to inter-Asian network of trade and commerce. These were in great demand in both West Asia and South-East Asia where artisans and merchants were fetching huge profits.
- Indian textiles, specially cotton cloth, fine muslins, silks, brocade and satin were also in great demand.
- Ibn Battuta was amazed by the efficiency of the postal system which was of two kinds, the horse-post called 'uluq' and the foot-post called 'dawa'.

Francois Bernier: A French Traveller

- A number of Portuguese, Dutch, English and French travellers came to India in the 16th and 17th century. Of them, Jesuit Roberto Nobili, Duarte Barbosa, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier and Manucci wrote different aspects of Indian society.
- French doctor, political philosopher and historian Francois Bernier spent twelve years (1656 to 1668) in India and was closely associated with the Mughal court.
- Bernier travelled to several parts of India and wrote detailed accounts by comparing the situation in India with Europe.
- His works were published in France in 1670-71, and translated into English, Dutch, German and Italian. His writings became extremely popular.

Bernier and His View About Contemporary Society:

- As compared to Ibn Battuta, Bernier believed in a different intellectual tradition where he was more critical. He compared and contrasted what he saw in India with the situation in Europe in general and France in particular.
- Bernier's book 'Travels in the Mughal Empire' is marked by detailed observations, critical insights and reflection. He constantly compared Mughal India with contemporary Europe, generally emphasising the superiority of the latter.
- According to him, the Mughal emperor owned all the lands and distributed it among his nobles and it led to disastrous consequences for

economy and society. This perception was supported by most of the travellers of that period.

- As having no legal right over land, landholders could not pass on their land to their children. Thus, they avoid any kind of long-term investment in the sustenance and expansion of production.
- This crown ownership system of land ruined the agriculture as well as the living standard of all sections of society, except the ruling aristocracy which oppressed the peasant class.
- He explained that because of crown ownership of land, Indian society has no social group or class between the poorest of the poor and the richest of the rich. He further said, "There is no middle state in India".
- Bernier described Mughal king as the king of "beggars and barbarians". But Abdul Fazl gave a different account by describing revenue as a claim made by the ruler on his subjects for the protection he provides, rather than as rent on land that he owned.
- Bernier's descriptions influenced Western theorists from the 18th century onwards. For instance, French philosopher Montesquieu used this account to develop the idea of oriental despotism and in the 19th century, Karl Marx used this account to develop the Asiatic mode of production.
- He also explained that India had a more complex social reality where artisans had no incentive to improve the quality of their products as profits were appropriated by the state. But at the same time, he added that the country used to exchange its manufacturing goods with the precious metals

- gold and silver, from outside the sub-continent. Whereas he also noticed existence of a prosperous merchant community as well.
- There were all kinds of towns i.e. manufacturing towns, trading towns, port-towns, sacred centres, pilgrimage towns, etc.
- The different urban groups included mahajans, sheth, nagarsheth, hakim or vaid, pundit or mulla, wakii, painters, architects, musicians, calligraphers, etc.

Views of Travellers about Women:

- Slaves were openly sold in markets with horses, camels and other commodities.
- I bn Battuta mentioned that there was considerable differentiation among slaves.
- Slaves were generally used for domestic labour and female slaves were used for the service of Sultan and to keep a watch on the nobles.
- Bernier wrote about the practice of Sati'. He noted that while some women seemed to embrace death cheerfully, others were forced to die.
- Women's labour was crucial in both agricultural and non-agricultural production.
- Women from merchant families participated in commercial activities.
- Traveller's accounts provide us important information of that period but many aspects of social life were unnoticed by them.

Important Terms:

- **Hindu:** The term “Hindu’ was derived from an old Persian word which was used in 6th century BCE. It referred to the region towards the east of the river Sindhu, i.e. Indus.
- **Antyaja:** Those people who were included in the major four castes prevalent in the Indian society.
- **Tarababad:** It means the music market in Daultabad.
- **Ulaq:** Horse postal system.
- **Daw:** Foot postal system.
- **Camp Towns:** Those towns which owed their existence and survival to the imperial camp.

Time Line:

- 973 – Al-Biruni was born in Uzbekistan
- 1031 – Kitub-ul-Hind in Arabic by Al-Biruni was published
- 1048 – Death of Al-Biruni
- 1304 – Ibn Battuta born at Tangier
- 1333 – Ibn Battuta’s reached Sindh
- 1354 – Ibn Battuta’s return to Morocco
- 1377 – Rihla was published
- 1620 – Francisco-Pelsart a Dutch traveller reached India
- 1628 – Petermundy of England visited India
- 1656-68 – Francois Bernier visited India

