
Chapter-05

Through the Eyes of Travellers

- Al-Biruni was born in Khwarizm in present day Uzbekistan.
- Sultan Mahmud attacked Khawrizm and took Al-Biruni to his capital Ghazni.
- Al-Biruni wrote “Kitab-ul-Hind” also known as “Tahkik-a-Hind”
- Ibn-Battuta’s travelling account “Rihla” gives very interesting information of social and cultural life of India.
- Ibn-Battuta’s attacked by bands of robbers several times.
- Whatever Bernier saw in India compared it with European condition.
- Al-Biruni discussed several “barriers”.
- Ibn-Battuta wrote that Indian agriculture was very productive.
- Ibn-Battuta’s was greatly amazed by looking at the postal system. Bernier compared India with contemporary Europe.
- Bernier critically wrote his account “Travels in the Mughal empire”.
- Around 15% population in 17th century lived in towns in India.
- Bernier called Mughal cities as “camp town”, which were dependent upon imperial protection for their survival.
- Bernier’s description influenced western theorists like Montesquieu.

AL-BIRUNI AND THE KITAB -UL-2. 1.2 THE KITAB -UL -HIND:

- Al-Biruni’s Kitab- ul- Hind written in Arabic.
- It is voluminous text, divided into 80 chapters on subjects such as religion and philosophy, festival, astronomy, manners and customs, social life, weight.

Making sense of an alien world al-biruni and the sanskrit IC tradition

Overcoming Barriers to Understanding:

- The language, Sanskrit was so different from Arabic and Persian that ideas and concept could not be easily translated from one language into another.
- Different in religious beliefs and practices.elf –absorption and consequent insularity of the local population.
- He depended almost on the works of Bramanas, often citing passages from the Vedas, the Puranas, the Bhagavatd Gita.
- The works of Patanjali, the Manusmriti etc provided an understanding of Indian society.

Al-Biruni’s Description of the Caste System:

- Al-Biruni tried to explain the caste system by looking for parallels in other societies.
 - He suggested that social divisions were not uniqueto India
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- He pointed out that within Islam all men were considered equal, differing only in their observance of piety.
 - He disapproved the notion of pollution.
 - He remarked that everything that falls into a state of impurity strives and succeeds in regaining its original condition of purity.
 - He was appointed as the qazi or judge of Delhi in 1333.
 - In 1342 he went to China as the Sultan's envoy to the Mongol ruler.
 - He went to Malabar Coast through central India and later to Sri Lanka
 - According to him it took 40 days to travel from Multan to Delhi and 50 days from Sindh to Delhi, 40 days from Daulatabad to Delhi, Gwalior to Delhi 10 days.

The coconut and the paan:

- Two kinds of plants that were unfamiliar to his audience were coconut and paan.
- He had compared coconut with that of Palm; they look exactly the same except that the one produces dates and the other bears the nuts as its fruits.
- He describes the paan as a tree which is cultivated in the same manner as the grape vine.

Ibn Battuta and Indian cities:

- He founded the cities in the subcontinent with full of exciting opportunities for those who had the necessary drive, resources and skills.
- They were densely populated and prosperous.
- Most cities had crowded streets and bright and colourful markets with wide variety of goods.
- He describes Delhi as a vast city, with a great population, the largest in India
- Daulatabad was equal in size of Delhi.
- The bazaars were not only places of economic transactions, but the hub of social and cultural activities.
- Most bazaars had a mosque and a temple and space were marked for public performances by dancers, musicians and singers.
- He found Indian agriculture very productive because of the fertility of soil.

A unique system of communications:

- The state evidently took special measures to encourage merchants
- All trade routes were well supplied with inns and guest houses
- He was amazed by the efficiency of the 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.

Francois Bernier

A Doctor with a Difference:

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- He was a Frenchman, a doctor, political philosopher and historian.
 - He came to the Mughal court in search of opportunities
 - He was in India for 12 years from 1656 to 1668.
 - He was closely associated to the Mughal court as a physician to Prince Dara Shukoh the eldest son of Shah Jahan.

Comparing “East” and “West”:

- He travelled to several parts of the country and wrote accounts of what he saw and comparing India with the situation in Europe.
- He dedicated his major writing to the king of France.

The question of landownership:

- According to Bernier one of the fundamental differences between Mughal India and Europe was the lack of private property in land.
- He believed in the virtues of private property and saw crown ownership of land as harmful for both the state and its people.
- The empire owned all the land and distributed it among his nobles who had disastrous consequences for the economy and society.

A more complex social reality:

- He felt that artisans had no incentive to improve the quality of their manufactures.
 - The profit was appropriated by the state.
 - A vast quantities of the world’s precious metal flowed into India, as manufactures were exported in exchange for gold and silver.
 - He also noticed the existence of prosperous merchant community, engaged in long – distance exchange.
 - Merchants often had strong community or kin ties and were organized into their own caste –cum occupational bodies.
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