

Part-II: Chapter 1
THROUGH THE EYES OF TRAVELLERS: Perceptions of Society
Revision Notes

Key concepts in nutshell

- 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 fifteen per cent population in seventeenth 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.

1. AL-BIRUNI AND THE KITAB-UL-HIND :

- i. Al-Biruni was born in Khwarizm in present day Uzbekistan.
- ii. He was well versed in several languages: Syriac, Arabic, Persian, Hebrew and Sanskrit.
- iii. In 1017, when Sultan Mahmud invaded Khwarizm, he took several scholars and poets back to his capital, Ghazni; Al-Biruni was one of them.
- iv. It was in Ghazni that Al-Biruni developed an interest in India.
- v. Al-Biruni’s Kitab-ul-Hind written in Arabic.
- vi. It is simple, lucid and voluminous text, divided into 80 chapters on subjects such as

religion and philosophy, festival, astronomy, manners and customs, social life, weights and measures, iconography, laws and metrology.

- vii. Al-Biruni, who wrote in Arabic, probably intended his work for peoples living along the frontiers of the subcontinent.

2. **MAKING SENSE OF AN ALIEN WORLD: Al-Biruni and the Sanskritic tradition**

- I. **Overcoming barriers to understanding** He discussed several “barriers” that he felt obstructed understanding. The first amongst these was language.
- a. He depended almost on the works of Bramanas, often citing passages from the Vedas ,the Puranas ,the Bhagavat Gita, the works of Patanjali, the Manusmriti etc provided an understanding of Indian society.
 - b. The self-absorption and consequent insularity of the local population according to him, constituted the third barrier.
 - c. The second barrier was difference in religious beliefs and practices.
 - d. For him, Sanskrit was so different from Arabic and Persian that ideas and concept could not be easily translated from one language into another.

II. **Al-Biruni's description of the caste system**

- i. Al-Biruni tried to explain the caste system by looking for parallels in other societies.
- ii. He noted that in ancient Persia, four social categories were recognised.
- iii. He suggested that social divisions were not unique to India.
- iv. He pointed out that within Islam all men were considered equal, differing only in their observance of piety.
- v. He accepted the Brahmanical description of the caste system but disapproved of the notion of pollution.
- vi. He remarked that everything that falls into a state of impurity strives and succeeds in regaining its original condition of purity.
- vii. The conception of social pollution, intrinsic to the caste system, was according to him, contrary to the laws of nature.
- viii. Al-Biruni’s description of the caste system was deeply influenced by his study of normative Sanskrit.

3. **IBN BATTUTA'S RIHLA** : Ibn Battuta was an inveterate traveller who spent several years travelling through north Africa, West Asia and parts of Central Asia (he may even have visited Russia), the Indian subcontinent and China, before returning to his native land,

Morocco. When he returned, the local ruler issued instructions that his stories be recorded.

i. **An early globe-trotter:**

- a. Ibn Battuta was a Moroccan traveller was born in Tangier into a family known for their expertise in Islamic religious law or shari'a.
- b. 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.
- c. He just loved travelling, and went to far-off places, exploring new worlds and peoples.
- d. Before he set off for India in 1332-33, he had made 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.
- e. Battuta reached Sind in 1333 travelling through Central Asia.
- f. Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the Sultan of Delhi, was impressed by his scholarship appointed him the qazi or judge of Delhi.
- g. In 1342 , he was sent to proceed to China as the Sultan's envoy to the Mongol ruler.
- h. He then proceeded to the Malabar coast through central India.
- i. From Malabar he went to the Maldives, where he stayed for eighteen months as the qazi. He then proceed to Sri Lanka and Maldives.
- j. Before resuming his mission to China, visited Bengal and Assam as well. He took a ship to Sumatra, and from there another ship for the Chinese port town of Zaytun (now known as Quanzhou). He travelled extensively there.
- k. He meticulously recorded his observations about new cultures, peoples, beliefs, values, etc.
- l. According to him, it took forty days to travel from Multan to Delhi and about fifty days from Sind to Delhi.
- m. The distance from Daulatabad to Delhi was covered in forty days, while that from Gwalior to Delhi took ten days.
- n. Ibn Battuta was attacked by bands of robbers several times. So,he preferred travelling in a caravan.
- o. While travelling from Multan to Delhi his caravan was attacked and many of his fellow travellers lost their lives; Battuta, including other survivors were severely

injured.

ii. **The Excitement of the Unfamiliar:**

- a. By the time Ibn Battuta arrived in Delhi in the fourteenth century, the subcontinent was part of a global network of communication that stretched from China in the east to north-west Africa and Europe in the west.
- b. He enjoyed spending time with learned men and rulers, often officiating as qazi, and enjoying the cosmopolitan culture of urban centres. Anything that was unfamiliar was particularly highlighted to impress the readers or listeners.
- c. **The coconut and the paan:** Ibn Battuta's strategies of representation are evident in the ways in which he described the coconut and the paan. These two kinds of plants that were unfamiliar to his audience.
- d. He had compared coconut with that of palm; they look exactly the same except that the one produces dates and the bears the nuts as its fruits. He describes the paan as a tree which is cultivated in the same manner as the grape-vine.

iii. **Ibn Battuta and Indian cities**

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

iv. **A unique system of communications**

- a. The state evidently took special measures to encourage merchants.
- b. All trade routes were well supplied with inns and guest houses.
- c. 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.

4. FRANCOIS BERNIER

i. **A doctor with a difference**

- a. He was a Frenchman, a doctor, political philosopher and historian.
- b. He came to the Mughal court in search of opportunities.
- c. He was in India for twelve 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.

ii. **Comparing "East" and "West"**

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

iii. **The question of landownership**

- a. Bernier's Travels in the Mughal Empire is marked by detailed observations, critical insights and reflection
- b. According to Bernier one of the fundamental differences between Mughal India and Europe was the lack of private property in land.
- c. He believed in the virtues of private property and saw crown ownership of land as harmful for both the state and its people.
- d. The empire owned all the land and distributed it among his nobles which had disastrous consequences for the economy and society.

iv. **A more complex social reality**

- a. He felt that artisans had no incentive to improve the quality of their manufactures.
- b. The profit was appropriated by the state.
- c. A vast quantities of the world's precious metal flowed into India, as manufactures were exported in exchange for gold and silver.
- d. He also noticed the existence of prosperous merchant community, engaged in long-distance exchange.
- e. Merchants often had strong community or kin ties and were organized into their own caste-cum occupational bodies.
- f. Other urban groups included professional classes such as physicians (hakim or vaid), teachers (pundit or mulla), lawyers (wakil), painters, architects, musicians, calligraphers, etc

-
- g. Some depended on imperial patronage, many made their living by serving other patrons and some served ordinary people.

5. Women Slaves, Sati and Labourers

- i. Travellers who left written accounts were generally men who sometimes took social inequities for granted as a “natural” state of affairs.
- ii. It appears from Ibn Battuta’s account that there was considerable differentiation among slaves.
- iii. Slaves were generally used for domestic labour, and Ibn Battuta found their services particularly indispensable for carrying women and men on palanquins or dola.
- iv. The price of slaves, particularly female slaves required for domestic labour, was very low, and most families who could afford to do so kept at least one or two of them.
- v. Contemporary European travellers and writers often highlighted the treatment of women as a crucial marker of difference between Western and Eastern societies
- vi. 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.
- vii. It seems unlikely that women were confined to the private spaces of their homes because their labour was crucial in both agricultural and non-agricultural production.

Timeline:

Some Travellers who Left Accounts

Tenth-eleventh centuries

973-1048 -- Muhammad ibn Ahmad Abu Raihan al-Biruni (from Uzbekistan)

Thirteenth century

1254-1323 -- Marco Polo (from Italy)

Fourteenth century

1304-77 -- Ibn Battuta (from Morocco)

Fifteenth century

1413-82 -- Abd al-Razzaq Kamal al-Din ibn Ishaq al-Samarqandi (from Samarqand)

1466-72 (years spent in India) -- Afanasii Nikitich Nikitin (fifteenth century, from Russia)

Sixteenth century

1518 (visit to India) -- Duarte Barbosa, d.1521 (from Portugal)

1562 (year of death) -- Seydi Ali Reis (from Turkey)

1536-1600 -- Antonio Monserrate (from Spain)

Seventeenth century

1626-31 (years spent in India) -- Mahmud Wali Balkhi (from Balkh)

1600-67 -- Peter Mundy (from England)

1605-89 -- Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (from France)

1620-88 -- François Bernier (from France)

Note: Unless otherwise indicated, the dates mentioned are those of the lifespan of the traveller.