Chapter 5: Through the Eyes of Travellers

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Write a note on the Kitab-ul-Hind.

The Kitab-ul-Hind was written by Al-Biruni in Arabic and is a voluminous text 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. Its language is simple and lucid. Al-Biruni generally adopted a distinctive structure in each chapter, beginning with a question, following it with a description based on Sanskritic traditions, and concluding with a comparison with other cultures. Some scholars have argued that this almost geometric structure, remarkable for its precision and predictability, owed much to his mathematical orientation. Al-Biruni probably intended the work for peoples living along the frontiers of the subcontinent. He was familiar with Arabic translations of Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit texts, but was critical of how they were written and wished to improve on them.

Q2 Compare and contrast the perspectives from which Ibn Battuta and Bernier wrote their accounts of their travels in India.

Ibn Battuta, a fourteenth-century traveller from Morocco, valued experience gained through travel more than books. He described everything that impressed and excited him because of its novelty, recording the unfamiliar — such as the coconut and the paan — so his audience could share his wonder. He highlighted cities, markets, the efficient postal system and prosperity, generally presenting India as a land of exciting opportunities and curiosities. His account was dictated for an audience that delighted in marvellous and curious particulars. Bernier, a seventeenth-century French doctor, philosopher and historian, belonged to a very different intellectual tradition. He constantly compared and contrasted Mughal India with Europe, especially France, emphasising the superiority of the latter. His representation worked on a model of binary opposition, presenting India as the inverse of Europe and ordering the differences hierarchically so India appeared inferior. He dwelt on what he considered depressing, aiming to influence policy-makers and the intelligentsia. Thus Ibn Battuta wrote with curiosity and admiration, while Bernier wrote critically and comparatively.

Q3 Discuss the picture of urban centres that emerges from Bernier’s account.

Bernier described Mughal cities as "camp towns" — towns that owed their existence and survival to the imperial camp. He believed they came into existence when the imperial court moved in and declined rapidly when it moved out, lacking viable social and economic foundations and depending on imperial patronage. This, however, was an oversimplified picture. In reality, during the seventeenth century about 15 per cent of the population lived in towns, a proportion on average higher than in Western Europe at the time. There were many kinds of towns: manufacturing towns, trading towns, port-towns, sacred centres and pilgrimage towns, whose existence reflected the prosperity of merchant communities and professional classes. Merchants had strong community or kin ties and were organised into caste-cum-occupational bodies — in western India called mahajans, their chief the sheth, and in centres like Ahmedabad the nagarsheth. Other urban groups included physicians, teachers, lawyers, painters, architects, musicians and calligraphers, who served imperial patrons, other patrons or ordinary people in the bazaars.

Q4 Analyse the evidence for slavery provided by Ibn Battuta.

Ibn Battuta's account shows that slaves were openly sold in markets like any other commodity and were regularly exchanged as gifts. When he reached Sind he purchased "horses, camels and slaves" as gifts for Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq, and at Multan he presented the governor with "a slave and horse together with raisins and almonds". He records that the Sultan, pleased with a preacher named Nasiruddin, gave him "a hundred thousand tankas and two hundred slaves". His account also shows considerable differentiation among slaves. Some female slaves in the Sultan's service were experts in music and dance, and Ibn Battuta enjoyed their performance at the wedding of the Sultan's sister. Others were employed to keep watch on nobles, and female scavengers entered houses to gather information. Most slaves were used for domestic labour, including carrying people on palanquins or dola. The price of slaves, especially female slaves for domestic work, was very low, so most families who could afford it kept one or two.

Q5 What were the elements of the practice of sati that drew the attention of Bernier?

European travellers often highlighted the treatment of women as a crucial marker of difference between Western and Eastern societies, and Bernier chose the practice of sati for detailed description. What struck him most was that while some women seemed to embrace death cheerfully, others were forced to die against their will. His most poignant account was of a sati he witnessed at Lahore, where a beautiful young widow, who he thought could not have been more than twelve years of age, was sacrificed. The poor child appeared more dead than alive as she approached the dreadful pit; she trembled and wept bitterly. Three or four Brahmanas, assisted by an old woman holding her by the arm, forced the unwilling victim towards the fatal spot, seated her on the wood, and tied her hands and feet lest she run away, after which she was burnt alive. Bernier confessed he found it difficult to repress his feelings. Thus the coercion of unwilling, sometimes very young, widows particularly drew his attention.

Q6 Discuss Al-Biruni's understanding of the caste system.

Al-Biruni tried to understand the Indian caste system by placing it in a comparative framework and by drawing on normative Sanskrit texts. He looked for parallels in other societies, noting that in ancient Persia four social categories had been recognised — knights and princes; monks, fire-priests and lawyers; physicians, astronomers and other scientists; and peasants and artisans. By doing so he suggested that social divisions were not unique to India. At the same time, he pointed out that within Islam all men were considered equal, differing only in their observance of piety.

For his description of the four varnas, Al-Biruni depended almost exclusively on the works of Brahmanas, citing passages from the Vedas, the Puranas, the Bhagavad Gita, the works of Patanjali and the Manusmriti. Following these texts, he described the Brahmanas as created from the head of Brahman and therefore considered the best of mankind, the Kshatriya from the shoulders and hands, the Vaishya from the thigh, and the Shudra from the feet. He noted that despite these differences, the classes lived together in the same towns and villages, mixed in the same houses and lodgings.

Although he accepted the Brahmanical description, Al-Biruni disapproved of the notion of pollution intrinsic to the caste system. He argued that everything which falls into a state of impurity strives and succeeds in regaining its original purity — the sun cleanses the air and the salt in the sea keeps the water from becoming polluted — and that if this were not so, life on earth would be impossible. The conception of social pollution, he insisted, was contrary to the laws of nature. His account, however, was shaped by normative texts; in real life the system was less rigid, as groups such as the antyaja, though socially oppressed, were included within economic networks.

Q7 Do you think Ibn Battuta's account is useful in arriving at an understanding of life in contemporary urban centres? Give reasons for your answer.

Ibn Battuta's account is a rich and useful source for understanding life in fourteenth-century urban centres, even though it reflects his own interests and his delight in the unfamiliar. He found cities in the subcontinent full of exciting opportunities for those with the necessary drive, resources and skills. He described them as densely populated and prosperous, except for occasional disruptions caused by wars and invasions, with crowded streets and bright, colourful markets stacked with a wide variety of goods. He noted that Delhi was a vast city with the largest population in India, and that Daulatabad in Maharashtra easily rivalled it in size.

His account tells us that bazaars were not merely places of economic transaction but also hubs of social and cultural activity. Most bazaars had a mosque and a temple, and some set aside spaces for public performances by dancers, musicians and singers — as in the market at Daulatabad known as Tarababad, reserved for male and female singers. Historians have used his account to argue that towns derived much of their wealth by appropriating surplus from villages. He also observed the productivity of Indian agriculture, which allowed two crops a year, and the integration of the subcontinent into inter-Asian trade, with Indian textiles such as cotton cloth, fine muslins, silks, brocade and satin in great demand. He further described an efficient postal system that carried information, credit and goods swiftly.

Its usefulness has limits: Ibn Battuta was not particularly concerned with explaining the prosperity of towns, and he highlighted whatever was unfamiliar to impress his audience. Yet precisely because he noted everyday details that indigenous writers took for granted, his account gives historians a valuable glimpse of urban life, provided it is read critically.

Q8 Discuss the extent to which Bernier’s account enables historians to reconstruct contemporary rural society.

Bernier's account is useful for reconstructing rural society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but it must be used with caution because of his strong preconceptions. He believed that one of the fundamental differences between Mughal India and Europe was the absence of private property in land. He thought the emperor owned all the land and distributed it among his nobles, with disastrous consequences: since landholders could not pass land on to their children, they avoided long-term investment, which led to the ruination of agriculture, oppression of the peasantry and a decline in living standards for all except the ruling aristocracy. His description of the poor peasant — driven to despair by rapacious governors, losing children to slavery and abandoning the country — presented rural India as undifferentiated impoverished masses ruled by a small, rich minority, with "no middle state in India".

Historians, however, know this picture was oversimplified and often inaccurate. No Mughal official document suggests the state was the sole owner of land; Abu'l Fazl described land revenue as "remunerations of sovereignty", a tax on the crop rather than rent on land owned by the ruler. Bernier's binary opposition later influenced ideas such as Montesquieu's "oriental despotism" and Marx's "Asiatic mode of production", which wrongly portrayed Indian villages as stagnant and egalitarian.

Yet Bernier's account also hints at a more complex reality. He conceded that vast quantities of the world's precious metals flowed into India in exchange for exported manufactures, noticed a prosperous merchant community engaged in long-distance trade, and described fertile regions like Bengal. Rural society was in fact marked by considerable differentiation — from big zamindars with superior land rights, through big peasants using hired labour and smaller subsistence peasants, down to landless "untouchable" labourers. Read critically, Bernier's observations are valuable, but his framework of decline must be corrected against other evidence.

Q9 Read this excerpt from Bernier: Numerous are the instances of handsome pieces of workmanship made by persons destitute of tools, and who can scarcely be said to have received instruction from a master. Sometimes they imitate so perfectly articles of European manufacture that the difference between the original and copy can hardly be discerned. Among other things, the Indians make excellent muskets, and fowling-pieces, and such beautiful gold ornaments that it may be doubted if the exquisite workmanship of those articles can be exceeded by any European goldsmith. I have often admired the beauty, softness, and delicacy of their paintings. List the crafts mentioned in the passage. Compare these with the descriptions of artisanal activity in the chapter.

The crafts mentioned in this excerpt are: the making of muskets and fowling-pieces (metalwork and arms manufacture), the crafting of beautiful gold ornaments (goldsmithing), and painting. Bernier admired the skill of these artisans, noting that they worked even when destitute of tools and without instruction from a master, and that they could imitate European articles so perfectly that the original and copy could hardly be told apart.

This admiring description sits in tension with other passages in the chapter where Bernier presents artisanal activity in decline. Elsewhere he argued that artisans had no incentive to improve the quality of their manufactures because profits were appropriated by the state, so manufactures were everywhere declining. In his account of the imperial karkhanas or workshops, he described halls where embroiderers, goldsmiths, painters, lacquer-varnishers, joiners, turners, tailors, shoe-makers and manufacturers of silk, brocade and fine muslins worked under a master; yet he claimed that in this "quiet regular manner" time glided away with no one aspiring to improve his condition — conveying much activity but little progress.

Comparing the two, the excerpt reveals a contradiction within Bernier's own account: despite his overall framework of stagnation and decline, he could not help admiring the genuine skill and dexterity of Indian craftsmen. The chapter also records the prosperity this craftsmanship generated — Indian textiles like cotton cloth, fine muslins, silks, brocade and satin were in great demand, manufactures were exported in exchange for gold and silver, and vast quantities of the world's precious metals flowed into India. Thus the crafts Bernier praises corroborate the picture of a vibrant artisanal economy, qualifying his own gloomier claims of decay.

Q10 On an outline map of the world mark the countries visited by Ibn Battuta. What are the seas that he may have crossed?

On an outline world map, mark the places the chapter says Ibn Battuta visited: Morocco (his birthplace Tangier) in north-west Africa; Mecca, Syria, Iraq, Persia, Yemen and Oman in West Asia; trading ports on the East African coast; the regions of Central Asia he crossed overland; and in the Indian subcontinent Sind, Multan, Uch and Delhi, the Malabar coast, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bengal and Assam. Mark Sumatra in Southeast Asia and China, where he reached the port of Zaytun (Quanzhou) and travelled as far as Beijing. The chapter also notes he may have visited Russia. The seas and waters he may have crossed, following these routes, include the Mediterranean Sea and Red Sea (around north Africa and West Asia), the Arabian Sea (shown on the chapter's map and lying between Arabia, East Africa and western India), the Bay of Bengal (between the eastern subcontinent and Southeast Asia) and the South China Sea (on the way to China). Mark only the sites named in the chapter and do not invent additional places.

Q11 Interview any one of your older relatives (mother/father/grandparents/uncles/aunts) who has travelled outside your town or village. Find out (a) where they went, (b) how they travelled, (c) how long did it take, (d) why did they travel (e) and did they face any difficulties. List as many similarities and differences that they may have noticed between their place of residence and the place they visited, focusing on language, clothes, food, customs, buildings, roads, the lives of men and women. Write a report on your findings.

This is a project to be completed by the student. Choose one older relative who has travelled outside your town or village and interview them around the five points given: (a) where they went, (b) how they travelled, (c) how long the journey took, (d) why they travelled, and (e) the difficulties they faced. Then, like the travellers in this chapter, note the similarities and differences they observed between home and the place visited — in language, clothes, food, customs, buildings, roads, and the lives of men and women. Write up your findings as a short report in your own words.

Q12 For any one of the travellers mentioned in the chapter, find out more about his life and writings. Prepare a report on his travels, noting in particular how he described society, and comparing these descriptions with the excerpts included in the chapter.

This is a project to be completed by the student. Pick any one traveller named in the chapter — for example Al-Biruni, Ibn Battuta, François Bernier, Abdur Razzaq Samarqandi, Marco Polo or Jean-Baptiste Tavernier — and research his life and writings using your library or reliable sources. Prepare a report on his travels that focuses in particular on how he described society, and compare your findings with the excerpts from his account included in this chapter, noting where they agree or add new detail.