

### Travel Accounts as Historical Sources & Al-Biruni's Method

The movement of people across regions has been a constant feature of human history. Individuals travelled for a variety of reasons—economic necessity, trade, administrative duties, pilgrimage, or even sheer curiosity and adventure.

Such journeys brought travellers into contact with unfamiliar environments, where they encountered new landscapes, languages, social customs, religious practices, and systems of knowledge.

These encounters often produced a sense of difference, prompting travellers to observe, interpret, and record what they considered unusual or remarkable.

These travel accounts today serve as invaluable historical sources. They offer insights into aspects of everyday life that were often ignored by indigenous writers, who tended to take such practices for granted.

This contrast in perspective is crucial: while local authors focused on normative or elite concerns, travellers documented lived realities, thereby enriching our understanding of the past.

However, it is equally important to recognise the limitations of these sources. The absence of women's travel accounts, despite evidence that women did travel, points to a gendered gap in historical documentation.

Travel narratives varied widely in content and focus. Some concentrated on political and courtly affairs, while others dealt with religious beliefs, architecture, or social customs.

For instance, the detailed description of Vijayanagara by Abdur Razzaq Samarqandi highlights how travellers could provide valuable accounts of urban life and state structure.

In some cases, travel did not even involve crossing national boundaries; Mughal administrators travelled within the empire and recorded local customs, traditions, and folklore, thereby contributing to an internal ethnography of the region.

The chapter focuses on three major travellers—Al-Biruni, Ibn Battuta, and François Bernier—whose accounts span from the eleventh to the

seventeenth century. Each came from a distinct cultural and intellectual background, which shaped both the nature of their observations and the purposes of their writings. Their works differ not only in content but also in method, audience, and interpretative framework.

Al-Biruni, one of the earliest among them, represents a highly scholarly approach to understanding Indian society. Born in 973 CE in Khwarizm (present-day Uzbekistan), a renowned centre of learning, he received a comprehensive education and mastered several languages, including Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit.

His intellectual curiosity was further stimulated when he was brought to Ghazni by Mahmud of Ghazni after the latter's invasion of Khwarizm. It was here that Al-Biruni developed a sustained interest in India.

His engagement with Indian knowledge systems was profound and methodical. He spent years in the company of Brahmana scholars, learning Sanskrit and studying a wide range of texts, including works on philosophy, religion, astronomy, and mathematics.

His linguistic abilities enabled him not only to access these texts but also to translate them, thereby facilitating intellectual exchange between cultures. This engagement reflects a broader tradition of knowledge transmission, where Sanskrit works had been translated into Arabic since the eighth century.

Al-Biruni's most significant work, the *Kitab-ul-Hind*, stands out for its systematic and analytical structure. Written in Arabic, it comprises eighty chapters covering diverse topics such as religious doctrines, philosophical ideas, festivals, social customs, laws, astronomy, and systems of measurement.

What distinguishes this work is its methodological clarity. Each chapter typically begins with a question, followed by a detailed description based on Sanskrit sources, and concludes with a comparison with other cultures.

This structured approach reflects Al-Biruni's mathematical training and his commitment to precision and logical reasoning.

The purpose of the *Kitab-ul-Hind* was twofold. On the one hand, it aimed to assist those interested in engaging with Indian religious and philosophical traditions. On the other hand, it served as a repository of information for those seeking to understand Indian society more broadly.

Unlike many later travellers, Al-Biruni did not seek merely to describe what he saw; rather, he attempted to interpret and explain Indian society within a comparative framework.

At the same time, Al-Biruni was acutely aware of the challenges involved in understanding a foreign culture. He identified several barriers, including linguistic differences, variations in religious beliefs and practices, and what he perceived as the insularity of Indian society.

Despite these challenges, he relied extensively on Brahmanical texts, which influenced his interpretation of social structures such as the caste system.

Thus, Al-Biruni's work exemplifies a rigorous and scholarly approach to cross-cultural understanding. His emphasis on comparison, analysis, and textual study distinguishes his account from more narrative or experiential travelogues. At the same time, his reliance on elite textual traditions highlights the limitations inherent in his method.

acquired from books. This inclination drove him to undertake extensive journeys across North Africa, West Asia, Central Asia, and eventually the Indian subcontinent.

By the time he arrived in India in 1333, Ibn Battuta had already travelled widely, including pilgrimage journeys to Mecca. His decision to visit India was influenced by the reputation of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq as a generous patron of scholars. Upon reaching Delhi, he was appointed as a qazi (judge), a position he held for several years.

His career, however, was marked by instability; he fell out of favour, was imprisoned, and later reinstated before being sent as an envoy to China.

Ibn Battuta's travels were extensive and often hazardous. He journeyed through the Malabar coast, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bengal, Assam, and Southeast Asia before reaching China.



Expert Coaching  
for **CUET UG**  
Online + Offline Classes

UniDrill

Enroll at [www.unidrill.in](http://www.unidrill.in)

The advertisement features a blue and orange color scheme. It shows a student in a yellow shirt sitting at a desk with a laptop, looking at a presentation. In the background, a teacher is presenting to a group of students in a classroom setting. The UniDrill logo is prominently displayed in the top right corner of the ad.

### Ibn Battuta – Experience, Curiosity, and Social Life

In contrast to Al-Biruni's analytical approach, Ibn Battuta's account reflects a deeply experiential engagement with the world. Born in Tangier, Morocco, into a family of Islamic scholars, he received a formal education in religious law (shari'a).

However, unlike many of his contemporaries, Ibn Battuta valued knowledge gained through travel more than that

Travel during this period was fraught with dangers, including attacks by robbers, illness, and the psychological strain of isolation. His accounts vividly describe such hardships, providing a personal dimension to his narrative.

His travelogue, the *Rihla*, is rich in detail and offers a vivid portrayal of social and cultural life in the fourteenth century. Unlike Al-Biruni's work, which is structured and analytical, the *Rihla* is narrative and descriptive, aimed at entertaining as well as informing its audience.

It was compiled at the behest of the ruler of Morocco, who wished to preserve Ibn Battuta's experiences.

One of the most striking features of Ibn Battuta's writing is his emphasis on the unfamiliar. He often described objects, practices, and customs that were new to his audience by comparing them with familiar ones. For example, he described the coconut as resembling a human head and explained the use of paan in a detailed, step-by-step manner.

Such descriptions not only conveyed information but also evoked a sense of wonder and curiosity.

Ibn Battuta's account also provides valuable insights into urban life in the subcontinent. He described cities such as Delhi and Daulatabad as densely populated, prosperous, and vibrant centres of economic activity.

Markets were depicted as bustling spaces where trade, social interaction, and cultural performances coexisted. Bazaars were not merely commercial hubs but also sites of entertainment, with musicians, dancers, and performers attracting crowds.

His observations on agriculture and trade highlight the economic vitality of the region. He noted the fertility of the soil, which allowed for multiple crops annually, and the integration of the subcontinent into extensive trade networks connecting West Asia and Southeast Asia.

Indian textiles, including cotton, muslin, silk, and brocade, were in high demand and contributed significantly to economic prosperity.

Another remarkable aspect of Ibn Battuta's account is his description of the communication system. He was particularly impressed by the efficiency of the postal system, which included both horse-post and foot-post mechanisms.

This system enabled rapid transmission of information and goods, facilitating trade and governance.

Overall, Ibn Battuta's narrative reflects a world that was interconnected and cosmopolitan. His account captures the dynamism of urban life, the richness of cultural practices, and the complexity of economic networks. At the same time, his focus on novelty and wonder reveals the subjective nature of his observations.

### **François Bernier – Comparison, Critique, and Bias**

François Bernier represents yet another perspective, shaped by the intellectual currents of seventeenth-century Europe. A French doctor, political philosopher, and historian, he lived in Mughal India for about twelve years, from 1656 to 1668.

Unlike Ibn Battuta, whose account emphasised experience, Bernier's writings are characterised by comparison and critique.

Bernier's primary objective was to compare Indian society with that of Europe, particularly France, and to highlight what he perceived as the shortcomings of the former. His works, often written in the form of letters to influential figures, were intended to influence European policymakers and intellectuals.

A central feature of Bernier's analysis is his use of a binary framework, in which India and Europe are presented as opposites. India is depicted as backward, stagnant, and despotic, while Europe is portrayed as progressive and rational.

This framework reflects a Eurocentric perspective that prioritises European norms and values.

One of Bernier's key arguments concerns landownership. He claimed that in the Mughal Empire, all land belonged to the emperor, and that this system prevented the development of private property. According to him, this led to a lack of investment in agriculture, resulting in economic decline and widespread poverty.

He argued that peasants were heavily exploited and often driven to despair.

However, this interpretation is problematic. Mughal sources suggest that land revenue was not a form of ownership but rather a tax on agricultural produce. Bernier's misunderstanding reflects both his limited knowledge and his tendency to interpret Indian institutions through a European lens.



Expert Coaching  
for **CUET UG**  
Online + Offline Classes

UniDrill

Enroll at [www.unidrill.in](http://www.unidrill.in)

The advertisement features a blue and orange color scheme. It shows a student in a yellow shirt sitting at a desk with a laptop, looking at a screen displaying a teacher. In the background, another student is seen in a classroom setting with a teacher pointing at a bar chart on a whiteboard. The UniDrill logo is prominently displayed in the top right corner.

Bernier also described Indian society as sharply divided between a small, wealthy elite and a vast mass of impoverished people, claiming that there was no significant middle class.

In reality, society was far more complex, with multiple intermediate groups, including zamindars, merchants, artisans, and various categories of peasants.

His views on the economy are similarly contradictory. While he argued that artisans lacked incentives and that manufacturing was in decline, he also acknowledged the large-scale export of Indian goods and the influx of gold and silver into the subcontinent.

This contradiction highlights the limitations of his analysis.

Bernier's description of urban centres as "camp towns" dependent on imperial patronage further illustrates his tendency to oversimplify. In reality, cities in the Mughal Empire served diverse functions as centres of trade, production, and religious activity.

Despite these limitations, Bernier's writings had a significant impact on European thought. They contributed to the development of theories such as "oriental despotism" and the "Asiatic mode of production," which portrayed Asian societies as stagnant and despotic.

