

CUET · HISTORY · CLASS XII · CODE 314

Through the Eyes of Travellers

CUET unit: Theme V — Medieval Society through Travellers'
Accounts

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Snapshot

- Chapter reconstructs c. tenth–seventeenth-century Indian society through the eyes of three outsider travellers: Al-Biruni (11th c., from Khwarizm/Uzbekistan), Ibn Battuta (14th c., from Morocco) and François Bernier (17th c., from France).
- Each traveller wrote in a different language and for a different audience — Arabic (Kitab-ul-Hind and Rihla) and French/European languages (Travels in the Mughal Empire) — and each adopted a distinct strategy for handling the "unfamiliar".
- Core themes tested by CUET: methodology and "barriers" of cross-cultural understanding (Al-Biruni); the "enjoyment of curiosities" and description of Indian cities, agriculture, postal system, coconut/paan (Ibn Battuta); the binary opposition of "East" and "West", crown ownership of land, "camp towns", sati and karkhanas (Bernier).
- Supporting themes: caste/varna system, slavery, women and sati, and the long shadow of Bernier's account on European thinkers (Montesquieu's "oriental despotism", Marx's "Asiatic mode of production").

Detailed Notes

2.1 Core concepts

- Travellers came to India as traders, soldiers, priests, pilgrims and adventurers; their accounts are valuable because, coming from different social-cultural worlds, they recorded "everyday activities" that indigenous writers took for granted (NCERT §intro, p. 115–116).
- We have practically no surviving travel accounts left by women, although women did travel (NCERT §intro, p. 115).
- **Al-Biruni** (973–1048) was born in Khwarizm, present-day Uzbekistan; knew Syriac, Arabic, Persian, Hebrew and Sanskrit, and read Greek philosophers (Plato etc.) in Arabic translation; in 1017 Sultan Mahmud took him as a hostage to Ghazni, where he developed an interest in India and spent the rest of his life until death at age 70 (NCERT §1.1, p. 116).

- He learnt Sanskrit from Brahmana priests and scholars, translated Patanjali's grammar into Arabic, and translated Euclid into Sanskrit for his Brahmana friends (NCERT §1.1, p. 116).
- **Kitab-ul-Hind** was written in Arabic, simple and lucid in style, voluminous, divided into 80 chapters on religion, philosophy, festivals, astronomy, alchemy, manners and customs, social life, weights and measures, iconography, laws and metrology (NCERT §1.2, p. 117).
- Al-Biruni adopted a near-geometric chapter structure: a question, a description from Sanskritic traditions, then a comparison with other cultures — a precision attributed by some scholars to his mathematical orientation (NCERT §1.2, p. 117).
- The term "Hindu" was an Old Persian word (sixth–fifth centuries BCE) for the region east of the Sindhu; Arabs called the region "al-Hind"; later Turks called the people Hindu, the land Hindustan, the language Hindavi — none of these expressions originally indicated religious identity (NCERT box, p. 117).
- **Three barriers** Al-Biruni identified to understanding India: (1) language — Sanskrit so different from Arabic/Persian that concepts could not be easily translated; (2) difference in religious beliefs and practices; (3) the self-absorption and "insularity" of the local population (NCERT §4.1, p. 124).
- He depended almost exclusively on the works of Brahmanas — Vedas, Puranas, Bhagavad Gita, Patanjali, Manusmriti (NCERT §4.1, p. 124).
- On caste, Al-Biruni sought parallels with ancient Persia's four social categories (knights/princes; monks/fire-priests/lawyers; physicians/astronomers/scientists; peasants/artisans) and noted that under Islam all men were considered equal, differing only in piety (NCERT §4.2, p. 124).
- He disapproved of the notion of pollution: anything that falls into impurity strives to regain purity (sun cleans the air, salt prevents the sea from rotting); the conception of social pollution was, he argued, contrary to the laws of nature (NCERT §4.2, p. 124–125).
- **Ibn Battuta** (1304–77), born in Tangier, Morocco, into a family of experts in Islamic religious law (shari'a); he prized travel over books; reached Sind in 1333 having travelled through Central Asia, attracted by Muhammad bin Tughlaq's reputation as a patron (NCERT §2.1, p. 118).
- The Sultan was impressed by his scholarship and appointed him qazi (judge) of Delhi; he later fell out of favour, was restored, and in 1342 was sent as envoy to the Mongol ruler of China (NCERT §2.1, p. 118).
- He travelled via the Malabar coast, Maldives (qazi for 18 months), Sri Lanka, Bengal, Assam, Sumatra and China (Beijing); returned home in 1347 (NCERT §2.1, p. 118–119).
- According to Ibn Battuta: 40 days from Multan to Delhi, ~50 days from Sind to Delhi, 40 days Daulatabad to Delhi, 10 days Gwalior to Delhi (NCERT §2.1, p. 119).

- His **Rihla**, written in Arabic, was dictated to Ibn Juzayy on the orders of the local ruler upon his return (NCERT Source 3, p. 121).
- He described unfamiliar things using comparisons — the **coconut**'s nut resembles a man's head with two eyes and a mouth, its inside like the brain, with fibres like hair used to sew up ships in place of iron nails (NCERT §5.1 + Source 6, p. 126).
- **Paan** ("betel") is cultivated like the grape-vine, has no fruit, grown only for its leaves; used with areca nut and a little chalk, chewed together (NCERT §5.1 + Source 7, p. 126).
- He described Delhi as the largest city in India and Daulatabad (Maharashtra) as rivalling Delhi in size; bazaars were hubs of social/cultural life with mosques and temples; Daulatabad had Tarababad, a market-place for male and female singers (NCERT §5.2 + Source 9, p. 127–128).
- Indian agriculture was very productive — two crops a year on fertile soil; Indian textiles (cotton, fine muslin, silk, brocade, satin) were exported across West Asia and Southeast Asia (NCERT §5.2, p. 128).
- **Postal system** had two kinds: the horse-post (**uluq**), run by royal horses at stations every four miles; the foot-post (**dawa**), with three stations per mile (each one-third of a mile). The foot-post was quicker and was also used to transport Khurasan fruits; news of spies reached the Sultan from Sind in just five days, vs. fifty days by ordinary travel (NCERT §5.3 + Source 10, p. 129).
- **François Bernier** (1620–88), French physician, political philosopher and historian; in India for 12 years (1656–1668); attached as physician to Prince Dara Shukoh (eldest son of Shah Jahan), later to Danishmand Khan, an Armenian noble at the Mughal court (NCERT §3, p. 122).
- His book **Travels in the Mughal Empire** was dedicated to Louis XIV, king of France; many of his other works were letters to influential officials. He almost always presented India as inferior to Europe (NCERT §3.1, p. 122).
- His works were published in France in 1670–71 and translated into English, Dutch, German and Italian within five years; between 1670 and 1725 reprinted eight times in French — in marked contrast to Arabic/Persian accounts that circulated only as manuscripts and were generally not published before 1800 (NCERT §3.1, p. 123).
- Bernier's representation worked on a **binary opposition** model — India as the inverse of Europe — and hierarchically ordered, with India as inferior (NCERT §6, p. 130).
- His central economic argument: there was **no private property in land** in Mughal India; the emperor owned all the land and distributed it to his nobles. This (he claimed) led to ruination of agriculture, oppression of peasantry and prevented the emergence of "improving" landlords as in Western Europe (NCERT §6.1, p. 130).
- Bernier concluded: "There is no middle state in India" — society had only impoverished masses and a small rich ruling class with nothing in between (NCERT §6.1, p. 131).

- **no Mughal official document** suggests the state was the sole owner of land; Abu'l Fazl (Akbar's chronicler) described land revenue as "remunerations of sovereignty", a claim for protection, not rent on land owned by the king (NCERT §6.1, p. 132).
- Bernier's ideas influenced **Montesquieu's** concept of "oriental despotism" and later **Karl Marx's** concept of the "Asiatic mode of production" (in which surplus was appropriated by the state and society consisted of autonomous, internally egalitarian, stagnant village communities) (NCERT §6.1, p. 132).
- During the 17th century about **15 per cent** of Indian population lived in towns — higher than the urban proportion in contemporary Western Europe — yet Bernier characterised Mughal cities as "**camp towns**" that owed their existence to the imperial camp and declined when it moved (NCERT §6.2, p. 134).
- This was an oversimplification: there were manufacturing towns, trading towns, port-towns, sacred centres and pilgrimage towns; merchants were organised into caste-cum-occupational bodies (**mahajans** in western India), led by a **sheth**, and in cities such as Ahmedabad collectively represented by the **nagarsheth** (NCERT §6.2, p. 134).
- Bernier also described **karkhanas** (imperial workshops) where embroiderers, goldsmiths, painters, lacquer-varnishers, joiners, turners, tailors, shoemakers and silk/brocade/muslin manufacturers worked under a master (NCERT Source 14, p. 134).
- On **slavery**: slaves were openly sold in markets and gifted; Ibn Battuta himself bought slaves in Sind as gifts for Muhammad bin Tughlaq; Muhammad bin Tughlaq once gave a preacher "a hundred thousand tankas and two hundred slaves"; female slaves performed music/dance, spied on nobles, and the price of slaves (especially female for domestic labour) was very low (NCERT §7, p. 135).
- On **sati**, Bernier left a famous description of a Lahore child sati — a young widow not more than twelve years old, who trembled and wept but was forced by Brahmanas onto the wood and burnt alive; European travellers used sati as a marker of difference between East and West (NCERT §7 + Source 16, p. 135).
- These accounts need qualification: women's labour was crucial to agricultural and non-agricultural production; merchant women participated in commerce and even went to court; women were not confined to private spaces (NCERT §7, p. 136).

2.2 Definitions to memorise

Term	Definition	Page
Kitab-ul-Hind	Al-Biruni's voluminous 80-chapter Arabic work on India covering religion, philosophy, astronomy, manners, social life, weights and measures, iconography, laws and metrology	117
Rihla	Ibn Battuta's Arabic book of travels, dictated to Ibn Juzayy on the local ruler's orders after his return	118, 121

Term	Definition	Page
Travels in the Mughal Empire	François Bernier's major work, dedicated to Louis XIV of France	122
Metrology	The science of measurement	117
Hindu / al-Hind / Hindavi	Old Persian / Arab / Turkish-era terms for the region east of the Sindhu, its people and its language — without religious connotation in their original use	117
Qazi	A judge; office held by Ibn Battuta in Delhi (under Muhammad bin Tughlaq) and in the Maldives	118
Uluq	Royal horse-post with stations every four miles	129
Dawa	Foot-post with three stations per mile (one-third of a mile each) — quicker than uluq	129
Antyaja	Categories "born outside the system" — expected to provide inexpensive labour to peasants and zamindars	125
Karkhana	Imperial workshop where artisans (embroiderers, goldsmiths, painters, varnishers, etc.) worked under a master	134
Mahajan / Sheth / Nagarsheth	Caste-cum-occupational merchant body in western India / its chief / chief of the merchant community of a city (e.g. Ahmedabad)	134
Camp town	Bernier's label for Mughal cities — dependent on the imperial camp, declining when it moved out	134
Asiatic mode of production	Marx's concept (developed from Bernier and Montesquieu) — surplus appropriated by the state, society made of autonomous internally egalitarian village communities, stagnant	132

2.3 Diagrams / processes to remember

- Fig. 5.1a–b (p. 115): Paan leaves and a coconut — items that struck many travellers as unusual.
- Fig. 5.2 (p. 117): 13th-c. Arabic manuscript showing the Greek statesman Solon addressing his students — example of Greek thought circulating in Arabic.
- Fig. 5.3 (p. 118): 16th-c. Mughal painting of robbers attacking travellers — illustrates the hazards of medieval travel.
- Map 1 (p. 120): Places visited by Ibn Battuta in Afghanistan, Sind and Punjab — Tirmidh, Balkh, Kabul, Ghazna, Qandahar, Multan, Ajudahan, Sarasati, Hansi, Dehli.
- Fig. 5.6 (p. 122): A 17th-c. painting depicting Bernier in European clothes.
- Fig. 5.10 (p. 128): Ikat weaving patterns — adopted at coastal centres in the subcontinent and Southeast Asia.

- Timeline (p. 137): Al-Biruni 973–1048; Marco Polo 1254–1323; Ibn Battuta 1304–77; Abdur Razzaq 1413–82; Duarte Barbosa 1518; Mahmud Wali Balkhi 1626–31 in India; Tavernier 1605–67; Bernier 1620–88.

2.5 Timeline / Key events

Year / Period	Event	Significance
973–1048 CE	Lifetime of Al-Biruni	First major outsider scholar of India (NCERT §5.1, p. 116)
1017 CE	Mahmud of Ghazni takes Al-Biruni as hostage after sack of Khwarizm	Al-Biruni's forced migration to Ghazni (NCERT p. 116)
c. 1030 CE	Al-Biruni composes the Kitab-ul-Hind in Arabic	Encyclopaedic account of India (NCERT p. 116)
1254–1323 CE	Lifetime of Marco Polo	(NCERT timeline, p. 137)
1304–77 CE	Lifetime of Ibn Battuta	(NCERT §5.2, p. 118)
1333 CE	Ibn Battuta reaches Sind, then Delhi via Multan	(NCERT p. 119)
1334 CE	Muhammad bin Tughlaq appoints Ibn Battuta qazi of Delhi	(NCERT p. 119)
1342 CE	Ibn Battuta sent as Sultan's envoy to China; sails from Calicut	(NCERT p. 119)
1353–54 CE	Ibn Battuta returns to Morocco; dictates the Rihla in Arabic	(NCERT §5.2, p. 119)
1413–82 CE	Abdur Razzaq Samarqandi (Persian envoy to Vijayanagara, 1442–43)	(NCERT timeline, p. 137)
1518 CE	Duarte Barbosa's Portuguese account of India	(NCERT p. 137)
1605–89 CE	Lifetime of Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (French jeweller-traveller)	(NCERT p. 137)
1620–88 CE	Lifetime of François Bernier	(NCERT §5.3, p. 122)
1626–31 CE	Mahmud Wali Balkhi travels in India	(NCERT timeline, p. 137)
1656–68 CE	Bernier in India; serves as physician to Dara Shukoh, then with Danishmand Khan	(NCERT §5.3, p. 122)
1670 CE	Bernier's Travels in the Mughal Empire dedicated to Louis XIV of France	(NCERT p. 122)

Year / Period	Event	Significance
1670s onwards	Eight editions of Bernier's Travels in France within five years	Sets stage for Montesquieu's "oriental despotism" (NCERT p. 122)

2.4 Common confusions / NTA trap points

- **Languages of the works:** Kitab-ul-Hind = Arabic; Rihla = Arabic (NOT Persian); Bernier's Travels = French (dedicated to Louis XIV). NTA often swaps these.
- **Patron-sovereign confusion:** Al-Biruni came with Mahmud of Ghazni (1017); Ibn Battuta served Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq (NOT Alauddin Khalji); Bernier was physician to Dara Shukoh (NOT Aurangzeb personally, although later attached to Danishmand Khan at Aurangzeb's court).
- **Uluq vs Dawa:** uluq = horse-post (every 4 miles); dawa = foot-post (three stations per mile, i.e. one-third mile each). Foot-post was FASTER than horse-post per NCERT.
- **Crown-ownership claim:** Bernier said the king owned all land; NCERT explicitly says no Mughal document confirms this — distractor traps often present Bernier's claim as factual.
- **"Hindu":** Originally a geographical term (east of Sindhu); religious connotation came much later. NTA likes to test the etymology.
- **Tarababad:** A market for singers in Daulatabad (NOT Delhi).
- **"There is no middle state in India"** is Bernier's quote, not Ibn Battuta's.

Practice MCQs

PYQ Alignment

This chapter is heavily tested in CUET History every year: typically 12–18 MCQs across the three travellers, with predictable favourites around (i) language and patron of each work (Kitab-ul-Hind/Arabic/Mahmud-Ghazni; Rihla/Arabic/Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq; Travels/French/Louis XIV-Dara Shukoh), (ii) Al-Biruni's three "barriers" and his caste analysis, (iii) Ibn Battuta's coconut/pan/postal-system (uluq vs dawa) descriptions, and (iv) Bernier's "no private property in land", "camp towns", "no middle state" and the line of influence from Bernier → Montesquieu (oriental despotism) → Marx (Asiatic mode of production).

CUET 2023 — Actual PYQs from this chapter

Q.15 (CUET 2023) Ibn Battuta was from which country?

- A) Uzbekistan B) Morocco C) France D) England **Tests:** Ibn Battuta — biography and Rihla **Answer:** Not in extracted key

Q.16 (CUET 2023) According to _____ one of the fundamental differences between Mughal India and Europe was the lack of private property in land in the former.

- A) Francois Bernier B) Ibn Battuta C) Al-Biruni D) Jean Baptiste Tavernier **Tests:** Bernier on private property and Mughal-Europe contrast **Answer:** Not in extracted key

CUET 2024 — Actual PYQs from this chapter

Q.43 (CUET 2024) Match List-I with List-II. List-I List-II (A) Duarte Barbosa (I) Morocco (B) Marco Polo (II) Spain (C) Ibn Battuta (III) Portugal (D) Antonio Monserrate (IV) Italy Choose the correct answer:

- A) (A-I), (B-II), (C-IV), (D-III) B) (A-III), (B-IV), (C-I), (D-II) C) (A-I), (B-III), (C-IV), (D-II) D) (A-III), (B-IV), (C-II), (D-I) **Tests:** Travellers and their countries — Barbosa, Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, Monserrate **Answer:** Not in extracted key

CUET 2025 — Actual PYQs from this chapter

Q.10 (CUET 2025) If you are reading traveller accounts, which of the following would be of Al-Biruni?

- A) Explanation of caste system using parallels in Persia B) Description of Daulatabad as vast city C) Finding lack of private property in India D) Description of coconut and paan **Tests:** Al-Biruni and the Kitab-ul-Hind — caste compared with Persia **Answer:** Not in extracted key

Q.35 (CUET 2025) Match travellers with descriptions: Description Traveller Hostage in Ghazni Al-Biruni Qazi of Delhi Ibn Battuta Physician to Shah Jahan François Bernier Wrote on trade in South India Duarte Barbosa Options:

- A) A-I, B-III, C-II, D-IV B) A-I, B-II, C-III, D-IV C) A-II, B-I, C-IV, D-III D) A-III, B-IV, C-I, D-II **Tests:** Travellers and their roles — Al-Biruni, Ibn Battuta, Bernier, Barbosa **Answer:** Not in extracted key

Q.36 (CUET 2025) Which statement about Ibn Battuta is not true?

- A) Wrote Rihla in Arabic B) Born in Tangier C) Roads of India were unsafe D) Went to Persia in 1342 **Tests:** Ibn Battuta — biography, Rihla and travels **Answer:** Not in extracted key