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Through the eyes of travellers

Ibn Battuta and his Book Rihla:

- Ibn Battuta wrote the book 'Rihla' in Arabic. This book provides extremely rich and interesting detail about the social and cultural life in the sub-continent in the 14th century.
- Ibn Battuta went to far-off places, exploring new worlds and peoples.
- Before coming to India, he travelled extensively to Syria, Iraq, Persia, Yemen, Oman, Mecca and a few trading ports on the coast of East Africa.
- When he came to Delhi, Muhammad-bin- Tughlaq was the Sultan of Delhi. The Sultan was impressed by his scholarship and appointed him the 'qazi' or judge of Delhi.
- He visited Bengal, Assam, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Sumatra and China.
- He meticulously recorded his observations about new cultures, peoples, beliefs, values, etc.
- Travelling was not secure at that time. During his travel, Ibn Battuta was attacked by bands of robbers several times and was severely wounded.
- Ibn Battuta spent several years travelling through North Africa, West Asia, parts of Central Asia, the Indian sub-continent and China and recorded extensively his experiences.

Battuta's Description of Indian Society:

- In the 14th century, Indian sub-continent had its contact from China in the East to North West Africa and Europe in the West. Ibn Battuta travelled through these lands and arrived at Delhi in the 14th century after visiting sacred shrines, meeting with rulers, learned men and people who spoke Arabic, Persian, Turkish and other languages. He shared ideas, information and anecdotes.
- While describing Indian society, Ibn Battuta explained the unfamiliar things like coconut and paan in a unique way.
- Ibn Battuta found the cities of India densely populated and prosperous. According to him, Delhi was the largest city in India. He also had the same view for Daulatabad (in Maharashtra).
- The bazaars (markets) were the places of economic transactions and also the hub of social and cultural activities. There were masjids and temples to offer prayers and also some bazaars marked with spaces for public performances by dancers, musicians and singers.
- Ibn Battuta found Indian agriculture very productive because of the fertility of the soil where farmers tend to cultivate two crops a year.

- Indian manufacturing flourished due to inter-Asian network of trade and commerce. These were in great demand in both West Asia and South-East Asia where artisans and merchants were fetching huge profits.
- Indian textiles, specially cotton cloth, fine muslins, silks, brocade and satin were also in great demand.
- Ibn Battuta was amazed by the efficiency of the postal system which was of two kinds, the horse-post called 'uluq' and the foot-post called 'dawa'.

Al-Biruni's View About Indian Society:

- According to Al-Biruni, Sanskrit was so different from Arabic and Persian that ideas and concepts could not be translated easily from one language to another.
- Al-Biruni tried to explain the caste system by comparing it with other societies. He tried to suggest that social divisions were not unique to India.
- Al-Biruni depended on the Vedas, the Puranas, the Bhagavad Gita, the works of Patanjali, the Manusmriti, etc.
- Sanskrit texts laid down the rules of caste system from the point of view of Brahmanas, but in real life the system was not quite so rigid.