

CLASS:--12TH, HISTORY REVISION NOTES, CHAPTER:- 01, THROUGH THE EYES OF TRAVELLERS

Francois Bernier: A French Traveller

- A number of Portuguese, Dutch, English and French travellers came to India in the 16th and 17th century. Of them, Jesuit Roberto Nobili, Duarte Barbosa, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier and Manucci wrote different aspects of Indian society.
- French doctor, political philosopher and historian Francois Bernier spent twelve years (1656 to 1668) in India and was closely associated with the Mughal court.
- Bernier travelled to several parts of India and wrote detailed accounts by comparing the situation in India with Europe.
- His works were published in France in 1670-71, and translated into English, Dutch, German and Italian. His writings became extremely popular.

Bernier and His View About Contemporary Society:

- As compared to Ibn Battuta, Bernier believed in a different intellectual tradition where he was more critical. He compared and contrasted what he saw in India with the situation in Europe in general and France in particular.
- Bernier's book 'Travels in the Mughal Empire' is marked by detailed observations, critical insights and reflection. He constantly compared Mughal India with contemporary Europe, generally emphasising the superiority of the latter.
- According to him, the Mughal emperor owned all the lands and distributed it among his nobles and it led to disastrous consequences for economy and society. This perception was supported by most of the travellers of that period.
- As having no legal right over land, landholders could not pass on their land to their children. Thus, they avoid any kind of long-term investment in the sustenance and expansion of production.
- This crown ownership system of land ruined the agriculture as well as the living standard of all sections of society, except the ruling aristocracy which oppressed the peasant class.
- He explained that because of crown ownership of land, Indian society has no social group or class between the poorest of the poor and the richest of the rich. He further said, "There is no middle state in India".
- Bernier described Mughal king as the king of "beggars and barbarians". But Abul Fazl gave a different account by describing revenue as a claim made by the ruler on his subjects for the protection he provides, rather than as rent on land that he owned.
- Bernier's descriptions influenced Western theorists from the 18th century onwards. For instance, French philosopher Montesquieu used this account to develop the idea of oriental despotism and in the 19th century, Karl Marx used this account to develop the Asiatic mode of production.
- He also explained that India had a more complex social reality where artisans had no incentive to improve the quality of their products as profits were appropriated by the state. But at the same time, he added that the country used to exchange its manufacturing goods with the precious metals
- gold and silver, from outside the sub-continent. Whereas he also noticed existence of a prosperous merchant community as well.

- There were all kinds of towns i.e. manufacturing towns, trading towns, port-towns, sacred centres, pilgrimage towns, etc.
- The different urban groups included mahajans, sheth, nagarsheth, hakim or vaid, pundit or mulla, wakii, painters, architects, musicians, calligraphers, etc.