

CLASS NOTES

Class: XII

Topic: Chapter-5. **THROUGH THE EYES OF TRAVELLERS.**

3. FRANCOIS BERNIER

Subject: HISTORY

FRANCOIS BERNIER

✚ A doctor with a difference

- a. He was a Frenchman, a doctor, political philosopher and historian.
- b. He came to the Mughal court in search of opportunities.
- c. He was in India for twelve years from 1656 to 1658. He was closely associated to the Mughal court as a physician to Prince Dara Shukoh, the eldest son of Shah Jahan and later as an intellectual and scientist, with Danishmand Khan, an Armenian noble at the Mughal court.
- d. Bernier travelled to several parts of the country, and wrote accounts of what he saw, frequently comparing what he saw in India with the situation in Europe.
- e. He dedicated his major writing to Louis XIV, the king of France, and many of his other works were written in the form of letters to influential officials and ministers.
- f. In virtually every instance Bernier described what he saw in India as a bleak situation in comparison to developments in Europe. This assessment was not always accurate.

✚ Comparing “East” and “West”

- a. He travelled to several parts of the country and wrote accounts of what he saw and comparing India with the situation in Europe.
- b. He dedicated his major writing to the king of France Louis XIV.

The question of landownership (crown ownership of land)

1. Bernier, one of the fundamental differences between *Mughal India and Europe* was the lack of private property in land and crown ownership of land as being harmful for both the

state and its people.

2. He thought that in the Mughal Empire the emperor owned all the land and distributed it among his nobles, and nobles to the peasants.
3. Owing to crown ownership of land, landholders could not pass on their land to their children. So they were averse to any long-term investment in the sustenance and expansion of production.
4. Bernier saw the Mughal Empire – its king was the king of “beggars and barbarians”; its cities and towns were ruined and contaminated with “ill air”; and its fields, “overspread with bushes” and full of “pestilential marshes”.
5. And, all this was because of one reason: crown ownership of land. Curiously, none of the Mughal official documents suggest that the state was the sole owner of land.

Q. According to Bernier, ‘Crown ownership of land had disastrous consequences for the state and the society.’ Justify the statement.

Ans: Bernier was against the idea of crown ownership of land in Mughal India due to the following reasons:

1. Due to crown ownership of the land, the landholders had no right on the land. They could not pass on the land to their children. As a result, they were not interested in long-term investment in maintenance and expansion of production.
2. It prevented the emergence of the ‘improving’ landlords.
3. This led to deterioration of agriculture, excessive exploitation of the peasants and decline in the living condition of all sections of the society, except the ruling section of the society.

Q. Explain the views of Bernier about a more complex social reality of the Mughal Empire.

Ans: Berniers descriptions occasionally hinted at a more complex social reality.

1. Artisans had no incentive to improve the quality of their products, since profits were acquired by the state. Consequently, the production was on the verge of decline.
2. At the same time, he admitted that huge quantities of the world's precious metal came to India, as products were exported in exchange for gold and silver.
3. He also noticed that a prosperous community of merchants existed in the society, who were engaged in long distance trade.
4. Bernier also observed that a large portion of the land was extremely fertile and the Kingdom of Bengal surpassed the Kingdom of Egypt in the agricultural production and other various necessities of life such as silk, cotton and indigo.
5. He noticed that there were many parts in India which were thickly populated and the land was properly cultivated.
6. According to him although artisans were lazy, they were forced by necessity to work and manufacture carpets, brocades, gold, embroidery, silk cotton and so on.

✚ Mughal Cities (Camp towns)

Q. Examine why Bernier described the Mughal towns the 'Camp Towns'.

Ans: Bernier described the Mughal towns as 'camp Towns'.

1. In fact, during the seventeenth century about 15 per cent of the population lived in towns. This was higher than the proportion of urban population in Western Europe in the same period.
2. Bernier described Mughal cities as "camp towns". He believed that these cities came into existence and grown when the imperial court moved in and rapidly declined when it moved out.
3. There were all kinds of towns: manufacturing towns, trading towns, port-towns, sacred centres, pilgrimage towns, etc. Their existence is an index of the prosperity of merchant communities and professional classes.
4. Merchants often had strong community or kin ties, and were organised into their own caste-cum bodies. In western India these groups were called mahajans, and their chief, the sheth or occupational Nagarsheth.

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5. Urban groups included professional classes such as physicians (*hakim* or *vaid*), teachers (*pundit* or *mulla*), lawyers (*wakil*), painters, architects, musicians, calligraphers, etc. While some depended on imperial patronage, many made their living by serving other patrons.

✚ Sati and women Labourers:

- European travellers and writers often highlighted the treatment of women as a crucial marker of difference between Western and Eastern societies. Bernier chose the practice of sati for detailed description.
- He noted that while some women seemed to embrace death cheerfully, others were forced to die. However, women's lives revolved around much else besides the practice of sati.
- Women labour was crucial in both agricultural and non-agricultural production.
- Women from merchant families participated in commercial activities, sometimes even taking mercantile disputes to the court of law.
- Therefore, it seems unlikely that women were confined to the private spaces of their homes.

Travelers who wrote detailed accounts regarding Indian social customs and religious practices

Jesuit Roberto Nobili- He translated Indian texts into European languages.

Duarte Barbosa- He wrote a detailed account of trade and society in south India.

Jean-Baptiste Tavernier- He was particularly fascinated with the trading conditions in India, and compared India to Iran and the Ottoman Empire.

Italian doctor Manucci- He wrote detailed accounts regarding Indian social customs and religious practices and settled in India.

Q. How did François Bernier's descriptions influence Western theorists from the eighteenth century?

- Bernier's *Travels in the Mughal Empire* is marked by detailed observations, critical

insights and reflection. His account contains discussions trying to place the history of the Mughals within some his account contains discussions trying to place the history of the Mughals within some.

- Abu'l Fazl, the sixteenth-century official chronicler of Akbar's reign, describes the land revenue as "remunerations of sovereignty", a claim made by the ruler on his subjects for the protection to the crops he provided rather than as rent on land.
- Bernier's descriptions influenced Western theorists from the eighteenth century onwards. The French philosopher Montesquieu, for instance, used this account to develop the idea of oriental despotism, according to which rulers in Asia enjoyed absolute authority over their subjects, who were kept in conditions of subjugation and poverty.
- This idea was further developed as the concept of the Asiatic mode of production by Karl Marx in the nineteenth century. He argued that in India surplus was appropriated by the state. This led to the emergence of a society that was composed of a large number of autonomous and egalitarian village communities.
- However, this picture of rural society was far from true. In fact, during the sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries, rural society was characterised by considerable social and economic Differentiation.