**THEME 5: Through the Eyes of Travellers**

**Al-Biruni**

* Born in 973 AD, in Khwarizm in present day Uzbekistan
* He received the best education available at the time
* He was well versed in several languages: Syriac, Arabic, Persian, Hebrew and Sanskrit
* In Ghazni, where he came as a hostage of Sultan Mahmood, he developed an interest for India
* Al- Biruni spent years in the company of Brahmana priests and scholars, learning Sanskrit, studying religious and philosophical texts
* While his itinerary is not clear, therefore he travelled widely in the Punjab and parts of northern India

The *Kitab-ul-Hind*

* Al-Biruni’s *Kitab-ul-Hind*, written in Arabic is simple and lucid
* It is a voluminous text, divided into 80 chapters on subjects such as religion and philosophy, festivals, astronomy, alchemy, manners and customs, social life, weights and measures, iconography, laws and metrology

Making sense of an alien world

* He discussed several “barriers” that he felt obstructed understanding
* The first among these was language. According to him, Sanskrit was so different from Arabic and Persian that ideas and concepts could not be easily translated from one language into another
* The second barrier he identified was the difference in religious beliefs and practices
* The self absorption and consequent insularity of the local population according to him, constituted the third barrier
* Al-Biruni was aware of these problems, depended almost exclusively on the works of Brahmanas, often citing passages from the Vedas, the puranas, the Bhagavad Gita, the Manusmriti, etc, to provide an understanding of Indian society

Al-Biruni’s description of the caste-system

* He tried to explain the caste system by looking for parallels in other societies. He noted that in ancient Persia, four social categories were recognised: the knights and princes; monks, fire-priests and lawyers; physicians, astronomers and other scientists; and finally, peasants and artisans
* He attempted to suggest that social divisions were not unique to India
* In spite of his acceptance of the brahmanical description of the caste system, Al-Biruni disapproved the notion of pollution
* He remarked that everything which falls into a state of impurity strives and succeeds in regaining its original condition of purity
* The sun cleanses the air, and the salt in the sea prevents the water from being polluted. If it were not so, insisted Al –Biruni, life on earth would have been impossible
* The conception of social pollution, intrinsic to the caste system, was according to him, contrary to the laws of nature