

Foreign Travellers To India

Foreign travellers' accounts provide contemporaneous, external perspectives on India's polity, economy, society, and religion, often supplementing gaps in indigenous and court-centric sources. Owing to their factual observations, these accounts are highly relevant for UPSC Prelims and GS-I.

Accordingly, **this document compiles** chronological coverage, ruler-wise linkage, key factual observations, and comparative insights from major foreign travellers.

India Through Foreign Eyes: A Journey Through History

Foreign travellers' accounts are invaluable sources for reconstructing Indian history, offering firsthand perspectives on administration, society, and economy. This timeline highlights some of the most influential visitors from ancient Greece to early modern Europe.

Ancient & Early Medieval Visitors (c. 300 BCE – 700 CE)



Medieval & Early Modern Visitors (c. 1000 CE – 1540 CE)





Traveller	Origin	Approx. Period	Related Rulers	Work	Key Facts
Megasthenes	Greece	302–298 BCE	Chandragupta Maurya	Indika	- Compared Krishna with the Greek hero Herakles (Hercules). - Classified Indian society into 7 groups — not varnas. - Claimed no slavery in India.
Faxian	China	399–412 CE	Chandragupta II (Gupta)	Fo-Kwo-Ki (A Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms)	First Chinese Buddhist monk to India, started journey at age 60+. - Focused on monastic discipline & social-religious life — not politics. - Observed lenient criminal practices and charity-based hospitals.
Xuanzang	China	629–645 CE	Harsha of Kanauj (Pushyabhuti dynasty)	Si-Yu-Ki (Buddhist Records of the Western World)	- Studied at Nalanda for ~5 years. - Attended Kannauj Assembly hosted by Harsha. - Gave geographical, political & economic details across India. - Documented scholastic debates (Hinayana vs Mahayana). - Carried ~657 Buddhist texts back to China.
Yijing / I-tsing	China	671–695 CE	Chalukya/ Pallava era	A Record of the Buddhist Practices Sent Home from the Southern Sea	Reached India via SEA route (through Srivijaya empire). - Stayed 10 years at Nalanda (676–685 CE). Translated 400,000+ Sanskrit verses into Chinese. - Described daily monastic discipline & rituals.



Sulaiman	Arab	c. 851 CE	Mihira Bhoja of Gurjara-Pratihara Amoghavarsa of Rashtrakuta Pala rulers in Bengal region	Kitab al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik	• Arab merchant traveller who described political and commercial conditions of 9th-century India. • Called Bengal region “Ruhma” (Pala kingdom) and Rashtrakuta territory “Ruhimi.”
Al-Biruni	Uzbek	1017–1025 CE	Mahmud of Ghazni	Tahqiq-i-Hind (Kitab-ul-Hind)	• Learned Sanskrit • Studied Vedas, Puranas, astronomy, mathematics, geography. • Used scientific, comparative method — highly objective. • Explained time-calculation, astronomy & caste system. • Observed: Hindus excel in science but socially conservative. • Criticised Brahmin reluctance to share knowledge.
Ibn Battuta	Morocco	1333–1347 CE	Muhammad bin Tughlaq	Rihla	• Appointed Qazi of Delhi by Muhammad bin Tughlaq • Described Tughlaq as capable but unpredictable • Noted harsh punishments, token currency experiment, postal system • Travelled across Delhi, Malabar Coast, Maldives and Ceylon • Recorded existence of slavery



Marco Polo	Italy	1292–1294 CE	Pandya/ Kakatiya	The Travels of Marco Polo	• Visited Coromandel Coast (Pandya region). • Described pearl fisheries, climate, and coastal social life.
Niccolò Conti	Italy	1419–1439 CE	Vijayanagar (Deva Raya I & II)		• Travelled disguised as a Muslim merchant. • Visited Vijayanagara early 15th century — BEFORE Portuguese. • Provided rare early European description of the city.
Abdur Razzaq	Persia	1442–1445 CE	Deva Raya II (Vijayanagar) And Zamorin (Calicut)	Matla-us-Sadain wa Majma-ul-Bahrain	• First halted at Calicut under the Zamorin. • Then visited Vijayanagara — described massive wealth, army & court ritual. • Detailed royal procession & urban grandeur.
Afanasy Nikitin	Russian	1469–1472 CE	Bahmani Sultanate	Voyage Beyond Three Seas	• One of the earliest Russian accounts of India
Duarte Barbosa	Portugal	1500–1516 CE	Vira Narasimha (Vijayanagar)	Book of Duarte Barbosa	• Described coastal trade networks & society. • Explicitly mentions diamond mines in Vijayanagara region.
Domingo Paes	Portugal	1520–1522 CE	Krishnadeva Raya (Vijayanagar)	Chronica dos reis de Bisnaga	• Compared Hampi to Rome in splendour. • Mentioned 12,000 female royal guards. • Noted military organisation, agriculture & irrigation.



Fernão Nunes	Portugal (Jewish)	1535–1537 CE	Achyuta Deva Raya (Vijayanagar)	Chronicles	• Wrote about post-Krishnadevaraya decline. • Women in Vijayanagara trained as wrestlers, astrologers, soothsayers, accountants.
Francois Bernier	France	1656–1668 CE	Aurangzeb (Mughal Empire)	Travels in the Mughal Empire	• French doctor at Mughal court of Aurangzeb • Compared Indian economy with Europe • Criticised jagirdari system and absence of private land ownership

