ABSTRACT

In this work an attempt has been made to study the socio-economic and cultural way of Indian life from the outlook of the foreign travellers during the 16th and 17th century.

The significance of 16th and 17th cannot be measured in the 'World History'. Even the period of these two centuries formed the most brilliant epochs in Indian History because of the maturity and downfall of Hindu Kingdom in the South during the first half of the sixteenth century. On another hand it witnessed the rise and growth of the Mughals to paramountcy in Northern India. The political turmoil of the first half of the sixteenth century was transitional. Eventually, it gave way to the stability that signified Akbar's reign; beginning with the second half of the sixteenth century.

The history of both the centuries in India has been a very interesting study-politically, socially, economically and culturally. The changes in all these spheres are not only momentous and marked but, also, revolutionary. The Turko-Afghan rule in the early medieval period, gave way to the establishment of the Mughal sway-but, it lacked a solid basis and was swept away-rather, too soon, by the Afghans under Sher Shah. But, it is to their credit that, the Mughals were able to strike back successfully, and restore their lost glory and dignity. Moreover, they were able to perpetrate their dynastic rule in this land for about two centuries.

The period concerned here clashes with the arrival of maximum nos. of foreign travellers in India. These travellers came from different nations were mostly Europeans. They came in different professions and time span leaving a wide and rich variety of source materials on Indian society and culture.

During the first half of the sixteenth-century travellers generally visited Southern India, especially the Malabar Coast and the Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagar. This was due to its geographical location. Study show that the important travellers who visited India during the sixteenth century were seven in numbers. Excluding Ralph Fitch, all the other six travellers confined their visit to Southern India only.
The seventeenth century in India saw the maturity of a very great empire in the East, the Mughal Empire. The period of a century which saw the reign of three most important Mughal rulers besides Akbar was very significant in the making of the Indian Medieval History.

A large number of foreign travellers started visiting the Mughal Empire from the very beginning of the seventeenth century. Mostly the travellers were Englishmen. Nevertheless, there were some important non-English travellers also in record in every reign that had put forward an interesting and detailed account for the period dealing with the socio-economic and cultural life of the period.

Though the original material for the study of Indian History during 16th and 17th centuries is vast and varied but the place occupied by the accounts of foreign travellers has its own importance. The significance can also be guessed from its profuse usage by the modern historians especially in corroborating a fact. The present thesis entitled “Socio-Economic and Cultural Life of Medieval India during 16th and 17th Century as Depicted in the Accounts of Foreign Travellers” attempts to study those aspects of socio-economic and cultural life of Medieval India which were either not focused or not given due importance in the official or Persian chronicle.

Thus, the Socio-economic and Cultural life of Medieval India as depicted in the accounts of foreign travellers has been dealt in great detail in this thesis.

Almost every aspect of socio-economic and cultural life of medieval India had been taken by these travellers. Though there are lots of allegations on the travellers like they exaggerated the matter and depended mainly on bazaar gossips but there are some aspects of Indian History that came into light because of these foreigners like the issue of ‘Anarkali’ etc. As they were unofficial sources they were not under pressure to eulogise the reigning monarch.

The most valuable information regarding the contemporary mode of socio-cultural life during the medieval period is to be found in the accounts of Barbosa, Pyard Laval, Nuniz, Paes, Fitch, Pelsaert, William Finch, Edward Terry, Coryat, Pietro Della Valle, Peter Mundy, Manrique Mandelso, Tavernier, Bernier, Manucci, Thevnot, Bowrey, Carre, Careri, Fryer, Marshall, Ovington and Hamilton. These travellers recorded facts about Indian social life with considerable objectivity.
Accounts of Pelsaert, Tavernier and other travellers throw valuable light on the trade and economy of India during 16th and 17th century without any restrictions. These foreign travellers had taken into account the economic conditions of different segments of society.

This work has been divided into five chapters excluding introduction and conclusion. A brief sketch of each chapter is as follows:

The first chapter deals with the biographical study of travellers who visited India during the period of 16th and 17th century. This chapter aims at giving a brief introduction of the travellers and the significance of their works.

It discusses the circumstances at their home that led them to travel to the East. Their country and profession to which they belonged played an important role in the way of writing travel narrative. An attempt is also made to study their family background to know their mental setup. Significance of their travel narrative depends on the source of collection of their data and also on the fact that which places they had visited in India.

The travellers suffered from certain handicaps by ignorance of the language, customs and institutions of the country. That is why certain factors have to be taken into consideration while accessing the value and the volume of their evidence; the areas of the country they visited and the time and duration of their visit; their linguistic equipment, their opportunities and personal experiences in relation to the court and the people; and above all their education, mental equipment or powers of observation and their prejudices.

The chapter is divided into four sub-chapters for making the chapter easy and interesting giving a clear knowledge of traveller’s period-wise arrival, omitting all confusions to the readers.

The second chapter is an attempt to study the Indian society that was prevalent during the 16th and 17th century from the perspective of a foreigner. Looking the Indian society from the eyes of a foreigner is a different experience.

In this chapter the focus is to study the structure of the society during that period. Besides this an emphasis is made to study the similarities and differences that were prevalent between the Muslim and the Hindu societies such as their manner of taking food and drink, the way of wearing ornaments and dressing and the nature of
housing. The pastimes and amusements were similar for the whole period. In their household affairs, dresses, ornaments, arms, and in other details of their living, it was difficult to distinguish the one from the other. Most of the ceremonies performed by the Hindus and Muslims were same such as at the child-birth and beginning education were identical. A trial is also made to focus on the superstition and beliefs that was commonly prevalent in the society.

In the third chapter an attempt is made to analyse the Indian culture in all important aspects like; political and administrative organization, economic conditions, education, social and religious life etc. in medieval India. The role of aristocracy and nobility in enhancing the cultural development is studied. A trial is made to study the impact of living of higher class responsible in shaping the cultural life during the period; also the role played by the education-system, festivals and fasts on cultural life of the period in general. In spite of the Islamic pre-dominance a composite culture sprang up that was neither Islamic nor Hinduism in character is studied here.

The educational-system remained organized on the traditional lines. The Muslims and Hindus had a common system of education. They studied side by side in the same maktabs and madarsas under a common teacher. The primary education was given in these madarsas, attached with the mosques. Persian being the official language was learnt by most of the Hindus to get employed in mughal administration.

The Muslims learnt Hindi and some of them studied Sanskrit also. The Vedas, upanishads and several other Hindu religious and philosophical works were translated into Persian. Dara Shikoh and Jahanara Begum studied such works with great curiosity and interest. The Muslims also contributed in the enrichment of the Hindi, Bengali and Punjabi languages and literatures.

Fourth chapter tell us a good deal regarding the economic condition of India during the 16th and 17th century the travelogues. A trial is made in this chapter to get an exhaustive account of Indian products, industries, imports and exports, commercial codes and practices, transport system, banking and exchange etc. by weaving together numberless, scattered references in the travelogues and other sources.

In the economic sphere the account left by the travellers is of prime importance. They give ample and reliable information about agricultural crops, minerals, industries, trade and commerce. People lived mostly in self-sufficient villages forming
a unit. They produced all the necessities of life such as food and clothes for their own use. The cultivators grew different kinds of crops and the craftsmen manufactured all kinds of goods.

At the height of empire in the seventeenth century, the use of money, the cultivation of commercial crops and the production of manufactured goods had all become more widespread. The intensification of monetization and commercialization meant that even peasants were now enmeshed in economic relationships that extended considerably beyond their villages.

Commercial activity was not only intruding deeper and deeper into local agrarian economies, it was also operating in more expansive networks across the subcontinent as the Mughal Empire grew in size. Cash and credit, a wide range of goods and even people circulated on a much larger scale during the seventeenth century than in earlier times. As a consequence, all kinds of merchants, the small village moneylender, the urban shopkeeper, the long-distance trader, and the merchant-banker flourished.

Growing monetization and the expansion of economic networks were partly an outcome of the needs of the Mughal state. Revenues extracted from the hinterland typically in the form of cash, had to be dispatched to the capital, while funds for military campaigns or specialized goods had to be sent out to the provinces. This process could cumbersome, as in the early seventeenth century when Bengal’s revenues were physically transported to the Imperial heartland in a convoy of bullock-carts. A better means of remitting money from one place to another was soon developed, the hundi or bill of exchange.

The relative ease of travel and exchange over long distances also stimulated the expansion of economic networks in the seventeenth century. Even bulky raw materials and foodstuffs were circulated from one end of the empire to another. Rice, sugar and oil from Bengal for instance were sent inlands along the Ganges River to Agra and also down the eastern coast to the Coromandel. In its return, Bengal imported large quantities of salt from Rajasthan. Artisans in certain areas came to depend largely on supplies from distant regions. Bengal was the source of most of the raw silk used by Gujarat’s important silk textile industry, while Coromandel weavers
relied heavily on raw cotton from the western Deccan. High and luxury items like precious stones and finely worked metal ware were widely coveted and distributed.

People too had to travel to far-off places to procure goods for business deals and needed safe accommodations while away from their homes. A large city like Agra had as many as sixty rest-houses or serais for travellers.

It is significant to note that industries were in a highly flourishing state in those days. The manufacture of textiles was the biggest industry in the country. Besides textiles, metallurgy, diamond cutting and the saltpeter, ceramics reached the highest stage of artistic development. Indian manufactured goods were exported to Western Asia and to the countries of Europe, and it was the prospect of a lucrative trade in these goods that attracted the European merchants to India during this period. Imports were almost negligible as India was self-sufficient.

During early sixteenth-century the economy the Vijayanagara also flourished due to the resultant agrarian surplus along with the development of industry. Travellers describe the capital of Vijayanagara as the ‘best provided city in the world’. The Vijayanagara rulers prompted mining of metals and diamonds, built craft-guilds and encouraged their subjects to produce the best of fabrics and perfumes. They patronized Hindu religion and made extensive developments in the field of architecture through the construction of impressive temples and monuments. With the battle of Talikota in 1564 A.D., the glory of Vijayanagara finally came to an end.

Fifth and the last chapter aim at picturising the status of women in general from the view-point of a visitor. The curiosity of western males to know about the eastern beauties is a very interesting study that too when the access was almost impossible.

During the sixteenth and the seventeenth century the condition of women was not much different as it prevailed in early medieval period but with a minor alteration only. The representation of woman in every aspect of life with issues related to them is studied in this chapter. An interesting contrast has been drawn by our travellers when they recorded the freedom enjoyed by the women in South India that lowered the status and position of women during the period.

The royal ladies enjoyed special privileges and were held in high esteem. They were also given proper honour and respect. Some of them kept themselves involved in
commercial activities, court politics and even in state welfare works. The royal ladies held this place because of their personal achievements and ability sometimes. The position of the women of the nobility was just the copy of the royalty. They recorded the better economic position of Muslim women as compared to their Hindu sisters in Mughal India.

In spite of the many privileges enjoyed by the ladies of the aristocratic and nobility class their life was also not free from some of the evil practices in the society like *putdah* and polygamy. *Putdah* or veiling of women was a common practice among the Muslims, and it was also adopted by Hindu women after the advent of the Muslims. This system was particularly prevalent among affluent families of both communities, as it came to be associated as an elitist practice. In fact *putdah* was the most strictly observed by the royal ladies and higher class women. Polygamy was common among the Muslims while Hindus mostly practiced monogamy; but Hindu rulers were an exception to this rule.

On the other hand, the foreign travellers observed the social custom and practices that had a direct bearing on the place of middle-class and common women that relegated them (women) to the background. The social malpractices like the *child-marriage*, infanticide, *sati*, *jauhar*, dowry, divorce, remarriage, female slavery that included concubinage and dancing girls are fearlessly revealed in the travelogues. Many social reforms were undertaken such as the abolition of *child-marriage* and *sati* for raising the status of women in society.

In south India women enjoyed a better position as compared to their northern counterparts. They participated keenly in social, political and literary activities of the time. There were also women wrestlers, astrologers and clerks who were well-educated and experienced in state business.

Yet, the Vijayanagar society was not free from the social evils of child-marriage, the dowry system and the frequent practice of *sati*. Polygamy was not uncommon and even visits to brothels were considered to be fairly normal, unattached with any social stigma. Sometimes women of pleasure accompanied the army and accomplished courtesans often enjoyed special favours from the kings.

The critical study of material provided by the foreign travellers leads to the conclusion that a common civilization sprang up in the greater part of the country.
during the 16th and 17th centuries due to the establishment of a strong central government under the Mughals. This peaceful atmosphere enabled the people to evolve a common outlook upon life which brought about homogeneity in social and spiritual ideals and in art and literature.

The affluent sections of society were rich and prosperous from their income from agriculture, trade and manufacture. The standard of living of common masses was low but they were contented as foodstuffs and other basic needs were available in abundance; also at very cheap prices. The conditions of common masses were not so bad except during dislocation either caused by war or by some natural calamity.