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Italian traveller Varthema's rare 16th-century journal in Capital

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Pallavi Pandir : New Delhi, Thu Oct 18 2012, 01:27 hrs

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In the early 1500s, when Italian traveller Ludovico de Varthema reached West Asia, he decided to head southeast from Persia. Varthema reached Diu in 1504 and traversed through the western coast — Khambat, Chaul, Goa, Mangalore, Kozhikode and Kochi.

This venture became a part his travelogue — Itinerario de Ludouico de Varthema Bolognese (Itinerary of Ludovico de Varthema) — that was published in Rome in 1510.

It is one of the earliest European accounts of India.

The book has come to Delhi for the first time — and currently being displayed at an exhibition titled "Voyages to India of Ludovico de Varthema" at National Archives of India. The exhibition is part of the 12th Italian Language Week in the World.

It was inaugurated on Wednesday by Mushirul Hasan, Director of National Archives; Italian Ambassador Giacomo Sanfelice di Monteforte, Keki N Daruwalla, member of National Commission for Minorities; and Eugenio Lo Sardo, Director of Archivio di Stato di Roma (State Archive of Rome).

The exhibition is a collaboration between National Archives of India and Istituto Italiano di Cultura, New Delhi. It comprises excerpts of Varthema's book with illustrations.

"It is a very rare book since printing had begun only a few years before it was published. It was an immensely successful travel book of love, princesses, sex and conversions in India. Now, the book has 47 editions in 20 different languages," said Sardo, who played a big part in bringing Varthema's work to India. Sardo gifted a reprint of the first edition to Hasan.

Unlike other travellers of his time, Varthema (born in 1470) travelled solely for pleasure and stayed in India for eight years. However, there is no record of his personal life.

He witnessed various events including the Battle of Diu (1509) between the Portuguese and Turks. Most of his observations, however, are about society and people.

In Karnataka, for instance, he wrote about the practice of sati and noted that women were forced into the practice.

He also wrote about converted communities such as "Malabar Jews" and "Malabar Christians", and spices, elephants, occupations, gods, weddings, caste and social systems.

The exhibition will be on till October 31.

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