

**VASCO DE GAMA, JOURNEY TO INDIA¹: SIGNIFICANCE TO ASIA AND
THE MODERN WORLD**

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In this excerpt from a journal about Portuguese explorers' first arrival to Calicut, in the South Indian state of Kerala, we see a number of issues surface that had significant influence during that time and continue to have residual resonance today. Historian Anthony Disney Booth describes the voyage as “a stage in the globalization of trade”, “an occasion of unprecedented cultural encounters” and “a new route of exchange of influence between the extremities of Eurasia”². The recurring theme in the article seems to be that of the novelty of this experience and this is interesting against the backdrop of the mood of the times.

The document is a reflection of the atmosphere of exploration in 15th century Europe and the attempts to explore new avenues for trade with the East. The “Mediterranean cities of Italy”, and later the “commercial cities of the German Hanseatic League”, “manufacturing and trading towns of Netherlands” and “great European metropolises of Paris and London” were all part of a “golden network of commercial exchange”, reaping the benefits of trade with Asia³. During this period, all exchange of the precious commodities of spices and silk between East and West had to go through either the Islamic Arabs or the Venetians. There was intense competition amongst the

¹ Ref to Appendix: excerpt from a journal. Vasco de Gama, *Portuguese Voyages 1498-1663* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd; New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1947) pp 27-38, cited in *Documents in World History*, CD ROM (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 2004), p.326-328

² Anthony Disney Booth, *Vasco Da Gama and the Linking of Europe and Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 11.

³ Anthony Esler, *The Human Venture Vol II A Global History Since 1500* (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2004), p. 365.

European powers. In Portugal, Prince Henry the Navigator (1394 – 1460) had organized and financed numerous maritime voyages of discovery and the development of infrastructure to support these efforts⁴. He was motivated by his hatred of Muslims and his quest for greatness for Portugal. He sought to partake in the West-African trade and to find Prester John, “a Christian king that was rumored to hold a large empire somewhere in Africa”, with whom he might be able to “gain a decisive victory over the Muslims”⁵. Vasco de Gama was one among these Portuguese voyagers and his journey around the Cape of Good Hope to India proved to be an event of great significance.

This journal entry is an important piece of documentation of what Professor Sanjay Subrahmanyam, one of foremost experts on Vasco da Gama, describes as “the first Portuguese maritime expedition into the western Indian Ocean”⁶. The Indians were an entirely new people to de Gama and his men; they had strange hair, strange clothing, strange ornaments and strange “churches”. The “many jewels of gold” that they wore were an obvious sign of the wealth of the natives as was the “fine cloth” that the King sent back with the two men who had gone to announce the arrival of de Gama and his fleet⁷. This would have been a promising sign to de Gama who was looking to form new commercial liaisons⁸. Though there were no problems with the displays of wealth, there was confusion aplenty in understanding the people, their religion and their traditions. When taken to a Hindu temple, the Portuguese thought they were in a church and that the central deity in the temple was a representation of the Virgin Mary. One of the

⁴ <http://www.thornr.demon.co.uk/kchrist/phenry.html>

⁵ <http://www.win.tue.nl/cs/fm/engels/discovery/henry.html>

⁶ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 95.

⁷ *Documents in World History, CD ROM* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 2004), p. 326.

⁸ <http://www.colaco.net/1/vascosanjay.htm>

possibilities Subramanyam proposes for their having thought this was the language barrier. Communication between the Portuguese and the locals was carried out in Arabic but the Arabic spoken by de Gama's men had been learnt in Maghreb (a region of northwest Africa) and very likely would have been different from the version of Arabic spoken in India⁹. This miscommunication led not only to the Portuguese misconstruing the religion and religious practices of the locals but also to their inadvertently offending the Indians. One instance of when they might have done this would have been when de Gama gave the holy earth given to him in the "church" "in charge of someone, giving [the Indians] to understand that he would put it on later"¹⁰. This would have come across as a lack of respect and deference for the local religious practices. The fact that upon arriving and under the guidance of a pilot sent by the king, the Portuguese did not anchor their ships "as near the shore as the king's pilot desired"¹¹ and when told to unload the goods they had brought from home, they refused to bring the ships closer to shore would have riled the Indians and rubbed them the wrong way as well. Booth even goes so far as to claim that de Gama "prejudiced the future of European missions and commerce in the region by mistaking Hindus for Christians and offending his hosts so severely that, by report, 'the entire land wished him ill'"¹².

Despite the many misunderstandings that transpired between the Indians and the Portuguese, this trip paved the way for continued maritime trade, cultural and scientific exchange and later imperial conquest. In the journal entry although the king that de Gama meets in Calicut claims to regard the king of Portugal "as a friend and brother", this is not

⁹ Subrahmanyam, *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama*, p. 95.

¹⁰ *Documents in World History, CD ROM*, p. 326.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Booth, *Vasco Da Gama and the Linking of Europe and Asia*, p. 13.

indicative of a commitment of any sort on his part but rather a superficial acknowledgement of Portugal as a non-hostile entity¹³. This liaison, however lukewarm, proved to be extremely beneficial to Portugal because it meant they could circumvent the middlemen – the Muslims and the Venetians – and procure expensive Asian commodities at a fraction of the price they had earlier had to pay for them. This was a precursor to a revolutionary shift in power; Lisbon would become a major trading port and Portugal a trading power to be reckoned with. This had a ripple effect and added fuel to the race for power and profit. For India though, the arrival of the Portuguese was far less lucrative because the wool and canons the Portuguese had to offer were of little value to them. The superiority of the Portuguese in “navigation and nautical science” might have been something the Indians learnt and benefited from but not something that led to a substantial improvement in their economy¹⁴. As was the case with most early European explorations, despite the arrival of the Portuguese in India, “indigenous empires and trading states remained dominant and largely intact”¹⁵. The Portuguese came and engaged in commerce but this remained a relatively peripheral activity. However, what is significant is that the opening of new trade routes did subsequently allow for the transmission of religions – Christianity to the East and Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam to Southeast Asia – the shipping of Muslim pilgrims to Mecca and the transfer of technology between the East and the West¹⁶.

“By no means was Vasco’s voyage necessarily the most important in the history of the Indian Ocean”, but this documentation of that first arrival reflects the general

¹³ *Documents in World History, CD ROM*, p. 327.

¹⁴ Booth, *Vasco Da Gama and the Linking of Europe and Asia*, p. 72.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.15.

attitude of condescension that the West seems to have had for the East and arguably still has today¹⁷. There is a strong sense of “othering”, where an oversimplified negative and positive binary is set up with “the other” being attributed all the negative qualities and therefore one’s own identity is defined and created as positive in contrast. We see evidence of this in the author’s use of such terms as “ugly”, “covetous”, “ignorant”, “phlegmatic”, “unreliable” and “beasts” in his descriptions of the locals¹⁸. Furthermore there is an emphasis on the negligence and apathy that de Gama was subjected to in being made to wait for hours in the king’s court and the insolence and lack of gratitude on the part of the king’s officials in the account of their mockery of the Portuguese gifts for the king. These details are important to us as historians because we need to be careful not to read the document passively and accept everything as is portrayed by the narrator. The account is, as can be expected, biased in favor of the Portuguese and so we have to take it with a pinch of salt and try to read between the lines. Portuguese back home who read this would have formed an impression of the Indians as barbaric, in desperate need of education and civilization, and exploitable and these factors would have encouraged the imperialist desire. To be fair, we should keep in mind again the language barrier both sides had to overcome and that the difficulties in understanding each other would have bred misconceptions about the other’s intentions. Moreover, though it isn’t explicitly stated in the document, the peculiar religious ceremonies of the locals whom the Portuguese believed to be Christians might have stirred some suspicion in them of the Indians being Muslims and this may have tainted their opinions of them.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.13.

¹⁸ *Documents in World History, CD ROM*, p. 326 – 328.

This vivid account is a telling reminder of the importance of the politics of power and the forming of strategic alliances. These were crucial for economic progress then and still are today. We saw evidence of this in the translation of the culmination of inter-European rivalry into New Imperialism in the 19th century. The aggressive expansion into and occupation of large parts of Asia meant that these traders from the West were no longer discrete marginal entities but huge dynamic forces that would shape both the geographical boundaries and the very identities of the nations they seized. Today, we deal with new frontiers. Equipped with the fruits of technology, we now travel further and faster but there are two sides to the coin. Scientific discovery has given rise to moral and ethical dilemmas and cultural cohesion has been accused of diluting tradition. However we choose to see it, it is undeniable that we would not be where we are today without the early voyagers who dared to venture into the unknown.

Appendix

VASCO DE GAMA, JOURNEY TO INDIA

*Excerpt from de Gama's journal*¹⁹

“The city of Calicut is inhabited by Christians. They are of tawny complexion. Some of them have big beards and long hair, whilst others clip their hair short or shave the head, merely allowing a tuft to remain on the crown as a sign that they are Christians. They also wear moustaches. They pierce their ears and wear much gold in them. They go naked down to the waist, covering their lower extremities with very fine cotton stuffs. But it is only the most respectable who do this, for the others manage as best they are able.”²⁰

The women of this country, as a rule, are ugly and of small stature. They wear many jewels of gold around the neck, numerous bracelets on their arms, rings set with precious stones on their toes. All these people are well disposed and apparently of mild temper. At first sight they seem covetous and ignorant.

When we arrive at Calicut, the captain-major sent two men to the King with a message, informing him that an ambassador has arrived from the King of Portugal with letters.

¹⁹ Vasco de Gama, *Portuguese Voyages 1498-1663* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd; New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1947) pp 27-38, cited in *Documents in World History*, CD ROM (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 2004), p.326-328

²⁰ The visitors thus became at once acquainted with the various castes constituting the population of Calicut, including the Nairs, or fighting caste of Malabar, who eat meat (which shows a single servile origin), but wear the thread of the Dwija (twice-born), rank next to the Brahmans, and practice polyandry; and the turbulent Moplah, who are descendents of Arab fathers and native women. These latter are the “native” Moors.

The King presented the bearers of this message with much fine cloth. He sent word to the captain bidding him welcome.

A pilot accompanied our two men, with orders to take us to a place called Pandarani, below the place [Capua] where we anchored at first. At this time we were actually in front of the city of Calicut. We were told that the anchorage at this place to which we were to go was good, whilst at the place we were then was bad, with a stony bottom, which was quite true; and, moreover, that it was customary for the ships which came to this country to anchor there for the sake of safety. We ourselves did not feel comfortable, and the captain-major had no sooner received this royal message that he ordered the sails to be set, and we departed. We did not, however, anchor as near the shore as the king's pilot desired.

When we were at anchor, a message arrived informing the captain-major that the king was already in the city. At the same time the king sent a bale [governor], with other men of distinction, to Pandarani, to conduct the captain-major to where the king awaited him. This bale is always attended by two hundred armed men with swords and bucklers. As it was late when this message arrived, the captain-major deferred going.

On the following morning, they took us to a large church, and this is what we saw:

The body of the church is as large as the monastery, all built of hewn stone and covered with tiles. At the main entrance rises a pillar of bronze as high as mast, on the top of which was perched a bird, apparently a cock. In addition to this, there was another pillar as high as a man, and very stout. In the centre of the body of the church rose a chapel, all built of hewn stone, with a bronze door sufficiently wide for a man to pass, and stone steps leading up to it. Within this sanctuary stood a small image which they

said represented Our Lady. Along the walls, by the main entrance, hung seven small bells. In this church the captain-major said his prayers, and we with him.

We did not go within the chapel, for it is custom that only certain servants of the church should enter. These men wore some threads passing over the left shoulder and under the right arm, in the same manner as our deacons wear the stole. They threw holy water over us, and gave us some white earth, which the Christians of this country are in the habit of putting on their foreheads, breasts, around the neck, and on the forearms. They threw holy water upon the captain-major and gave him some of the earth, which he gave in charge of someone, giving them to understand that he would put it on later.

Many other saints were painted on the walls of the church, wearing crowns. They were painted variously, with teeth protruding an inch from the mouth, and four or five arms.

The captain, on entering, saluted in the manner of the country; by putting the hands together, then raising them towards Heaven, as is done by Christians when addressing God, and immediately afterwards opening them and shutting the fists quickly.

And the captain told the king that he was the ambassador of a king of Portugal, who was lord of many countries and the possessor of grant wealth of every description, exceeding that of any king of these parts; that for a period of sixty years his ancestors had annually sent out vessels to make discoveries in the direction of India, as they knew that there were Christian kings like themselves there. This, he said, was the reason which induced them to order this country to be discovered, not because they sought for gold or silver, for of this they had such abundance that they needed not what was to be found in this country. He further stated that the captains sent out traveled for a year or two, until

their provisions were exhausted, and then returned to Portugal, without having succeeded in making the desired discovery. There reigned a king now whose name was Dom Manuel, who ordered him not to return to Portugal until he should have the king of the Christians, on pain of having his head cut off. That a letter had been entrusted to him to be presented in case he succeeded in discovering him, and, finally, he had been instructed to say by word of mouth that he [the king of Portugal] desired to be his friend and brother.

In reply to this the king said that he was welcome; that, on his part, he held him as a friend and brother, and would send ambassadors with him to Portugal. This latter had been asked as a favor, the captain pretending that he would not dare to present himself before his king and master unless he was able to present, at the same time, some men of this country.

On Tuesday the captain got ready the following things to be sent to the king: twelve pieces of lambel, four scarlet hoods, six hats, four strings of coral, a case containing six washstand basins, a case of sugar, two casks of oil, and two of honey. And as it is the custom not to send anything to the king without the knowledge of the Moor [who advised him on commercial matters], and of the bale, the captain informed them of his intention. They came, and when they saw the present they laughed at it, saying that it was not a thing to offer to a king, that the poorest merchant from Mecca, or any other part of India, gave more, and that if he wanted to make a present it should be in gold, as the king would not accept such things. When the captain heard this he grew sad, and said he brought no gold, that, moreover, he was no merchant, but an ambassador; that he gave of that which he had, which was his own [private gift] and not the king's; that if the King of Portugal ordered him to return he would entrust him with far richer presents; and that if

King Samolin would not accept these things he would send them back to the ships. Upon this they declared that they would not forward his presents, nor consent to forwarding them himself. When they had gone there came certain Moorish merchants, and they all depreciated the present which the captain desired to be sent to the king.

When the captain saw that they were determined not to forward his present, he said that he would go to speak to the king, and would then return to the ships. They approved of this, and told him that if he would wait a short time they would return and accompany him to the palace. And the captain waited all day, but they never came back. The captain was very wroth at being among so phlegmatic and unreliable a people, and intended, at first, to go to the palace without them. On further consideration, however, he thought it best to wait until the following day. As to us others, we diverted ourselves, singing and dancing to the sound of trumpets, and enjoyed ourselves much.

On Wednesday morning the Moors returned, and took the captain to the palace. The palace was crowded with armed men. Our captain was kept waiting for fully four long hours, outside a door, which was only opened when the king sent word to admit him, attended by two men only, whom he might select. It seemed to him, as it did to us, that this separation portended no good.

When he had entered, the king said that he had expected him on Tuesday. The captain said that the long road had tired him, and that for this reason he had not come to see him. The king then said that he had told him that he had come from a very rich kingdom, and yet had brought him nothing; that he had also told him that was the bearer of a letter, which had not yet been delivered. To this the captain rejoined that he had brought nothing, because the object of his voyage was merely to make discoveries, but

that when other ships came he would then see what they brought him; as to the latter, it was true that he had brought one, and would deliver it immediately.

The king then asked him what kind of merchandise was to be found in his country. The captain said that there was much corn, cloth, iron, bronze, and many other things. The king asked whether he had any merchandise with him. The captain replied that he had a little of each sort, as samples, and that if permitted to return to the ships he would order it to be landed, and that meantime four or five men would remain at the lodgings assigned to them. The king said no. He might take all his people with him, securely moor his ships, land his merchandise, and sell it to the best advantage. Having taken leave of the king the captain returned to his lodgings, and we with him. As it was already late no attempt was made to depart that night.

The next morning the captain asked for boats to take him to his ships. They began to whisper among themselves, and said that we should have them if we would order our vessels to come nearer to the shore. The captain said that if he ordered his vessels to approach his brother would think he was being held prisoner, and that he gave this order on compulsion, and would hoist the sails and return to Portugal. They said that if we refused to order the ships to come nearer we should not be permitted to embark. The captain said that King Samolin had sent him back to his ships, and that as they would not let him go, as ordered by the king, he should return to the king, who was Christian like himself. If the king would not let him go, and wanted him to remain in his country, he would do so with much pleasure. They agreed that he should be permitted to go, but afforded him no opportunity for doing so, for they immediately closed all the doors, and

many armed men entered to guard us, none of us being allowed to go outside without being accompanied by several of these guards.

On the following day, these gentlemen [i.e., the bale and others] came back, and this time they “wore better faces.” They told the captain that as he had informed the king that he intended to land his merchandise, he should now give orders to have this done. The captain consented, and said that he would write to his brother to see it being done. They said this was well, and that immediately after the arrival of the merchandise he would be permitted to return to his ship. The captain at once wrote to his brother to send certain things, and he did so at once. On their receipt the captain was allowed to go on board, two men remaining behind with the things that had been landed.

At this we rejoiced greatly, and rendered thanks to God for having extricated us from the hands of the people who had no more sense than beasts, for we knew well that once the captain was on board those who had been landed would have nothing to fear. When the captain reached his ship he ordered that no more merchandise should be sent.”

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