



From Pepper to Power: The Spice Trade and Colonisation of India

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ABSTRACT

It is an established fact that the human quest for things has often ended up with fascinating discoveries. What is however ignored is that the same would simultaneously cause catastrophic impacts as well. The quest for spices resulted in the Spice trade with the East including India. The growing need and demand of spices in European markets eventually wrought in a colonial commerce and competition era. It persuaded Europeans to seek a direct trade route to India. The same quest concluded with the discovery of 'New world' from one side and that of the sea route to India on the other and finally its colonisation at the hands of Europeans. This article specifically explores and underscores the significance of the spices and their trade in particular, along with some other commercial goods which ultimately led to the political subjugation of India.

INTRODUCTION

It seems very much odd that something as insignificant as a spice, which is being used as a mere commodity or an ingredient to add flavour to food or burn to add aroma to air and for pharmaceutical purposes, would decide the fate of millions of people across the world particularly in South and South-East Asia. The growing demand of the spices like pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, ginger etc since the roman times to medieval era, had decided the future of many existing and emerging political powers besides defining the economies from India to Europe.⁽¹⁾ The craze for spice trade reached to such an



extent that resulted in the emergence of some first truly international trade routes across the globe which still carries bountiful economic exchanges annually through Atlantic and Indian oceans. Moreover, those who deal with and regulate the spices and its trade become so powerful that they could control the flow of wealth around the world.

The Eurocentric accounts of history credits Europeans for unleashing modern times marked by overseas Empires that have roots in the European awakening that occurred in the form of renaissance, reformation and dozens of other developments. Rarely they acknowledge the productive and lucrative aspects of the European world that galvanised their energies and ambitions. Recent scholarship from the Non-European world have been to some extent able to invoke the earlier interests of the European companies, and how they caused large devastation of environment and human genocides, all in search of spices that had a grand market demand. generally it is argued that the fifteenth century had witnessed an upsurge in European ambitions, driven by a multitude of factors, including a craze for maritime adventures, technological advancements, lust for economic growth along with the promotion of religious and cultural ideas. Apart from that, the political confrontations between the Muslim and Christian worlds, pushed the Christian based European empires to search for a direct trade route to India in order to end their dependence on the Arab and Venetian traders, to get access to Indian spices. The discovery of the sea route to India via the southernmost tip of Africa by Vasco-Da-Gama in 1498 ended the Europeans quest, what they had been searching for, for decades, and opened the gates for them to grab enormous riches associated with this trade. Vasco-Da-Gama, after returning back to Europe earned sixty times what he had spent on the entire voyage out of the commodities which he had bought after landing on Malabar Coast⁽²⁾ that served as a crucial hub of commercial activities in terms of spice trade at that particular juncture of time. This financially promising trade has no limits in arousing the curiosity of Europeans to invest in it, as much as they could. Consequently, Portuguese were followed by other Europeans like Dutch, English and French to try their fate in such a lucrative trade, which ultimately resulted in commercial competition, controversies, battles and finally the political subjugation of South and South-East Asian countries in general and India in particular by these European commercial powers.

This paper examines the spice-productive capabilities of India that caused the first arrival of Europeans. The aim is to argue that spices played a phenomenal role in the development of earlier interest of Europeans in India and had severe ramifications. The wide Eurocentric claims ascribes such inroads exclusively to progressive nature of their societies manifestly to hide the brutal truth that exploitation of the East, especially its spice trade in the beginning, was like a driving force.

Scholarship on the subject of spice trade and early imperial inroads in East and Africa have critically examined various aspects of the early modern period. John Keay elucidates the history of the spice trade and the Indian spices as highly sought-after commodities from ancient times to colonial era. In his seminal work *'The Spice Route: A History'* he investigates the significance of Indian spices as fragrant products; a connecting force between India and the rest of the world particularly West-Asia and Europe and shape the global trade routes. preoccupied with benefits procured by Europe, and silent about what colonies faced on account of such spice-based commercial interventions, he throws light on only how the European commercial entities regulated and exploited the spice resources of India, imposed monopolies and disrupted economies by politically subjugating India. The work has been however highly Eurocentric in perspective and underplays the role and existence of Indian merchants and local economies in shaping the trade and trading networks.⁽³⁾

Giles Milton in his work *'Nathaniel's Nutmeg: How one Man's Courage Changed the course of History'* provides an anecdotal account, and not historical analysis, of Anglo- rivalry over species. The main concern romanticizes the European adventure and neglects violence and exploitation inherent in colonial trade. Another important work *'Spices, Scents and Silk: catalysts of world trade'* by James.F Hancock offers a comprehensive analysis of spices as drivers of global trade including deeper connections with India. The work, despite being interdisciplinary in approach, ignores the socio-cultural impact of species on Indian society. Czarra's seminal account, *'Spices: A Global History'* presents an impressive narrative of the international spice trade and its profound impact; it explores and examines the exploitative tactics adopted by European commercial enterprises to regulate the financially

promising spice trade and monopolize it, which consequently led to the commercial exclusion of indigenous traders. Additionally, it sheds some light on how the spice trade appeared as an instrument of colonisation and its enduring repercussions on India's cultural and economic aspects. ⁽⁴⁰⁾Sanjay Subramanyam's work, *'The Portuguese Empire in Asia 1500-1700: A political and Economic History'*, presents a comprehensive analysis of the colonial endeavours of Portugal in Asia and specifically in India. The book delves into the ways the Portuguese exploited the spice resources of India, particularly pepper, and the way they established a monopolistic grip that pushed the local traders to the periphery. Moreover, it describes the long-lasting socio-economic effects of Portuguese colonial rule. ⁽⁶⁾

Marjorie Shaffer's treatise, *'Pepper: A History of the World's Most Influential Spice'*, delineates the narrative of pepper, a highly valued commercial product with a significant impact on international commerce and colonial expansion. India as an epicentre of this promising trade of pepper played a considerable role in shaping international relations and financial hegemony. This account further examines the way European trading companies, especially the British, disrupt the traditional commercial networks of India and colonise it. Apparently, the said process had fatal socio-economic repercussions on India. ⁽⁷⁾ The thrust area of the work however seems to be exclusively pepper-centric and ignores other essential aspects and commodities of trade.

Charles Corn in *'The Spice Islands: The History of the Maluku Archipelago and the impact of the Spice Trade'*, undertakes an exhaustive examination of the aforementioned group of islands and its importance in international spice trade. The book explores the pivotal role of India within this paradigm. This work throws an ample light on the way the European commercial enterprises, particularly Dutch, tried hard enough to regulate the spice trade which led to exploitative subjugation of spice producing areas of India. Moreover, it investigates the cultural and economic effects of Colonialism. ⁽⁸⁾ The book however tends to prioritize the European perspective over the indigenous narrative. Michael Krondl's work *'The Taste of Conquest: The Rise and Fall of the Three Great Cities of Spice'*, is centred on the spice trade of three cities of Lisbon, Venice and Amsterdam which were the centres of the global Spice market. This account debates over the exploitative measures, adopted and introduced by European colonists particularly that of Dutch and Portuguese in spice producing areas of India. Apart from that, this book discusses how spice trade became a bone of contention among European commercial entities which led to colonial ambitions. ⁽⁹⁾ While examining the spice trade transactions and cultural exchanges the people of spice islands have passively been treated. William Dalrymple's book, *'The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company'*, offers a comprehensive account of the rise of the English East India Company. It examines the eighteenth century and how commercial enterprise transformed into a colonial giant by exploiting India's rich resources and regulating its lucrative spice trade. The control over the said things financed the expansionist agenda and colonisation of India with far reaching and catastrophic repercussions. ⁽¹⁰⁾

From the exhaustive references to the literature on the spice trade it becomes evident that spices as commercial and material items were more important in the earliest trading adventures of the Europeans. The eye of procuring material gains and prosperity was the key dimensional and other aspects including adventure and intellectual exercises were of secondary importance. In the initial intervals of time only those places turned into the centre of their activities that offer them trading commodities without getting involved much in the core regions. The initial inroads were in and around the fringe regions that possess specific potential of species and their specific nature of trade decided their policies to get hold of what they were looking for. For all this, they used every possible way to extract the things required which even included coercion, competition and conquest and catastrophic clashes with the spice borne regions and their indigenous communities.

Quest for 'Land of Spices'

Spices had been utilized since the inception of Human civilization. Human history has witnessed the rise and fall of empires by getting engaged in commercial activities based on the exchange of exotic spices ⁽¹¹⁾ and so is the case with India. India, besides known for its several highly sought after commodities, was particularly famous for its intensely flavoured or fragrant substances of vegetable origin. ⁽¹²⁾ India, known as "Land of Spices" since centuries, remained home to a diverse number of rich



aromatic substances, which can be considered as a testament to its rich history of spice cultivation.⁽¹³⁾ The Indian spices which were in a great demand in international market and specifically in European markets with the beginning of modern period of world history includes peppers, particularly black pepper, “The King of Spices”, Cardamom “The Queen of Spices”,⁽¹⁴⁾ cinnamon, ginger, cloves etc. It’s the mediation of Arab and venetian traders between India and Europe that had made things hard for Europeans to get them at cheaper prices or made a good fortune out of this lucrative trade. Moreover, due to the political and religious confrontations between Christian empires of Europe and Muslim empires of West and Middle East Asia, particularly the fall of Constantinople in 1453 turned things worse. These circumstances pushed Europeans very hard to fight tooth and nail to discover a direct route to India.⁽¹⁵⁾ The reasons which pushed Europeans were not just economic and culinary, rather social as well, because using Indian spices in Europe had become a tool of displaying and defining once class and social status.⁽¹⁶⁾ This is what urged the European ruling class to sponsor navigators and sea explorers to sort the issue out. So, from this era till decades to come the spices determined the wealth and policies of European nations.

It is in fact as a consequence of such policies that Christopher Columbus discovered ‘New world’ in 1492 and Vasco-Da-Gama discovered a direct sea route to India in 1498, thus achieving what Europe was craving for. Boarded on four tiny ships, sailed southward from the part of Lisbon, Portugal, Vasco-Da-Gama reached the shores of Malabar Coast, and landed at Calicut. After the accomplishment of his two years of sea voyage, covering 38,623 km back to the place he had initiated his trip from Vasco-Da-Gama reached with only two ships to his home port. However, the matter of utmost significance is that the cargo of spices and other commodities which Vasco-Da-Gama brought back with him was worth 60 times the cost of the respective voyage. This is the reason Europeans even dare to risk their lives in quest of spice routes and more importantly for the ‘sought after commodities’, that is, the spices. Commercial confrontations; catastrophic wars in the waters of Indian Ocean and colonisation.

The Portuguese enjoyed a monopoly over maritime trade and commerce for over a century after they landed on the shores of India.⁽¹⁷⁾ This monopoly was overshadowed by the arrival of other European powers at the beginning of the 17th century. The Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-indische compagnie (VOC)) emerged as a big threat for commercial interests of their predecessor trading company, viz, ‘Estado da India’ a Portuguese commercial enterprise, followed by English East India Company (EEIC), which proved even more disastrous for rest of the Europeans commercial companies in the time to come.

The Portuguese established their commercial empire in the East due to the innovations in the maritime sector which facilitated such explorations.⁽¹⁸⁾ They were persuaded by a mixture of economic, religious and political inducements. However, due to certain imperfections within the management of company affairs, it failed to withstand an adequately funded, outstandingly crewed and privately owned Dutch commercial enterprise.⁽¹⁹⁾ The Dutch, due to their competence and excellence in certain domains like shipbuilding, seafaring and international trade emerged to prominence in Asian trade. The English East India Company (EEIC) on the other hand, because of a well-structured and equilibrated company, its locations and stewardship bypassed its competitors in becoming the stronger player among the maritime commercial entities of Europe in Asian waters. The French overpowered Dutch later and by this time the Asian waters became a hot battle field for all European commercial entities which by now began to be escorted by armed forces in both sea and land. In order to get rid of other competitors in Asian trade, these European powers fought on land and sea as well. The cargo ships escorted by armed men laden with cannons turn the Indian Ocean into a hotbed of bloody maritime wars succeeded by fierce battles on land as well.

The Portuguese dominated the maritime spice trade throughout the 16th century. Although their rivals gave them a tough-competition they still maintained their existence with a significant share in trade that estimates around forty percent of the global spice trade in the early 17th century. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) with their arrival on the commercial scene of India pushed the Portuguese to wall. The annual profit of VOC from Spice trade was approximately around 1.5-3 billion dollars today. As far as the English East India Company is concerned, its annual profits from spice trade were

comparatively smaller and the same were estimated to be around 1-2 million pounds which is roughly equivalent to 150-300 million dollars today. The French East India Company (Compagnie des Indes), though a late entrant to this trade too succeeded in making significant profits and accumulating huge sums of wealth, no doubt lesser than that made by Dutch and English. ⁽²⁰⁾ However, these figures vary across diverse sources.

It is actually such hefty amounts of margins which dragged these Europeans commercial entities to fight bloody battles among themselves and later with the local rulers, almost throughout the subcontinent. The huge demand of Spices in European markets and the increasing competition among these trading companies raised the prices, which in turn diminished the profits and ultimately brought Europeans into conflict and confrontations among themselves and with local Rajas and Nawabs. ⁽²¹⁾ As far as the commercial animosity among the European commercial entities is concerned, English emerged as an exceptional trading organisation and as masters of Asian trade. These trade wars restricted Portuguese to small regions of Goa, Daman and Diu and French to Pondicherry, Mahi, Yanam and Karaikal. The Dutch exchanged their Indian territories with the British in South East Asian Spice Islands. So far as the conflicts with local rulers are concerned the first territory invaded by English was Bengal, which opened the gate of British colonisation of India, simply to save and upheld their commercial interests. This is how the Spice trade along with other sought-after products became a grave cause responsible for the colonisation of the Indian subcontinent.

So far as it's repercussions on the Indian population is concerned, a plethora of information can be availed to cite illustrations of European brutality to establish colonial empires to regulate the spice trade. The infamous and horrifying episode of 1502 during the second voyage of Vasco-da-Gama reveals the premeditated atrocities of early European colonialism. This brutal incident unfolded against the backdrop of Vasco-da-Gama's expedition to establish Portuguese supremacy over the immensely promising spice trade in the Indian Ocean, predominantly controlled by Muslim merchants. The Zamorin, a Hindu ruler of Calicut, regulating a significant port on Malabar coast had rebuffed Portuguese demands for exclusive trading rights, as a consequence of which tensions escalated between Portuguese and the local ruler, Zamorin. In retaliation, Vasco-da-Gama sought to disrupt Zamorin's strategic alliance with Muslim traders, who formed the nucleus of Calicut's commercial operations, through coercion and made him to submit. Vasco-da-Gama's seizure of the ship was a ruthless act of intimidation. The large merchant vessel, transporting Muslim pilgrims returning from Mecca to Calicut, was defenceless and packed with non-combatants, including women, children and the elderly. In spite of their desperate appeals for mercy, Vasco-da-Gama commanded his men to plunder the ship and then set it ablaze, entrapping hundreds of people on board. This carnage was not merely an act of piracy but a deliberate exhibition of terror designed to intimidate the Zamorin and the Muslim trading community.

The slaughter of the Muslim pilgrims serves as a dismal testament to the devastating human toll of European colonial aspirations. This tragic event highlights the utilisation of violence as a means to establish and perpetuate colonial dominance, as well as the defiance displayed by local rulers like Zamorin in the face of European aggression. Moreover, this massacre remains a heart-wrenching reminder of the profound impact of colonialism on indigenous peoples.

CONCLUSION

The Spice trade, due to its economically promising nature and spices like pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves etc, as products with their strong abilities to be helpful in preserving food and enhancing flavour drove Europeans to seek direct access to the original source of these sought after commodities and exclude the Arab and Venetian intermediaries by discovering the sea route to India. Beginning with Portuguese followed by Dutch, English and French, the rich spice producing regions of India attracted them all which resulted in commercial competition at the initial stage, but soon turn into hostilities. Fighting for their survival these European commercial companies get entangled into local politics, which added fuel to the fire. As the time passed by there was a grave conflict over the commercial interests of these European trading companies and that of the political and economic interests of the local rulers which in its inception were tried to settle down through negotiations, but all in vain. These circumstances pushed these commercial entities to go from 'trade to territory'. Hence,



evolved into full-scale colonisation and establishment of colonial empires, particularly in India and generally in South-east Asia.

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