MARITIME HISTORY OF INDIA

COURSE CODE: M21HS08DE

Discipline Specific Elective Course

Postgraduate Programme in History

Self Learning Material

SREENARAYANAGURU
OPEN UNIVERSITY

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The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

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Maritime History of India

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Semester - IV

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MESSAGE FROM VICE CHANCELLOR

Dear learner,

I extend my heartfelt greetings and profound enthusiasm as I warmly welcome you to Sreenarayanaguru Open University. Established in September 2020 as a state-led endeavour to promote higher education through open and distance learning modes, our institution was shaped by the guiding principle that access and quality are the cornerstones of equity. We have firmly resolved to uphold the highest standards of education, setting the benchmark and charting the course.

The courses offered by the Sreenarayanaguru Open University aim to strike a quality balance, ensuring students are equipped for both personal growth and professional excellence. The University embraces the widely acclaimed "blended format," a practical framework that harmoniously integrates Self-Learning Materials, Classroom Counseling, and Virtual modes, fostering a dynamic and enriching experience for both learners and instructors.

The University aims to offer you an engaging and thought-provoking educational journey. The Master's program in History aims to familiarise learners with the complexities of historical research and facts through courses on historiography and research methodologies. Learners will develop skills to analyse historical dynamics, allowing them to step deeper into the nuances of historical narratives and reexamine past events with an appropriate outlook. The curriculum's interdisciplinary nature is evident in its incorporation of concepts from various fields. The Self-Learning Material has been meticulously crafted, incorporating relevant examples to facilitate better comprehension.

Rest assured, the university's student support services will be at your disposal throughout your academic journey, readily available to address any concerns or grievances you may encounter. We encourage you to reach out to us freely regarding any matter about your academic programme. It is our sincere wish that you achieve the utmost success.

Warm regards.
Dr. Jagathy Raj V. P.

01-01-2025

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Maritime Contacts Of Early India

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UNIT 1

Oceans and India's Past

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- distinguish between literary, archaeological, epigraphic and numismatic sources related to ancient maritime trade
- examine how sources provide insights into ancient trade routes connecting India with Southeast Asia, Rome and the Middle East
- assess the role of ports like Muziris, Arikamedu and Kaveripoompattinam through archaeological discoveries
- understand the commercial relations of Indian merchants with foreign traders

Background

There has been all through history two India's, viz., the inland or terrestrial India and Maritime India, each supplementing and complementing the other. Maritime (deriving from the Latin word mare, which means "sea"). India is the sea oriented segment and it represents the long stretch of littoral India, which stands remarkably unique and different from its landlocked counterpart in its social, economic and political process.

With India's strategic geographical location, situated at the heart of southern Asia, the Indian subcontinent commands a central position, with access to Arabia and Africa to the west via the surrounding seas and to Burma, Thailand and Indonesia to the east. The very structure of the Indian Ocean enhances its significance in the southern hemisphere. The Arabian Sea, which lies between peninsular India and Arabia, has supported maritime routes that date back nearly 3,000 years. Meanwhile, the Bay of Bengal, lapping the coasts of Burma and Malaya, played a vital role in the colonisation and cultural influence over East Asian regions. In this way, nature has endowed India with a highly advantageous position. Its geographical relationship with the Indian Ocean and the surrounding maritime expanse has naturally fostered the growth of international trade and foreign interactions.

Keywords

Monsoon, Wind, Trade, Ports, Ships, Pottery, Coins, Inscriptions, Oceans, Rainfall

Discussion

1.1.1 Historiography

♦ *Indian shipping*

Historians are increasingly incorporating the ocean into their studies of India and other Indian Ocean regions, recognising its significant role in shaping historical connections and interactions. The first modern study on the Indian Ocean was R. K. Mookerji's A History of Indian Shipping, originally published in 1912 and later revised for its reprint in 1957. In this work, Mookerji presents an enthusiastic nationalist narrative, emphasising the long standing contributions of Indian seafarers in the Indian Ocean and beyond. For instance, he asserts that India's dominance in world markets during the ancient period stemmed from its innovations in applied chemistry.

♦ *India and the Indian Ocean*

This was followed by K. M. Panikkar's India and the Indian Ocean, first published in 1945, with multiple subsequent editions. In this work, he emphasises India's historical engagement in naval and maritime affairs. He assigns a central importance to naval power in shaping India's destiny, asserting that India maintained its independence until it lost control of the sea in the early 16th century.

♦ *A Maritime History of India*

These themes are further explored in Admiral Sridharan's A Maritime History of India, authored by a serving officer and published by the Indian government. The book's purpose is evident from its focus on "the maritime developments of which we should be justifiably proud and the study of which helps individuals learn from history and better appreciate the necessity of maritime defense".

♦ *History of the Indian Ocean*

The most widely accepted History of the Indian Ocean is by Auguste Foussaint, first published in French in 1961 and later in English in 1966. Foussaint, along with M. Mollat, played a key role in promoting the International Historical Association of the Indian Ocean, which held its inaugural meeting in 1960. Subsequent meetings of the Association have focused on maritime routes, the connections between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, the early trading companies and patterns of population movement.

♦ *Maritime History of 1980's*

A significant shift in maritime historiography gained momentum from 1985 onwards, though its roots can be traced back to the earlier works of scholars like Hourani and Tibbetts. From the mid 1980s, a growing number of historians began reinterpreting the Indian Ocean's role in relation to India's evolving economic and social landscape, especially in the light of changing national socio-political dynamics. Moving beyond the colonial lens, scholars increasingly explored India's broader historical linkages, emphasising the complexity of transnational connections and cultural exchanges facilitated through the Indian Ocean's maritime routes. As a result, a substantial body of literature emerged, expanding the scope of Indian Ocean studies. Prominent figures in this historiographical movement include Ashin Das Gupta, M. N. Pearson, Sinnappah Arasaratnam, Kenneth McPherson, B. Arunachalam, Om Prakash, K. S. Mathew, K. N. Chaudhuri, Lotika Varadarajan, Himanshu P. Ray, Lakshmi Subrahmaniam, Patricia Risso and others.

♦ *Contributions of Himanshu and Chakravarti*

Another important historiographical trend in maritime history during this period was a deeper exploration of the Indian Ocean's history prior to the arrival of Europeans, focusing on a time when developments revolved around multiple centres. Scholars such as Himanshu P. Ray concentrated on the ancient seafaring traditions of South Asia, while Ranabir Chakravarti examined the role of mercantile networks in fostering a sense of unity across this maritime space before European intervention. Their work significantly broadened and enriched the scope of Indian Ocean studies, opening up new and more expansive avenues of inquiry.

♦ *'Monsoon Islam'*

Another important figure in this theme is Sebastian Prange, a historian of the medieval Indian Ocean World. In his work *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast,* he underscores the critical role of the Indian Ocean monsoon winds, noting that Graeco-Roman maritime expeditions were heavily reliant on their knowledge of these seasonal patterns. This book explores two interrelated dynamics: the spread of Islam facilitated by Muslim merchants and the impact of their engagement with non-Muslim societies across the medieval Indian Ocean world. It aims to look outward, tracing the spatial and temporal movements of Muslim communities and inward, examining how these communities perceived and adapted to shifts in their social and political surroundings.

Pius Malekandathil is a distinguished historian in the field of maritime history, with a particular focus on the Indian Ocean, the west coast of India, especially Kerala and the interactions between European and indigenous trading systems. Renowned for his

♦ *Maritime India*

effective use of both indigenous and European archival sources, his research sheds light on the intricate dynamics of coastal societies and maritime networks. One of his key contributions is *Maritime India: Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean,* which examines how early medieval India responded to the maritime trade activities of the Sassanid Empire.

1.1.2 Monsoons, Winds and Trade

♦ *Advantage of Monsoon*

The Indian subcontinent is a distinct geographical unit, predominantly located within the tropical zone. The monsoon has significantly influenced India's history, with the southwest monsoon occurring between June and October, bringing rainfall of varying intensity across most of the country. In ancient times, when irrigation systems were not widely developed, agriculture relied heavily on these seasonal rains. India's strategic position was further enhanced by the presence of two seasonal monsoons in the northern Indian Ocean. As a climatologist aptly noted, "Nowhere else on the globe is the annual reversal of wind and rainfall regimes as spectacular as in the realm of the Indian Ocean and surrounding land areas."

♦ *Monsoon navigation*

Just as these monsoon winds are vital for the subcontinent's agriculture due to the rains they bring, they hold equal significance for those navigating the ocean. In coastal regions, where the monsoons and their associated rainfall have a profound impact, they govern a range of activities and shape maritime infrastructure. The monsoon winds, rainfall and oceanic currents influence the rhythm and patterns of trade, the placement of ports, the flow of rivers and the distribution of alluvial deposits. They also determine the depth and contours of coastal waters and the formation of shorelines. The seasonal movement of trade is directly linked to the direction and intensity of these winds, which open and close sea routes in specific directions throughout the year.

♦ *Monsoon cycle*

The monsoon cycle is divided into two distinct phases: the southwest monsoon, which dominates one half of the year and the northeast monsoon, which governs the other. These monsoons follow a fairly predictable pattern in terms of onset, intensity and retreat. The southwest monsoon influences the ocean from May to September, with its strongest winds occurring during June, July and August.

♦ *Monsoon progression*

The southwest monsoon first arrives in regions just north of the equator, reaching Sri Lanka with southwesterly winds around May 20 before gradually advancing northward. By early June, it reaches the southern coast of Malabar and continues its progress toward the Kutch region, where it arrives around June 15. By July,

the entire Indian subcontinent experiences intense monsoon winds. The monsoon begins to weaken in September and its gradual retreat southward is complete by November.

♦ *Monsoon navigation challenges*

During the peak months of the southwest monsoon, especially June, July and August, the west coast of India becomes highly unfavourable for sailing. Westward voyages from India were impossible, though rapid passages could be made from the Cape of Good Hope towards India and from West Asia to India. Due to the intense monsoon winds, ships could not anchor safely in most west coast ports, as they were directly exposed to the harsh conditions. As a result, Indian sailing vessels sought refuge in ports located further inland, while smaller vessels took shelter in the few river estuaries that could accommodate them.

♦ *Monsoon trade cycle*

European vessels scheduled their voyages to arrive on the coast at the end of the monsoon season in September and departed for other destinations before May. The increasingly larger East India men of the Portuguese, English and Dutch, if remaining during the monsoon, had to anchor far offshore. In contrast, Indian vessels avoided sailing altogether, particularly from the exposed Malabar coast. The retreat of the monsoon was marked by festivals and rituals, signifying the beginning of a new trading season.

♦ *Monsoon voyages*

The monsoon winds facilitated swift travel from Malabar to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, with voyages to Muscat taking 10 -12 days and to Mocha around 20 days. The entire southwest monsoon season was favourable for sailing along the eastern coast of India. In April, as the monsoon began, the winds were variable, but remained steady towards the south and west of the Bay of Bengal. By May, the monsoon winds followed their typical southwest direction, though slightly southward off the coast of Madras. During the peak monsoon months of June and July, the southwest winds blew consistently over most of the Bay. In August, their intensity fluctuated, with stronger winds concentrated toward the Bay's centre. By September, the winds weakened significantly, becoming more unpredictable.

♦ *Northeast monsoon*

From November to March, during the northern winter, a shift in wind patterns occurred as the north-eastern monsoon swept across much of the northern Indian Ocean. Its duration was shorter than that of the south-western monsoon. The transition began in October with predominantly westerly winds, which gradually shifted to north-westerlies. By November, the south-western winds had completely disappeared, giving way to the dominance of north-eastern winds across the entire Bay. During this month, in the equatorial belt, the winds were north-westerly, a phenomenon referred to as the "cross monsoon."

♦ *Northeast winds*

By the beginning of December, winds in the Bay of Bengal had turned north-easterly and easterly, with high winds and torrential rains in all parts of the Bay. During October and November, these winds produced cyclones, in the western and north-western parts of the Bay, affecting particularly the Andhra and Orissa coasts. The north-east winds continued into December, but with decreasing force, when the retreat of the monsoon started and the wind died out in March. In January north-east winds prevailed but towards the head of the Bay they were in a more northerly direction. In February while north-east winds continued through most of the Bay, in the western half they were more easterly. March could be an unsteady month when winds circulated anti-cyclonically throughout the Bay.

♦ *Coastal vulnerability*

During the peak of the north-east monsoon (October to December) the eastern coast was closed to all shipping, as were the months June to August on the west coast. The east coast is even more exposed to the winds and tidal currents from the ocean as there are no features that provide protection from these phenomena. There are thus even less facilities for shipping to use home ports on this side during these months.

♦ *Favourable sailing*

Because the intensity of the north-east monsoon lasted for only two to three months, the sailing season in the Bay of Bengal was rather longer than it was in the Arabian Sea. During the entire period of the south-west monsoon the east coast of India was the lee shore and vessels could sail in and out of ports in relative comfort. The roadsteads of the entire coast were calm and easily approachable. During this period vessels made quick passage from West to east and south to north. It was reported in the late eighteenth century that vessels made the journey from Madras to Penang on the Malay coast in eight days during the south-west monsoon.

♦ *Bay navigation*

During the period of the weakening of monsoon winds, it was possible to make passage either way by tacking and trimming and utilising changes of winds. When the winds were contrary, it was possible for the vessels to work up and down and take advantage of every change of wind. When sailing across the Bay and north-south and vice versa, vessels utilised the Andaman and Nicobar islands and the passages through them, in Preparis north and south channels and Achin head — when looking for passageways. These routes were well known to the Cholas and to the Arabs and were traced in Arab sea-charts used by their nachodas for many centuries.

The periods of the change of monsoons produced inclement weather that had to be guarded against. The most dangerous was the early break of the north-east monsoon, which often began with cyclonic storms that hit the Coromandel and Orissa coasts.

♦ *Cyclonic hazards*

Climatologists have estimated an average of two per year along this coast. Now and then these were attended by destructive winds, torrential rains and great loss to life and property in coastal areas. Ships anchored along the coast when such a cyclone struck were blown against the shore and smashed to pieces, to avoid which they had to sail southwards and south-westwards to the Bay of Madura. May, October and November were the worst months for the Bay of Bengal: in May the early south-west winds could develop into cyclonic storms and move westwards and north-westwards; in October the north-east monsoon broke and could produce the worst cyclones. These cyclones are not a feature of the Arabian Sea, where there may be an occurrence in December or January in the north-western area around Kathiawar and Sind, but not of similar intensity.

♦ *Monsoon shelter*

The island of Sri Lanka and the extreme southern tip of the subcontinent provided some shelter from each of these monsoons. It was possible for vessels from both coasts of India to take shelter on the leeward side of the island's coast and the Bay of Trincomalee was large enough to harbour many ships throughout the year. Malabar ships could take shelter from the south-west monsoon in the ports to the east of Tuticorin. Likewise, Coromandel ships could sail south-westwards into Madura Bay to escape the north-east monsoon. In general, the two monsoon regimes hindered the growth of home-ports of any substantial size to house fleets and promoted a nomadic existence for Indian shipping on both sides of the coast. To some extent, the monsoons and the nature of the ports also determined the character of shipping.

1.1.3 Literary and Archaeological Evidences

♦ *Reconstructing Maritime history*

The sources and materials available for reconstructing the history of Indian maritime activity can be broadly categorised into two: Indian and foreign. The Indian evidence includes information derived from Indian literature and art, encompassing sculpture and paintings, as well as archaeological evidence in its three branches: epigraphic, monumental and numismatic. The foreign evidence includes writings by foreign travellers and historians that offer observations on Indian subjects, as well as archaeological remains, such as those found in Java. These writings are primarily found in classical literature, including Chinese, Arabic and Persian texts, which we access mostly through translations.

1.1.3.1 Literary Sources

According to Buhler, the renowned German orientalist, "there are passages in ancient Indian works that provide evidence of

♦ *Indirect evidence*

early navigation in the Indian Ocean and the later trading voyages made by ancient merchants to the shores of the Persian Gulf and its rivers." However, these pieces of evidence mostly offer indirect proof; they do not provide direct information about the existence and development of a national shipping industry, which is clearly implied by the existence, growth and continuation of the maritime trade they reference.

♦ *Literary sources*

The literary sources encompass all written works in languages such as Sanskrit, Pali, Persian, Tamil, Marathi, Bengali and other Indian languages, as well as accounts from foreign travellers and historians. Literary sources have been extensively utilised to reconstruct the history of maritime trade in ancient times. The significant Sanskrit texts that serve as valuable sources for maritime history include:

(a) The Vedas:

♦ *The Vedic maritime*

The term Veda is derived from the root vid, meaning "to know," and translates to "knowledge." There are four Vedas, Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda. The Rig Veda, in particular, contains some of the oldest surviving poetry in the world, notable for its profound philosophical insight and lyrical beauty. Each Veda is traditionally divided into four sections: the Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka and Upanishad, with some overlap among the latter three. India's engagement in maritime trade dates back to the earliest periods of recorded history, with the Rig Veda likely reflecting trade with western regions such as Chaldaea, Babylon and Egypt. This early seafaring trade, hinted at in the Rig Veda and corroborated by archaeological findings from Egypt and Assyria, is also believed by many scholars to be referenced in several passages of the Bible.

(b)The Puranas:

♦ *Purana accounts*

The Puranas preserve ancient historical traditions and contain foundational historical facts. The Puranas also provide references to merchants engaged in sea-borne trade. The Varaha Purana tells the story of a childless merchant named Gokarna, who set out on a trading voyage but was caught in a storm at sea and nearly shipwrecked. The Varaha Purana also recounts how a merchant embarked on a sea voyage in search of pearls, accompanied by experts familiar with them. In the Markandeya Purana, there is a well-known passage, frequently recited as a mantra by thousands of Brahmins, that illustrates the perilous situation of a man sailing on the vast ocean in a ship caught in a whirlwind.

(c) Epics:

♦ *Epic voyages*

Similarly, the two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, recount historical events and traditions, offering insight into two significant occurrences from the distant past. Regarding the reliability of the Puranas and epics as historical sources, Pusalker summarises: "No student of Indian history should overlook the legendary aspects of the Puranas and epics. Traditions cannot be accepted as authentic historical facts unless they are corroborated by contemporary texts or other credible evidence. Until then, they should be regarded as traditional history rather than verified historical accounts". The five hundred ships mentioned in the Ramayana, in which hundreds of Kaivarta young men were instructed to lie in wait and block the enemy's passage, were described. The Ramayana also includes several passages that suggest sea-based interactions between India and distant lands. In the 'Kishkindha Kanda,' when Sugriva, the Lord of the Monkeys, instructs the monkey leaders to search for Sita, he names all the possible places where Ravana might have hidden her. One such passage directs them to travel to the cities and mountains on the islands of the sea.

(d) Manusmriti:

♦ *Manusmriti Laws*

Manusmriti is the code of law attributed to Manu, including provisions related to maritime laws. Although its exact date of composition remains uncertain, historians estimate it was written between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. Manu states that a Brahman who has ventured to sea is considered unworthy of entertainment. In Chapter VIII of Manu's Code, there is an interesting verse that prescribes the rate of interest on money lent for bottomry, to be determined by those experienced in sea voyages or land journeys. The chapter also includes a rule for determining the fare for boat hire, both for river journeys and sea voyages.

(e) The Arthashastra:

♦ *Arthashastra Insights*

The *Arthashastra* is an exceptional work that provides valuable insights into the administrative system during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya (4th century B.C.E). It also contains significant information on maritime trade and commerce, along with aspects of military strategy and international law. The *Arthashastra* also mentions pattana and panyapattana, two terms used to describe a settlement or town. These terms are also found in early Tamil literature.

(f) **Yukti Kalpataru** : The **Yukti Kalpataru** is a compilation attributed to Bhoja Narapati, covering a wide range of subjects, including a detailed account of ships and the techniques of their

construction. It also broadly classified ships into two types. They are Ordinary *(Samanya)* and Special *(Visesa)*. The Ordinary *(Samanya)* ships used for regular river traffic or in waterways belong to this category. The Special *(Visesa)* category includes only sea-going vessels. Under the Ordinary category, ten different types of vessels are listed, each varying in length, breadth and depth or height. The *Yukti Kalpataru* also provides detailed instructions for decorating and furnishing ships to ensure comfort for passengers. It recommends four types of metals for decorative purposes: gold, silver, copper and a combination of all three. Four different colours are suggested for four types of vessels: a ship with four masts should be painted white, a three-masted ship red, a two-masted ship yellow and a one-masted ship blue.

♦ *Account of ships and the techniques*

1.1.3.2 Secular Literature

In addition to religious texts like the Vedas, the Epics and the Sutras and Puranas, secular texts by Sanskrit poets and writers also contain numerous references to the sea as a vital route for trade, as well as to voyages and naval battles. For instance, in Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsa* we find the story of Raghu's defeat of a powerful naval force from Bengal, which had attacked him and his planting the pillars of victory on islands in the Ganges River. The *Raghuvamsa* also mentions that Raghu's victorious campaigns even reached Persia, though it is noted that he travelled there by land. This explicit reference to the land route suggests that the maritime route was also well established.

♦ *Raghuvamsa*

In Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*, there is a reference to China as the land of silk fabrics. The *Sakuntala* also tells the tale of a merchant named Dhanvriddhi, whose vast fortune passed to the king after his tragic death at sea, with no heirs to inherit it. The popular play *Ratnavali*, often attributed to King Harsha, tells the tale of a Ceylonese princess, the daughter of King Vikramavahu, who is shipwrecked in the open sea and later rescued by merchants from the town of Kausambi.

♦ *Cultural references*

In Dandin's *Dasakumaracharita,* there is the story of a merchant named Ratnodbhava who travels to an island called Kalayavana, marries a local girl, but is shipwrecked on his way back. The *Shishupala Vadha* by the poet Magha contains an interesting passage in which Lord Krishna, travelling from Dwarka to Hastinapura, encounters merchants from foreign lands arriving by ship, carrying goods and exporting Indian commodities abroad.

♦ *Maritime stories*

The *Kathasaritsagara* by the Kashmiri poet Somadeva is filled with references to sea voyages and interactions with foreign lands. In the *Hitopadesha*, a ship is depicted as essential for crossing

♦ *References to sea voyages*

the ocean, with a story of a merchant who, after twelve years at sea, finally returns home with a cargo of precious stones. In the *Nitisataka* by Varthriharin, there is a passage comparing ships to lamps that dispel darkness, symbolising the means of crossing the vast expanse of water. The *Rajatarangini* also contains a passage describing the hardships faced by a royal messenger at sea.

1.1.3.3 Buddhist Literature

♦ *Buddhist references*

In the *Vinaya Pitaka*, there is mention of a Hindu merchant named Poorna, who made six sea voyages. On his seventh voyage, he travelled with Buddhist citizens of Sravasti, who converted him to Buddhism. The *Sutta Pitaka* also contains several references to voyages across distant seas, far from land. In the *Sanyutta Nikaya* and the *Anguttara Nikaya*, there are passages that describe voyages lasting six months, made in ships or boats (referred to as nava) that could be hauled ashore during the winter. Mahavamsa contains references to maritime activities.

♦ *References to sea voyages*

The *Jatakas*, a vast body of Buddhist literature that is generally believed to span a period of one thousand years starting from 500 B.C.E., contains clear and compelling references to sea voyages and sea-borne trade. The Baveru *Jataka* undoubtedly indicates the presence of commercial interaction between India and Babylon in the pre-Ashokan era. The *Jatakas* mention a pattanagama located on the Ganga River near Varanasi, which was used by merchants travelling to Suvarnabhumi.

1.1.3.4 Sangam Works

♦ *Tamil maritime*

Among Indian literary sources, Tamil literature is particularly valuable for understanding maritime activities, as the region where it is spoken, being peninsular, had extensive sea trade. Tamil works such as *Pattinappalai, Silappadikaram* and *Manimekhalai* contain numerous references to the maritime ventures of South Indians. *Pattinappalai*, one of the Sangam poems, was written by Kadiyalur Rudran Kannan in the 2nd century C.E. It provides a detailed account of the activities at the renowned port of Kaveripattinam, located at the mouth of the Kaveri River. *Silappadikaram*, a Tamil epic composed by Ilangovadigal, the brother of Cheran Senguttuvan, has an uncertain date, but it was certainly written no earlier than the 2nd century C.E. and possibly no later than the 5th century C.E. Its sequel, *Manimekhalai,* was composed around the same period and offers valuable insights into the traditional life and customs of the time.

1.1.3.5 Accounts of Foreign Travellers

♦ *Foreign accounts*

The accounts of foreign travellers and historians provide another invaluable source of information. One such work is the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea *(Periplus Maris Erythraei),* written by an anonymous Greek author who visited India in the 1st century C.E. The Periplus served as an attempt to compile and systematise existing sailing and navigational knowledge of the Indian Ocean for the benefit of merchants and seafarers.

♦ *Foreign writers*

Pliny's *Natural History* (77 C.E.) and Ptolemy's *Geography* (140 C.E.) provide valuable insights for studying this period. Additionally, a series of foreign writers have made significant contributions, including Megasthenes, *Strabo,* Fa-Hien (415 C.E.), Hiuen Tsang (7th century C.E..), I-tsing (7th century C.E.), Marco Polo (13th century C.E.), Nicolo Conti (15th century C.E.), Abdur Razzak (1442 C.E.) and Varthema, all of whom have left extensive records documenting contemporary events in India.

1.1.4 Archaeological Sources

Archaeological evidence can be classified into three categories: epigraphic, monumental and numismatic. Through scientific analysis of archaeological finds, numerous facts have emerged that illuminate the history of India. Research on early maritime contacts has largely been based on textual sources, with archaeological evidence primarily serving to support literary references.

♦ *Archaeological evidence*

Archaeological excavations at Arikamedu have revealed that settlements at the site persisted into the 4th century C.E. and beyond. Additionally, some medieval pottery and fragments of Chinese and other East Asian ceramics were discovered, though further research is needed, especially considering evidence from other sites in the region.

1.1.4.1 Inscriptions

♦ *Monumental inscriptions*

Another valuable source of historical information is monumental inscriptions and inscriptions on plates. When kings made land grants, they would often inscribe their genealogy and extol their achievements and these records have been well-preserved, proving highly useful for reconstructing history.

1.1.4.2 Sculptures

♦ *Artistic evidence*

The conclusions drawn from literary evidence are further supported by other forms of evidence, primarily monumental in nature. These include old Indian art, such as sculpture and painting, as well as Indian coins. While these pieces of evidence are limited compared to the wealth of available literary sources, both native

and foreign, they offer a unique directness and freshness, along with the permanence that art provides, creating timeless works of beauty.

♦ *Ancient depictions*

There are numerous depictions of ships and boats in ancient Indian art. The earliest of these can be found in the Sanchi sculptures, dating back to the 2nd century B.C.E. One such sculpture on the Eastern Gateway of Stupa No. 1 at Sanchi shows a canoe constructed from rough planks crudely stitched together with hemp or string. It depicts a river or a body of freshwater, with the canoe crossing it, carrying three men dressed in ascetic priestly attire. Another sculpture, located on the Western Gateway of Stupa No. 1 at Sanchi, depicts a body of water with a barge floating on it. The prow of the barge is shaped like a winged gryphon, while the stern is adorned with the tail of a fish.

♦ *Shipwreck depiction*

The sculptures in the caves of Kanheri, located on the small island of Salsette near Bombay are also significant. These sculptures, as confirmed by their inscriptions, date back to the 2nd century C.E., during the reign of the Andhrabhritya or Satakarni king Vashishthiputra (133-162 C.E.) and Gautamiputra II (177-196 C.E.). Among these works is a depiction of a shipwreck at sea, with two individuals helplessly praying for rescue from the god Padmapani, who sends two messengers to assist them. This is likely the earliest representation of a sea voyage in Indian sculpture.

♦ *Dynamic ship depiction*

The sculptures of the Temple of Jagannath at Puri vividly portrays a grand barge, driven forward by vigorous oarsmen with all their strength. One can almost hear the splash of their oars as the barge cuts through the water, which is skilfully rendered with ripples and waves created by a few simple yet masterful strokes. The entire scene conveys a sense of urgency and haste, capturing the frantic speed of a flight or escape from danger.

1.1.4.3 Paintings

♦ *Remarkable ship depictions*

Among the renowned paintings in the Buddhist cave temples at Ajanta, there are a few remarkable depictions of ancient Indian ships and boats. These caves, where Buddhist devotees sought refuge from the distractions of the world over nineteen centuries ago, were carved into the wild ravines and basaltic rocks. The labour, skill, perseverance and endurance required to excavate these painted palaces make them lasting monuments to the boldness of vision and resilience characteristic of both ancient and modern Indian spirit. The significance of this accomplishment is further emphasised by the fact that much of the work was carried out with the aid of artificial light. It is not hard to imagine the challenges posed by the Indian climate and the difficulty of working in such conditions with little to no ventilation.

♦ *Expansion of Gupta influence*

The depictions of ships and boats found in the Ajanta paintings are primarily in Cave No. 2, which dates between 525 C.E. and 650 C.E. These years marked the end of an era that saw the expansion of India and the spread of Indian thought and culture across most of Asia. By this time, the vitality and distinctiveness of Indian civilisation were well-established, flourishing during the prosperous days of Gupta imperialism. By the late 7th century, Indian influence had even reached the far East, playing a role in the civilisation of regions like Java, Cambodia, Siam, China and even Japan.

♦ *Ancient trade vessels*

The depictions of ships and boats in the Ajanta paintings are seen by Griffiths as a "vivid testimony to the ancient foreign trade of India." Of the two representations included here, the first depicts "a sea-going vessel with a high stem and stern, featuring three oblong sails attached to three upright masts." The second representation shows "the emperor's pleasure-boat, which resembles a heraldic lymphad, with painted eyes at both the stem and stern". It features a pillared canopy amidships and an umbrella at the front.

♦ *Indian maritime influence*

The magnificent sculptures of the Borobudur Temple in Java showcase Indian art at its highest expression, within the context of the Indian environment and civilisation that was transplanted there. Most of the sculptures in this temple vividly depict ships under full sail, along with scenes that recall the history of the Indian colonisation of Java during the early centuries of the Christian era. These sculptural depictions of Indian ships reflect the characteristics of Indian art.

♦ *Fresco Painting*

Finally, it is worth noting that in the Great Temple at Madura, within the fresco paintings adorning the walls of the corridors surrounding the Suvarnapushkarini tank, there is an impressive depiction of the sea and a ship under full sail, as large as those found in the sculptures of Borobudur.

1.1.4.4 Pottery

♦ *Ceramic analysis*

An important point that needs to be emphasised is the value of studying ceramics to map trade routes in relation to the Early Historical period in the Indian subcontinent. Unlike the extensive focus on pottery, there are relatively few studies on pottery types found in India from the 7th to the 12th centuries C.E. It is generally suggested that India's involvement in maritime trade was limited to coastal navigation. The lack of archaeological data from Early Medieval sites, particularly in Gujarat, presents a significant challenge when assessing shifts and changes in sea-lanes over time.

Chinese pottery was a major item of export along the sea lanes from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries and though these are

♦ *Pottery trade*

abundant at coastal sites, few specimens have been found along the overland Silk Route. A related issue is the neglect of non-local coarse pottery in the archaeological record as an indicator of maritime networks in the Indian Ocean. In antiquity, pots were used to transport commodities and the discovery of non-local pottery sherds deserves more focussed study.

♦ *Cataloguing foreign pottery*

Historical writing on maritime trade in the past has often been overly focussed on cataloguing foreign pottery, often mistakenly identified as Roman, from sites in the Indian subcontinent and subsequently using this pottery as a chronological marker for maritime networks. A project was undertaken by the Archaeological Survey of India and the Society for South Asian Studies primarily to document authentic Roman objects found in India.

♦ *Expansion of maritime network*

According to MacDowall, it is becoming increasingly apparent that much of the pottery once thought to be Roman is actually of indigenous origin. A study of the distribution patterns of Red Polished and Rouletted Wares reveals that these ceramics can only be used to outline the extent of internal networks, rather than serving as a chronological framework for maritime contacts. Recent discoveries of non-local coarse pottery, such as Black Ware from sites in the Persian Gulf and along the south Arabian coast, extending to locations on the coasts of Java and Bali, further support the existence of a sophisticated network of luxury and subsistence goods that sustained the maritime system.

1.1.5 Foreign Sources

♦ *Ancient maritime links*

Three remarkably similar fifth-century inscriptions were discovered on the west coast of Malaysia, one of which, now housed in the Indian Museum, documents the establishment of a stupa by the mariner Buddhagupta from Rakta Mrittika. Rakta Mrittika has been identified with Rajbadidanga in Bengal, where excavations on the now silted bed of the Bhagirathi River have uncovered a three-phase sequence dating back to the second or third century C. E. The site's most prosperous period, however, is dated between the fifth-sixth and ninth-tenth centuries, as evidenced by the large number of terracotta seals and sealings found.

♦ *Buddhist expansion*

Recent archaeological evidence from sites in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam has pushed back the timeline of maritime contacts between India and Southeast Asia to the late first millennium B.C.E. These interactions have been primarily viewed as economic exchanges driven by the demand for luxury goods to satisfy the insatiable appetite of the Roman West. However, it has also been argued that beyond trade, Buddhism played a significant role in expanding these networks from the Indian subcontinent.

♦ *Buddhist pilgrimage*

In the early centuries of the Christian era, monks from India undertook proselytising missions to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, leading to the establishment of Buddhism in these regions. This, in turn, fostered regular pilgrim traffic to the Indian subcontinent, with devotees seeking to visit early Buddhist sites and engage in the study and translation of Buddhist canonical texts. Alongside upasakas from Southeast Asia, Buddhist monks from China frequently travelled via maritime routes, often making stops at key centers in Southeast Asia. Archaeological finds such as votive tablets and clay stupas serve as compelling evidence of this pilgrim movement and should be given greater significance in maritime studies.

1.1.6 Coins

♦ *Coins and shipping*

We have coins of the different periods of Indian history and the legends on them yield several clues. There are several intriguing representations on ancient Indian coins that clearly indicate the development of Indian shipping and naval activity. For instance, a significant discovery of Andhra coins from the 2nd and 3rd centuries C.E., found on the east coast, features the image of a two-masted ship, clearly of considerable size. In his South Indian Buddhist Antiquities, Alexander Rea provides illustrations and descriptions of three of these ship coins from the Andhras.

♦ *Kurumbar coinage*

In addition to the Andhra coins, some Kurumbar or Pallava coins have been discovered along the Coromandel coast. On the reverse side of these coins, there is an image of a "two-masted ship, similar to the modern coasting vessel or dhoni, steered by oars from the stern." The Kurumbars were a pastoral tribe who lived in community settlements and occupied the region from the base of the tableland to the Palar and Pennar Rivers for several centuries before the 7th century. They were involved in trade, owned ships and conducted significant maritime commerce.

Summarised Overview

Early studies on the Indian Ocean focussed on India's maritime history, with significant works like R. K. Mookerji's *Indian Shipping,* which highlighted Indian seafarers' innovations and their role in global trade. His book presents a nationalistic perspective on India's long maritime history. His work emphasises India's naval engagements, while K. M. Panikkar's *India and the Indian Ocean* (1945) focussed on India's successes in maritime warfare.

India's strategic location and dependence on monsoon winds shaped its agricultural and maritime activities. The monsoon cycle, dictating the sailing seasons, influenced trade patterns and port locations. Ports were positioned in relation to coastal geography, river outlets and currents, affecting the timing of maritime exchanges.

The earliest references to maritime activity, particularly in the Rig Veda, describe sea voyages undertaken by merchants for trade. Texts like the Varaha Purana tell stories of merchants caught in storms while trading pearls and the Markandeya Purana describes perilous sea voyages, emphasising the dangers of maritime travel. Both the Ramayana and Mahabharata contain references to maritime trade and sea-based interactions. *Manusmriti* outlines maritime laws, such as rates for boat hire and interest on money lent for sea voyages, reflecting the legal structure surrounding maritime activities. The *Arthashastra* provides significant insights into maritime trade, commerce and military strategies, emphasising India's organised approach to seafaring and trade. *Yukti Kalpataru* categorises ships into ordinary (for river traffic) and special (for sea voyages) and also provides guidelines on ship construction, decoration and furnishing.

Foreign writings, mainly from Chinese, Arabic and Persian texts, provide observations on Indian maritime activities and trade. Archaeological findings, such as those in Java, further corroborate these accounts. In addition to religious texts, secular literature in ancient India also provides valuable insights into maritime activities, trade and naval encounters. The *Vinaya Pitaka* and *Sutta Pitaka* mention sea voyages, with references to merchants crossing vast oceans. Tamil works like *Pattinappalai, Silappadikaram* and *Manimekhalai* are essential sources, providing detailed accounts of South Indian maritime activities.

Ancient Indian art, such as those found in the Ajanta Caves, often depict ships and sea voyages. Sculptures from places like Sanchi and Kanheri show boats and ships in use for travel and trade.

Pottery plays a significant role in understanding ancient maritime networks. Inscriptions found on the west coast of Malaysia and other Southeast Asian locations document the presence of Indian maritime activity and trade. Indian coins from the 2nd and 3rd centuries C.E., particularly from the Andhra region, feature images of large ships with two masts, further illustrating the development of Indian shipping and naval activity.

Assignments

1. Discuss the significance of archaeological evidence in understanding the maritime history of ancient India. Provide examples from specific archaeological sites.
2. Analyse the role of inscriptions and coins as sources for reconstructing India's ancient maritime trade. Refer to examples such as the Andhra and Pallava coins.
3. Examine the references to maritime trade and sea voyages in the Rig Veda. How do these early texts contribute to our understanding of ancient Indian maritime activities?

4. Explain the significance of the monsoon winds in shaping the patterns of maritime trade in ancient India. How did Indian traders use monsoon winds for long-distance voyages?
5. Discuss the seasonal nature of the monsoon winds and their impact on ancient Indian maritime trade routes. How did these winds affect the trade between India and other regions, such as the Arabian Peninsula, Southeast Asia and East Africa?

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

UNIT 2

Maritime Skills and Trade

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- explain how dynasties like the Mauryas, Guptas, Kushans and Harsha's empire contributed to maritime trade
- analyse the economic significance of ports along the eastern and western coasts under North Indian rule
- examine how North India was connected to the Indian Ocean trade network despite being landlocked
- evaluate the importance of riverine trade via the Ganges and Brahmaputra as a link to maritime trade
- discuss the role of Indo-Roman, Indo-Southeast Asian and Indo-Chinese trade in shaping the economy of North Indian kingdoms

Background

The geographical situation of India in relation to the Indian Ocean and the oceanic expanse around her should help to develop international commerce as well as foreign relations. The geographical configuration of the Indian Ocean itself lends it prominence in the southern hemisphere. It washes the major part of the east coast of Africa on one side and the Indonesian Archipelagos and Australia on the other. It stretches as far south as the Antarctic, while it forms a confluence with the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal in the north. Then we have the Arabian Sea itself dividing peninsular India and Arabia, on which lies the oceanic route which is nearly 3,000 years old. Then there is the Bay of Bengal washing the shores of Burma and Malaya, which played its important part in the colonisation of the East Asian countries. Thus nature has placed India in a favourable situation.

Sardar K. M. Panikkar observes that "it is an obvious fact to any student of history that India's security lies on the Indian Ocean." Looking back into the pages of history, it is clear that the Indian Ocean played a very prominent part in the subjugation of India by the Western powers. A critical analysis of Indian history brings out the fact that with the loss of the command of the sea India lost her independence. Supremacy of the invading foreigners in the East was based on the sea power they enjoyed in the West.

Keywords

Vessels, Harbour, Commerce, Ports, Navigation, Indian Ocean, Red Sea, Ship building

Discussion

1.2.1 Maritime Activity in the Prehistoric Period

♦ *Coastal exploration*

From the earliest stages of human existence, people were gradually compelled to venture into the waters in search of food, particularly fish. Historians estimate that human presence in India dates back approximately 500,000 years, coinciding with the transition from the First Interglacial Period to the Second Ice Age. During this time, as well as in the Palaeolithic Age, archaeological discoveries across habitable regions of India reveal the use of tools made from coral. This suggests that early humans explored at least as far as the low waterline, if not deeper, in search of coral reefs. There is no doubt that fish, along with fruits and animal meat, was a part of their diet. However, whether they primarily consumed freshwater or marine fish remains a topic of debate. Nevertheless, it is clear that their quest for fish played a crucial role in their exploration of aquatic environments.

♦ *Seafaring pioneers*

R. C. Majumdar, in his discussion of the earliest known Dravidian civilisations of the Prehistoric Age, asserts that they not only developed urban life but also participated in international trade. He further highlights their knowledge of various metals and plants, as well as their expertise in crafting pottery, boats and ships. Anthropographic studies and research on racial migration indicate that the Negritos, the first migrants from Africa to India, eventually settled in the Andaman Islands. They are believed to have crossed the sea from India in small dug-outs, a remarkable achievement for Paleolithic humans, given that it involved navigating approximately 700 miles of sea.

1.2.1.1 Indus People and Oceanic Engagements

♦ *Maritime evidence*

The Indus Valley Civilisation, which thrived nearly 3,000 years before Jesus Christ, provides substantial evidence of maritime activity. Excavations at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa have uncovered significant findings supporting this idea. Analysis of Harappan skeletal remains has revealed personal ornaments, including shell bangles and mother-of-pearl shells, buried alongside the deceased. Among these burial artefacts was a large mussel shell, possibly used

as a ladle. The presence of such items strongly indicates that the Harappans engaged in seafaring activities. The widespread use of shell ornaments further supports this, with the shells likely sourced from India's coastline or even the Persian Gulf.

♦ *Seafaring diet*

The dietary practices of the Indus Valley Civilisation indicate a significant consumption of fish, including both freshwater and marine species, along with shellfish. This is evidenced by waste heaps discovered near houses and streets in excavated cities. Additionally, some recovered seals from the region bear fish engravings. While most of the evidence points to inshore seafaring, there are indications that the Harappans also undertook open sea voyages. Among the many seals unearthed at Harappa, one features an anchor. The presence of an anchor strongly implies the use of deep water vessels, suggesting the possibility of long distance maritime travel.

♦ *Dock evidence*

Another important piece of evidence suggesting that the Harappans likely had large sea vessels is the recently discovered naval dock at Lothal in Gujarat. Measuring approximately 710 feet in length and 120 feet in width, this structure indicates that it may have functioned either as a docking facility for sizeable sea-going ships or as a boat pen capable of accommodating multiple smaller vessels.

♦ *Ship building*

Extensive evidence suggests that the inhabitants of the Indus Valley maintained commercial connections with several foreign civilisations, including Sumeria, Egypt, Crete, as well as regions in Central Asia and Persia. While historical records confirm that ships from Crete, Egypt and Sumer were actively engaged in maritime trade and likely visited India, there is also strong evidence that the Harappans possessed ships of similar construction, indicating their participation in sea borne commerce. It would be speculative to determine which of these civilisations first built ships resembling those depicted on the Harappa seal and the pot sherd paintings of Mohenjo-Daro. However, what is relevant to this discussion is that the Indus Valley Civilisation did have such vessels. The ship illustrated on the seal and paintings features a prominently raised bow and stern, bearing a striking resemblance to those depicted in early Egyptian pottery, Minoan seals and Sumerian cylinder seals.

♦ *Sea borne Possibility*

It remains uncertain whether all, some or none of the goods were transported by sea. However, some tentative conclusions can be drawn based on the size and design of the vessels depicted. One ship is shown with a mast and yard, while another features a midship cabin and a man at the helm. These details suggest that at least some of these vessels, particularly the latter type, were designed for seafaring.

♦ *Maritime Theories*

Sir Mortimer Wheeler provides an insightful perspective on this issue, stating: "These may be river-craft, but there is no reason to assume that similar small ships were any less adventurous than the Arab dhows of today. Coastal traffic along the Persian Gulf would support the existence of a near-coastal Harappan site such as Sutkagen-dor, located 300 miles west of Karachi." Dr. Mackay asserts that the Indus Valley Civilisation maintained maritime ties with Sumer and Elam, while Dr. Sayce proposes that commercial oceanic trade between India and Babylon must have existed as early as 3000 B.C.E.

♦ *Shereen's view*

There are two contrasting views on the nature of Harappan – Mesopotamian trade. Shereen Ratnagar emphasises its significance, particularly the trade in lapis lazuli and even suggests that the decline of this trade contributed to the fall of the Harappan civilisation. However, despite numerous items listed in Mesopotamian texts, the actual archaeological evidence remains limited; only a few Harappan artefacts have been found in Mesopotamia and even fewer Mesopotamian items at Harappan sites. Some Mesopotamian style stone weights have been discovered at Mohenjodaro and Harappa. Additionally, three motifs on Harappan seals, the whorl pattern, a figure wrestling with two animals and a gate post design are considered by some scholars to show Mesopotamian influence. Overall, the available evidence is relatively sparse.

♦ *Chakrabarti's view*

By countering Shereen Ratnagar's view, Dilip Chakrabarti states that the primary evidence for long-distance trade comes from Harappan or Harappan-like artefacts discovered outside the Indian subcontinent, as well as foreign objects found at Harappan sites. In the case of Indus–Mesopotamian trade, this archaeological data is further supported by textual references. However, Dilip Chakrabarti and Shaffer contend that this trade was neither direct, widespread nor intensive. They suggest it did not play a significant role in the development or maintenance of the Harappan civilisation.

1.2.1.2 Maritime Activities of Vedic Period

♦ *Maritime references*

We will now examine the influence of Aryan civilisation and explore their maritime activities during the historical period known as the Vedic Age. Vedic literature contains numerous references to boats, ships and sea voyages. The Rig Veda speaks of Varuna, the Lord of the Sea, crediting him with knowledge of oceanic routes used by ships. Appropriately the modern Indian Navy has adopted the motto, "O Lord Varuna, be tranquil." The Rig Veda also describes merchants setting out on voyages to foreign lands in pursuit of wealth.

♦ *Oceanic Ventures*

The Brihat Samhita, an encyclopedic text, notes that the well-being of sailors is influenced by the moon and there are mentions of ships embarking on profitable ventures.The Rig Veda emphasises that merchants were unbounded in their explorations, even crossing oceans in search of riches. One passage vividly depicts a well-rigged ship carrying Varuna and Vasishta into the mid-ocean, detailing its rolling and pitching as it navigates the waves.

♦ *Naval innovations*

The Rig Veda also mentions a vessel called plava, described as sturdy, storm-resistant and equipped with "wings" on its sides, possibly an early form of stabilisers. The *Amarakosa* contains various naval terms, including *nau bandhana* (anchorage or mooring), *naukarana* (helm or steering) and *naukaranadhara* (helmsman). Further, the Atharva Veda Samhita portrays the boats of that time as well-constructed, durable, spacious and capable of navigating waves with ease. The Puranas further describe Arjuna of the Haihaya tribe as Sahasrabahu or "thousand-armed," which may symbolically represent a fleet of a thousand ships.

♦ *Seafaring trade*

The Bhrigus, a tribe contemporary with the Haihayas, were renowned seafarers actively engaged in maritime trade with the Western world. Another prominent clan of the time, the Atris, known for their shipbuilding expertise, is believed to have constructed Sahasrabahu's fleet, either a thousand ships or a single vessel with a thousand oars. The Markandeya Purana makes references to sea going vessels, while the Varaha Purana describes people venturing into the sea in search of pearls and oysters.

♦ *Maritime warfare*

The epics also contain numerous references to knowledge of overseas territories. In the Ramayaṇa, certain slokas mention foreign lands, believed to refer to places such as China, Java and Sumatra, as potential locations where Sita might have been hidden. The same canto also hints at preparations for a naval encounter, suggesting some awareness of maritime warfare. Similarly, in the Mahabharata, the Droṇa Parva includes references to mariners and ocean voyages, while the Santi Parva describes the Navy as one of the divisions (angas) of the military. Moreover, the Sabha Parva recounts how Sahadeva successfully crossed the seas to subjugate distant islands inhabited by diverse tribes.

♦ *Maritime debate*

The Baudhayana Dharmashastra refers to "samudra samyanam," meaning "oceanic voyage." Despite numerous references in the Rig Veda, Puranas, epics and Shastras, some foreign historians argue that there is no definitive evidence of oceanic navigation during the Rig Vedic period. Their argument rests on the absence of specific maritime terms such as masts, sails, rudders and anchors in the Rig Veda. Further, they contend that the mouth of the Indus River,

which would have been highly suitable for maritime ventures, does not appear to have been utilised for oceanic trade.

♦ *Oceanic navigation*

Several European scholars, including Max Muller, Zimmer and Lassen, assert that the ocean was known to the Rig Vedic people. While opinions differ on the extent of their maritime activities, Vedic literature provides substantial evidence suggesting that "the sea was undoubtedly known and there was probably some degree of sea borne trade."

♦ *Etymological evidence*

As early as the 10th century B.C.E. and possibly even earlier, goods such as rice and satin cloth were being exported to distant lands. Linguistic evidence suggests that this trade occurred via maritime routes rather than overland through Persia. This is supported by the observation that Persians typically altered the Sanskrit "S" to an "H," a change not seen in the word's transmission. For instance, the Sanskrit word sindhu appears as "sadain" in Hebrew and "sinthon" in Greek, indicating a direct transmission likely by sea. Similar etymological patterns are found in other Indian exports: the Tamil or Malayalam word for peacock, togai, became "tukim" in Hebrew and "tofos" in Greek; and the Tamil word for rice, arisi, evolved into "arros" in Spanish, "oruza" in Greek and "oryza" in Latin.

1.2.2 North Indian Dynasties and Maritime Activities

1.2.2.1 Nandas and Mauryas

♦ *Hellenistic influence*

From the 5th century B. C. E. onwards, the Nandas established their dominance, followed by the Mauryas. This period saw Alexander's invasion of India and the gradual spread of Hellenistic influence in the region. Greek and Roman literary sources detailing Alexander's campaign and contemporary events provide substantial evidence of maritime trade and oceanic ventures during the Nanda and Mauryan empires. Greek accounts indicate that by the time of Alexander's invasion, India had considerable knowledge of navigation and shipbuilding, well-suited to the technological standards of the age.

♦ *Harbor construction*

During Alexander's campaign in India, he constructed a harbour at Patala, where the Indus River divides into two major branches. The geographical condition of the Indus basin at that time differed significantly from what it is today. Alexander aimed to explore the western course of the Indus leading to the sea, but his efforts were hindered by the region's powerful bore tides. It was largely with the help of locals that he was able to navigate the river successfully and reach the sea.

♦ *Nearchus voyage*

As Alexander prepared for his return journey, he learned from the Indians about a relatively direct sea route to Mesopotamia. He then instructed Admiral Nearchus to sail from the mouth of the Indus to the Euphrates. To undertake this nearly 1,500-mile voyage, the Admiral assembled a fleet of river boats, including 30 oared vessels built in the Punjab by the Ksatri (Xathroi) tribe. The fleet navigated along the coast of the Persian Gulf, enduring storms and rough seas, before finally reaching Ormuz, a testament to the durability of Indian built boats of that era.

♦ *Coastal trade*

Greek classical sources reveal that commercial traffic between the Seleucid Empire and India was partially conducted via a sea route through Gerrha on the western coast of the Persian Gulf. Further, an Aramaic inscription from the 4th century B.C.E. provides valuable evidence of a coastal trade route leading to Seleucia through the Persian Gulf and then via the Tigris. This route became so well established that during the Mauryan period, India saw a significant influx of foreigners, including traders, artisans, travellers and envoys. The influx was so substantial that Kautilya's Arthashastra mentions the establishment of a dedicated department to manage their affairs and ensure their well being.

♦ *Naval administration*

The *Arthashastra* provides valuable insights into the well organised administrative system during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya. It details the establishment of a "War Office," consisting of a board of 30 officers, further divided into six divisions, each with five members. Notably, the first division mentioned is the "Admiralty," indicating the significant role it played in Chandragupta's administration. This department oversaw naval affairs and was headed by a naval officer known as Navadhyakṣa, whom Megasthenes refers to as the "Superintendent of Ships."

♦ *Naval regulations*

The *Arthashastra* also lays down specific regulations governing naval and mercantile marine affairs. It granted the government extensive authority, including the power to destroy vessels that violated port laws or were destined for enemy territories. The "Department of Navigation" was entrusted with the upkeep of harbours and harbour craft under the supervision of Harbour Masters. Shipowners were provided facilities for refitting and repairing their vessels. Additionally, foreign ships docking at Mauryan ports were required to pay port dues at predetermined rates.

Kautalya distinguishes between river routes, coastal trade routes and oceanic routes, analysing their respective significance and advantages. The *Arthashastra* provides clear evidence that the Mauryans operated both a mercantile fleet and seagoing naval

♦ *Commercial ventures*

vessels, as the "Department of Navigation" was responsible for safeguarding passengers and goods from pirate attacks. Moreover, the *Arthashastra* mentions a "Superintendent of Ocean Mines," highlighting the Mauryan interest in ocean bed exploration, particularly pearl fishing.

♦ *Shipbuilding legacy*

During the Mauryan Age, the state employed Indian artisans, including ship builders, armament manufacturers and even sailors, who were considered a privileged class and received certain tax concessions. Strabo notes that ship building was a state monopoly under the Mauryas, while Pliny records that some ships weighed up to 75 tons. A variety of boats and watercraft were constructed to meet different needs, including timber ships, bamboo vessels, basket boats covered with skin and inflated leather bag rafts. Large wooden ships were used for seafaring, whereas smaller vessels facilitated river crossings and the transportation of goods and people via inland waterways. The availability of essential materials ensured that Mauryan India could build sturdy, seaworthy ships.

♦ *Diplomatic navigation*

During this period both private and state-owned ships operated along oceanic and riverine routes, facilitating extensive overseas trade and fostering international cooperation. Diplomatic relations between the Mauryan Empire and the House of Seleucus were strong, as evidenced by the presence of foreign ambassadors like Megasthenes and Deimachos at the Mauryan court. During the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus of Egypt, an embassy was dispatched to the Mauryan court, highlighting the exchange of diplomatic missions. Indian envoys were also sent abroad, representing their country in foreign lands.

♦ *Missionary voyages*

The depiction of the Mauryan Age would be incomplete without acknowledging the remarkable reign of Ashoka, who dispatched missionaries to propagate Buddhism. Evidence suggests that Ashoka's son, Mahendra and daughter, Sanghamitra, journeyed from Tamralipti to Ceylon along the eastern coast of India, aiming to convert the Ceylonese to Buddhism. Ashoka's edicts and other historical records confirm the extensive travels of his missionaries to distant regions, including Western Asia, Egypt and Eastern Europe. His inscriptions reference foreign rulers whose territories were targeted by Buddhist preachers for religious expansion. While some missionaries travelled via land routes, Ashoka is believed to have maintained a naval fleet that facilitated both religious and diplomatic endeavours.

Historian V. A. Smith asserts that Ashoka likely possessed a seafaring fleet, given his interactions with Ceylon and other overseas territories. Further, Ksemendra's Bodhisattva Avadana

♦ *Naval expansion*

Kalpalata alludes to maritime trade during his reign. In 256 B.C.E, Ashoka waged a war against the Kalingas, a prominent maritime power of the time. His eventual conquest of Kalinga suggests the probable existence of a naval force under his rule.

♦ *Cultural outreach*

The period of the Nandas and the Mauryas saw significant maritime activity, fostering closer ties with other nations and facilitating the spread of trade, culture and religious beliefs beyond India's borders. The Mauryan era's enlightened policy of international cooperation and diplomacy laid the groundwork for enduring Indian trade relations with overseas regions in later periods. As K. A. Nilakanta Sastri observes, "It is not unreasonable to suppose that these favourable conditions were attended with phenomenal development of industry as well as inland and foreign trades of the empire under Maurya rule."

1.2.2.2 The Andhra and Kushan Period

♦ *Roman trade*

The Satavahana dynasty (also known as the Andhras) held dominance in the south around the 2nd century B.C.E., while the Kushans rose to prominence in the north by the 1st century C.E. During this time, Roman influence on India was at its height, with strong commercial ties between the Andhra Kingdom and the Roman Empire. The demand for Indian luxury goods was so high that large quantities of Roman gold coins flowed into India as payment. This is evident from the abundance of Roman coins discovered, particularly in southern India, where they are found in greater numbers than in the north.

♦ *Naval coinage*

Definitive numismatic evidence confirms that the Andhras maintained a fleet. Coins issued during the reigns of Pulumayi and Yagnasri feature depictions of sailing ships with two masts on their obverse. These coins have been discovered in large numbers in Tondaimandalam, a region that appears to have been part of the Satavahana Empire. The inhabitants of this area were known as "Tiraiyar," meaning "sea-people." It is believed that some of these coins were minted to commemorate a naval victory of the Andhras.

♦ *Monsoon discovery*

During this period, maritime voyages from India's West Coast to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea underwent a significant transformation. The discovery of monsoon winds, credited to Hippalus in 45 C.E., revolutionised navigation by replacing long and arduous coastal routes with a more direct oceanic passage that utilised seasonal winds. However, recent scholarly debates have challenged Hippalus' role in this discovery, drawing on an account by Strabo. According to this version, an Indian sailor, stranded on the Arabian Sea's shores, reached Alexandria and disclosed the sea route to India. Acting on this information, Euergetus II was

commissioned by Eudoxus of Cyzicus to embark on a voyage to India. Eudoxus successfully completed the journey and later repeated it.

♦ *Monsoon winds*

The monsoons, well understood by sailors, follow a predictable pattern. The "trade winds," as they are commonly known, blow from one direction for six months and then shift to the opposite direction for the next six months. It was observed that these winds originated from four directions, southwest, northeast, southeast and northwest and were confined within specific latitudinal ranges. This predictable cycle enabled sailors to set sail with the wind in their favour and return home six months later with the opposing wind. However, the primary challenge they faced was the squally weather brought by the monsoons, making ocean voyages perilous undertakings.

♦ *Sail revolution*

With the discovery of trade winds, multi-oared galleys were gradually replaced by sail-powered ships. Over time, larger vessels with increasingly sophisticated square rigged sails were constructed. Even today, Indian sailboats and their Arab counterparts, the dhows, can be seen gracefully navigating the seas, laden with cargo and harnessing the trade winds. This breakthrough in ocean navigation opened new opportunities for maritime trade, leading to significant commercial expansion.

♦ *Greek influence*

During the Kushan period, extensive interactions took place with foreign nations, particularly the Hellenistic world, leading to a strong Greek influence. This influence was so pronounced that Kanishka incorporated the Greek alphabet in some of his inscriptions, while Vasudeva, the last Kushan ruler, exclusively used Greek script for his writings. These connections highlight both cultural and economic ties between the Kushans and the wider Hellenistic world.

♦ *Periplus insights*

Another source of information about this period is found in the remarkable work Periplus of the Erythraean Sea. Written by an unknown Greek author, it provides first hand accounts of his visit to India in the 1st century C.E. and offers valuable insights into the region's trade and maritime activities. The text begins by describing the mouth of the Indus as shallow and challenging for safe navigation. It mentions Barbaricum, a prominent seaport located at the mouth of the Indus and then traces the major ports of Saurashtra, eventually reaching the renowned port of Broach across the Gulf of Cambay. The Periplus refers to this area as the "beginning of the Kingdom of Nambanus and all India," a phrase widely interpreted as a reference to the Andhra Empire.

♦ *Trade hubs*

The Periplus also highlights the challenges of navigating up to Broach and describes the arrangements made for guiding ships safely into the port. Government pilot vessels would meet foreign ships at the mouth of the Narmada River and escort them to designated mooring basins. The text provides a detailed list of ports along the coastline, indicating the presence of numerous trade hubs during this period. By this time, maritime commerce between India and the wider world had expanded significantly. Key export goods included precious stones, spices, pearls, perfumes and other luxury items.

♦ *Trade decline*

With the rise in trading activity, political relations also developed, particularly between India and the Roman Empire, leading to a significant Indian presence in Alexandria. An analysis of Roman coins found in India suggests that commercial ties began during the reign of Augustus and continued to thrive until 217 C.E., during the time of Caracalla. The decline of this trade can be attributed in part to the weakening of the Andhra dynasty, which led to the fragmentation of political unity in southern India, as well as the fall of the Kushan Empire. Moreover, the rise of Sasanian power in Persia disrupted Roman - Indian maritime trade routes. The Sassanians monopolised the sea route through the Persian Gulf, took over Arab trade networks and extended their influence across the Indian Ocean, reaching as far as China.

1.2.2.3 The Gupta Period

♦ *Naval revival*

This section explores the reign of the Imperial Guptas, followed by that of Harshavardhana and the Gurjara Pratiharas, who are renowned in history for their naval achievements. Other northern Hindu kingdoms, such as the Chandelas and the Chauhans, hold less significance in this context until the emergence of the Palas of Bengal, when maritime activity experienced a revival. The period of the Guptas and Harsha witnessed the partial colonisation of Burma and Malacca. Insights into Indian maritime enterprise during this time can be gathered from the accounts of Chinese travelers Fa-Hien and Hiuen Tsang. Further details about the Gupta reign are found in the Allahabad Pillar inscription, composed by Harisena, the "warrior poet" of Samudragupta, as well as in the celebrated works of Kalidasa.

♦ *Naval expansion*

During his empire building campaign, Samudragupta launched a major military expedition toward the south, annexing territories along India's east coast as he advanced, reaching the Pallava Kingdom. Along with conquering coastal regions, he is also believed to have subjugated nearby islands. R. C. Majumdar suggests: "The march along the coast suggests a joint operation by the navy." He further notes: "Although there is no definite proof of

this, we know that many islands in the Indian Ocean were either conquered by the great Gupta monarch or submitted to him out of fear, clearly indicating his possession of a powerful navy." The Allahabad Prasasti also references the Gupta emperor's conquest of several islands.

♦ *Diplomatic expansion*

Samudragupta is also known to have maintained diplomatic contacts beyond India. Chinese sources indicate that during his reign, Meghavarna, the King of Ceylon, sent an embassy to his court seeking permission to construct a Buddhist monastery at Bodh Gaya. It has been established that the Mahabodhi Vihara was built by the Ceylonese. Chandragupta II, also known as Vikramaditya, continued his father Samudragupta's legacy by expanding and consolidating the vast Gupta Empire.

♦ *Port development*

During his reign, several ports on both the eastern and western coasts were opened, facilitating a free flow of commercial traffic from inland trade centres. Ports such as Dwarka, Porbandar, Verawal, Ghogha and Cambay soon became bustling hubs, filled with goods from northern manufacturing centers, leading to a significant revival of maritime trade with European and African countries. These ports served as key points for exporting goods on both Indian and foreign ships. Further, a major shift occurred in overland trade routes, petty principalities along the route from the north to the coast could no longer impose local taxes on goods, as they were now under Vikramaditya's authority. As a result, northern India gradually began to share in European trade, which had previously been dominated by southern India.

♦ *Economic prosperity*

The significant rise in overseas trade is evident from the substantial inflow of foreign gold and the remarkable number of trade guilds that flourished during this period. At Vaishali, Bloch discovered no fewer than 274 seal specimens, all bearing the inscription "Sreṣṭhi-Sarthavaha-Kulika-Nigama", which translates to "the Corporation of bankers, traders and merchants." These seals were likely used to authenticate contracts issued by the guilds. Fa-Hien, who visited India in 399 C. E., provided a first hand account of Gupta India.

♦ *Astronomical advancements*

Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsa,* a Sanskrit work from the reign of Vikramaditya, contains numerous references to ships and boats. It describes the conquest of Bengal as having been carried out under the protection of a fleet. This period also witnessed remarkable advancements in astronomy, with Aryabhata and Varahamihira emerging as distinguished astronomers. The mapping of celestial bodies became increasingly precise and oceanic navigation was enhanced through rough calculations based on known stars. Notably, this progress in charting the night sky occurred even before the

invention of the magnetic compass. Shortly afterwards, the Hindus developed the Matsya Yantra, a primitive precursor to the modern magnetic compass.

1.2.2.4 Pushyabhuti Dynasty

♦ *Diplomatic decline*

During the reign of Harshavardhana, diplomatic relations between India and China were notably cordial. The Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsang visited India during this time and Harsha, in turn, sent an envoy to China. This was followed by another diplomatic mission led by Wang-Hiuen-Tse, reflecting the close overseas ties between the two nations. Harsha is also believed to have maintained a naval fleet. However, with his downfall, the imperial unity of India began to disintegrate, leading to a decline in the previously flourishing commercial enterprises and prosperous trade networks that had characterised the Gupta - Harsha era.

♦ *Naval expansion*

Inscriptions from the reign of Jivitagupta II attribute to him a fleet of war boats that formed an integral part of his army. Hiuen Tsang also records that during this period, the King of Assam maintained a formidable fleet of 3,000 ships. Around 600 C.E., anticipating the decline of their rule, the Saka kings of Gujarat sought refuge beyond India and began preparations for capturing Java. A powerful fleet set sail from the shores of Gujarat, reaching the western coast of Java, carrying a large number of settlers from the Gurjara region. This marked the first wave of colonists from India's western coast to establish settlements in Java, significantly contributing to the dissemination of Indian art and culture.

♦ *Saindhava navy*

In 756 C.E., during the reign of Pushyadeva of the Jayadratha dynasty, who ruled a state in Kathiawar under the Pratihara Empire, the Arabs launched a sea-borne invasion of Sind. However, the Saindhava Navy successfully repelled the attack. In 776 C.E., the Arabs attempted another naval assault, but they were decisively defeated by the Saindhava fleet, marking the end of their maritime invasions of India. Renowned for their naval dominance in the peninsular waters, the Saindhavas held the title aparasamudradhipati, meaning "Masters of the Western Sea." An inscription from the Saindhava period attests to their naval achievements. R. C. Majumdar acknowledges their maritime prowess, stating, "The credit of saving India from Arab invasion by sea justly belongs to the Saindhavas, who are chiefly remarkable as being one of the few powers in ancient India with a distinguished record of naval exploits."

1.2.2.5 The Palas

Until the end of the Imperial Gupta rule, Bengal remained a vassal state. However, with the rise of the Palas, the region began to play a significant role in maritime affairs. The Jatakas mention merchants

♦ *Bengal maritime expansion*

undertaking voyages from Campa on the Ganga to Suvarnabhumi, a term historians generally associate with Burma, the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian Archipelago. This is further supported by references in the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, which alludes to such voyages originating from Bengal. Kalidasa also makes mention of Bengal's monarchs possessing ocean going vessels. Evidence of shipbuilding activity during the reign of Dharmaditya in 531 C.E. can be inferred from a copper plate grant containing the term navatakseni. Tamralipti, an important port in Bengal, served as a significant centre for overseas trade, with numerous voyages setting sail from there.

♦ *Pala maritime influence*

During the reign of Dharmapala (770–815 C.E.), his Khalimpur copper plate grant mentions officials such as Naukadhyaksa, Tarika and Saulkika, which have been interpreted as "Inspector of Fleet," "Overseer of Ferries, Tolls and Forests," and "Customs Officer," respectively. This indicates a well-organised maritime administration. Close ties existed between the Sailendras, the rulers of the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian Archipelago and the Palas of Bengal. Evidence of religious and cultural exchanges between these two kingdoms is well documented. In the first half of the 9th century C.E., Devapala of the Pala dynasty granted permission to the Sailendras to construct a Buddhist monastery at Nalanda, as confirmed by a copper plate grant from the period. The architectural similarities between the famous stupa at Borobudur in Java and the monastery at Paharpur in Bengal further reinforce these connections.

♦ *Naval limitations*

Thus, it is evident that the Imperial Guptas and their successors in the north showed considerable interest in maritime affairs. However, their primary focus remained on countering relentless external invasions, such as those from the Huns and the Arabs. Additionally, frequent internal conflicts and domestic challenges, which were typically resolved through land battles, demanded much of their attention. These factors limited their ability to make significant advancements in maritime pursuits.

1.2.3 South Indian Dynasties and their Maritime Ventures

It is evident that South India has played a dominant role in maritime affairs since ancient times. As early as 1000 B.C.E., there were established contacts between South India and overseas regions such as Mesopotamia, Egypt and Palestine. Sylvain Levi provides evidence suggesting that sea routes from South Indian ports to the East were well known centuries before Christ. Numerous ancient ports along the peninsular coastline emerged as thriving centers of

♦ *South India maritime dominance*

overseas trade. The Dravidian civilisation of the first century B.C.E maintained strong maritime trade ties with the Roman Empire, as confirmed by the Arikamedu excavations near Pondicherry. These findings not only highlight active trade but also indicate a cosmopolitan culture with notable Roman influence. Pliny further supports the existence of this flourishing trade, estimating India's income from it to be around £70,000 per annum.

♦ *Early maritime expansion*

Between 600 B.C.E. and 400 B.C.E., the Aryans gradually moved southward and by the 1st and 2nd centuries C.E., their influence extended beyond India's shores, reaching distant regions such as the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian Archipelago. Maritime routes played a crucial role in facilitating communication with the outside world. Even before this period, trade connections with overseas countries were well established. The *Jataka* tales are replete with accounts of merchant ships voyaging to Suvarnabhumi (the "Land of Gold") in pursuit of wealth, highlighting the adventurous spirit of ancient seafarers. The challenges and dangers of such voyages are evident from a Chinese source, where Kang Tai mentions that a journey from India to 'Suvarnabhumi' and back took three to four years. During the Satavahana dynasty, fables from the *Kathasaritsagara* and other literary sources describe ships sailing to Kataha or Kataha-dwipa, identified as present-day Kedah in Malaysia. These stories also mention merchant expeditions to Karpura Dweepa (Camphor Island) and Suvarnadvipa (Sumatra).

1.2.3.1 The Pallavas

♦ *Pallava maritime influence*

Following the decline of the Satavahana dynasty, naval supremacy shifted to the Pallavas, whose influence over the Hindu kingdoms of Southeast Asia was notably profound. The expansion of the Sanskrit language in these regions is largely credited to the Pallavas. Inscriptions and architectural styles found in Kambuja (Cambodia) and Java exhibit strong Pallava characteristics. The spread of the Saivite religious tradition in Kambuja is also attributed to Pallava influence. Evidence of colonial ventures across the Bay of Bengal is apparent and the cultural, religious and linguistic connections strongly suggest that colonisation likely originated from early Pallava territories in South India. The Kasakudi plates mention a successful naval expedition led by Simhavishnu, the Pallava ruler (575–600 C.E.), against Ceylon.

The later Pallava rulers became entangled in the turbulent political affairs of Ceylon. During his reign (630–668 C.E.), Narasimhavarman I was approached by Manavarma of Ceylon, who sought assistance in reclaiming his lost power on the island. Narasimhavarman agreed, as Manavarma had been his ally in defeating Pulakesin II, an early Chalukya ruler. The initial naval

♦ *Pallava naval campaigns*

expedition, launched in collaboration with Manavarma, ended in failure. However, a subsequent campaign proved successful, enabling Manavarma to seize control of the island. The Kasakudi plates praise this naval conquest, even likening it to Rama's legendary victory. Narasimhavarman I, a distinguished Pallava king, demonstrated strategic foresight by establishing a naval base at Mamallapuram, approximately thirty miles south of Madras. Another key naval base was located at Nagapattinam, further south along the eastern coast.

♦ *Pallava maritime power*

The Vayalur Pillar inscription suggests that during his reign (680–720 C.E.), Narasimhavarman II conquered the Laccadive Islands. His period witnessed a thriving maritime trade and he also dispatched an embassy to China. Nandivarman III, a capable Pallava ruler who reigned for approximately 22 years from 840 C.E., is known to have maintained a formidable naval force. His overseas influence is evident from an inscription at Takua Pa, written in Pallava script, where a temple was named in his honour. Evidence suggests that Nripatunga, a Pallava ruler of the late 9th century C.E., aided the Pandyan king, Sri Mara, in an invasion of Ceylon, further underscoring the Pallavas' enduring naval dominance.

1.2.3.2 The Chalukyas

♦ *Chalukya naval power*

The Chalukyas were the long standing rivals of the Pallavas, who emerged as a dominant power in the 6th century C.E. Mangalesa, the son of Pulakesin I, ruled between 597 and 608 C.E. and is credited with capturing the Kalingan island of Revati through a naval expedition, as recorded in the Nilgunda plates of Vikramaditya VI. However, the most renowned Chalukya ruler was Pulakesin II, who reigned from approximately 609 CE to 642 C.E. He developed a formidable navy, establishing his kingdom as a significant maritime power. The Chalukya navy was primarily engaged in military campaigns rather than peaceful trade.

♦ *Chalukya maritime expansion*

With its support, Pulakesin II successfully besieged the island of Puri, now known as Elephanta Island near Mumbai. The Aihole inscription attests to this naval engagement, which reportedly involved over a hundred ships. By defeating the Mauryas of Konkan and subjugating Malwa and Gujarat, Pulakesin II expanded his empire along an extensive coastline, facilitating further maritime ventures. His well-established navy continued to thrive after his death, as evidenced by Vinayaditya, who followed his grandfather's example and launched a successful naval campaign against Ceylon.

1.2.3.3 The Kalingas

It is fitting to highlight the significant role played by the Kalingas in shaping India's maritime history. They were instrumental in

♦ *Kalinga influence*

fostering the adventurous spirit that led to the colonisation of Java. Historical records indicate that Kalinga seafarers embarked on a daring oceanic voyage and successfully reached Java as early as 75 C.E. Upon arrival, they established settlements, built colonies and developed thriving trade relations with India. This marked the beginning of Hindu civilisation in this part of the Far East. In addition to legendary accounts of the "Klings" (Kalingas) colonising Java, inscriptional and architectural evidence in the region further substantiates their presence and influence.

♦ *Gujarat-Java connection*

Some historians have attempted to establish that the earliest colonisation of Java originated from Gujarat. Their argument is based on a legend recorded in Javanese chronicles, which suggests that a prince named Aji Saka travelled to the island from India in 75 C.E. It is evident that as early as 75 C.E., if not earlier, Hindus had begun arriving in the Indonesian Archipelago, leaving a lasting imprint of Hindu civilisation, Indian art and architecture and Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions. The island of Bali, located on the east of Java, still retains visible traces of its ancient Hindu culture and heritage.

♦ *Buddhist maritime influence*

In Java, the influence of Buddhism is deeply evident. The Borobudur temple features intricate sculptural reliefs, including depictions of Indian ships. One such relief illustrates the perilous voyage of a prince from Gujarat to Java's shores. In ancient times, Chilika Lake in present day Odisha served as a crucial anchorage for the Kalingas and from the port of Palura on the Kalinga coast, numerous ships embarked on voyages to the East.

♦ *Kalinga's maritime legacy*

Kalidasa frequently mentions the ports of Kalinga, where ships laden with spices were anchored. He also refers to the Kalinga capital as being located along the seashore and describes King Hemangada as the "Lord of Mahendragiri and Mahodadhi," the latter signifying the "Great Sea." The Kalingas not only extended their influence to the Far East but also maintained maritime ties closer to home, particularly with Ceylon. It is believed that Hemamala, a Kalinga princess, fled from Dantapura, carrying the revered "tooth relic" of the Buddha to Ceylon for safekeeping. Additionally, some ruling families of Kalinga are known to have migrated to Ceylon for refuge when their kingdom fell under Yavana rule. Until the emergence of the Cholas in South Indian maritime history and the Sri Vijaya rulers in the Far East, the Kalingas played a significant role in naval affairs, leaving a lasting imprint of their civilisation and maritime enterprise in historical records.

1.2.3.4 Sri Vijaya Empire

The expansion of kingdoms in the Far East progressed with little resistance from the indigenous population. The earliest Hindu ruled

kingdom in Sumatra was Sri Vijaya, which emerged around the 4th century C.E. From modest beginnings, it grew into a dominant naval and commercial power by the late 7th century C.E. Through a series of conquests, the Sri Vijaya Empire extended its influence from Sumatra to western Java and the Malay Peninsula. By securing control over the Malacca Strait, it established maritime supremacy in the Indian Ocean's eastern waters until the rise of the Sailendras in Farther India, a formidable naval power that later challenged Sri Vijaya's dominance.

♦ *Sri Vijaya's maritime expansion*

With a powerful navy, the Sri Vijaya rulers ensured piracy free seas and promoted thriving trade between India and their empire. They maintained particularly strong ties with Indian kingdoms along the east coast, especially with the rulers of Kalinga. Holding Malacca firmly under their control, they effectively dominated all maritime trade in the region, securing a near monopoly over commerce with China.

♦ *Srivijaya's maritime dominance*

1.2.3.5 The Sailendra Dynasty

The Sailendra dynasty seized power from the Kingdom of Sri Vijaya and firmly established itself in Java by 782 C.E. By the late 8th century C.E., the Sailendras had expanded their rule over Sumatra, Java and the Malay Peninsula, effectively unifying the Hindu kingdoms of Suvarnadvipa. They also attempted to annex Champa and their formidable Java fleet launched attacks on the "Hinduised" kingdom of Annam in Indo-China. Although these military campaigns were not always successful, they demonstrated the immense strength of the Sailendra navy.

♦ *Sailendra expansion*

The Arab writer Masudi, in 943 C.E., highlighted the vast extent of the Sailendra Empire, stating that "even the most rapid vessels could not complete in two years a tour round the isles." Within a century of their rise, the Sailendras became one of the most dominant naval powers in the East. The only major force that challenged their maritime supremacy was the Cholas, whose naval exploits spanned nearly a century and played a crucial role in shaping the history of the Indonesian archipelago.

♦ *Sailendra supremacy*

Having established control over most of the islands in the Indian Ocean, except for Ceylon, the Sailendras sought to annex it. Chandrabhanu, the Sailendra ruler, launched two invasions of the island in 1236 C.E. and 1256 C.E., but both proved to be costly endeavours. Sardar K. M. Panikkar remarks: "The grand expeditions of Chandrabhanu, involving the coordinated efforts of thousands of soldiers and hundreds of ships across the Bay of Bengal, mark the final chapter in Hindu maritime supremacy."

♦ *Final expedition*

1.2.3.6 Chola, Chera, Pandya

Let us now turn to the three major maritime kingdoms of the Indian Peninsula, Chera, Chola and Pandya. Their deep engagement in naval affairs, far exceeding that of their northern counterparts, was a natural outcome of their geographical position. Among them, the Cholas emerged as a dominant maritime force, having established their kingdom in the south several centuries before Christ. Initially, their territory was modest, bordered by the Coromandel Coast to the east, the South Pennar River to the north, the Vellar River to the south and the Coorg region to the west. Although the Pallavas initially restricted their expansion, the Cholas, driven by their military prowess and a powerful navy, eventually overcame these constraints. Their influence extended not only across the land but also over the seas.

The Cholas

♦ *Chola port*

The renowned sea port of Kaveripattinam served as the centre of Chola maritime activity. Also known as Puhar, it was strategically located at the mouth of the Kaveri River. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* refers to it as 'Kamara', while Ptolemy's *Geography* records it as 'Khaberis'. The citadel, constructed on the river banks under the visionary leadership of Karikala Chola, functioned not only as a strategic naval base but also as a thriving commercial hub. During that period, the river's depth was sufficient to accommodate large vessels, allowing them to dock close to the harbour. The port was well-equipped with facilities such as stevedoring, customs clearance, warehousing and currency exchange, fostering a flourishing trade environment that made the city a bustling centre of commerce.

♦ *Vibrant trade*

The *Pattinappalai*, a Tamil Sangam poem, provides a detailed account of the port, including its trade activities, which is corroborated by the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and the Tamil epic *Silappadikaram.* An excerpt from *Pattinappalai* describes the variety of goods traded: "Horses arrived from distant lands beyond the seas, pepper was brought in ships, gold and precious stones came from the northern mountains, sandalwood and akir from the eastern seas, along with produce from the regions watered by the Ganges, crops from the banks of the Kaveri, food supplies from Ilam (Ceylon) and manufactured goods from Kala-kam."

♦ *Port administration*

With such bustling trade, the port attracted numerous foreign merchants, sailors and intermediaries, leading to the establishment of a designated quarter in the city for their settlement, as noted in Tamil literary sources. Moreover, the Cholas implemented a structured customs clearance system in their ports. Both *Pattinappalai* and

Silappadikaram reference the administrative measures in place, wherein goods were received, appraised and cleared under the Chola king's tiger seal. In cases of delays, the goods were securely stored in government operated warehouses within the dockyard.

♦ *Maritime infrastructure*

Another notable navigational aid provided at Chola ports was a series of lighthouses to facilitate night-time sailing. *Silappadikaram* records that the early Cholas initially used clay oil lamps placed atop palmyra trees to guide ships. Later, they constructed lighthouses using brick and mortar. With such well-organised port infrastructure and administrative support, the Cholas not only fostered a flourishing maritime trade but also sustained a formidable naval fleet, asserting their dominance over the seas by the late ninth century C.E.

The Cheras

♦ *Chera connections*

The Sailendras were also exhausted by their wars against the Cholas and following Chandrabhanu's humiliating defeat, the empire began to decline in the 15th century. Another state that gained prominence in India's early maritime history was the Cheras, who maintained direct commercial ties with the peoples of the West. Even long before the discovery of the trade winds in 45 C.E., the Cheras not only engaged in trade but also had religious interactions with the Western world. This is evident from the origins of the Christian church in Malabar and the presence of Syrian Christians in Kerala. Excavations at Ur, dating back to the 6th - 7th century B.C.E. unearthed Indian teak and cedar, which are believed to have originated from Kerala's forests.

♦ *Muziris hub*

Ancient Tamil texts mention the renowned port of Muziris, known today as Cranganore, located on the West Coast at the mouth of the Periyar River in the Chera territory. This port gained prominence as a key trading hub frequently visited by the "Yavanas" (Greeks) who arrived in their ships for commerce. The Periplus refers to it as Muziris and Ptolemy identifies it as a significant commercial port. The well known mud banks along the Malabar coast created a sheltered maritime zone, providing excellent anchorage for ships visiting these ports.

♦ *Pepper trade*

The discovery of Roman coins at Cannanore on the West Coast confirms the extent of trade, which appears to have flourished during the Julius - Claudius era. This commerce primarily involved the export of Malabar pepper and other spices. Pepper was such a vital ingredient in Western cuisine that, as Gibbon notes, Alaric was willing to spare Rome in 408 C.E. in exchange for a ransom paid in pepper. The Malabar pepper trade became so prevalent carried out in both Indian and foreign vessels, that ship tonnages were often

measured by the number of baskets of pepper they could transport.

♦ *Chera seafaring*

Isolated from the southern mainland by the towering Western Ghats, the Chera country naturally developed a strong seafaring tradition and its people became skilled sailors. They endured long voyages with minimal provisions, relying on the abundantly grown coconut in Malabar, which served as both a remedy for scurvy and its milk as a substitute for fresh water. The Cheras maintained a naval force even during the reign of King Senguttuvan, who is credited with defeating the "Yavanas" at sea and conquering Kadambu near Goa through a naval expedition. However, in later periods, the Cheras were overshadowed by the Cholas, whose formidable fleet dominated the waters.

♦ *Chera trade*

During this time, the Cheras focused more on fostering peaceful maritime trade than on military conflict. Nevertheless, they were not lacking in naval prowess, as evidenced by their significant sea battle against the Cholas off the coast of Kandalur (near present day Trivandrum). Later history would further highlight the maritime dominance of the Malabar fleet under the Zamorins of Calicut and the Rajas of Cochin. We may conclude that despite their conflicts with other contemporary South Indian kingdoms, the Cheras maintained their trade relations with the West without interruption.

The Pandyas

♦ *Pandya diplomacy*

The Pandyas were a dynasty with a rich legacy that allowed them to cultivate international relations and expand maritime commerce over time. As early as 20 B.C.E., a Pandyan king is known to have formed an alliance with Augustus Caesar. The extent of these interactions is evident in the *Silappadikaram,* which mentions that Roman soldiers served under the Pandyan king Chezhiyan. The text also refers to "Yavana" ships that frequently docked at the Pandyan port of Nerkundram, identified in the Periplus as Nelkynda. The Pandyan influence appears to have extended as far as the Far East, as suggested by striking similarities in the names of certain clans in Sumatra. Closer to home, they maintained close ties with Ceylon, as recorded in early historical accounts.

♦ *Pandya navalism*

According to historical accounts, a Pandyan princess was given in marriage to Prince Vijaya of Ceylon and the entire bridal entourage, consisting of over 800 passengers, was transported by ship. This detail provides insight into the impressive size of ships used during that time. The Pandyas were involved in Ceylonese politics from an early period and their interactions with the Sinhalese often led to conflicts. During his reign from 815 to 862 C.E, the Pandya king Srimara Srivallabha, son of Varaguna I, launched a naval expedition

against Ceylon, then ruled by Sena I, compelling him to sue for peace. Later, Jatavarman Sundara Pandya I is said to have led a seaborne invasion of Ceylon, returning with a vast collection of pearls and elephants. Kulasekhara Pandya reportedly dispatched a successful naval expedition to seize the sacred tooth relic of Buddha. These events clearly demonstrate the Pandyas' formidable naval power, which enabled them to undertake significant maritime campaigns.

♦ *Pandya- Ceylon alliance*

During the reign of Vira Pandya, Pandyan-Ceylonese relations were so strong that he came to their aid by defeating the Sailendra king, Chandrabhanu, who had launched a naval attack on Ceylon. A Pandyan inscription from 1264 C.E. records this event and Sardar K. M. Panikkar observes: "Following his (Chandrabhanu's) defeat and death in battle against Vira Pandya, the Sri Vijaya (Sailendra) Kingdom ceased to be a naval power."

♦ *Pandya prosperity*

Around 1310 C.E., the Pandyas ruled a vast territory stretching along the Coromandel Coast in the east and from Quilon to Cape Comorin on the West Coast. With Ceylon under their control, the Gulf of Mannar effectively became Pandyan territorial waters, where they extensively engaged in pearl fishing. Pandyan pearls became highly sought after in the West, generating significant demand. Alongside pearl fishing, the Pandyas also held a monopoly on beryls, precious stones of various colours, which were particularly prized by Western women. With such abundant natural wealth, including Pandyan pearls, beryls and Malabar pepper, the export trade flourished during the Chera-Pandya era.

♦ *Pandya decline*

At its peak in the 13th century, the Pandyan kingdom was the dominant power in the south, thriving on extensive international maritime trade. However, throughout its history, it faced persistent conflicts with the Chalukyas, Pallavas, Cholas and Sinhalese, which significantly weakened its stability.

1.2.3.7 The Vijayanagara

♦ *Vijayanagar maritime*

Founded around 1336 C.E., the Vijayanagar Empire rose to prominence under Harihara II, who extended his rule over Mysore, Kanara and the whole of southern India. Under Deva Raya I, the empire expanded further, even bringing distant islands under its control. The Persian traveller Abdur Razzaq, who visited Vijayanagar in 1442 C.E., recorded that the empire controlled as many as 300 ports. Among them, he highlighted Calicut as a major port, praising the rulers for their well organised port administration, which facilitated international trade. Deva Raya II not only adopted the grand title of "Lord of the Eastern, Western and Southern Oceans" but also appointed his trusted commander, Lakkanna, as "Lord of

the Southern Sea," entrusting him with the supervision of overseas commerce. The people of Vijayanagar played a crucial role in maritime trade between India and the Far East. Their economy was heavily reliant on overseas commerce, with key exports including diamonds, rice, cloth, sugar and spices, while imports primarily consisted of horses, copper and mercury.

♦ *Vijayanagar fleet*

The thriving trade of the Vijayanagar Empire attracted people from across the world, including Burmese, Chinese, Indonesians, Thais, Arabs, Persians, Abyssinians and Portuguese. Ship building was a prosperous industry during this period, with ships being constructed not only in India but also in the Maldive Islands. Epigraphic evidence confirms that Vijayanagar rulers maintained naval fleets and were skilled in ship building even before the arrival of the Portuguese.

♦ *Naval resurgence*

The existence of a Vijayanagar navy is evident from the various naval expeditions launched against Pegu, Tenasserim and Ceylon. Even Portuguese records acknowledge the strength of the Vijayanagar fleet. Historical accounts mention an officer known as Navayada Prabhu, who oversaw the fleets stationed at Bhatkal and Mangalore. The rise of Vijayanagar coincided with the decline of the Bahmani Kingdom, ushering in a period of Hindu maritime resurgence in southern India.

♦ *Vijayanagar decline*

The Vijayanagar Empire, once a dominant force in South India, ultimately declined due to several factors. Continuous wars with the Deccan Sultanates, the emperors' inability to maintain political unity and the lack of a sustained overseas commercial strategy backed by a strong navy weakened the empire. The arrival of the Portuguese further hastened its downfall, particularly after they captured Goa in 1510 C.E., one of Vijayanagar's key ports.

♦ *Missed opportunity*

Despite possessing abundant natural resources and opportunities for commercial expansion, the empire failed to capitalise on them effectively. In hindsight, the rulers of South India were on the verge of establishing a Greater India through maritime and trade influence but fell short due to internal conflicts and a lack of long term vision. This ultimately led to the downfall of the Vijayanagar Empire and prevented the establishment of a lasting Hindu empire in South India.

These kingdoms played a significant role in shaping the maritime history of the region. Their cultural and religious influence extended to Malaya, Burma, Indonesia and Thailand, while their vast trade networks reached as far as China and Japan in the East and Africa and the Mediterranean in the West. These remarkable achievements have left a lasting imprint on the historical fabric of the nation.

Summarised Overview

The Indus Valley Civilisation (3000 B.C.E.) showed strong evidence of maritime trade through findings like shell ornaments, fish-engraved seals and a dockyard at Lothal. Trade links with Sumer, Egypt, Crete and Persia suggest the Harappans built their own seaworthy ships. During the Vedic period, texts like the Rig Veda mention sea voyages, ocean deities (like Varuna) and seafaring clans. Under the Nanda and Maurya dynasties (5th–2nd centuries B.C.E.), maritime activities expanded further. Greek records from Alexander's time praise India's shipbuilding and navigation skills. The Mauryan Empire, guided by Kautilya's Arthashastra, had a structured naval administration, regulated ports, promoted maritime trade and sent religious missions overseas, strengthening India's influence across Asia and the Mediterranean.

The Satavahanas (Andhras) dominated southern India (2nd century B.C.E.) and developed extensive maritime trade, particularly with the Roman Empire, as seen from the abundance of Roman coins and ship depictions on Satavahana coins. The Kushan Empire (1st–3rd centuries C.E.) absorbed strong Greek cultural influences, even using Greek script. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea records active maritime trade through ports like Barbaricum and Broach, highlighting exports like gems, spices and luxury goods to Rome.

Under the Guptas (4th–6th centuries C.E.), maritime trade flourished again. Ports along both coasts expanded, trade guilds thrived and overseas commerce with Europe and Africa grew. During Harshavardhana's reign (7th century C.E.), India maintained strong maritime and diplomatic ties with China. During the Pala dynasty (8th–9th centuries C.E.), Bengal emerged as a major maritime power.

South India led maritime trade from 1000 B.C.E., connecting with Mesopotamia, Egypt and even Rome by the 1st century B.C.E. The Pallavas became a formidable naval power, influencing Southeast Asian culture and religion. The Chalukyas, rivals of the Pallavas, developed a strong navy mainly for conquest. The Kalingas were pioneers in Southeast Asian colonisation, reaching Java as early as 75 C.E. The Sri Vijaya Empire, emerging in Sumatra around the 4th century C. E., became a major naval and commercial power by the late 7th century C. E. The Sailendra dynasty rose to power in Java by 782 C. E., eventually unifying Hindu kingdoms across Sumatra, Java and the Malay Peninsula.

Among the South Indian kingdoms, the Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas were deeply involved in maritime activities. The Cholas, in particular, grew into a dominant maritime and military power, expanding both territorially and across the seas, initially despite constraints from the Pallavas. Their geographical location naturally fostered their strong naval tradition.

The Vijayanagara Empire maintained a strong navy, conducted overseas expeditions and promoted shipbuilding. However, internal conflicts, wars with the Deccan Sultanates and the rise of Portuguese dominance led to its decline. Hindu kingdoms significantly shaped maritime history through widespread trade and cultural influence across Asia.

Assignments

1. Discuss the role of the Chola dynasty in the expansion of maritime trade and naval expeditions. How did their naval dominance influence Southeast Asia?
2. Examine the significance of Tamil Sangam literature in reconstructing the maritime history of ancient South India.
3. Analyse the trade relations between South Indian kingdoms and the Roman Empire. What archaeological evidence supports these interactions?
4. How did the Pallavas and the Pandyas contribute to maritime trade in the Indian Ocean region?
5. Evaluate the impact of South Indian maritime activities on the spread of Indian culture and religion (Hinduism and Buddhism) to Southeast Asia.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

UNIT 3

Overseas Maritime Trade

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- explain how maritime trade contributed to the economic prosperity of ancient Indian kingdoms
- analyse the role of major ports like Lothal, Muziris, Arikamedu and Kaveripattinam in facilitating trade
- assess the impact of trade on urbanisation and economic growth in coastal regions
- discuss the policies of South Indian rulers in encouraging trade and diplomatic relations

Background

India established contact with foreign nations through trade from a very early period. Archaeological evidence suggests that by the eighth century B.C.E., regular trade relations existed, both by land and sea, between India and regions such as Mesopotamia, Arabia, Phoenicia and Egypt. Chinese literary sources also reference maritime trade between India and China as early as the seventh century B.C.E. Additionally, recent archaeological discoveries in the Philippines, the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia support the idea of sustained trade between India and the Far Eastern countries from the first half of the first millennium B.C.E., continuing into the early centuries of the Christian era.

By the fourth century B.C.E., trade and maritime activities had become highly developed, with the Mauryas efficiently organising a Board of Admiralty and a Naval Department. This naval strength facilitated Indian expansion into the islands of the Indian Archipelago. Around the same period, regular trade routes emerged between India and China, both overland and maritime. Alexander's invasion (327–325 B.C.E.) further intensified India's interactions with the Hellenic world, leading to diplomatic exchanges, including embassies sent to the Maurya court by Greek rulers of Egypt and Syria. Emperor Ashoka later extended these connections by dispatching missionaries to five Hellenic kingdoms. Evidence strongly suggests that a significant volume of sea trade between India and the western world, extending as far as the African coast, was already well established before the beginning of the Christian era.

Keywords

Indian Ocean Trade, Silk Road, Spice Trade, Arikamedu, Ships, Roman coins

Discussion

1.3.1 India's Relation with Ancient Greece and Rome

♦ *Trade intermediaries*

In the early stages, trade between Rome and India was facilitated through intermediaries. The most significant middlemen and carriers included: (i) the Greeks, particularly those from Egypt; (ii) Syrians, Jews and other peoples of Asia Minor; and (iii) Armenians and various Caucasian tribes. These groups were either Roman subjects or allied with Rome.

♦ *Strategic intermediaries*

The Arabians, Auxumites and Somalis also played a crucial role as intermediaries. Unlike the others, they were not under Roman influence and preferred to ensure that trade between India and the West remained indirect. Their strategic geographical position, situated between Rome and India, allowed them to dominate trade routes. By controlling the entire flow of goods between the East and West, they sought to obscure the true sources of the wealth of India and China from the Greeks and Romans while maximising their own profits as middlemen.

♦ *Trade hub*

Rome and India were connected through trade routes via the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. The Red Sea provided the shortest maritime link between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean through the Heroopolite Gulf. Many of the middlemen facilitating trade resided in regions along the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. All major trade routes from India and China to Rome converged in a narrow strip of land encompassing Asia Minor, Palestine, Arabia and Egypt. This region served as a crucial hub where merchants from the East and West exchanged goods.

♦ *Yavana trade*

The term Yavana originally referred to the Greeks in ancient Indian texts but later came to denote all foreigners from regions west of the Indian subcontinent. In Ashoka's inscriptions, the Yavanas are mentioned as a people inhabiting the northwestern borders of the Mauryan Empire. Early Tamil literature makes frequent references to the Yavanas. Sangam poems describe their large ships sailing on the Periyar River, bringing gold and wine while departing with cargoes of black pepper.

♦ *Periplus commerce*

A mid-first century Greek maritime geography, the Periplus, serves as a detailed account of ports and trade routes along the Red Sea and the Indian coast, including their hinterlands and the goods exchanged. While it primarily focuses on commerce, it also makes indirect references to political conditions. Among the traded items, textiles, pepper, semi-precious stones and ivory were exchanged in the peninsula for high value Roman coins, which were the principal import, along with coral and wine. Excavations have uncovered amphorae bases with traces of wine sedimentation, while the discovery of a distillation apparatus suggests that both locals and visitors consumed wine and alcohol. Early Tamil literature enthusiastically describes Yavana ships arriving at ports like Muziris, praising the quality of the wine they brought and highlighting the lucrative trade of black pepper in exchange for Roman gold coins.

♦ *Urban flourishing*

The excavation of numerous urban centres from this period provides evidence of an improved standard of living. The Indo-Greek city of Sirkap at Taxila has been uncovered, revealing its distinct urban layout, with the acropolis set apart from the residential areas. Visitors can now walk through its streets, observe the well-defined quarters and almost visualise the city as it once was. Bactria, leveraging its strategic position as a hub of trade routes, had a characteristic city layout, featuring a fortified citadel for the ruling elite alongside a larger residential area. Within this space, houses, craft centres and monasteries were densely clustered, while suburbs extended further out. The city of Bactra (modern Balkh) is estimated to have had a population of approximately 100,000.

♦ *Cultural crossroads*

The prominence of craft centres was a defining feature of both these cities and others across the subcontinent during this era. Mathura, like Bactra, stood at the crossroads of migrating communities, artistic influences and religious patronage. Kushana rulers continued to uphold Mathura's significance, although their patronage of towns in Gandhara was even greater. The city's political importance was further reinforced by the establishment of the Kushana royal portrait gallery nearby at Mat.

♦ *Silk Route shift*

Between the 2nd century B.C.E. and 2nd century C.E., trade between India and the Roman Empire thrived. In addition to exporting goods to the Mediterranean, India played a crucial role in facilitating the Chinese silk trade. During the reign of Emperor Augustus (27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.), traders began to avoid the section of the Silk Route passing through Parthia in Central Asia due to political instability. As a result, a portion of the trade was diverted over land to India, from where goods were shipped to the Roman Empire via the sea route. After the reign of Marcus Aurelius in the

late 2nd century C.E., this trade began to decline, largely due to internal turmoil in the Roman Empire. However, it did not cease entirely.

♦ *Roman gold flow*

The Periplus provides a detailed list of goods exported from Indian ports along the Indus Delta and the Gujarat coast to the Roman Empire. Both Pliny and Dio Chrysostom mention the significant outflow of Roman gold to India. The Vienna Papyrus, which documents a trade agreement between two merchants from Alexandria and Muchiri, appears to reference a loan for purchasing commodities such as nard (aromatic balsam), ivory and textiles.

♦ *Roman coin discoveries*

A significant number of Roman coins have been discovered in India, with approximately 170 finds from around 130 sites. Most of these coins date back to the reign of Emperors Augustus (31 B.C.E.–14 C.E.) and Tiberius (14–37 C.E.), including both original and imitation issues. The coins include silver denarii and gold aurei, with silver coins being more abundant in both Rome and India.

♦ *Roman coins finds in India*

Notably, a high concentration of these finds has been recorded in the Coimbatore region of Tamil Nadu and the Krishna Valley in Andhra Pradesh. In contrast, Roman coins discovered in western India, such as near Sholapur, Waghoda, Vadgaon - Madhavpur and Kondapur, are relatively fewer in number. Apart from a handful of discoveries at sites like Taxila, Manikyala and Mathura, Roman coins are extremely rare in North India. Some Roman coins found in India bear slash marks and small counter marks, including dots, stars and curves. The exact purpose of these slashes remains unclear, though they may have served as ownership marks.

♦ *Roman pottery in India*

Beyond coinage, valuable insights into Indo-Mediterranean contacts also come from pottery. Two significant types of Roman pottery found in India are amphorae jars and terra sigillata. Amphorae are large jars with an oval body, narrow cylindrical neck and two handles. Terra sigillata is a distinctive red-glazed pottery, created by pressing designs into a mold. Earlier, scholars referred to it as "Arretine ware," named after Arezzo, a major production centre. However, not all pottery of this type discovered at Arikamedu necessarily originated from Arezzo. Thus, the term terra sigillata is preferred, as it encompasses both moulded, decorated wares and undecorated, wheel made varieties, whether produced in Italy or as local imitations.

Significant evidence of India's maritime trade links has been uncovered at Arikamedu, a site on the Coromandel coast, located 4 kms. from Pondicherry on the right bank of the Ariyankuppam River, near its confluence with the Bay of Bengal. Excavations conducted in 1945 revealed that the settlement was occupied from

♦ *Arikamedu excavations*

the late 1st century B.C.E. to the 1st and 2nd centuries C.E. The site was divided into northern and southern sectors. In the northern sector, a brick structure was identified as a warehouse, likely used for storing trade goods. In the southern sector, two walled courtyards with tanks and drains were tentatively identified as dyeing vats, where muslin cloth may have been dyed and prepared for export.

♦ *Arikamedu findings*

Alongside locally produced pottery, excavators also found Mediterranean wares, including amphorae and terra sigillata (previously referred to as Arretine ware). The amphorae had a pink body, yellow slip and two handles, while rouletted black ware, showing foreign influence, was also discovered. Other notable finds included over 200 beads made of shell, bone, gold, terracotta and semiprecious stones. A Graeco-Roman gem featured what appeared to be an intaglio carving of Emperor Augustus and a fragment of a Roman lamp, made of fine red ware, was also recovered. Based on these discoveries, Mortimer Wheeler identified Arikamedu as Poduke, one of the Yavana emporia (trading stations) mentioned in classical sources. However, more recent excavations have led to a reassessment of some of these interpretations.

♦ *Roman trade*

Products in demand in Roman markets were primarily exchanged for Roman coins. The frequent discovery of such coin hoards in the Deccan and South India suggests that this trade was substantial. Most of the coins belong to early Roman emperors like Augustus and Tiberius, while the debased coins of Nero were not considered valuable enough for hoarding. Some coins bear marks or nicks, possibly to prevent their recirculation. The Roman historian Pliny lamented that trade with the East was a significant drain on Rome's economy, costing around 550 million sesterces annually, with at least a fifth of this amount going to India. Indian exports largely consisted of luxury goods, including spices, gemstones, textiles, ivory and exotic animals, such as apes, parrots and peacocks sought after for the entertainment of Roman patricians and their families.

1.3.1.1 India's Relation With Middle East (West Asia)

♦ *Significance of gandhara*

Between approximately 200 B.C.E. and 300 C.E., trade relations between the Indian subcontinent and East and Southeast Asia grew significantly. Due to its close proximity to Central Asia and the presence of Chinese military garrisons in the Pamirs, the Gandhara region held particular importance for the Han emperors of China. While initial Chinese interest was driven by military and political concerns, these were soon overshadowed by flourishing trade and religious exchanges with the Indian subcontinent. Silk emerged as the dominant commodity in commercial transactions.

♦ *Silk Route divisions*

The history and nature of early trade between ancient India and ancient China have been explored by Xinru Liu (1988). The vast Chinese Silk Route served as a vital link connecting India with Central Asia, West Asia and Europe. Spanning approximately 4,350 miles, it extended from Loyang on the Yellow River (Huang He) in China to Ctesiphon on the Tigris River in West Asia. From Loyang, the route passed through Ch'ang and Tunhuang, near the Yellow River's source, before splitting into two branches. The northern route traversed the oases between the northern edge of the Taklamakan Desert and the Tienshan Mountains, while the southern route followed the desert's southern edge along the Kunlun Mountains. These two paths converged at Kashgar, only to divide once again.

♦ *Trade Goods exchange*

Coral and glass were highly valued commodities in China during the early centuries C.E., though there is limited archaeological evidence of Roman glassware reaching the region. In fact, very few Roman artefacts have been discovered in China, possibly due to insufficient archaeological excavations. The Chinese obtained fragrances such as frankincense and styrax from Central Asia and then exported them westward. These, along with other Chinese and Central Asian goods, were imported into India and later shipped to the West from ports like Barygaza (near the mouth of the Narmada) and Barbaricon (at the mouth of the Indus). Central Asia also supplied superior animal hides. Key products transported from or through India to China during this period included pearls, coral, glass and fragrances, while silk remained China's primary export to India. Trade between China and the West faced disruptions in the 3rd and 4th centuries due to political upheavals.

♦ *Southeast Asia links*

For a long time, Indian historians interpreted India's interactions with Southeast Asia through the lens of political and cultural colonisation. However, more balanced reassessments have examined these connections as reciprocal and long term exchanges. Despite this progress, there remains a significant need for further exploration of the nature and expressions of these interactions. Ancient Sanskrit and Pali texts refer to a land called 'Suvarnadvipa' or 'Suvarnabhumi,' the "land of gold", which was associated with wealth and is generally identified as Southeast Asia. This identification is more concrete in the *Arthasastra*, which mentions incense known as kaleyaka from 'Suvarnabhumi' and aloeswood imported from across the sea. The *Milindapanha* also references Suvarnabhumi in the context of shipping ports, while the Jatakas describe sea voyages from Varanasi and Bharukachchha to this prosperous land.

During the 1st century C. E., the quantity and variety of Indian goods exported to Southeast Asia increased significantly. This shift

was influenced by the rise of kingdoms in mainland Southeast Asia, the development of a more stratified society, the expansion of craft production and the growth of interregional trade. Indian artefacts have been discovered in Iron Age burials at Don Ta Phet, Khuan Lukpad (on the Malay Peninsula) and Chaiya (on the southeastern coast of Thailand). They have also been found in emerging urban centres located in the valleys of the Chao Phraya, Irrawaddy and Mekong rivers. Since coinage was not introduced in Southeast Asia until the mid-1st millennium C.E., trade with India likely operated through barter or the use of cowrie shells as a medium of exchange.

♦ *Southeast Asia expansion*

1.3.2 India's Relation with the Far East

Recent archaeological findings, as discussed by Glover, from sites in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam, have pushed back the origins of maritime contacts between India and Southeast Asia to the late first millennium B.C.E. These interactions have often been interpreted as economic exchanges driven by the demand for luxury goods to satisfy the Roman West. However, it has also been suggested that beyond trade, Buddhism played a significant role in expanding these networks from the Indian subcontinent.

♦ *Buddhism & trade*

In the early centuries of the Common Era, Buddhist monks from India embarked on proselytising missions to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. The spread of Buddhism in these regions led to regular pilgrimages to India, as devotees sought to visit sacred sites associated with the Buddha and to study and translate Buddhist canonical texts. In addition to upasakas (lay devotees) from Southeast Asia, Buddhist monks from China frequently travelled along the maritime route, often making stops at centres in Southeast Asia before continuing their journey.

♦ *Buddhist expansion*

In earlier times, the entire region including Cambodia, Siam (modern Thailand), Indo-China (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), Malaya (Malaysia), Indonesia and the smaller surrounding islands was collectively known in India as Dvipantara and was "culturally regarded as an integral part of Bharatvarsha." Linguistic and ethnological studies suggest that close ties existed between the people of Dvipantara and India since prehistoric times.

♦ *Cultural ties*

Voyages to Southeast Asian ports were largely driven by the search for spices. Evidence of these early maritime connections is found in the form of Brahmi-inscribed graffiti on pottery sherds, carnelian beads and rouletted ware discovered at sites accessible to ships from the Bay of Bengal. These include the Irrawaddy Delta, the Malay Peninsula, Oc-Eo in the Mekong Delta and even the island of Bali.

♦ *Spice trade*

1.3.3 India's Relation with China

♦ *Expansion of maritime activity*

During the Gupta and Harshavardhana periods, Indian maritime activity expanded significantly across the eastern seas, reaching as far as China and Japan, beyond the earlier settlements in Java and Sumatra. India's sea-based interactions with China began at least as early as the begining of the Christian era. However, the Chinese themselves did not arrive in the Malay Archipelago until the 5th century and only extended their voyages to India, Persia and Arabia a century later.

♦ *Indian embassies to China*

According to Chinese historical records, throughout the 1st and 2nd centuries C.E. during the reigns of Emperor Ploti (89–105 C.E.) and Emperor Hiwanti (158–159 C.E.), numerous embassies from Indian rulers arrived at the Chinese court. These delegations brought goods that were officially classified as tribute, as the Chinese court maintained a monopoly over foreign trade. Southeast Asia's connections with China and India date back to the early centuries C.E. Artefacts such as an ivory comb, carnelian ring stones and a seal inscribed with Brahmi letters suggest the presence of Indian merchants in the region. This presence was particularly strong in areas closer to India, such as Shrikshetra (near Prome) in Myanmar and ports like Oc-eo, strategically located between India and China near the Gulf of Siam.

♦ *Southeast Asian cultures*

Recent excavations in Southeast Asia have revealed thriving pre-existing cultures with which Indian traders likely interacted. At Ban Chiang, evidence indicates rice cultivation supported by livestock, such as water buffalo. Some sites feature mortuary complexes with burial urns, while others contain megaliths. The Dong Son culture, known for its decorated bronze drums and other bronze artefacts, reflects advanced Chalcolithic societies.

♦ *Silk transit trade*

Apart from goods directly supplied by India, certain commodities from China and Central Asia were first brought to India before being re-exported to the eastern Roman Empire. While silk was traditionally transported from China to Rome via the Silk Route through northern Afghanistan and Iran, the rise of Parthian rule in Iran and its surrounding regions created obstacles for this route. As a result, silk was redirected to western Indian ports via the northwestern part of the subcontinent. Occasionally, it also reached India's eastern coast before being shipped westward. This led to a significant transit trade in silk between India and the Roman Empire.

Interaction with the West was not the only significant development of this period; these centuries also marked the early stages of Indian contact with China and the introduction of Indian culture

to Southeast Asia, all initially facilitated by trade. By the second and third centuries B. C. E., some Chinese goods were already in use in India, with names derived from Chinese, for example, china patta (Chinese cloth) and kichaka (bamboo), possibly linked to the Chinese ki-chok. When the first Buddhist missionaries arrived in China in the first century C. E. and established themselves at the renowned White Horse Monastery in Loyang, the nature of contact shifted from trade to cultural and religious exchange, though the mission initially progressed slowly. Over time, central Asian oases such as Yarkand, Khotan, Kashgar, Tashkent, Turfan, Miran, Kucha, Qarashahr and Dunhuang evolved into key transit hubs, later emerging as important centers for monasteries and stupas.

♦ *Cultural and religious exchange*

1.3.4 Ports and Coastal Towns in Malabar

Naura

The Periplus refers to "Naura and Tyndis, the first markets of Damirica," which are believed to correspond to the Satiyaputra kingdoms mentioned in Ashoka's inscriptions (R. E. II). Naura, likely located in North Malabar, is identified with present day Cranganore, a known hub of Roman trade, as evidenced by the discovery of Roman coins from the reigns of Tiberius, Claudius and Nero.

♦ *Roman trade*

Tyndis

Both the author of the Periplus and Ptolemy agree in identifying Tyndis as one of the earliest or northernmost ports of the Deccan. The Periplus describes Tyndis as "a village in plain sight by the sea" and states that it belonged to the kingdom of Cerobotra. Mr. Schoff locates it at Ponnani, which, as noted in the Imperial Gazetteer, is navigable for small vessels some distance inland. Dr. Burnell and Aiyangar propose Kadalundi near Beypore as its location, while S. N. Majumdar suggests that Tyndis represents the Dravidian Tondi.

♦ *Tyndis debates*

Muziris

Muchiri or Muziris, likely situated near Kodungallur or Cranganore (close to Kochi), was a key centre for the trade of pepper, spices and beryl. A recently discovered second-century C.E. Greek papyrus records a contract between an Alexandrian merchant importer and a financier, highlighting the large-scale trade in pepper and spices from Muziris. References to Malabar's thriving pepper trade persist for centuries, extending to the Portuguese era. The distribution of coin hoards indicates a trade route from Muziris through the Palghat Gap, accessing the beryl mines and along the Kaveri Valley to the east coast.

♦ *Muziris trade*

Nelcynda

♦ *Muziris and Nelcynda*

The principal ports on the west coast, moving southward from Tyndis, were Muziris and Nelcynda. Muziris belonged to the territory of Cerobothra, while Nelcynda was part of the Pandya kingdom, centered around Madura. Both ports held significant importance during the period described in the Periplus. Scholars such as Burnell, Caldwell and Yule have identified Muziris with Muyiri-kotta, which, as Cranganore, remained a major port in medieval times. Their conclusions are based on the Periplus's statement that the total distance to the southern end of Damirica from Barygaza is 7,000 stadia. The Periplus further notes that Muziris was located on a river, about 500 stadia from Tyndis via river and sea and 20 stadia inland from the shore. Nelcynda, also on a river, was approximately 500 stadia from Muziris by river and sea and was 120 stadia from the coast.

Bakarei

♦ *Bakarei's decline*

The term Bakarei may correspond to the Sanskrit word Dvaraka, meaning "door." Ptolemy mentions three coastal towns situated between Muziris and Bakarei: Podoperoura (likely Poudopatana, meaning "new town," as referenced by Cosmas), Semne and Nelcynda. All these towns were located on the inland side of the backwaters. The town was also renowned for its involvement in the pepper trade. However, by Ptolemy's time, Muziris had become the sole authorised trading centre, with Nelcynda and Bakarei losing their status as official marts and Tyndis being classified merely as a coastal town.

Balita

♦ *Balita's significance*

Beyond Bakarei lies the district of Paralia, described in the Periplus as "stretching along the coast," with its first notable location being Balita, which is said to have a fine harbor. Balita is likely the modern Varkkallai, a site that once held significant commercial importance. Recent modifications, including cutting through a bluff, have connected its backwaters to other waterways leading as far as Trivandrum, now the region's principal port. Balita is also believed to correspond to Bammala, as mentioned by Ptolemy.

1.3.5 Ports and Coastal Towns in Coromandel Coasts

Korkoi

Beyond Balita, there is another location called Comari, identified with Korkai. Dr. Caldwell suggests that Korkai was likely the site

of the earliest settlement of civilised people in Tinnevelly. He theorised that the Aryans who settled in Ceylon under Vijaya may have later established colonies along the Tinnevelly coast, naming the chief river after their original homeland. Tamil tradition holds that the three brothers previously mentioned initially ruled together at Korkai. This site is among the few Indian locations recorded in the Peutinger Tables under the name Coleis Indorum (the Coleis of the Indians). The *Silappadhikaram* refers to Korkai as one of the major ports of its time, particularly renowned for its pearl fisheries. Ptolemy also describes it as both a cape and a town.

♦ *Significance of Korkai*

Puhar

The city of Puhar appears to have gained significant prominence from early times under the name Kakandi. N. K. Sastri suggests that this most likely refers to Kaveripattinam. In the Jataka stories, Akitti is depicted as leaving Benares for a garden near Kaveripattinam. The *Mahavamsa* recounts how a noble-born Tamil named Elara travelled from the Chola country to Ceylon and gradually established his rule there around the mid-2nd century B.C.E. This suggests that by this period, Kaveripattinam had already risen to prominence, serving as a key link between Bharhut and Benares in the north and Ceylon in the south. Kaveripattinam was situated on the northern bank of the Kaveri River, which at the time was a wide and deep waterway, allowing heavily laden ships to enter directly from the sea without reducing sail

♦ *Significance of Kaveripattinam*

Poduca

Poduca or Podouke, referenced in the Periplus and by Ptolemy, is likely modern-day Pondicherry. It was situated to the north of Puhar and later became known as Arikamedu. The site features a mound or medu, with remnants of brick structures near the village of Kakkayantoppu, still called Arikamedu, meaning "mound of ruins" (arukku = to ruin). Arikamedu represents the remains of a significant ancient town on the Coromandel coast and served as an Indo-Roman trading station.

♦ *Trade hubs*

In 1945, R. E. M. Wheeler the British archaeologist, discovered Roman pottery at the site, confirming that monsoon driven trade between the Mediterranean world and western India, with coastal or overland links to the Coromandel coast, was well established by around 30 C.E. The route described in the Periplus continues around the southern tip of the Indian peninsula and up the eastern coast. Among the ports mentioned, the most well-documented is Arikamedu (referred to as Padouke in the Periplus). Excavations at Arikamedu have revealed a large settlement with evidence of

♦ *Roman trade*

trade links to the eastern Mediterranean. More than just a stopover, Arikamedu served as a significant trading hub in southeastern India, exporting locally sourced goods and possibly producing textiles tailored to Roman specifications for shipment to the West.

1.3.6 Mercantile Corporations and Commodities

♦ *Merchant guilds*

The spirit of cooperation is an inherent social instinct in humans, making guilds a natural development as units formed around common objectives. The earliest mention of merchant corporations appears in the Rig Veda, where the gods were invoked to attack the Panis. According to Ludwig, the *Panis* were indigenous traders who travelled in caravans and were prepared to resist Aryan incursions. The Ramayana employs the term *Naigama* to refer to a society of traders and craftsmen, while the Mahabharata uses it to denote a guild of merchants. Buddhist literature is rich with references to trade guilds.

♦ *Sresthi*

The term *Sresthi* frequently appears in the Jataka, referring to the "official representative of the commercial community." The title *Setthi* (chief), often encountered and sometimes translated as "treasurer," may suggest authority over a particular trade or industry. Further, the terms *Sreni, Puga, Kula* and *Gana* were used to denote trade or craft guilds.

♦ *Sreni*

Manu uses the term Sreni, which has been interpreted in three different ways: first, as a collective of merchants, bankers and artisans; second, as an association of merchants and farmers; and third, as a group that included merchants and performers. The term *Shreni* has been translated as "guild," though it primarily functioned as a professional association of merchants or artisans who collaborated while sharing certain characteristics with a guild. These organisations played a crucial role in boosting production, supporting commerce and shaping urban life.

♦ *Role of Guilds*

Many artisans joined shrenis as competing individually against professional organisations was challenging. *Shrenis* provided social status and a measure of security. Buddhist texts such as the Milinda-panha and the Mahavastu mention over seventy-five different occupations, though not all could have been structured as guilds. Guilds were likely limited to trades that produced goods with significant commercial demand. As demand grew, some guilds began employing hired labour and even slaves. The state encouraged such organisations, as they streamlined the collection of revenue from commercial production and trade.

The shrenis established rules regarding work, the quality of

finished products and pricing to protect both artisans and customers. Prices of manufactured goods were determined based on quality or set according to a fixed scale. Member conduct was regulated by a guild court, which upheld the customary laws of the guild, known as *shrenidharma*. This was considered equivalent to the traditional laws of the *jati* as an occupational group and was expected to be respected by the king. The shreni was led by a head, the jyeshtha, who likely handled negotiations with other institutions when necessary. To some extent, its functioning resembled that of the gana-sanghas.

♦ *Guild regulations*

The *Arthashastra* states that guilds had to be registered in the locality where they operated and required permission to relocate, though this rule may not have been strictly enforced. Artisans from various crafts could form guilds, with prominent ones including potters, metalworkers, weavers, goldsmiths, bead and glass makers, ivory carvers and carpenters. However, private entrepreneurship was not excluded.

♦ *Guild regulations*

The Taxila Casket inscription of Kanishka's reign mentions guilds of architects. The Mathura inscriptions also reference numerous blacksmiths. The Karle inscription further notes a donation of a cave-door by the perfumer Sinhadata from Dhenukakata. The Jatakas mention a guild of barbers alongside shampooers. In the Pali Suttavibhanga, their profession is referred to as hinasippa (a lowly trade). The term Rajanapita (chief of barbers) appears in a boldly engraved inscription on a slab, which may have served as a signboard for his house or shop.

♦ *Guild professions*

The Basarh seals provide evidence of commercial transactions conducted by various guilds during the Gupta period. These guilds included merchants *(Shresthins)*, caravan traders *(Sarthavaha),* artisans *(Kulika)* and chief artisans *(Prathama-Kulika)*. They were among the most influential organisations, wielding significant authority in various trade centres across India.

♦ *Guild transactions*

1.3.6.1 Functions of Guilds

Inscriptions indicate that ancient guilds functioned similarly to modern banks. They accepted public deposits at regular interest rates and provided loans to individuals. The interest rates varied between 12% and 9%. Like contemporary banking institutions, these guild-banks were widespread across the country and offered financial services to the public. They earned the trust of the people, suggesting that they operated with integrity and fairness in their dealings. There is further evidence of guilds functioning as treasury offices.

♦ *Guild banking*

♦ *Militarised guilds*

Kautilya also highlights the significant military strength of guilds. He mentions that the corporations of warriors from Kamboja, Sumatra and other regions sustain themselves through agriculture, trade and the wielding of weapons. Some guilds are described as living "by the title of a Raja," indicating their elevated status and influence. This suggests that trade guilds were not only economic entities but also played a role in military affairs when required. Kautilya's observations underscore the considerable power and autonomy these guilds wielded in ancient society.

♦ *Guild coinage*

According to Cunningham, merchant guilds in ancient India issued their own coins. He notes that private coinage dates back to antiquity and suggests that the Puranas align in character with a type of private coinage still in use. He argues that these coins were likely issued not by any state but by bankers and merchant guilds, which would explain their abundance and widespread circulation.

1.3.6.2 Character of Guilds

♦ *Mutual regulation*

Although the guilds were managed by executive officers, the opinions of individual members were equally respected. The power of the guilds to make laws, which must be accepted by the king. The relationship between the guilds and the state was one of mutual dependence, where both entities recognised and respected each other's roles. While the king upheld the traditions and regulations of the guilds, the guilds were also subject to royal authority.

♦ *Commercial autonomy*

Guilds played a crucial role in advancing trade in ancient India. Hopkins, in his work *India Old and New,* compares the contributions of ancient and modern guilds, emphasising their significance in shaping mercantile interests. He notes that these guilds were essential for the rise of the middle classes, helping them gain recognition in the face of both despotic rulers and a powerful priesthood that sought to suppress their social mobility. As guilds grew in influence, a new legal principle emerged, advising kings to refrain from oppressing them or imposing excessive taxation. This shift allowed trade to develop in a more structured manner. Just as village panchayats maintained self governance in rural areas, guilds ensured autonomy in trade.

Summarised Overview

Trade between Rome and India flourished through intermediaries like Greeks, Syrians and Arabs, who controlled key trade routes and obscured the source of India's wealth. Connected via the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, both empires exchanged goods such as textiles, pepper and precious stones, with Roman coins and pottery found in Indian hubs like Arikamedu. Despite Roman complaints about the costs of Eastern trade, the relationship remained mutually beneficial, with Greek and Roman influences visible in Indian Buddhist art and literature.

From 200 B.C.E. to 300 C.E., trade between India and East or Southeast Asia expanded. The Gandhara region became a vital trade hub and the Chinese Silk Route connected India to Central Asia, West Asia and Europe. China primarily exported silk to India, while India sent pearls, coral and fragrances. Maritime trade with Southeast Asia grew, driven by the demand for luxury goods and Indian merchants engaged in bartering with local products. Buddhism further strengthened cultural ties and Indian artifacts have been found across Southeast Asia.

During the Gupta and Harshavardhana periods, India's maritime activity expanded to China and Japan. Indian embassies visited the Chinese court in the 1st and 2nd centuries C. E., contributing to the ongoing exchange of goods and tribute.

Ports like Naura (likely Cranganore), Tyndis, Muziris (near Cranganore), Nelcynda, Bakare and Balita were key trading centers. Muziris, in particular, was a major hub for spice trade, while Bakare and Nelcynda saw a decline in significance over time.

Guilds were crucial socio-economic units in ancient India, centered around shared professional interests. These guilds were integral to trade, production and urban development, as mentioned in texts like the Rig Veda, Ramayana, Mahabharata and Buddhist literature.

Assignments

1. Discuss the major overseas trade routes of ancient India. How did these routes facilitate India's economic and cultural exchanges with the world?
2. Analyse the role of South Indian dynasties (Chera, Chola, Pandya, Pallava) in promoting maritime trade. How did their naval power influence trade relations with Southeast Asia?
3. Examine the archaeological and literary sources that provide evidence of India's overseas maritime trade. How reliable are these sources in reconstructing ancient trade networks?
4. Discuss the trade relations between India and the Roman Empire during ancient times. What commodities were exchanged and how did this trade impact the Indian economy?

5. Evaluate the impact of Indian maritime trade on Southeast Asia in terms of commerce, religion and culture.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

Locating the Transitions in the Medieval Times

BLOCK-02

UNIT 1

Delhi Sultanate and Mughals

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- discuss the significance of India's maritime trade in the Sultanate and Mughal periods
- examine how the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire facilitated trade and economic growth
- evaluate the trade policies of rulers of the Sultanate and Mughal periods

Background

India's strategic location and flourishing maritime trade established it as a pivotal centre in world commerce, linking Europe, Asia and Africa. During the medieval period, Indian merchants dominated trade routes, both over land and across the Indian Ocean. Ports along the western coast, such as Diu, Goa, Calicut, Cochin and Quilon, were vibrant centres of trade activity, facilitating the exchange of commodities like spices, textiles and precious metals. Under the Delhi Sultanate, Sultan Alauddin Khalji and Muhammad bin Tughlaq recognised the significance of trade, constructing extensive road networks and establishing secure trade routes. The acquisition of Gujarat's ports further strengthened maritime trade, allowing India to maintain its role as a leading exporter of textiles, spices and agricultural goods. Similarly, the Mughal Empire upheld this commercial legacy, fostering vibrant trade networks that linked Indian markets with Central Asia, West Asia and beyond.While the Sultans expanded infrastructure and protected trade routes, Mughal policies promoted regional specialisation and urbanisation. This unit we discuss how the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire influenced trade and economic activities.

Keywords

Delhi Sultanate, Mughals, Maritime Trade, Portuguese, Trade Routes, Multan, Caravan Trade.

Discussion

♦ *India dominated ancient sea trade*

In the ancient period, India played a dominant role in maritime trade, connecting Europe, Asia and Africa. Indian merchants built ships, navigated vast seas and controlled major trade routes both by land and sea. This prominence in international commerce continued through medieval and modern times.

♦ *Travellers praised India's trade*

Several foreign travellers have documented India's thriving trade during the medieval period. The Arab traveller Ibn Battuta (1333-46) described the bustling markets of both northern and southern India. While admiring Alexandria's port in Egypt, he remarked that only ports like Quilon and Calicut in Malabar, Sudak in Crimea and Zaytun in China could rival it. The Portuguese writer Barbosa also praised the prosperous ports of Gujarat, Deccan, Malabar and Bengal, highlighting their extensive inland, coastal and overseas trade.

♦ *Western ports led coastal trade*

India's western coast was dotted with numerous ports known for their excellent harbours and active trade. Ports like Diu, Goa, Calicut, Cochin and Quilon were particularly prominent. Malabari merchants dominated trade between Gujarat and Malabar, dealing in commodities such as coconut, cardamom, spices, wax and iron. In return, Malabar imported cotton, grains, horses and carnelians. Coastal trade in Deccan ports was largely managed by both Gujarati and Malabari traders, further emphasising India's commercial strength.

2.1.1 Delhi Sultanate: Promotion of Trade and Oceanic Ventures

♦ *Trade routes expandeda*

The Delhi Sultans played a crucial role in shaping the Indian subcontinent, particularly in defending it against Mongol invasions. Rulers like Alauddin Khalji and Muhammad bin Tughlaq focused on securing borders, which inadvertently led to the expansion of trade routes linking India with China and the Black Sea. Infrastructure saw notable improvements, with key roads maintained to enhance connectivity. Muhammad bin Tughlaq, in particular, constructed vital highways extending from Peshawar to Sonargaon and from Delhi to Daulatabad.

♦ *Mongol raids disrupted land trade*

Trade during this period was dynamic, with Delhi and Multan serving as significant commercial centres. Merchants from Lahore and the Middle East facilitated caravan trade, although frequent Mongol raids disrupted overland commerce. To counter this, the acquisition of Gujarat's ports allowed the Sultans to tap into the Indian Ocean trade network, shifting commerce towards maritime

routes. Alauddin Khalji introduced the position of *malik ul-tujjar,* responsible for overseeing trade activities.

♦ *Gujarat's textiles dominated exports*

India's economy thrived on the export of manufactured goods, especially textiles from Gujarat, which found a strong market in Southeast Asia, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and East Africa. Alongside textiles, agricultural and mineral resources were also traded. In return, India imported spices like cloves and nutmeg from Indonesia, horses from West Asia and precious metals such as silver from the Middle East. Tin from Malaya was a crucial import for local industries.

♦ *Delhi's elite imported luxury textiles*

The Indian Ocean trade network was diverse, involving both essential and luxury goods. Basic commodities like salt, sugar and grains moved alongside high value items such as spices, porcelain, ivory and gemstones. The Indian market also sought out war animals, rare artefacts and medicinal ingredients. By the 14th century, Delhi's elite increasingly demanded luxury textiles, including imports from Europe.

♦ *India traded extensively in coin-age metals*

Before the Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean trade, coinage metals were widely exchanged between western and southern Asia. Southwest India saw a steady influx of Venetian gold coins, Egyptian and Ottoman currencies and Aden's dinars. Silver trade was especially prominent, with the Persian Gulf port of Hormuz channeling wealth into Gujarat and Bengal. During Alauddin Khalji's reign, the conquest of Gujarat resulted in plundering its riches, including the capture of Malik Kafur.

♦ *Gujarat traded extensively with Hormuz*

Cloth remained the dominant trade commodity, with the Malabar Coast exporting teak wood, spices, drugs and luxury items, while importing horses, valuable textiles and metals. By the 14th century, the demand for fine textiles grew among Delhi's nobility, leading to increased imports of European fabrics. Chinese silk and pottery were also prized possessions among the ruling elite. Jewish traders, as recorded in the Cairo Geniza, were actively involved in exporting metal and glass ware. Gujarat maintained strong commercial ties with Hormuz, with the latter balancing trade deficits by sending large quantities of silver and paying for Indian exports with horses.

♦ *Gujarat was a key trade centre*

Gujarat's geographical position made it a crucial trading centre, serving as an outlet for goods from the Indo Gangetic plains and Malwa. It also had strong connections with Malabar, Bengal and Coromandel. However, the region relied on trade to offset its food grain shortages, sourcing supplies from surplus producing areas like Malwa and the northern plains. The accessibility of Gujarat via the Burhanpur-Khandesh and coastal routes strengthened its links to the Deccan.

♦ *Horticulture flourished under Tughlaq rulers*

The 14th century also saw a flourishing of horticulture under rulers like Muhammad bin Tughlaq and Firuz Shah Tughlaq. Firuz Shah established numerous gardens in Delhi, while Sikander Lodi focussed on improving fruit production, particularly pomegranates from Jodhpur. These developments boosted fruit trade and created employment opportunities. Wine production also improved in areas like Meerut and Dholpur.

♦ *Gujarat and Kashmir led in textiles*

India continued to be a major manufacturing centre, supplying goods to both Asian and East African markets. Cities like Multan, Lahore and Khambath emerged as key trade centres, with Gujarat and Bengal excelling in textile production. Cavalry being central to military strategy led to a consistent demand for imported horses. Technological advancements like the spinning wheel and sericulture propelled the textile industry forward. Gujarat was renowned for gold and silver embroidery, while Kashmir became famous for its shawls, both enjoying patronage from the Delhi Sultanate.

♦ *Silk Route remained vital for trade*

The movement of precious metals was evident in the Broach hoard, with a significant number of gold and silver coins originating from the Mamluk and Rasulid kingdoms. Maritime trade expanded, linking India with Southeast Asia and China. The ancient Silk Route, passing through Afghanistan to Indian ports, remained a critical artery for trade. The spread of Brahmanical and Buddhist influences strengthened India's cultural and economic ties with Southeast Asia and the broader Indian Ocean trade network.

2.1.1.1 Domestic Trade

♦ *Turkish rule improved trade*

During the Sultanate era, much like in earlier times, India served as a major hub for manufacturing, supplying goods to various parts of Asia and even neighbouring regions in East Africa. Domestic trade was thriving, backed by a well-organised system. This economic strength stemmed from highly efficient agricultural practices, skilled artisans, a deep-rooted tradition of craftsmanship and an experienced network of traders and financiers. The establishment of Turkish rule in northern India brought greater centralisation, which in turn led to better communication networks, a stable monetary system with silver tankas and copper dirhams and a revitalisation of Indian trade, especially through overland routes connecting Central and West Asia.

Trade within the country can be broadly categorised into local trade — between villages, district markets (*mandis*) and nearby towns — and long-distance trade, linking major urban centres and economic regions. There was also a mid-level trade segment that connected district hubs with metropolitan cities. At the local level, the sale of agricultural produce was crucial, as it helped farmers

pay land revenue and supply food to the growing towns. This task largely fell to the village bania, who also provided essential goods like salt, spices and raw iron for blacksmiths. Occasionally, affluent farmers transported their surplus directly to the *mandis* — a practice that Alauddin Khalji actively promoted to curb hoarding at the village level. In addition to *mandis*, periodic fairs played a key role in the local economy, where livestock was traded, fulfilling essential needs such as farming, transport and dairy production. Although local trade was indispensable to the economy, it did not generate substantial wealth. Traders engaged in it rarely amassed great fortunes and the much criticised village bania likely lived no more lavishly than a prosperous peasant.

♦ *Local trade fuelled daily economy*

On the opposite end of society were wealthy merchants and financiers — sahs, modis and *sarrafs* — who dominated trade. Their business extended across the country, dealing in both large-scale staple goods and high end luxury items sought by the aristocracy in major cities. Essential food products like grains, oil, ghee and pulses were transported from surplus areas to regions facing shortages. For instance, Bengal and Bihar, known for their excess rice and sugar production, supplied these goods to Malabar and Gujarat via sea routes. Similarly, wheat from eastern Uttar Pradesh (Awadh and Kara / Allahabad) was shipped to the Delhi region. However, overland transportation of such bulk goods was costly and was largely handled by banjaras — nomadic traders who travelled with their families and thousands of cattle. It is likely that these operations were funded by the affluent sahs and modis, although detailed records are scarce.

♦ *Rich merchants controlled bulk trade*

Transporting expensive but bulky items, such as fine textiles, was done using horsebacks or bullock carts. These goods moved in large caravans, or tandas, under the protection of hired guards, as highways were notorious for bandits and wild animals. To address these challenges, rulers took measures to improve road infrastructure. One such example was Muhammad bin Tughlaq's construction of a road from Delhi to Deogir, where trees were planted along the route and rest houses (*sarais*) were set up every two miles (karoh) to offer food and shelter. In Bengal, an embankment was built to ensure that sections of the road to Lakhnauti, which would normally be submerged during monsoons, remained usable.

♦ *Caravans carried bulky luxuries*

In terms of long distance trade, apart from essential goods, textiles were a major commodity. Bengal and Deogir were known for producing fine muslin, while Gujarat excelled in high quality fabrics. Horses, both locally bred and imported, were in high demand. Other sought-after items included indigo, spices, perfumes, medicinal products, leather goods and luxurious Kashmiri shawls

♦ *Textiles and horses dominated trade*

and carpets, which found eager buyers in Delhi. Imported wines complemented local varieties produced in Meerut and Aligarh, situated in the Gangetic plain.

When it came to financing trade, the *hundi* system played a crucial role, managed primarily by modis and *sarrafs*. While a formal banking system did not exist, financial transactions were facilitated at different levels — village money lenders (banias) operated at the grassroots, while modis and *sarrafs* handled larger trade networks at the national scale. According to historian K. M. Ashraf, interest rates on loans varied: large sums were lent at a 10% annual rate, whereas smaller amounts attracted a 20% interest.

♦ *Hundis enabled trade financing*

2.1.1.2 Foreign Trade

India had long-standing commercial connections with West Asia, extending further to the Mediterranean, Central Asia, Southeast Asia and China through both land and sea routes. The land routes passed through the Bolan Pass to Herat, the Khyber Pass to Bukhara and Samarkand and via Kashmir to Yarkand and Khotan, facilitating trade with China. These routes were occasionally disrupted by invasions from Central Asian nomadic groups, such as the Huns in the 6th and 7th centuries and the Mongols in the 13th century. Political changes and the rise and fall of empires also influenced the security of these trade paths. However, merchants demonstrated resilience, adapting to challenges and ensuring the continuation of commerce. Nomadic groups, recognising the economic advantages of trade, often chose to regulate and tax it rather than obstruct it. The Mongols, for instance, not only encouraged trade but actively participated in it, dealing in goods like horses, camels, weapons, furs, falcons and musk. Though Sultan Balban faced difficulties in acquiring Central Asian horses due to Mongol interference, this issue seemed temporary, as Alauddin Khalji later encountered no such problem. With the Mongol Empire securing trade routes, exchanges with China and West Asia flourished. While Mongol invasions led to the destruction of key trade centres such as Samarkand and Bukhara, commerce continued to thrive, especially after the Mongols integrated into Islamic culture, further stabilising trade conditions in the 14th century.

♦ *India had vast trade networks*

♦ *Mongols secured and joined trade*

Due to high transportation costs, merchants prioritised lightweight yet valuable goods. Horses were among the most crucial imports into India, particularly for military purposes, as cavalry played a dominant role in warfare. These horses, sourced from Arabia, Iraq and Central Asia, were also symbols of prestige and wealth, making their trade subject to strict regulation by the state. Other key imports included camels, furs, white slaves, velvet, dry fruits and wine. China supplied silk and tea, though silk was also imported from

♦ *Valuable goods prioritised in trade*

Persia, where the Mongols had introduced mulberry cultivation and silk production in the 13th and 14th centuries. Indian exports primarily consisted of cotton textiles, food items like rice, sugar and spices. There was a steady outflow of slaves from India, as demand for them remained significant in the Islamic world.

2.1.2 Inland and Oceanic Trade

During the medieval period, Multan emerged as the key hub for overland trade with India. In contrast, Lahore, which had suffered devastation at the hands of the Mongols in 1241, remained in decline until the rule of Muhammad Tughlaq. Multan also served as the primary gateway for foreign traders, commonly referred to as Khurasanis. Although their exact numbers are uncertain, they seemed to possess less wealth compared to the Multanis. On the other hand, foreign merchants, particularly Arabs, were more engaged in maritime trade along the coasts of Gujarat and Malabar. Indian traders, including Hindus (notably Agrawals and Maheshwaris), Jains and Bohras, also played a significant role in commerce, with many establishing trade settlements across West and Southeast Asia. Bengal actively participated in trade with China and Southeast Asian nations, exporting textiles and importing luxury goods like silk and spices. The Chinese traveller Ma Huan, who visited Bengal in the early 15th century, observed that many affluent individuals constructed ships and ventured abroad for trade.

♦ *Multan led overland trade*

2.1.2.1 Inland Trade

The Ghaznavid invasions initially disrupted Indian trade, but after Mas'ud took the throne in 1030, plundering as a primary revenue source was replaced by taxation from local rulers. Over time, structured fiscal policies, such as the *kharaj* (land tax), were introduced. While early Sultans compensated their officials with revenue assignments *(iqta)*, direct monetary taxation became more evident under Alauddin Khalji (1296-1316).

♦ *Land tax and monetary reforms*

Despite the invasions, the Ghaznavid rulers inherited a relatively stable economy in northwestern India. This stability was reflected in the continued use of regional coinage, shaped by the interests of trading communities. Ghaznavid Lahore flourished culturally, with royal patronage supporting Muslim poets and Sufi scholars, indicating a growing Muslim presence by the late 11th century.

♦ *Stable economy and regional coinage*

By the late 15th century, the political landscape had drastically changed. Bengal and Gujarat ceased sending revenues to the central authority and the Lodis struggled to extend their influence in the South. Scholars debate whether political fragmentation disrupted inland trade routes or if trade remained largely unaffected. Some

♦ *Trade persisted despite instability*

argue that road insecurity hindered commerce, while others believe the Lodi Sultans were financially stable due to their political gains rather than reliance on trade. Nevertheless, while trade may have been impacted, it was not entirely halted. Instead of engaging in this debate, the focus here will be on inland and overland trade routes during the Delhi Sultanate period.

Inland Trade Routes

♦ *Currency circulation increased market activity*

During medieval times, a network of caravan routes emerged, converging at key trade centres like Pulicat and Hugli along the Coromandel and Bengal coasts, as well as at major imperial capitals such as Delhi and Vijayanagara. Under the rule of the Delhi Sultanate, the demand for goods in urban centres fuelled a thriving inland trade system. The increasing use of currency further enabled a steady flow of goods and services, as city dwellers had the means to purchase a variety of products.

♦ *Inland trade ranged in scale*

This inland trade functioned at two levels: (a) a short distance exchange between villages and towns for everyday commodities and (b) a long distance trade between towns involving high value goods. Delhi, for instance, relied on grain supplies from Doab, eastern Rajasthan and Amroha in the Trans-Ganga region. High quality rice came from Sirsa in Haryana, while wheat, rice and sugar were sourced from Kara and Manikpur on opposite sides of the Ganga River. Sugar also arrived from Kanauj (Habib, 2011:127). Meanwhile, distilled wine was transported from Aligarh and Meerut to Delhi. The capital was also linked to far-off trading hubs like Dhar in Malwa, while textiles made their way from regions such as Gola (modern day Rohilkhand), Nagaur, Devagiri and Awadh (Ayodhya). Towns often had overlapping trade zones, as seen in Multan, which sourced sugar from Lahore and Delhi and ghee from Sirsa.

♦ *Land routes complemented sea trade*

Despite the expansion of inter-oceanic trade, caravan routes remained vital due to their cost-effectiveness and accessibility to remote areas. Rather than competing with maritime trade, these land routes complemented it, connecting market towns and administrative centres with coastal regions and broader trading networks. This growing system of trade ensured that small scale peddlers continued to have a role in the market, alongside affluent merchants. The increasing integration of regional economies, specialisation of production and division of labour point to the early stages of a more synchronised and interdependent commercial system.

Since ancient times, India and Central Asia have been linked through extensive and winding caravan trade routes. These land

routes connected northern India with Afghanistan, Turkestan, Khurasan, western Iran, Iraq and the Levant. However, the nature of these trade networks evolved over different historical periods. By the late 14th century, the decline of the linen industries in Egypt and Syria, which had been significant textile exporters to Islamic and Mediterranean markets, led to the expansion of textile production in South Asia. This shift in manufacturing contributed to the revival of trade networks, particularly in the eastern Indian Ocean, which will be explored later. The emergence of ports along the Malay Peninsula also highlights the growing maritime connections between the Indian Ocean coastal regions and their inland trade routes. Precious metals and simple currency flowed into the region via these caravan routes in exchange for textiles from Punjab and various goods from the Indo-Gangetic plains.

♦ *Caravan links spanned vast regions*

The medieval caravan trade was influenced by fluctuations in international commerce and shifts in bullion movement from Europe to the East. A notable trading hub that impacted the flow of precious metals into the Indian subcontinent was Qus, a town along the Levantine trade route. The annual Damascus pilgrimage caravan transported goods overland to Mecca and Aden, running parallel to maritime trade routes. Armenian and Italian merchants, operating under Mongol protection, were actively engaged in commerce along the caravan highways that connected Trebizond and Tabriz via the Persian Gulf. Indian traders also played a significant role in these exchanges, competing with merchants from various regions. The primary goods transported along these routes included spices, perfumes and indigo, which were exchanged for horses, textiles, gold, silver and other luxury commodities. The influx of precious metals had a direct impact on coin production under the Delhi Sultanate. Some of these metals reached the subcontinent through tribute payments from regions such as Bengal. Historical records suggest that during the late 15th century, indigo and cotton textiles from India were supplied to Bursa, an Ottoman city, alongside bullion shipments that later found their way into South India and the Deccan. These riches were eventually seized during the military campaigns of Alauddin Khalji and Muhammad Tughlaq.

♦ *International trade shaped bullion flow*

The prominence of caravan trade in the medieval economy highlights its integral role in the international exchange network and its susceptibility to economic shifts. Alongside these land-based trade routes, inland waterways also served as crucial channels for transporting goods, though their use was often dictated by seasonal variations. Domestic trade operated on multiple levels, including transactions between villages, marketplaces (*mandis*) and district towns. Agricultural produce was typically sold to fulfil land tax obligations and sustain urban populations. Village traders, known

♦ *Trade relied on land and water*

as banias, facilitated local trade by supplying farmers with essential goods such as salt, spices and raw iron for blacksmithing. To curb hoarding, Alauddin Khalji implemented policies to encourage market exchanges at the village level. Fairs complemented the mandi system, acting as temporary trade hubs. In Multan, a significant portion of goods was either redistributed to other regions or received from Delhi for further trade.

Merchants and Commodities of Trade

♦ *Caravan routes linked major centres*

During the Delhi Sultanate, the mercantile community comprised various groups, each with distinct roles. Barani, in *Tarikh-i Firuzshahi,* described different types of traders, including karwaniyan (grain merchants split into transporters and market traders), baqqalan (often referring to members of the baniya community), zargaran (likely from Central Asia), sahan (wealthy merchants), muhtakiran (hoarders) and bazariyan (shopkeepers). Other merchant groups included Multaniyan (large-scale moneylenders), dallalan (brokers skilled in trades like horses and cattle), kisahdaran (moneylenders involved in horse trading), mihtaran (renowned traders) and sarrafan (goldsmiths who also acted as money changers and lenders). Among the key trade routes, the Multan - Quetta route connected India to Central Asia, Afghanistan and Persia, making Multan a vital commercial hub from as early as the 11th century. The Multani merchants, primarily Hindus fluent in Persian, had a strong presence in Muslim ruled regions, benefiting from their cultural adaptability.

♦ *Delhi relied on distant supplies*

Grain trade was among the most significant, dominated by karwanis and saudagaran-i bazari, who often hoarded supplies to maximise profits. Barani criticised these practices, particularly during crises like Mongol invasions (1299, 1303) and the famine of 1309 when traders drove up prices. To curb such exploitation, Alauddin Khalji introduced strict market regulations. He compelled grain traders to settle along the Yamuna and sell surplus grain at state controlled prices. Market regulations extended to other goods, with a designated official, *Shahnah-i Mandi*, ensuring compliance. Merchants dealing in textiles faced similar restrictions, as they had to store goods in state warehouses and sell them at fixed prices. Loans were given to Multani merchants to bring cloth to the capital at controlled prices, benefiting the nobility. These stringent policies temporarily dismantled trade monopolies, but after Alauddin's death, merchants resumed their earlier practices, leading to price increases under later rulers like Muhammad Tughlaq.

The military's reliance on cavalry made horse trading a highly profitable business. Horses and slaves were among the most prized

assets, often presented as gifts in the Sultan's court. Shihabuddin al-Umari recorded that Ali bin Mansur al-Uqaili, an Arab merchant from Bahrain, supplied horses to Muhammad Tughlaq. Brokers played a crucial role in horse trading due to the expertise needed to evaluate breeds. Elephant trade, however, was exclusively controlled by the Sultan, with elephants obtained as war spoils or imported from regions like Africa and Ceylon. The Delhi Sultanate also thrived on the slave trade, with rulers supporting and facilitating it. Sultan Firuz Shah, for instance, was said to have owned an astonishing 180,000 slaves, as noted by historian Afif.

♦ *Caravan routes supported coastal links*

2.1.2.2 Oceanic Trading Network

Trade in the Indian Ocean has a long history, with India playing a crucial role due to its strategic location between West Asia and Southeast Asia. The country's vast economic resources allowed it to supply a diverse range of goods at competitive prices, including agricultural products like rice, sugar and oil, as well as raw materials such as cotton and indigo. While much of this trade occurred along the coastline, the interior regions provided a steady flow of goods, leading to the development of key trading hubs near major maritime centres.

♦ *India connected Asia's trade routes*

Ancient sources like Strabo and Arrian document that Indian traders imported goods such as wool, brass, lead, tin, glassware and wine from Egypt and other regions, while exporting valuable commodities like spices, diamonds, pearls, silk and perfumes. The high regard for Indian gemstones is also confirmed by Roman legal records, which listed taxable Indian goods. Gujarat, in particular, emerged as a central trading point from the Chalukya era onward, serving as a key link between Europe and Southeast Asia. By the 15th century, trade in the Indian Ocean became more segmented, with Arab traders primarily managing exchanges between West Asia and India's western coast, while Indian merchants dominated commerce in the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Bay of Bengal, extending to Malacca. This network thrived on strong financial and credit systems, a robust agricultural base and a well-organised market structure.

♦ *India imported and exported diverse goods*

The prosperity of these trading centres led to wealth accumulation, with Gujarati merchants gaining substantial economic influence. Gujarat's ports played a vital role in early commercial capitalism, fostering market growth, monetisation and urban development. The region was known for its fertile land and agricultural abundance. Historical accounts highlight the variety of food grains, fruits and spices grown there, contributing to self-sufficiency and export trade. Crops like millet, paddy and cotton thrived, while fruits such as mangoes, melons and pears were widely cultivated. Gujarat's

♦ *Gujarati merchants grew economically powerful*

natural beauty, with its verdant landscapes and shady tree lined roads, was well documented by European travellers.

♦ *Indigo was Gujarat's prized export*

One of Gujarat's most significant exports was indigo, a highly valued dye sought after in European and Asian markets. Produced through a specialised process, indigo was considered a premium commodity. The region's rich biodiversity not only sustained its people but also fuelled a thriving trade economy, making it a key player in the broader commercial landscape of the Indian Ocean.

Oceanic Trade Route

♦ *Ports connected to Persian Gulf*

The west coast of India, stretching from Sindh to Malabar, was a significant hub for maritime trade, connecting to the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and East Africa. Key ports in the Persian Gulf included Hormuz and Basra, while Aden, Mocha and Jedda served as vital links along the Red Sea. Before the 13th century, Qays played a dominant role in the region and housed a thriving colony of Gujarati Bohra traders. However, as Qays declined, Hormuz took its place as a major trading centre. Marco Polo, who visited in 1295, noted Qays as a key hub for exporting Persian horses to India. Indian goods transported through these Persian Gulf and Red Sea ports reached Damascus and Europe, with Aleppo and Alexandria serving as crucial Mediterranean transit points. Gujarat and Malabar ports had strong connections with the ports of Malacca Strait and Achin.

♦ *Ports in Gujarat, Sind and Malabar.*

On India's west coast, significant trading ports included Cambay and its satellite ports, Gandhar and Ghoga, in Gujarat. In Sind, Dabhol and later Lahari Bandar played prominent roles, while Quilon and Calicut were major commercial centres in Malabar. Due to its strategic maritime position, the ruler of Calicut, known as the Zamorin, earned the title "Samudri Raja" (King of the Sea). Aden served as the key gateway for East African trade, with goods transported from there to the port of Ayzab. From Ayzab, camel caravans carried merchandise to key Egyptian markets in Qus and Fustat. By the mid 14th century, however, Ayzab declined, leading to the rise of the Aden-Jedda-Tur trade route. Meanwhile, along the South Arabian coast, ports such as Ash-Shihr and Dhofar became notable centres for the trade of horses and honey, while Malabar supplied them with rice.

On India's eastern coast, the Bay of Bengal, spanning from Coromandel to Bengal, formed a crucial link to Southeast Asian trade. This route connected South China and the Indonesian Archipelago through the Malacca Strait. Trade in this region was not one sided; large Chinese ships, or "janks," frequently arrived on the Malabar coast, while Gujarati merchants transported Chinese goods to India's west coast. Unlike the westward trade, which had

multiple transit points, commerce with China was more direct, allowing vessels to sail freely. However, after Admiral Zheng He's historic voyages between 1405 and 1433, during which he travelled via Champa, Java, Sumatra and Calicut, China's naval expeditions abruptly ended under the Ming rulers. As a result, Chinese ships visiting Indian ports became less frequent, a trend further exacerbated by the arrival of the Portuguese. Important intermediate ports between India's west coast and South China included Champa, Java and Sumatra, while Hangzhou (Zaitun) stood out as a major port in South China. In addition to overseas trade, coastal commerce thrived along the Indian coastline, linking Sind, Gujarat, Malabar, Coromandel and Bengal, forming an extensive network that sustained inland and oceanic trade.

♦ *Zheng He's voyages impacted trade*

2.1.3 Mughals

Trade played a crucial role in sustaining urban centres, with villages supplying food grains and raw materials like cotton and indigo to towns. Village merchants and nomadic traders, known as banjaras, facilitated this exchange, transporting goods to local markets (*mandis*) in towns and large villages. These markets not only served as selling points for villagers but also provided access to essential commodities like salt, spices and metal goods. Wealthier villagers indulged in luxuries such as fine clothing and jewelry.

♦ *Villages supplied goods to towns*

Inter-regional trade thrived due to regional specialisation, particularly in luxury goods. The banjaras, known for their large caravans, carried bulk commodities like grains, pulses and salt over long distances. While oxen were the primary means of land transport, boats and coastal routes were preferred for bulkier goods due to lower costs.

♦ *Regional specialisation fuelled trade*

Bengal was known for its rice, sugar and fine muslin, while the Coromandel coast emerged as a textile hub trading actively with Gujarat. Gujarat, a key port for foreign goods, exported textiles and imported food grains and spices. North India traded indigo and food grains while importing luxury goods. Lahore was renowned for its handicrafts and served as a hub for Kashmir's prized shawls and carpets. The Punjab and Sindh regions maintained strong trade connections with Kabul, Qandhar, Delhi and Agra, highlighting an extensive and interconnected trade network.

♦ *Punjab and Sindh maintained strong trade ties*

India had a thriving trade system that included both high-end and everyday goods, with Agra and Burhanpur serving as key hubs in northern India. However, by the 18th century, Banaras gained prominence as Agra's influence declined. Lahore had the advantage of utilising the Indus River for trade, while Delhi and Agra were linked by the Jamuna. The trade routes facilitated the movement of

♦ *Lahore had Indus River trade advantage*

silk and fine cotton textiles from Bengal to northern India, while Gujarat supplied specialised cotton fabrics.

♦ *Intermediaries connected wholesalers and merchants*

Trade was not limited to luxury items; a well-structured system connected wholesalers to merchants, extending to local levels through intermediaries like agents and commission brokers. When Dutch and English traders arrived in Gujarat in the 17th century, they observed Indian merchants as highly skilled and competitive, quickly responding to demand fluctuations across regions.

♦ *Road networks supported trade infrastructure*

Road networks played a crucial role in supporting trade, with successive rulers working to enhance connectivity since the time of Sher Shah. The infrastructure compared well to European standards, with rest houses established at regular intervals along major routes. Various means of transport were used, including ox-drawn carts, camels and pack-oxen, while horses and palanquins provided more comfortable travel options.

♦ *Sarrafs managed currency and credit*

A robust financial system further supported commerce, allowing money to be transferred efficiently across regions through *hundis* — credit instruments that could be encashed after a set period. These *hundis* often included insurance costs based on factors such as transport method and destination. Money changers or *sarrafs*, played a dual role by managing currency exchange and handling *hundis*, effectively operating as private bankers. They not only safeguarded the wealth of nobles but also provided credit to traders, reducing the risks of transporting large sums of money. Prominent traders, like Virji Vohra, established networks of agency houses across key trading centres, including Burhanpur, Golconda, Agra and coastal ports in West Asia and Southeast Asia. The hundi system was so prevalent that in Ahmedabad, merchants relied almost entirely on these instruments for financial transactions. Even nobles used them to pay soldiers, underscoring their integral role in India's economic framework.

2.1.3.1 Foreign Trade

♦ *Portuguese aimed to control trade*

Before the Portuguese arrival at the end of the 15th century, trade in Asia, particularly maritime trade, followed a well-established pattern. The Portuguese attempted to assert control over this trade through military force, aiming to monopolise key commodities like spices, horses and weaponry while limiting the involvement of Muslim and Arab merchants. However, their success was only partial. By the mid-16th century, a form of compromise had emerged between the Portuguese and Asian traders. Acknowledging Portuguese naval dominance, local merchants were required to obtain special passes, known as *cartaz*, in exchange for paying duties at Portuguese controlled ports. These passes were issued freely,

leading to a situation where the Portuguese primarily functioned as customs collectors, with revenue from these duties becoming a crucial aspect of their enterprise. Ultimately, their presence did little to disrupt the traditional trade networks.

♦ *European companies boosted trade*

From the mid-16th to the mid-18th century, India's overseas trade experienced significant growth, both in terms of the volume of goods transported and the expansion into previously under-utilised regions. This growth was influenced in part by the arrival of European trading companies, particularly the Dutch, English and later the French, while others, such as the Austrian, German and Danish companies, had a lesser impact. Additionally, the emergence of three powerful Asian empires — the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal — contributed to the expansion of commerce. The Ming dynasty in China also played a role. These empires fostered stability, promoted economic growth and encouraged urbanisation and monetisation. However, alongside these economic advancements, political conflicts arose, with struggles over trade and control of trade routes shaping regional power dynamics.

Role of the Foreign Trading Companies

♦ *Operated as joint stock firms*

The Dutch and English trading companies ventured into India in the early 1600s, with the French following later that century. Their arrival underscored India's significance in Asian commerce and reflected Europe's growing demand for goods like spices, which promised substantial profits. Unlike the Portuguese, whose operations were tightly controlled by their monarchy, the Dutch and English companies operated as joint stock enterprises, resembling early multinational corporations with extensive global trade networks. This structure granted them more autonomy, though they still relied on governmental support, particularly for military backing, as their success was crucial to their home economies.

♦ *Used force to gain monopolies*

Despite their structural differences, European trading companies shared similar objectives and strategies. They sought to dominate trade by securing monopolies and using naval force to suppress competition. They also leveraged military power to extract favourable trade privileges from local rulers, often sidelining native merchants. The European preference for free trade emerged only after they had established dominance in the region.

♦ *Dutch captured Amboina in 1605*

Initially, both the Dutch and English focused on Java and Sumatra, aiming to control the lucrative spices trade. From the late 1500s, they dispatched expeditions to the East Indies and the Dutch soon gained the upper hand over the Portuguese, capturing the fort of Amboina in 1605. However, it took decades to fully expel the Portuguese influence.

♦ *Pulicat became Dutch trade base*

Recognising India's crucial role in sustaining trade with the spice islands, the Dutch prioritised establishing a presence on the Coromandel Coast. The region produced highly sought-after textiles, which were exchanged for spices in the East Indies due to the islands' limited monetisation. In 1606, the Dutch secured permission from Golconda's ruler to set up a trading post in Masulipatam, enjoying tax concessions. Later, they expanded their operations with similar privileges from Vijayanagar and local Nayak rulers, ultimately making Pulicat their key base. This area was a major hub for cotton textile production, essential for their trade in the East Indies.

♦ *Roe secured English trading rights*

The Dutch faced strong resistance from the Portuguese when they attempted to expand their trade into Gujarat. Initially, Indian merchants, who had an arrangement with the Portuguese, were hesitant to support them. However, when the Portuguese tried to impose a blockade on Surat, both the Mughal authorities and Indian traders welcomed the Dutch as a counterforce. Around the same time, the English, who had recently defeated the Portuguese in a naval battle near Surat, also gained acceptance. The Dutch established a factory in Surat in 1617, while the English had set up theirs earlier, in 1613. It was Sir Thomas Roe, serving as an ambassador at Jahangir's court, who secured an official decree in 1618 solidifying English trading rights.

♦ *Dutch captured key Portuguese ports*

The Dutch were focused on overthrowing Portuguese dominance in Asian trade, particularly in spices. Their strategy involved capturing key locations such as Malacca in 1641, Colombo in 1655-56 and Cochin by 1663. To weaken Portuguese control over trade routes in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, the Dutch blockaded Goa for a decade from 1663. Meanwhile, tensions between the Dutch and English escalated in the East Indies, culminating in the 1623 Amboina Massacre, where ten English traders were executed. This incident forced the English to shift their focus to India and the Persian Gulf. In 1622, a joint Anglo-Persian force expelled the Portuguese from Hormuz, redirecting trade to Bandar Abbas. As a result, Indian traders benefited, no longer needing Portuguese trade passes. By the end of the century, Portuguese influence in overseas trade had significantly diminished, with their presence limited to Goa, Daman and Diu.

With the Dutch dominating the spice trade, the English sought new opportunities by exporting indigo and Indian textiles to Europe. Indigo, primarily sourced from Gujarat, Bayana and the Coromandel coast, was a superior and cost-effective dye compared to woad, which had been traditionally used in Europe. However, by the 18th century, competition from West Indian and Spanish

American exports affected its profitability. Indian textiles became the most significant export item, particularly the white fabrics and painted calicoes of Gujarat, which found markets in North Africa, the Levant and the West African slave market. By the late 17th century, demand had expanded to luxury textiles such as Bengal muslins and Coromandel chintz. The export of textiles by the English East India Company surged from 750,000 pieces in 1664 to 1.5 million within two decades, making up 83% of their foreign trade. The Dutch East India Company also saw significant growth, exporting over a million pieces by the late 1600s. Initially, Gujarat dominated textile exports, but by 1660, Coromandel had surpassed it, followed by Bengal and Orissa. The rising popularity of Indian fabrics disrupted the European linen and wool industries, leading to protectionist measures in Britain, such as high import duties and even bans on painted cloth. Despite these restrictions, white Indian calicoes continued to flood the market, reaching two million pieces by 1720. Eventually, this competition pushed Britain towards industrial innovation, laying the groundwork for the Industrial Revolution.

♦ *Indian textiles dominated English trade*

Apart from textiles, the English also expanded the export of raw silk from Kasimbazar, challenging the silk industries of Persia, Italy and France. By the 18th century, silk had become one of the most profitable exports after textiles. Another key export was salt petre, an essential ingredient for European munitions and artillery. It was primarily sourced from Bihar, East U. P. and Gujarat and also served as ballast for ships bound for Europe.

♦ *Silk, saltpetre were vital exports*

By the late 17th century, European trading companies had spread their networks across India, reaching markets from Multan and Lahore via the Indus River. Their rapid penetration was facilitated not only by their strategic planning and support from Indian rulers but also by India's well-developed financial and transport systems. European traders could easily move goods and money, as well as secure loans when needed. However, since there was minimal demand for European goods in India — aside from certain metals and spices — the balance of trade was largely paid for in gold and silver. This was possible due to the influx of precious metals from the Americas, particularly through the Spanish. Some European thinkers viewed this as giving Europe a strategic advantage in Asia, though at the time, many mercantilists criticised the outflow of gold and silver. The Dutch, with revenues from their East Indies colonies, had an edge over the English in financing their trade. Recognising this disadvantage, English officials in India emphasised the need for territorial control to secure a steady revenue stream, as reflected in a letter from Sir Joshua Child to the Madras Council.

♦ *English aimed for territorial revenue*

♦ *Trade turned into colonial conquest*

Unlike native Indian merchants, European trading companies were unwilling to operate under local trade regulations. They sought to convert their trading posts into fortified settlements, giving them autonomy and leverage over regional rulers. This approach led to conflicts, such as the Portuguese confrontation with Shah Jahan in Hugli (1633) and the English clash with Aurangazeb in 1687. However, mere fortifications were not enough — both the English and French harbored ambitions of territorial expansion to finance their trade. They saw an opportunity when the Mughal Empire began to decline, using political rivalries among regional rulers to intervene in Indian affairs. Ultimately, European trading companies did not just facilitate commerce — they became instruments of colonial conquest, not only in India but throughout Asia.

Summarised Overview

India's maritime trade played a significant role in connecting Europe, Asia and Africa, with merchants controlling major trade routes. Ports like Quilon, Calicut and Gujarat prospered, engaging in extensive inland, coastal and overseas trade. The Delhi Sultanate promoted trade by expanding infrastructure and maintaining key roads. Under rulers like Alauddin Khalji and Muhammad bin Tughlaq, Gujarat's ports were integrated into the Indian Ocean trade network, exporting textiles, agricultural products and minerals. While internal trade was driven by agricultural surplus, India also imported luxury items like horses, spices and precious metals.

The Delhi Sultanate established effective administrative systems that boosted trade. Trade centres such as Delhi, Multan and Gujarat flourished, with merchants and financiers playing crucial roles. Alauddin Khalji introduced market regulations to prevent hoarding and maintain fair prices. Gujarat emerged as a dominant commercial hub, acting as an outlet for goods from Malwa and northern India. Despite challenges like Mongol invasions, India's robust economic networks ensured continued prosperity. The introduction of coinage systems and efficient road networks further facilitated commerce.

The Mughal period witnessed the expansion of domestic and foreign trade, supported by improved infrastructure and administrative policies. Agra, Delhi and Lahore emerged as major centres, with specialised goods like textiles from Bengal and Gujarat enjoying high demand. The introduction of European trading companies, including the Portuguese, Dutch and English, reshaped trade dynamics. While the Portuguese initially attempted to dominate maritime trade, the Dutch and English established trading posts and secured favourable agreements with local rulers. The exchange of textiles, indigo and spices with Europe brought significant revenue. Despite facing competition, Indian merchants maintained a strong presence in regional and international markets, contributing to the vibrant commercial landscape during the Mughal era.

Assignments

1. Discuss the significance of India's maritime trade during the medieval period.
2. Explain how the Delhi Sultans promoted trade and oceanic ventures. What measures did Alauddin Khalji and Muhammad bin Tughlaq take to support trade expansion?
3. Analyse the impact of Mongol invasions on India's trade routes. How did the shift towards maritime trade benefit the Delhi Sultanate?
4. Examine the influence of Portuguese, Dutch and English trading companies on the Mughal economy. How did their presence alter traditional trade practices?
5. Discuss how trade networks, both inland and overseas, contributed to the economic prosperity of the Mughal Empire.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

UNIT 2

Trade Networks and Institutions

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- analyse the contributions of the Delhi Sultans and Mughals in expanding trade networks
- evaluate the use of financial instruments - *hundis* and the evolution of credit systems that supported extensive domestic and international trade
- examine the insurance practices adopted by merchants to mitigate trade risks, including inland and maritime insurance systems
- discuss the socio-economic impact of trade networks on urbanisation

Background

India's role as a major centre for trade and commerce continued to flourish during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal periods. The Sultanate rulers established significant inland and oceanic trade networks, connecting India with Central Asia, West Asia and East Africa. Ports along the western coast, including Gujarat and Malabar, became thriving centres of maritime trade. Improved infrastructure, centralised administration and the introduction of stable currencies further facilitated domestic and international commerce. Additionally, the use of financial instruments like *hundis* streamlined trade, while institutions such as sarais and market towns supported the movement of goods and merchants.

During the Mughal era, nobles and princes actively invested in oceanic trade, contributing to the expansion of commercial activities. The development of specialised regional markets, a robust network of roads and an efficient banking system played a significant role in promoting trade. Nobles often financed large scale ventures and collaborated with traders to maximise their wealth through overseas commerce. This unit explores how the economic policies and investments of the Delhi Sultans and Mughal nobility shaped trade networks.

Keywords

Trade Networks, Bankers, Financiers, Insurance, Brokers, Sarraff, Bima, Hundi system, Sarais Thanas, Qasbas, Urbanisation.

Discussion

2.2.1 Trade Networks

♦ *Trade boosted by centralisation*

During the Sultanate period, as in earlier times, India continued to serve as the manufacturing hub for Asia and neighbouring regions of East Africa, supported by a vibrant and well established domestic trade network. This prominent position was underpinned by highly productive agriculture, skilled artisans, robust manufacturing traditions and an experienced class of traders and financiers. The centralisation under Turkish rule in north India contributed to the growth of towns and the expansion of a monetary economy. Improved communication systems, a stable currency based on the silver tanka and copper dirham and the revival of overland trade with Central and West Asia further strengthened India's commercial standing.

♦ *Local trade connected villages*

Domestic trade during the Sultanate period was divided into local and long distance trade. Local trade connected villages with nearby markets (*mandis*) and district towns. It primarily involved selling crops to pay land revenue and supply the growing urban population. Village traders, known as banias, managed this exchange and provided essentials like salt, spices and raw iron. Wealthier farmers sometimes sold surplus produce directly at the *mandis*. Alauddin Khalji promoted these markets to prevent hoarding. While local trade was essential for the economy, it did not generate significant wealth for most traders.

♦ *Wealthy traders dominated commerce*

Long distance trade during the Sultanate period was dominated by wealthy traders and financiers like sahs, modis and *sarrafs*. They managed the transport of bulk commodities across regions, as well as luxury goods for the urban nobility. Surplus products such as rice and sugar from Bengal and Bihar were shipped to Malabar and Gujarat, while wheat from eastern Uttar Pradesh was transported to Delhi. Overland transport was costly and often handled by Banjaras using large caravans of bullocks, likely financed by wealthy merchants. High-value textiles were carried on horses or in bullock carts, with caravans guarded by hired soldiers for protection from threats like wild animals and bandits.

♦ *Towns relied on village trade*

During the Mughal period, towns heavily relied on the inter-local trade of food grains, often facilitated by Banjaras and village banias. Along with food, villages supplied raw materials like cotton and indigo for urban industries. *Mandis* and larger market villages, called katras, served as key trading hubs where villagers exchanged surplus produce for essential goods like salt, spices and metal work.

♦ *Banjaras led bulk transport*

During the Mughal period, regional specialisation in various products, including luxury goods, encouraged significant intra-regional trade. As in the Sultanate era, Banjaras played a key role in overland trade, primarily transporting bulk commodities like food grains, pulses, ghee and salt. These nomadic tribes travelled long distances with their families, often using thousands of oxen. Some caravans, comprising up to 30,000 bullocks, were even escorted by state forces to supply armies. More valuable items, such as textiles and silks, were carried on camels, mules or carts. However, transporting bulk goods by waterways was more economical. Boat traffic on rivers and coastal trade routes was well developed, making water transport a preferred choice for heavier cargo.

♦ *Intermediaries linked trade networks*

India's inter-regional trade was not limited to luxury goods. It operated through an extensive network connecting wholesalers to merchants at regional and local levels. This system was facilitated by intermediaries such as agents (gumashtas) and commission agents (dalals), ensuring the smooth movement of goods across regions.

♦ *Sarais aided long travel*

Inland trade during the Sultanate and Mughal periods was supported by an expanding network of roads, continuously improved by various rulers. Muhammad Tughlaq, for instance, constructed a road from Delhi to Deogir, while Sher Shah Suri took significant steps to enhance road connectivity. Roads were often lined with trees for shade and rest stations known as sarais were established every couple of miles, providing food and shelter to travellers. During the Mughal era, these facilities were further developed, with sarais spaced every eight to ten miles on major routes. European travellers like Tavernier compared these accommodations favourably to those in France and Italy. Transport relied mainly on oxen, carts and camels, with horses used for personal travel. Wealthier travellers often used palanquins, carried by teams of servants, covering distances of up to 20 or 30 miles a day, though a typical day's journey averaged around 8 to 12 miles.

♦ *Hundis enabled money transfer*

The movement of goods in India was supported by a well developed financial system that enabled the easy transfer of money across regions. Central to this system were *hundis*, a form of credit note payable at a discount after a specified period. These often included insurance *(bima)* with rates varying based on factors like the value of goods, destination and mode of transport. *Sarrafs* (money changers) played a significant role in handling *hundis*, functioning similarly to private bankers by accepting deposits from nobles and providing loans to traders.

Through *hundis*, they created credit that supplemented the cash

in circulation, facilitating both domestic and international trade. Prominent merchants like Virji Vohra established agency houses in major Indian cities such as Burhanpur, Golconda and Agra, as well as in ports across West Asia, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and Southeast Asia. The use of hundis was so prevalent that in markets like Ahmedabad, most transactions and payments were settled using them. Even nobles used *hundis* to pay soldiers' salaries, reducing the risks associated with physically transporting money.

♦ *Credit backed trade expansion*

2.2.1.1 Hundis

In Mughal India, long before inland bills became legal in England in 1672, various types of bills of exchange, known as *hundis*, were widely used in the credit market. The term 'hundi' originates from the Sanskrit word 'hundika,' with references dating back to 914 CE. These were paper documents, typically written in Hindi or other Indian languages, promising the payment of a specified sum at a designated location, either immediately *(darshani hundi)* or after a set period *(miyadi hundi)*. Unlike their European counterparts, which were initially used for currency exchange, *hundis* in India served as a secure means of transferring money and extending credit.

♦ *Used for credit and remittance*

To avoid the risk of carrying cash over long distances, individuals would deposit money with a *sarraf* (money changer) and receive a *hundi*. Upon presenting the document at the intended destination, the amount would be paid by the *sarraf's* agent *(gumashta)*. In many cases, these *hundis* functioned like modern travellers' cheques, often carried personally or sent via a messenger (qasid). According to Abul Fazl, no seal or witness was necessary for these transactions, demonstrating the system's reliability and the merchants' trust in it.

♦ *Sarrafs ensured safe transactions*

Historian Sujan Rai Bhandari, writing around 1695-96, also detailed the use of *hundis*, emphasising the role of *sarrafs* in facilitating remittances. His accounts noted the negotiability of these documents, which could be sold at a slight discount, turning them into a flexible credit instrument. European merchants, including the English East India Company, heavily relied on *hundis* to transfer funds across regions and support their factories. Records show Armenian traders also used *hundis* for financial mobility, travelling with minimal cash while keeping their capital in circulation.

♦ *Hundis were negotiable i nstruments*

The Mughal state used *hundis* for administrative purposes, transferring resources between the central treasury and regional offices. For instance, Akbar used *hundis* to send amounts ranging from 50 rupees to 3 lakh rupees to the Deccan. Beyond remittances, these documents also served as short term credit instruments. Merchants could draw *hundis* for immediate funds, which the

♦ *Hundis offered short-term credit*

sarrafs would discount at a rate influenced by market conditions. On occasions, members of the Mughal elite acted as lenders by discounting merchants' *hundis*.

♦ *Rates varied with instability*

Hundis also facilitated commercial transactions. In the Deccan, diamond buyers often used them for payment. English merchants frequently settled transport costs and local purchases through *hundis* issued by their factories. The exchange rate, representing the actual price paid for a *hundi,* was influenced by factors like the origin, destination and duration of the document. While generally stable during Mughal rule, the rates fluctuated due to political instability, especially after Aurangzeb's death. In 1720, a bill from Surat to Agra incurred a 10-15% discount.

♦ *Hundis boosted financial integration*

Despite these challenges, the extensive use of *hundis* enabled the sarrafs to finance large scale inland commerce and international trade. By offering credit and ensuring the fluid movement of capital, they significantly contributed to the financial integration of India's vast commercial networks during the Mughal era.

2.2.1.2 Insurance Practices in Medieval India

♦ *Merchants used risk sharing partnerships*

In medieval India, merchants and bankers were well aware of the challenges and uncertainties that came with long distance trade and travel. To protect their capital and goods, they adopted various risk sharing strategies. One of the earliest and simplest forms of risk management involved partnerships, where multiple individuals shared both profits and losses. However, these internal arrangements were limited in their ability to provide complete protection against unforeseen losses.

♦ *Bima was early Indian insurance*

A more sophisticated form of risk management came in the form of insurance, which introduced a third party to assume financial responsibility in exchange for a fee called a premium. The earliest documented evidence of inland and marine insurance, referred to as *bima*, dates back to the 17th century. Sujan Rai Bhandari, in his work *Khulasat ut Tawarikh,* describes how *sarrafs* (bankers) would accept goods, valuables or merchandise for transport, guaranteeing their safe delivery for a fee. This practice, which was widely recognised as *bima,* was also mentioned in the correspondence of English merchants operating in Surat. In 1662, they attempted to transport goods from Agra to Surat using this insurance system, though financial constraints prevented the deal from materialising.

There were two prominent types of insurance provided by the *sarrafs*. The first, a form of combined insurance and carriage service, involved the insurers not only covering the risks of loss but also managing transportation and tax payments. Due to its

♦ *Adhvayas handled goods transport*

extensive coverage, the rates for this type of insurance were higher. The transportation of goods was often handled by a specialised class known as adhvayas, who took on the responsibility of cartage and the payment of transit dues *(rahdari)*. These adhvayas, often identified as Banjaras, profited from the savings made on tax payments while working under fixed contracts with merchants or insurers.

♦ *Basic insurance excluded transport duties*

The second type of insurance was a more conventional system where the *sarrafs* simply provided insurance without any transportation responsibilities. This was particularly common for goods and money transported over both land and sea. The cost of insurance varied depending on factors such as political stability, security conditions and the likelihood of theft, piracy or natural disasters. Despite these risks, contemporary accounts suggest that insurance rates under the Mughal Empire were considered relatively moderate compared to other regions, including 19th century Central India.

♦ *Avak was maritime risk finance*

To ensure safety during travel, the Mughal administration implemented stringent measures, holding local officials accountable for crimes committed within their jurisdictions. Officials were often required to compensate victims for any losses they suffered, thus encouraging safer trade routes. Moreover, merchants often required both financial support and protection from losses. This led to the widespread use of *hundis*, a form of credit bill, which allowed merchants to borrow money based on the safe arrival of their goods. The rates on such *hundis* included an insurance premium. In maritime trade, a similar practice called *avak* in India, akin to respondentia in Europe, was used. In these cases, financiers assessed various risk factors, such as the quality of the ship, the voyage route and the threat of piracy, to determine appropriate insurance rates.

♦ *Avak vyaju insured credit loans*

Another form of insurance called *avak vyaju* emerged as a credit insurance practice. Merchants and financiers who provided risk-sharing loans could, in turn, insure their investments against potential losses. Notably, the English merchants in 1648 secured their *hundis* from Gujarat to Sindh using this form of insurance, ensuring protection against the risk of non-payment. This demonstrates that advanced insurance mechanisms were well-established in medieval India, long before the practice became widespread in Europe.

2.2.1.3 Banking in Medieval India

With the growth of commercial activities and expanding business opportunities, there was an increasing demand for money and credit resources. To meet this demand, moneylenders and bankers expanded their operations by reinvesting profits from interest and

♦ *Demand for credit increased rapidly*

seeking external funds. Over time, deposit banking emerged as a significant financial practice. This involved individuals or firms accepting deposits and providing loans from these funds.

♦ *Merchant usurers existed very early*

Although the exact origins of deposit banking in India remain uncertain, references to merchant usurers suggest its existence as early as the sixth century BCE. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, documents indicate the presence of merchant usurers like dhaniks, vyavaharas and sreshtis who provided loans at interest. *Zia Barani* mentions that the wealth of the Multanis and sahs in Delhi was largely tied to loans given to nobles, who repaid using revenue drafts. However, these moneylenders primarily operated as merchants. Some inscriptions from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries also refer to Jain bankers, but details about their functions remain unclear.

♦ *Sarrafs handled treasury transfers efficiently*

Under the Mughals, the *sarrafs* dominated the banking sector, though other groups also participated. Like the goldsmiths in England, the *sarrafs* not only handled deposits and issued loans but also specialised in discounting bills of exchange (*hundis*). They acted as intermediaries, facilitating large financial transactions without the direct use of cash. While there are no surviving records from the seventeenth century detailing their practices, it is evident that *sarrafs* accepted both short term conditional deposits and demand deposits from merchants, nobles and even the state. For instance, in 1623, when Prince Khurram moved his treasury to Mandu, *sarrafs* from Ahmedabad managed the remittance, causing a shortage of money in the city.

♦ *Brokers connected producers and merchants*

Alongside the *sarrafs*, brokers (dalals) played a crucial role in the credit and trade systems. They acted as intermediaries between producers and merchants, earning commissions from both sides. In North India, brokers mainly belonged to the baniya communities. Their expertise in different currencies and financial instruments also allowed them to facilitate credit. European merchants, including the English and Dutch, often relied on brokers for financial transactions. These brokers, in some cases, held substantial deposits and occasionally provided loans to foreign traders.

♦ *Mahajans financed trade and state*

Prominent merchants like Santidas and Virji Vohra from Gujarat were also known to offer loans. While some historians suggest that Virji Vohra performed banking functions, there is no concrete evidence to support claims that he accepted deposits. Beyond the *sarrafs* and brokers, other financiers known as mahajans, sahukars and sahs played a significant role. The term *mahajan*, meaning "great person," commonly referred to merchant bankers. In Rajasthan, mahajans were often grain traders who also engaged in money

lending. They accepted deposits and extended loans, sometimes even financing state activities. In Bengal, by the eighteenth century, the term *mahajani* was synonymous with money lending.

♦ *Sahukars used wide agent networks*

Similarly, sahukars and sahs were influential merchant bankers who operated through agents and factors. Historical records from the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries describe sahukars as prominent merchants engaged in both trade and money lending. They managed business operations across distant regions, employing agents like gumashtas, beoparis and banjaras. While *sarrafs* led in banking during the Mughal era, sahukars gained prominence in the nineteenth century.

♦ *Vaishyas became key trading class*

India has had a long standing tradition of trade, with a well-developed class of traders and financiers since ancient times. The *Dharmashastras* set out laws related to contracts, loans and the sale and purchase of goods, reflecting the structured economic practices of early Indian society. The emergence of the Vaishyas as a distinct trading community and their inclusion in the category of *dvija* (literally meaning "twice-born" or the privileged class) highlight their significant role in the country's social and economic framework. However, a clear distinction must be made between the leading merchants or nagar sreshthins and ordinary shopkeepers (banik) and transporters (banjaras). According to the *Panchatantra,* a 5th century fable, leading merchants were socially close to the ruling elite and even interacted with the royal family. These influential merchants not only engaged in wholesale and long distance trade, including international commerce, but also played a crucial role in finance and money changing. Long-distance trade was supported by an advanced system of financial instruments, such as *hundis*, which facilitated the transfer of money and provided insurance against risks.

♦ *Multan was vital trade centre*

The expansion of trade in India was greatly influenced by the establishment of a strong centralised empire in the north, a stable currency system based on the silver tanka, improved road security, urban growth and the country's increasing connections with the Islamic world. These factors contributed to the flourishing overland trade with West and Central Asia, as well as maritime trade, particularly from Gujarat. The significance of these developments is evident in the frequent references to the Multanis as traders and financiers. Throughout medieval times, Multan was a key commercial hub, directly connected via the Bolan Pass to Qandahar, Herat and Bukhara — the latter being a major junction on the Silk Road that extended eastward to China and westward across Iran to Constantinople and Lebanon. Moreover, Multan had river links through the Indus to western seaports, further strengthening its

role in trade. The Multanis, who were primarily Hindu, amassed immense wealth. According to the historian Barani, they, along with the Sahs of Delhi, had accumulated so much gold and silver through money lending that these precious metals were found almost exclusively in their homes. Barani also notes that Sultan Jalaluddin Khalji refused to take harsh action against Hindus, even in Delhi, where wealthy Multani traders lived comfortably without fear for their safety or property.

Another prominent group of traders mentioned by Barani was the dallals or brokers, who acted as commission agents, charging a fee to connect buyers and sellers. Their rise signified the growing trade activities in Delhi, particularly during Alauddin Khalji's market regulations. Buyers, especially those interested in textiles, were drawn to Delhi due to the Sultan's control over market prices. Barani specifically mentions brokers in relation to Alauddin's efforts to regulate the horse trade. Many of these dallals, particularly in the horse trade, were Muslims and formed a wealthy and influential group. At times, they even challenged the Sultan's authority and disregarded his orders.

♦ *Dallals emerged as trade agents*

Muslim traders in Delhi were generally foreigners, including Iraqis, Iranians and Khurasanis, though there were also a few Muslim Multanis. For instance, the father and grandfather of Hisamuddin, whom Alauddin appointed as a *qazi,* were prominent merchants from Multan. According to the traveller Ibn Battuta, all foreign traders in India were referred to as Khurasanis. The Afghans also played a role in trade, particularly in caravan trade and the horse trade.

♦ *Foreign Muslim traders dominated Delhi*

Information about trading communities in different regions of India remains somewhat limited, but Gujarat had a well-established commercial tradition. Both Indian and foreign merchants were active there. An Egyptian trader, Shihabuddin Kazruni, owned several ships and resided in Khambayat. Other prominent trading communities included the Jains, Marwaris, Gujarati banias and Bohras, who were deeply involved in commerce. According to traditional accounts, it was from one of these traders that Malik Kafur was purchased for Alauddin Khalji. The intricate network of traders, financiers and brokers played a crucial role in the economic framework of medieval India, fostering both domestic and international trade while contributing to the wealth and prosperity of the region.

♦ *Foreign traders owned shipping fleets*

2.2.1.4 Mercantile Community

Monetisation primarily impacted coastal regions, India's interior was significantly influenced by economic and political linkages. The concentration of surplus wealth among the ruling elite reshaped

♦ *Wealth reshaped trade, urbanisation*

urbanisation patterns and market structures. A dense local trade network existed, with periodic markets facilitating transactions between cultivators and craftsmen.

The key commodities in overland trade were horses, elephants and slaves, primarily serving the royal class. This led to a growing demand for tax collection in cash, benefiting prosperous cultivators, craftsmen and trading communities such as karwanis, baqqals, zargarans, multanis and *sarrafs*. Increased monetisation further strengthened these exchange networks. However, despite higher agricultural and craft production, mass consumption did not rise proportionally. Understanding these economic shifts requires an analysis of intra Asian Oceanic trade networks.

♦ *Cash tax favoured trading communities*

The mercantile community under the Delhi Sultanate comprised various groups, each with specialised roles in trade and commerce. According to Barani's *Tarikh-i Firuzshahi,* apart from the prominent traders known as saudagran, tujjar and bazurganan, there existed several specialised trading groups. Among them were the Karwaniyan, who were grain traders further categorised into two types: saudagaran-i karwani or transport merchants and saudagaran-i bazari, who operated as market merchants. Another significant group was the Baqqalan, a term frequently used by Muslim writers in India to refer to members of the baniya community, who were engaged in trade and commerce.

♦ *Zargaran linked to Central Asia*

♦ *Bazariyan managed local markets*

The Zargaran were likely traders from the Zargaran region in Central Asia. The Sahan or sah, were wealthy merchants and esteemed members of the commercial class. The Muhtakiran, literally meaning hoarders, were involved in accumulating goods, while the Bazariyan were shopkeepers or retail dealers who operated in the markets.

♦ *Multaniyan*

Beyond these specialised traders, there were influential merchant communities that played a crucial role in the economic framework of the Delhi Sultanate. The Multaniyan were large-scale merchants who had established themselves in the money-lending business. The Dallalan functioned as brokers in the market and possessed expert knowledge in various trades, including horse and cattle trade. The Kisahdaran, possibly money lenders engaged in the horse trade, also formed a part of the mercantile structure. Meanwhile, the Mihtaran were recognised as reputable merchants and the Sarrafan, primarily goldsmiths, were actively involved in money changing and money lending professions.

♦ *Multaniyan excelled in lending*

2.2.2 Development of Road Networks and Trade in Medieval India

2.2.2.1 Establishment of Road Transportation

♦ *Transport links boosted medieval economy*

The expansion and prosperity of the medieval economy were closely linked to the development of transport and communication systems. The state of a society's transport infrastructure serves as a reliable indicator of its economic activity. A well established communication network facilitates the smooth movement of goods and commodities across regions, enhancing trade and commerce. Additionally, it promotes cultural exchanges and the sharing of ideas, both of which are crucial for social growth and development.

♦ *Networks strengthened trade and society*

The progress of transportation was closely tied to the advancement of communication systems, as both encouraged mobility and trade. In medieval India, an efficient network of roads and trade routes contributed significantly to the economic and social landscape. The interdependence between communication and transportation was a defining characteristic of the period, benefiting both the economy and society as a whole.

♦ *Monetary economy drove infrastructure*

The transition from a predominantly rural economy to a more monetised system was driven by state policies concerning extraction of agricultural surplus. As the money economy expanded at an unprecedented rate, economic interactions increased both across different regions and within local areas. This surge in commercial activity necessitated improvements in the communication network, which in turn led to the development of transportation infrastructure. Although still in its early stages, this transportation system played a vital role in connecting trade hubs and facilitating the movement of goods and people. Over time, as the monetary economy became more structured, the transportation and communication systems became more refined and well defined, further strengthening trade and commerce across the subcontinent.

2.2.2.2 Sarai

♦ *Sarai meant palace or citadel*

The term *sarai*, meaning a resting place for merchants and travellers, first emerged in the sixteenth century. However, in the Islamic world, *sarai* originally referred to a "citadel" or "palace." Ottoman sultans held their courts in the Sarai Humayun, while Timur's palace in Kish was called Ak Sarai (White Palace) (Bosworth, 1997). Under the Delhi Sultans, the term carried a similar meaning, often referring to a royal palace or a building owned by a wealthy individual (Siddiqui, 2012: 30). For instance, Shaikh Nizamuddin Aulia referred to Sultan Iltutmish's palace as Sarai Sultani and Ziauddin Barani used the term *sarai* to describe Alauddin Khalji's palace (Siddiqui, 2012).

♦ *Sarais built near pilgrim routes*

Historian I. H. Siddiqui suggests that the first recorded mention of a caravan sarai dates back to the reign of Sikandar Lodi, who reportedly built one outside Mathura for travellers (Siddiqui, 2012: 31). However, Shams Siraj Afif also references the construction of sarais (rest houses) and khanqahs (hospices) to accommodate pilgrims. These sarais, often established in remote and insecure forested areas, were typically accompanied by *thanas* (police outposts) with military officers (shiqdars) stationed there. Over time, such settlements rapidly evolved into townships or *qasbas*. When Sultan Firuz built hospices, Afif recorded that he intended them for pilgrims from all directions to come and stay in these sarais.

♦ *Provided shelter and provisions*

Sarais were various types of buildings that served as resting places for travellers in medieval India. These establishments were particularly important for merchants and pilgrims, who required frequent places to rest and take shelter while travelling across the vast countryside. Unlike the widely spaced towns and cities, which offered shelter in harsh and inhospitable regions, sarais were strategically located along major highways, providing a secure resting place for both people and their animals. They also ensured access to essential provisions such as food and water.

♦ *Turks introduced sarai design*

It is believed that the Turks introduced the concept of sarais in India. These structures were typically large rectangular enclosures, featuring wide gateways and rows of cells built along the interior walls. Over time, both their institutional role and physical design underwent significant transformations to better accommodate travellers' needs. The construction of sarais began in larger towns under the rule of the Delhi Sultanate in the mid-thirteenth century. However, the most significant contributions to the development of sarais were made by Sher Shah Suri, who is widely praised in historical chronicles for his efforts in establishing sarais at regular intervals along every major road in his empire.

♦ *Sarais spaced along trade routes*

The northern and northwestern trade routes had a well-established network of sarais, allowing travellers to rest safely and store their belongings. European travelers who journeyed through these routes attested to the presence of these facilities at regular intervals. Similarly, the road leading eastward was well equipped with sarais, which often provided additional amenities such as cooked food. In major cities, multiple sarais existed, some of which included warehouses for storing goods transported by merchants and other travellers.

Due to the presence of large rivers, ferries were commonly used for crossings as only smaller rivers had permanent bridges. A notable

example was the floating bridge constructed across the Yamuna River, allowing vehicles from the eastern regions to access Delhi. Both European travellers and Persian chroniclers documented the extensive network of sarais in Mughal India. These establishments were not only located along key trade routes but also within urban and suburban areas of the empire. Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama* (circa 1595) records an order issued in 1578, instructing craftsmen to build sarais across various quarters of Agra. These sarais were to be entrusted to benevolent individuals so that the poor and needy could find shelter without having to search for it or suffer the hardships of waiting.

♦ *Bridges rare, ferries common*

2.2.2.3 Thanas

Thanas played a crucial role in the emergence of new towns. According to Barani's account of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban's reign (1266-87), *thanas* were primarily established as police outposts in rebellious regions to maintain law and order. One such *thana*, Deopalgir, was set up near Delhi to curb the activities of the Mewati insurgents. Balban cleared the surrounding jungles and stationed Afghan forces there, establishing multiple similar outposts. Afghanpur, near Amroha, the headquarters of the Katehr region, was another such *thana*. Other strategic *thanas* with Afghan garrisons included Jalali, Kampil, Patiali, Bhojpur, Shamsabad and Bogaon in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab.

♦ *Thanas were police outposts*

Barani records that Balban built the fort of Jalali and assigned it to the Afghans, transforming it from a haven for robbers into a secure settlement for Muslims and a safe passage for travellers. Similarly, to control dacoit infested areas in the Chambal Valley, Sultan Sikandar Lodi (1489-1517) established a *thana* near the village of Hatkant. Under Sher Shah's reign, this outpost grew into a significant urban centre, with a massive Afghan settlement of twelve thousand Tarin Afghans from Sirhind. Many of these *thanas* evolved into prominent towns. Kampil became so significant that Alauddin Khalji (1296-1316) constructed a formidable fort there, which Ibn Battuta later described as one of the most impregnable fortresses in the Doab region.

♦ *Jalali transformed into a settlement*

♦ *Kampil became an important town*

Thanas were typically built after clearing dense forests and were often accompanied by mosques, madrasas and sometimes Sufi establishments. Jalali serves as a notable example of this transformation. Some *thanas* were located in remote areas, particularly along major highways, ensuring secure trade routes (Siddiqui, 2012: 32). Balban extensively combed the Mewat and Doab (Katehr) regions, establishing forts and *thanas* while settling Afghan populations, ultimately freeing the area from highway

♦ *Thanas had mosques and madrasas*

robbers (Barani, 2015: 37). By the 15th century, Kalpi had emerged as an important centre, prompting muqtis to clear forests and establish *thanas*, which later flourished into towns in the 16th century.

♦ *Badaun served as a military outpost*

Although Badaun was not originally a *thana*, it served as a military outpost throughout the Khalji period until Muhammad bin Tughluq discontinued it as an army base. Many *thanas* were reinforced with forts, but nobles and sultans also constructed independent fortresses, laying the foundations of new cities. Sultan Firuz Tughluq was particularly renowned for his urban development projects, founding Hissar Firuza and establishing several fort towns, including Fatehabad, Firozabad, Harnikhera, Tughluqpur Kasna, Tughluqpur Muluk Makut and Jaunpur.

2.2.2.4 Qasbas

♦ *Qasbas were fortified townships*

During the Sultanate period, a new category of settlements known as *qasbas* (townships) emerged. These were smaller than *shahr* (cities) and initially functioned as fortified administrative centres. Over time, *qasbas* evolved into fully developed townships, with the term becoming synonymous with towns that ranked below *shahr* in the urban hierarchy. Afif refers to Abohar as a *qasba* and a significant hub for Sufi activities. Ibn Battuta also describes it as a small yet densely populated town.

♦ *Qasbas were fortified administrative centres*

According to Nizamuddin Ahmad's *Tabaqat-i-Akbari,* a *qasba* was an administrative centre that functioned as the headquarters of a pargana. During Akbar's reign, there were an estimated 3,200 *qasbas* and 120 cities *(shahr)*. By the early 18th century, around 1720, the number of *qasbas* had increased to 4,716. However, it was not mandatory for each pargana to have only one *qasba*, as this requirement remained flexible. For instance, in the early 18th century, the Pargana Barsana region in western Rajasthan contained as many as twenty *qasbas*.

♦ *Qasbas had defensive structures*

In western Rajasthan, *qasbas* were often fortified, enclosed by either a fort *(garhi)* or defensive walls *(garh)*. In the medieval period, a *qasba* essentially represented an expansion of a nearby village. A large settlement with a central marketplace had all the necessary features to evolve into a *qasba.* The towns of Harigarh, Kundi and Kakurmi, which were classified as villages in the 17th century, were later designated as *qasbas* in early 18th century records. In some cases, settlements developed into *qasbas* to take advantage of the security provided by a nearby fort.

Many *qasbas* originated as market towns. Those with the suffix *ganj* were primarily commercial hubs, hosting weekly markets

(hats) and fairs (melas). The emergence of such *qasbas* became more prominent from the mid-18th century onward. Research by B. L. Bhadani and Sato on the development of *qasbas* in western Rajasthan indicates that the population in market towns continued to grow steadily throughout the 18th century, as people migrated from villages and other smaller settlements.

♦ *Qasbas hosted weekly markets*

2.2.3 Urbanisation in Medieval India

Urbanisation in medieval India, spanning from the sixth to the eighteenth century, was a complex and multi-faceted process. The expansion of urban centres had profound effects on the subcontinent's economy, society and culture. Several factors, including trade, administration, military requirements and religious developments, played crucial roles in shaping medieval Indian cities. The process of urbanisation was not uniform but evolved through different phases influenced by political changes, economic transformations and cultural exchanges.

♦ *Urbanisation influenced by many factors*

The development of urban centres in medieval India was often driven by various factors, including economic, political and religious influences. While some towns expanded due to bustling trade and commerce, others emerged as pilgrimage hubs or administrative seats. Coastal areas also played a significant role in the growth of urban centres, serving as ports that facilitated maritime trade.

♦ *Pots vitals for urban growth*

Max Weber defined a city as a place where trade and commerce dominate agriculture, emphasising the importance of urban economies. According to him, cities were typically centralised and bureaucratised. Karl Marx, on the other hand, viewed urbanisation as a mechanism for advancing productive forces and sustainable development. In the context of medieval India, Weber's perspective appears more applicable, particularly during the Mughal period, when urban economies flourished under state patronage.

♦ *Weber's model suits Mughal era*

Political stability was a crucial factor in the growth of towns. Hamida Khatoon Naqvi highlighted that centralised states with capitals in cities like Lahore, Delhi and Agra fostered urban growth. The fortunes of cities often mirrored the strength or weakness of the ruling authority. For instance, Lahore, which held significance during the Ghaznavid period, fell into decline under Firuz Tughlaq but regained prominence under the Mughals, becoming almost a second capital.

♦ *Political stability boosted cities*

Satish Chandra, however, critiqued the notion that political centralisation was the sole driver of urbanisation. He argued that agricultural expansion significantly contributed to urban growth. Technological advancements, such as the Persian wheel and

♦ *Agriculture spurred town creation*

the construction of canals under rulers like Muhammad Tughlaq supported agricultural productivity, leading to the establishment of numerous towns. The integration of Afghan settlers into rural areas further stimulated agricultural development and, consequently, urbanisation.

♦ *Trade drove urban prosperity*

Trade also played a pivotal role in urban expansion. R. S. Sharma linked the rise and fall of towns to the fluctuations in long-distance trade. Henri Pirenne similarly asserted that the growth of medieval towns was closely tied to commercial networks. In Gujarat, I. P. Gupta's research revealed that economic activities overshadowed administrative and military functions in most towns, with cities like Ahmedabad, Surat and Cambay serving as major commercial hubs.

♦ *Trade and Islam linked growth*

In Bengal, Nihar Ranjan Ray and Arun Das Gupta associated urbanisation with the spread of Islam and the revival of overseas trade. However, Aniruddha Ray contested this view, noting the existence of flourishing towns like Harikela, Nadia and Vikrampur before the Turkish conquests. He identified the decline of a central power and shifts in river courses as primary factors influencing the rise and fall of urban centres.

♦ *Cities became more cosmopolitan*

Iqtidar Hussain Siddiqui explored the socio-cultural dimensions of urbanisation during the Delhi Sultanate. He described how older caste based cities evolved into cosmopolitan urban centres through the interactions between indigenous and immigrant Muslim communities. Large-scale construction projects, including palaces, gardens and forts, drew skilled artisans and craftsmen, enriching architectural traditions.

♦ *Temples central to town growth*

In South India, temple urbanism significantly shaped the growth of towns. R. Champakalakshmi traced the origins of towns to the ninth century, attributing their expansion to external trade and the activities of merchant guilds. Temple towns, such as Chidambaram and Srirangam, emerged as religious and economic centres, fostering local and regional trade networks.

2.2.3.1 Urban Centres

♦ *Economic activity spurred urban growth*

Urban centres in medieval India emerged for various reasons, with some growing from small towns into bustling cities due to economic and commercial activities. Others developed as important pilgrimage sites, attracting people and contributing to urban growth. Coastal areas also witnessed the rise of towns that eventually evolved into major urban centres, driven by maritime trade.

Max Weber characterised cities as places where trade and commerce played a dominant role over agriculture, emphasising the significance of the urban economy. He viewed cities as centralised,

♦ *Weber emphasised trade-centered cities*

bureaucratic entities. Conversely, Karl Marx perceived urbanisation as a means of advancing productive forces and fostering sustainable development. He maintained that rural life and urban development were closely interconnected. In the context of India, Weber's insights seem particularly relevant, especially during the Mughal era, when administrative and commercial hubs flourished.

♦ *Urban growth influenced societal change*

The study of urbanisation in medieval India has not received extensive attention. S. C. Misra suggested that urban centres expanded over time, impacting various aspects of society, including the economic system, political landscape, social networks and even the collective mindset of the people. Hamida Khatoon Naqvi argued that political stability significantly influenced urban growth. She highlighted how centralised states with capitals in Lahore, Delhi or Agra nurtured urban centres. The prosperity of cities like Lahore often depended on the strength or weakness of the ruling authority. For instance, Lahore, which thrived during the Ghaznavid period, fell into decline under Firuz Tughlaq, only to be revived and nearly transformed into a secondary capital under the Mughals.

♦ *Politics supported economic development*

K. N. Chaudhuri emphasised the symbiotic relationship between political power and economic activity, noting that Mughal commercial towns exemplified the idea of the "flag following the trade." He asserted that political acumen was essential to safeguarding economic interests. On the other hand, Satish Chandra challenged the notion that political stability was the primary driver of urban growth. He pointed to the proliferation of towns even after the disintegration of political power in the post-Tughlaq period. According to him, agricultural expansion played a crucial role, especially during Firuz Shah Tughlaq's reign, when innovations like the Persian wheel and canal networks enhanced agricultural productivity.

♦ *Trade networks drove urban growth*

Trade also played a pivotal role in the expansion of towns. Henri Pirenne and R. S. Sharma linked urban growth to the extent of long-distance trade networks. In Gujarat, I. P. Gupta argued that the economic activities of towns like Ahmedabad, Surat and Cambay were far more significant than their administrative or military functions. He estimated that 80-90% of urban activities in Gujarat were economically driven. Forts rarely served as the foundation of urban centres; instead, cities often became administrative hubs due to their commercial prominence.

Chetan Singh also underscored the economic base of urban centres, noting that even administrative towns like Lahore gained importance as manufacturing and commercial hubs. Nihar Ranjan Ray and Arun Das Gupta associated urbanisation in Bengal

♦ *Economy shaped administrative towns*

with the spread of Islam and the resurgence of overseas trade. However, Aniruddha Ray disputed this view, arguing that Bengal had flourishing towns like Harikela, Nadia and Vikrampur before the Turkish invasions. He attributed the rise of urban centres to the weakening of centralised power and changes in river courses, which led to the growth of cities like Pandua and the decline of others like Lakhnauti.

♦ *Turkish conquest spurred urban change*

Muhammad Habib proposed that the Turkish conquest led to an urban revolution in North India. He believed that the entry of the Turks dismantled social barriers, allowing low caste Hindu workers to move into cities, thereby fostering the growth of industrial and commercial centres. However, Irfan Habib critiqued this theory, arguing that the expansion of urban centres in the 13th and 14th centuries was driven more by slave and unfree labour than by any emancipation of the working class.

♦ *Cities became cosmopolitan centres*

♦ *Temples boosted economic activity*

Iqtidar Hussain Siddiqui explored the transformation of Indian urban centres from caste based cities to cosmopolitan hubs during the Delhi Sultanate. He emphasised the role of Muslim immigrants in shaping urban culture and highlighted large scale construction projects that attracted artisans and craftsmen. Similarly, James Heitzman discussed the concept of temple urbanism in South India, where the expansion of temples stimulated local economies, supported artisanal activity and facilitated regional trade networks. R. Champakalakshmi further examined the growth of medieval towns in Chola territories, identifying distinct categories of towns, including mercantile, royal, ceremonial and fortified cities.

♦ *Qasbas smaller than shahrs*

In medieval India, the distinction between small towns and large urban centres was clearly recognised. Nizamuddin Ahmed, in his writings, distinguished between *qasbas* and shahrs. According to his records, there were around 3200 *qasbas* and 120 shahrs during Akbar's reign. Ibn-Khaldun believed that royal authority and dynasties played a crucial role in the establishment and planning of cities. Sultanate texts also highlighted the differences between rural and urban populations, with authors like Isami portraying villagers in a negative light while glorifying cities like Delhi.

♦ *Qasbas were village extensions*

Qasbas were generally small towns that functioned as administrative centres, often serving as the headquarters of a pargana. Unlike larger urban centres, *qasbas* were frequent extensions of villages that expanded due to their strategic location or economic importance. For example, in western Rajasthan, Barsana had twenty *qasbas* by the early 18th century. These towns were often fortified, surrounded by walls or forts *(garhi)* for protection.

♦ *Qasbas were semi-urban zones*

The concept of a *qasba* was fluid, existing in a space between rural and urban. Some historians describe them as "rurban" or "nuclear urban" settlements. While they shared certain urban characteristics like marketplaces, military garrisons and a concentration of non-agricultural populations, their administrative jurisdiction was smaller than that of a city. Based on the classification in the Ain-i-*Akbari*, the headquarters of larger administrative units like sarkars and subas were labelled as shahrs, whereas pargana and tappa headquarters were classified as *qasbas*.

♦ *Cash revenue promoted marketing*

Over time, the number of *qasbas* grew significantly. By 1647, their number had risen to 4350 and by the early 18th century, it increased to 4716. Irfan Habib argued that Akbar's policy of converting land revenue payments from kind to cash greatly stimulated the growth of *qasbas*. These towns became essential grain storage and distribution points, catering to government requirements. They also served as collection centres for Banjaras, who specialised in grain transportation. As peasants needed to sell their produce to meet revenue demands, increased marketing activity further contributed to the proliferation of *qasbas*.

♦ *Market villages became qasbas*

In many cases, villages developed into *qasbas* due to their growing economic significance. For example, villages like Harigarh, Kundi and Kakurmi in western Rajasthan were documented as *qasbas* by the early 18th century. Others emerged around forts, benefiting from the security provided by fortified structures. Some villages with market, like Daulatganj, were intentionally established by annexing nearby lands. The *qasbas* with large marketplaces *(ganj),* weekly markets (hats) and fairs (melas) were common by the mid18th century. However, the growth of such market towns slowed down by the 19th century.

♦ *Qasba meaning changed over time*

Satish Chandra observed that the concept of a *qasba* evolved over time and varied across regions. During the Sultanate period, a qasba often referred to a fortified village, whereas in the Mughal period, it denoted a village with a market. These towns served both as marketplaces for agricultural produce and centres of craft production. Sunil Kumar, however, argued that in the 13th century, *qasbas* did not primarily function as market towns but were fortified settlements often lacking large urban characteristics.

♦ *Sarais turned into qasbas*

Another significant factor contributing to the emergence of *qasbas* was the presence of sarais. Travellers and traders, who typically covered around 10-12 miles in a day, required resting places. These sarais sometimes evolved into *qasbas* or small towns due to the influx of merchants and local trade. Additionally, nobles established marketplaces (*mandis*) that often grew into *qasbas*, further supporting the expansion of urban centres during the

medieval period.

2.2.3.2 Cantonments and Fortifications

♦ *Forts across diverse regions*

Medieval Indian fortifications are significant in the history of military architecture, characterised by their tall and massive walls and towers based on medieval defensive concepts. The Delhi Sultanate constructed numerous forts across the rugged terrain of Rajputana and beyond. In the northern plains, forts were built on artificial mounds, while in the Deccan, they were strategically constructed on rocky hills to provide a tactical advantage.

♦ *Forts supported military campaigns*

Fortifications served as key military bases that supported the expansionist policies of the Khaljis and Tughlaqs. Devagiri (later named Daulatabad) was one such strategic cantonment, offering logistical support to imperial armies during campaigns in Warangal and Dwarasamudra. The fort, built on a conical rock, had three distinct layers of defence. Ibn Battuta described its divisions, including the royal residence, a military cantonment (kataka) and an inner fortification known as Deogir.

♦ *Warangal had dual walls*

Warangal also featured robust fortifications with dual walls, the outer one made of hardened mud. Amir Khusrau described the fortress as nearly impenetrable. In Delhi, significant fortresses like Siri, Tughlaqabad and Adilabad were built during the Sultanate period. Muhammad bin Tughlaq further reinforced the city's defences by connecting Old Delhi and Siri with a fortified wall, creating Jahanpanah, which expanded the city's protected boundaries.

♦ *Fortified palace towns emerged*

While Sultanate fortifications mainly secured imperial centres, common people lived outside the walled areas. It was during the Tughlaq reign that fortified palace towns began to emerge. Under the Mughals, fortified cities like Lahore, Ahmedabad and Cambay flourished, enclosed by thick walls with battlements. Shahajahanabad and Multan also had fortified perimeters, though towns like Agra and Ujjain lacked city walls, relying instead on trenches for defence.

♦ *Southern forts were multifunctional*

In South India, fortified cities gained prominence, particularly under the Vijayanagara Empire. Cities like Vijayanagara, Senji, Dindigul and Madurai were fortified to serve as both administrative and military centres. These hilltop fortresses provided commanding views and protected strategic routes. Fortifications typically featured double walls, moats and bastions designed to withstand artillery attacks. Many fortified cities included temples, bazaars, palaces and garrisons.

2.2.3.3 Administration and Urban Life in Medieval India

♦ *Dual-level urban administration*

During the medieval period, Indian towns experienced significant growth as centres of commerce and manufacturing. Urban administration operated on two levels: self-governing institutions influenced by local traditions and ethos and state administered towns managed by officials appointed by rulers.

♦ *Mohallas and guilds managed towns*

Local self governance was evident in the form of mohallas (residential neighbourhoods) in North India and pols in Gujarat, often organised by caste or occupation. These mohallas had designated supervisors known as mir-i mohalla. Additionally, trade guilds *(juki)* and mahajans, led by seths, regulated economic activities and maintained internal harmony. Influential leaders like the nagarseth represented collective guild interests, sometimes even negotiating with state authorities.

♦ *Kotwals ensured law and order*

State appointed officials also played crucial roles. While the Mughals rarely appointed city governors, officials like Mutasaddis in cities like Surat and Cambay performed administrative and military duties. The kotwal, responsible for law enforcement and maintaining public order, supervised markets and collected taxes. Other officials such as qazis handled judicial matters, while muhtasibs ensured moral conduct and monitored market activities.

Urban Life

♦ *Urban society was diverse*

Urban populations in medieval India were diverse, including nobles, officials, merchants, artisans and labourers. Cities reflected stark social contrasts. While the elite lived luxurious lives, commoners often struggled with poverty. Nobles and their families indulged in grand lifestyles, with lavish mansions, ornamental gardens and decorative architecture. On the other hand, lower income groups resided in simple mud or thatched houses.

♦ *Trade supported urban economy*

Trade was the backbone of many urban centres. Merchants from various communities controlled local and international trade networks. Markets were bustling with specialised traders, while guilds ensured fair practices. Towns like Ahmedabad and Patna had significant merchant populations. Artisans and labourers provided essential services, though their wages were typically low. Slavery was prevalent during the Delhi Sultanate, with slaves acquired through war or trade. They often worked as domestic servants or specialised labourers. Despite their status, some skilled slaves gained prominence, even reaching administrative positions.

Cultural and social life in medieval towns was characterised by a mix of traditions and festivities. Religious celebrations, including

♦ *Festivals fostered social unity*

Eid, Holi and Diwali, brought communities together. Sufi shrines also attracted large gatherings. Games like chess, polo and gambling were popular among the upper classes. Women of noble families often lived in seclusion, though some engaged in education and cultural activities.

♦ *Elite women received education*

Education opportunities were limited for the ordinary women, but elite women, particularly from royal families, received formal education. Akbar promoted female education by establishing schools in cities like Fatehpur Sikri. Marriage ceremonies were grand affairs among the nobility, often involving extravagant expenses. However, customs like sati and jauhar were still practised, especially among Rajput women. Akbar took steps to regulate and prevent forced sati.

2.2.3.4 Nobility and Urban Development in Medieval India

♦ *Nobles led lavish lifestyles*

During the medieval period, Indian nobles enjoyed luxurious lifestyles, often imitating the grandeur of the ruling class. Under the Delhi Sultanate, nobles lived in grand palaces adorned with elaborate furnishings and maintained large households with numerous servants and retainers. Although Alauddin Khalji imposed strict controls on extravagant living, these ostentatious lifestyles resurfaced under subsequent rulers, particularly the Tughlaqs. Wealthy nobles accumulated vast fortunes, with properties passing down to their heirs.

♦ *Havelis imitated royal palaces*

During the Mughal era, the nobility was the wealthiest class. Mansions, called havelis, mirrored the architectural styles of royal buildings, featuring spacious rooms, courtyards, baths and ornamental decor. Nobles also maintained gardens, wells and water tanks, contributing to urban beautification. Cities like Bengal, Gujarat and Ahmedabad were particularly known for their luxurious homes surrounded by gardens and orchards.

♦ *Nobles built public structures*

Nobles actively participated in public infrastructure projects, constructing sarais, hammams, mosques, madrasas and marketplaces. Many also established towns and cities, revitalising existing settlements with new public amenities. Their construction activities were motivated by social prestige and the desire to leave a lasting legacy.

Religious Centres and Urban Development

♦ *Ajmer became a spiritual and strategic hub*

Religious institutions played a pivotal role in urban development. Cities like Ajmer, Banaras and Pandharpur emerged as prominent centres of pilgrimage and religious activities. Ajmer, renowned for the tomb of Sufi saint Shaikh Muinuddin Chishti, flourished

under Mughal patronage. Akbar, Jahangir and Shahjahan invested in fortifications, palaces and religious structures in the city, establishing it as both a spiritual and strategic hub.

♦ *Banaras remained a sacred centre*

Banaras, revered as a Hindu pilgrimage site, retained its status as a centre of learning and religious discourse during the medieval period. Although Aurangzeb renamed it Muhammadabad and built mosques within the city, its original name and spiritual significance persisted. By the 18th century, the Marathas and Peshwas further contributed to its development by constructing temples and restoring existing structures.

♦ *Pandharpur centered around pilgrimage*

Pandharpur evolved from a small village to a significant religious town, closely associated with the Varkari sect. The temple of Sri Vittala became the focal point of the town, attracting pilgrims and contributing to its urban expansion. The Marathas, particularly the Holkars, supported the construction and maintenance of its religious sites, further enriching its cultural and architectural heritage.

Summarised Overview

During the Delhi Sultanate, India maintained its prominent role as a manufacturing and trading hub, with agricultural productivity, skilled artisans and experienced traders. The period saw the expansion of local and long-distance trade networks. Local trade was managed by village traders known as banias, who facilitated the exchange of agricultural produce and essential goods. Long-distance trade was dominated by wealthy merchants and financiers like sahs and *sarrafs*, with large caravans transporting commodities such as rice, sugar and textiles. Ports along the Indian Ocean, including Gujarat and Malabar, became vital nodes in maritime trade, connecting India to West Asia, Africa and Southeast Asia. The Sultanate's investments in infrastructure, including roadways and caravan routes, further enhanced trade activities.

Under the Mughals, inter-regional and oceanic trade expanded significantly. Mughal princes and nobles actively invested in maritime ventures, contributing to the growth of ports and ship building industries. Coastal trade connected India with regions like the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia, while inland waterways were extensively used for the transportation of goods. Agricultural commodities, textiles and luxury items such as indigo and silks formed major exports. The financial system, centered around the use of *hundis* (credit instruments) and managed by *sarrafs*, facilitated the secure transfer of money across regions. European merchants, including the English East India Company, integrated into India's trade networks, further boosting commerce.

The development of road networks and trade institutions supported the flourishing economic landscape during both the Sultanate and Mughal periods. Sarais (rest houses) and

thanas (police outposts) were constructed to ensure the safety of merchants and travellers along trade routes. The Mughal administration also established a robust insurance and credit system, providing financial security to traders. The urban centres, including ports like Surat and inland markets like Agra, emerged as significant commercial hubs. The dynamic trade environment fostered cultural exchanges, strengthened diplomatic ties and contributed to the overall prosperity of the Indian subcontinent.

The state played a crucial role in promoting trade by building roads and ensuring the security of trade routes. Markets and trading posts were strategically established, further strengthening economic activity. While local merchants managed internal trade, European traders, particularly the Dutch and English, became involved in maritime trade through their trading companies.

Assignments

1. Explain the significance of inland trade networks during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal periods. How did the development of roads and sarais support trade activities?
2. Discuss the role of merchant communities such as the Multanis and Gujarati banias in the expansion of domestic and foreign trade during medieval India.
3. Analyse the importance of the **hundi** system in facilitating trade during the Mughal period. How did it function as a financial instrument in the absence of a formal banking system?
4. Discuss the role of the *sarrafs* (money changers) in the financial system of medieval India.
5. Explain the concept of insurance *(bima)* in medieval India.
6. Evaluate the significance of sarais and *thanas* in facilitating trade and contributing to the development of towns.
7. Discuss the factors that contributed to the growth of urban centres during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal periods.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

UNIT 3

Advent of the Portuguese

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- discuss the context of the arrival of the Portuguese in India and their role in the European maritime expansion
- analyse the factors that led to the establishment of Portuguese trade dominance in the Indian Ocean through *cartaz* system
- examine the nature of resistance against Portuguese dominance by Kunjali Marakkars
- explore the concept of Latinisation and its influence on Indian society

Background

The arrival of the Portuguese in India marked a significant turning point in the region's trade, politics and cultural context. The disruption of traditional trade routes in the Middle East prompted European powers to seek alternative maritime routes to the East, leading to Vasco da Gama's arrival in Calicut in 1498. The Portuguese established a maritime empire by capturing strategic ports and enforcing monopolies over the lucrative spice trade. Through the use of military power, naval dominance and administrative systems like the *cartaz* and *qafila*, they exerted substantial control over Indian Ocean commerce. Their presence also reshaped local trade networks and intensified competition with other European powers like the Dutch and the British. Despite their efforts, the Portuguese struggled to maintain their monopoly in the face of local resistance and emerging rivals.

In addition to their commercial ambitions, the Portuguese left a lasting cultural imprint on Indian society through the process of Latinisation. This was particularly evident in regions like Goa, Daman and Diu, where religious orders such as the Jesuits and Franciscans played a key role in spreading Catholicism. Indigenous traditions were replaced with European customs, the Latin script was introduced and administrative systems were aligned with Western models. However, resistance from local rulers, communities and religious groups, like the St. Thomas Christians, limited the extent of Portuguese influence. This unit highlights the dynamics of European expansion, the impact of Portuguese trade monopolies and the socio-cultural transformations they initiated in India.

Keywords

Estado da India, Casa da India, Trade Monopoly, *Cartaz* System, *Qafila* System, Naval Dominance, Maritime Trade, French East India Company, Kunjali Marakkars, Latinisation.

Discussion

2.3.1 European Entry into Indian Trade and Colonial Expansion

♦ *Portugal began sea trade dominance*

The disruption of traditional trade routes and the shifting political landscape in the Middle East prompted European traders to seek alternative routes to India. The arrival of Vasco da Gama in Calicut in May 1498 marked the beginning of a new phase in Euro-Asian trade. Initially, the Portuguese established dominance over trade between India and Europe, having discovered the sea route via the Cape of Good Hope. With limited private capital, Portugal's Crown provided financial and political support to sustain its overseas mercantile ventures.

♦ *Dutch, English, French companies rise*

♦ *Trade limited to port cities*

By the late 16th century, the Portuguese monopoly faced challenges from other European powers. The Dutch East India Company (1602) and the English East India Company (1600) emerged as significant competitors, followed by the French East India Company in 1664. While these companies were primarily state backed, private traders also participated in Euro-Asian trade. These European commercial enterprises relied heavily on naval power and aimed to monopolise trade. However, their presence was initially limited to coastal port cities and they generally avoided direct interference with Indian political sovereignty. Indian rulers often tolerated their presence since the trade brought valuable bullion, contributing to the region's economic growth. Although occasional conflicts arose over trade dominance, European powers typically avoided large scale military confrontations in the early phases.

♦ *French initiated territorial control*

The French were the first to pursue territorial ambitions in India, aiming to establish a larger colonial empire. The British East India Company later adopted similar strategies, followed by the Dutch. Intense competition among these European powers further heightened conflicts over trade monopolies and territorial control, laying the groundwork for colonial dominance in India.

2.3.2 Arrival of the Portuguese

Vasco da Gama's arrival in Calicut in May 1498, after navigating

around the Cape of Good Hope, marked the beginning of Portuguese maritime exploration in India. The expedition was primarily driven by commercial motives, though the Portuguese monarch, D. Manuel (1495-1521), often framed it as a Christian mission aimed at spreading the faith. The primary goal, however, was to establish a monopoly over the spice trade with Europe, a highly profitable enterprise at the time. Military strength was used to achieve this objective.

♦ *Portuguese aimed at spice monopoly*

To secure their commercial interests, the Portuguese built forts at Cochin and Cannanore. The first Viceroy, Francisco d'Almeida, who arrived in 1505, made limited progress in advancing the territorial and commercial ambitions of Portugal. However, significant strides were made under Alfonso de Albuquerque (1509-1515), who effectively executed the Portuguese geopolitical strategy. He rapidly captured key port cities in India and islands in the Indian Ocean, including Goa in 1510, Malacca in 1511 and Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf in 1515. While the territory under Portuguese control remained relatively small, its strategic importance was immense.

♦ *Albuquerque expanded Portuguese control*

Further expanding their dominance, the Portuguese established a fort at Colombo in Sri Lanka in 1518. Goa became the administrative capital of the Portuguese commercial empire in India in 1530. Throughout the 16th century, they continued their conquests, occupying Diu, Daman and Bassein to control the trade routes from Gujarat. They seized parts of the Konkan and Malabar coasts to dominate the spice trade from Malabar. By the late 16th century, the Portuguese maintained approximately fifty forts and commanded a formidable naval fleet of around 100 ships.

♦ *Goa became Portuguese capital*

In their pursuit of commercial and territorial expansion, the Portuguese sometimes received assistance from local rulers. The Raja of Cochin, for example, aligned with the Portuguese to strengthen his position against his traditional rival, the Zamorin of Calicut. Furthermore, Portuguese naval and commercial vessels often included crews and soldiers recruited from the local population, demonstrating a degree of integration into regional maritime networks.

♦ *Local alliances supported Portuguesea*

2.3.2.1 Establishment of Trade Monopoly

The Portuguese established a maritime empire rather than a territorial one, forming a network that connected territories, ports, ships, people and administrative systems in Asia and East Africa under the authority of the Portuguese Crown. The Casa da India, a royal trading firm based in Lisbon, managed this maritime empire. While the Crown maintained significant control, European

♦ *Casa da India controlled trade*

merchants, financiers and bankers also played a role in financing and managing the return cargo from Asia.

♦ *Viceroy held wide authority*

In Asia, the administrative structure was known as the Estado da India, governed by a Viceroy stationed in Goa. The Viceroy, who held supreme civil and military authority from East Africa to regions like the Moluccas and Macao, was accountable solely to the Portuguese Crown. He was supported by informal councils that gradually became institutionalised, consisting of key officials including the Archbishop of Goa, the chief Inquisitor, prominent noblemen, the captain of Goa, the chief judge of the high court and the chief financial officer. Additionally, a municipal council, elected by the Portuguese and Eurasian residents, supervised local governance in Goa. Other forts and settlements followed a similar administrative framework.

♦ *Forts enforced spice trade monopoly*

The primary objective of Portuguese forts and naval forces was to maintain a monopoly over the spice trade with Europe and regulate intra-Asian trade. Captains of the forts enforced this control, levying taxes and imposing restrictions on trade. They often engaged in private trading themselves, contributing to the Portuguese economy. In fact, during the 16th century, customs duties accounted for approximately 60-65% of the total revenue generated by the empire, supplemented by spoils from captured ships.

♦ *Trade shared due to competition*

Spices, particularly pepper from Malabar and Kanara, were the most sought after commodities. From 1506, the Portuguese Crown held a monopoly over the spice trade, directly controlling the exchange of precious metals from Portugal for Asian goods. While private traders were allowed to participate through royal licenses, they often provided financial backing to the Crown in return for trade privileges. Pepper was procured in India and sold in Antwerp until the mid16th century, after which Lisbon became the primary market. By 1564, however, the Crown faced difficulties in maintaining its monopoly and began sharing it with private merchants. In 1575, the pepper trade was contracted to merchants like Konrad Rott and Rovalesca at fixed rates, a practice that continued until 1598 when competition from the British and Dutch made the monopoly unsustainable.

♦ *India Company failed by 1633*

Despite forming the Portuguese India Company in 1628 to restore profitability, the venture failed, leading to its dissolution in 1633. The Portuguese also engaged in intra-Asian trade, which was often more lucrative than trade between Goa and Lisbon. Commodities exported from Portugal to Asia included gold from West Africa, silver rials from the Americas, copper, lead, tin, quicksilver, coral,

alum, wine and olive oil. Among these, copper held the most significant value.

Much of the intra-Asian trade involved the exchange of Indian textiles for Moluccan spices, which were then shipped to Lisbon. Though the Crown maintained a nominal monopoly, it was a loose system that permitted royal ship crews, state officials and private traders to participate. Captains of royal ships frequently transported goods for personal profit, reducing the Crown's share of the trade. By the 1540s and 1550s, financial difficulties made it increasingly unfeasible for the Crown to sustain its monopoly. With limited resources to protect its interests, the Portuguese state struggled to maintain control over its extensive maritime network.

♦ *Loose monopoly allowed private trade*

2.3.2.2 Instruments of the Portuguese Trade Dominance

Upon their arrival in India, the Portuguese quickly sought to establish a monopoly over the spice trade. Throughout the sixteenth century, directives from Lisbon and Goa reinforced the exclusivity of the spice trade to the Portuguese Crown and its representatives. This strict monopoly was maintained through the dominance of Portuguese naval forces, which ensured control over sea routes and maritime trade. The Crown organised specialised expeditions to designated locations in Asia, granting exclusive rights to particular ships for specific voyages each year. Initially, private merchants were permitted to purchase cargo space on these royal ships at a premium. However, by the 1540s, the increasing expense of shipbuilding made these ventures unsustainable for the Crown.

♦ *Portuguese sought spice monopoly*

In response, the Portuguese state began issuing trade licenses to private merchants and individuals, allowing them to conduct commercial activities. These licenses were often granted as rewards for military service, given as dowries for the daughters of noble but financially strained fidalgos or attached to administrative positions. However, more commonly, licenses were auctioned to the highest bidder, generating significant profits for both the Crown and the license holders.

♦ *Trade licenses replaced royal ships*

To further assert control over Indian Ocean trade, the Portuguese introduced the *cartaz* system. This was a mandatory sea pass issued by Portuguese authorities, effectively functioning as a permit for vessels to navigate within Asian waters. The *cartaz* included details such as the name of the ship's captain, the ship's size, crew count and the limited number of arms and munitions permitted onboard. Ships were required to dock at a Portuguese-controlled fort to pay customs duties before proceeding to their destinations. Vessels sailing without a valid *cartaz* faced confiscation and their crews

♦ *Cartaz required for legal sailing*

were subject to severe punishment. While the fee for obtaining a *cartaz* was relatively minor, the Portuguese reaped substantial gains through the collection of customs duties.

Later in the century, the Portuguese devised another trade control mechanism known as the *Qafila*. This system involved forming convoys of local merchant vessels escorted by Portuguese naval fleets. The *qafila* served two main purposes: providing security to native traders from piracy and facilitating the collection of customs revenue at Portuguese ports. In some instances, these convoys also transported essential supplies, particularly food, to sustain Portuguese forts and settlements along the coast. Through such measures, the Portuguese effectively maintained their dominance over maritime trade in the Indian Ocean.

♦ *Qafila ensured trade security*

Cartaz and Qafila

Throughout the 16th century, a significant feature of the Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean was their effort to dominate and tax the trade conducted by Asian merchants. Their most notable influence on regional commerce was through the implementation of the *cartaz*-armada-*qafila* system. The *cartaz* was a mandatory naval pass issued by the Portuguese, supported by their formidable fleets, known as armadas. Since most Asian states either lacked naval power or had inferior maritime forces, the Portuguese were able to enforce their regulations with minimal opposition.

♦ *Cartaz-armada-qafila enabled control*

Under the *cartaz* system, every Asian merchant ship was required to obtain a pass from Portuguese authorities, specifying its travel route and mandating a stop at a Portuguese controlled port for the payment of customs duties. Ships found without a *cartaz* were seized and the crew often faced severe punishment, including execution or forced labour in Portuguese galleys. Even vessels possessing a *cartaz* were subject to confiscation if they violated its terms. Despite these strict regulations, the actual fee for obtaining a *cartaz* was relatively small.

♦ *Strict enforcement of cartaz rules*

In the latter half of the 16th century, the Portuguese introduced the *qafila* or caravan system along India's western coast. This system aimed to ensure compliance with the *cartaz* policy by requiring merchant ships to travel in groups under the protection of a Portuguese naval escort. It was also designed to protect ships from Malabari pirate attacks. However, many Indian merchants were reluctant to participate in the *qafila* system, as it meant calling at Portuguese ports like Goa, paying customs duties and engaging in what was effectively coerced trade. To enforce compliance, the Portuguese fleets not only guarded the convoys but also prevented any ships from evading their control.

♦ *Qafila ensured escorted trade*

♦ *India key to spice trade*

The Portuguese primarily exported spices, particularly pepper, to Europe. Although they conquered Malacca in 1511, most of their pepper supply continued to come from the Malabar and Kanara regions on India's southwest coast. Consequently, India became the focal point of their trading operations in Asia. While their engagement with other parts of Asia, including China and Japan, held significance for the intra-Asian trade, it was secondary to their spice trade with Europe.

♦ *Portuguese targeted horse trade*

The Portuguese sought to monopolise the horse trade, a sector traditionally dominated by Arab merchants. Before their arrival, high quality horses were imported from the Persian Gulf region, particularly from Arabia and Persia. Recognising the strategic importance of horses in regional warfare, the Portuguese attempted to control this trade to strengthen their influence in the region.

2.3.2.3 *Cartaz* System

♦ *Trade became coercive and monopolised*

Control over an oceanic region is defined as the ability to navigate freely while preventing others from doing the same. In practice, it largely involved the physical or legal capability to seize the ships of other parties and protect one's own vessels from capture. From the early 16th century, the Portuguese asserted dominance over the Indian Ocean, allowing only those vessels that purchased a *Cartaz*, a safe conduct pass, to sail without facing seizure. This form of protection was sold as a means of extracting tribute from Asian traders. Ships traversing routes not monopolised by the Portuguese had to secure a *Cartaz* to ensure the safety of their cargo and avoid confiscation. Consequently, the *Cartaz* system introduced coercion and monopolistic practices into the Indian Ocean trade.

♦ *Cape route helped enforce dominance*

Following the Portuguese discovery of the Cape route, their initial objective was to completely exclude Asian ships from the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Trade in spices was heavily restricted and the *Cartaz* system was the main tool used to implement this policy. Adversaries of the Portuguese and merchants carrying restricted goods, such as spices, were prohibited from trading. This system effectively constrained the principle of free navigation and reinforced the ideological foundation of the Portuguese maritime empire in the East.

Historically, the concept of sea passes or safe conducts, had existed in Europe prior to the Portuguese *Cartaz*. The legal justification for Portugal's maritime control stemmed from the belief in a universal empire led by the Portuguese king. Dom Manuel (1495-1521) envisioned himself as a global promoter of Christianity, a sentiment reinforced by Vasco da Gama's return from India. While the religious zeal of Dom Manuel declined under subsequent rulers, the concept

♦ *Cartaz tied to Christian empire*

of imperial jurisdiction over the Indian Ocean persisted. Portuguese kings were seen as the supreme protectors of Christianity in the East and local rulers were treated as vassals. By the 17th century, scholars like Fr. Serafim de Freitas further legitimised Portuguese claims to maritime sovereignty, asserting their dominion over the Indian Ocean.

♦ *Older systems inspired Cartaz idea*

The *Cartaz* system was not without historical precedent. Prior to the Portuguese, maritime powers such as Srivijaya in Sumatra levied passage fees on merchant ships. Likewise, Arab and Indian rulers in the Indian Ocean taxed passing vessels. However, the scale and systematic application of the *Cartaz* system were unprecedented. Ships found without a *Cartaz* were seized, their crews enslaved or killed. Unlike previous practices, the Portuguese enforced their maritime dominance with brutal efficiency, employing a standing naval force to police the seas. Under this system, all ships were required to carry a *Cartaz* identifying the captain, crew size, cargo and specified ports of call.

♦ *Cartaz authority became centralised*

The issuance of *Cartaz*es was initially decentralised, with local rulers such as the Cochin Raja, the Zamorin of Calicut and the Sheikh of Aden authorised to distribute them. However, by the second half of the 16th century, the Portuguese centralised this authority, allowing only their officials to issue Cartazes. Goa became the primary administrative centre for the *Cartaz* system. Ships transporting forbidden goods like spices, weapons or slaves were particularly targeted. Portuguese captains often justified their seizures by claiming to enforce the protection of Christianity and their king's authority.

♦ *Corruption weakened Cartaz control*

While the *Cartaz* system provided the Portuguese with considerable control, it also introduced corruption and inefficiency. Officials frequently sold Cartazes for personal gain and bribes were common. Additionally, the issuance of Cartazes to merchants from rival states undermined the Portuguese monopoly. Despite these challenges, the *Cartaz* system was maintained for over two centuries, with records of its use extending into the early 19th century.

♦ *Cartaz supported strategic dominance*

The *Cartaz* was not solely a means of economic control; it also served strategic and political purposes. By regulating the spice trade, limiting the movement of rival merchants and asserting Portuguese authority, the *Cartaz* system reinforced the Estado da India's dominance. However, opposition persisted. Gujarati merchants, for example, often disregarded the *Cartaz* regulations, engaging in illicit trade. Arab traders redirected their spice trade to bypass Portuguese patrols and even local rulers resisted the imposition of Portuguese maritime authority.

♦ *Portuguese monopoly failed in the long run*

While the *Cartaz* system contributed to the temporary success of the Portuguese Empire, it ultimately failed to secure long-term control over the Indian Ocean trade. By the 17th century, competing European powers such as the Dutch and the English introduced their own systems of trade regulation. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) implemented a more efficient convoy and pass system, while the English focused on market competition. Unlike the Portuguese, whose policies relied heavily on monopolistic control, these companies adapted to market dynamics.

2.3.2.4 Impact of Portuguese Trade on Indian Overseas Commerce

♦ *Portuguese affected Gujarat's maritime trade*

The Portuguese control over Indian overseas trade, particularly in Gujarat, had noticeable effects, leading to a shift in the region's maritime commerce during the 16th century. At the beginning of the century, Gujarat's trade network extended primarily in two directions: towards the Red Sea and Southeast Asia via Malacca. However, over the next hundred years, trade with the Red Sea region gained prominence, while commerce with Southeast Asia gradually declined. The influence of Portuguese interventions played a significant role in this reorientation.

♦ *Trade patterns remained largely intact*

Despite their aggressive efforts, the Portuguese failed to bring about major transformations in trade routes, products or production techniques. Their control was more about diverting trade and imposing additional customs duties rather than introducing fundamental changes. In essence, the Portuguese system manipulated existing trade patterns without reshaping the regional economy. This limited impact was especially evident in regions beyond Gujarat. For instance, the Chettiyar merchants of the Coromandel Coast largely escaped Portuguese influence. Similarly, in Malabar, although Portuguese control was extensive and often burdensome, local traders found ways to bypass their regulations.

♦ *Asian trade remained largely dominant*

The broader consequences of the Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean remain a subject of debate. W. H. Moreland viewed the arrival of the Portuguese as marking the beginning of a new era in the region. However, scholars like Van Leur contested this notion, arguing that Asian maritime trade remained dominant. Despite Portuguese attempts, they failed to monopolise even the lucrative pepper and spice trade. Supporting this view, Niels Steensgaard highlighted that the volume of pepper and spice exports via the Oceanic route to Europe did not experience substantial growth until the arrival of the Dutch and English East India Companies in the early 17th century.

♦ *Gujarati ships outpaced Portuguese*

C. R. Boxer acknowledged that by the late 16th century, Gujarati ships were transporting more pepper from Acheh to the Red Sea than the Portuguese were carrying to Lisbon. L. F. Thomaz estimated that Portuguese exports of cloves to Europe throughout the century constituted only about 10% of the total production in the Moluccas. Furthermore, their role in the overall Asian spice trade was minimal. According to M. N. Pearson, Portuguese influence was often irrelevant in the vast Asian markets, where local demand for spices far outweighed European consumption.

♦ *Portuguese presence not transformative*

Historian Ashin Das Gupta summarised the Portuguese presence in India as spectacular but not dominant. While the Portuguese made their mark in specific areas, they did not significantly alter the course of Indian maritime trade. There was no definitive "Vasco da Gama epoch" in Indian maritime history, as their arrival in 1500 failed to establish overwhelming control over regional commerce.

Malabar Coast

♦ *Papal support backed conquest plans*

King Immanuel of Portugal secured papal approval to explore new trade routes and establish dominance over them. This sanction fuelled his ambition to control the Indian Ocean trade through conquest. With insights from Bartolomeu Dias, who had explored the Cape of Good Hope and intelligence gathered through spies, the king planned an expedition led by Vasco da Gama. On July 8, 1497, da Gama set sail from Lisbon with 170 men, many of whom were criminals. After navigating the African coast and receiving guidance from a Gujarati mariner sent by the Sultan of Malindi, he reached Kozhikode on May 18, 1498, though many of his crew had succumbed to scurvy.

♦ *Marakkars warned against Portuguese arrival*

Upon his arrival, local fishermen informed the Zamorin, who, concerned about the monsoon, directed da Gama to anchor at Kappad. The Zamorin met him with suspicion, influenced by warnings from Marakkar Muslim traders who feared losing their dominance. Although da Gama was temporarily detained, he eventually returned to Portugal, his mission partly unsuccessful. In 1500, Pedro Álvares Cabral led a larger expedition with 1,200 mariners, including mercenaries. They resorted to violence along the Malabar coast, returning with spices obtained by force. Seeking revenge, da Gama returned in 1502 with 20 heavily armed ships, killing civilians and demanding retribution from the Zamorin. When refused, his forces ravaged Kozhikode, committing brutal atrocities.

At the time, local rulers controlled maritime activity through licenses called *cartaz*, rooted in Arab, Mamluk and Chinese naval

traditions. However, the Portuguese, backed by papal authority, claimed dominion over oceanic territories, enforcing their own passes. This led to conflicts as they attacked merchant ships, provoking appeals for protection from the Zamorin. Despite Portuguese efforts to monopolise trade, resistance persisted. Muslim merchants, particularly the wealthy paradesi Muslims and the coastal Marakkars, adapted through alternative trade routes. The Marakkars initially collaborated with the Portuguese but later resisted their oppressive policies. Some became corsairs, engaging in naval resistance under leaders like Kunjali Marakkar, who operated from Calicut with Zamorin's support.

♦ *Portuguese challenged local trade rules*

The Portuguese established forts in Cochin, Goa and other regions, using a pass system called *cartaz* to control trade. Despite these measures, Gujarati merchants and others continued trading through the Red Sea. Political alliances also shaped the conflict. The Portuguese supported rulers like the King of Cochin, influencing regional state formation. However, their reliance on taxation and naval power limited their territorial control. By the late 16th century, their monopoly weakened as the Dutch and English entered the Asian trade network.

♦ *Forts and cartaz controlled trade*

The Kunjali Marakkars emerged as formidable naval commanders. Initially maritime traders from Cochin, they moved to Ponnani under the Zamorin's protection after the Portuguese arrived. Appointed as admirals, they disrupted Portuguese trade using agile vessels and guerrilla tactics. Under Kutti Ali's leadership, they inflicted significant damage, though counterattacks weakened their fleet. The Portuguese responded by establishing a fort at Chaliyam in 1531, further threatening the Zamorin's control. Despite temporary treaties, tensions continued, leading to the Zamorin's victory and the destruction of the Chaliyam fort in 1571.

♦ *Marakkars used agile naval tactics*

Following this triumph, the Kunjali Marakkars gained prominence. Kunjali III constructed a fortress at Kottakkal and assumed a Nair chieftain's status. However, alliances shifted as the Zamorin re-established ties with the Portuguese. Kunjali IV's defiance, declaring himself "King of the Moors" and "Lord of the Indian Seas," further strained relations. In 1600, the Zamorin, in alliance with the Portuguese, besieged Kottakkal. Kunjali IV surrendered under a false promise of pardon, only to be executed in Goa. His betrayal by the Zamorin remains a dark chapter in Kerala's history, symbolising the complexities of resistance and political maneuvering during the age of colonial expansion.

♦ *Zamorin betrayed Kunjali IV*

The arrival of the Portuguese in Malabar was not merely a commercial venture but the start of political, religious and naval

♦ *Colonisation displaced native trade systems*

colonisation. By monopolising sea trade and dismantling the region's free trade culture, they established dominance over native communities, particularly Muslims, whom they saw as both religious and commercial rivals. Their technological superiority, including powerful warships and advanced cannons developed with German expertise, initially gave them a stronghold. However, the Portuguese faced fierce resistance from the Kunjali Marakkars. Without the Kunjalis' resistance, Kerala might have faced the same fate as Goa, with its population becoming a cultural hybrid.

♦ *Muslim response was not unified*

The conflict between Muslims and the Portuguese was not uniform. While the Kareemi Muslims maintained bitter enmity, the Marakkars had a more complex relationship, involving both conflicts and temporary alliances. Some local merchants cooperated with the Portuguese, even acting as spies, with figures like Koyapakki serving as intermediaries.

♦ *Cannons revolutionised local warfare*

Portuguese dominance also introduced significant changes in warfare. Previously, local battles in Kerala resembled ritualistic skirmishes using fire torches. The Portuguese, however, used cannons and introduced a system of professional naval combat led by German officers. This technological edge initially overwhelmed the Zamorin's forces, but over time, they adapted and acquired similar military skills.

♦ *Cassados threatened Marakkar dominance*

Initially, the Kunjali Marakkars maintained a cooperative relationship with the Portuguese, assisting them with manpower and maritime support. However, conflicts emerged as Portuguese ambitions to monopolise trade intensified. The rise of the cassados — Portuguese settlers with local spouses — further aggravated tensions. Protected by the Portuguese, the cassados established a powerful trading network that threatened the Marakkars' dominance in coastal trade. The Marakkars fiercely opposed both the Portuguese and the cassados, resulting in a series of confrontations.

♦ *Religious framing masked trade rivalry*

While some viewed the Marakkar resistance as a religious conflict, with leaders like Shaik Zainuddin framing it as a jihad in his text *Tuhfat Ul Mujjahiddin*, economic rivalry remained the primary cause of the conflict. Despite frequent clashes, the Portuguese occasionally reconciled with the Marakkars for strategic trade benefits. The Marakkars were vital in supplying cargo to Portuguese ships and maintaining the coastal trade network.

2.3.2.5 Kunjalis

Kunjali I, the first Marakkar appointed by the Zamorin, organised an efficient naval force. He was a skilled commander who introduced small, swift boats called 'paraos,' which outmaneuvered the slower,

♦ *Guerrilla tactics forced convoys*

heavily armed Portuguese vessels. Strategic hilltop signals were also used to monitor enemy movements, a communication advantage the Portuguese lacked. This effective guerrilla warfare forced the Portuguese to adopt convoy systems for protection.

♦ *Red Sea trade evaded control*

In 1523, Kunjali I audaciously led a fleet of pepper loaded ships to the Red Sea, bypassing Portuguese surveillance. Despite facing counterattacks led by Martin D'Souza and other Portuguese commanders, the Marakkars' resilience remained evident. Even when Kunjali I was captured and sworn under the *Quran* not to fight again, resistance continued. Pattu Marakkar and Balia Hasan led subsequent guerrilla campaigns, sinking several Portuguese ships. However, internal betrayals, like the Arakkal king's surrender of Balia Hasan, strained the resistance.

♦ *Chaliyam fort extended control*

In response to ongoing attacks, the Portuguese established the Chaliyam Fort in 1532 with the consent of the Raja of Tanur. Strategically positioned, the fort facilitated Portuguese control over the Zamorin's territories, leading to further confrontations.

♦ *Portuguese suffered repeated losses*

Kunjali II, the successor to Kunjali I, intensified attacks on Portuguese settlements along the Coromandel Coast and in Ceylon. His tactics involved simultaneous attacks from multiple fronts, causing considerable disruption. The Portuguese retaliated, defeating the Marakkar fleet in battles like the one at Naya Pattinam in 1533. However, Kunjali II regrouped, defeating them in subsequent encounters.

♦ *Alliance attempts were uncoordinated*

In 1537, the Zamorin launched an offensive against Portuguese forces in Kodungallur and Cochin, supported by Kunjali II. Attempts to form alliances with other regional powers, including Gujarat and the Ottoman Empire, faced challenges due to a lack of coordination. Despite military setbacks, the Marakkars' continued resistance significantly hindered Portuguese control over Malabar's maritime trade.

♦ *Chaliyam siege weakened Portuguese control*

In 1571, the Zamorin's forces, supported by local Muslims, laid siege to the Portuguese fort at Chaliyam. Under the leadership of Pattu Marakkar, the fort's supply lines were severed, leading to the starvation of its inhabitants. The Portuguese captain De Castro was captured and later executed in Goa. The fall of Chaliyam was a major blow to Portuguese prestige and influence along the Malabar Coast, significantly weakening their control.

♦ *Marakkar Kotta built at Puduppatanam*

Following the victory at Chaliyam, the Zamorin permitted Pattu Marakkar to build a fort and dockyard at Puduppatanam, which was completed within two years and named Marakkar Kotta. During the tenureof Kunjali Marakkar III, war technology improved with the

assistance of Egyptian and Turkish architects and even the Mughal emperor contributed a sculptor for the construction of the fort.

♦ *Naval resistance disrupted Portuguese operations*

Kunjali III engaged in continuous naval skirmishes with the Portuguese, using innovative tactics. Velliyamkallu, known as "Sacrifice Rock," became notorious for the slaughter of Portuguese soldiers. Despite his efforts, he was unable to expel the Portuguese from Goa. However, his resistance disrupted their operations along the Malabar Coast. The Portuguese attacks on villages and commercial ships continued, leading to famines in Calicut. Nevertheless, the fleet of Kunjali III, under the leadership of commanders like Kutti Moosa and Kutti Pokker, successfully counterattacked, protecting Malabar's coastal trade.

♦ *European designs strengthened fleet*

The Zamorin's decision to permit the Portuguese to construct a fort at Ponnani in 1588 proved disastrous. This marked the beginning of tensions between the Zamorin and Muslim seamen, straining their once strong alliance. The leadership of Kunjali III, however, remained formidable. He incorporated European naval designs into his fleet with the help of German engineers, maintaining a powerful presence in the Arabian Sea.

♦ *Rumors stirred Zamorin's distrust*

Upon the death of Kunjali III, his nephew, Muhammad Kunjali, assumed leadership. Known as Kunjali IV, he continued the resistance against the Portuguese. His growing power and influence, however, unsettled the Zamorin. The Portuguese exploited this rift, spreading false rumours that Kunjali intended to establish a Muslim empire. This created widespread suspicion and fear.

♦ *Zamorin allied with Portuguese*

The support of Kunjali IV for the enemies of the Portuguese, including the Rani of Ullal and the Sultan of Bijapur, further intensified hostilities. Despite his successful naval campaigns, the relationship between Kunjali and the Zamorin deteriorated. The Portuguese capitalised on this, forming an alliance with the Zamorin to bring down Kunjali IV.

♦ *Joint siege blocked fort supplies*

In 1599, a joint Portuguese-Zamorin force, led by Viceroy Francisco de Gama, launched a massive siege on Marakkar Kotta. The Portuguese fleet was accompanied by over a thousand soldiers, while the Zamorin provided additional man power. Despite fierce resistance, Kunjali's fort was surrounded and supply lines were blocked. After months of fighting, the weakened defenders faced starvation.

♦ *Kunjali IV surrendered to Zamorin*

Kunjali IV, realising the hopelessness of the situation, surrendered to the Zamorin, believing he would be granted clemency. However, the Zamorin handed him over to the Portuguese. Kunjali IV and his followers were taken to Goa, where they were executed. His body was dismembered and displayed publicly as a warning.

♦ *Resistance ended with Kunjali's fall*

The fall of Kunjali Marakkar IV marked the end of organised resistance against the Portuguese in Malabar. While the Portuguese regained temporary dominance, their power began to wane with the rise of the Dutch. The legacy of the Kunjali Marakkars lived on through stories, songs and historical texts, symbolising resilience against colonial oppression.

♦ *Maritime tactics influenced regional warfare*

The Kunjalis' struggle was not merely a military confrontation but a form of resistance against political and economic subjugation. Their maritime strategies, including guerrilla tactics, hit-and-run assaults and naval blockades, significantly influenced the region's warfare. Even during World War II, similar convoy protection strategies were used, reflecting the enduring relevance of their methods.

♦ *Kunjalis symbolise defiance in Kerala*

The resistance of the Kunjali Marakkars continues to be celebrated in Kerala as a symbol of defiance and valour. Their legacy underscores the significance of naval independence in maintaining sovereignty. The collapse of the Kunjali Marakkars also contributed to the eventual decline of the Zamorin's authority, as foreign powers like the Dutch and the British expanded their influence. The history of the Kunjali Marakkars is a reminder of the importance of maritime power in shaping the political and economic history of a region. Their fierce resistance against the Portuguese remains an integral part of Kerala's historical narrative.

2.3.3 Latinisation

♦ *Portuguese spread culture through Catholicism*

The Latinisation of India by the Portuguese was a significant aspect of their colonial influence, particularly in regions like Goa, Daman and Diu. Arriving in 1498, the Portuguese established a strong hold along the western coast of India, bringing with them not only trade and military power but also their culture, language and religion. One of the primary tools of Latinisation was the spread of Christianity, particularly Catholicism, through missionary activities led by religious orders like the Jesuits, Franciscans and Dominicans. Churches, schools and seminaries were established to propagate Christian teachings and European cultural values. The introduction of the Latin script and the promotion of the Portuguese language played a crucial role in this process. Indigenous names, traditions and cultural practices were often replaced or influenced by European customs. Furthermore, the adoption of Christian names and the enforcement of Western legal and administrative systems further embedded Latin cultural elements into Indian society. Despite resistance and the resilience of native traditions, the legacy of Latinisation is evident today in the architectural landmarks, religious practices and linguistic influences that remain in former Portuguese territories.

♦ *Papal Bulls sanctioned Portuguese dominance*

The Portuguese arrival on the Malabar coast in the late 15th century marked the beginning of significant interactions with the St. Thomas Christians, an ancient South Indian community tracing their origins to the apostle St. Thomas. Driven by the pursuit of gold, glory and religious expansion, the Portuguese established a mercantile and religious foothold in India, exploiting the spice trade while interfering in the customs of the St. Thomas Christians through a process of Latinisation to align their traditions with Roman Catholic norms. Papal Bulls legitimised these efforts, granting Portugal control over newly discovered territories and endorsing the spread of Catholicism.

♦ *Synod enforced Latin customs*

The Padrado Real system allowed the Portuguese crown to manage church activities within its territories, reinforcing their religious and commercial ambitions. Missionaries, particularly from the Society of Jesus, played a key role in attempting to convert and discipline native Christians, often labelling their practices as heretical. Archbishop Alexis de Meneses led one of the most significant attempts at Latinisation. Following the death of the Eastern Church Bishop Mar Abraham, Meneses convened the Synod of Diamper in 1599, enforcing the replacement of Syriac traditions with Latin customs and condemning Eastern Church practices. Despite these efforts, the St. Thomas Christians resisted, culminating in the Coonan Cross Oath of 1653, a public rejection of Portuguese ecclesiastical dominance.

♦ *Local alliances shaped Portuguese impact*

The Portuguese influence in Malabar also involved complex alliances. While the Zamorin of Calicut initially resisted them, other rulers, like the Kolathiris, aligned with the Portuguese for trade and military support. The Marakkars, a prominent Muslim trading family, maintained fluctuating relationships with the Portuguese, driven by economic interests and maritime conflicts. Despite their aggressive attempts, the Portuguese failed to achieve full Latinisation, as resistance from the St. Thomas Christians and regional political rivalries limited their influence. By the late 17th century, the community fragmented into groups with differing allegiances, leading to long -lasting religious and cultural consequences.

♦ *Inquisition triggered community migrations*

Kerala's religious landscape experienced significant upheaval during the Portuguese period, marked by their ambition to spread Catholicism and establish Papal supremacy. Papal Bulls like the one issued by Pope Nicholas V in 1454 granted Portugal the right to explore and convert territories. The Portuguese established the Inquisition in Goa, persecuting and forcibly converting Muslims and Jews, leading to the migration of communities like the Gowda Saraswaths and Jews to Kerala. Settling in towns such as Cochin,

Ernakulam and Chennamangalam, these communities sought refuge from persecution.

♦ *Seminaries spread Latin church practices*

While Hindu rulers were generally left alone to maintain political alliances, the Portuguese destroyed temples like those in Tevalakkara and Palluruthi. Muslims faced severe persecution, with mosques destroyed and forced conversions imposed. Similarly, the St. Thomas Christians, who followed the Syriac liturgy and maintained ties with the Patriarchate of Babylon, faced religious persecution. The Portuguese established seminaries and churches to impose Latin practices, with institutions like the Seminary of Cranganore and the Jesuit College at Cochin serving as centres for Latin learning.

♦ *Synod replaced Syriac with Latin*

The Synod of Diamper in 1599, presided over by Archbishop Meneses, condemned the Syriac liturgy, declared Nestorianism heretical and mandated the adoption of Latin rites, severing the St. Thomas Christians' connection with the Patriarchate of Babylon and placing them under Papal authority. However, Portuguese control over the Kerala Church was short lived. The arrival of a Jacobite bishop named Ahatalla in 1653, rumoured to have been killed by the Portuguese, incited widespread unrest. Thousands of Syrian Christians gathered at the Coonan Cross in Mattancherry, taking an oath rejecting the authority of the Latin Archbishop.

♦ *Syrian traditions resisted full Latinisation*

This revolt, known as the Oath of the Coonan Cross, marked a turning point in Kerala's Christian history. Archdeacon Thomas was subsequently consecrated as the Metropolitan of the Syrians, leading to a permanent division between the Romo-Syrians, who remained loyal to Rome and the Jacobite Syrians, who rejected Papal authority. Despite Portuguese efforts, their attempt to fully Latinise the Kerala Church failed. The resilience of the Syrian Christians ensured the preservation of their traditions and identity, resulting in the continued existence of both the Roman Catholic and Jacobite branches of the St. Thomas Christian community.

Summarised Overview

The arrival of the Portuguese in India marked the beginning of European maritime dominance in the Indian Ocean. Vasco da Gama's arrival in Calicut in 1498 established Portuguese trade connections, leading to the establishment of a trading empire. Through the construction of forts and naval superiority, they secured control over key ports, including Goa, which became the administrative capital. The Portuguese implemented the *cartaz* system, a form of naval pass that ensured their dominance over Asian maritime trade. Although their influence was challenged by regional powers like the Zamorin of Calicut

and the resistance of the Kunjali Marakkars, the Portuguese maintained a stronghold over spice trade routes. Despite the establishment of the Portuguese India Company in 1628, financial difficulties and competition from the Dutch and British eventually weakened their monopoly.

The Portuguese also pursued religious and cultural dominance through the Latinisation of Indian societies, particularly in regions like Goa, Daman and Diu. Missionary efforts by Jesuits and other religious orders promoted Catholicism, imposing Western customs and the Latin script while undermining indigenous religious practices. The Synod of Diamper in 1599, led by Archbishop Meneses, enforced Latin rites upon the St. Thomas Christians, leading to resistance and the historic Coonan Cross Oath of 1653. Additionally, the Portuguese established the Inquisition in Goa, targeting religious minorities like Muslims and Jews. However, local resistance and the resilience of indigenous traditions limited the long-term success of these efforts, resulting in lasting cultural and religious divisions in the region.

Assignments

1. Discuss the factors that led to the arrival of the Portuguese in India and their establishment of maritime dominance.
2. Describe the *cartaz* system implemented by the Portuguese.
3. Evaluate the significance of the Kunjali Marakkars' resistance against Portuguese naval dominance.
4. Discuss the impact of Portuguese trade policies on the Indian maritime economy. To what extent did they succeed in monopolising the spice trade.
5. Examine the process of Latinisation initiated by the Portuguese in India.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

European Companies and India's Waters

BLOCK-03

UNIT 1

Colonial Perception of Indian Seas and Littoral People

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to :

- explain the significance of pre-colonial maritime networks in the Indian Ocean
- analyse how colonial powers redefined trade, governance and indigenous economies
- assess the impact of colonial narratives that labelled indigenous maritime communities as pirates
- examine the resilience and adaptation of littoral societies to colonial disruptions

Background

The Indian Ocean has long been a vibrant corridor of commerce, culture and connectivity, linking diverse societies across Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Before European colonial intervention, this maritime expanse was characterised by intricate networks of trade and cultural exchange. However, the arrival of European colonial powers, particularly the British, introduced new perceptions and policies that redefined the Indian Ocean and its littoral communities. Colonial narratives often depicted these maritime regions as chaotic and lawless, necessitating European intervention and control.

Keywords

littoral Societies, Pre-Colonial Maritime Networks, Indian Ocean Trade, Colonial Piracy Narratives, Thalassocracies, Colonial Economic Disruption

Discussion

3.1.1 Pre-Colonial Maritime Networks in the Indian Ocean

Prior to European colonisation, the Indian Ocean functioned as a dynamic nexus of trade and cultural exchange, connecting diverse regions such as the Swahili coast of East Africa, the Arabian

Peninsula, the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. Maritime communities from these areas engaged in extensive trade networks, dealing in commodities like spices, textiles and precious metals. These interactions fostered cosmopolitan societies along the littoral regions, characterised by linguistic diversity, religious pluralism and shared economic interests. Historian Michael Pearson introduced the concept of 'littoral societies' to describe communities inhabiting coastal regions, engaging in both maritime and terrestrial activities. These societies were not confined by rigid territorial boundaries but were instead defined by their fluid interactions across the sea. This perspective challenges traditional, land-centric views of history, highlighting the significance of maritime connections in shaping cultural and economic landscapes.

♦ *The Concept of 'Littoral Societies'*

The Swahili coast of East Africa exemplifies the characteristics of littoral societies. Stretching from present-day Somalia to Mozambique, this region was home to numerous city-states that thrived on Indian Ocean trade. These city-states, such as Kilwa and Mombasa, were cosmopolitan centres where African, Arab, Persian and Indian cultures intermingled. Archaeological evidence indicates that these societies were deeply integrated into the broader Indian Ocean trade networks, dealing in goods like gold, ivory and slaves.

♦ *The Swahili Coast: A Case Study*

The Bay of Bengal region also hosted intricate maritime networks during the pre-colonial era. Ports such as Chittagong, Masulipatnam and Aceh served as crucial nodes connecting the Indian subcontinent with Southeast Asia. Merchants from these ports traded in a variety of goods, including textiles, spices and precious stones. These trading communities were often organised into diasporic networks, facilitating the flow of goods, people and ideas across vast distances.

♦ *Maritime Networks in the Bay of Bengal*

In Southeast Asia, thalassocracies—maritime-based polities—such as Srivijaya and Majapahit emerged, exerting control over sea routes and trade networks. These empires leveraged their naval prowess to dominate regional commerce, facilitating cultural and economic exchanges between diverse communities. The Austronesian peoples, known for their advanced seafaring skills, played a pivotal role in establishing these maritime networks, connecting regions as far apart as Madagascar and the Pacific Islands.

♦ *Thalassocracies and Maritime Dominance*

The extensive trade networks of the Indian Ocean facilitated not only economic transactions but also cultural and religious exchanges. For instance, the spread of Islam along the Swahili coast and into Southeast Asia can be attributed to these maritime interactions. Merchants and sailors acted as conduits for religious

♦ *Cultural and Religious Exchanges*

ideas, leading to the establishment of Muslim communities in regions like coastal India, Indonesia and East Africa. This religious diffusion contributed to the rich tapestry of cultural diversity characteristic of littoral societies.

♦ *Technological Innovations in Maritime Trade*

Technological advancements played a crucial role in the success of pre-colonial maritime networks. The development of the lateen sail, for example, allowed ships to navigate against the wind, enhancing their maneuverability. Additionally, the understanding and utilisation of monsoon wind patterns enabled more predictable and efficient voyages across the Indian Ocean. These innovations underscored the adaptability and ingenuity of littoral societies in maximising the potential of their maritime environment.

3.1.2 Colonial Perceptions and Justifications for Intervention

♦ *Legitimise expansionist ambitions*

European colonial powers, upon entering the Indian Ocean arena, encountered established trade networks that had operated efficiently for centuries. However, to legitimise their expansionist ambitions, they often depicted these networks as disordered and in need of regulation. This narrative served as a pretext for imposing their own frameworks of control. For instance, the Portuguese, upon arriving in the Indian Ocean in the late 15th century, sought to dominate the spice trade by establishing a maritime empire. They perceived the existing trade system, which was free and competitive, as chaotic and endeavoured to control it through force and coercion.

♦ *Imposition of Colonial Economic Structures*

The British, following the Portuguese, further entrenched colonial dominance by restructuring the Indian Ocean's economic landscape. They implemented policies that integrated the region's economy into the global capitalist system, often to the detriment of indigenous practices. The introduction of free trade principles, particularly after the Charter Act of 1813, allowed British manufactured goods to flood Indian markets, undermining local industries and artisans. This shift disrupted traditional economic structures and led to the deindustrialisation of regions that had previously been manufacturing hubs.

♦ *Disruption of Indigenous Systems*

Colonial policies often undermined indigenous systems of governance, trade and social organisation. The British, for example, introduced land revenue systems like the Permanent Settlement, which altered traditional land ownership patterns and imposed fixed revenues on peasants. This led to widespread indebtedness and loss of land among local populations. The emphasis on cash crops for export disrupted subsistence agriculture, making local economies more vulnerable to global market fluctuations.

♦ *Socio-Economic Disruptions*

The colonial restructuring of economic systems had profound socio-economic impacts on littoral communities. The decline of traditional industries, coupled with the emphasis on cash crop cultivation, led to increased poverty and food insecurity. Furthermore, the integration into the global capitalist economy made these communities susceptible to economic downturns, as they were now linked to the volatile international market. The disruption of traditional social structures and the imposition of foreign legal systems further exacerbated social dislocation and cultural erosion.

♦ *The Koli Community: From Mariners to 'Pirates'*

The Koli community, indigenous to regions like Gujarat and Maharashtra, traditionally engaged in fishing, coastal trade and agriculture. Their intimate knowledge of the sea and coastal terrains made them adept mariners. However, during periods of political instability, such as the decline of the Mughal Empire, some Koli groups resorted to raiding maritime trade routes, activities the British later labelled as piracy. This branding served the colonial agenda by portraying the Kolis as lawless, thereby justifying British naval interventions to secure trade routes and establish control over coastal regions.

♦ *The Marakkayar Community: Navigators Under Suspicion*

The Marakkayars, a Tamil Muslim seafaring community, played a significant role in regional and international maritime trade. Their expertise in navigation and shipbuilding established them as prominent maritime traders. However, with the advent of European colonial powers, their activities came under suspicion. Accusations of piracy against the Marakkayars facilitated colonial efforts to suppress indigenous trading networks and assert control over strategic maritime regions, thereby disrupting established economic systems.

♦ *Colonial Strategy: Branding Resistance as Piracy*

Labelling indigenous maritime resistance as piracy was a calculated colonial strategy. By defining these communities' defensive actions against foreign intrusion as criminal, colonial powers legitimised their military interventions and the subsequent imposition of legal and economic structures that favoured colonial interests. This approach not only undermined indigenous sovereignty but also facilitated the monopolisation of trade routes and resources by colonial powers.

♦ *Consequences of the 'Pirate' Label*

The branding of indigenous maritime communities as pirates had lasting socio-economic impacts. It led to the marginalisation of these communities, loss of traditional livelihoods and the erosion of cultural identities. The imposition of colonial legal frameworks criminalised customary practices, disrupting social structures and economies that had thrived for centuries. This not only facilitated the consolidation of colonial rule but also left enduring legacies

of social and economic disenfranchisement among the affected communities. The construction of the 'pirate' archetype by colonial powers was a deliberate tactic to delegitimise indigenous maritime communities and justify imperial expansion. This strategy facilitated the suppression of resistance, the restructuring of traditional economies and the entrenchment of colonial dominance in maritime regions.

♦ *Marginalisation of Indigenous Maritime Practices*

Colonial administrations frequently undervalued indigenous maritime knowledge, favouring European methods and technologies. Traditional navigation techniques, which had enabled sailors to traverse vast oceanic distances using environmental cues, were often overlooked. Similarly, indigenous shipbuilding practices, adapted to local conditions and resources, were sidelined in favour of European designs. This dismissal not only devalued local expertise but also led to the decline of indigenous shipbuilding industries.

♦ *Disenfranchisement of littoral communities*

The imposition of Western legal frameworks further disrupted indigenous maritime practices. Colonial laws often failed to recognise customary rights, leading to the disenfranchisement of littoral communities. For instance, traditional fishing rights, integral to the livelihoods of coastal populations, were frequently overlooked, resulting in conflicts and the marginalisation of local fishermen. This legal disenfranchisement eroded communal management systems that had sustainably governed marine resources for generations.

♦ *Impact on Littoral Societies*

The colonial reconfiguration of the Indian Ocean had profound implications for littoral societies. Communities that once thrived on maritime trade and navigation faced economic decline as colonial policies favoured European merchants and shipping companies. The disruption of traditional trade networks led to the impoverishment of coastal communities and the loss of their socio-economic autonomy. Moreover, the establishment of centralised administrations and rigid territorial demarcations disrupted the fluidity that characterised littoral societies, hindering traditional patterns of mobility and trade.

♦ *Resilience and Adaptation*

Despite these challenges, littoral communities exhibited resilience and adaptability. Some groups integrated into colonial economies as intermediaries or adopted new maritime professions. Fishing communities, for example, diversified their livelihoods by engaging in activities such as salt production or small-scale trading. Cultural practices and identities persisted, often blending indigenous traditions with new influences brought by colonial interactions. This syncretism is evident in various aspects of coastal cultures, from culinary traditions to religious practices, reflecting the enduring legacy of pre-colonial maritime connections.

Summarised Overview

Before European colonisation, the Indian Ocean was a thriving hub of trade and cultural exchange, connecting regions like East Africa, Arabia, India and Southeast Asia. Littoral societies flourished through maritime trade, shipbuilding and navigation, fostering cosmopolitan communities. Colonial powers, especially the British, disrupted these networks by imposing economic and legal frameworks that favoured European interests. Indigenous maritime communities, like the Kolis and Marakkayars, were branded as pirates to justify colonial intervention. This led to economic decline, marginalisation and loss of traditional livelihoods. Despite these challenges, littoral societies adapted, preserving cultural practices and integrating into colonial economies where possible.

Assignments

1. Identify features of littoral societies in the pre-colonial Indian Ocean world.
2. Explain how colonial powers justified intervention in Indian Ocean maritime networks.
3. Analyse why Koli and Marakkayar communities were labelled as pirates.
4. Illustrate technological innovations that enabled maritime trade across the Indian Ocean.
5. Evaluate how littoral societies adapted to colonial disruptions and economic changes.

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Suggested Reading

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

UNIT 2

Battles for Monopoly over Spice Trade

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to :

- understand European colonial trade strategies by examining how the Dutch East India Company (VOC) established and maintained its commercial and political control in India
- identify the causes of the VOC's decline and the rise of other European trading companies
- compare European colonial enterprises in India by evaluating the strategies, successes and failures of these Companies

Background

Prior to the arrival of the Dutch, the spice trade in the Arabian Sea was a central component of the broader Indian Ocean commercial system. Coastal regions along the Malabar Coast, Arabian Peninsula and East Africa engaged in the exchange of high-value spices such as black pepper, cardamom and cinnamon. These commodities were in high demand across West Asia, North Africa and Europe. Trade was facilitated by predictable monsoon wind patterns, which enabled seasonal navigation and regular contact between ports. Cities like Calicut, Muscat and Aden functioned as key nodes in this network, serving both economic and diplomatic functions.

Keywords

Dutch East India Company (VOC), French East India Company, British East India Company, Trade Monopoly, Battle of Colachel, Carnatic Wars, Anglo-Dutch Rivalry

Discussion

3.2.1 The Dutch East India Company

♦ *Establishment of the VOC*

In the early 17th century, the Dutch East India Company, known as the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), emerged as a dominant force in global trade, particularly within the Indian subcontinent. Established in 1602, the VOC was granted a 21-year charter by the States General of the Netherlands, providing exclusive rights to trade in Asia. This charter empowered the company to engage in diplomacy, wage war and establish colonies, reflecting the intertwining of commercial and state interests. The primary objective was to dominate the spice trade, capitalising on Europe's insatiable demand for commodities like nutmeg, mace and cloves.

The VOC's initial ventures into India were strategic, aiming to establish a foothold in the lucrative spice markets and counter Portuguese dominance. In 1605, the Dutch established a trading post in Masulipatnam on the Coromandel Coast. This move marked the beginning of their enduring presence in India's spice trade.

Over the subsequent decades, the VOC expanded its network by establishing several key trading posts and factories across India:

♦ *Expansion in India*

1. **Pulicat (1610):** Located north of Madras (now Chennai), Pulicat became the VOC's principal settlement on the Coromandel Coast. It served as a vital center for the textile trade, with the Dutch exporting Indian cotton to markets in Southeast Asia and Europe.
2. **Surat (1616):** Situated in Gujarat, Surat was a significant Mughal port city. The VOC established a factory here to tap into the thriving trade network of the Mughal Empire, dealing in textiles, spices and other commodities.
3. **Chinsurah (1653):** Located in Bengal, Chinsura became an important Dutch trading post, focusing on the trade of silk, cotton and spices. Its strategic position along the Hooghly River facilitated access to the rich resources of Bengal.
4. **Cochin (1663):** The Dutch captured Cochin from the Portuguese, establishing it as a significant base on the Malabar Coast. This allowed them to control the pepper trade and strengthen their presence in South India.

3.2.1.1 Administration and Governance of the Dutch East India Company in India

♦ *Organisation of VOC*

At the height of its power in the 17th century, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) operated as a quasi-state, wielding both commercial and political authority. Unlike other European trading companies, the VOC was unique in its ability to act as an autonomous entity with governmental powers. It maintained an extensive bureaucratic and military structure that allowed it to conduct diplomacy, collect taxes, regulate trade, administer justice and wage wars when necessary. This formidable organisation enabled the Dutch to secure a dominant position in the lucrative spice trade.

The VOC divided its Indian operations into multiple administrative regions, each overseen by a senior company official. These regions included major trading posts such as Pulicat, Cochin, Chinsura, Surat and Nagapattinam. Each of these settlements functioned as an independent administrative unit, but they were ultimately answerable to the Governor-General of Batavia (modern-day Jakarta), who served as the highest VOC official in Asia.

♦ *Administrative Structure in India*

- **Governors and Directors:** The VOC appointed governors or directors to oversee its major trading posts and settlements. These officials were responsible for maintaining law and order, collecting revenues and ensuring the smooth flow of trade. In regions like Cochin and Chinsura, the Dutch entered into agreements with local rulers, securing economic privileges in exchange for military or financial support.
- **Councils of Policy:** To manage governance efficiently, the VOC set up Councils of Policy at its major trading stations. These councils consisted of high-ranking company officials who made decisions on trade policies, diplomatic engagements and military actions. They were also responsible for implementing orders from Batavia.
- **Military Administration:** The VOC maintained a well-organised military force, including a standing army and a formidable naval fleet. The military was used not only for defence but also to expand the company's control, particularly against rivals like the Portuguese and the English. The company's private military frequently engaged in battles with European competitors as well as Indian rulers when conflicts arose over trade or territorial disputes.

The Dutch East India Company operated with a hybrid model of governance, blending commercial strategies with direct political control. It functioned as both a corporation and a sovereign power, possessing several key legal and administrative rights.

♦ *Governance and Legal Authority*

- **Negotiation of Treaties:** The VOC engaged in diplomacy with Indian rulers such as the Zamorin of Calicut, the Nayaks of Tanjore and the Rajas of Travancore, securing trade privileges through treaties. These agreements often granted the company monopoly rights over specific commodities such as pepper, textiles and saltpeter, in exchange for Dutch military support or annual tributes.
- **Taxation and Revenue Collection:** Like other European trading powers, the Dutch established revenue systems to extract wealth from their territories. In Bengal, they levied taxes on weavers and merchants involved in the textile industry. In the Malabar region, they imposed duties on the spice trade, often regulating production to maintain high prices.
- **Judicial System:** The VOC established its own courts to administer justice in its territories. These courts handled both civil and criminal cases, applying Dutch laws to European employees and a mix of local laws and Dutch regulations to Indian subjects. The company also set up prisons and law enforcement mechanisms to maintain order in its settlements.
- **Coinage and Monetary Policies**: The VOC issued its own currency in regions under its control, such as Pulicat and Cochin. Dutch-minted coins facilitated trade by standardising monetary transactions and integrating local economies into global trade networks. This was a significant development as it reduced reliance on Portuguese and Mughal currencies in Dutch-administered areas.

3.2.1.2 Economic Impact of the VOC in India

♦ *Monetary Policies and Trade Regulation*

The VOC's monetary policies helped streamline trade in the regions it controlled. Dutch-minted coins, such as Rijksdaalders and Duit coins, were widely used in VOC settlements, reducing reliance on fluctuating local currencies. By standardising transactions, the Dutch facilitated the movement of goods across India and Southeast Asia, making their trading operations more efficient. Furthermore, the VOC implemented strict trade regulations to control the supply and pricing of commodities. In the spice-producing regions of Malabar, the Dutch exercised a monopoly over black pepper by

regulating its cultivation and export. By limiting supply, they ensured high prices in European markets.

The Dutch significantly altered agricultural patterns in India by promoting the large-scale cultivation of cash crops to meet European demands. These changes had lasting effects on rural economies and land use.

♦ *Agricultural Innovations and Cash Crop Cultivation*

- **Indigo Cultivation:** The VOC encouraged indigo production in Bengal and the Coromandel Coast, making it a major export commodity for European dye industries.
- **Tobacco and Coffee Plantations**: The Dutch introduced new forms of commercial farming, particularly in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Malabar, where they cultivated tobacco and coffee for export.
- **Coconut and Coir Industry:** In Kerala, the Dutch played a pivotal role in developing the coir (coconut fiber) industry, which was used for making ropes and mats. They established processing centers in Cochin and Quilon.

Indian textiles were among the most valuable goods traded by the Dutch. The VOC established strong trade links with Bengal, Surat and the Coromandel Coast, exporting fine cotton and silk fabrics to Europe, Indonesia and Japan.

♦ *Effects on Indian Handicrafts and Textiles*

- **Impact on Local Weavers:** While the Dutch brought prosperity to certain weaving communities, they also introduced exploitative practices. The VOC often forced weavers to sell their products at artificially low prices, limiting their profits.
- **Dutch Influence in Global Trade**: Indian textiles shipped by the Dutch became popular in European markets, leading to a surge in demand. The VOC also supplied these fabrics to Japan and Indonesia, where they were used as currency in local trade networks.

3.2.1.3 Decline of the Dutch East India Company in India

♦ *Weakening of the VOC*

The Dutch East India Company was one of the most powerful commercial enterprises of the 17th century, dominating the global spice trade and establishing trading posts across Asia. However, despite its early successes, the VOC's influence in India gradually declined due to a combination of strategic, military and economic factors. By the late 18th century, the company was weakened to the point of dissolution and its presence in India faded as the British emerged as the dominant colonial power.

♦ *Focus on the East Indies Over India*

One of the primary reasons for the decline of the VOC in India was its strategic focus on the East Indies (modern-day Indonesia) rather than the Indian subcontinent. Unlike the British and French, who actively sought territorial control and political influence in India, the Dutch were primarily interested in monopolising the spice trade, which was more profitable in the East Indies. The VOC controlled key spice-producing islands, such as the Moluccas (Spice Islands), Java and Sumatra, where it maintained a near-total monopoly on valuable commodities like nutmeg, cloves and mace. This focus led to the neglect of Indian trade, allowing competitors—particularly the British East India Company (EIC)—to expand their influence. By the early 18th century, Dutch trade in Indian textiles and other goods was significantly overshadowed by the British, who secured stronger alliances with Indian rulers and controlled major trading ports such as Bombay, Madras and Calcutta.

♦ *Military Defeats and Loss of Influence*

Despite its early strength, the VOC suffered several military defeats in India, most notably at the Battle of Colachel (1741). In this decisive battle, the Kingdom of Travancore, led by Maharaja Marthanda Varma, defeated the Dutch forces. The Dutch had attempted to interfere in local politics and expand their influence in the Malabar region, but the Travancore army, equipped with modern firearms and European military strategies, routed the VOC forces. The defeat at Colachel marked the first instance of an Asian power decisively defeating a European colonial force in the Indian subcontinent. It not only ended Dutch expansionist ambitions in South India but also weakened their overall position in the region. Following this loss, the Dutch entered into an agreement with Travancore, effectively curtailing their military and political influence.

♦ *Rise of British Power*

In addition to local conflicts, the Anglo-Dutch Wars (17th–18th centuries) further strained the VOC's resources. Although the Dutch successfully resisted British expansion in Southeast Asia, their weakening naval and financial position in India allowed the British to gain the upper hand. The Battle of Chinsurah (1759), in which the British decisively defeated the Dutch forces in Bengal, further cemented British dominance in India.

The VOC's decline was also driven by financial mismanagement, corruption and increasing competition. By the 18th century, the company's once-profitable monopoly was under threat from both European rivals and changing global trade dynamics. Internal corruption among VOC officials, along with inefficient administration, led to heavy financial losses. Unlike the British East India Company, which gained *Diwani* rights (revenue collection) in Bengal after the Battle of Buxar (1764), the Dutch lacked a stable

financial base in India. Their reliance on spice trade profits proved unsustainable as global demand fluctuated and competitors disrupted supply chains. By the late 18th century, rising debts, declining trade revenues and costly military engagements left the VOC financially crippled. The Dutch government, recognising the company's inability to sustain itself, officially dissolved the VOC in 1799, transferring its assets to the Dutch state. This marked the definitive end of Dutch colonial ambitions in India, leaving the British East India Company as the dominant power in the subcontinent.

♦ *Economic Decline and VOC's Dissolution*

The Dutch East India Company, revolutionised European colonial trade with its pioneering model of a state-backed corporate entity that wielded both commercial and political power. It was granted exclusive trading rights and sovereign powers, including the ability to wage war, negotiate treaties, establish settlements and administer justice. This unique blend of economic enterprise and state functions inspired the establishment of similar companies by other European powers, most notably the French and British East India Companies. However, while the Dutch remained dominant in the spice trade for much of the 17th century, their influence in India gradually waned as the British and French vied for supremacy in the subcontinent.

♦ *Dutch overtaken by the British and French*

3.2.2 The French East India Company

The French East India Company (Compagnie française pour le commerce des Indes orientales) was founded in 1664 under the patronage of King Louis XIV and his finance minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert. Unlike its Dutch and British rivals, which were largely driven by private investors, the French company was heavily reliant on state support. This dependency on royal patronage made it vulnerable to political instability and fluctuating financial resources.

♦ *Founded with royal state support*

Despite these challenges, the French made significant inroads into India, establishing key trading posts such as Pondicherry (1674), Chandernagore (1686), Mahe (1725) and Karaikal (1739). These settlements were intended to serve as commercial hubs for the trade of spices, textiles and other valuable commodities. The French also sought to establish diplomatic and military influence, often aligning with local rulers to counter British expansion.

♦ *Key French trading posts established*

One of the most influential figures in French colonial ambitions was Joseph Francois Dupleix, who was appointed Governor-General of French India in 1742. Dupleix was an astute diplomat and military strategist who envisioned expanding French influence through alliances with Indian rulers. He actively intervened in local succession disputes, a tactic known as "divide and rule", which was later perfected by the British.

♦ *Dupleix pursued alliances and power*

♦ *French decisively defeated at Wandiwash*

The First Carnatic War (1746–1748) saw initial French successes. In 1746, Dupleix's forces captured Madras (now Chennai) from the British, marking a significant victory. However, the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748) forced the French to return Madras to the British in exchange for territories in Europe, negating their gains. The Second Carnatic War (1749–1754) was more devastating for the French. Although Dupleix attempted to extend French influence in South India through alliances with local rulers such as Chanda Sahib and Muzaffar Jung, British intervention, led by Robert Clive, reversed many of his gains. Facing criticism from the French government for his military expenditures, Dupleix was recalled to France in 1754, marking a significant setback for French ambitions in India. The Third Carnatic War (1756–1763) was decisive. As part of the larger Seven Years' War, this conflict saw the final defeat of the French in India. The Battle of Wandiwash (1760) was a turning point, where British commander Sir Eyre Coote decisively defeated the French under Count de Lally. The war ended with the Treaty of Paris (1763), which limited French holdings in India to a few trading enclaves.

Several factors hindered the long-term success of the French East India Company:

- **Financial Instability:** Unlike the British East India Company, which was bolstered by robust private investment, the French company's reliance on government funding made its financial position unstable. Economic crises in France often translated into inadequate resources for maintaining its colonial enterprises.
- **Bureaucratic Inefficiency:** The centralised decision-making structure in Paris delayed responses to local issues in India. This contrasted with the British system, where company officials had significant autonomy to make strategic decisions.
- **Military Engagements**: The French East India Company was frequently embroiled in conflicts with the British, particularly during the Carnatic Wars (1746–1763). These wars drained French resources and ultimately weakened their position in India.

3.2.3 The British East India Company

The British East India Company (EIC), established in 1600, was initially a commercial enterprise focused on securing a share in the highly lucrative Indian trade, particularly the spice trade. Over time, however, it transformed from a trading entity into a political and military power, ultimately establishing British rule over vast

♦ *The Rise of the British East India Company in India*

territories in India. Unlike its European counterparts, particularly the Dutch and French East India Companies, the EIC benefited from a combination of strong financial backing, strategic alliances and military strength, allowing it to emerge as the dominant colonial power in India.

♦ *Britain's Interest in the Spice Trade*

During the 16th and 17th centuries, spices were among the most valuable commodities in the global economy. Pepper, cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon and cardamom were in high demand in Europe, both for culinary and medicinal purposes. Initially, the Portuguese and later the Dutch controlled the spice trade, particularly in the East Indies (modern-day Indonesia). However, the British sought to challenge this dominance by establishing their own foothold in India and Southeast Asia.

♦ *British EIC had autonomy*

While the Dutch concentrated their efforts on securing the spice trade in the East Indies, the British turned their attention to India, where they could access spices while also expanding into other lucrative trades such as cotton, silk and indigo. Unlike the French East India Company, which suffered from inconsistent funding and excessive state control, the British EIC enjoyed relative autonomy. Backed by a stable political environment in England, it functioned as a semi-independent entity, with its own administrative structure, army and even diplomatic authority.

The British East India Company began its operations in India by securing trading rights from local rulers. The first significant breakthrough came in 1612, when the Mughal Emperor Jahangir granted the British permission to establish a factory (trading post) in Surat. Over time, the company expanded its influence and secured additional trading posts in:

♦ *Early Expansion and Key Trading Posts*

- Madras (1639) – Established with the permission of local rulers, becoming a major centre for trade and military operations.
- Bombay (1668) – Originally under Portuguese control, it was transferred to the British as part of the dowry of Catherine of Braganza, who married King Charles II of England.
- Calcutta (1690) – Founded by Job Charnock, it became the headquarters of British operations in Bengal and the most important administrative centre in India.

3.2.3.1 Expansion Beyond the Spice Trade

While spices remained an important commodity, the British soon expanded into other industries, particularly textiles, opium and tea. By the 18th century, the British were no longer just traders in spices but had established a complex economic system that integrated

India into the global economy.

- **Textiles**: India's cotton and silk industries became central to British trade, with Bengal emerging as a major centre of textile production. Indian fabrics were highly prized in Europe and played a key role in the British Industrial Revolution.
- **Opium Trade**: By the late 18th century, the British established a lucrative opium trade with China, using Indian-grown opium to finance their imports of tea and silk from China. This trade would later contribute to the Opium Wars between Britain and China in the 19th century.

♦ *The move towards free market trade*

- **Tea Trade:** The British promoted the cultivation of tea in India, particularly in Assam and Darjeeling, to reduce their dependence on Chinese tea imports. This became one of the most profitable industries under British rule.

3.2.3.2 Factors Behind British Supremacy

The British East India Company, initially functioned as a trading enterprise, seeking to establish commercial ties with India. At the time of its arrival, the Mughal Empire was at its peak, overseeing a flourishing economy and exerting control over vast territories. Recognising the power of the Mughals, the British adopted a diplomatic approach to secure trading privileges. However, as the Mughal Empire weakened in the 18th century, the EIC gradually transitioned from a mere trading company to a military and political power. By using a combination of military strength, strategic alliances and economic control, the British emerged as the dominant force in India by the late 18th century.

♦ *EIC shifted from trade to power*

The initial relationship between the Mughals and the British was largely defined by trade agreements. The first major breakthrough for the British came in 1612, when Mughal Emperor Jahangir granted them permission to establish a trading factory in Surat. This relationship was further strengthened in 1615, when Jahangir issued a farman (royal decree) allowing the British to trade duty-free in Mughal territories. This privilege provided the British with a significant economic edge over local merchants and other European competitors. However, tensions occasionally arose, particularly under Aurangzeb (1658–1707), who attempted to curtail British expansion. In 1686, when the British tried to fortify their trading posts without Mughal consent, Aurangzeb responded by expelling them from Surat, forcing them to negotiate for peace. Despite these conflicts, the British remained reliant on Mughal patronage for their trade operations.

♦ *Mughals granted vital trade privileges*

♦ *Mughal decline enabled British expansion*

The decline of the Mughal Empire in the early 18th century created new opportunities for the British. As regional governors, such as those of Bengal, Oudh and Hyderabad, began asserting independence, the British capitalised on these power struggles. Unlike the Dutch, who remained focused on maritime trade and the French, who pursued direct military intervention, the British employed a more flexible strategy of alliances, diplomacy and military force to expand their territorial control. This shift from trade to territorial expansion was marked by two decisive battles—Plassey (1757) and Buxar (1764), which ultimately solidified British dominance in India.

♦ *British built disciplined land army*

One of the key factors behind British supremacy was their military strength. The British East India Company maintained a formidable private army, trained in European warfare techniques. Unlike the Dutch, who focused on naval dominance and the French, who suffered from inconsistent leadership, the British built a disciplined land force. By recruiting Indian sepoys (local soldiers) and training them in European combat methods, the EIC was able to defeat both Indian rulers and European rivals. Commanders like Robert Clive and Hector Munro played a crucial role in securing British victories, further strengthening their control over Indian territories.

♦ *Strategic alliances boosted British control*

In addition to military strength, the British were highly skilled in political manipulation and forming strategic alliances. Instead of relying solely on military conquest, they exploited internal conflicts among Indian rulers. The British frequently supported rival factions in regional disputes, ensuring that the victorious side remained loyal to British interests. They also installed puppet rulers, such as Mir Jafar in Bengal, who were dependent on British backing. Furthermore, the British co-opted Indian elites and zamindars, integrating them into the colonial administration and ensuring local support for British policies.

♦ *Plassey began British political dominance*

The Battle of Plassey (1757) was a turning point in Indian history. Led by Robert Clive, the British forces defeated Siraj-ud-Daulah, the Nawab of Bengal. This victory was made possible through treachery, as Mir Jafar, the Nawab's commander, betrayed Siraj and sided with the British in exchange for the throne. Plassey granted the British control over Bengal's immense economic resources, which they used to finance further expansion. More importantly, it marked the beginning of British political dominance, as they began installing rulers who were entirely dependent on them.

Following their victory at Plassey (1757), the British gained control over Bengal's vast wealth, allowing them to fund further

♦ *Buxar secured financial supremacy*

military campaigns. Their victory at Buxar (1764) reinforced this financial dominance, leading to the Treaty of Allahabad (1765), which granted the British *Diwani* rights (revenue collection) over Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. This meant that the British could directly collect taxes, making them financially independent from Britain and ensuring a steady flow of income to maintain their military and administrative machinery. This financial control was further institutionalised through policies like the Permanent Settlement of Bengal (1793), introduced by Lord Cornwallis, which integrated Indian landlords into the British revenue system.

♦ *British crushed major Indian coalition*

While Plassey established British supremacy in Bengal, the Battle of Buxar (1764) further solidified their rule in northern India. The British, under Hector Munro, defeated a coalition of powerful Indian rulers, including Shuja-ud-Daula (Nawab of Oudh), Mir Qasim (former Nawab of Bengal) and Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II. This battle demonstrated the military superiority of the British and led to the Treaty of Allahabad (1765), which granted the EIC Diwani rights, effectively placing Bengal's economy under British control. The ability to directly collect revenue provided the British with financial independence and significantly strengthened their administrative structure.

♦ *Formal British administration institutionalised rule*

By the late 18th century, the British faced little European competition in India, as both the Dutch and French influence had declined. The transformation of the EIC from a trading company to a governing power was further institutionalised with the appointment of Lord Cornwallis as Governor-General in 1786, marking the beginning of formal British administration. Over time, British policies such as the Permanent Settlement of Bengal and the establishment of British legal and military systems ensured continued dominance over Indian affairs.

Summarised Overview

The unit explores the rise, governance, economic impact and decline of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in India. Established in 1602, the VOC dominated trade by securing key ports like Pulicat, Surat and Cochin. It functioned as a quasi-state, negotiating treaties, collecting taxes and issuing currency. However, its focus on the East Indies, military defeats and financial mismanagement led to its decline by the late 18th century. The unit also compares the VOC with the French and British East India Companies, highlighting how British military and financial strategies ultimately ensured their dominance over European rivals in India.

Assignments

1. Discuss the motives and objectives of European trade companies in India during the 16th to 18th centuries. How did these evolve over time?
2. Compare and contrast the policies and practices of the Portuguese, Dutch, French and British trading companies in India. Which company was most successful and why?
3. Analyse the impact of the British East India Company on the Indian economy and society. How did its commercial interests pave the way for colonial rule?
4. Examine the role of Indian intermediaries, merchants and rulers in facilitating or resisting the operations of European trade companies.
5. What were the key reasons behind the decline of other European companies (Portuguese, Dutch, French) and the rise of British dominance in India?

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

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UNIT 3

Commercial Revolution

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to :

- understand the role of European colonial powers in establishing ports and integrating India into global trade
- evaluate the Maratha Navy's resistance to colonial naval dominance under Kanhoji Angre
- examine the rise of Indian business houses like the Tatas, Birlas and Chettiars amid colonial economic policies
- assess the impact of colonial rule on India's transition from traditional trade to industrial enterprises

Background

The colonial era in India saw the emergence and expansion of various markets and ports, driven by the economic ambitions of European powers such as the British, French and Dutch. These powers established trading posts, controlled strategic ports and influenced local economies to serve their commercial and imperial interests. The development of these markets and ports not only facilitated trade but also integrated India into global economic networks. This Unit examines the major markets and ports that flourished under British, French and Dutch rule, highlighting their economic significance and long-term impact.

Keywords

Maratha Navy, Indigenous Business Houses, Tata, Birla, Chettiar, Opium and Cotton Trade, Agency Houses, Swadeshi Movement

Discussion

3.1.1 New Ports and Markets

3.3.1.1 British Colonial Ports and Markets

♦ *Calcutta grew as a trade, admin hub*

Under British rule, several ports and markets became key centres for trade and administration, contributing significantly to the colonial economy. Calcutta emerged as a dominant commercial and administrative centre under British rule. The British East India Company established its presence in the city in 1690 and it later became the capital of British India from 1772 to 1911. Its strategic location along the Hooghly River facilitated extensive trade, with goods such as jute, tea, opium and textiles being exported to Europe and China. The establishment of the Calcutta Port Trust in 1870 further enhanced its infrastructure, making it one of the busiest ports in Asia. The city also became home to major markets, including Burrabazar, which played a crucial role in wholesale trade.

♦ *Bombay thrived with cotton*

Bombay transformed from a small fishing village into a major port and commercial hub after the British acquired it from the Portuguese in 1661. Its natural harbour and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 boosted its significance in global trade. The city became the centre of the cotton trade, particularly during the American Civil War, when the demand for Indian cotton surged. The Bombay Port Trust, established in 1873, further expanded the city's trade capacity. Major markets like Crawford Market and the Bombay Cotton Exchange played a key role in commerce, solidifying the city's status as a financial hub.

♦ *Madras developed through trade*

Founded in 1639, Madras served as one of the earliest British settlements in India. The construction of Fort St. George marked the beginning of its development as a trade and administrative centre. The city was crucial for the export of textiles, spices and other commodities to European and Southeast Asian markets. The development of the Madras Port allowed for increased maritime trade, while local markets such as Georgetown flourished under British influence.

3.3.1.2 French Colonial Ports and Markets

♦ *Pondicherry thrived on textile trade*

Though the French presence in India was not as dominant as the British, they developed significant trading ports and markets to support their colonial ambitions. Pondicherry, acquired by the French in 1673, became the centre of French commercial and military activities in India. Its port facilitated trade in textiles, spices and local handicrafts, linking French India to European markets. Pondicherry's economy was heavily dependent on its textile trade

and its markets grew in importance as suppliers of fine fabrics to France. However, frequent conflicts with the British weakened its commercial potential.

♦ *Small but crucial port for French interests*

Chandernagore, located near Calcutta, was another important French trading post established in 1690. The town thrived as a centre for textile and silk trade, with its port enabling commercial exchanges between India and France. Unlike British-controlled ports, Chandernagore remained relatively small but played a crucial role in the French colonial economy until it was captured by the British in the late 18th century.

3.3.1.3 Dutch Colonial Ports and Markets

♦ *Key role in Dutch textile trade*

The Dutch East India Company (VOC) was one of the first European powers to establish a strong trading presence in India, focusing primarily on spice and textile trade. Pulicat, established in 1610, became the Dutch East India Company's principal trading post on the Coromandel Coast. The town played a key role in the Dutch textile trade, with cotton and dyed fabrics being exported to Southeast Asia and Europe. The Dutch built extensive warehouses, markets and fortifications to protect their trade interests.

♦ *Centre of the Dutch spice trade*

Nagapattinam, captured from the Portuguese in 1658, served as the Dutch East India Company's headquarters in India. The port was strategically important for the Dutch spice trade and maritime dominance in the Indian Ocean. It was a major centre for the export of black pepper, nutmeg and other valuable commodities. However, with increasing competition from the British, Dutch influence in the region declined by the 18th century.

3.3.2 Resistance to Colonial Naval Supremacy: The Maratha Navy

♦ *Maratha Navy challenged European control*

The rise of European colonial powers in India during the 17th and 18th centuries was marked by their dominance over maritime trade and naval control. However, several Indian powers actively resisted this expansion, with the Maratha Navy emerging as one of the most formidable naval forces challenging European supremacy. Established under Shivaji Maharaj and strengthened by Kanhoji Angre, the Maratha Navy played a crucial role in controlling the western coastline of India, defending against European incursions and disrupting colonial trade.

♦ *Shivaji built forts, naval power grew.*

The Marathas, initially a land-based power, recognised the strategic importance of naval strength in securing their western coastline from European and Mughal influences. Shivaji Maharaj (1630–1680) was the first to establish a structured naval force, commissioning the construction of Sindhudurg and Vijaydurg forts

as coastal defence outposts. The primary objective of this naval expansion was to protect maritime trade routes and prevent foreign naval incursions.

♦ *Angre expanded fleet, resisted Europeans*

Following Shivaji's reign, the Maratha Navy saw significant expansion under Kanhoji Angre (1669–1729), who was appointed as the Admiral (Sarkhel) of the Maratha Navy. Angre developed a strong fleet that operated along the Konkan and Malabar coasts, using smaller, highly mobile vessels to conduct raids, protect Maratha trade and resist European naval forces. His leadership was instrumental in making the Maratha Navy a dominant force in the Arabian Sea during the early 18th century.

♦ *Small ships defended coastal Maratha trade*

The Maratha Navy employed a coastal defence strategy that relied on a network of fortified bases and fast-moving naval vessels. Unlike European naval powers, which used large warships suited for deep-sea engagements, the Marathas focused on small, manoeuvrable ships such as 'ghurabs' and 'gallivats,' which were better suited for operating in shallow coastal waters. One of the key tactics used by the Marathas was intercepting and disrupting European trade routes. The western coast of India was a vital region for British, Portuguese and Dutch commercial activities and the Marathas frequently attacked merchant ships, seizing goods and levying taxes on passing vessels. This strategy not only weakened European economic interests but also provided revenue for the Maratha state. Another effective tactic was raiding European outposts and naval bases. The Marathas launched repeated attacks on Portuguese and British forts along the coast, capturing ships and disrupting their ability to maintain maritime supremacy. These operations forced European naval commanders to divert significant resources to counter Maratha naval activities.

♦ *Angre defeated British in battle*

The Maratha Navy frequently clashed with the British, Portuguese and Dutch naval forces, leading to several notable battles. One of the most significant confrontations occurred in 1718, when the British East India Company attempted to capture Kanhoji Angre's stronghold at Vijaydurg. Despite British naval superiority in terms of firepower and ship size, Angre successfully repelled the attack, demonstrating the effectiveness of the Maratha naval strategy. The British later allied with the Portuguese to mount a larger campaign against Angre in 1721, but this effort also failed, reinforcing the resilience of the Maratha Navy. These repeated conflicts illustrated the limitations of European naval dominance in the Indian coastal waters and highlighted the strategic importance of local naval forces in resisting colonial expansion.

3.3.2.1 Decline of the Maratha Navy

♦ *Could not compete with British naval powera*

Despite its successes, the Maratha Navy began to decline in the mid-18th century due to internal political struggles and technological limitations. Following the death of Kanhoji Angre in 1729, the Marathas faced leadership disputes that weakened their central command. The British East India Company, benefiting from advanced naval technologies and better-organised fleets, gradually gained the upper hand. By the late 18th century, British naval power had expanded significantly and the Marathas increasingly relied on land-based military campaigns. The capture of key Maratha naval bases, such as Vijaydurg in 1756, marked the decline of their influence at sea. With the establishment of British naval supremacy in the early 19th century, the Maratha Navy ceased to be a major force in Indian maritime affairs.

♦ *Legacy influenced naval warfare in India*

The resistance of the Maratha Navy played a crucial role in delaying European naval dominance along the western coast of India. It forced the British and Portuguese to invest heavily in naval defences and altered their strategies for expanding control over Indian trade routes. The Marathas demonstrated that indigenous naval forces could effectively challenge European maritime powers through well-planned coastal defence, strategic raids and control over key maritime territories. While the Maratha Navy ultimately declined, its legacy continued to influence naval warfare strategies in India. The concept of coastal fortifications, fast-moving fleets and maritime defence was later adopted by various Indian rulers and even played a role in the development of independent India's naval strategy in the modern era.

3.3.3 Rise of Indigenous Commerce

♦ *India's commerce was disrupted by Europeans*

Prior to European intervention, India boasted a complex and thriving economic system characterised by established guilds, merchant networks and artisanal production. The arrival of European trading companies, notably the Portuguese, Dutch, French and British, introduced new dynamics to this system. The Dutch East India Company (VOC), for instance, integrated Indian textiles into their global trade networks, influencing traditional commerce patterns.These European entities established trading posts and sought to control lucrative markets, particularly in textiles and spices, which had significant repercussions on indigenous trade networks.

3.3.3.1 British East India Company and the Rise of Agency Houses

The British East India Company (EIC), established in 1600, gradually transitioned from a trading entity to a political power,

especially after the Battle of Plassey in 1757. This shift led to the emergence of 'agency houses'—European-controlled private firms that dominated trade and finance in colonial India. These houses facilitated long-distance trade by leveraging indigenous instruments like *hundis* (traditional financial instruments), while gradually transitioning to modern banking systems. The 18th and 19th centuries were a period of significant economic transformation in India. While much of the subcontinent was under British colonial rule, Indian entrepreneurs adapted to the changing economic landscape, establishing business houses that would later form the backbone of modern Indian industry. Despite facing challenges such as colonial economic policies that favoured British enterprises, many Indian merchants successfully expanded their businesses into banking, textiles, shipping and manufacturing.

♦ *Agency houses dominated trade and finance*

3.3.3.2 The Changing Economic Landscape of Colonial India

During the 18th century, India was a major player in global trade, known for its textiles, spices and artisanal goods. Indian merchants had long operated within established trade networks, dealing with Persian, Arab and Chinese traders. However, with the expansion of European trading companies, particularly the British East India Company, the economic environment changed dramatically. The British exerted increasing control over India's economy, shifting it from a thriving exporter of finished goods to a supplier of raw materials for British industries. Despite this shift, Indian business communities found opportunities to thrive. Many adapted by becoming intermediaries between British traders and local markets, while others diversified into new industries. This adaptability allowed them to lay the foundations for some of India's most influential business houses.

♦ *Forced shift in trade by the British*

Marwari and Gujarati Traders

Among the most successful business communities were the Marwaris and Gujarati traders, who built extensive commercial networks across India. The Marwaris, originally from Rajasthan, migrated to key commercial centres such as Calcutta (Kolkata), Bombay (Mumbai) and Madras (Chennai). They established themselves as financiers, moneylenders and commodity traders, financing both British and Indian businesses. Gujarati traders, particularly from Surat and Ahmedabad, were already well-connected to global trade networks. During the 18th and 19th centuries, they expanded their businesses into textiles, banking and shipping. Some of them became major suppliers to the British East India Company, handling the export of cotton, opium and silk. The Jain and Hindu banking families of Gujarat played a crucial role in

♦ *Adapted to the new British system*

♦ *Expanded into textiles, shipping and trade*

providing capital for trade and infrastructure projects.

The Rise of the Tata Family

One of the most significant names to emerge in the 19th century was Jamsetji Tata, the founder of the Tata Group. Born into a family of Parsi merchants, Tata initially worked in the cotton trade before establishing the Empress Mills in Nagpur in 1874. His vision extended beyond textiles; he dreamed of building India's first steel plant and modernising the country's industrial infrastructure. Tata's efforts to industrialise India were revolutionary. He travelled to Europe and the United States to study industrial practices and applied these lessons to his business. His ventures in steel, textiles and later hydroelectric power laid the foundation for India's industrial future. Though he did not live to see the establishment of Tata Steel in 1907, his legacy shaped India's business landscape for generations to come.

♦ *Modeled modern Indian industry*

Birla Family

Like the Tatas, the Birla family also transitioned from trading to manufacturing during the 19th century. Originally involved in the cotton and opium trade, the Birlas later moved into textiles, banking and jute manufacturing. Ghanshyam Das Birla, born in the late 19th century, expanded the family's business into new industries, including cement and sugar. The Birlas were closely associated with the Swadeshi movement, which encouraged Indians to boycott British goods and support indigenous enterprises. This nationalist sentiment helped their businesses grow, as Indian consumers sought alternatives to foreign products. The Birlas also played a major role in banking and finance, funding various nationalist initiatives and industrial projects.

♦ *Birlas backed Swadeshi, diversified industry*

Chettiars

The Chettiar community from Tamil Nadu became one of the most influential business groups in South India during the 18th and 19th centuries. Known for their expertise in money lending and banking, the Chettiars established financial networks that stretched from India to Burma (Myanmar), Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Their financial institutions provided credit to traders, landowners and industrialists, playing a key role in funding early Indian businesses. Unlike British banks, which often restricted loans to Indian entrepreneurs, the Chettiars provided capital to local industries, enabling many businesses to expand. Their banking system was based on trust and personal networks and their wealth allowed them to invest in temples, schools and infrastructure projects across Tamil Nadu.

♦ *Chettiars built Southeast Asian networks*

The Role of Opium and Cotton Trade in Business Expansion

The 19th century saw the rise of Indian business houses that profited from the opium and cotton trade, two industries that were closely linked to British economic policies. Indian merchants, particularly in Bombay and Calcutta, became key suppliers of opium, which was exported to China under British supervision. The Jagdish Seths and Sassoon family were among the most prominent names in this trade. Similarly, the cotton trade boomed during the American Civil War (1861–1865), when the British textile industry faced a shortage of American cotton. Indian traders filled the gap and cities like Bombay became major hubs for cotton exports. This period saw the rapid expansion of Indian textile mills, marking the transition from raw material export to local manufacturing.

♦ *Opium, cotton trade enriched merchants*

Challenges Faced by Indian Business Houses

Despite their success, Indian entrepreneurs faced significant challenges under British rule. Colonial policies favoured British firms, making it difficult for Indian businesses to compete. High taxes, import duties on Indian goods and limited access to finance restricted their growth. Additionally, British banks and insurance companies often denied services to Indian traders, forcing them to rely on indigenous banking systems like the *hundi* (credit notes). Indian business houses also had to navigate political uncertainties, balancing their economic interests with the growing nationalist movement.

♦ *Colonial bias restricted Indian business*

The business houses that emerged during the 18th and 19th centuries laid the foundation for India's modern industrial economy. Many of these families, such as the Tatas, Birlas and Chettiars, continued to play a crucial role in India's economic development post-independence. They contributed to nation-building by investing in education, infrastructure and industry, helping shape India's transition from a colonial economy to an independent industrial power. Their resilience in the face of colonial restrictions demonstrated the entrepreneurial spirit of Indian businesses, which adapted to changing economic conditions while maintaining strong cultural and ethical traditions. Today, the legacy of these business houses lives on in India's corporate sector, with multinational companies like Tata Group, Aditya Birla Group and Godrej continuing to influence global markets.

♦ *Legacy shaped today's corporate India*

Summarised Overview

The colonial period in India was marked by significant economic and commercial transformations driven by European powers such as the British, French and Dutch. These colonial forces established ports, trading networks and economic policies that reshaped India's trade, industry and indigenous business enterprises. While European companies sought to dominate India's maritime trade and industrial resources, Indian entrepreneurs adapted to these changes, finding opportunities to expand their businesses despite restrictive colonial policies.

This unit covered three major themes: the development of colonial ports and markets, the resistance to colonial naval supremacy by the Maratha Navy and the rise of indigenous commerce. It examines how British, French and Dutch trading enterprises shaped India's commercial landscape, how the Maratha Navy challenged European control of coastal trade and how Indian business communities like the Tatas, Birlas, Marwaris and Chettiars emerged as key economic players. By analysing these developments, the unit highlights the dynamic interactions between colonial economic policies and indigenous responses, laying the foundation for India's modern industrial economy.

Assignments

1. Analyse the strategic importance of Calcutta in British colonial trade.
2. Discuss the economic impact of the cotton trade on Bombay.
3. Analyse how Kanhoji Angre's tactics challenged European naval dominance.
4. Discuss the role of agency houses in shaping colonial commerce.

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Impact of Maritime Contacts

BLOCK-04

UNIT 1

Economic Impact

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand how overseas demand changed agricultural production patterns
- discuss how indigenous crafts and industries were affected by shifts in production
- familiarise themselves with shipbuilding technologies during the period
- recognise the role of coastal merchants and early capitalist trends in the economy
- connect local economic changes with world trade during the colonial period

Background

How did the sea transform India's economy, production, and trade? Maritime trade had an immense influence on the economies and industries across the subcontinent. As trade networks expanded, India prioritised export crops like pepper, cardamom, indigo, and cotton. This shift from traditional farming to cash crops altered land use patterns, regional economies, and agriculture. The farmers, once focused on subsistence farming, became integrated into the global economy by adapting to foreign demand.

Alongside this agricultural shift, the craft industries in India also flourished along with maritime trade. Surat, which was famous for its textiles, became a hub for high-quality products that were sought after across Europe. However, the increasing dominance of European colonial powers disrupted indigenous production, with the influx of cheap imports and changing market needs leading to the decline of traditional crafts and a move toward mass production. At the same time, shipbuilding centres in Gujarat and Malabar progressed, with skilled labourers and carpenters working within hereditary guilds to produce vessels essential for maritime trade. Along with the expansion of trade, financial systems such as the hundi system emerged. It facilitated long-distance transactions and the flow of goods and capital across the Indian Ocean world. In this unit, let us explore how these shifts in agriculture, crafts, shipbuilding, and finance transformed the Indian economy and tied it more directly to world trade.

Keywords

Indian Ocean trade, Network, Export, Crops, Coast, Agrarian Economy, Indigenous crafts, European Colonialism, Shipbuilding Techniques, *Khalasis*, Maritime Guilds, *Hundi*

Discussion

4.1.1 Global Demands and the Changes in Agricultural Patterns and Production

♦ *Trade and agri-cultural patterns*

As maritime trade expanded, Indian agriculture also witnessed a rise in demand for particular crops in the world market. The Indian Ocean trade route that was used by the Romans and then subsequently by Arab and European maritime powers restructured the economy of the Indian subcontinent. The export-oriented crops such as pepper, cardamom, indigo, and cotton emerged as the main commodities in international trade. Roman demand for pepper, along with other spices, encouraged extensive cultivation of such crops along the coasts, especially in the Malabar and Coromandel regions. In response to these evolving shifts, the local agrarian communities tried to adapt their production to the demands of external markets.

♦ *Change in land use and crop selec-tion*

♦ *Land Reclamation*

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, maritime trade influenced patterns of agricultural production across the subcontinent, both for domestic consumption and export. This period witnessed the expansion of agricultural output to meet the growing demands of overseas markets. As commercial networks expanded, the adoption of new agricultural techniques and the introduction of diverse crop varieties began to redefine existing agrarian systems. The growing demand for spices, cotton, textiles, and indigo led to a transformation in land use and crop choices. The impact of trade on agricultural practices can also be seen in the reclamation of lands for cultivation in areas previously unsuitable for farming. The process of land reclamation, which gained momentum during this period, was closely linked to the evolving demands of both local and global markets, reflecting the growing integration of regional agrarian economies into wider commercial networks.

If we look at the case of Travancore, in the 19th century, as plantation economies grew in the hilly areas to meet global

demand for tea, coffee, and spices, rice cultivation began to decline. Many agricultural workers also moved to coir weaving industries, which were expanding because of overseas demand. This caused a shortage of rice for local consumption. To overcome this situation, the Travancore government started importing rice from Bengal, Burma, and Siam. They also promoted cassava *(kappa)* as an alternative food. More importantly, they reclaimed land from the Vembanad backwaters to grow rice. Under the rule of Sri Moolam Thirunal Maharaja, farmers who reclaimed land were given tax exemptions and loans. The reclaimed land turned out to be very fertile. In 1903, the British government raised an objection, fearing that reclaiming the backwaters would reduce the depth of water in Cochin harbour, which was important for maritime trade. After discussions, the Madras Presidency government withdrew their objection. This case clearly shows how global trade demands affected local agriculture, land use, and labour patterns. It is a good example of how a local economy like Travancore adapted to the changing needs of international markets.

♦ *Travancore and the reclamation efforts*

The maritime contacts of the late pre-colonial period had a major effect on agricultural production in South India, especially as global trade networks expanded. In particular, the demand for agricultural products in Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia influenced what crops were grown and how they were cultivated. For instance, regions along the Tamil coast and Malabar became increasingly oriented towards export crops like spices, textiles, and indigo, while the domestic market continued to support staple food crops like rice. Local farmers adapted to meet the rising demand, which often meant increasing the scale of production and sometimes changing the types of crops they cultivated. It was a shift, as agricultural output was used mainly for distant markets rather than just local consumption.

♦ *Agricultural output for export*

Sanjay Subrahmanyam, in his work *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India 1500–1650*, examines how long-distance trade shaped the southern Indian economy and politics in the 16th and 17th centuries. He produces a nuanced understanding of the relationship between agriculture, manufacturing, and trade in southern India between 1500 and 1650. He challenges the conventional view that the growth of agriculture during this period was driven primarily by external demand, particularly from expanding maritime trade networks. While it is undeniable that trade created new opportunities for agricultural produce, Subrahmanyam argues that this explanation alone is too simplistic. Instead, he proposes an interactive model where agriculture, manufacturing, and commerce influenced each other. He also

♦ *Agriculture and trade as mutually influencing forces*

dismisses the old Physiocratic notion, which considered agriculture as the sole foundation of economic prosperity, suggesting that neither agriculture nor external trade can be seen as the sole cause of economic change. By quoting the ideas of the French thinker Turgot, Subrahmanyam mentions the concept of a shifting equilibrium, where agriculture, manufacturing, and trade produced unequal returns but maintained a reciprocal influence over each other. This balance was never considered static, but it constantly shifted in response to both internal developments and external pressures. Subrahmanyam urges historians to move beyond linear cause-and-effect explanations and instead pay attention to the ongoing, dialectical process through which domestic production and external trade shaped one another over time.

♦ *Export surplus in Bengal*

Historians like Om Prakash have argued that from about 1630 to 1720, Bengal's economy experienced a noticeable export surplus. This means Bengal was selling more to foreign markets than it was buying, mostly textiles and other manufactures, in exchange for bullion (precious metals like silver and gold). This surge in exports, especially of manufactured goods, indirectly created pressure on the agrarian system. Demand for raw materials like cotton and indigo rose, as textiles were among the most demanded goods in exports.

♦ *Landowning elites and control*

♦ *Distinction between local and export-oriented production*

Irfan Habib, one of the well-known Marxist historians, argued that the main effect of bullion inflow was inflation, a general rise in prices, rather than a massive restructuring of agriculture. It was pointed out that in an agrarian economy dominated by landowners, any additional wealth from trade mostly stayed at the top. Agricultural production remained largely tied to traditional landholding patterns, with gradual shifts toward producing raw materials for export-oriented industries. K. N. Chaudhuri, in his work *Asia Before Europe*, makes an analytical distinction between local and export-oriented production. Local production served the needs of nearby communities and was limited to a specific region. In contrast, export-oriented production operated on a much larger scale, producing goods for distant markets. This type of trade, Chaudhuri argues, required a well-developed commercial infrastructure to support long-distance exchange.

♦ *Connection between commercial capitalism and industrial production*

Chaudhuri further argues how the demands of international markets influenced the patterns of agricultural and industrial production in India. He emphasises that the impact of external events often depended on whether industries produced for local markets or for distant, international markets. He provides examples such as Indian fine cotton textiles and Chinese porcelain, which were traded across the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean,

Map of Indian Ocean RegionSource: Sebastian Prange
https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-Asian-Waters_fig1_290053273

reaching wealthy buyers far from where they were made. This vast trade network, he argues, shows the strong connection between commercial capitalism and industrial production in pre-modern Asia.

This kind of long-distance, export-oriented production reflected a growing economic specialisation. Even though most people relied on farming and transport costs were high, industries producing luxury goods for export helped build non-agricultural wealth, encouraged the use of money, and led to the rise of commercial crops like cotton, indigo, mulberry, and linen. According to K.N. Chaudhuri, several regions of Asia had attained a high degree of skill, technological advancement, and production efficiency during the early modern period. He contends that Europe only began to challenge Asia's pre-eminence in manufacturing and trade from the late eighteenth century onward. He identified the role of commercial capitalism in driving this transformation, particularly in integrating localised production systems into expansive transregional trade networks. Asian industries, especially textile production, were closely linked to commercial capitalism and changing patterns of consumer demand. Crafts like cotton and silk textiles were made not just for local use but also for international markets, according to their needs and tastes. As global trade expanded, there was a growing move towards specialised production. European trading companies began to exert increasing influence over both the nature of goods

- *Export-oriented crops and their production*
- *Role of commercial capitalism*
- *Role of merchants*

produced and the methods of their manufacture, introducing new designs and encouraging modifications in production techniques. Unlike Europe, where industrial change followed the decline of feudal structures, production in Asia remained closely tied within existing social and commercial frameworks.

While Chaudhuri deals with the larger economic frameworks of early modern Asia, other historians have done detailed case studies that ground these processes in specific commodities and regions. Sebastian Prange, one of the well-known medieval historians, re-examined the Indian Ocean pepper trade. Until the eighteenth century, black pepper remained the most important spice produced in India. The Eurocentric narrative on the pepper trade focused on its economic importance in Europe during the ancient and medieval periods, and on the European struggle for control over the trade in the early modern era. In contrast, Sebastian Prange argues for a reorientation of this history towards its larger Asian context. He examines the Indian Ocean pepper trade through different perspectives. He considered the supply side, focusing on the Malabar Coast as the primary source of pepper. He analyses different branches of Malabar's pepper trade. Prange points out the crucial role of Muslim mercantile networks in sustaining and regulating this trade across vast distances. He focuses on how these established networks were transformed in the sixteenth century under the pressure of Portuguese intervention and competition. Prange challenges conventional Eurocentric accounts and specifies Asian commercial systems and merchant communities in the making of early modern global trade.

♦ *Pepper trade*

4.1.1.1 The Commercialisation of Agriculture and Its Impact on Indian Peasantry

Before we talk about the shifts brought in by British rule, especially the commercialisation of agriculture, let us look at what kind of agrarian world existed here before colonialism? The Mughal period, especially between 1556 and 1707, has been studied extensively, and one of the most influential works on this subject is Professor Irfan Habib's *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*. Habib's work moves beyond the simple, sometimes romantic idea of the self-sufficient, egalitarian Indian village. Through a meticulous study of sources, he reveals hierarchical society where both class and caste divisions structured everyday life. He argued that rights over land were not evenly distributed and there existed a hierarchy of claims and control. What makes Habib's study especially striking is his refusal to casually apply the term 'feudalism' to this system. Unlike many Marxist historians of his time, he avoids forcing Indian history into European models,

♦ *Agrarian system prior to British colonial rule*

arguing instead for an analysis grounded in India's specific social and economic realities. His work also discusses how the peasantry was heavily exploited through taxes and forced payments, often leading to peasant revolts. Another important feature he mentioned was the relationship between village and town economies. While coins didn't circulate widely within villages, the agricultural surplus generated in the countryside fed urban centres. Satish Chandra, another medieval historian, argued that despite oppressive conditions, agricultural production did not decline. It was upon this unequal, deeply stratified, and yet economically resilient agrarian structure that British colonial policies intervened, restructuring land relations and aggressively pushing for the commercialisation of agriculture, a shift that carried major consequences for rural India in the centuries to follow.

♦ *Shift to commercial farming*

♦ *Coercion of peasants*

♦ *Causes of the Indigo Rebellion*

The commercialisation of agriculture in colonial India indicates the changes made to the agriculture sector and its production not for local consumption but for selling in markets, generating profit, and accumulating capital. In India, the peasant communities were coerced to follow this shift and did not benefit much from the commercialisation. In the case of the indigo industry in eastern India, the Company took the initiative in 1788 by offering advances to ten major planters attempting to cultivate indigo in Lower Bengal using methods imported from the West Indies. However, unlike the large plantation economies seen in other colonies, indigo in India never developed that way. But, unlike large plantations elsewhere, planters in India couldn't buy land outright until 1829. Instead, they relied on persuading or often coercing local peasants to take loans, or *dadon*, to grow indigo on their own land. As tensions grew, the demand for indigo was not stable, and production was driven more by the remittance trade than the needs of English industries. This exploitative system eventually led to the Indigo Rebellion of 1859-60.

♦ *Hoping for profit*

It's commonly argued that peasants were 'forced' into growing cash crops like indigo, cotton, or jute due to high revenue demands and the need to pay taxes and debts in cash. But as Sekhar Bandhopadhyay, in his work *From Plassey to Partition and After*, notes, some historians dispute this. Some evidence shows that when crop prices rose, so did the area under its cultivation. This indicates that peasants were also motivated by the hope of profit, not just compulsion. That said, it was largely the wealthier peasants who could take advantage of these opportunities. And even they were not safe from the fluctuations in the market. If we look at the cotton boom in western India during the 1860s, caused by the disruption of cotton supplies from America during its Civil War, cotton

cultivation expanded rapidly in the Deccan region and created a short period of prosperity. But once the war ended and American cotton returned to the market, prices collapsed and it triggered famine and peasant riots in the 1870s.

♦ *Jute growers had no control over prices*

A similar pattern can be witnessed in the case of jute in eastern India. Many peasants turned to this 'golden crop' hoping for better returns. Yet, as Sugata Bose points out, between 1906 and 1913, the jute-growing community had little control over prices. British jute manufacturers and exporters held what Bose calls '*monopsony power*', meaning they were virtually the only buyers in the market. This left the producers with no room to negotiate.

♦ *Shift to capitalism*

♦ *The rural economy remained fragile*

So how should we assess the impact of agricultural commercialisation on Indian peasants? Tirthankar Roy argues, 'It is possible that the capitalists captured most or all of the increase in value-added. The rich may have become richer. But that does not mean that the poor got poorer. For total income had increased.' Still, even if the poor were not worse off, the benefits remained unequally distributed, keeping most peasants on the margins. Moreover, one might be tempted to see this commercialisation as marking a transition from a pre-capitalist to a capitalist system, with a powerful rural capitalist class emerging and the peasantry turning into wage labourers. Bandhopadhyay argues it is an oversimplification. The collapse of the jute economy in the 1930s and the Bengal Famine of 1943 revealed its nuances. However, it is debated whether the rise of cash crops is linked to famines. While some argue that cash crops displaced food grains and affected local food availability, Bandyopadhyay notes this was a very localised issue. Even by the end of colonial rule, food crops still occupied around 80% of cultivated land.

♦ *Commercialisation brought uneven growth*

Some historians suggest that colonial infrastructure like railways and roads for trade improved food security by making it easier to transport food to areas facing scarcity. However, this remains a controversial argument, especially considering the Bengal famine of 1943. Despite better transport and market integration, the province had suffered from a long-term decline in per capita rice entitlement. It means that ordinary people had access to less and less food over time.

4.1.1.2 The Great Depression and Its Impact on Indian Agriculture

Between 1850 and 1950, Indian agriculture witnessed major shifts as it became increasingly integrated into the world

♦ *Departure from subsistence farming*

capitalist economy. Under colonial rule, agricultural practices were systematically reoriented to serve the demands of British industrialisation and international markets. This period witnessed a departure from subsistence farming as the emphasis shifted towards the cultivation of cash crops such as jute, cotton, and indigo for export purposes. As a result, agriculture in India became more vulnerable to fluctuations in global commodity prices. The impact of international economic crises was reflected in rural areas.

♦ *Depreciation of silver and its consequences*

♦ *Global economic instability*

The depreciation of silver in the late nineteenth century affected how global economic changes influenced Indian agriculture. As the rupee, tied to silver, weakened against the gold standard, Indian exports became more competitive. This shift benefitted producers, particularly those involved in the export of cash crops like jute. However, the repercussions were that British manufacturers and colonial officials in India, whose income was linked to the pound, experienced terrible losses. Omkar Goswami discusses the consequences of these shifts in his analysis of the impact of the Great Depression on the jute economy of East and North Bengal. In his essay, *Agriculture in Slump: The Peasant Economy of East and North Bengal in the 1930s*, he reveals how the global downturn severely affected the agricultural output of the region. The collapse in demand for jute led to a dramatic fall in prices, which in turn caused widespread hardship for the peasants dependent on the crop. Goswami shows that global economic instability, combined with an over-reliance on a single export crop, placed immense pressure on rural communities and eventually deepened their economic vulnerability.

♦ *Agriculture bearing burden*

♦ *Colonial monetary system and its repercussions*

Similarly, Amiya Kumar Bagchi, in his essay, *The Great Depression (1873 - 96) and the Third World with Special Reference to India*, argues that silver-using economies, like India, were particularly disadvantaged during the global depression. With the value of silver falling, the British colonial government maintained policies that prioritised stabilising foreign exchange, often at the expense of local agricultural needs. Bagchi mentions how external financial pressures worsened domestic economic difficulties, with Indian agriculture bearing much of the burden. B. R. Tomlinson, in his study *Britain and the Indian Currency Crisis, 1930- 32*, addresses the specific currency crisis in India during the interwar years. He demonstrates that colonial monetary policy, which prioritised the interests of the British Empire, created severe economic strains in India. For Indian farmers, already grappling with low agricultural prices, the currency crisis added another layer of hardship. Tomlinson's work focuses on how the colonial monetary system, designed to serve imperial needs, had negative repercussions for the rural economy in India.

♦ *Economic transactions of India with the world economy*

The 'drain of wealth' theory further tries to address the question of the economic relationship of India with the British Empire and suggests that colonial rule drained resources from India to Britain gradually. Sunanda Sen argues in support of this view and opines that the transfer of surplus wealth was an ongoing feature of the colonial system. On the other hand, K. N. Chaudhuri challenges this interpretation and suggests that the 'drain' concept reduces the gravity of global trade relationships. He contends that the economic transactions of India with the world economy should be understood through the lens of international trade theory, which accounts for both the benefits and costs India faces within a global economic system.

4.1.2 Industrial Production: Crafts and Indigenous Industries

♦ *Artisan-based production*

♦ *Increased demand for Indian textiles*

The growth of overseas trade created new demands for locally produced goods such as textiles, pottery, metalwork, and particularly hand-woven material like cotton and silk. These goods were highly demandable in global markets, which in turn contributed to the growth of small-scale indigenous industries that were linked to these trade networks. However, the economic structure of the time was not yet fully capitalist in the way we understand it today. The production systems remained artisan-based and small-scale. They focused on craftsmanship rather than mass production. The export boom directly affected local industries too, particularly crafts and textiles. The demand for Indian textiles increased in Europe and Southeast Asia, and it triggered higher export demand which led to more production and employment in local industries. Sanjay Subrahmanyam mentions the critical role of Indian manufacturers and artisans in this context. The textile industry in regions such as Gujarat, Coromandel, and Bengal saw an increase in both production and quality. Skilled artisans, who were often organised into guilds, were an integral part of the production process. They produced fine cloth for export, which required techniques that were passed down through generations.

♦ *Growth of ancillary industries*

♦ *Interference of the trading companies*

The ancillary industries also grew along with the local economies of textile-producing regions. For example, the need for dyes in the textile industry led to a rise in dyeing and chemical industries, while the growing demand for fine metalwork led to innovations in metallurgy. These industries, in turn, provided employment to a wide range of labourers and artisans, further commercialising the Indian economy. The arrival of European trading companies, such as the Dutch East India Company and the British East India Company, interfered in indigenous production, both in terms of product demand and the organisation of labour.

4.1.2.1 Textile Production in Surat and Its Decline

♦ *European companies and trade monopolies*

As we mentioned above, textiles, pottery, and metalwork were among the most important craft sectors that were affected by maritime trade. Cities like Surat and Cholamandalam were well-known for their textiles, and their products were in demand in European markets. While the maritime trade provided new markets and materials, it also facilitated the exchange of knowledge, particularly in terms of weaving and dyeing techniques. This process is sometimes referred to as proto-industrialisation, where craft-based industries began transitioning towards larger, more specialised production systems to meet demand. However, the decline of local crafts happened under European dominance. As Ashin Das Gupta argues in *Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat*, the local craft industries in Surat and Gujarat suffered due to competition from European manufacturers and the imposition of trade monopolies by the European companies. The decline of Surat, a major centre of textile production, is an example where local craftwork was affected by the cheap European imports.

♦ *Decline of trade and crafts in Surat*

Surat, once an established Mughal port, was the most important centre of trade across the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its decline in the early eighteenth century, however, was a topic of scholarly debate. Ashin Das Gupta challenges common claims like river silting, piracy, or Maratha attacks by arguing instead that the decline of Surat was closely tied to the weakening of three major empires: the Mughal, Safavid, and Ottoman. These empires together supported the trading networks that Surat depended on. The Indian merchants of Surat, though influential, were fragmented and lacked strong organisation to protect their interests when Mughal control began to decline in western India. As a result, Surat became cut off from important markets in northern India and Gujarat. While local industries such as textile weaving continued, they struggled against reducing demand and rising risks in trade. European merchants also faced similar challenges due to the unstable economy. Das Gupta's work shows how the decline of trade and crafts in Surat was deeply connected to the larger political changes and the loss of central authority.

4.1.3 Shipping and Shipbuilding: Techniques and Labour in India

India's shipbuilding industry has ancient roots, with evidence dating back to the Harappan civilisation. The port city of Lothal reveals a dockyard and ship drawings, indicating early maritime trade. India engaged in trade with Europe, Africa, and the Arabian

♦ *Maritime past*

Peninsula, exporting food products and vessels, establishing its longstanding position in overseas trade. The ports on the Coromandel Coast and Malabar had a long tradition of maritime activity, and the early modern period saw developments in shipbuilding and shipping.

♦ *Maritime economy of pre-colonial India*

The maritime economy of pre-colonial India, particularly from the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries, reveals a competitive trading system that challenges earlier Eurocentric narratives. Indian merchants actively engaged in extensive oceanic trade, both regional and long-distance trade networks, despite the presence of intrusive European companies. The maritime trade routes that connected India to various parts of the world were crucial arteries for the exchange of goods, and the shipbuilding industry, particularly along the western coast of India, played an essential role in this trade. Shipbuilding and maritime transport were fundamental to the Indian Ocean trade, with coastal regions like Malabar, Gujarat, and Konkan playing central roles in constructing ships suited for long-distance trade.

♦ *Traditional shipbuilding techniques*

♦ *European intrusion*

The traditional shipbuilding techniques, such as the use of *Kettuvallam* (the wooden boats of Kerala) and Arab dhows, were made to meet the specific demands of the maritime trade network. The production of 'junk'-type ships dominated, including large vessels for Haj pilgrims. In response to European demand, Indian shipyards gradually adapted to constructing European-style ships, particularly in Surat and Bombay. Scholars such as Ashin Dasgupta and Sinnappa Arasaratnam have demonstrated that Indian traders not only withstood European intrusion but also extended their influence across Southeast Asia. The inability of the Mughals to offer naval defence compelled merchants to accept European protection in exchange for relative freedom.

♦ *Growth of ancillary industries*

♦ *Interference of the trading companies*

At the core of India's maritime trade were the ship owners and operators who controlled vessels along both coastal and long-distance routes. These ranged from powerful magnates like Abdul Ghaffur of Surat, Mir Kamaluddin of Masulipatam, and Astrappah Chetty of Pulicat, men who commanded entire fleets, to merchants who owned a single ship and personally accompanied their cargo. Ship owning was typically a specialised, family-run affair, dominated by both Muslim and Hindu families, with relatives managing operations and agents stationed in major production centres and overseas ports like Bandar Abbas, Malacca, and Acheh. Joint ownership was rare, and even smaller ship owners often enjoyed privileges both onboard and ashore. Most overseas merchants, however, didn't own ships but hired space on vessels. As demand grew, ships of up to 1,000 tons were built, with Surat

♦ *Ship owners*

alone boasting around 50 sea-going ships by 1650. The Mughal emperors too commissioned new vessels yearly until Aurangzeb halted the practice. By 1700, Surat's fleet had expanded to 112 ships. Alongside this, rulers on the Malabar coast and in Southeast Asia, such as Ayuthya, Arakan, Acheh, Johore, and Bantam, maintained active trade links with India. They often coordinated shipments to maximise profits and avoid the costly mistake of empty return voyages.

4.1.3.1 Shipbuilding Industry in Early Modern India: Indigenous Practices

♦ *Hereditary knowledge*

The shipbuilding industry in early modern India flourished in several coastal regions such as Gujarat, Malabar, Coromandel, Konkan, and Bengal. In India, the hereditary craftsmen passed down their skills in shipbuilding across generations. Their close understanding of timber varieties and construction methods helped them to make durable and efficient Indian vessels. Textual references, such as the *Yuktikalpataru*, describe ships of varied design, adorned with ornate carvings and constructed with scientifically chosen woods. It featured decorative designs on animals and birds.

♦ *Riverine Bengal industry*

As we discussed, Surat had a crucial place in the shipbuilding economy during the seventeenth century. The region had rich natural resources and was near the timber-producing towns of Navsari, Gandevi, and Bulsar. The port city became renowned for the strength and longevity of its ships. Manucci noted the superiority of Indian-built ships over their European counterparts. Also, the strategic location of Surat along the Tapti River helped the production of both coastal craft and vessels capable of long-distance oceanic voyages. In the case of Bengal, where inland navigation was possible due to an extensive river network, shipbuilding was a prominent industry. Dacca became a hub for boat construction with carpenters along riverbanks as labourers. Bengali ships traded with Coromandel, Sumatra, and the Red Sea ports, while literary sources described vessels elaborately decorated and made from local woods such as jackfruit and sal. Despite lacking navigational tools like the magnetic compass, sailors relied on celestial guidance, which reflects indigenous navigational competence.

The Coromandel Coast developed a narrow but sustained industrial zone for ship construction, particularly around Narsapur and Madapollam. These shipyards, though mostly private, supported fleets that engaged in regional and transoceanic trade. European companies such as the Dutch and English frequently commissioned or repaired vessels at these yards. This shows the quality of Indian craftsmanship. Local iron workers produced spikes, anchors,

and rigging. In the case of Cochin, Calicut, and Cannanore, they formed the core of shipbuilding on the Malabar Coast. The availability of timber from the inland regions made construction economically viable. With Portuguese patronage, Cochin evolved into a significant naval yard by the early sixteenth century. Ships were constructed with the help of local carpenters and caulkers. Portuguese officials preferred Cochin for new builds and repairs, and by 1514, the port had become central to their maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean. The Konkan coast, particularly the Thana, Kolaba, and Ratnagiri regions, developed as important sites for shipbuilding under the patronage of the Marathas. Ports such as Kalyan, Alibag, and Bhiwandi had construction centres, with timbers coming from the locality. Ships built in Agashi and Vasai were capable of voyages to Europe. Hindu seafaring communities such as the *Kolis* and *Bhandaris* provided the skilled labour for both construction and trade.

♦ *Malabar's naval hubs*

♦ *Konkan's skilled communities*

The increased demand for shipping services not only increased employment opportunities for artisans, carpenters, and labourers but also influenced coastal economies. Port towns like Masulipatnam, Surat, and Cochin became crowded centres of economic activity, where migrant workers and craftsmen from surrounding areas were engaged in it. Labourers often worked under strict labour conditions, with profits concentrating in the hands of merchant capitalists and company officials. Maritime trade could not have flourished without an advanced and skilled shipbuilding industry, especially in regions like Gujarat and the Malabar Coast. These ships, often referred to as 'dhows' or 'ghats,' were built with specialised knowledge passed down through generations. The labour involved was highly specialised. *Khalasis* played a critical role in the loading and unloading of goods and maintenance of ships.

♦ *Role of Labourers*

4.1.3.2 The Tradition of Malabar and the Role of *Khalasis*

Malabar, on the southwestern coast of India, is known for its rich natural resources such as pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, timber, and iron. Its fertile soil and extensive coastline were also features. Ports in Calicut, Kollam, Kasargod, Beypore, and Ponnani became centres for international maritime trade within the Indian Ocean. The abundance of high-quality timber from inland forests and navigable river systems facilitated the transportation of raw materials to coastal shipyards.

♦ *Timber-rich terrain*

♦ *Geographical Advantage*

Evidence from Greco-Roman sources, such as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (1st century CE), and archaeological finds like

♦ *Long maritime tradition*

Roman coins in South India confirm maritime links between the western Indian coast (including Malabar) and the Mediterranean world from at least the 3rd century BCE. The expansion of the Islamic world, particularly after the establishment of Abbasid trade networks, intensified maritime trade in the Indian Ocean. By the 9th century, Arab and Persian merchants had become intermediaries in Indian Ocean commerce. Malabar's ports grew in strategic and economic importance during this period. The growth of trade necessitated advancements in maritime technology, and coastal regions like Malabar became noted for indigenous shipbuilding practices. The dhow, for instance, was commonly used by Arab traders, and local shipyards contributed to this tradition, influenced by both Indian and West Asian techniques.

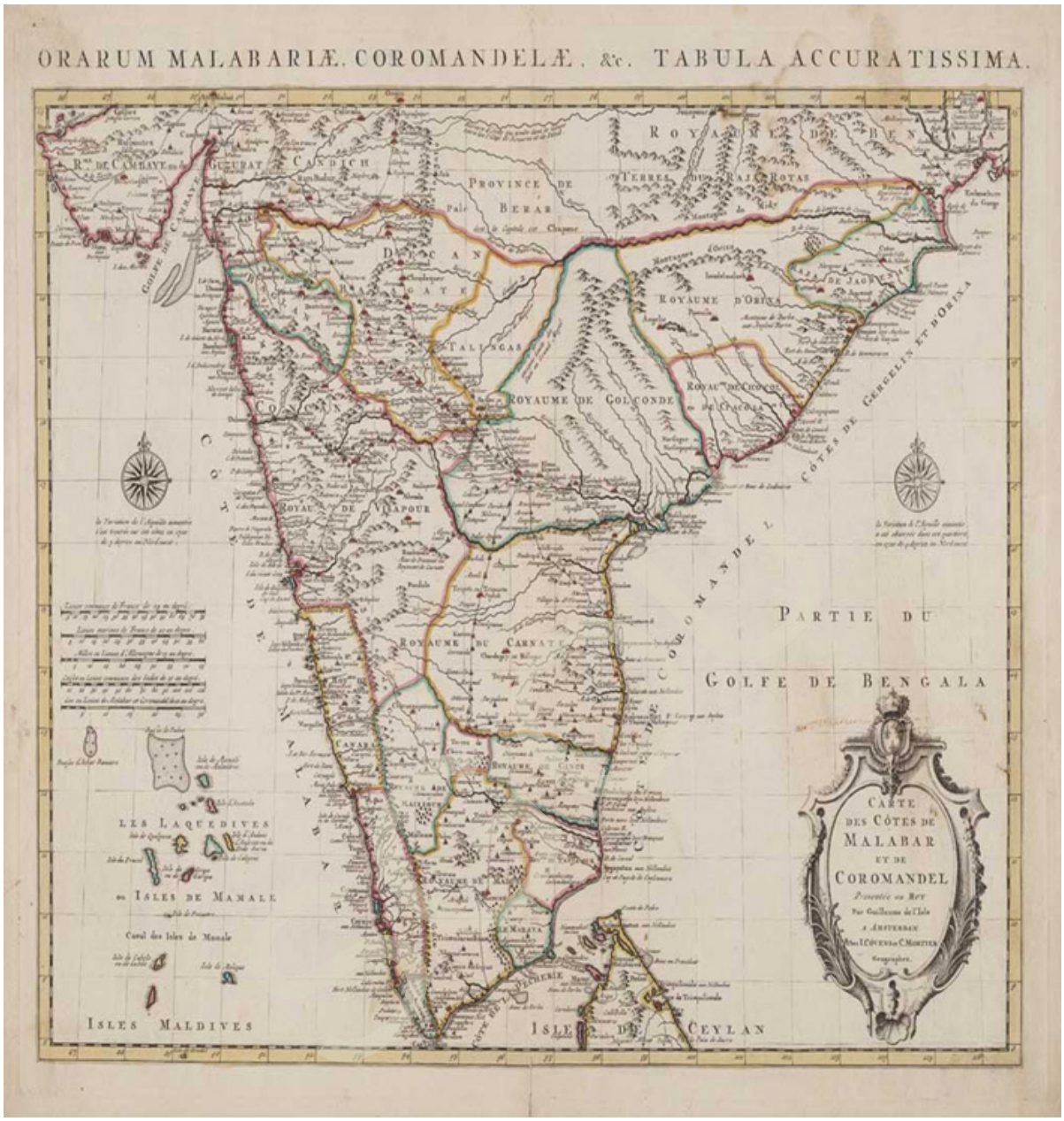
♦ *Traditional craftsmanship mastery*

Shipbuilding in Malabar flourished from the medieval period. The estuarine conditions, with deep, less saline waters, especially near Beypore, made it an ideal location for building and launching *Urus,* the traditional wooden vessels. The keel or 'pandi' of these ships was crafted from premium teak or *karimaruth*, sourced from nearby Nilambur and Wayanad forests. The Chaliyar River facilitated the transport of timber, while skilled carpenters and *Khalasis* (shipyard workers) contributed indispensable expertise in the *Uru* building industry. The master craftsmen, known as *Maistiries*, relied on traditional skills and mental calculation rather than modern tools. The labour force included carpenters from the *Viswakarma* and *Asari* communities, Muslim-controlled *Uru*-building companies, and Mappila *Khalasis*.

♦ *Khalasis' role*

Ship construction was a collective enterprise involving various occupational groups. While traditional carpenters, *Thachans*, and woodworkers formed the technical core, communities such as *Odayis*, *Khalasis*, and *Kammalis* played critical roles in logistical and auxiliary tasks. Though not caste-based, these roles gradually became socially differentiated. *Khalasis* had a major role in Uru construction, especially during the ship's launching, a festive occasion marked by communal participation. These workers, known as a mix of "black and white," specialised in lifting heavy timber and manoeuvring vessels into water using traditional techniques such as capstans and pulleys. Their expertise extended beyond shipbuilding to bridge construction, and they maintained unique songs and rituals related to their work. Despite migration for alternative employment, *Khalasis* remain vital to the cultural and technical heritage of *Uru* making.

Rituals associated with *Uru* construction begin with the ceremonial felling of trees and continue through to the launching. While the exact origins of *Uru*-building remain debated, theories



Map of the Malabar and Coromandel coasts by Guillaume de l'Isle, c.1742, published by Covens & Mortier, Amsterdam. Source: https://notevenpast.org/

♦ *Rituals associated with Uru construction*

include Arab influence linked to Noah's ark traditions, contributions by Gujarati *Maistiries* ('Kaithars'), or indigenous development. Similarities with the *Odams* of Lakshadweep show shared shipbuilding methods, although *Urus* were larger and constructed for overseas trade.

The importance of Indian teak extended to British shipbuilding and led to the establishment of the Connolly teak plantation in Malabar during the 19th century. Artisan communities such as

♦ *Methods of Uru construction*

Asaris (carpenters) and *Kollans* (blacksmiths) near port towns were involved in the work. Though the traditional *Uru* construction methods have largely persisted unchanged, modern adaptations include the use of Malaysian timber, iron nails, steel bars, plastic ropes, iron pulleys, and motor engines replacing wind sails. Despite efforts such as the Beypore Heritage Shipbuilding Project, state support has waned, and artisans have migrated to other centres like Mangalore and Gujarat.

♦ *Colonial impact and decline*

Indigenous vessels were built to suit the coastal and deep-sea conditions of the Indian Ocean. Prior to European intervention, the region-built ships were adapted to both trade and naval defence. Some European techniques were also adopted later. British colonial policies shifted resources, particularly teak, from local shipyards to centralised imperial dockyards in Bombay. This redirection, combined with the colonial neglect of local industries, initiated the decline of traditional shipbuilding in Malabar. The labour network began to disintegrate.

4.1.3.4 Maritime Infrastructure and Shipbuilding Centres

♦ *Coastal ship-building centres*

We have discussed the crucial role of the Malabar Coast in the early modern period of maritime commerce and naval enterprise. Among its many coastal kingdoms, Cannanore emerged as a locus of shipbuilding and trade. The chief shipbuilding hubs on the Malabar coast were Calicut, Cochin, and Cannanore. Local carpenters, caulkers, and artisans, using generations of knowledge, produced vessels suitable for both riverine and oceanic navigation. Timber, sourced from the hinterlands, made construction economical. Portuguese records show that shipyards in Cochin produced large transoceanic vessels. Ships like *Santa Catarina de Monte Sinai* were built there between 1511 and 1514.

♦ *Cannanore's maritime economy*

♦ *Arackal Ali Rajas and Commercial Sovereignty*

Cannanore held an important place in maritime trade and shipbuilding. Ports like Porma Palam near Tellicherry, referred to by Barbosa, were inhabited by *Mappila* merchants, known for their ship construction and timber trade. The region exported horses, pepper, and textiles while importing goods from Arabia and Persia. These ports were capable of ship production and maintenance. In the latter half of the seventeenth century, the political and commercial strategies of the Arackal Ali Rajas, rulers of Cannanore, showed how regional elites used maritime power to maintain their autonomy. Historian Binu John, in his work, *Lords of the Seas*, notes that the Arackal Ali Rajas, who were prominent maritime merchants during early modern Malabar, successfully resisted Dutch East India Company attempts to control regional trade. Their ability to

maintain commercial links across the Indian Ocean demonstrated the role of indigenous agency in European expansion. This maritime resilience was supported by access to local shipbuilding facilities and a deep understanding of the commercial geography of the Indian Ocean.

♦ *Portuguese Interference and the Cartaz System*

However, the arrival of the Portuguese marked a new phase of regulatory control. They introduced the *cartaz* system, a naval pass required to sail in the western Indian Ocean. While rulers like the Zamorin of Calicut had to acquire these passes, local traders remained vulnerable to arbitrary seizures. Royal monopolies, especially on pepper and ginger, further constrained native commerce. However, these policies didn't eliminate indigenous shipbuilding or maritime activity; instead, they forced the native naval force to renegotiate their presence in the oceanic world.

4.1.3.5 Indigenous Maritime Resistance

♦ *Marakkars and the Portuguese*

The confrontation between the Marakkars and the Portuguese on the Malabar coast during the sixteenth century is well known. It reflects how the natives responded to the disruptive entry of foreign naval powers in the Indian Ocean world. Marakkars developed a distinct naval strategy centred on small, swift vessels designed for the littoral waters of the region. These ships, which required a limited crew, were more effective in Indian conditions than the larger, slower Portuguese carracks. Marakkars followed guerrilla-style attacks and launched several assaults on Portuguese shipping during the 1530s. They destroyed various Portuguese vessels, inflicted considerable losses, and exposed the vulnerabilities of European ships in unfamiliar waters.

♦ *Indian Ocean resistance*

The maritime setbacks made the Portuguese identify the Marakkars as their foremost naval adversaries in Kerala. To weaken this resistance, they sought the support of the Zamorin and initiated direct military action. Dom Henrique de Menezes, Vasco da Gama's successor, led a series of attacks by destroying Marakkar ships at Ponnani and targeting their stronghold at Panthalayani Kollam. This naval conflict reflects a wider tension between indigenous maritime systems and European efforts to dominate Indian Ocean trade routes. The Marakkars' resistance showed the resilience and adaptability of Indian seafaring communities, who used their knowledge in shipbuilding and navigation to safeguard local interests in a globalising world.

4.1.4 Monetary Circulation and Trade Finance

As maritime trade flourished, the importance of a proper financial system became increasingly evident. The extensive trade

networks in the Indian Ocean facilitated the circulation of coinage and bullion, which were essential for facilitating transactions throughout the region. Indian merchants played a major role in managing the flow of bullion, particularly gold and silver, between different parts of the Indian Ocean. According to Satish Chandra, trade was supported by a financial system based on *hundis*, letters of credit that allowed safe, cashless transactions across long distances, often including insurance *(bima)*. Money changers *(sarrafs)* handled *hundis* and operated like private bankers, accepting deposits and financing trade. Influential merchants like Virji Vohra established agency houses across Indian cities and international ports from the Persian Gulf to Southeast Asia, integrating inland markets with overseas maritime trade routes. The introduction of credit systems such as the *hundi* system was a noted development in maritime trade. The *hundi* was a form of promissory note used to facilitate trade, and it became mostly used by merchants to transfer funds and engage in long-distance transactions. This system supported merchants in trading across vast distances without the need for physical currency. By the early modern period, India's economy was deeply connected to both inland and overseas trade. In places like Ahmedabad, merchants and even nobles preferred using *hundis* over cash for settling payments, including salaries for soldiers. It shows how financial practices kept pace with expanding trade.

♦ *Hundi system*

4.1.5 Commercialisation, Monetisation, and Agrarian Expansion

With the expansion of trade, especially maritime trade, there was a marked increase in the commercialisation of agriculture and the monetisation of local economies. As global trade expanded, so did the flow of precious metals into India, particularly silver, which was a major catalyst for the monetisation of these local economies. This monetisation of the economy was not just a result of external factors. Agricultural production became increasingly market-oriented as the demand for exports intensified.

♦ *Flow of precious metals into India*

Sanjay Subrahmanyam and C.A. Bayly have labelled the regional entrepreneurs as 'portfolio capitalists' who emerged during this period. They were engaged in different revenue-generating activities, including revenue farming, local agricultural trade, military resource trade, and even maritime trade. According to historians such as C.A. Bayly and David Washbrook, the rapid commercialisation of the eighteenth century, driven by increased bullion availability and the emergence of financial markets, created opportunities for these capitalists to become significant political players. As financiers of existing rulers, capitalists often acted

♦ *Portfolio capitalists*

as *de facto or de jure* governors, exercising power across the subcontinent. These entrepreneurs invested in multiple sectors and were instrumental in facilitating the integration of local markets with broader commercial networks. This led to the expansion of cash crop cultivation, which in turn encouraged the agrarian transformation of regions like South India.

♦ *Increasing monetisation of agricultural production*

The monetisation of the economy, as Subrahmanyam notes, was linked to the increased importation of precious metals such as silver and gold from the European colonies. The influx of silver into India, facilitated by the growing trade networks, allowed for the expansion of market economies. These imported metals were often used for trade, creating a larger volume of coinage in circulation. At the same time, the demand for fiscal revenue by the Mughal Empire and regional kingdoms also played a role in the increasing monetisation of agricultural production. However, Subrahmanyam critiques the conventional view that the state's growing fiscal needs directly led to increased monetisation. Instead, he suggests that the commercialisation of agriculture, which was driven by the needs of trade and production for distant markets, was a factor. After the 1740s, the British began using unfair tactics against Indian merchants and pressured artisans to lower prices, disrupting this earlier flow of benefits.

Summarised Overview

In this unit, we have explored the economic impact of maritime trade in India, with particular attention to agriculture, craft industries, and finance. Challenges arose as indigenous industries and labour systems came under the pressure of European colonial powers. The expansion of maritime networks in the Indian Ocean encouraged global demand for Indian agricultural products like pepper, cardamom, indigo, and cotton. It further influenced land-use patterns and promoted export-driven agriculture. Craft industries, such as textiles and metalwork, flourished due to maritime trade, but the growing European dominance in the 16th and 17th centuries led to a decline in indigenous crafts. Traditional methods in coastal regions such as Malabar and Gujarat supported the growing maritime commerce, with shipbuilding communities maintaining these practices. Finally, trade finance systems, including instruments like the *hundi*, were crucial for facilitating long-distance trade. They enabled merchants to conduct business across vast distances.

Assignments

1. Discuss the impact of global demand for agricultural products on the land-use patterns in coastal India. How did maritime trade influence agricultural practices in the subcontinent?
2. How did maritime trade contribute to the development of craft industries in India? Discuss the role of textiles, pottery, and metalwork in the global economy, and how indigenous crafts were affected by European competition?
3. Examine the role of shipbuilding in sustaining maritime trade in India. What were the traditional shipbuilding techniques, and how did they contribute to the success of Indian Ocean trade routes?

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2. Malekandathil, Pius. *Maritime India: Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean.* New Delhi: Primus Books, 2010.
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6. Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. *Political Economy of Commerce in South India, 1500–1650.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

UNIT 2

Social Impact

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand the spread of Semitic religions via maritime networks
- trace the diffusion of Buddhism and Hinduism through sea routes
- examine the social and cultural impact of exchanges of maritime India

Background

When we think about trade, we often think first about commodities: spices, textiles, ivory, and gold. But the most transformative exchanges are not always material. Ideas, beliefs, and even entire religious systems travelled alongside cargo. Maritime routes weren't just about trade; they were roadways of culture too. The sea was a corridor for people, beliefs, and identities, and it reshaped Indian society. That's how new religions were introduced across the coasts of the Indian Ocean. Take the Jewish community of Cochin, for instance. Their presence in Kerala can be traced back as early as the first century CE, though reliable records become more tangible by the medieval period. These Jewish traders, possibly of West Asian origin, became integrated communities along the Malabar coast. In this unit, let us examine the spread of Semitic religions in India through maritime contacts and their impact.

Keywords

Maritime Networks, Semitic religions, Social transformation, Jewish communities, Syrian Christians, Buddhism, Merchant guilds, Religious syncretism, Indian Ocean trade

Discussion

4.2.1 Advent and Spread of Semitic Religions

♦ *Transportation of ideas and beliefs*

Maritime trade was not merely an economic activity. It altered the social structure of port cities and their hinterlands. Social hierarchies, occupational roles, and patterns of mobility were redefined through the interaction of traders, migrants, and new ideas. When traders first began sailing the Indian Ocean, they carried more than just goods; they transported beliefs, myths, and memories. Religion often arrived at ports not with conquest, but quietly, through conversation, marriage, and market interactions. Along the Malabar Coast, Jewish communities like those in Cochin laid down roots centuries ago, possibly as early as the first millennium CE. These settlers from West Asia moved eastward, attracted to the spice trade and the relative religious tolerance of coastal rulers. Though precise dates remain debated, archaeological and textual evidence point to a sustained Jewish presence by the medieval period.

♦ *Social transformation*

♦ *Urbanisation and social mobility*

Pius Malekandathil identifies how port settlements attracted foreign mercantile communities, including Christians from Sassanid Persia, Jews, and Muslims. These groups often received state patronage and were allowed to form autonomous settlements. We can draw an example from the grant of privileges to Mar Sapor and Mar Proth by the ruler of the Ay kingdom in the ninth century. It demonstrates how trade creates semi-independent foreign settlements. This confluence led to the formation of multi-ethnic, multi-religious urban societies that were different from the inland territories. Such cities encouraged social mobility. Migration to port towns created mixed communities with new roles and rising social groups.

♦ *Merchant Guilds*

Merchant guilds such as the *manigramam* and *anjuvannam* became the institutions that managed trade and social interaction. These guilds were socio-economic regulators and operated beyond caste and religious lines. By this period, *Anjuvannam* (generally seen as a Jewish merchant guild) and *Manigramam* of Kollam (considered a Christian guild) had assumed power as *karalars* of the city. In Kerala, the guild appears to have evolved into a powerful commercial institution of Christian merchants, engaged in long-distance trade across the Indian Ocean, especially with regions like the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Levant.

4.2.1.1 Syrian Christians

The ancient spice trade routes that connected Kerala to the outside world brought not only merchants but also missionaries and travellers carrying new faiths and practices. One of the examples from this period is the arrival of Christianity in Kerala, traced through the traditions of the Indian Church to the Apostle Saint Thomas himself. According to these legends, Saint Thomas landed in India in 52 CE, preached the gospel, and established a Christian community. This group came to be known as the Saint Thomas Christians or Marthoma *Nazranikal*. They engaged in trade and often worked as brokers or scribes for coastal kings. Syrian Christians maintained a distinct West Asian culture while adapting to the economic and political realities of the Malabar coast. These early Christians, often referred to as Syrians *(Suryanikkar)* and Christian *Mappiḷas (Nazrani Mappilamar)*, built seven churches along strategic trade routes, one of which stood on the banks of Vembanad Lake. The lake and its network of backwaters functioned as the lifeblood of commerce, and the Syrian Christians established their congregations along these routes. The evolution of port cities like Cochin was driven by tectonic shifts and the silting of older ports such as Kodungallur, which only deepened the interconnection between trade and religious communities.

♦ *St.Thomas Tradition*

♦ *Syrian Christians*

The origins of Christianity in India, particularly in Kerala, are closely linked to these early merchants, including Syrian Christians and Jews, who came to the Malabar Coast for trade. Epigraphic evidence supports the idea that Christianity arrived in India through these traders and missionaries. From the 4th century onward, Christian merchants from Persia settled in places like Cranganore and Quilon. Thomas of Cana arrived in Cranganore in the 4th century, and later, Mar Sabor and Mar Proth came to Quilon in the 9th century. These Persian Syrian Christians migrated due to persecution and established settlements with the support of local rulers, enjoying socio-economic privileges that were recorded on copper plates later handed to the Portuguese. The local Christians in Cranganore and Quilon, followers of Apostle Thomas, were united with the new immigrant group under Thomas of Cana. Church leadership, including bishops and priests, held influence over the native Christian community until the 17th century.

♦ *Origin of Christianity in Kerala*

There are different views about the origin of the St. Thomas tradition in Kerala. While many believe it came with West Asian traders and navigators involved in the spice trade, some scholars like M.G.S. Narayanan and Rajan Gurukkal question the historicity of St. Thomas's mission in India. Medieval European travellers note that Syrian Christians played important roles in the pepper

♦ *Views on St. Thomas Tradition*

trade, serving as brokers and port officials, and were skilled in both maritime and inland trade, which gave them occupational and geographic mobility. Ancient writers like Pliny mention the seaports of the Malabar Coast and their commercial and cultural connections. Recent archaeological findings have uncovered the ancient port city of Muziris near Cranganore, believed to be where St. Thomas first arrived, though the exact location of Muziris remains debated.

♦ *Changes happened during the Portuguese Period*

Until the arrival of the Portuguese in Kerala, Syrian Christians had followed Eastern Christian traditions and maintained a close relationship with the Church of the East, especially the Patriarchate of Babylon. The Portuguese, however, aimed to bring all Christians in Kerala under the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope. This process involved replacing the Syrian liturgy with Latin rites, introducing Roman Catholic practices, and discouraging the traditional customs of the local church. New religious institutions like the Cranganore Seminary (1541), the Jesuit College at Cochin, and the Vaipikotta Seminary were established to train priests loyal to the Latin Church. In 1555, they found the Diocese of Cochin for the Latin Christians and the converts. With the coming of Jesuits, the propagation of Christianity was intensified. St. Francis Xavier converted the fishermen and lower caste and backward section of the society around the coastal region of the southern part of Kerala. The chiefs and the upper caste section of the society did not get affected by this conversion. Furthermore, as their status or source of income was not in any danger, they hardly paid any attention to the Portuguese religious policy.

♦ *Latinisation efforts*

The most decisive moment in this period came with the Synod of Diamper in 1599, organised by Archbishop Alexis de Menezes at Udayamperur (Diamper). This assembly, attended by 813 representatives of the Syrian Christian community, was intended to enforce Roman Catholic supremacy. The Synod condemned several Syrian Christian texts as heretical, ordered their destruction, and cut off the community's ancient ties with the Patriarchate of Babylon. It placed the Syrian Christians directly under the Pope's authority, replacing their traditional bishops with Latin ones. These changes caused great resentment within the community. The situation worsened when rumours spread that a bishop sent from the Patriarchate, Ahatalla, was reportedly detained and possibly killed by the Portuguese authorities. In response, thousands of Syrian Christians gathered at the Mattancherry Church in 1653. In a historic event known as the *Oath of the Coonan Cross*, they took an oath, holding a rope tied to an old cross, refusing to accept the authority of Latin bishops and the Jesuits. This marked a major turning point, halting Portuguese Latinisation efforts and allowing the Syrian Christians to preserve aspects of their distinct religious

identity, though not without lasting tensions and divisions within the community.

♦ *Influence of European colonialism*

With the dawn of the colonial period, maritime connections intensified and brought with them new economic opportunities as well as social disruptions. The Syrian Christian community, like many others, experienced rifts and transformations under the influence of European colonialism. Not only were their theological practices influenced by missionary activities, but their economic status also changed as they acquired land previously held by other communities.

4.2.1.2 Islam in Coastal India

♦ *Arrival of Islam in the Indian Ocean region*

Islam arrived in India by sea long before it came through the north-western passes. Arab traders began visiting and settling along the Indian coastline by the 7th century CE. George Hourani, in his work *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean*, shows that these traders formed settlements, some even intermarrying with local communities and establishing mosques. Islam here was not imposed; rather, it was absorbed. The sea allowed it to take on different hues, shaped by local conditions and cultural interactions.

♦ *Monsoon Islam and the Indian Ocean World*

Between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, a distinct form of Islamic belief and practice emerged among Muslim trading communities of the Indian Ocean. On the Malabar Coast, Islam was established not through conquest but through commerce. It was through forms of Sufi religiosity that prioritised healing, charisma, and community-building. Historian Sebastian Prange describes this as 'Monsoon Islam', a version of Islam spread more by merchants rather than sultans. It was driven by commercial needs rather than warfare, and deeply influenced by the experience of Muslims living within non-Muslim societies. Focusing on Malabar's pepper trade, Prange offers a case study showing how this form of Islam evolved in response to specific economic, socio-religious, and political challenges. Since Muslim merchants across the Indian Ocean belonged to connected commercial, literary, and political networks, the developments in Malabar reflect a larger, trans-oceanic history of Islam in monsoon Asia.

♦ *Early Islamic presence*

Historian Mahmood Kooria, in his work *Islamic Law in Circulation: Shāfiʿī Texts across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean,* mentions that between the seventh and tenth centuries, Muslims were already present across the Indian Ocean littoral, including regions connected to present-day India, as indicated by references to Tamil, Malayalam, and Sanskrit sources. These communities, composed of traders, travellers, scholars, and

exiles, settled along maritime routes and played an active role in the development of Islamic law. Though distant from the theological and juridical debates of the Islamic heartlands, they formed their own religious and legal practices. Kooria emphasises that these Muslims were not marginal; they had demographically significant communities with legal institutions such as mosques and the roles of *qazis* and *shaikhs*. Their practices emerged through constant negotiation with dominant non-Muslim socio-political entities, thus producing distinct juridical experiences within the Islamic tradition. Kooria notes that Muslim communities, including traders, travellers, and exiles, were active in Indian Ocean trade before the rise of Islam, and likely established settlements in this region by the seventh century. One inscription from Matayi in Malabar (dated to 627 CE) and oral traditions from Ghogha in Gujarat suggest early mosque foundations, though Kooria cautions that these claims lack strong corroboration.

♦ *Umayyad military campaigns*

It is considered that the conquest of Sind by Muḥammad bin Qasim in 715 CE, prompted by a maritime dispute involving Muslim captives near the western Indian coast, marks a crucial moment. Through this campaign, new territories in India were incorporated into the Umayyad realm. This not only introduced Islamic political control but enabled the application of Islamic law in taxation, legal proceedings, and rituals, representing a structural transformation facilitated by maritime interaction.

4.2.1.3 The Jews in Kerala

♦ *Jews in the Eurasian trading Network*

The Jews of Kerala set an example of how religion and trade intertwined through maritime contacts. From around the 10th century onwards, Jewish traders played a major role in connecting the Indian Ocean world with the Mediterranean. They became crucial links within Eurasian trading networks. Though Jewish settlements in Malabar likely began even before the 10th century, as mentioned by surviving copper plate inscriptions, it was from the mid-tenth century that larger groups, particularly Egyptian Jews under the Fatimid Caliphate, became actively involved in India's growing spice trade. Kerala, with its strategic location and priced commodities, naturally attracted these merchants.

♦ *Migration of the Jews to Kerala*

Nearly two thousand years ago, the collapse of Jerusalem in 70 CE and the destruction of the Second Temple by Roman forces triggered one of the earliest large-scale Jewish diasporas. Communities of Jewish settlers scattered across Europe, North Africa, and parts of Asia in search of refuge and new opportunities. Among these groups, a small yet significant number made their way to the distant shores of southwestern India, to the tropical

region of Kerala along the Malabar Coast. Over time, they built a community, eventually numbering in the thousands, with eight synagogues scattered across towns like Kochi, Ernakulam, Parur, Chendamangalam, and Mala. It is recorded that the Jewish settlers were warmly received by local rulers, even granted land, privilege, and a considerable degree of autonomy.

♦ *Cooperation with Arabs*

What makes their story particularly interesting is the way Jewish traders worked alongside Arab merchants, even maintaining strong commercial ties during the turbulent years of the Crusades. These religious communities cooperate for mutual benefit, sidestepping the religious conflicts that plagued much of the Mediterranean world. However, everything shifted with the arrival of European traders. As the Portuguese and later the Dutch asserted control over Indian Ocean trade, the Jewish merchants were forced to adapt. Portuguese anti-Jewish policies created hardships, while the Dutch period brought a comparatively easier time, though tensions within the Jewish community itself, especially between long-settled Jews and newly arrived European Jews, became a new challenge. Still, the Jewish merchants of Kerala managed to secure patronage from local rulers and communities and overcome religious differences and political changes.

♦ *Internal division among the Jews in Kerala*

Yet, internal divisions took root within the Jewish community itself. The Cochin Jews, as they came to be known, split into two distinct groups, the so-called White Jews of Mattancherry *(Paradesis)* and the Black Jews of Ernakulam *(Malabaris)*. The former traced their origins to later waves of Jewish migration, particularly refugees from the Iberian Peninsula and the Middle East, while the latter claimed descent from the earlier Jewish settlers who arrived possibly as early as the first centuries of the Common Era. These divisions, unfortunately, hardened over time, fuelled by disputes over ancestry, social status, and privilege. At the heart of their centuries-old conflict lay a persistent question: Who among them had arrived first in Kerala? This rivalry, sharpened by differences in skin colour and socio-economic standing, led to a long-standing social segregation, an internal apartheid of sorts, that limited intermarriage and communal cohesion. Despite sharing religious beliefs and rituals, these communities maintained separate synagogues and rarely mingled beyond the necessities of trade and worship.

Meanwhile, some Jewish families came to own vast estates and plantations, while others secured positions of commercial and political importance under successive local rulers and colonial regimes. During the Dutch occupation of Malabar (1663–1795), David Ezekiel Rahabi acted as an intermediary between the Dutch

East India Company and native rulers. However, the 20th century, particularly following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, witnessed a steady exodus of Kerala's Jews. Many Malabari Jews emigrated to Israel in the 1950s, followed later by the Paradesis. The combined forces of migration, inter-community rivalry, and a declining birth rate adversely affected the Jewish population of Kerala. By the early 21st century, fewer than fifty Jews remained in Kerala, and only one synagogue, the Paradesi Synagogue in Mattancherry, continued to hold services. In her book The *Last Jews of Kerala,* Edna Fernandes offers a poignant narrative of the rise, divisions, and gradual decline of the community.

♦ *Factors affecting the Jewish community*

♦ *Exodus of Kerala Jews*

4.2.2 Spread of Buddhism and Hinduism to the External World

Apart from trade, the Indian Ocean witnessed a spiritual circulation. Monks, pilgrims, and missionaries moved alongside merchants, and temples or monasteries often served as resting places for travellers. Buddhism spread outward from Indian ports to Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Southeast Asia, and eventually East Asia. Himanshu Prabha Ray's archaeological studies show that monasteries like those at Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati were strategically located on trade routes, functioning as both religious and commercial hubs.

♦ *Spiritual circulation*

♦ *Maritime transmission of Buddhism*

As Buddhism moved eastward, it adapted to local traditions. The image of Avalokiteśvara, for instance, was assimilated into the Chinese pantheon as Guanyin, considered an embodiment of compassion that crossed linguistic and cultural boundaries. Buddhism's maritime spread was facilitated by trade networks and adapted flexibly to local religious cultures.

♦ *Buddhism in the local religious culture*

Hinduism, while less centralised than Buddhism in its proselytising efforts, spread through merchant networks. Temples in Bali, Champa, and Cambodia show clear evidence of this diffusion. But this wasn't simply a matter of Indians exporting culture; rather, local elites appropriated Indian imagery, cosmologies, and rituals to legitimise their own rule. Malekandathil argues that the Indian Ocean saw multiple centres of Sanskritic influence, where local and foreign elements were fused into hybrid traditions. Hinduism's maritime expansion relied less on direct missionary work and more on merchant mobility and local reinterpretation of Indian ideas.

♦ *Spread of Hinduism through merchant networks*

♦ *Temples in Bali, Cambodia, etc.*

Coexistence of Religions in the Port Cities

Port towns like Calicut or Cambay became the regions where religious interactions occurred daily. Sebastian Prange and M.N. Pearson both note that these cities saw regular interactions between Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Jews, and Jains, facilitated by shared

♦ *Religious exchanges and syncretism*

♦ *Interfaith interactions in port towns*

commercial goals. Instead of rigid boundaries, religion operated fluidly here, often negotiated through contracts, rituals, or intermarriage rather than conflict.

♦ *Port cities as liminal social spaces*

Historian Dilip Menon draws attention to port cities as spaces that blend cultural interactions with economic processes. He points out that the cities, such as Melaka, Kochi, and Zanzibar, have long histories as cosmopolitan spaces, where diverse groups from various parts of the world converge for trade. He reflects on port cities as liminal spaces, places that sit on the edge of land and sea, where diverse social groups converge. These cities are constantly shaped by migration and the flow of goods, and as such, they reflect social tensions as well as social cooperation. He notes that these cities were often marked by the 'double consciousness' of global processes (such as trade and migration) and local social pluralism.

♦ *The social imaginaries beyond national borders*

In engaging with the idea of the paracolonial, Dilip Menon challenges the conventional notion of reading history backwards from a national and colonial perspective. The movement of people, such as the trade in goods and religion, illustrates how social imaginaries extend beyond national boundaries. Menon emphasises that the oceans have long facilitated social networks that surpass national affiliations, offering a more fluid and transnational approach to understanding social space.

♦ *Symbiotic relationship by M.G.S.*

As M.G.S. Narayanan points out, the Arab, Jewish, Christian, and later Muslim settlers integrated themselves into the region without disrupting the prevailing social order. While they retained their own religious and communal identities, they coexisted with the Hindu majority. Hinduism remained the dominant belief, particularly among the agrarian classes and the Brahmin elite. However, foreign settlers such as Jews, Christians, and Muslims were able to establish and maintain their own identities while blending into the local social structure. They were often welcomed and accorded privileges that enabled them to settle. As M.G.S. argues, it was not a result of political subjugation, but a deliberate and peaceful interaction rooted in trade and mutual respect. The rulers formed alliances with specific communities. For instance, the Zamorin of Calicut aligned with Muslims, while the Cochin Raja allied with the Portuguese and the Dutch. Over time, this peaceful coexistence led to assimilation and adaptation. Narayanan notes that some of these communities lost their separate identities. Jains and Buddhists had their roles mostly as traders in inland regions. For example, Jains were absorbed into the Nair community, and Buddhists merged into what later became the Ezhava community. M.G.S. Narayanan emphasises that this social integration was not the result of coercion or conquest but of mutual need and long-

standing interaction, which he calls "symbiosis" in the truest sense. This absorption occurred through everyday social exchanges and shared practices.

4.2.3 Role of Seafarers, Merchants, and Missionaries in Community Formation

♦ *Migration and creation of new social networks*

Merchants from Hadhramaut, Persian cities, and East Africa settled in India's port towns, often forming interlocking kinship and commercial ties with local groups. Dilip Menon cites Engseng Ho's study on the migration of religious specialists, traders, and political actors across the Indian Ocean. This movement formed new social networks that were not bound by national or colonial lines. For example, the Alawi Sayyid descendants moved across the Indian Ocean from Hadramawt in Yemen to Southeast Asia, creating kinship ties and spreading Islam. These social networks exceeded colonial and national narratives, showing how migration forms social relations across the ocean that are not governed by the limitations of modern nation-states.

♦ *Arab, Persian, African influences on coastal India*

Binu John's *Lords of the Sea* describes how the Ali Rajas of Cannanore strategically married into local matrilineal Muslim lineages, thereby embedding foreign seafaring power into existing Kerala society. Communities like the Mappilas emerged from such interconnections. Many of these groups followed matrilineal descent, a striking contrast to most Islamic societies. Mahmood Kooria's research into Shafii legal texts demonstrates how Kerala's Muslims reconciled matrilineal inheritance with Islamic jurisprudence, often by privileging local custom *(urf)* in matters of family law. He argues it is a legal adaptation rather than legal negligence.

♦ *Matrilineal communities, mixed marriages, and hybrid identities*

Matriliny among coastal Muslims shows how deeply local customs could shape religious practice, especially through legal innovation. Mixed marriages also produced hybrid identities, visible in dress, language, and even religious practice. The African Siddis of Gujarat and Karnataka, for example, trace their ancestry to East African sailors and mercenaries. Though often marginalised in modern narratives, they once held crucial influence, especially under regional sultanates and later, Portuguese and Maratha patronage. Hybrid communities like the *Siddis* or *Mappilas* reveal how race, culture, and religion blended in ocean-facing societies.

♦ *Growth of Islamic Communities*

In his work, Mahmood Kooria discusses the impact of maritime contact on various zones, including India, by focusing on the roles of different groups within the Indian Ocean. By the ninth and tenth centuries, Muslim communities had become more visible and institutionally grounded across Indian coastal regions. These communities were composed of both settlers and itinerants, with

references in geographical and travel literature such as Ibn Khurradāḏbih, Masʿūdī, and others. Their growing presence indicates sustained maritime connectivity and legal-cultural exchanges.

Following unrest in Chinese ports (e.g. the 879 Guangzhou massacre), some Muslim traders reportedly migrated to Southeast Asian and South Asian ports, including Kalah and likely western Indian regions. These displacements further strengthened existing Muslim networks in India and helped expand their commercial and residential presence in port cities. Kooria discusses the migration of various Muslim groups who sought refuge in different parts of the Indian Ocean, including India. He mentions Alawis, Shias, and Sunnis who fled from persecution under the Umayyads. Some of these exiles, like the Shias from Khurasan, are said to have settled along the Malabar Coast and integrated with the local population and contributed to the spread of Islam in India. These communities brought their own interpretations of Islamic law and built local Islamic institutions.

♦ *Migration strengthened networks*

4.2.3.1 Exiles and Refugees

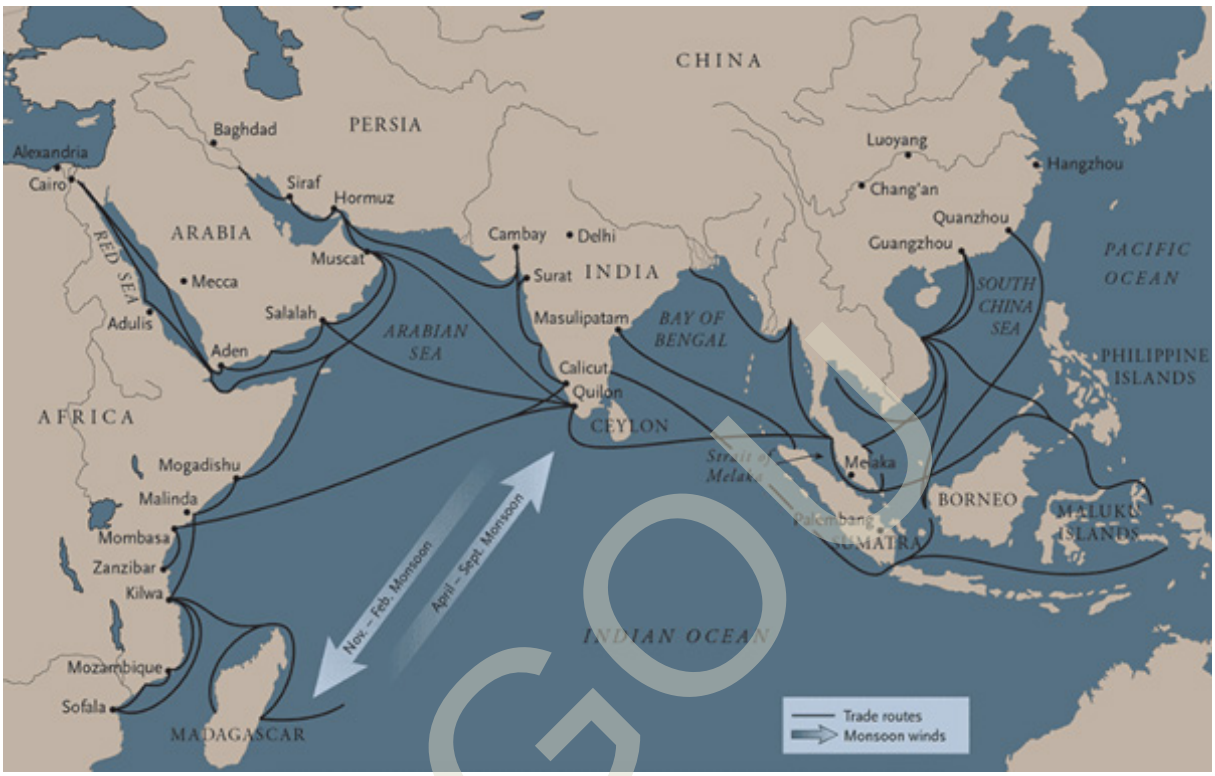
Similarly, traders had a major role in spreading Islam and contributing to economic exchanges through their extensive commercial networks across the Indian Ocean. Kooria notes that Arab and Persian merchants, who were central to the maritime trade, often settled in Indian ports such as Malabar and Gujarat. Even though Arabs and Persians were the dominant mercantile groups, some of the first converts to Islam were 'Sudanese merchants, who themselves participated in the Red Sea trade as well as the wider Indian Ocean trade'. Their interaction with local communities in India led to cultural exchanges, including the introduction of Islamic practices and juridical norms in the coastal regions. The importance of monsoon winds in trade patterns also fostered lasting connections between Indian traders and Muslim merchants, influencing both the commercial and cultural landscapes.

♦ *Traders and economic exchange*

Apart from traders and scholars, the soldiers, many of whom came from Indic and African zones between the eighth and tenth centuries, also had a crucial role. As Kooria explains, the military conquests of Sind by Muḥammad bin Qasim and later campaigns under rulers like Maḥmūd Ghazni brought large numbers of Muslim soldiers into India. These soldiers left behind permanent settlements and contributed to the spread of Islamic law and governance in the subcontinent. In Sind regions, Muslim soldiers maintained political control over non-Muslim populations, which allowed for the establishment of Islamic institutions and practices, particularly in the north-western regions of India. However,

♦ *Military Presence*

Kooria also notes that intermarriage between these soldiers and the local populations was limited. While Muhammad bin Qasim's 8th-century conquest of Sindh spread Islam into northwestern India via land routes, the west coast saw the arrival of Islam largely through maritime routes.



Depiction of the monsoon winds across the Indian Ocean
Credit: National Museum of African Art/Smithsonian Institution
Source: notevenpast.org

♦ *Religious teaching*

The arrival of Islamic scholars on the Malabar Coast established a foundation for Islamic law and teachings in India. Kooria refers to early records of Islamic scholars and companions of the Prophet Muhammad who spread Islam and its teachings in Malabar and Gujarat. According to local traditions and Muslim historical narratives in Malabar, *Qazis* (judges) were appointed as early as the 7th century, possibly by the Prophet's companions or their early followers. They introduced Islamic jurisprudence and spread religious practices among local Muslims. They became instrumental in introducing Islamic jurisprudence to the local society and spreading religious practices among local Muslims.

4.2.4 Social Mobility and the Emergence of New Social Groups

For many communities, especially those outside dominant agrarian caste hierarchies, maritime trade offered new routes to power. Trade enabled new social classes, especially merchants, to gain both economic and political influence in coastal polities. Merchant castes like the *Chettiars* and *Bohras* built influence not only through wealth but through temple endowments, diplomacy, and even military sponsorship. M.N. Pearson, in *Merchants and Rulers of Gujarat,* argues that powerful merchant groups in Gujarat held influence within the maritime economy, particularly in port cities like Cambay and Surat. These merchants often exercised authority in matters of trade, customs, and negotiation with foreign traders. Pearson emphasises that these merchants became intermediaries between local rulers and overseas traders due to their language skills and commercial expertise. Some of these merchant elites managed trade networks and diplomatic exchanges, sometimes wielding authority comparable to that of official administrators within their commercial sphere.

♦ *Rise of merchant castes and maritime elites*

Rulers understood the value of such communities. It was stated by medieval historians that the Zamorin's Calicut or the Portuguese *Estado da Índia* often gave special privileges to merchant groups, especially those who could maintain naval fleets or tax outposts. The Marakkars, for instance, were not just traders; they were naval commanders whose power arose from their maritime skills. Trade competition and Portuguese control led to violent confrontations, especially with Marakkars.

♦ *State patronage for sea-linked communities*

State patronage often favoured maritime groups who could provide services, military or fiscal, that agrarian elites could not. These new elites often challenged older caste structures. In some cases, upward mobility was achieved by adopting Brahmanical rituals; in others, by redefining caste identities through occupational success. Meanwhile, Portuguese *cassados* married local women, and thus Indo-Portuguese networks emerged. Thus, the maritime economy created space for mobility, made new elites emerge, and old hierarchies to be contested.

♦ *Intersections of caste, occupation, and oceanic livelihood*

Summarised Overview

Maritime trade in the Indian Ocean facilitated not only economic exchange but also the spread of religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, alongside social and cultural transformation. Port cities, especially in Kerala, became platforms where traders, missionaries, and migrants from West Asia, East Africa, and beyond formed hybrid communities through intermarriage, local adaptation, and religious syncretism. Buddhist monks and missionaries often travelled alongside traders, establishing monasteries at major trade centres such as Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati. These centres became hubs of religious learning and cultural exchange. As Buddhism spread through the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean, it adapted to local cultures. Similarly, Hinduism reached Southeast Asia through merchant networks.

Communities such as the Jewish *Paradesis* and *Malabaris*, Syrian Christians, and Muslim groups like the *Mappilas* emerged with identities shaped by both local customs and foreign influences. Maritime trade created opportunities for social mobility, particularly for groups outside agrarian caste hierarchies. Merchant castes gained economic and political power through trade, temple patronage, and naval activities. These developments led to the emergence of new elites and the transformation of older caste structures. Some groups adopted Brahmanical rituals to enhance status, while others redefined caste through occupational success. Indo-Portuguese communities also emerged from intermarriage, creating new social formations.

Assignments

1. Discuss the role of maritime trade in the diffusion of Semitic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam along the Malabar Coast. How did these faiths interact with and adapt to local cultures?
2. Examine the influence of maritime routes on the spread of Buddhism and Hinduism across Asia.
3. Evaluate the impact of 'Monsoon Islam' on the religious and legal system of coastal India. In what ways did Islamic law adapt to local traditions and practices?
4. Analyse the role of merchant guilds such as *Anjuvannam* and *Manigramam* in facilitating religious coexistence and social mobility in Indian Ocean port towns.
5. Evaluate how maritime trade led to the formation of new social elites and transformed existing caste hierarchies.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

UNIT 3

Cultural Impact

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand the formation of a syncretic culture brought about by the maritime contacts in India
- know about the cosmopolitan port culture
- learn about the influence of maritime contacts on Indian culture

Background

For centuries, the coastal regions around the Indian Ocean have been a contact zone where people, ideas, and goods crossed linguistic, religious, and political borders. Maritime encounters resulted in cultural exchange and blended forms of art, language, and ideas. From the early medieval period through the colonial era, port cities like Calicut, Cochin, Surat, and Masulipatnam grew into multicultural centres influenced by Arab, Persian, Chinese, and later Europeans. These interactions were marked by negotiation, adaptation, and a blending of traditions. The cultural impact of these maritime connections can be seen everywhere, in the languages people spoke, the architectural styles, the foods they enjoyed, the music they created, the religious practices they followed, and the everyday customs they shared. In this unit, let us explore the transformation of Indian culture that happened via the sea. Let us explore how maritime networks shaped Indian Ocean societies into pluralistic and cosmopolitan communities. We will also discuss the cultural exchanges that happened in the fields of music, art, language, and architecture, with respect to maritime contact in India.

Keywords

Culture, Cosmopolitanism, Maritime, Ports, Coastal Trade, Language, Art, Literature, Multiculturalism, Cultural Symbiosis, Syncretism

Discussion

4.3.1 Formation of a Syncretic Culture

♦ *Multiculturalism and interconnectedness in coastal cities*

The coastal cities of India, such as Calicut, Cochin, Surat, and Masulipatnam, were not merely ports of trade but vibrant hubs of cultural confluence. Sugata Bose, in A Hundred Horizons, emphasises how these cities reflected the deep connections of Indian Ocean.They shaped regional identities while linking communities across Asia and Africa, creating shared spaces beyond borders and empires.

♦ *Interaction between economic life, society, and civilisation*

K.N. Chaudhuri, in Asia Before Europe, explores the interaction between economic life, society, and civilisation in the regions around and beyond the Indian Ocean during the period from the rise of Islam to 1750. He looks closely at the structural features of everyday life, from food habits and clothing to architectural styles and housing patterns, as well as the different modes of economic production that supported these societies. Chaudhuri also shows how the societies around the Indian Ocean were both connected and separated by conscious cultural and linguistic identities. Yet beyond these visible differences, there existed deeper layers of unity, formed through shared ecologies, common technologies of economic production, similar governmental traditions, theories of political obligations and rights, and collective historical experiences.

♦ *Tensions and cooperation*

Apart from the multicultural environment, the competition for trade dominance often led to conflicts among different communities. However, these tensions were frequently mitigated through collaborations and mutual agreements. Pius Malekandathil, in *The Indian Ocean in the Making of Early Modern India*, discusses how economic interdependence necessitated cooperation among diverse groups. He illustrates instances where communities, despite their differences, came together to function in trade and commerce.

4.3.1.1 Connected Histories

♦ *Cross-cultural influences*

Early modern India was a period often dismissed by earlier historians as one of stagnation or isolation. Instead, what we find is a world remade through seaborne trade routes. The collection of essays, *The Indian Ocean in the Making of Early Modern India*, edited by Pius Malekandathil, discusses how the Indian Ocean served as a medium through which cultures collided, coexisted, and collaborated. The work also discusses the commercial and cultural ties with regions like Aceh in Southeast Asia, reflecting how India was part of a larger Indian Ocean system, sharing not

just goods but ideas and technologies. The maritime interactions extended to warfare too; changes in weapon-making and military techniques hold the imprint of cross-cultural influences arriving by sea. These maritime connections influenced the native language, cuisine, religious practices, urban life, and even technology. Bible translations and polemical debates in India, for instance, owe much to the coming of European missionaries and traders.

♦ *Syncretic culture*

Sebastian R. Prange, in *Monsoon Islam*, shows how Islamic merchants integrated into the local societies of the Malabar Coast. He explains that these merchants often adapted to local customs and formed alliances with indigenous communities, which further led to a syncretic culture that balanced both collaboration and competition.

♦ *Cultural Symbiosis*

M.G.S. Narayanan refers to this process as "cultural symbiosis," where foreign communities brought with them unique traditions yet adapted themselves to local practices. Its layered culture developed through centuries of interaction with foreign communities. The term "cultural symbiosis" describes how different religious and ethnic groups shared and exchanged cultural traits without losing their own distinctiveness. According to him, this exchange was clearly visible in everyday practices, rituals, and lifestyle. The Syrian Christian community preserved its religious identity but adopted several elements of Hindu cultural practice. Syrian Christians began using the traditional Kerala lamp (*nilavilakku*) and wore the *tali* (wedding pendant). At the same time, local people also absorbed elements from the foreign communities; new words, new dietary habits, and ritual practices were integrated into Kerala's culture. This process of cultural adaptation was not confined to Christians alone. Jews, Muslims, and other foreign groups similarly contributed to the cultural diversity while assimilating elements of the local tradition. M.G.S. was careful to stress that this was not a case of cultural dominance or erosion. Instead, it represented a two-way exchange, where each community remained distinct yet became part of a shared culture. He argues that this cultural fusion was possible because the foreign communities were not seen as threats but as partners in trade and society.

♦ *Increasing commercial and cultural contact*

One of the most important modern historians of Indian Ocean trade is Sanjay Subrahmanyam, whose work *Across the Green Sea* explores around two centuries of interaction among regions bordering the western Indian Ocean, including India, Iran, East Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula. From the mid-fifteenth century onward, this maritime world saw increasing commercial and cultural contact, which was driven by the trade of goods like textiles, spices, and slaves. Subrahmanyam mentions how cities

such as Surat and Mecca became major hubs in this network, shaped by the rise of the Ottoman Empire, the spread of Islam into East Africa, and the withdrawal of China's Ming dynasty from long-distance trade.

♦ *Connected Histories*

Sanjay Subrahmanyam emphasises a polycentric system, in which a world with multiple centres of power and influence exists, rather than one dominant empire controlling weaker peripheries. His use of diverse sources in Persian, Arabic, Malayalam, and European languages allows him to trace these connections in rich detail. His approach of 'connected histories' is particularly useful for understanding how India's maritime trade was deeply linked to larger political, religious, and social changes across the Indian Ocean world. This work fits well when studying the impact of maritime trade on India's economy and culture from the 15th to the 17th centuries, before the full arrival of European colonial powers.

4.3.2 Cosmopolitanism in Port Cities

♦ *Ocean as a cultural space*

Sugata Bose points out that the Indian Ocean was as much a cultural space as it was an economic one. The movement of people, beliefs, art, and social practices created a shared cultural milieu that helped shape the contours of early modern India and its neighbours. Even though cultural exchange was quite integral to the trade, it requires its own importance in the history of the Indian Ocean. In this way, the ocean connected different societies not just through material goods, but through the exchange of knowledge, religion, and customs.

♦ *Cosmopolitanism in ports*

Dilip Menon, in the work *Ocean as a Method,* reflects on cosmopolitanism in port cities like Melaka, Kochi, and Zanzibar. These cities reflect cultural interactions where multiple ethnicities, languages, and religions coexisted. However, he also cautions that this cosmopolitanism should not be idealised. The coexistence in these cities is also marked by conflict, prejudices, and social tensions. Despite the cultural diversity, the cities' cosmopolitanism did not always erase social hierarchies or cultural divides.

♦ *Multilingualism*

As Menon notes, ports are fundamentally liminal spaces, situated at the edge of the ocean, open to the wider world, and marked by fluid, shifting boundaries. He illustrates the polyglot nature of maritime spaces, where cultural diversity was not an exception but the norm. Hence, these port cities and towns were not merely points of arrival and departure for goods. They were meeting zones for peoples, languages, and ideas. There merchants, travellers, religious figures, and sailors from across the Indian Ocean world engaged in constant negotiation and exchange. According to the Portuguese apothecary

Tome Pires of the sixteenth century, Melaka recorded the existence of eighty-four spoken languages. As this multilingual world was so layered, as Pires noted, even the parrots seemed to have picked up multiple tongues. This linguistic and cultural plurality was central to the maritime trade and social interaction in early modern India.

♦ *Polyglot ports*

According to Dilip Menon, with the advent of European colonialism, the existence of plurality came under strain. It resulted in what Edouard Glissant terms *linguistic intransigence,* the drive to impose monolingualism and suppress the fluidity of local tongues. Yet, as Menon argues, even within such pressures, the older polyglot ports often persisted. Cities like Surat, Calicut, and Masulipatnam remained spaces where multiple languages, religions, and cultural traditions coexisted in daily life. This multilingualism facilitated trade negotiations, religious and philosophical exchanges, and encouraged the circulation of art forms and ideas.

♦ *Archipelagic thinking and cultural interconnections*

When we think about the cultural impact of maritime contacts, the neat divisions of continents and oceans shape so much of how we understand history. As Menon mentions, these ideas are deeply shaped by colonial and nationalist histories, which tend to make the world into fixed and isolated spaces. He incorporates the French philosopher Edouard Glissant's concept of 'archipelagic thinking' to argue that the ocean is a 'connected non-contiguous space' that creates shared cultural relations through migration, travel, and historical intersections. Menon adopts this idea to illustrate how the sea, rather than being a boundary, creates a cultural arc that ties distant places together through history and migration.

4.3.3 Music, Art, Languages and Literature

♦ *Blending of languages*

While we consider the linguistic and literary exchanges, the interaction between Tamil and Arabic, for instance, gave rise to Arwi, a script that used Arabic letters to write Tamil. Mahmood Kooria, in *Islamic Law in Circulation*, argues how such linguistic blends were not just practical tools for communication but also carriers for cultural and religious expression. He discusses the role of Arwi in disseminating Islamic teachings among Tamil-speaking Muslims. Prange, in *Monsoon Islam*, discusses how the multicultural environment of the Malabar Coast influenced literary productions. He notes the exchange of stories, poems, and religious texts among different communities reflects the syncretic culture of the region.

In their work, *Arabi-Malayalam: Linguistic Cultural Traditions of Mappila Muslims of Kerala,* M.H. Ilias and Shamshad Hussain K.T. examine the language ArabiMalayalam, used by the Mappila

♦ *Arabi Malayalam*

Muslims of Kerala, which is considered to stand on the verge of extinction. The importance of this language lies not only in its linguistic features but also in what it reveals about the cultural connection with the maritime contacts. According to Ilias, the development of literature in Arabi Malayalam reflects trade and cosmopolitanism that is based on faith. These cultural influences extended across Southern Yemen, East Africa, and Southeast Asia, which is connected to the Malabar Coast through trade and religious networks. Arabi Malayalam was expressed through oral and written traditions during rituals, lifecycle events, and performative occasions. They also discuss how these cultural movements of people, ideas, and goods influenced the formation of this literature and language. Furthermore, they argue that Arabi Malayalam literature, often categorised as 'religious' or 'vernacular community literature,' faced skepticism within 'secular-national' literary discourses.

♦ *Stories carried history*

Folk performances from the coastal belts of Kerala, Gujarat, and Andhra Pradesh frequently referenced the sea, storms, shipwrecks, and foreign travellers. They were reflections of lived experience. Similarly, in Tamil Nadu, the Paravar community's oral traditions often reference encounters with Portuguese traders, Christian missionaries, and distant lands. The Mappila songs of Kerala, for example, are often sung in a mix of Malayalam and Arabic. These ballads recount tales of love, war, trade, and faith, deeply interconnected with maritime life.

♦ *The tradition of Mappilappattu*

The tradition of *Mappilappattu* is one of the cultural outcomes of the long history of maritime contact in Kerala. These songs are composed in Arabic-Malayalam that reflect the social and political realities of the region. Among these, two *padappattu* or war songs, *Cheroor Padappattu* (1851) by Muhammedkutty and Muhayyudheen, and *Malappuram Padappattu* (1883) by Moyinkutty Vaidyar, are important. These were much more than songs. They served as expressions of resistance against colonial rule in 18th and 19th century Malabar. *Cheroor Padappattu* narrates a battle fought in 1843 under Mamburam Saidalavi Thangal's leadership, where the Mappilas allied with oppressed castes to oppose British authority and its local representatives. Malappuram *Padappattu*, on the other hand, recollects a conflict sparked by the conspiracy of a landlord, which soon escalated into a larger peasant revolt. British administrator William Logan recorded *Cheroor Padappattu* in his *Malabar Manual*. These songs stand apart from the dominant elite culture, especially when colonial rulers attempted to dismiss native art forms as mere 'folk' traditions.

The arrival of European colonial powers, first the Portuguese

and later the British, had a lasting impact on the social structures of Kerala and its performing arts. The Portuguese, arriving in 1498 with religious and commercial motives, actively persecuted Muslim communities, and their oppressive policies led to the emergence of resistance literature like *Mappilappattu*. Sheikh Zainuddin Maqdhum's *Tuhfatul Mujahideen* provides descriptions of these atrocities, while works such as *Muhiyiddeen Mala* (1607) reflected the defiance of local communities. The British later reinforced caste and landlord dominance while portraying peasant uprisings as communal disturbances. In his *Malabar Manual* (1887), William Logan argued against this colonial interpretation, explaining that these revolts stemmed from the insecurity and distress of tenant farmers. He insisted that what was needed was legal protection for their rights, noting that among them, the Mappilas were especially industrious and deserving of land security. Yet, despite the historical significance of *padappattu* and similar oral traditions, they remained largely absent from official accounts on the Kerala renaissance.

♦ *Resistance literature*

4.3.3.1 Cultural Contributions of European Colonialism

Let us now look at the cultural influence of European colonialism on maritime India. The Portuguese introduced several new crops like cashew, tobacco, custard apple, guava, pineapple, and papaya, which gradually became part of the agricultural and culinary traditions of Kerala. Portuguese-controlled large-scale spice exports to Europe flourished under their control, while European goods began to find a market in Kerala, weakening old trade connections with the Arabs. The Portuguese built churches, palaces, and townships that reflected European urban designs. The Portuguese introduced advanced warfare and supplied the local rulers with guns, cannons, and artillery. They also established seminaries and colleges to train Christian priests and laid the groundwork for Indological studies, encouraging the translation of Portuguese works into Malayalam.

♦ *Portuguese Contribution*

In the cultural sphere, one of the major contributions was the introduction of the printing press in Kerala. The Portuguese made a turning point in the literary and intellectual life of the region. The press made religious and educational texts more accessible. A unique art form, *Chavittunatakam*, a type of Christian musical dance-drama, emerged during this period under Portuguese influence. However, their aggressive religious policies, particularly forced conversions and the destruction of local religious institutions, drew resentment from the native population. Over time, factors like corruption within their administration, lack of

♦ *Introduction of Press*

♦ *Art forms*

military reinforcements, officers engaging in unauthorised private trade, and the merger of Portugal with Spain under Philip II led to their decline. This weakening of Portuguese power created a political vacuum in Kerala, paving the way for the arrival of the Dutch, the British, and later, Mysorean rulers.

When the Dutch arrived on the Malabar coast, their primary goal was initially to control the lucrative pepper trade of the East. But in the process, they left a lasting cultural imprint on Kerala. The Dutch negotiated treaties with local rulers and introduced scientific methods in farming, particularly in coconut cultivation at places like Pappinivattom near Calicut. They also promoted indigo plantations, coconut oil extraction, coir production, and salt farming. Their keen interest in local industries like dyeing influenced the economy of Kerala. Beyond the trade at Cochin, Anjengo, Colachel, and Tengapatanam, they brought along new varieties of fruits, animals, and birds, and their tastes in gardening, furniture, and house-building gradually influenced local practices. Unlike the Portuguese, the Dutch did not actively engage in religious conversions. They respected local customs, refraining from actions like cow slaughter to avoid offending Hindu sentiments. However, their attitude towards Portuguese religious institutions was far from tolerant, as churches, convents, and Jesuit establishments, like the library they destroyed in Cochin in 1698, became targets. Yet, it is considered that they took care not to disturb the places of worship belonging to Syrian Christians and Hindus.

♦ *Dutch contribution*

While we consider the cultural legacies left by the Dutch, their influence reflects on the architecture and literature of Kerala. The landmarks of Cochin include the Bolgatty Palace, built in 1774, and the Dutch Palace at Mattancherry, famous for its mural paintings that beautifully blend Dutch and traditional Kerala styles. Wooden country houses and garden residences near the backwaters reflected European sensibilities combined with local aesthetics. One of their contributions was the monumental work *Hortus Malabaricus*, a twelve-volume compilation published between 1686 and 1703 in Amsterdam under the leadership of Van Rheede. This work documented the medicinal properties of the plants of Kerala, with crucial contributions from local scholars like Ranga Bhatt, Itti Achuthan, and Carmelite Mathew. Though the Dutch never prioritised education or built seminaries in Kerala, various travel accounts written by Dutch visitors, such as Visscher and Nieuhoff, provide glimpses into 17th-century social and cultural life in Kerala.

♦ *Architectural influences*

♦ *Hortus Malabaricus*

Now, when we look at the cultural impact of British rule in India, one of their major contributions was the systematic introduction of English education. Institutions such as Hindu College in

♦ *British Influence*

Calcutta (1817) and CMS College in Kottayam (1817) emerged as important centres of learning. The western-educated Indians later spearheaded major social reform movements. Among them, Raja Ram Mohan Roy campaigned against *Sati*, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar advocated for widow remarriage. The British supported the dissemination of the printing press, which further resulted in the proliferation of newspapers such as *The Hindu* in Madras and a corpus of modern literature in various Indian languages. The British colonial period also witnessed the construction of many buildings like the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta and Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, formerly Victoria Terminus in Bombay, which reflect a fusion of European and Indian styles of architecture. The introduction of new forms of leisure, including cricket, horse racing, and club culture, further transformed the cultural sphere, with cricket, in particular, evolving into one of the most integral parts of the contemporary popular culture of India.

♦ *Cross- cultural Exchanges*

Through maritime trade, port cities such as Bombay, Madras, and Cochin developed into cosmopolitan centres where cross-cultural exchanges extended beyond commodities to include clothing styles, dietary practices, and social etiquette. The cultural consequences of colonial maritime contact, whether through the Romans or the British, transcended economic and political domains. These interactions shaped religious practices, art, architectural traditions, education systems, and everyday social customs. Such dimensions of cultural interaction and transformation merit further detailed exploration to comprehensively understand the ways in which foreign maritime powers contributed to the shaping of the cultural history of Kerala and India at large. We have already covered the impact of European colonialism in the courses we studied earlier on Indian history.

4.3.3.2 Influence of Islamic Architecture on Coastal India

♦ *Maritime motifs*

Let us consider the architectural influence of the maritime contacts on Coastal India. The construction of mosques in Kerala lacks domes or minarets typical of Middle Eastern Islamic architecture and instead reflects local wooden temple styles. Sebastian Prange reflects on this in *Monsoon Islam*, noting how Islam on the Malabar Coast was deeply embedded in local cultural forms, adapting to existing architectural idioms while subtly inserting Islamic motifs. The result was a hybrid style in which a mosque looks like a traditional Kerala house, yet faces Mecca and holds a *mihrab*. Apart from Islamic architecture, the Portuguese churches, especially in coastal Kerala and Tamil Nadu, began incorporating Indian motifs such as lotus flowers, peacocks, and

even temple-style arches into Christian iconography.

Early photograph of Ponnani Juma Masjid by Gotthilf Dengler, 1938. Courtesy: Basel Mission Archives (C-30.84.138); in Sebastian Prange, Monsoon Islam (Cambridge UP, 2018), p. 114, fig. 2.2. Source:notevenpast.org

♦ *Architecture of the regions shaped by maritime trade*

Mehrdad Shokoohy, a well-known scholar of Islamic architecture and urban history, who worked extensively on South Indian Muslim architecture. Through his work *Muslim Architecture of South India: The Sultanate of Ma'bar and the Traditions of the Maritime Settlers on the Malabar and Coromandel Coasts (Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Goa)*, Shokoohy shifts scholarly attention away from the well-known monuments of North India and the Deccan sultanates. He focused instead on the historic port towns of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Goa, regions shaped by centuries of maritime trade. Through extensive surveys of mosques, tombs, and urban infrastructures, he reveals the distinct architectural tradition that developed independently and was shaped by the local environment and the cultural exchanges brought by seafaring communities from across the Indian Ocean world. He reinterprets these coastal monuments within their maritime and historical contexts. He demonstrates how the architectural forms of these regions reflected both indigenous influences and the traditions of Muslim settlers who were traders, sailors, and scholars who arrived through the busy ports of Coromandel and Malabar.

Summarised Overview

In early modern India, coastal cities like Calicut, Cochin, Surat, and Masulipatnam were important centres of trade and cultural exchange. These were not just commercial ports but also active social spaces. Sugata Bose and K.N. Chaudhuri explain how the Indian Ocean connected diverse communities across regions. It was a space where goods, ideas, religions, and traditions moved freely. Despite occasional conflicts, these port cities encouraged cooperation. Different communities often worked together for mutual benefit. People kept their distinct identities but borrowed customs, rituals, and everyday habits from one another.

Trade routes carried more than goods; they spread political ideas, religious debates, and new technologies. These cosmopolitan spaces were also marked by tension and inequality. Under European colonial pressure, this diversity was often threatened. Yet, many port cities managed to hold on to their multilingual, multicultural character. Together, these histories reveal how the Indian Ocean shaped the shared past of the region.

Maritime trade exerted a deep influence on the languages, literature, and performing arts of coastal India. Tamil-Arabic interactions produced Arwi, while Mappila Muslims in Kerala developed Arabi Malayalam, blending Arabic script with Malayalam. Folk traditions like *Mappilappattu* narrated tales of love, faith, war, and colonial resistance. While we consider the lasting cultural imprints left by the European colonial powers, the Portuguese introduced crops, the printing press, and new art forms, while the Dutch influenced agriculture, architecture, and local industries. The British brought English education, print culture, and social reforms. Maritime cities like Cochin and Madras became cosmopolitan centres of cultural exchange.

Assignments

1. Explain how maritime trade networks contributed to the development of cosmopolitan port cultures in early modern India.
2. Discuss the concept of cultural symbiosis in the context of Kerala's Syrian Christian community. How did religious identity and local customs interact?
3. Analyse the role of language contact and literary exchange in shaping cultural identities along the Malabar Coast.
4. Evaluate the impact of maritime contacts on the art and architecture of coastal India.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

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