

Facharbeit

Influence of the trade between Asia and Europe on India

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1 Introduction

1.1 Summary

1.2 Thesis Statement

My thesis statement: the trade between Asia and Europe, in both directions, had a profound effect on India by introducing Islam, influencing the political structure, and forming the basis for colonisation.

1.3 Methodology

2 Trade up to the age of Islam

Trade in this time, before the trade movements were consolidated under the peace and security offered by the Islamic conquests of Arabia, moved both on the land route via the middle east and from India over the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea, and from there on to Egypt or the eastern coast of the Mediterranean.¹ For both of these routes, the Mediterranean served as the distributor to Europe.²

2.1 Traded goods

While most of the goods traded were spice and other special, often medical, plants, luxuries like silk and gems were also increasingly in demand from a prosperous upper class in the Roman empire.³

2.1.1 Spice

At the time, spices were appreciated not just as enhancers of food, but primarily as medicine.⁴ The spices came from India, modern-day Indonesia, and China. Cinnamon, for example, is native to Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and the Malabar Coast of India itself.⁵

2.1.2 Precious stones

Some Gems could only be sourced outside Europe, and due to their compactness were attractive trade goods. However, as the demand for spice far outpaced that for precious stones,⁶ they were not the main focus of many merchants.

In this era, the stones were often engraved, a technique found in almost all early cultures. The craftsmen performing this work in Greece and Rome were so famous that many of their names have survived to this day. Precious stones were given as state gifts and donated to temples.⁷

¹Miller, Chapter 7.

²These routes are recorded in the first-century BC anonymous work *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*.

³Veen and Morales.

⁴Freedman, "The medieval spice trade".

⁵*Cinnamon*.

⁶Miller.

⁷*Gems*.

2.1.3 Silk

Silk had not yet reached the prominence it would in the late middle ages, but was still a well-known import from northern China. There are recorded complaints about the desire of Roman wives for silk depleting the silver and gold reserves, demonstrating the trade deficit between west and east.⁸

2.2 Trade routes

In this age, India was mostly a distribution hub for the spices and other luxury goods from Indonesia and China. Reports of trading fleets exchanging goods in Indian harbours even made it all the way to ancient Greece and Rome, where they were written down and are still preserved today, for example in the writings of Ptolomy.⁹

2.2.1 To India from Indonesia

Spices were mainly originating from the islands of Indonesia and Malaya, and, over their history, many empires and kingdoms thrived of controlling the trade routes between the isles.¹⁰

There was also a direct trade between Indonesia and western Africa. This led to the colonisation of Madagascar by the Austronesians.¹¹

The stories of their *Raft-men*, who came to India on rudderless rafts to sell the spices and return home with traded goods, traveled along the trading routes to Europe. They are mentioned, for example, by Pliny.¹²

2.2.2 From China

From China, there were three main routes.

The northernmost, known as the *Scythian route*, went from the north of the yellow river, next to the central silk road. In modern-day northwest China, it separated, and made its way north of the Aral and Caspian Sea, passing through Volgograd and ending on the mouth of the river Don on the Black sea, the ancient Greek colony of Tanaïs. This, of course, opened the way to Byzantium via the Black Sea.¹³

Most of the non-spices exported from China, primarily silk, were carried along the *Silk Road*. The route tended to start in northern China, bypassing Tibet, the Himalayas, and thus India, to the north. From there, it led through the Parthian empire¹⁴ to Mediterranean ports like Antioch.¹⁵

Many spices were imported into the southern ports of China like Canton, from where spices and other goods were also exported by sea to modern-day Sri Lanka. Furthermore, goods were also shipped overland from southern China to India.¹⁶ The importance of this route must not be underestimated; Chinese records describe Roman trade missions in cities in modern-day northern Vietnam,¹⁷ and Ptolemy tells of a place called *Cattigara*, identified

⁸Miller, Chapter 13.

⁹Ibid., p. 148-150.

¹⁰Partogi.

¹¹*History of Madagascar*.

¹²Miller, Chapter 8.

¹³Ibid., p. 149.

¹⁴Gill.

¹⁵Miller, Chapter 7, Maps 2 and 3.

¹⁶Ibid., Maps 4 and 5.

¹⁷Curtin.

today as *Óc Eo*, an archeological site in the Mekong River delta where Roman gods from the second century CE have been excavated.¹⁸

2.2.3 India as a trade nexus

India, while producing many of the goods traded, also served as a trading centre of the Asia-Europe trade. This was due to its geographical advantages with access to Arabia and the Red Sea to the west, as well as the Indian ocean and land connections to China to the east.

In general, trade flowed mostly eastwards, while the recipients in Europe mostly paid in gold coin. India's position as a trading centre, especially after the emergence of the Roman empire, is demonstrated by the find of Roman-struck gold coinage from the imperial age.¹⁹

2.2.4 From India to Europe

From India, the main route was via the Red Sea. This route was on the upswing after the pacification under Augustus, coinciding with the coins mentioned earlier.²⁰

The overland route crossed the Parthian Empire, which acted as an intermediary between the Chinese trade missions and the Roman traders. They often obscured the origins of their goods to prevent being bypassed.²¹

2.2.5 Development under the Romans

During the Roman empire, both diplomacy and war opened up new routes. Ships from Europe even made it to southern India, bringing home a new spice: black pepper. It was even added to meals, remaining the only spice used this way in Antiquity.²²

This made spice trade even more important in relation to other imports.²³ These efforts also made Alexandria, then part of the Roman empire, one of the foremost trading cities in the world.²⁴

3 Networks of Trade up to the Age of Discovery

3.1 Changes in Arabia and the middle east

3.1.1 Beginnings of the Arabic empire

After the first conquests under Muhammad, the Islamic or Arabian empire was created, stretching from Spain to India.²⁵ This made the land routes to India and China much more attractive. This era formed the golden age of the silk road, with increasing contact between Europe and China.

¹⁸“Óc Eo”.

¹⁹Curtin, p. 100.

²⁰Miller, Chapter 7.

²¹Gill.

²²Veen and Morales.

²³Gill; Miller.

²⁴*Spice trade*.

²⁵Afsaruddin, Section *Achievements*.

3.1.2 The Abbasid caliphate

After the removal of the previous widely unpopular²⁶ Umayyad caliphate, the Islamic world was ruled by the nominally Shia *Abbasid Caliphate*. The beginning of Abbasid rule in 750 CE was followed by the inauguration of the *House of Wisdom* in Bagdad, marking beginning the Islamic golden age.²⁷

In this time, the caliphate was shaken by civil wars and separatist dynasties, including remnants of the Umayyads.²⁸ Nonetheless, this centralised power made travel and trade easier along the overland Silk Road.

3.1.3 Cultural influences on trade

Muhammad himself was a merchant,²⁹ and Islam was, in the first centuries of its spread, very much a trade-based religion. Even though arab muslims conquered vast lands, these campaigns were not at all motivated by religion,³⁰ and active conversion efforts were rare. Instead, many converted to access the Islamic trade networks.³¹ In this environment, merchants, especially arabs, were able to significantly expand their trade networks.

3.1.4 Changing trade routes

Due to the islamization of the land routes between the Mediterranean, these land routes became more attractive for Chinese trade missions. However, Christians were reluctant trade via the Levant, embroiled in conflict by the crusades, to the benefit of Alexandria.³²

3.2 India

In the context of this research report, India is defined not strictly along the geographical lines used today, but as a culturally hegemonous area that included modern-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the north of Myanmar.

While India was mostly an exporter of ideas during antiquity (Buddhism reached China in this period³³), the trading began having a noticeable influence on India by introducing new ideas and, most importantly, Islam as a new religion.

3.2.1 Political structure during the middle ages

Between the fall of the Gupta around 450 CE³⁴ and the next significant centralized authority, the Islamic Delhi sultanate, in 1206,³⁵ India was ruled mostly by small kingdoms and principalities. These states often exercised informal control over their neighbours, and many smaller kingdoms paid tribute.³⁶

²⁶ Afsaruddin.

²⁷ *Abbāsīd caliphate*.

²⁸ Afsaruddin, Section *End*.

²⁹ Sinai and Watt.

³⁰ Lapidus, p. 200.

³¹ *The Silk Road and Islam Spread*.

³² *Alexandria*, Paragraph 5.

³³ *The Silk Road and Islam Spread*.

³⁴ Schwartzberg and Srivastava, Section *Gupta*.

³⁵ *Delhi Sultanate*.

³⁶ Schwartzberg and Srivastava.

3.2.2 Cultural transfers from the west

After the 8th century, muslim traders began to bring their religion with them.³⁷ Many along the trade routes eagerly converted, and to this day, muslims make up a majority of Pakistanis and a significant minority of Indians.³⁸

Scientists in India were also exposed to new ideas from the centres of research in the islamic world, especially in medicine.³⁹

3.2.3 Spice production

Spice production remained a major economic factor in India. An example is Cardamom, native to Malabar in south-western India.⁴⁰

3.3 Europe

Between the fall of the western Roman empire and the first excursions by merchants, the spice trade remained an important part of the economy.⁴¹ This was, especially in the middle ages, driven by the high demand for these spices in Europe.

According to Freedman, “Spices were ubiquitous in medieval gastronomy”.⁴² Spice usage expanded significantly in comparison to antiquity, but medicinal use remained important.⁴³

3.3.1 Venice

Up until the exploitation of routes around Africa to access the spices more directly, Venice controlled the trade in the Mediterranean sea. Venetian merchants sold the spice to distributors in Europe, having gained their monopoly in the Chioggia war (1387-81) with Genoa.⁴⁴

4 From 1498 to 1857

After 1498, the trade routes discussed earlier were bypassed by rounding Africa. The focus was not political, but mostly commercial; in da Gama's second voyage to India, enough profit was made to finance a third.⁴⁵

Soon, however, colonial powers like the Portuguese and the Dutch established permanent settlements and later colonies, followed by large *companies* and English and French colonizers.

4.1 Discovery of a direct route to India

In 1498, a Portuguese expedition under the command of *Vasco da Gama* reached India by rounding Africa, completely bypassing the traditional trade routes.⁴⁶ This expedition made

³⁷ *The Silk Road and Islam Spread*.

³⁸ Schwartzberg and Srivastava.

³⁹ *The Silk Road and Islam Spread*.

⁴⁰ Miller, p. 71.

⁴¹ Freedman, *Spices: How the Search for Flavors Influenced Our World*.

⁴² Freedman, “The medieval spice trade”, p. 3.

⁴³ Veen and Morales.

⁴⁴ *Spice trade*.

⁴⁵ Fernandez-Armesto and Campbell, Section *The second voyage*.

⁴⁶ O'Rourke and Williamson, “Did Vasco da Gama matter for European markets?”

a lasting and deep impact on the trade between Asia and Europe, ending the dominance of the Islamic world and Venice as waystations and distributors of the spice trade.⁴⁷

4.1.1 The first voyage

The expeditions were financed by King Manuel I, who had ascended to the throne in 1495. While court politics were certainly a main factor in starting the expedition, the explanation for why da Gama was chosen to lead it, the underlying goals were to break the muslim and venitian monopoly on trade with the east.⁴⁸

The expedition established a *factory*, or trading post, in Calicut (known today as *Kozhikode*). After a conflict with arab merchants in the city, the factory is destroyed by a mob and about 50 portuguese are massacred, while anchored portuguese ships are unable to help.⁴⁹

4.1.2 The second voyage

Da Gamas second voyage was intended as a trading mission and a punitive expedition to target Calicut, in response to the massacre of the factory.⁵⁰

The fleet massacred hundreds of pilgrims, women and children after capturing a muslim fleet conducting Hajj. He justified this act of piracy as retaliation for the Calicut massacre,⁵¹ but his actions would set the tone for Indo-European relations in the next centuries.

4.2 The Mughal empire

The *Mughal Empire*, occupying northern India from Afghanistan to Assam and Bangladesh, and southern India almost to the coast, was founded in 1526 by Babur.

4.2.1 Early history

Babur, a muslim, came from central Asia and entered India by first establishing himself in Kabul and pushing through the Khyber Pass. After a victory in Panipat in 1526, he was able to occupy much of northern India. However, the focus on military campaigns weakened the empire, and his successor Humayun was overthrown and exiled by a rebellion.

4.2.2 Expansion and begin of decline

Humayun was able to return in 1555, reestablishing Mughal rule. Akbar, who acceded to the throne in 1556 after his fathers death, expanded the empire to encompass the entire Indian subcontinent to the north of the Godavari river. Establishing a new ruling class, a cult around himself, and increasing trade with european companies, Akbar was able to stabilize the Empire.

Jahangir, Akbars heir, ruled from 1605 to 1627, and was succeeded by Jahan, who erected the Taj Mahal. Under Jahan, however, the financial situation of the empire was under stress due to the splendor of its court.⁵² After he fell ill, his more liberal son Dara Shikoh became

⁴⁷O'Rourke and Williamson, "When did globalisation begin?"

⁴⁸Fernandez-Armesto and Campbell.

⁴⁹Ramusio, Gastaldi, and Giunta.

⁵⁰Fernandez-Armesto and Campbell.

⁵¹Ramusio, Gastaldi, and Giunta.

⁵²Richards, Chapter 6.

regent, but was overthrown by orthodox muslims and his younger brother Aurangzeb. Even after Jahan recovered, he was declared unfit to rule and imprisoned.

4.2.3 Aurangzeb

Aurangzeb ruled from 1658 to 1707.⁵³ His legacy is controversial, with religious orthodoxy and the establishment of sharia on the one hand, but rising political and economic fortunes on the other. He was able to expand the empire to include most of southern Asia.⁵⁴

4.2.4 Decline

After Aurangzeb's son's death in 1712, the dynasty was embroiled in infighting and sank in chaos. In 1719 alone, four emperors ruled successively. Under Muhammad Shah, who was able to rule until his death in 1748, the Mughal empire began to crumble. Shah Alam II, who reigned from 1759 to 1806, unsuccessfully attempted to save the central power, but ultimately had to beg for the protection of the Emir of Afghanistan.

Thereafter, Mughal power was limited at best, with many de facto independent princes still ceremoniously paying homage to the emperor.

5 Analysis

6 Conclusion

⁵³Richards, p. 165.

⁵⁴Ibid., Chapter 8.

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