Plants and Human Civilization: Indian Spices

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There is hardly any consumerism that can match the frantic quest for spices that has existed for more than 2,000 years. The lure of spices began with the dawn of civilization; since antiquity, India has been the largest producer, consumer, and exporter of spices. When there were no refrigerators, spices were used to prolong the freshness of the cooked food, mask the unpleasant smell of decaying meat, and add taste and flavor to bland dishes. Later, as knowledge about their medicinal and other values unfolded, they became an important part of everyday life, food, health, and moods. Scarcity of aromatic and pungent spices in European lands made them as precious as gold, driving merchants and adventurers across the globe in search of the spice-producing regions.

Taking a journey through the historic past, this study tracks how these spices from India made their way into distant Europe, and became a catalyst of some of the greatest adventures in human history. The discovery of maritime routes and new lands, while facilitating intercontinental and cross-cultural movements, also extended Europe’s commercial traffic to the remotest parts the world. The competition for spice trade triggered a fierce competition among the seafaring powers for control over the Indian Ocean routes and the spice-producing regions, eventually culminating in the colonization of India.
Spices in antiquity

In ancient civilizations, all aromatic plant-products were known as herbs. Today, there is a sharp distinction between herbs and spices. Whereas small aromatic temperate leafy plants such as coriander, mint, and basil, are labelled herbs (derived from the Latin word ‘herba’ meaning ‘grass’ or ‘green stalks’), the withered detritus obtained from flowers, fruits, buds, seeds, bark, and rhizome of specific tropical plants such as peppercorns, cloves, cinnamon, are known as spices (derived from the Latin word “species” meaning “specific kind”). In Roman usage, the term species implied value, and was used to denote specific dutiable items. A tariff, Alexandria Manifest, prepared during Justinian’s reign (b. 482, r. 527-565 AD), listed the goods that were liable for duty at the port of Alexandria, and spices were placed under this category.1

From time immemorial, both herbs and spices have been used in magical rites, as incense, for fumigation, and as food preservatives, culinary additives, curatives, and stimulants. In ancient Egypt, the laborers working on the pyramid of Cheops (2600 BC) were fed onions mixed with spices to increase their strength. Spices and herbs were notable for their medicinal usages.

The oldest surviving historical records, namely the Sumerian tablet (3000 BC), a Chinese medical treatise entitled Pen T’Sao Ching (2700 BC), and India’s Ayurvedic texts, notably Charaka Samhita (1st century AD) and Susruta Samhita (2nd century AD), based on ancient scriptures, and a 65-feet long scroll Ebers Papyrus (1550 BC) list innumerable spices and herbs for use in medicine, cosmetic ointments, perfumes, fumigation, and embalming.

Impressed by the power of spices, the Babylonian king Hammurabi (r. 1796–1750 BC) urged physicians
and surgeons to make full use of medicinal spices. Queen Hatshepsut (1473-1458 BC) sent an expedition to Punt (modern Somalia) to procure aromatic and medicinal plants. Because of their anti-bacterial and preserving properties, spices were also sought after as effective embalming agents. When the Greek traveler Herodotus passed through Egypt in the 5th century BC, he found several types of mummification. The most expensive version used spices in embalming the body. The mummy of Ramses II (r. 1279-1213) was discovered with peppercorns stuffed into his nostrils.

The value of spices was determined not by their small size and strange appearances, but by their sensual and aromatic appeal to European imaginations, passion, and cravings in a variety of ways. Spices, such as cinnamon and ginger, enlivened wines, were boiled for tea, cooled, decanted and used as stimulants to arouse passions. Cleopatra (b. 69 BC, r. 51-30 BC) of Egypt had a penchant for spices and used them not only as culinary additives but also as cosmetics and aphrodisiacs.

Of all the spices, black peppers, particularly India’s Malabari peppercorns, have been historically the most significant because they were also used as commodity money for their intrinsic value. Plato (429-347 BC) described the tiny shriveled berries as “small in quantity, great in virtue.” Non-availability of Indian spices in European lands and their transportation through the hazardous caravan routes made them coveted gift items and emblems of power for the ruling class.

When the peripheral warrior tribes, the Goths, led by Alaric (370-410 AD), captured Rome in 408, his tributary demand included 3000 pounds of pepper, along with 5000 pounds of gold, among other things. And, when Attila the Hun (406-453 AD) besieged Rome in 435, his demand for
pepper (3000 pounds) far exceeded that of gold (350 pounds). Gifts of peppercorns had the trappings of upper-class culture and state ceremonial functions and the tradition continues until today. In 1973, when United Kingdom’s Prince Charles took the symbolic possession of the Duchy of Cornwall, his tribute included a pound of pepper.

**Spice trade since antiquity**

The archeological evidence indicates well-developed trading networks among the settlements along the Indus, Tigris-Euphrates, and Nile rivers. (See Figures 1 and 2.) The Indus Valley traded mustard, sesame, spikenard, and indigo in exchange for frankincense, myrrh, and coral. The Sumerians called them *meluhha*, derived from the Sanskrit

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**Fig. 1: Indus Valley (3000–1500 BC)**
word *mleccha*, meaning barbarian or alien. The presence of Indus artifacts and seals in Sumer and the absence of them in the Indus Valley, indicates that trade was mostly one-way traffic. The Indus people were self-sufficient because most of the raw materials were available within the distribution zone of their civilization. As such, they felt little or no need to expand or even acknowledge their peripheral neighbors.

In ancient times, spices were sought as incenses, fumigants, and embalming agents. They had to be crushed or powdered, which made their transportation easier. The Indian merchants carried the powdered spices to the shores of the Arabian Peninsula, and from there Arab and Phoenician merchants maneuvered the caravan through Petra to Egypt and beyond.

The Hebrew Bible refers to King Solomon of Jerusalem dispatching an expedition to Ophir to procure the fragrant
almug wood for the construction of temple pillars and aromatic spices for incenses. The land of Ophir was probably the southern part of India, because most of Solomon’s supplies, such as *almug* (sandalwood), ivory, cotton textiles,
and livestock (peacock and chattering parrots) are native to India.

The Bible also mentions the Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon with camel-loads of spices, gold and precious stones. The kingdom of Sheba (Sheva) had risen to prominence because of its hold over the Incense Road and the Gulf of Aden, which provided the link between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. (Fig. 3)

Over time, spices became a key pillar of the trade industry. Small in size and high in price, the trade of aromatic plant products became a very lucrative business – a source of untold wealth for those who could deliver it to the market. Their non-bulky, non-perishable and unbreakable qualities facilitated their transportation over long distances.

Trading links between India and Europe received a boost when the Macedonian king Alexander (356-323 BC) extended his empire to the Indus River. The trail of Alexander’s conquests from the Mediterranean to the Punjab in northern India provided a corridor for overland trade by bringing the entire land-mass (Egypt, the Middle East, Iran and Afghanistan) under the single aegis of Macedonian rule.

Alexander’s Indian campaigns presented the country’s rich flora and fauna, amazing cotton textiles, and exotic spices to the world. The port of Alexandria, at the crossroads of three continents, became a thriving Mediterranean entrepôt, linking the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Alexander thus not only bridged the gap between India and Europe but also paved the way for the establishment of direct maritime links between India and Europe.

Before Alexander’s thrust into India, spices and the trade that brought them within the reach of Europe’s peripheral
regions carried an invisible baggage of myths and fantasies about their origins. Coming from distant and obscure lands, changing hands a dozen times between their source and Europe, the prices of spices soared with each transaction, and the Arabs were the greatest beneficiaries. To protect their sway over the trade, Arab traders kept the location of spices a close-guarded secret and spread horrifying tales to dissuade ambitious contenders from encroaching into their domains.

Many Greek scholars such as Herodotus (484–425 BC) took these tales at face value. But following Alexander’s Indian invasion, much of the mystery surrounding the origin of spices was lifted. Theophrastus (372–287 BC) found out that most of the spices were grown in the hot regions of India. His two books, *On Odors* and *An Enquiry into Plants*, based on the information gathered during Alexander’s campaigns, gives valuable insights as to the source of spices and their therapeutic usages.

According to the Greek geographer Strabo (64 BC–24 AD), the first European to attempt to establish commercial ties with India was a Greek entrepreneur, Eudoxus (130 BC) of Cyzicus. He successfully made two trips to India (116 and 118 BC) and returned with shiploads of spices, cotton textiles, and precious stones. Eudoxus had met a shipwrecked Indian sailor at Alexandria who not only guided his voyages from Alexandria to India but also told about the monsoon wind system of the Indian Ocean and its impact on sailing ships. The Indian and Arabian merchant sailors had long known about this, but they kept it a secret and controlled the sea trade for many centuries.\(^5\)

Credit for disseminating the facts about it, however, goes to a Greek merchant named Hippalus, who sailed to India in 45 AD and wrote up his observations, which greatly
benefitted future sailors and explorers. Hippalus observed that the vast wind systems (the monsoons) of the Indian Ocean reversed their direction twice a year—blowing from southwest to northeast in summer (April-October), favorable for the outbound trip from Egypt to India, and from northeast to southwest in winter (October-April), favorable for the return voyage from India. (Fig. 4)

Fig. 4: Impact of the Indian Ocean’s monsoons on sailing ships

The utility of monsoon winds for sailing ships considerably reduced the importance of Arabia’s overland spice routes and brought Roman contenders on the scene. Having learnt the fundamental secrets of the monsoons, the
Romans built ships and eventually broke the Arab monopoly of the Indian trade.

The Romans were great connoisseurs of spices. They indulged in spices in every imaginable combination for their food, beverages, and pleasure. They bathed in water mixed with aromatics, scented their homes with the fragrance of cardamom, slept on pillows filled with saffron, and peppered their food with Oriental spices. Of all the spices, the hot and pungent taste of pepper became so popular that during the reign of Trajan (r. 98-117) all spices collectively came to be known as *pipera*, derived from Sanskrit word *pippali* for pepper. Apicius, a well-known gourmet who lived during the reign of Tiberius (b. 42 BC, r. 14-37 AD), experimented by cooking with Indian spices and wrote up his culinary experiences. These were later compiled in four volumes under the title of *De Re Coquinaria* in the 4th century AD. The volume contains 468 recipes, and pepper figures in 349 of them. The archeological findings of several silver pepper pots (*piperatoria*) dating from early imperial period reinforce the evidence for widespread use of pepper both as a spice and a condiment.

For the rulers of the sprawling Roman Empire, possession of spices added to their prestige. The Romans, during the reign of Augustus (r. 27 BC-14 AD), had secured control over trade with India, and the main ports of call included Barbaricon (Karachi), Barygaza (Broach), Muziris (Cochin), Arikamedu (Pondicherry), and Ganga Bandar (Kolkata). (Fig. 5)
Fig. 5: Trading links between India and the Roman Empire
Greco-Roman merchants traded topaz, coral, storax, frankincense, glassware, silver and gold plate, and wine in exchange for silk yarn, indigo, ebony and sandalwood, rice, sesame, and spices. Other major imports were ivory, nard (*jatamanasi*, an aromatic plant from the Himalayan foothills), and fine cotton textiles.

The Romans lived with great pomp and show and took immense delight in exhibiting their Oriental luxuries. Seneca, one of Rome’s wealthiest citizens, had 1,500 ivory tusks serving as table legs. The value of imports of white and black pepper varied between 4 *denari* per pound and 300 *denari* per pound. This brisk trade meant an exodus of gold and silver to India. Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD) put the annual trade at 100 million sesterces (10,000 kg. of gold), of which as much as 50 to 80 percent was accounted for by black pepper alone.6

To this date more than 7,000 coins bearing seals of Augustus (24 BC -14 AD), Tiberius (14-37 AD), Claudius (41-54 AD) and Nero (54-68 AD) have been found in Kerala (South India), and archaeological excavations are still underway. In ancient times, strings of these coins were the most coveted neck and waist ornaments (*kasumalai*) among South Indian women and the custom continues to this day.

The Roman monopoly over the spice trade was broken when the Arabian Peninsula, the Fertile Crescent (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine), and Egypt all fell into the hands of Arab traders who emerged from a powerful Islamic State under Muhammad (570-632), the founder of Islam. In fact, the early history of Islam and the spice trade was closely intertwined because Muhammad was originally a spice trader before he started preaching in Mecca.

Within a century, Islamic merchants captured Alexandria (641), the “Gateway to the East,” and established themselves
along all the spice routes stretching from India’s Malabar Coast to the northernmost region of the African continent. Muslim domination of the Arabian region, which was central to all trade routes, created a continental divide between Europe and Asia. (Fig. 6)

![Fig. 6: Rise of Islamic Empire and Spice Trade (641-1096)](image)

Before the Muslim conquest, trade was a piecemeal business passing from one carrier to another, but Arab traders made it a direct trade, traveling the entire length without any middlemen. The astonishing military success of Arab leaders, and their unifying, expansionist and proselytizing zeal, enabled them to develop dominance over the caravan and Red Sea trade and transform it into a network of Muslim settlements that rapidly spread along the Indian Ocean littoral.

Muslims traders residing in foreign ports established business contacts with the local people and developed their
settlements into effective organizations. Direct interaction with the people along the trade routes also contributed to the spread of Islam. The Muslim practice of pilgrimage kept their heartland in communication with the far-flung settlements, making Mecca a center not only of religious and political influence but also a hub of commercial activity.

During the Crusades (1097-1490), launched to liberate the Christian Holy Lands from Muslim domination, the crusading armies were exposed to the untold riches the Oriental world. After the capture of Jerusalem (1099), the returning crusaders brought with them treasure chests filled not only with gold and silver, but also with peppercorns and rare spices. This made a lasting impact on the cuisine and habits of Europe.

To meet the increasing demand, spices were smuggled into the ports of Genoa and Venice, both of which became prosperous trading centers. But the Venetian traders wanted a greater share of the spice trade. In 1270, Marco Polo (1254-1329) set out overland from Venice in search of the fabled exotica of the East. After spending 16 years in China at the court of Kublai Khan, Marco Polo returned via the innumerable islands in Southeast Asia, where he found groves of spice trees.

Polo noted an extensive network of routes crisscrossing the waters surrounding these islands to connect trade between the markets of Asia and the Arabian region. Polo also recorded that the city of Kinsai (Hangzhou) alone received one hundred times as much pepper as the whole of Christendom. His accounts of the hustle and bustle of Coromandel and Malabar ports reinforce the pivotal role played by India in the movements of spices, both eastward and westward.
On reaching India’s southern shores, Polo found the markets flooded with Venetian ducats (gold coins weighing 3.5 grams). He noted that about 100 pounds of black pepper, which might be selling for 60 to 90 ducats in Venice, could be bought for just 3 ducats in Calicut.7

The situation remained unchanged for several decades. Fifty years later, when a Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta (1304-78) visited India, his account of India’s spice markets was no different than Polo’s. In Calicut, Battuta was astonished to find the Malabari merchants counting peppercorns one by one like pearls, both nearly of the same value. Battuta spent eight years in India in the service of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq (b. 1300, r. 1325-51) who sent him as an emissary to China. Sailing via Sumatra and Java, he smelt the fragrance of camphor and clove trees and observed a large number of trading vessels anchored in the harbor.

Although India was the main source of spices, the growing popularity of spices and their heightened demand had pushed Arab merchants to explore new areas beyond the Indian Ocean. They found several new spices—nutmeg and mace—growing in the Moluccas and the Malay Archipelago, collectively known as the “Spice Islands.” The commercial expansion of Muslim merchants and traders across the Indian Ocean to South and Southeast Asia also spread Islam. And, with Islam on a firm footing in India, the Arab merchants acquired a virtual monopoly of the entire spice route.

European explorations

The fascinating narratives of Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta inspired ambitious sailor-merchants to undertake massive voyages by sea to find the resource-laden spice regions. Until the discovery of the direct maritime route to India, Indian Ocean trading routes possessed two faces, the sea itself and
the arid plateau beyond the Himalayan heights. Trade was like a relay race in which the Indian merchants trudging along the coastal region handed over the merchandise to Arabs, who carried it through combined sea, river, and overland routes across the Persian Gulf to Syria and Egypt. There the goods were sold to Greek and Venetian traders who shipped them across the Mediterranean from Alexandria to Rome.

However, these ancient routes, ones that had served for centuries, became obsolete after the disintegration of the Mongol Empire and the outbreak of the Black Plague pandemic. The situation was further aggravated by the fall of Constantinople (1453) and the rise of the Ottoman Empire. The new rulers imposed high tariffs amounting to nearly one-third of the value of every cargo passing from Suez to Alexandria. The increased demand, stagnant transportation technology, spiraling customs duties and manifold rise in the price of spices resulted in a crisis. The crisis generated a need for a safer and less costly trade route to the spice-producing lands. The answer was an alternate route, via sea, to India.

Another factor behind European explorations was that goods were coming to Europe through several middlemen, which increased their prices. The only way to eliminate the middlemen, mostly Arabs, in the spice trade was to establish direct links with the regions supplying these goods. The glimpses of the dazzling wealth of the Arabian world during the Crusades spurred European merchants and adventurers to undertake perilous travels beyond Eurasia and Arabia to unravel the fabled treasures of the eastern lands.

Marco Polo's travel tales had given sufficient clues that most of the exotica were coming from India, Ceylon, China, and several islands—as many as 7,459 in the Eastern Sea of China—all of which produced "a great variety of spices."
Subsequently, the term “Orient” came to encompass not just the Arabian lands but all of Asia, as far as China.

Aided by new cartography, navigation, the mariner’s compass, and sailing vessels, the Portuguese collated all available knowledge of geography and worked their way down the western coast of Africa, sailing further and further south, in hopes of finding an all-sea route to India.

Soon the center of commerce shifted from Italian and Egyptian ports to the harbors of Portugal and Spain—the two leading maritime powers of the day. Competition grew so fierce between the two Iberian powers that to avoid a conflict they struck a deal at Tordesillas (1494), which received the sanction of Pope Alexander VI. The papal order divided the world and the sailable seas vertically pole to pole, assigning the undiscovered world in the east to the Portuguese and in the west to the Spaniards. Both nations were tasked with spreading the glory of Christianity.

While Portugal headed south along the western coast of Africa to India and China, Spain took the opposite route, sailing west to find a more direct route across the open ocean. Completely oblivious of the existence of the two large continents and the ocean that lay between Europe and China, Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) headed towards the west, hoping to hit the Indian coast.

He made four voyages (1492, 1493, 1498, and 1502) across the Atlantic, but he neither reached India nor did he find the spices. Instead, he found a cluster of islands in the Caribbean—the Bahamas, Cuba, and Hispaniola, and discovered some new spices (allspice, chillies, paprika, and the fragrant vanilla).

Portugal’s search for a round-Africa route to the spices of the East was rewarded when Vasco da Gama (1460-1524) crossed the Cape of Good Hope and reached Calicut on the
western coast of India in 1498. That Vasco da Gama chose to go to Calicut rather than Gujarat and Coromandel was no accident. Through the Venetian merchants, the Portuguese learned that Calicut was the major spice market in the Indian Ocean.

In Calicut, he sought an audience with the Hindu ruler Samuthri Raja (also known as Zamorin, a name given by the Arab merchants), and requested permission to trade. The Arab merchants were shocked to see a Portuguese man on Indian shores. “We are looking for Christians and spices,” stated the Portuguese navigator, and with that, the Arabs saw their monopoly crumbling. After a few months, Vasco da Gama returned with a rich cargo of Indian spices and precious stones as a parting gift from Samuthri.

After the discovery of a sea route to India, naval expeditions became annual events. The sight of lush green pepper vines in Malabar aroused imperialistic ambitions and Vasco da Gama returned to India in 1502 with an armada of 20 warships. He did not even spare his old friend, Samuthri, and bombarded Calicut. Samuthri had to flee. The Portuguese conquest of Goa (510) laid the foundation of their Estado da India, comprising several fortified posts that served as conduits of trade along the entire coastline of India. (See Fig. 7.)
With India as their base, the Portuguese moved to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), which they occupied in 1536, and forced the local king to pay an annual tribute of 110 tons of cinnamon to the Portuguese crown. Backed by superior naval technology and gunpowder, the Portuguese had established a complete monopoly over the spice trade. By the mid-16th century, the Portuguese had set up 50 trading posts throughout the maritime region in Africa, India, Southeast Asia, China, and Japan. However, their main objective was not to conquer territories but to control the ports of call and levy taxes on the merchant vessels sailing in the Indian Ocean rim. (See Fig. 8)
Along with the explorers and traders came missionaries, such as Francisco Xavier (1506-1552), who sought to convert the entire Hindu population of Goa. In other words, spices constituted both an economic incentive and an iconic imperative. By resorting to militant aggression and superior technology to secure economic monopolies and enforce Christianity, the Portuguese brought violence and introduced a new, aggressive type of relationship to non-European countries.

Until the Portuguese pursuit of the spice monopoly, Europeans looked upon Asian states and cultures with awe. The flow of Indian spices and rare artefacts projected India as an affluent and a prosperous country. But by conquering Goa and fortifying the trading outposts, the Portuguese established a precedence that paved the way for the advent of European powers into India and for the eventual conquest of the subcontinent by Great Britain.
European discovery of the spice-regions, in short, also meant the beginnings of global conflict.

Spices during plague pandemic

Another devastating impact of the spice trade was the transmission of deadly diseases. While carriers coming from China via the overland Silk Route transmitted the deadly bacillus of bubonic plague, decimating urban populations all along the spice trade routes, the Columbian transfer of animal and plants spread smallpox and measles from Europe to the New World.

In the 1340's, when the plague pandemic engulfed Europe, the demand for spices soared. The aromatic herbs and spices were thought effective to ward off the disease and miasma. A 14th century German price-table set the value of spices as: 1 lb. ginger = 1 sheep/2 cows; 1 lb. cloves = 7 sheep; 1 lb. saffron = 1 horse; 2 lbs. mace = 1 cow; and 1 lb. nutmeg = 7 oxen.9

Spices were used in various ways for purification. Physicians treating plague-victims wore a costume consisting of leather gown and gloves, mask with glass-covered eyeholes, and long beak-like nose-piece filled with spices and herbs to counter the stink and filter the air they breathed. People would keep cloves and cinnamon in their mouths or carry pomanders for protection against infection. Sponges soaked with extracts of cinnamon and cloves were placed beneath the noses of the sick or dying.

The trauma of plague and the Black Death and the awareness of the therapeutic uses of spices found expression in contemporary art and literature. The rhyme “Ring a ring o’roses; pocket full of posies; atchoo, atchoo! We all fall down,” which appeared in Kate Greenaway’s Mother Goose in 1881, was actually composed during the plague pandemic.
Although the words sound very innocuous today, at that time they conveyed a sense of dignity, hope, and fearlessness with which people faced death and terrible misfortune. “Rosies” depicted the rash of the plague victims; “posies” were the herbs for freshening the air; “atchoo” depicted sneezing caused by the fumes or vapors of pungent spices; and “We all fall down” represented the sick people dying. (See below)

Fig. 9. Ring a ring’o roses: Dance of Death*

The plague remained in Europe for the next few centuries, breaking out occasionally. Survivors of the Black Death claimed that a powdered mixture of saffron, aloes, cinnamon, cloves, myrrh, and mace enabled them to pass
through streets clogged with dead bodies. Thereafter, it became quite common for the people to carry pomanders or sachets of spices in pockets or wear them as a pendant around the neck or waist, even during disease-free times. Queen Elizabeth I (1533, r. 1558-1603) always carried one. When the British ship *Mary Rose* that had sunk in 1545 was raised from the ocean floor in 1980, every sailor was found with a bunch of peppercorns on his person.¹⁰

**Mercantile expansion: Advent of the Europeans into India**

After Vasco da Gama’s discovery of sea route to India, European vessels started gathering in Asian waters from the farthest corners of the world in search of spices, textiles, and other exotic goods. The trading structure set up by the Treaty of Tordesillas had excluded all other sea-faring nations (England, the Netherlands, and France) from sailing into the open seas in the East. For almost a century, Portugal and Spain dominated the sea routes and the spice trade. However, no monopoly could last forever. Lured by the prospects of the spice trade, the Dutch, English, and French soon joined the race and set up commercial posts in India.

The Portuguese held on to the spice trade for about a century, but by 1590, their power began to wane and they lost the trade to the Dutch. The Dutch acquisition of the Malabar markets brought them in confrontation with the British, who had set up the “East India Company” (1600) in Madras on the adjacent Coromandel Coast. With the arrival of rival European powers, India became a scene of a fierce international feuding. After the British conquest of spice-trading ports on the Malabar Coast, the Dutch left India and redirected their attention towards the Moluccas in Southeast
Asia, commonly known as the “Spice Islands.” These remained under their control until World War II.

Impact on Human Civilization

The quest for these extravagant cravings of the human palate marked the beginning of the modern era, leading to the discovery of maritime routes, new continents, and new lands. The sea routes united the continents and the scattered islands all over the globe. Spices thus provided an enduring link between Asia and Europe, facilitating trans-regional and intercontinental trade and human migration. This exploratory zeal led to advancement in ship-building techniques, maritime knowledge, and nautical, cartographical, and navigational skills. As geographical and navigational knowledge expanded, the European mariners linked all the major ports of the world, paving the way for global trade.

From the outset, spices had become an international commodity with globalizing ramifications. The discovery of maritime routes led to the development of long-distance trade centers in the Indian Ocean, thus changing traditional trade patterns. Until the European discovery of Indian Ocean routes, Indian trade was largely eastward—towards China and Southeast Asia. As far as the West was concerned, it was the traders from the Red Sea and the Gulf who used to come to India, rather than vice versa. However, the Portuguese presence in India marked a decisive re-orientation towards the West because it encouraged the traders to venture out into new areas which they had previously avoided.

The wealth accrued from the spice trade contributed to developing Calicut, Alexandria, Constantinople, Venice, Lisbon, Amsterdam, and Malacca into prosperous merchant-cities. The Italian city-states of Venice and Verona became major players as the ports of entry for spices coming from
distant and obscure eastern regions. These cities also owed their rise to their favourable geographical location, which facilitated commerce, trans-shipping, and cross-cultural fusion.

As the spice-seekers came from various creeds and religions, it fostered an exchange of ideas, brought several civilizations into contact, and promoted cross-cultural interactions and movements. India became a meeting point of several civilizations: Hindu, Muslim, and Christian. The spice trade also played a crucial role in the eastward spread of Islam and Christianity across the Indian Ocean to India and Southeast Asia.

The exposure to a rich Indo-Arabic civilization during the Crusades fostered the renaissance or rebirth of European culture. Europeans acquired a new numerical system, which made possible bookkeeping, and astronomical and nautical knowledge, which made possible the great voyages of discovery.

The most obvious impact was in the life-style of European people. Their homes were now furnished with carpets, sofas, and the baldachin (state canopy); their dresses were made of new materials—silk, velvet, damask, and taffeta; and their foods were augmented by new foodstuffs and peppered with oriental seasonings. The East-West interaction introduced changes in cuisine and culinary skills: While Europeans experimented with spices, the Asians learnt techniques of baking and using vinegar.

The impact of cultural fusion was also evident in literature. The daring adventures along the spice routes and the fabulous wealth of the Oriental world inspired a new genre of story-writing. The Thousand and One Nights—a collection of fascinating stories based on Indian and Persian sources dating from 800-900 AD, remains an all-time favorite.
with children and adults. Other prominent works influenced by the exotic orient include Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (1400), and works by William Shakespeare (1564-1616).

Once the spice trade assumed global dimensions, it brought a decisive shift in European attitudes towards Asia. Until the Portuguese pursuit of the spice monopoly, Asia was a mystery. Europeans looked upon Asian cultures with awe and admiration. India was perceived to be an affluent and a prosperous country endowed with precious gems and exotic spices.

While all this was true, they found the real India to be a heterogeneous society and a country without political unity or central authority. The country was divided among a large number of autonomous warring states, which made it easier for the foreign intruders to subjugate the native population and impose their rule.

The Portuguese introduced an aggressive type of mercantilism whereby they acquired control of all strategic points along the eastern coast of Africa, India, Ceylon, and the Moluccas. The rapid transformation of Portugal—hitherto Europe’s smallest and most impoverished state—into a prosperous empire aroused the jealousy of other powers, especially the Dutch, the French, and the British. This triggered fierce competition among the sea-faring powers for control of Indian Ocean trade routes and of India itself.

The quest for spices thus led to the foundation of the Asian empires of Portugal, Netherlands, and Great Britain. The struggle for control over the resource-laden regions of Asia marked the beginning of colonialism and imperialism, which eventually changed the East-West relationship and the course of history.
Conclusion

Since the dawn of civilization, spices have played a pivotal role in human history, transforming the lives of the people. Spices became irresistible items because of their fragrant aromas, piquant tastes, and regenerative properties. With the passage of time, the word “spice” became inextricably linked with the mysterious Orient and its fabled wealth. Scarcity of these spices in Europe made them precious commodities, both politically and economically, inspiring ambitious rulers, merchants, and sailors to undertake expeditions in search of the spice-producing regions.

The quest for spices became a catalyst for the exploration of sea routes and new lands. The lucrative spice trade culminated in wars, outright acquisition of spice lands, and subjugation of the native populations. Although all the former colonial empires and spice trade cartels have vanished and costs are relatively low because spices are being grown in many other locations, spices retain their omnipresent appeal and India continues to remain the largest producer (88% = 2 m. tons), consumer (41%), and, as the following figure shows, exporter (47%) of spices.

Fig. 10. India’s share in world spice trade (2007)
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* Figure: La Danse Macabre, also called Dance of Death, by Michael Wolgemut (1493-1519), was produced under the impact of the Black Death. It personified death with skeleton-figures dancing to the grave. The cartoon reminded people of how fragile their lives were and how vain were the glories of earthly life!


3 The Sumerian name *Meluhha* for the Indus Valley people is believed to be derived from the Sanskrit word ‘mleccha’ meaning ‘barbarian’ or ‘foreigner.’ For details, Asko Parpola and Simo Parpola, “On the relationship of the Sumerian toponym Meluhha

4 Nayanjot Lahiri, "Harappa as a centre of trade and trade routes: A case study of the resource-use, resource-access and lines of communication in the Indus Civilization," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* (1990), vol. 27, no.4, pp.431-41.


10 Ibid.