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The Spice Route: A Historical Survey

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Abstract

The spice routes were established around 3000 BCE and this was two thousand years before the Silk route was established. Spices were the most valued medicinal plants and were used for medicinal purposes during the ancient times. Spice route remained a major sea route for trade and grew in importance with the coming of Europeans in India. Spice route acted as a bridge for cultural and religious exchanges between different regions of the world. Languages such as Persian and Arabic were introduced in India as the contacts with central Asian region were established firmly through these trade routes. Sufism too, found its way to India through these trade routes.

Keywords: Spice route, historical survey

Introduction

Since ancient times, trade has been an integral part of human life. According to Bridey Heing “the History of Indian Trade is the history of trade for humankind.”^[1] Silk route (the land route) and the spice route (the maritime route) were the ancient trade routes that dominated the world trade. The land route was mainly used for the trade of the Silk whereas spices were traded through the maritime routes. Spices such as cinnamon, pepper, ginger, cloves and nutmeg were traded through the spice routes^[2].

The spice routes were established around 3000 BCE and this was two thousand years before the Silk route was established. Spices were the most valued medicinal plants and were used for medicinal purposes during the ancient times. Their use in food became prevalent much later^[3]. Spices were among the valued luxurious items that were exchanged for western commodities like gold and silver. However, other valuable goods were also exchanged across the spice routes such as textiles, metal work, saffron, incense, etc.

Spice route remained a major sea route for trade and grew in importance with the coming of Europeans in India. Spice routes linked the east with the west as it stretched from Japan through Indonesia to India to the Middle Eastern lands to Europe through Mediterranean, covering a distance of 15,000 kilometers^[4].

As India was the leading producer of spices, it became the centre of the world's spice trade. Spices became an important part of India's trade Chinese, Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Arab civilisations. Even today, India tops the list of the spice-producing countries of the world. Around 70% of the global spices are produced in India^[5]. For almost 5,000 years, Arab traders had a monopoly over the spice trade till the Europeans searched for new routes to the Far East regions. The most lucrative of the spice traders during this time were the Arabians. South Arabia was the great spice emporium in antiquity^[6].

Spices were so valued once that people used to risk their lives just to trade in spices. Arab merchants who traded in spices, would tell fantastic tales about their adventures in order to reach spice growing regions. This would ensure high prices for the spicess. Myths associated with phoenix, giant eagles, dragons were created around the spice producing lands. The Greek historian Herodotus has mentioned how the spice cassia grew in a lake “infested by winged creatures like bats, which screeched alarmingly and were very pugnacious.”^[7] Such stories were made popular by the traders in order to hide the source of spices.

India supplied spices to most of the European countries. Cochin and Malabar coast^[8] were the leading producers of the Pepper. In the Coastal regions of Bay of Bengal, cloves were grown in huge quantity. In the medieval period, food spoiling was a major problem faced by

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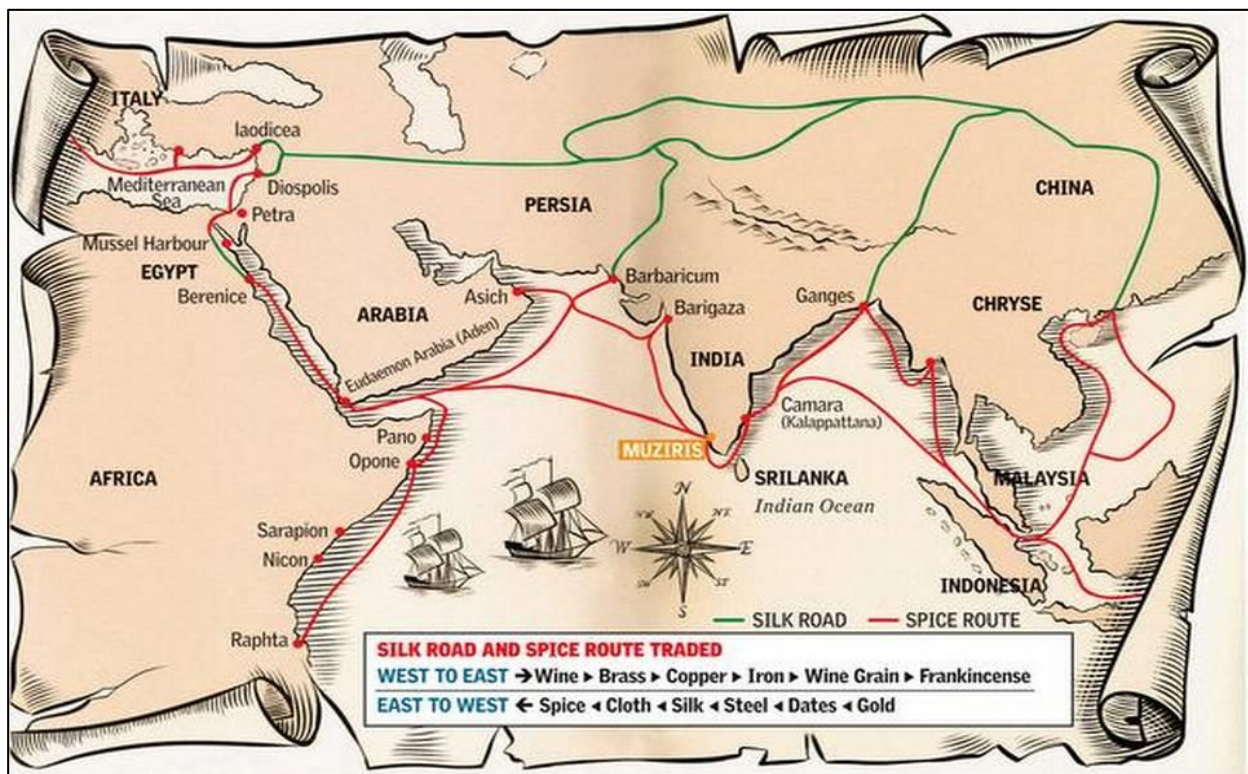
The Europeans as they lacked the refrigeration and general hygiene ^[9]. In such a situation, species became important as they helped to preserve the food for a long period of time. Species were so important that in the 16th century, dockworkers in London used to get their bonuses in cloves. In another instance, Rome was captured by Visigoths in 410 AD. As ransom, Visigoths demanded around 3000 pounds of peppercorns ^[10].

In the middle ages, spice trade was among the most lucrative industries in the world. Many empires rose and fell around the spice routes. For India, along with wealth and knowledge, trade in spices brought invaders and colonizers too.

Much of the history of the world revolves around the Spices and the Spice trade routes. Spices such as cloves are mentioned in the ancient religious text, Ramayana too. The Romans controlled all the spices which entered their territory through their trading centre in Alexandria throughout the 1st century BC. In the following centuries, many battles were fought for control over the spice route. Finally, in the 13th century, Venice became the primary port for spice trade with Europe. Venice imposed high tariffs on spice trade and became enormously wealthy. However, this monopoly of Venice did not last long ^[11].

In 1498, Vasco da Gama came to India through sea route. This led to domination of spice trade route by Portuguese for a short period of time. Portugal accumulated great wealth during this short phase. They established their monopoly over the spice route until the end of the sixteenth century when Dutch entered the picture and marked an end to their monopoly. However, England which was a threat for Portuguese earlier, became an imminent danger for the Dutch because of their supreme naval power ^[12]. Throughout the 17th and 18th century, the spice trade was dominated by the East India Company ^[13]. With the colonisation of the distant lands, the cultivation of spices was introduced by the colonisers in places outside of their land of origin. As a result, the prices of spices began to fall. Spices no longer remained an exclusive trade item around which wealthy monopolies were once established. Hence, the onset of globalisation ^[14] can be traced back to the spice trade ^[15].

However, by the end of the twentieth century, spices and spice route lost their significance ^[16] though spice trade is still important for the countries where they are produced. Spice routes in many ways paved the way for the modern world.



Courtesy: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/Envoys-of-31-nations-on-Spice-Route-to-meet/article14919598.ece>

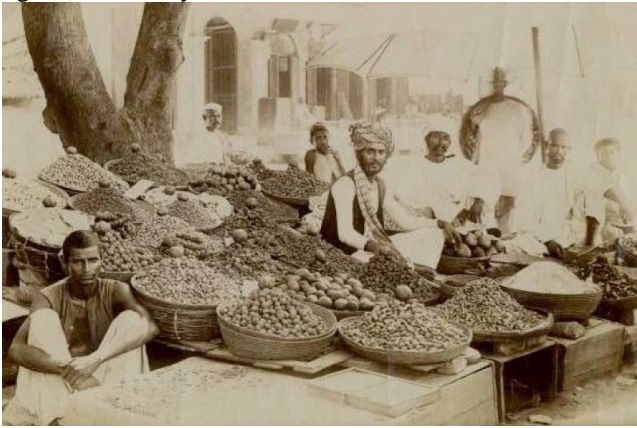
Influences

Spice route acted as a bridge for cultural and religious exchanges between different regions of the world. Languages such as Persian and Arabic were introduced in India as the contacts with central Asian region were established firmly through these trade routes. Sufism too, found its way to India through these trade routes. Roman empire followed by Byzantine Empire and Sassanid Empire took immense interest in trade with India. Arabs too, played a major role in trade with India since ancient period. They became the traders. Chinese also consumed large amount of spices, which were traded from India and Southeast Asian

region. In the accounts of the Arab travellers, Canton or Kanfu is mentioned as an important port of China for trade. Canton river with ships from India in large numbers in it, is mentioned in the Chinese accounts. Canton even had temples which indicates that the port was frequented by Hindu travellers and traders.

Knowledge about the social and religious life of the people were also transferred through the trade routes. Traders brought with them their social and religious practices which were often adopted by the locals. Buddhism and Islam spread to Southeast Asia from India with traders travelling through the sea routes. The influence of the Dravidian

culture is visible in the art and architecture of the southeast region, even today ^[17].



Spice market in 1857 (Source: www.pinterest.com)

Kerala occupied an important place along the sea trade routes. As Kerala produced many important spices, including black pepper (indigenous to Kerala) ^[18], Kerala became the hub of cultural and economic exchanges. The traditional sailing ships building created huge demand for wood and coir from regions such as Kerala. Beypore in Calicut (known for Uru making) linked the Malabar coast to the spice routes ^[19].

In the beginning of the twenty first century, Various archaeological remains were found at Village Pattanam in Kerala. As a result, Muziris Heritage Project (MHP) ^[20] was initiated by the Central Government in association with the State government. *Muziris* was one of the ancient and most flourishing ports of India. *Muziris* is extensively mentioned in the Tamil Sangam literature ^[21] and the accounts of the Roman philosopher Pliny. It was destroyed by frequent earthquakes and floods.

Conclusion

Since ancient times, Indian ocean has remained a strategic location in the maritime trade. India and China have been working towards making the ‘Asian Century’ ^[22] a reality for themselves. Both India and China are the fastest growing economies of the world. Both the nations aim to become a world leader and are making efforts to take advantage of their strategic locations. Revitalizing the ancient spice route would not only provide a connect to our glorious past but would also provide a platform to revive our economic and cultural ties.

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