

UNIT 103 – UPSC - Vasco da Gama

India's History : Medieval India : First voyage of Vasco da Gama - 1498

Vasco da Gama Arrives in India



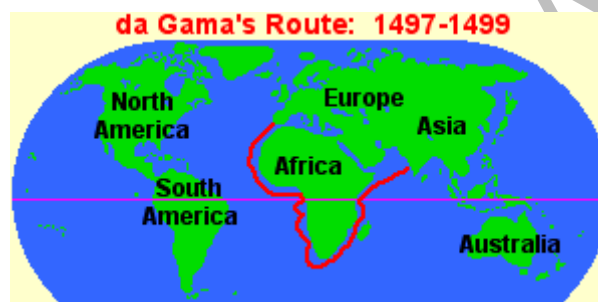
Vasco da Gama is famous for his completion of the first all water trade route between Europe and India. Da Gama's father, Estavao, had originally been chosen by King Joao II to make this historic voyage, but he died before he could complete the mission. It is also said that the opportunity was then given to da Gama's brother, Paulo, who turned it down. The trip needed to be made, and as a last choice, King Emmanuel looked to da Gama to complete the mission.

Vasco da Gama was born in Sines, Portugal in 1469. Being the son of the town's governor, he was educated as a nobleman and served in the court of King Joao II. Da Gama also served as a navel officer, and in 1492 he commanded a defense of Portuguese colonies from the French on the coast of Guinea. Da Gama was then given the mission to take command of the first Portuguese expedition around Africa to India.

When Vasco da Gama set out on July 8, 1497 he and his crew planned and equipped four ships. Goncalo Alvares commanded the flagship Sao (Saint) Gabriel. Paulo, da Gama's brother, commanded the Sao Rafael. The other two ships were the Berrio and the Starship. Most of the men working on the ship were convicts and were treated as expendable. On the voyage, da Gama set out from Lisbon, Portugal, rounded the Cape of Good Hope on November 22, and sailed north. Da Gama made various stops along the coast of Africa in trading centers such as Mombasa, Mozambique, Malindi, Kenya, and Quilmana.

As the ships sailed along the east coast of Africa, many conflicts arose between the Portuguese and the Muslims who had already established trading centers along the coast. The Muslim traders in Mozambique and Mombasa did not want interference in their trade centers. Therefore, they perceived the Portuguese as a threat and tried to seize the ships. In Malindi, on the other hand, the Portuguese were well received, because the ruler was hoping to gain an ally against Mombasa, the neighboring port. From Malindi, da Gama was accompanied the rest of the way to India by Ahmad Ibn Majid, a famous Arab pilot.

Vasco da Gama finally arrived in Calicut, India on May 20, 1498. Calicut was the principle market of trade for precious stones, pearls, and spices. At first, the Portuguese were well received and accepted by the Hindu ruler. There was a great ceremony, and da Gama was taken to a Hindu temple. However, this immediate reaction did not last. The ruler later felt insulted by the gifts that Vasco da Gama brought, because they were of little value to him. Da Gama was not able to establish his trading station or negotiate a trading agreement, because the Zamorin (samudrin raja, the Hindu King) did not want to alienate the local merchants. The Portuguese goods that had been well accepted in Africa were not suitable for the prestigious Indian market. The Muslim merchants despised the Portuguese interference in their business and often threatened to not trade with them. Finally, when da Gama wanted to leave, the Zamorin told him that he had to pay a heavy tax and leave all the Portuguese goods as a form of collateral. Da Gama was enraged, and on August 29, 1498, da Gama and his crew departed with all of their possessions and five hostages. Da Gama also took a letter from the Zamorin stating that the Zamorin would trade spices and gems if the Portuguese could get scarlet cloth, coral, silver, and gold.



Vasco da Gama and his crew departed in August 1498 and reached Lisbon in September of 1499. The return trip took so long because many of the sailors died of diseases such as scurvy. When Vasco da Gama returned, he was rewarded with a great celebration. Da Gama was looked upon as a hero, and King Manoel awarded him with titles and a large income.

When Vasco da Gama went out on his second expedition on February 12, 1502, he was prepared for an encounter with the Muslim traders. He set sail with 20 well-armed ships, hoping to force his way into the market and to get revenge on the Muslims for the opposition in 1498. Da Gama killed many innocent Indians and Muslims. In one instance, da Gama waited for a ship to return from Mecca, a Muslim trading and religious center. The Portuguese overtook the ship and seized all the merchandise. Then they locked the 380 passengers in the hold and set the ship on fire. It took four days for the ship to sink, killing all men, women, and children.

When da Gama arrived in Calicut on October 30, 1502, the Zamorin was willing to sign a treaty. Da Gama told him that he would have to banish all of the Muslims. To demonstrate his power, da Gama hung 38 fishermen; cut off their heads, feet, and hands; and floated the dismembered corpses onto the shore. Later da Gama bombarded the city with guns and forced his way into the trading system. This led the way for other Portuguese conquests in the East Indies.

In February of 1503, da Gama returned home. During his final voyage to India, da Gama got sick and died on December 24, 1524. Vasco da Gama's remains were taken back to Portugal, where he was buried in the chapel where he had prayed before his first voyage.



Vasco da Gama's voyages to India resulted in centuries of Portuguese colonialism throughout Asia (Macao was only returned to the Chinese government in 1999). However, whether colonization was Portugal's first intention is a matter of debate. It seems that Portugal, a country formed by its struggles against the Moors, sent da Gama abroad to seek pre-existing Christian nations with which to form anti-Islamic alliances. The lucrative spice trade was further temptation for the Portuguese crown. Eventually, these aims led to religious conversion, unethical trade, and colonization.