

# Vasco da Gama's Voyages to India: Messianism, Mercantilism, and Sacred Exploits

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## Abstract

The Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama (1460-1524), was the first European to sail from Portugal to India. Accolades for this achievement have long obscured the messianic motivation for the 1498 voyage, “to invade, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens (Muslims) and pagans and other enemies of Christ; to reduce them to perpetual slavery; to convert them to Christianity; [and] to acquire great wealth by force of arms from the Infidels,” as sanctified by various Papal Bulls, together called “the Doctrine of Discovery” (*Dum Diversas*, 1452; *Romanus Pontifex*, 1455; *Inter Caetera*, 1493). The other key motive in this enormous undertaking was to displace Arab control of the spice trade and establish, instead, Portuguese hegemony that eventually resulted in colonialism/imperialism. The main instrument in this effort was extreme violence, sanctioned by the Church, inflicted upon the natives, and predicated on the Portuguese Inquisition and earlier crusades. The paper concludes with some cautionary remarks about the current Islam-West clash environment.

## Introduction

Not long ago, a historian published a paper that pointed out to the readers, especially other historians, that “the explorers in the ‘Age of Discovery’ have been so firmly canonized” and “when the central problem of world history is seen as the ‘rise of the West,’ the often hesitant, discordant moments of European exploration, settlement, and conquest are easily forgotten” (Wolff, 1998, p. 298). This is especially true in the case of Vasco da Gama. As this paper will demonstrate, numerous well-established scholars, upon consulting the original sources of chroniclers, diarists, recorders, letters and eye-witness testimonials of those who accompanied the voyages, and others who documented the events soon after, clearly describe the horrific violence perpetrated in the name of God and king (see Boxer (1969), Cliff (2012), Crowley (2015, 2016), David (1988), Disney (1995, 2009), Hall (1998), Jayne (1910), Panikkar (1959), Subrahmanyam (1997, 2012), and others). With the not uncommon Eurocentric gloss, much of the mainstream literature tends to glorify da Gama’s voyages, with only a scant reference to the atrocities he committed (see, for example, Ames (2005), Calvert (2005), etc.), and mainly pointing to his “unquestionable greatness” (Diffie & Winius, 1977, p. xx).

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To be sure, however, in recent years, some even in Portugal have attempted to change the narrative and “the myth of Vasco da Gama has been quietly resisted” (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 367). This article primarily focuses on the literature on da Gama’s violent “onslaught on India” in an effort to counter the persistent narrative of unquestioned aggrandizement that continues to take precedent despite its violent circumstances.

The term “Gama epoch” is often used to describe the era of European commercial and imperial expansion in Asia and its particular relevance to India’s political fate where da Gama first established a foothold. As Charles Boxer (1969) has summarized, “the main impetus behind what is known as the Age of Discovery evidently came from a mixture of religious, economic, and strategic and political factors. They were by no means always in the same proportion; even motives primarily inspired by Mammon were often inextricably blended with things pertaining to Caesar and to God” (p. 17). Bailey Diffie and George Winius (1977) further explain, “the mysteries of the Atlantic Ocean and the African coast challenged those adventurous in spirit. The young fighting class found a place to win honors and new lands. The religious saw an opportunity to convert infidels to Christianity. For the merchants and seamen there was opportunity for profits in a new era of trade” (pp. xiii-xiv). Although hailed as a “discovery,” the Portuguese were well aware of the lands of the Far East, but what they lacked was direct access to the region. Traveling the ocean route allowed the Portuguese to avoid sailing across the highly disputed—and costly—Mediterranean and traversing the dangerous Arabian lands.

From the early 15th century, Henry the Navigator (1394-1460) had been extending Portuguese knowledge of the African coastline. Also known as Henry the Crusader, his ventures were united not only by geographical curiosity but also by the combined zeal of his “militant Christian mysticism and bitter hatred of Islam” (Panikkar, 1959, p. 25). He hoped to conquer Islam in the East by joining forces with the mythical “Indies” Christian kingdom of Prester John and thus capture Indian Ocean trade for Portugal. Henry embarked on “Portuguese expansion into North Africa in 1415 with a massive military expedition against the Moroccan port-town of Ceuta” (Disney, 2009, Vol. I, p. 1). As Crowley (2015) notes, the “Ceuta campaign was conceived in secret as an outlet for religious, commercial, and nationalistic passions, fueled by a background hatred of the Islamic world” (p. xxiii). The southern extent of the continent, however, remained elusive for him, until 1487 when another Portuguese voyager, Bartholomew Diaz, rounded the Cape of Good Hope. “We came to serve God and to get rich,” Diaz declared upon arrival (Crowley, 2015, p. 221). For Europe, this journey showed that a sea route to India might indeed be feasible, a goal fulfilled later by Vasco da Gama.

Vasco da Gama (1460-1524) is Portugal’s most renowned historical figure who was the first European to travel by sea, via the southern tip of Africa, from Portugal to India, thereby having circumvented the land barrier that long separated the East from the West. The voyage remains one of the defining moments in maritime history. Little is known of da Gama’s early life; his father was governor of Sines, Portugal, where he was born. He first came to historical notice in 1492 when King John II commanded him to lead raiding flotillas to seize French ships in Portuguese

ports as reprisal for piratical raids. For his success in daring raids, he was commissioned and assigned to the court of King Manuel I.

In two epic voyages that spanned six years, da Gama would fight a running sea battle that would ultimately change the fate of three continents. The story has taken mythical proportions in the literature. The Portuguese national epic poem, *The Lusíads*, penned in Homeric style by soldier-poet Luis Vaz de Camões in 1572, celebrated the voyage in biblical terms. Wherever da Gama lands, the poem “divinizes” him “as surrounded by twelve apostles, in an obvious comparison to Christ and twelve apostles” (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 157). Similarly, Christianity’s encounters with “pagans” were presented as in the fictional *Song of Roland* that expressed a popular sentiment of the early Crusades era: “pagans are wrong, Christians are right” (Darling, 1998, p. 2237).

For his achievements, there have been many attempts to “build the cult of Vasco da Gama,” for example, a century after his voyage, in 1597, there were suggestions that “this part of Asia be called *Gama* in order to preserve by such an illustrious name the memory of the greatest feat that there has been since God created the world until now” (Subrahmanyam, 1997, pp. 16-17). And among the numerous symbols of glory (including naming a crater on the moon, a railway station in India, football teams in Brazil, Gama City in Goa, etc.), the most recent is the Vasco da Gama Bridge, linking Lisbon to Europe, inaugurated in 1998, in celebration of the 500th anniversary of the voyage. However, as will be noted later, suggestions to celebrate the occasion in India and elsewhere were rebuffed.

The “divine” sanction for the messianic explorations was grounded in Papal bulls, aimed at “universalizing” Christianity as a prelude to an apocalyptic “end-of-the-world” theology. Further, economic considerations called for seizing control of markets in spices, silks, and precious gems from Muslim traders (also displacing Venetian intermediaries) and to claim for Portugal all the territories “discovered” and establish Portuguese control over Afro-Oriental trade.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, “Vasco da Gama had sailed east with the express purpose of subjugating all of India” (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 227; also see Cliff, 2012, p. 355). Da Gama succeeded in his mission and thus began an era of eventual European domination through sea power and commerce, and 450 years of Portuguese colonialism that brought wealth and power to the Portuguese crown. As for the success, Hobson (2004) points out that “had it not been for the diffusion and assimilation of Eastern science as well as nautical technologies, Vasco da Gama would not even have got as far as the Cape let alone India. The Portuguese borrowing of Islamic science began in the twelfth century, and was to an extent initiated by the royal family” (pp. 140-141).

In order to thoroughly examine the rationale, context, and circumstances of da Gama’s voyages, the paper is divided in three sections. First, it will explain the messianic mission that inspired the da Gama voyage, based on several Papal Bulls,

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<sup>1</sup> Much like Middle-Eastern oil today, spices represented the premier commodity in Europe at this time. Aside from food flavoring and preservation, there were multiple other uses - for religious rituals, witchcraft, remedies and elixirs, fragrances, and even sexual stimulation.

together called “the Doctrine of Discovery.” It will also consider the economic motives, i.e., trade-based mercantile pursuits that spurred the effort. Second, it will discuss the considerable religious fanfare that accompanied the preparation and launching of the voyage. Third, more importantly, the paper will discuss acts of organized violence in the Indian Ocean, in India, and en route that were unleashed in the name of the Catholic Church. Significant pieces of the story, especially da Gama’s brutalities, are often among the missing elements in the literature. Thus, says an eminent scholar, historians generally “had the temerity, in the late 1980s, to produce a programmatic text on Portuguese expansion, which wholly excluded both Asian and African source-materials, and even Asian and African historians” (Subrahmanyam, 1997, pp. 366-367). While the Portuguese arrival is presented as the unfolding of an historic saga, “the darker side of this process was overlooked, and probably deliberately suppressed” (Disney, 1995, p. 11). Yet, it might be noted as Disney (1995) suggests that da Gama was “not quite the monster he is so often painted as being” (p. 19). According to Disney (1995), the atrocities da Gama is “alleged” to have committed are “exaggerated” and his actions “more understandable if viewed in their contemporary contexts,” where cruelty is a “manly virtue;” thus, “*crueldade* (meaning a harsh, unyielding attitude to one’s enemies, with no or little room for mercy, especially when they were Muslims) was often presented as a manly virtue in sixteenth-seventeenth century Portuguese chronicles” (pp. 20, 24). However, despite “exaggerations,” Disney (1995) concludes that “it is equally obvious that Gama’s actions were ruthless and violent enough” (p. 28).

This paper argues that the use of violence, sanctioned by the church, to establish control of trade, set the tone throughout the Age of Discovery around the world. In conclusion, brief remarks will be offered on the da Gama legacy, with some contextualization of this history in reference to what seems to be an Islam-West “clash” environment presently.

### **Messianism and Mercantilism**

During the era of Portuguese voyages (including the 1492 Columbus expedition), the dominant ideology was a curious combination of messianism and mercantilism, the former inspired by the apocalyptic fervor of the time and the latter driven by commercial interests.

The key impetus for messianism was embedded in what has become known as “the Doctrine of Discovery,” defined by several Papal Bulls that called for annihilating “Muslims and all other pagans” and “Christianizing” the world.<sup>2</sup> Beginning with the Papal Bull, *Dum Diversas*, issued in 1492, there were several others - *Romanus Pontifex* (1494), *Inter Caetera* (1493) and *Praeae Denotionis* (1494), each reinforcing the Crusade mission (see Ghazanfar, 2016). Specifically, the 1492 Bull called for the King,

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<sup>2</sup> At the initiative of various Native American scholars, the Doctrine of Discovery was repudiated by the World Council of Churches in February 2012; however, repudiation at the Vatican level has not yet happened.

to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens (Muslims) and pagan whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and ... all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself .... and to convert them to his and their use and profit. (*Dum Diversas*, 1452)

Scriptural texts were foundational to the Doctrine: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... and teaching them everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20; also, Romans 13:1). And according to the theological and legal doctrine, *Terra Nullius* (“empty land”), any “‘discovered’ lands were devoid of humans if the original people who lived there, defined as ‘heathens, pagans, and infidels,’ (and) were not ruled by a Christian prince” may be possessed (Friesen & Augustine, 2014). And, “non-Christians were considered enemies of the Catholic faith, and as such, less than human” (Newcomb, 1992, p. 18). Thus, “it was the duty of the Portuguese to snatch them—however much they might resist—into the arms of the Christ and His salvation” (Edwardes, 1971, p. 171). Some historians, to be noted, view these Bulls as extending the legacy of Pope Urban II's Crusades that premised, along with battling the "infidels," European expansionism into the "lands of milk and honey," accommodating "both the marketplace and the yearnings of the Christian soul" (Bown, 2012, p. 75; see Atiyah, 1962).<sup>3</sup>

Further, as in earlier Crusades, the faithful "went into battle armed with an ironclad guarantee from Christ's representatives on earth: mass indulgences for those who died, which absolved them of doing penance for their sins and guaranteed immediate admittance to heaven" (Cliff, 2012, p. 26). With Papal Bulls as the sacred authority, some saw the voyage to India in an apocalyptic context, "having calculated the coming of the Anti-Christ and predicted that the world would end in 1646/1648 and all humankind would then be baptized" (Fried, 2000, p. 235).

As he assumed the Crown in 1485, King Manuel inherited a messianic destiny. Christened with the luminous name Emmanuel, "God is with us," he saw “mystical significance into his coronation” (Crowley, 2015, p. 36). As the 1500th anniversary of Christ's birth approached, apocalyptic fervor occupied Europe, particularly the Iberian Peninsula, where the Spanish *Reconquista* and “the expulsion of Muslims and Jews was taken as a sign” (Crowley, 2015, p. 36). Manuel believed that he was "predestined" to exterminate Islam and achieve the worldwide spread of Christianity under a universal monarch (Crowley, 2015, p. 36). Further, "after accession to the throne, these Messianic beliefs enabled Dom Manuel at times to

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<sup>3</sup> While the Crusades were driven mainly by religious zeal, there were also colonial and economic motives. Thus, as Pope Urban II launched the First Crusade on November 27, 1095, he said: “This land you inhabit ... is too narrow for your large population; nor does it abound in wealth; it furnishes scarcely enough food for its cultivators ... Enter upon the road to Holy Sepulcher, wrest the land from the wicked race, and subject it to yourself that land which, as the Scriptures say, ‘floweth with milk and honey’” (See Munro, 1895, pp. 5-8).

act in a highly autocratic fashion, since he believed that he was directly inspired by the Holy Spirit" (Subrahmanyam, 2012, p. 54). Moreover, the sacred-secular mix of the voyage was instanced by some Italian merchants, "who headed all the pages of their ledgers with the invocation: 'In the name of God and of Profit'" (Boxer, 1969, p. 18).

If the voyage was forged in the spirit of a crusade, "it also had a material dimension: not only to wrest trade from the Muslims but also to replace the Venetians as the mart for the luxury goods of the Orient" (Crowley, 2015, p. 37). Mercantilism provided the basis for trade expansion for the Crown through capturing the trade from Muslims. A Portuguese writer calls it "monarchical capitalism;" another scholar calls it "royal mercantilism" (Subrahmanyam, 2012, pp. 48, 54). Within this framework, there were the British quasi-private East India Company and the state-sanctioned Dutch *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*. Similarly, "from earliest Portuguese voyages to Asia, the state's involvement was considerable" (Subrahmanyam, 2012, p. 48).

The Portuguese "saw trade as the obvious key to prosperity, given Portugal's, and especially Lisbon's, position at the cusp of the Mediterranean and the Atlantic" (Subrahmanyam, 2012, p. 48). Maritime activities were an "important aspect of the royal household's interests in the fifteenth century: [especially] the trade conducted on royal ships. From at least as early as 1373, there is sporadic evidence of the Crown's direct interest in trade" (Subrahmanyam, 2012, p. 50). Subsequently, the "royal merchant-capitalists ... traded in slaves and sugar, sold the grain, wine and fruit produced in their estates" (Subrahmanyam, 2012, p. 51). Even the "Duke of Beja" (the future King Manuel I) engaged in trading enterprises in the early 16th century and some called him "the grocery-king" (Subrahmanyam, 2012, p. 51).

In 1485, King Manuel appealed to the Pope to bless exploration of Africa, and suggested that "once this region is explored, we will see an enormous accumulation of wealth and honor for all the Christian people and especially you, most Holy Father" (Crowley, 2015, p. 12). As Subrahmanyam (2012) notes, "the phenomenon of Portuguese royal mercantilism reached its apogee in the period from the 1480s and 1520s, under Dom Joao II and his successor Dom Manuel I" (p. 51). However, "royal mercantilism itself cannot be seen in Dom Manuel's reign without its strange bedfellow--royal messianism" (Subrahmanyam, 2012, p. 52). Indeed, "royal mercantilism was in part a necessary condition for putting into effect messianist plans: making war required resources, especially a war that was unlikely to enthrone the nobility" (Subrahmanyam, 2012, p. 54).

### **The Voyage: Preparation and Launching**

In order to launch the Crusade, King Manuel of Portugal commissioned Vasco da Gama in 1497. His messianic "foreign policy" was based on "a divine mandate to fight Islam," to launch "a Last Crusade to recapture Jerusalem, the great event from which, the Scripture foretold, the Last Days of the world would follow as light follows dark" (Cliff, 2012, pp. 160-161). Further, there will be enormous economic gains; "in addition to the expansion of the Christian religion, it would be possible to acquire unheard quantities of pearls, spices, and gold" (Noonan, 2007, p. 284).

The preoccupation with “the conquest of the Holy Land.... came to be seen as the potential climax of overseas expansion, indeed the crowning achievement that would enable Dom Manuel to claim the title of Emperor of the East” (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 57). Further, “India was a means to an end. That end was Manuel’s ambition to install himself as the king of Jerusalem, and the first step in that Crusade was not the conquest of India but the expulsion of its Muslim merchants” (Cliff, 2012, p. 355). He believed that after the extermination of Islam, there will be “worldwide spread of Christianity under a universal monarch” (Crowley, 2015, p. 36).

Manuel was convinced, da Gama was the one who would "negotiate alliances that would oust Islam and entrench Portugal as an Eastern Power.... He would inspire, cajole, and threaten, and if argument failed, he would have to persuade at the point of a gun ... a Crusader fit to carry the standard of Christ" (Cliff, 2012, p. 161). Known as short-tempered, “he had an outstanding charge of violent affray against his name. The obdurate nature of his personality would unfold in the voyage ahead: implacable speed in the crusading tradition of hatred of Islam ... bold in action, severe in his orders and very formidable in his anger” (Crowley, 2015, p. 39). Further, he was reputed to have a “surly disposition; unlettered, brutal, and violent. For some assignments, he would have been useless, but for this one he was made to order. The work lying ahead could not be accomplished by a gentle leader” (Newell, 1954, p. 32). Besides, “the novice Crusader was schooled in the warrior monks’ malice toward Muslims,” for his credentials also included induction into the “Moors-slaying” society, the Order of Santiago (Cliff, 2012, pp. 163, 359).

On July 8, 1497, the day “chosen by astrologers as auspicious,” the historic expedition set sail from Lisbon, amid parades, pageantry, and intense religious fanfare, similar to earlier Crusades. Da Gama and his crew spent the previous night in prayer and vigil. Hall (1998) writes, “An aura of messianic fervor infused this moment, for oaths had been sworn that death was the only alternative to success; the ships would never return without having borne the sacred symbol of the Order of Christ through the oceans of the East” (p. 160). With a gilded cross on his chest, he was undertaking a voyage of discovery “which was also a holy crusade” (Hall, 1998, p. 160). And his “mission was both sacred and secular, with overtones of crusade mixed with commercial rivalry” (Crowley, 2015, p. 39). Wrote Crowley (2015), “Gama led his men in a devotional procession from the chapel down to the beach, organized by the priests and the monks of the Order of Christ” (p. 41). By such means, declared the Pope, the “Christian Empire would be propagated” (Newcomb, 1992, p. 18). Panikkar (1959) maintained, “The Portuguese during the age of discovery were undoubtedly animated by the spirit of the great Crusades - essentially an anti-Islamic spirit” (p. 15).

The young da Gama sailed from Portugal, leading in his flagship *San Gabriel*, so named, “for the archangel Gabriel was Heaven’s messenger, bearer of divine truths” (Hall, 1998, p. 159). The fleet circumnavigated Africa, crossed the Indian Ocean, and “discovered” the maritime route to the Indies and, thereby, obtained access to the fabled wealth of the East. The mission was to launch a "sweeping counter offensive against Islam and inaugurate a new era in which the faith and

values of Europe would be exported across the earth" and "fighting the Infidel was the highest calling" (Cliff, 2012, p. 6). Vasco da Gama's arrival in the East was seen as a turning point in the centuries-old struggle between Islam and Christianity. Vasco da Gama (and his archrival, Christopher Columbus) was "obsessed with the idea of a Crusade against Islam" (Hobson, 2004, p. 136). Furthermore, as Plumb (1969) has described, the zeal of these endeavors knew no bounds, it was,

[the] mixture of deeper passions—greed, wolfish, inexorable, insatiable, combined with religious passion, harsh, unassailable, death-dedicated—that drove the Portuguese remorselessly on into the torrid, fever-ridden seas that lapped the coasts of tropical Africa and beyond. The lust for riches and passion for God were never in conflict ... Prince Henry trafficked in slaves and did not despise the wealth that he regarded as God's blessing. As with Prince Henry, so with the rest: the Portuguese pioneers plucked the naked blacks out of their canoes, traded their horses for nubile young women and shipped them back to Lisbon's slave market where they found eager buyers. This combination of greed and godliness has always been regarded as the major driving force not only of the Portuguese, but of the Spanish too. (p. xxii)

Indeed, "the development of slave trade also helped to finance the cost of Portuguese voyages down the West coast of Africa after about 1442" (Boxer, 1969, p. 24).

What is clear is that the Papal Bulls represented clear examples of how the "Christian Powers" viewed indigenous peoples as "the lawful spoil and prey of their civilized conquerors" (Newcomb, 1992, p. 18). In fact, the Christian "Law of Nations" asserted that Christian nations had a divine right to claim absolute title to and ultimate authority over any newly "discovered" non-Christian "pagans" and their lands; indeed, the natives were perceived as "non-human" (Newcomb, 1992, p. 18); if they were not Christians, they did not "exist."

In sum, the Papal Bulls launched the "Age of Discovery" with the "divine mandate to fight Islam, and eventually to fulfill the call for the Second Coming and Last Judgment" (Cliff, 2012, p. 2). Indeed, the venture was the continuation of earlier Crusades, and "the Church's acknowledgment that fighting and killing in the name of God was a worthy enterprise (which) justified the holiness of their endeavor to the crusaders" (Pfeiffer, 2011, p. 1).<sup>4</sup> By the time of Vasco da Gama's second voyage in 1502, however, "there was no distinction between the trading mission and crusade against Islam, and da Gama proceeded with atrocious brutality to secure an exclusive market" for Portugal (Fleming, 2003, p. 305). Further, "To a

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<sup>4</sup> As for the historic Crusades that began in 1096, on the occasion of the 900th anniversary, Christians from around the world undertook a 2,000-mile "Reconciliation Walk," from Cologne, Germany, to Jerusalem, "apologizing to Muslims and Jews for the atrocities committed against their forebears," for having "committed the equivalent of modern-day ethnic cleansing," seeking "to build bridges of understanding and to reverse a legacy of animosity among three of the world's most prominent religions" (Wright, 1996, p. 90).

devout and patriotic Iberian, the fight against Islam was a stern imperative. Islam was the enemy and had to be fought everywhere. Much of the Portuguese action in Asia will remain inexplicable unless this fact is constantly born in mind” (Panikkar, 1959, p. 24). More importantly, “It is essential not to confuse the cause with the result. The end result was colonization and a commercial revolution; the motivating cause was the pursuit of holy war against the Muslims....” (Hamdani, 1994, p. 277). And, in the process, massive brutalities were inflicted on the natives—all in the name of the Church.

### **Da Gama’s Sacred Exploits**

As to our main focus, the following pages will document some of da Gama’s “sacred” exploits. As the Papal Bulls ordained, da Gama

always tried to convert the natives to Christianity. He brought monks along with him in his journeys to preach. He would be very cruel to Muslims who didn’t listen and would often use torture. One of the accompanying soldier-diarists notes the torturing of “Moors, by dropping boiling oil upon their skin,” and “the torture had an additional anguish for Gama’s Muslim victims: he used boiling pork oil.” (Hall, 1998, p. 166)

Another scholar notes, “what is known of him, however, indicates a violent and bitter hatred of Muslims” (Pearson, 1987, p. 13; also see Polk, 2018, p. 542). An Indian scholar recounts, “da Gama would take captives, chop off their limbs and string them in pieces on the masts of his ships to intimidate others” (Alvares, 1997, p. 2; also see Cliff, 2012, p. 327). The dehumanizing notion that their enemies were somehow not real people was too deeply ingrained to be shaken.

Commenting on these encounters, a French-Indian historian insists that “Vasco da Gama indulged in some of the most heinous crimes; he needs to be tried for crimes against humanity” and since he “was acting under the orders and blessings of the Portuguese royalty and the Church, they should be held accountable for these crimes and for colonialism” (More, 2013 p. 1). Some strident voices have surfaced even in Portugal, where “a ‘Black book’ on Portuguese expansion has appeared, alleging that the Portuguese expansion is no different from Nazi Germany’s genocide of Jews and Gypsies” (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 367).

### **The Journey: Destination India**

Vasco da Gama and his fleet sailed from Lisbon on 8 July 1497. To assist the voyage, vital “reconnaissance” information on the ports of east Africa and Indian coasts was obtained. In 1487, one Pedro da Covilha, disguised as an Arabic-speaking Muslim merchant and familiar with Muslim rituals and customs, undertook an overland “espionage/scouting” journey to India (Cliff, 2012, pp. 128-142; also see Winsler, 2012). During 1489-90, Covilha had visited the ports of Malindi, Kilwa, and Safala, gathered vital information and delivered his scouting

report back to Lisbon. That knowledge was available to da Gama, along with latest maps and navigational instruments.

Out of sight of land for 13 weeks and having traveled over 4,500 miles, on November 7th they landed at St. Helena Bay, 125 miles northwest of the Cape of Good Hope. On November 27th, they rounded the Cape of Good Hope and landed at Mossel Bay, where they traded trinkets with local people in exchange for an ox for food. Sailing in unknown waters, on Christmas day 1497, they proceeded northward along the east coast of what is now South Africa and called the country "Natal." By January 11, 1498, they were exploring the mouth of Copper River, named after the copper ornaments worn by the local population. When da Gama tried to establish trade links with the ruling Sultan, his products were rejected as unworthy (Winsler, 2012, p. 3). Moving northeast against a strong south-westerly current, the fleet travelled 1,700 miles up the coast until, on March 2, 1498, it sailed into the port of Mozambique. Misled by scouting reports, the visitors thought they were among Christians, the land of spices and Christian kingdom of Preston John. And da Gama and his men "wept at the thought of riches within their grasp. The European conquest of Indian Ocean was about to begin" (Hall, 1998, p. 161-162). Wrote the chronicler, Alvero Velho, "We shouted with joy" (Hall, 1998, p. 162). Their joy was short-lived, however.

Mozambique was one of a chain of Muslim city-states, often with mixed religious affiliations, along the east African coast. Fearing hostility from the local population, da Gama impersonated as a "Muslim from Morocco" gained audience with the Sultan of Mozambique, whom he saw as magnificently dressed, decorated with gold and emeralds. Da Gama found that the Sultan customarily received gifts of gold from visiting merchants. However, da Gama hardly had anything suitable to offer. The Portuguese had totally underestimated the quality of goods being traded in this part of the world--cotton, ivory, gold, and pearls. Sheppard (2006) wrote, "With their glass beads and tin bells, the Portuguese could afford to buy only fruits, vegetables, and pigeons to eat. This fresh food cured the scurvy, but the Portuguese mistakenly credited the 'very good air' of Mozambique for their recovery from the disease" (p. 4).

Soon the local populace began to see through the subterfuge. When politely asked of his copy of the Qur'an, da Gama responded he left the holy-book in his homeland (Hall, 1998, p. 162). After several other deceptions, the Sultan concluded the newcomers were not really Muslims, but "a gang of Christian pirates" (Hall, 1998, p. 162; see Sheppard, 2006, p. 4). The locals brawled with Portuguese seamen, and the Sultan ordered da Gama to leave the port. Da Gama vengefully inflicted death and destruction by firing several cannonballs into the town, and then departed north toward Mombasa (modern Kenya).

Around Mombasa, the expedition resorted to piracy, looting Arab merchant ships. Unlike da Gama's ships, the Arab vessels in the Indian Ocean usually were not armed and the explorers "were delighted to discover that they could easily intimidate and rob any ship they could outrun" (Sheppard, 2006, p. 4). Here, too, they had assumed they were among Christians and they did not disguise themselves but later discovered they were among Muslims (Subrahanyam, 1997, p. 117).

Da Gama hoped to enter into a lucrative trade agreement with the Sultan of Mombasa, but here, too, he was unwelcome. Again, after inflicting violence on the natives, the fleet departed further north toward the port of Malindi another Muslim principality with indigenous character. In Malindi, da Gama observed some ships with strange-looking, long-haired men, whom he assumed to be Indian Christians. He showed them a figure of Virgin Mary, and courteously, they bowed. Confidently, he pronounced he had found Indian Christians, disciples of Prester John. In reality, they were Hindus (Sheppard, 2006, p. 4). Since “Europe’s with-us-or-against-us world picture allowed for two religions: Christians they had to be” (Cliff, 2012, p. 236). The Portuguese “were convinced they were in the land of some sort of deviant Christians, anything that was not explicitly Islamic appeared, residually, to be Christian” (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 133).

As to the economic motives, da Gama took advantage of conflicts between Mombasa and Malindi, and he found the Sultan of Malindi, more conciliatory; besides, the Sultan was aware of the havoc caused by the visitors at previous stopovers. Da Gama managed to sign a trade agreement with the Sultan. Further, ignorant of the monsoon patterns of the Indian Ocean and deterred by mighty waves, da Gama found himself stranded in Malindi (present day Kenya) unable to cross the Arabian Sea. Fortunately, the Sultan was persuaded to provide da Gama with the services of a knowledgeable Muslim pilot-navigator, Ahmed Ibn Majid.<sup>5</sup> Harnessing the seasonal monsoon winds, the seafaring expertise of Arabian sailors had long-established extensive patterns of migration, trade, and social relationships between India, the Arabian Peninsula, and East Africa. It was the knowledge and guidance of this pilot that enabled da Gama’s success in his ultimate goal—sailing across the Indian Ocean and reaching the Malabar Coast of India. King Manuel’s instructions also required construction of coastal watchtowers, with a cross on top, throughout the journey. In Malindi, there is one, known as the “Pillar of Vasco da Gama.”

### **Mission Accomplished: Arrival in India**

On May 20, 1498, the fleet reached the mighty port of Calicut, an international emporium bursting with oriental riches, the hub of the busiest trade network in the world, sprawled in front of the sailors’ eyes. Small native boats came out to welcome and to offer the Portuguese transportation to shore, but Vasco da Gama did not trust the native boatmen. India’s Malabar Coast was at the center of the spice trade; it was the main outlet for Kerala’s large pepper crop and the place where ships from the Indonesian Spice Islands came to trade cloves with Arab merchants from the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. Da Gama’s entourage included monks, priests, interpreters, and convicted criminals with sins forgiven and promise of heaven. Vasco da Gama ordered one of the convicts, a Jewish convert, João Nunez, to make

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<sup>5</sup> Whether Ibn Majid was the navigator who guided da Gama is disputed by some, who argue that it was a Gujrati Muslim at Malindi who assisted da Gama (Hobson, 2004, p. 143).

the first trip to shore (really the *first* Portuguese to reach India, not da Gama). When his local hosts asked the reason for his visit, Nunez answered, "We have come in search of Christians and spices" (Cliff, 2012, p. 4). The reference was to the lost Christians from the ancient past whom the Portuguese hoped to find and build an alliance against Muslims.

This was the beginning of disharmony in "a polyethnic world, in which trade depended on social and cultural interaction, long-range migration, and a measure of mutual accommodation among Islam, Hinduism, local Christians and Jews: it was richer, more deeply layered and complex than the Portuguese could initially grasp" (Crowley, 2015, p. 52). The Muslim community "lived in harmony with their high-caste Hindu overlords to the mutual benefit of both religious groups" (Crowley, 2015, p. 61). The state of Kerala included several religions and was known as a tolerant and "peaceful community, subjects of the Zamorin of Calicut and other Kerala kings, until the arrival of Vasco da Gama and the Portuguese, followed by other Europeans" (More, 2013, p. 3).<sup>6</sup>

The next day "a turning point in the history of Indian Ocean is crystallized. Patterns of life and commerce which had held good for centuries were about to be shattered" (Hall, 1998, p. 173). The emissary had an audience with the Zamorin, who welcomed him and invited da Gama to visit and discuss trade possibilities. Though a bit unsure, Vasco da Gama decided to risk going ashore with 13 men. He was greeted by an honor guard of 200 Indians holding muskets and unsheathed swords. They lifted him onto a palanquin and set off, with trumpets playing and muskets firing into the air, on a tour of the city. The Portuguese were impressed by this extravagant welcome (Sheppard, 2006, p. 5; also Cliff, 2012, pp. 222-223).

At this point, there occur several incidents of cultural confusion. The procession stopped at a Hindu temple, which hardly looked like a church. However, da Gama assumed this to be the local version of a Christian Cathedral. Inside the temple was an idol which the Indians mentioned as Mata Mari, the name of a Hindu goddess. Da Gama heard it as "Maria, Maria," and assumed it was the statue of the Virgin Mary; and he bowed and prayed. Another was identified as that of Hindu god, Krishna; da Gama thought it was the local version of "Christ" and again performed the rituals. Painted on the temple walls were many images of Hindu gods and goddesses, which da Gama assumed to be saints of local "deviant" Christianity. Da Gama saw a wall painting of a dove and thought it was the Holy Ghost (Cliff, 2012, p. 204). Since they knew of only two religions, Christianity and Islam, the Portuguese thought the Hindus around them were really Christians, the disciples of the legendary Apostle Thomas or Christian subjects of the mythical King Prester John, and the odd statues and paintings merely represented a corrupted form of Christianity.

The welcoming group arranged a meeting between Vasco da Gama and the Zamorin which initially went well. Vasco da Gama presented himself as the

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<sup>6</sup> Following convention, this paper refers to the Hindu Ruler of Calicut as "Zamorin." More properly, however, he was called "Samundri Raja," meaning "Lord of the Sea" (Crowley, 2016, p. 2). In Hindu/Urdu languages, the word "samundar" means "the sea;" and "Samundri" means "belonging to the sea." "Raja" means "Lord."

Portuguese ambassador and described the great power and wealth of King Manuel I of Portugal. The Zamorin expressed his regard for the king and offered to exchange ambassadors. Sensing some cordiality, da Gama pressed his position and “demanded nothing less than the complete banishment of every Musalman in Calicut” (Jayne, 1910, p. 65). Da Gama insisted, “it will be better for you to have truck with so mighty a king (as the King of Portugal) than with the dogs of Mecca” (Disney, 1995, p. 22). However, there was a long-standing compact of religious accommodation between the Hindu ruler and Muslim population where the Zamorin King had reputedly stated: “You do not eat the ox; I do not eat the pig; we will reciprocally respect the taboo” (Crowley, 2016, p. 2). Da Gama’s ultimatum was rejected, however.

The atmosphere became less friendly the next day, when Vasco da Gama laid out some presents. Zamorin's courtiers laughed at the gifts. In fact, the potentates of the East were at that time far wealthier than the Western kings, and the Zamorin naturally had looked for the standard tribute of gold, as was customary. India’s economy was about 30% of the global economy at the time. And upon return, da Gama informed King Manuel of India’s “large cities, large buildings and rivers, and great and prosperous populations. He talked admiringly of spices and jewels, precious stones and ‘mines of gold’” (Tharoor, 2017, p. 219). The Zamorin ruler was unimpressed by the goods da Gama brought and, suspicious of the motives, he refused a trading pact with him.

Unable to arrange another meeting with the Zamorin, soon after, Vasco da Gama burst into the throne room unannounced and demanded that he be allowed to unload his goods and engage in trade. The Zamorin agreed to their storage in a warehouse. However, the Portuguese merchandise did not sell well, and the local merchants convinced the Zamorin that he stood to gain nothing by concluding a commercial agreement with the visitors.

During his three-month stay in Calicut, da Gama failed to buy more than a few handfuls of spices. Relations between him and the Zamorin became increasingly strained. Further, Zamorin's men arrested some Portuguese for failure to pay the customary harbor tolls. In retaliation, da Gama took some Hindus hostage. After winning the release of his men, Vasco da Gama abandoned his attempts to trade and set sail for Portugal. While he contained his wrath at this time, he was determined to seek revenge later.

The homeward journey was quite arduous. The pilot who guided the voyage to Calicut could not be found. The 2,300-mile journey back to Malindi took 93 days, compared to 23 days to reach India (Crowley, 2015, p. 78). Da Gama's crew suffered from scurvy and 30 men died. Only the kindness of the Sultan of Malindi saved the rest of the crew, with his gifts of fresh food. Of the 170 Portuguese who had set sail for India in 1497, only 54 were still alive when Vasco da Gama's two surviving ships returned to Lisbon on September 18, 1499 (Winsler, 2012, p. 4; also Sheppard, 2006, p. 6). Although the expedition had been a financial disaster, bringing home only tiny quantities of spices, King Manuel of Portugal was delighted by Vasco da Gama's claim that he had made contact with the “the Christians of India.” The king built a new cathedral as a thanksgiving for Vasco da

Gama's success, and struck new coins commemorating the voyage. King Manuel was very pleased. What had been done once could be done again, the King thought.

### **Interlude: Cabral's Expedition, 1500**

Soon after, early in 1500, Manuel dispatched another expedition, led by Pedro Alvares Cabral, in order to secure the sea route to India and "to deliver a stark Crusading message to the Muslims and pagans of the Indian Ocean: convert, or die" (Cliff, 2012, p. 282). As his fleet traveled southward, however, Cabral sailed so far west of the African coast that he accidentally crossed the Atlantic and discovered Brazil--and claimed the new land for Portugal. Once he resumed his route, the fleet reached Calicut in less than six months. This time the Portuguese were better prepared and brought lavish goods with which to tempt the Hindu ruler Zamorin into a trade agreement. Suspicious as he was from previous encounters with da Gama, he also saw it as an attempt to disrupt the harmonious coexistence between Hindus and Muslims.<sup>7</sup> The Muslim merchants were outraged at yet another attempt to steal their trade; there was no trade agreement. Cabral was driven out of the city, and during the clashes, several of his men were killed.

In retaliation, as his fleet was departing from Calicut, Cabral seized a dozen Muslim cargo vessels and "killed, drowned, and imprisoned hundreds of men. He carted off their cargoes of spices along with three elephants, which were slaughtered and salted for food, and he burnt the vessels" (Cliff, 2012, p. 286). At night, the Portuguese boats "lined up in front of the city, and at day break they opened fire. Cannonballs plowed into the crowds on the seafont and tore through houses and temples, killing hundreds more" (Cliff, 2012, p. 286). Cabral then moved on to Cochin, where he found another Hindu raja, who had conflicts with Calicut's Zamorin ruler. Exploiting this discord, Cabral found him more cooperative. Here, he was able to establish the first Portuguese trading post in India. He returned home on June 23, 1501, with his ships loaded with enough spices sufficient to disrupt the spice trade held by Arab and Venetian merchants.

### **Da Gama's Second Voyage, 1502**

Buoyed by the general success of Cabral's journey, King Manuel now planned for an even more successful campaign, equipped with an overwhelming display of force and commanded by his valiant knight, Vasco da Gama. On February 15, 1502, Vasco da Gama's launched his second journey to India. Exploration accomplished earlier, this was a voyage of conquest, backed by a bristling armada. Da Gama immediately launched a campaign of terror and pillage against Muslim shipping.

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<sup>7</sup> Harmonious interreligious environment is further corroborated by observations, such as "Islam had been spread, not at the point of a sword, but by missionaries and merchants from the deck of a dhow" (Crowley, 2015, p. 52); and "Islam came to Kerala ... through traders, travelers and missionaries, who brought its message of equality and brotherhood to coastal people. The new faith was peacefully embraced and encouraged" (Tharoor, 2017, p. 115).

The task now was to consolidate Portuguese dominance of the route to India. After plundering raids on ports along the east African coast, da Gama established several trading posts. The well-armed armada was indisposed to take no for an answer. Noted Cliff (2012), "Gama was under orders to take proud Kilwa down a peg" and he was keen to avenge the killing of Cabral's men in Calicut in 1501--and for Kilwa Sultan's "misbehavior" with da Gama in 1497 and with Cabral in 1500 (p. 303). As Nigel Cliff (2012) has emphasized, earlier, "Gama was a pathfinder; now he was a Crusader, and had designs far darker than simple extortion" (p. 309).

Upon reaching Kilwa, messages were sent to the Sultan to submit to the terms demanded by da Gama. According to the chronicler, Gaspar Correa, "the admiral harrangued the hapless ruler." He said, "I command and that if I choose, in one single hour your city would be reduced to embers, and if I chose to kill your people, they would all be burned in the fire." And, he "would fetch him by the ears and drag him to the beach .... and show him throughout India, so that all might see what would be gained by not choosing to be the captive of the king of Portugal" (Crowley, 2015, p.103).

The Sultan, aware of Portuguese violence elsewhere and weakened due to conflicts with other chieftains in his federation, was cautious. The Portuguese, aware of these local conflicts through their previous visits and scouting reports, exploited these divisions by supporting both groups, and offered the Sultan protection against his adversaries. The Sultan capitulated and surrendered. He "himself came to meet da Gama in his boat. He was told in no uncertain terms that the Portuguese wanted not only gold by way of trade, but a tribute of ten pearls a year for the Queen and 1,500 misqals of gold (yearly) and the ruler of Kilwa was henceforth obliged to fly a (Portuguese) flag as a sign of subordination" (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 202). And he wanted all but Portuguese ships to carry trade to the coastal towns, effectively putting many Kilwa merchants out of business.

Once the negotiations were completed, da Gama issued a hand-written proclamation, dated July 20, 1502, about the new vassal status of Kilwa and its ruler. Da Gama boasted that he was "determined to destroy him" if he would not submit, and further, that "he 'treated him much more discourteously than he had behaved with me,' taking an evident pleasure in his humiliation" (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 203).

Kilwa's conquest accomplished, "on July 27, Gama sailed on toward Malindi, where he was received warmly, if nervously, by his old friend the sultan" (Crowley, 2015, p. 103). After coasting along southern Arabia, then da Gama reached Goa (later, the focus of Portuguese power in India), before proceeding to Cannanore, a port in southwestern India. Near to the Malabar Coast, he found several Muslim vessels which were plundered and targeted by da Gama's cannons. And, "there was also the matter of revenge for the massacre at Calicut, and many were doubtless interested in the chance for personal plunder" (Crowley, 2015, p. 105).

### **Massacre of Pilgrims: The *Meri* ship**

On September 29, 1502, da Gama got his chance. A large dhow (an Arab lateen-rigged boat with a long overhang) was sighted coming from the north. It was a ship loaded with pilgrims returning from Mecca. And he engaged in one of the most gruesome massacres of his voyages. This was the most heinous destruction of the Muslim pilgrimage ship, *Meri*.

Da Gama captured the unarmed passenger ship, carrying Muslim families, returning to Calicut from Mecca. Among the approximately 700 pilgrims (men, women, and children) were some of the influential Muslims from Calicut. Aware of sea piracy not as unusual, the *Meri* surrendered without a fight. Initially, the pilgrims took the capture lightly but as things deteriorated, they offered considerable money and merchandise to da Gama; they even offered to arrange friendship and trade links with the Zamorin. However, da Gama demanded all wealth in the ship, or else, he threatened, everyone, with hands and feet bound, would be flung overboard. The chronicler, Thome' Lopez, noted that "the wealth on board would have sufficed to ransom every Christian slave in the kingdom of Fez (Morocco), and even then to have a handsome balance" (Jayne, 1910, p. 65). However, da Gama was determined.

Even from a distance, da Gama "could see the women pleading for their lives, holding out jewelry and precious objects, begging the admiral for mercy. Some took their children and held them out and asked for pity" (Crowley, 2015, p. 106). To intimidate the rest, he had one of the passengers thrown into the sea; and pilgrims immediately delivered everything they had. Aside from plunder, this piracy also was driven by the missionary zeal--to kill the 'infidels.' And, "the holy duty of the armada's Franciscan fathers received its due: Twenty children were spared to be turned into Christians" (Hall, 1998, p. 197).

Then followed the massacre. With all pilgrims aboard, da Gama ordered the ship set on fire. No pilgrim escaped, and he remained callous to the wailing women, holding their babies in their arms, imploring for mercy. Instead, he would watch the inferno through a spy-hole on his ship, as though relishing the scene. As the flames would diminish, he would come back to finish the job. The inferno lasted for four days, till all pilgrims perished. Clearly, "the dehumanizing notion that their enemies in faith were somehow not real people was too deeply ingrained to be shaken" (Cliff, 2012, p. 313). Writing in 1910, K. G. Jayne asserted, "there can be little doubt that the burning of the *Meri* and similar achievements were regarded in Europe as laudable manifestations of religious zeal," and if challenged, da Gama "would assuredly have answered 'that he was only doing his duty as a Christian in exterminating the vile brood of Muhammad; that his acts of piracy and pillage were authorized by letters of marque from God'" (p. 66).

The *Meri* tragedy is "often cited as a particularly conspicuous act of early Portuguese violence in Asia, and has troubled both contemporary and modern-day commentators" (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 208).

## **Brutal Encore at Calicut**

Next, da Gama moved on to the port of Calicut—his second visit and prepared for more revenge. He began with capturing 30 fishermen, dismembered them and

let their bodies float in with the tide for their families to find. Then, he found 20 trading ships in the harbor; he plundered them all and took the crews as prisoners. He ordered his men to parade the prisoners, and ordered them to “cut off the hands, ears and noses of some eight hundred ‘Moorish’ seamen” (Wolpert, 1989, p. 136; also see Jayne, 1910, p. 65).

Soon, King Zamorin sent a Brahmin emissary to protest and negotiate peace. However, da Gama demanded “nothing less than the banishment of every Musalman in Calicut,” and “to emphasize the mandate, he seized and hanged a number of helpless traders and fishermen, whose vessels were in the harbor” (Jayne, 1910, p. 65). Further, he insisted, that “as a precondition of peace,” not only “all the Moors of Mecca” must be expelled, but, further, in future “no Mecca ships should stop or trade in its ports” (Disney, 1995, pp. 21-22).

The 15th century Portuguese historian corroborates the event, “More than eight hundred Muslims, Correa declares, were so murdered; more were strung by their feet and were used by the Portuguese for target practice” (Cliff, 2012, p. 494). Gaspar Correa is further quoted as to what Vasco da Gama did next; thus,

“When all the Indians had been executed... he ordered them to strike upon their teeth with staves, and they knocked them down their throats; and they were put on board, heaped on top of each other, mixed up with the blood which streamed from them; and he ordered mats and dry leaves to be spread over them and sails to be set for the shore and the vessel set on fire ....and the small vessel with the friar (Brahmin), with all the hands and ears, was also sent ashore, without being fired” (Hall, 1998, p.198).

And to further demonstrate his barbarity, da Gama attached dog ears to replace the Brahmin’s own, and he was asked to carry a message to the Zamorin. Hall (1998) continues,

A message from da Gama was sent to the Zamorin. Written on a palm leaf, it told him he could make curry with the human pieces in the boat. And the atrocities committed by Vasco da Gama and his men live in infamy. The story is one of brutality, betrayal and colonial ambition. (p. 198; also see Cliff, 2012, p. 495)

Still, however, “not satisfied with this, da Gama bombarded Calicut from the sea for three consecutive days and razed it to the ground, killing several hundred people. All these crimes have been recorded by Portuguese chroniclers” (More, 2013, p. 6). Da Gama was furious to take revenge and determined to let the Zamorin know the consequences of his earlier belligerence.

Once invaders were in the city and under control, another incident of visitors’ barbaric greed happened, as recorded by a chronicler, Jean Mocquet. The Portuguese entered a temple to steal gold statues and they found several women engaged in dancing rituals as part of the Hindu worship. Wrote Cliff (2012), “They snatched jewelry from women's ears, [and] hacked their fingers to get the rings” (p.

312). After stealing the statues, they set fire to the temple and all the women were burned to death.

### **Aggressive “Christianization”**

The Portuguese often claim, quite erroneously, that their arrival in the East stopped all of India from succumbing to Islam; Islam was already present in India since the Mughul Sultanate in Delhi. However, they had certainly overcome the Muslims of the Malabar Coast. And, according to Papal Bulls, the messianic mission called for “universalizing” Christianity and conversion of all “Saracens (Muslims) and other pagans.” Given “the intense certainty and exclusiveness of its religious convictions .... the lust for souls was as avid as the lust for gold and spices in da Gama: but to kill the unconvertible, to punish the heathen, was always righteous: other races were base, slavery for them just” (Plumb, 1969, p. xxvi).

Thus, the Church expansion in Asia became a part of the colonial enterprise, along with imposition of culture and language of the new rulers. Soon, the Portuguese resorted to a familiar strategy, borrowed from Spain, of forced conversions, and the dark forces of Inquisition arrived to roam the streets of Goa, conquered in 1510 by another Portuguese, Afonso de Albuquerque (1453-1515), the Duke of Goa.<sup>8</sup> Also known as Albuquerque “The Terrible,” his suppression of the natives was just as brutal in his killing: “The bodies of men, women, the pregnant, babes in arms, were thrown to the crocodiles; the destruction was so great that the river was filled with blood and dead men, so that for a week afterwards the tides deposited the corpses on the banks. Evidently the reptiles were unable to cope with the glut” (Crowley, 2015, p. 253). Their aggressive method of proselytization was hardly conducive to winning converts and contrasted with “the basic nature of the Gospel based on compassion, humility and understanding” (David, 1988, p. 2). Indians who “failed to bow down to the new rulers or doff their caps were slashed with swords, cudgeled with bamboo poles, or beaten with long sandbags” (Cliff, 2012, p. 392).

When the Catholic Church deemed the conversion process was rather slow, material incentives were extended and “the colonial government offered rice to poor Hindus and jobs to the higher castes if they submitted to baptism. Many of the ‘Rice Christians’ were dunked under water, took their reward, and carried on with life as normal” (de Souza, 1988, p. 18; also see Cliff, 2012, pp. 398-399). Indeed, “intolerance of things Indian became henceforth the characteristic feature of missionary zeal in India. Any compromise with Hindu life or religion was avoided, e.g., the eating of beef was held to be necessary as it would put the convert altogether out of the pale of Hinduism” (Panikkar, 1959, p. 281).

Under the Portuguese Inquisition in India's Goa region, Hindus, Muslims, and Jews were forced to convert; or else suffer the fate, familiar from Spain: brutal death

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<sup>8</sup> With respect to Spain, recent scholarship disputes the ‘Reconquista’ notion; instead, it was a Crusade, like others. Here too, successive popes “were granting remission of sins, the hallmark of crusading bulls, to those exposing their lives in combat against Islam” (O’Callaghan, 2003, p. xi).

or expulsion.<sup>9</sup> And, “children under the age of 14 were to be forcibly baptized; many were dragged screaming into the churches for the ceremony” (Hall, 1998, p. 158). The Inquisition prosecuted non-converts who broke prohibitions against the observance of Hindu or Muslim religious rites or interfered with Portuguese attempts to convert non-Christians. Aside from being an instrument of social control, it was also a method of confiscating property and enriching the Inquisitors. When the Portuguese arrived, there were 40,000 Jews living peacefully with their Hindu, Muslim, and Christian neighbors. During the next few decades, Portuguese (and Dutch) warships destroyed the Jewish settlements; and now only a few Jews worship in Asia’s oldest synagogue in Kerala (Gier, 2008, p. 1; also see, Cliff, 2012, pp. 158-159).

“Forced baptisms” were viewed by the Portuguese Jesuits as a favor to the natives, for their souls were saved. Thus, as David (1988) has narrated,

A particularly grave abuse was practiced in Goa in the form of “mass baptism” and what went before it. The practice was begun by the Jesuits and was later initiated by the Franciscans also. The Jesuits staged an annual mass baptism on the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, and in order to secure as many neophytes as possible, a few days before the ceremony the Jesuits would go through the streets of the Hindu quarter in pairs, accompanied by their Negro slaves, whom they would urge to seize the Hindus. When the blacks caught up with a fugitive, they would smear his lips with a piece of beef, making him an “untouchable” among his people. Conversion to Christianity was then his only option. (pp. 18-19)

During his earlier visit, da Gama was surprised to find some Christians in India, who claimed to have been converted by Apostle Thomas and their priests were married. During the second trip, the Portuguese had Inquisitors on board who not only ensured their allegiance to the Church (or die), but, also “forced the priests to divorce their wives” (Gier, 2008. p. 1).

Further, an Indian historian, Sita Goel (2010), comments on St. Francis Xavier:

Francis Xavier had come to India with the firm resolve of uprooting paganism from the soil of India and planting Christianity in its place. His saying and doings have been documented in his numerous biographies and cited by every historian of the Portuguese episode in the history of India. St. Francis Xavier, whom the Catholic Church hails as the Patron Saint of the East, participated in this meritorious work, wrote back home: “As soon as I arrived in any heathen village, when all are baptized, I ordered all the

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<sup>9</sup> Concerning the Goa Inquisition, in September 2015, there were protests by Hindu nationalists in New York, when Pope Francis led a Catholic mass at Madison Square. One sign said, “Vatican must apologize for Goa Inquisition and your torture and murder of Hindus.” See [www.justiceforhindus.org/vatican](http://www.justiceforhindus.org/vatican).

temples of their false gods to be destroyed and all the idols to be broken to pieces. I can give you no idea of the joy I feel in seeing this done.” (p. 10; also see Shouri, 1985)

Another historian quotes a Portuguese chronicler, Filippo Sassetti, who lived in India from 1578 to 1588:

The fathers of the Church forbade the Hindus under terrible penalties the use of their own sacred books, and prevented them from the exercise of their religion. They destroyed their temples, and so harassed and interfered with the people that they abandoned the city in large numbers, refusing to remain any longer in a place where they had no liberty, and were liable to imprisonment, torture and death if they worshipped after their own fashion the gods of their fathers. (Sewell, 2012, p. 211)

Therefore, it is no surprise that one chronicler of the era, Gaspar Correa (1495-1563), who lived in India for 50 years, “deplored the Portuguese Government in India,” administered by “murderers who go home without any fear of punishment” (Woolf, 2011, p. 236).

Feared and hated, the carnage da Gama inflicted upon the local people throughout his voyages was inhuman and fully sanctioned by the Portuguese King and blessed by the Church as “God’s work.” Once the Indians had been subdued, he left behind the first European naval force in Asian waters, primarily to “intercept Muhammadan merchantmen and pilgrim transports.... He then headed for home, leaving behind him the trail of blood and ashes” (Jayne, 1910, p. 66). In Lisbon, the more gruesome the violence, the greater the glory; da Gama’s sacred exploits were viewed “not to indict the admiral but to glorify him and his Crusade” (Cliff, 2012, p. 394). Upon return home in September 1503, da Gama rode in triumph through the city. King Manuel extended numerous honors for his achievements, and in 1503, da Gama was appointed Viceroy of India.

## **500th Anniversary Celebration**

As a sequel to the preceding narrative, events relating to Portugal's proposal to celebrate the 500th anniversary (May 20, 1998) of da Gama's arrival in India are worth noting. A 1998 news report, "Explorer or Exploiter," written by Archana Masih (1998), covered the story. The Portuguese government had proposed a year-long celebration, in Portugal, India, and elsewhere. Soon, however, there was an eruption of protests, even riots in India, reminiscent of 1992, the year of 500th anniversary celebration of Columbus Day, when in the United States many challenged the day. While celebrated as a peerless symbol of glory in Portugal, the da Gama story has a notorious content elsewhere. And, 500 years later, the Portuguese were sucked into a whirlpool of controversy.

In India, da Gama’s effigies were burnt, black flags were waved about and politicians protested angrily: "Vasco de Gama is associated with colonialism and repression. The Portuguese came here and established their colony, which lasted for

450 years," Masih quotes a Mumbai MP. Further, "It is shameful to celebrate the arrival of Vasco de Gama who began the most torturous colonial era in the country. His arrival unleashed an era of cruelty and exploitation" (Masih, 1998, p. 1). Others agitated with statements, such as, "we can't forget that Gama came to India with a sword in one hand and the Bible in the other. His main purpose was to colonize and spread Christianity. Britishers were much better than Portuguese, who tried to destroy local religion and culture" (Goa News, 1997, May 29). A Goan politician, asked, "How can I forget that my father was shot dead and my brothers were imprisoned by the Portuguese Police when I was just 9 years old?" (Goa News, 1997, May 29). Others demanded a public apology from Portugal for its past misdeeds. In Calicut, a special committee was formed to formulate a program of year-long demonstrations and marches. In Mozambique, Angola, and elsewhere in Africa, there was universal rejection about "celebrating" a man associated with slave-trade and colonization. Relatedly, there is a recent Indian movie that showcases the cruelty of Vasco da Gama and attempts to read history from the side of the vanquished.<sup>10</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

Deified by some and vilified by others, nevertheless, there is almost universal acknowledgement of Vasco da Gama's expedition as historical in terms of linking the three continents of Europe, Africa, and Asia, as they had never been linked before. While some European writers are inclined to view the colonial expansion as "the inevitable expression of a civilization on the march," others view the experience as "the early European invasion of Asia." The march "challenged the basis of Asian societies; it imposed its will on them and brought about social and political changes in Asia which are of fundamental importance" (Panikkar, 1959, pp. 16-17). For Muslims, the "European age of expansion was an increasingly bitter time. As the nations of the North gained in relative power, they thrust into the South, destroying native states, uprooting societies, suppressing religious orders" (Polk, 2018, p. 60). Da Gama's legacy, thus, despite the distinction of being the first European to reach India by sea, becomes severely tarnished in light of the systematic violence inflicted upon the native peoples throughout the voyages. The Portuguese plunged into the world of the Indian Ocean, and da Gama and his successors "had come to spread the Christian faith. For nearly a century, they traded, pillaged, raped, and killed throughout the Indian Ocean. Such orgies of piracy and plunder served to secure Portugal's direct route to the East" (Polk, 2018, p. 60).

The Age of Discovery enabled vast wealth in resources (natural, human, bullion, and, of course, spices) to fall under Christian control. The world order founded in the wake of this era is often viewed in the Islamic world as an ongoing

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<sup>10</sup> See "Vasco da Gama - Urumi: history from the vanquished eyes;" See <http://www.news18.com/news/india/urumi-history-from-the-vanquisheds-eyes-365070.html>>; and "Vasco da Gama's atrocities now on screen," <<http://www.newindianexpress.com/entertainment/telugu/article304465.ece>.

Western endeavor to impose an alien way of life. While the events discussed here occurred over 500 years ago, recent Islam-West conflicts remind us that the rhetoric of the crusades, holy war, and jihad, with all the intensity those words conjure, is a powerful weapon that is still with us. And the "war on terror" is viewed as a new Crusade by some Muslim 'terrorists,' "an affront to mainstream Islam" (Cliff, 2012, p. 418). Some historians wonder if the age-old conflict has come back to haunt us again. Indeed, whatever other forces are at play, current battles for Middle East oil are reminiscent of the earlier Portuguese expedition for spices.

Presently, many scholars point to a "Clash of Civilizations" where a Christian West is portrayed as the protector and guarantor of human rights and the Islamic East as responsible for fueling terrorism, and the distinction between "state-terrorism" and "liberation-terrorism" are blurry. For others, it is modernity and a godless West that threaten the religious and cultural values of traditional societies. The atrocities laid out in this narrative perpetrated in the name of God with the blessing of the Catholic Church underscore how religion was used to rationalize and defend violence, something that should never be the case. It is most instructive to recall this history in order to underscore that "might" does not make "right." The tragedies of the past should not be forgotten; we should learn from them.

There is another way, however, as history further informs us. The history of peaceful coexistence and cooperation among diverse peoples far outweighs the episodic eruptions of conflict and violence that have plagued humanity. It was the Islamic scientific centers of learning in Baghdad and Cordoba that collected and disseminated much of the knowledge that later enabled Europe's ascendancy. And it was the three Abrahamic monotheistic religious traditions that informed the basis of law for large portions of human civilization. It is to a shared legacy of community building in creative relationship that we should look for exemplars of human civilization and not to the brutalities of lawlessness that occasionally raise their head to take by force what could not be obtained through fair and equitable interactions.

Certainly, if the "age of exploitation" was founded on religious intolerance, then the evolving "age of peaceful coexistence" must be grounded in religious pluralism and freedom. Documents such as the Magna Carta, the Petition of Rights, the Bill of Rights, and other such legal treatises are critical parts of the human heritage and are not the product of one culture, society or civilization (Obama, 2018).<sup>11</sup> Rather, they come from a multicultural, intercultural, and grassroots experience forged in the ashes of oppression and violence to assert the power of freedom and shared responsibility.

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<sup>11</sup> The Charter of Medina, also known as the Constitution of Medina, is another influential early document that emphasized individual rights within a community.

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