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TRAJECTORY OF THE INDIAN OCEAN TRADE FROM 1400 CE TO 1600 CE: A SHIFT FROM PEACEFUL COMMERCE TO NAVAL HEGEMONY

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Abstract
This study examines the trading system and its evolution in the Indian Ocean between 1400 CE and 1600 CE. It discusses the pre-existing maritime order, Chinese maritime expeditions under Zheng He, the rise of regional powers such as Malacca, and the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean. This study throws a light on the aspects that were held before European intervention. The Indian Ocean was a connected and commercially vibrant world, based largely on peaceful trade and multicultural interaction. Chinese participation in this was largely diplomatic, aimed at regional peace rather than colonial conquest. The study further demonstrates how the arrival of the Portuguese fundamentally changed the nature of maritime trade through naval militarization, violence, and monopoly. Drawing on the works of historians such as K.N. Chaudhuri, Richard Hall, Louise Levathes, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Sanjeev Sanyal and Jonathan Gil Harris, the study shows how the Indian Ocean slowly transformed from a decentralised Asian trading network into a site of European imperial competition. The Chinese role was largely diplomatic, motivated by a desire for regional stability rather than colonial expansion. The study argues that the Portuguese arrival also radically transformed the nature of maritime trade through naval militarisation, violence and monopoly. The study, drawing upon the works of historians like K.N. Chaudhuri, Richard Hall,

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Louise Levathes, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Sanjeev Sanyal and Jonathan Gil Harris, points to the gradual transition of the Indian Ocean from a decentralised Asian trading network to a space of European imperial competition.

Keywords

Portuguese, Trade, Naval Militarization, Malacca, Chinese Ships

Introduction

The Indian Ocean was considered a "borderless" and highly connected maritime zone. It was not just a trade route, but a major medium for the interaction of cultures, religions, ideas and people. The Bay of Bengal, Straits of Melaka, Java Sea, and South China Sea formed an interconnected network in which traders and communities from India, China, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia continuously interacted.

Trade was the most important aspect of the Indian Ocean. It was used for the exchange of commodities such as spices, silk, cotton textiles, ceramics, metals, and glassware. This network of East-West links was based in Southeast Asia. International markets developed at ports such as Melaka, Samudra-Pasai, and Java. The Indian Ocean was a highway of cultural exchange. Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic ideas spread far and wide with traders and the diaspora. Merchant communities established temples, mosques, and cultural institutions, from which mixed cosmopolitan societies developed. Therefore, the Indian Ocean was a major source of economic as well as cultural integration.

The Indian Ocean also held political importance. Regional powers and port-polities vied for control of trade routes and strategic ports. The prosperity of ports such as Melaka was directly linked to maritime trade. And the Ming China Zheng He voyages were yet another attempt to preserve the Indian Ocean trade and diplomatic influence.

Scholars such as Goitein (1966), Ahmad (1933), Braudel (1972), Boxer (1969), Khan (1978), Riello (2010), Stargardt (2014), and Haour & Moffett (2023) have highlighted the centrality of Indo-Arab maritime networks and examined the transformative impact of Portuguese intervention on the commercial structure of the Arabian Sea.

By the end of the 15th century, the Arabian Sea was a highly integrated commercial zone dominated by Indian and Arab merchants. A strong maritime trade network had developed between India, the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf, East Africa, and the Mediterranean world. This trade network facilitated the flow of Indian commodities, including spices, textiles, gemstones, and other luxury items, to ports in the Arabian Peninsula, where the goods would then be shipped to Europe for distribution. I.A. Khan states that the Indo-Arabian trade network served as one of the primary foundations for the medieval world economy and was essential in bringing together all three continents of Asia, Africa and Europe.

Before the coming of the Portuguese, places such as Calicut, Hormuz, Aden, and Cambay were the key trading ports. Hormuz was a meeting place for traders, while Calicut is referred to as the important port of the spice trade. Merchants from India were in possession of large ships and knew much about navigational skills and oceanic techniques. It is therefore evident that the Indian Ocean trade was very developed even before any European influence.

With the arrival of Vasco da Gama in India in 1498, a new phase began in the Indian Ocean trade. The main objective of the Portuguese was to break the Indo-Arab commercial network and establish a monopoly on the spice trade. They tried to control the old trade routes by capturing Goa (1510),

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Hormuz and East African ports. As a result, the economic importance of traditional ports like Aden and Calicut began to decline, and a large part of the trade was diverted towards Portuguese-controlled routes.

This study will review how free trade changed the system and led to the creation of a monopoly system. How external powers came to not only make the entire Indian Ocean their home but also tried to force its people into their system. Our main question is how free trade led to the militarization of the system and what transformations occurred in just 200 years, from 1400 CE to 1600 CE. This study aims to review the trade and culture from the 15th century to the 17th century and follows a systematic approach so that the reader gets a clear and concise idea.

Major trade centres before the arrival of portuguese

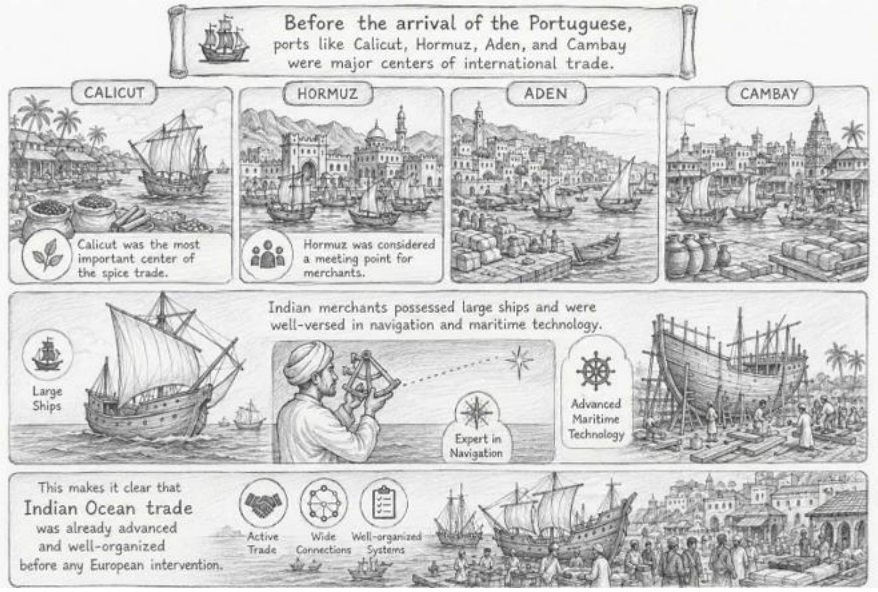


Figure 1

Source: ARABIAN SEA TRADE IN THE 15TH AND 16TH CENTURIES, Khan (1978)

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Major Trade Ports and Their Present-Day Locations

- Calicut (Kozhikode, Kerala) – Spice trade centre.
- Hormuz (Iran) – Persian Gulf gateway.
- Aden (Yemen) – Red Sea entrance port.
- Cambay (Khambhat, Gujarat) – Textile and indigo market.

Literature Review

- **Pre-Existing Maritime Order (15th Century)**

In K.N. Chaudhari's book, Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean (1975), trade was interconnected; Arab, Indian, Southeast Asian, and Chinese traders were heavily active, and the structure of the trade was mainly **'emporia trade'** at that particular period of time. Long-distance trade was well-connected, and merchants were private individuals; there was no role of the state in trade, but the state provided protection for foreign traders. Trade was very important in terms of culture; different civilisations like the Islamic world, Hindu India, Southeast Asia, and China had different cultures, although trade created an interaction among them. Religious ideas, goods, habits, and cultural practices also spread through ports and merchants. The

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exchange of luxury goods and specialized commodities was important during this period. Items such as incense, sandalwood, perfumes, textiles, precious metals, and cowries were widely traded. These commodities held not only economic but also cultural and symbolic importance.

In D.G.E. Hall's book A History of Southeast Asia (1994), Southeast Asia was going through a phase of major transition in the 15th century. According to D.G.E. Hall, maritime trade was the main basis of the region's politics and economy during this period. Different kingdoms and ports were connected by trade routes of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, and hence, the state that controlled trade became powerful.

In Richard Hall's book, Empires of the Monsoon (1996), the Indian Ocean is a highly sophisticated and interconnected maritime world. It was the centre of the trade; during this period, it was mainly controlled by Muslim merchants. Arab, Persian, Gujarati, and Malay traders regularly travelled between the ports of East Africa, Arabia, India, and Southeast Asia. Understanding of the monsoon winds made voyages systematic and seasonal, which made commerce stable. Hall presents India's western coast, especially Calicut, as a major commercial centre. Calicut's ruler encouraged foreign merchants, and the city became a central hub for the spice trade. Arab merchants had a strong presence here, and Indian Ocean commerce operated largely based on peaceful exchange. The maritime order of this time was open and commercially cooperative.

- **Chinese Interfere (Zheng He)**

According to Louise Levathes' book When China Ruled the Seas (1994), D.G.E. Hall's book History of South-East Asia (1994), and Richard Hall's book Empires of the Monsoon (1996), in the 15th century, Chinese interference occurred primarily through the maritime expeditions of the Ming dynasty, particularly during the period of Emperor Yongle. From these books, one can infer that the Chinese intervention in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia was not geared towards military conquest. Instead, they intended to use diplomacy to reinforce their political supremacy and tributary system. During the travels of Zheng He, Chinese fleets landed in ports at Malacca, Ceylon, and the Indian Ocean. The Chinese helped the region of Malacca so that it could be shielded from the threats presented by Siam and Majapahit. Levathes states that the court of Ming offered protection and diplomatic relations to Malacca, and consequently, it became a major port of commerce. It was aimed at maintaining regional stability as well as ensuring safe trade relations. The Chinese intervention in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) was quite military-like. The following books narrate the encounter between Zheng He and the ruler Alakeswara. After this, Chinese forces took military action and captured the ruler and took him to China. Levathes describes this incident as a clear example of Ming power projection. According to the books, another aspect of Chinese interference was diplomacy and tribute relations. Chinese fleets carried gifts, silk, and porcelain, and in return, foreign rulers sent tribute. The Ming rulers aimed to establish their emperor as the centre of the world order. Levathes repeatedly emphasises that the Chinese naval presence established temporary Chinese supremacy in the Indian Ocean trade routes but was not an attempt to create a long-term colonial empire. These voyages were unique in that they were 400 feet long and had the capacity to carry approximately 27,000 sailors at a time. They grew vegetables in galleys, as the voyages involved long journeys.

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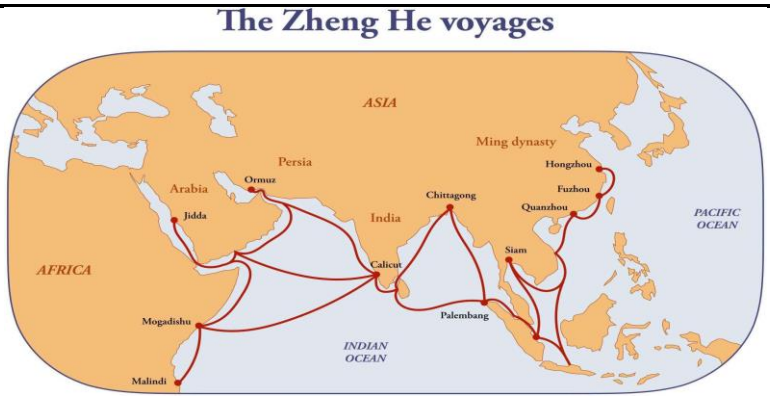


Figure 2

Source: Levathes, L. (1994). *When China ruled the seas: The treasure fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405–1433*. Simon & Schuster.

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- **Rise of Regional Powers**

In Louise Levathes' book When China Ruled the Seas and D.G.E. Hall's book History of Southeast Asia, the old Javanese power was gradually weakening, and new commercial ports were emerging. The most important development of this period was the rise of Malacca. Malacca rapidly became a major trading center due to its geographical position on the maritime route between India and China. Its foundation was laid by Parameswara (founder of the **Malacca Sultanate)** in the early 15th century, and gradually it transformed into an international port, attracting traders from Gujarat, Bengal, Arabia, China, Java, and the Spice Islands. Another important development in this era was the spread of Islam. Hall argues that the spread of Islam was mostly through Muslim traders in the coastal areas. The rulers of Malacca gradually adopted Islam, thereby expanding Muslim trade networks. Conversion was not only a matter of religion but also of trade and diplomacy. With the spread of Islam, Malacca forged closer links with Muslim traders of the Indian Ocean. Trade and political power slowly moved from Java to Malacca. Islam was spreading, and China was engaged in regional politics. The whole stage represents a vigorous mercantile and sea-trading order before the later coming of the Europeans. Malacca developed as a major international port of call for Chinese, Indian, Arab, and Southeast Asian traders. This port became powerful gradually with Chinese backing and its strategic location.

In Sanjay Subrahmanyam's book Across the Green Sea: Histories from the Western Indian Ocean, 1440–1640, the Hindu-Buddhist maritime power of the Majapahit gradually weakened in the 15th century, while Melaka became a major port-polity due to trade, diplomacy and Chinese support. Merchants began to prefer Melaka because it was strongly connected to the Indian Ocean trade networks. The book links Islamization to the rise of Melaka, where merchants and local rulers adopted Islam and gained political and economic legitimacy from the wider Islamic commercial world

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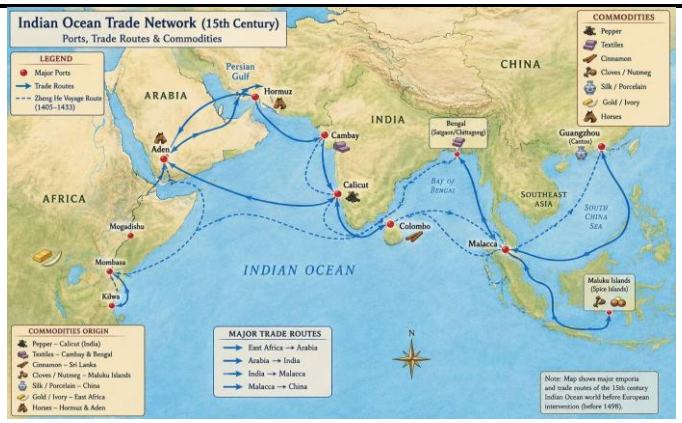


Figure 3

Source: (Haour & Moffett, 2023; Khan, 1978; Riello, 2010; SANJEEV SANYAL, THE OCEAN OF CHURN, n.d.; The Trade Of The Indian Ocean Post 1850s, n.d.; Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean, 1985; Seland, 2013; Stargardt, 2014)

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- **Arrival of the Portuguese**

Sanjeev Sanyal, in his book The Ocean of Churn, argues that the Indian Ocean was an ancient, interconnected system, very globalized even before the Portuguese arrived. Sanyal's focus is on how the Europeans, and especially the Portuguese, entered an already developed maritime world and disrupted it. His narrative is from an Asian perspective on Indian Ocean history. Thus, the Portuguese monopoly and naval warfare are presented as part of a larger transition, in which decentralized Asian trade gradually gave way to European imperial rivalry. Prior to Vasco da Gama's arrival, the Portuguese crown was collecting information about Indian Ocean trade routes, ports, and merchant activities of Muslims via spies, travelers, and intelligence networks.

The Portuguese had realized the huge profitability of spice trading, and were aware that this was controlled by Arabs and the Venetians. Hence, Portugal opted for a military solution in strategic ports and waterways, imposing blockades and attempting to establish a monopoly by weakening their competition. This was a pre-planned scheme, which was based on gathered intelligence about maritime affairs.

Another example of an author that takes a look at the Portuguese from the perspective of cultural contact and conflict is seen in Jonathan Gil Harris's The First Firangis. The concept of "violence" used by Harris is not only restricted to armed violence; fear, threats and coercion are all included. While more practical in nature, it demonstrates how the Portuguese invasion made local societies vulnerable and unstable. The book also touches upon the theme of "Firangi" identity and local reactions.

Richard Hall's Empires of the Monsoon is a history of maritime empires and long-term trade patterns in the Indian Ocean. Hall's account of Portuguese disruption is essentially naval expansion and strategic port control. His writing offers a comparatively wider historical narrative and he depicts the Portuguese as an imperial maritime power that militarized the existing trade system. Violence and monopoly are important, but the focus is on the larger oceanic political struggle.

Empires of the Monsoon, The First Firangis, and The Ocean of Churn all concur that the arrival

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of the Portuguese disrupted the existing maritime system of the Indian Ocean. These authors claim that Portuguese expansion was not a matter of peaceful trade but of violence and military pressure. These books see naval warfare as the primary tool of Portuguese power, in particular through cannon-armed ships and fleets. The three authors also agree on the ultimate goal of the Portuguese, that is, to monopolize the spice trade and maritime commerce. So, they wanted control of sea lanes, ports and merchant ships. All the books depict the Indian Ocean before the Portuguese arrival as a connected, commercially active world with several Asian merchant communities.

According to M. N. Pearson, the Portuguese mainly wanted to convert to Christianity in those regions of South-East Asia where Islam was not yet strongly established, especially Maluku and eastern Indonesia. Christian missionaries lived among local rulers and common people, preaching and spreading Christianity. Portuguese missionaries tried to understand local societies and sometimes also used political alliances and protection. But according to Pearson, Islam had already spread considerably in Southeast Asia through traders and Sufi networks; hence, Portuguese conversions were limited in that particular region.

According to Barreto Xavier, Angela's book Religion and Empire in Portuguese India: Conversion, Resistance, and the Making of Goa, the Portuguese used political power, missionary activities, and social pressure to spread Christianity in Goa. Conversion was not only a religious affair but also an imperial one. While some local communities refuse these conversions, certain elites in Goa, namely the upper caste Hindus and local political intermediaries, embraced Christianity as it enabled them to occupy a position within the Portuguese administrative system, acquire land rights, tax benefits, and upward social mobility. There is no doubt about the fact that empire, religion, and coercion were strongly linked together.

According to K.N. Chaudhari, Portuguese expansion in the Indian Ocean was mainly based on violence, naval warfare and monopoly. According to the study, the Portuguese used armed ships to attack merchant vessels, seize cargo and try to control ports through military pressure. They introduced Mediterranean-style naval warfare, which used cannon-equipped ships, fortresses (fortaleza), factories (feitoria) and the cartaz pass system. The Portuguese wanted to establish political control over “oceanic space”. Their main aim was to create a monopoly over the spice trade and maritime routes, especially to dominate the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade.

In Roger Crowley's book Conquerors: How Portugal Seized the Indian Ocean and forged the First Global War, leaders like Cosco da Gama and Albuquerque disrupted the peaceful trading system of the Indian Ocean through military power. According to the book, the Portuguese's main aim was to establish a monopoly on the spice trade, for which they used forts, blockades, and the cartaz system. Crowley states that the basis of Portuguese success was their naval technology and aggressive warfare strategy.

Methodology

The study is based on qualitative historical analysis, in which maritime trade networks, diplomacy, naval warfare, monopolies, and cultural interactions are interpreted through historical narratives. The purpose of this study is to grasp the change of the Indian Ocean world in the period of 1400 CE to 1600 CE.

This study employs a comparative and thematic methodology. The first part of the study deals with the pre-existing maritime order, then the Chinese intervention under Zheng He, the rise of

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regional powers such as Malacca and Majapahit, and finally the arrival of the Portuguese and naval militarisation. The viewpoints of different authors are looked at for similarities and differences.

This review study is completely based on secondary sources. Historical books and scholarly works are used in this study, which explains the Indian Ocean trade, Chinese maritime expeditions, regional port-polities, and Portuguese expansion. Important sources include books by K. N. Chaudhuri, Richard Hall, Loise Levates, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Sanjeev Sanyal, and Jonathan Gill Harris.

Military Violence Zones of the Portuguese



Figure 4

Source: Crowley, R. (2015). *Conquerors: How Portugal forged the first global empire*

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Table 1: Evolution of the Indian Ocean Trade (1400 CE to 1600 CE)

Period or Event	Dominant Powers	Trade Structure and Strategy	Key Port Cities and Regions	Commodities Traded	Primary Religious/Cultural Influence	Nature of Maritime Interaction	Naval Technology and Infrastructure
Pre-Existing Maritime Order (15th Century / Early 1400s)	Decentralized regional powers; Arab, Indian, Southeast Asian, and Chinese merchants.	Emporia trade; interconnected network of private individuals; no single state dominance; state provided protection for traders.	Calicut (Western India), Melaka, Samudra-Pasai, Java, and Bay of Bengal.	Spices, silk, cotton textiles, ceramics, metals, glassware, incense, sandalwood, perfumes, precious metals, and cowries.	Multicultural interaction; spread of Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu ideas; cosmopolitan societies.	Peaceful commercial exchange; open and commercially cooperative; borderless maritime zone.	Knowledge of monsoon winds for systematic seasonal voyages; merchant vessels with no specific military role mentioned.
Ming Chinese Expeditions (1405-1433)	Ming Dynasty China (Admiral Zheng He).	Tributary system; diplomatic channels to	Malacca (protected by China), Ceylon (Sri	Gifts of silk and porcelain; received tribute in return.	Ming political authority; diplomatic influence.	Primarily diplomatic; temporary supremacy to	Treasure ships 400 feet long; fleets carrying 27,000 sailors;

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		assert political authority and ensure regional stability.	Lanka), and various Indian Ocean ports.			safeguard Chinese interests; occasional direct military intervention.	galleys used to grow vegetables.
Rise of Malacca (15th Century)	Malacca Sultanate (Parameswara); weakening of Majapahit power.	Strategic international port-polity; international port of call for various Asian traders.	Malacca (Straits of Melaka).	Spices and goods from China, India, Arabia, Java, and Spice Islands.	Rapid Islamization; rulers adopted Islam to expand Muslim trade networks and gain legitimacy.	Vigorous mercantile and sea-trading order supported by Chinese diplomacy.	Development of strategic port infrastructure; protected trading center.
Portuguese Arrival and Expansion (1498-1600)	Portuguese Empire; European imperial rivalry.	Cartaz pass system; royal monopoly on spice trade; naval blockades and seizures of cargo.	Goa, Malacca (captured 1511), Maluku, Eastern Indonesia, and Red Sea.	Spice trade (spices) and general maritime commerce.	Spread of Christianity through missionary activity; use of political power for conversion; resistance and adaptation in Goa.	Naval militarization; violence, fear, and coercion; imperial-commercial scheme; aggressive warfare.	Cannon-equipped warships; Mediterranean-style naval warfare; fortresses (fortaleza) and factories (feitoria).

Source: Author's Review

Analysis

Before 1400 CE, the Indian Ocean trade system was largely peaceful and commercially cooperative. Multiple communities controlled trade networks, and no single political power had complete dominance. Knowledge of monsoon winds made trade stable and systematic. Ports such as Calicut and Malacca became international commercial centres where cultural interaction and exchange also took place.

The Chinese intervention brought temporary Chinese dominance in the politics of the Indian Ocean, although the aim of Ming China was not to create an enduring colonial empire. The purpose of the voyages undertaken by Zheng He included diplomacy and tribute. The growth of Malacca in this era illustrates the fact that there was a strong relationship between trade and power in the region. The Islamization process increased trade connections and incorporated Malacca within the Islamic world of commerce.

A significant transformation of Indian Ocean trade occurred with the arrival of the Portuguese around 1498. Prior to this time, Indian Ocean trade was based on the principle of peaceful commercial exchange through trade routes that had been established over many years. As the Portuguese began to exert their influence in the region, the Indian Ocean trading system changed from being based primarily on peaceful commercial exchanges to one that was primarily based on the militarization of the navy and monopolization of trade through the use of cannon-equipped ships, naval blockades and control of strategic ports; thereby disrupting established

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merchant communities and traditional trading patterns.

It was not only an economic change, as the social or political structure also altered dramatically. Portugal's expansion brought the Indian Ocean into an area that was now being contested as an imperialized area, thus using military might to control trade. Hence 1400 through 1600 have been viewed as a significant period of transition, one in which the formerly decentralized form of trading that had taken place amongst the nations in Asia were being replaced by newly emerging forms of imperial competition by European powers.

Strategic Ports of the Indian Ocean Trade System

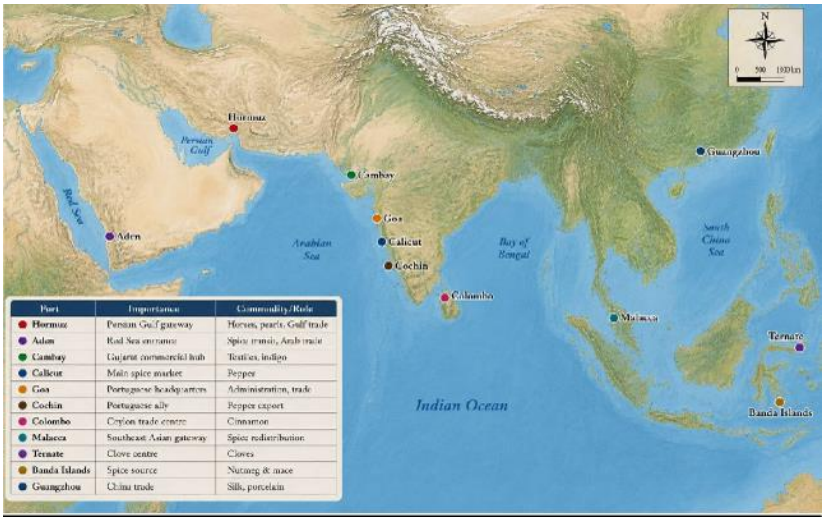


Figure 5

Source: (Haour & Moffett, 2023; Khan, 1978; Riello, 2010; SANJEEV SANYAL, THE OCEAN OF CHURN, n.d.; The Trade Of The Indian Ocean Post 1850s, n.d.; Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean, 1985; Seland, 2013; Stargardt, 2014)

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Table 2: Events and Phases of the Indian Ocean Trade Era

Phase/Era	Time Period	Key Empire or Individual	Geographic Focus	Significant Event or Strategy	Trade Goods or Resources	Outcome or Impact
The Asian Equilibrium	1300s–1430s	Majapahit Empire / Ming Dynasty	Java, Malacca, Indian Ocean	Majapahit and projection of Ming soft power; a system built on tribute and free trade.	Fine porcelain, lacquerware, silk, black pepper, pearls, giraffes.	A delicate system of balanced power and free-trade among Hindu/Buddhist empires and Arab merchants.
The Ming Interventions	1405–1433	Admiral Zheng He	Calicut, Sri Lanka, Malacca, Malindi	Backing local rulers (Melaka, Calicut) to create geopolitical wedges.	Black pepper, pearls, giraffes, porcelain, silk.	Expansion of the Chinese tributary hierarchy and the creation of a permanent wedge against Hindu Java.

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The Fall of the Old Guard	1431–1565	Vijayanagar / Thai / Dai Viet	Angkor, Champa, South India	Sequential collapse due to imperial geopolitics, total warfare, and climatic ruin (droughts/floods).	Agricultural lands, rice-hydraulic networks.	End of 1,500-year-old civilizations; rise of localized coastal resistance.
Breaking the Information Blockade	Late 1400s	Pero da Covilhã and Afonso de Paiva	Ethiopia, Indian Ocean ports	Inland exploration and mapping ports to bypass Arab information monopolies.	Information, maps.	Enabled Europeans to understand Indian Ocean defenses and navigation.
The Portuguese Shock	1498–1515	Vasco da Gama	Calicut, Malindi, Cape of Good Hope	Bypassing blockades with a Malindi pilot; introduction of armed monopolistic violence.	Black pepper, spices.	Trade replaced by terror and direct wealth extraction; start of systemic disruption.
Armed Terror / New World Order	1500–1510	Afonso de Albuquerque / Cabral	Calicut, Diu, Goa	Bombardment of cities, mutilation of sailors, and shattering of Ottoman/Venetian fleets with cannon fire.	Spices, naval dominance.	Establishment of European technological supremacy and capture of strategic hubs like Goa.
The Race for the Spice Islands	1509–1520s	Francisco Serrao /	Malacca, Ternate, Tidore (Spice Islands)	Maritime navigation and military assistance	Cloves (valued at 10,000 times cost).	One ship returns to Spain with cloves; death of Magellan;

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		Ferdinand Magellan		to local Sultans; Westward sailing to Asia.		Portuguese foothold in the Spice source.
Localized Coastal Resistance	Mid-1500s	Rani Abbakka (Chowtha Dynasty)	Ullal, Indian Coast	Guerrilla tactics, light coastal vessels, and fire-arrows to repel Portuguese fleets.	N.A	Decades of resistance; killing of Portuguese generals/admirals while inland empire's fell.

Source: **(SANJEEV SANYAL THE OCEAN OF CHURN, n.d.)**

Discussion

The 15th-century Indian Ocean was, according to many historians, a highly connected and dynamic maritime world. According to K. N. Chaudhuri, the Indian Ocean was a well-integrated commercial system based on monsoon winds, port cities, and merchant networks. He argues that before the arrival of the Portuguese, trade was largely peaceful and conducted through cooperation, as he describes in Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean (1985). Janet Abu-Lughod argued that the Indian Ocean was an important part of a pre-European world system in which Arabs, Indians, Chinese, and Southeast Asians dominated global trade before European hegemony. According to Andre Wink, the Indian Ocean was a major centre of Islamic commercial networks connecting Muslim merchants to East Africa, Arabia, India, and Southeast Asia; this argument is found in his book Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World. Richard Eaton saw the Indian Ocean as a medium for cultural mixing, migration, and Islamization, where religious and cultural exchange was more important than conquest. According to Sanjeev Sanyal's book The Ocean of Churn, between the 14th and 16th centuries, treasure ships, the spice trade, and the race for naval power completely transformed the world's geopolitics. The Indian Ocean was not just a centre of trade, but also became a battlefield for global power struggles. Chapter 8 of this book explains the Indian Ocean's transformation in three phases. The initial phase was characterized by peaceful trading and the use of soft power by Asian nations, such as the Majapahit and Ming dynasties; in the second phase, It was transformed into a domain under the domination of armed force through a monopoly system established by the invading Portuguese; and finally, during the third phase, we see the disintegration of these old empires and the emergence of various individualized resistance movements. Most historians share a consensus that prior to European naval hegemony, the Indian Ocean served as a core of peaceful commerce through interconnected networks within a multiracial society in the 15th century.

Louise Levathes uses a political and diplomatic lens to analyse Zheng He's voyages to understand their significance. She concludes that while they were not aimed at achieving colonization, they were aimed at exerting Ming authority over China and its tributaries. D.G.E. Hall takes a different approach and focuses more on regional politics and trade networks in Southeast Asia in terms of how these networks changed due to the rise of Islam and the conversion of Malacca to Islam.

Sanyal's book, "The Ocean of Churn," makes a comparison between the Ming Chinese fleets and the European explorers in terms of differences. While the former were very large and sophisticated vessels, the latter's objective was more of trade monopoly, military dominance, and wealth creation. Political activities carried out by Ming China are highlighted in this regard.

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The Chinese gained power through the support provided to the rulers of places like Sri Lanka and Malacca. The support provided to Malacca was strategic in nature against the Majapahits.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam connects the transformation of Melaka and Majapahit with the wider Indian Ocean commercial system. He argues that trade, diplomacy, and Islamization made Melaka an important port-polity.

Where the coming of the Portuguese is concerned, both Sanjeev Sanyal, Richard Hall, and Jonathan Gil Harris are of the view that the arrival of Europeans has disturbed the maritime world order. However, each of these three scholars approaches this issue from a unique perspective. Whereas Sanjeev Sanyal deals more with the bigger picture, Richard Hall talks about naval militarization and maritime imperialism, and Jonathan Gil Harris discusses culture clash and coercion.

The book by Sanjeev Sanyal explains about the actions of the Portuguese spies and explorers. Pero da Covilha and Afonso de Paiva gathered information about the Indian Ocean trade route and ports. This information later formed the foundation for the expansion and success of Portuguese empire, as well as Vasco da Gama. The arrival of Vasco da Gama in India is explained. Thanks to the assistance of the pilot from Malindi, he was able to reach Calicut and see the abundant spice trade in the Indian Ocean. The Portuguese realized how much money there was in spices; therefore, Europe became very aggressive in its ambitions. Vasco da Gama and Cabral attacked Calicut, and during the Battle of Diu in 1509, Portuguese cannons defeated Arabs and Ottomans. This battle gave Europeans naval superiority in the Indian Ocean. This helps one understand the struggle for the Spice Islands. The huge financial gain to be derived from spices drove Europeans to venture around the world to explore. Such explorers as Magellan and Francisco Serrao are good examples of Europeans who went round the globe through the spice trade. The book gives details of the Goa Inquisition and the destruction of culture that accompanied it. Temples were torn down, conversion was forced upon people, and ancient scripts were burnt in Goa when the place was under Portuguese control. Garcia da Orta provides an example of what happened during this era. Finally, it talks about the fall of Vijayanagara and Queen Abbakka's fight against the Portuguese.

According to Khan, the Portuguese did not succeed completely in establishing a monopoly. Indo-Arab trade continued in many places through the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, and Arab, Gujarati, and Malabari merchants continued their trading activities despite Portuguese restrictions. Thus, the Arabian Sea trade of the 16th century represents a transition period where there was constant competition and adjustment between old Asian maritime networks and new European commercial interests.

Table 3: From Monsoon Trade to Naval Empire: Historiographical Views on the Indian Ocean

Author or Historian	Source Publication or Book Title	Key Argument or Perspective	Focus Period	Primary Region or Power Discussed	Historical Transformation (Inferred)
K.N. Chaudhuri	Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean (1985)	The Indian Ocean was a well-integrated commercial system based on monsoon winds and merchant networks where trade was peaceful and cooperative before Portuguese arrival.	15th Century (Pre-1498)	Indian Ocean / Merchant Networks	The transition from a decentralized, wind-dependent cooperative network to a disrupted system following European contact.

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Sanjeev Sanyal	The Ocean of Churn	The Indian Ocean shifted from a zone of soft power and peaceful trade (Asian powers) to a battlefield for global power struggles and armed monopoly (Europeans).	14th to 16th centuries	Ming China, Majapahit, Portuguese	The transformation of trade into a militarized tool for direct wealth extraction and geopolitical dominance.
Janet Abu-Lughod	Before European hegemony	The Indian Ocean was a crucial part of a pre-European world system dominated by Arabs, Indians, Chinese, and Southeast Asians before European hegemony.	Pre-16th Century	Arabs, Indians, Chinese, and Southeast Asians	The end of a multi-polar Afro-Asian world system and the beginning of European global dominance.
Richard Hall	Empires of the monsoon	Focuses on the naval militarization and the creation of a maritime empire following the arrival of the Portuguese.	Post-1498	Portuguese Empire	The shift from commercial exchange to the use of naval force as the primary instrument of trade control.
Jonathan Gil Harris	The first firangis	Highlights the cultural encounters, fear, and coercion that characterized the Portuguese entry into the Indian Ocean.	16th Century	Portuguese / Local Populations	The introduction of religious persecution and cultural intolerance into the maritime commercial world.
Andre Wink	Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World	The Indian Ocean served as a major center for Islamic commercial networks connecting various regions from East Africa to Southeast Asia.	15th Century	Muslim merchants / Islamic World	The integration of diverse maritime regions into a cohesive Indo-Islamic commercial sphere.
Richard Eaton	The rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier	The Indian Ocean was primarily a medium for cultural mixing, migration, and Islamization, were cultural exchange outweighed conquest.	1400-1600	Indian Ocean / Migrant Communities	The evolution of the maritime space into a conduit for religious and cultural diffusion rather than just economic activity.
Sanjay Subrahmanyam	Across the green sea	Trade, diplomacy, and Islamization were the driving forces that established Melaka as a critical port-polity within the wider commercial system.	1400-1600	Melaka and Majapahit	The rise of specialized port-polities that acted as hinges between regional power and global trade.
Louise Levathes	When China ruled the seas	Zheng He's strengthened Ming authority and tributary relations through diplomacy rather than colonial conquest.	15th Century	Ming China	The brief establishment of a non-colonial regional supremacy based on tribute and soft power.

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Trade patterns and important commodities in the Indian Ocean between 15th and 17th centuries.

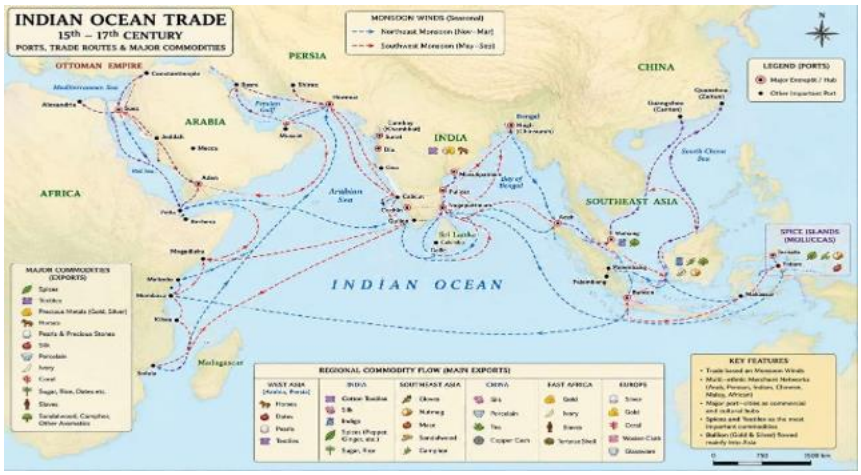


Figure 6

Source: (Haour & Moffett, 2023; Khan, 1978; Riello, 2010; SANJEEV SANYAL, THE OCEAN OF CHURN, n.d.; The Trade Of The Indian Ocean Post 1850s, n.d.; Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean, 1985; Seland, 2013; Stargardt, 2014)

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Conclusion

The Indian Ocean world witnessed major transformations between 1400 CE and 1600 CE. In the early period, maritime trade was peaceful, interconnected, and multicultural, with Arab, Indian, Chinese, and Southeast Asian merchants playing an active role. Chinese voyages influenced regional politics and diplomacy, while ports like Malacca became powerful regional centres through trade and Islamization.

Arrival of the Portuguese had a major impact on the established sea routes. With their navy and monopolies and trade through warships, Europeans tried to gain supremacy at sea. Thus, the Indian Ocean trade changed from being peaceful to becoming competitive and strategically based. In this case, we can conclude that the period discussed marks a transitional era in the history of the Indian Ocean. The main conclusion is that from the 15th to the 17th century, the Indian Ocean turned into a militaristic European colonial world from a peaceful Asian trading world. The existing literature about the evolution of the Indian Ocean pays attention primarily to the successes and conquests of Europeans and especially the Portuguese, but the question of highlighting Asian seafaring powers and resistance movements deserves attention, creating a significant gap in historiography. Seafaring forces such as the treasure fleet of the Ming Dynasty, the Majapahit Empire, the kingdom of Malacca, and the coastal Indian states were seen as background characters; however, in reality, all these entities took an active part in sustaining the balance of power and commerce in the Indian Ocean. At the same time, insufficient literature on resistance movements such as Queen Abbakka, the Kunjali Marakkars, and the Aceh Sultanate exists; historians tend to focus primarily on the successes of the Portuguese, but there is an opportunity for further research on these small forces. The impact of environmental issues is another critical gap, as the 15th century witnessed the weakening of the Asian empires through the changing weather conditions and flooding. However, there has been no scholarly discussion on the linkages between environmental impacts and maritime political developments at that time. Additionally, although there is a tendency to study the comparison between the Ming China

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and Portuguese expansion in terms of military strength, a comparison from a viewpoint of soft power, diplomacy, and ethics is highly required. The issue of cultural colonisation, the Goa Inquisition, and indigenous knowledge destruction has been addressed separately, but the interlinking with economic and naval imperialism is still under-researched. In general, the interdisciplinary approach that gives consideration to the Indian Ocean as a part of the Afro-Asian world system is required.

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