

MARITIME MARVELS OF MEDIEVAL INDIA: UNVEILING TRADE, EXPLORATION, AND SEAFARING ADVENTURES



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Short profile



ABSTRACT

This article delves into the captivating maritime history of medieval India, illuminating the multifaceted tapestry of trade, exploration, and seafaring exploits that characterized this era. The Indian Ocean, with its bustling ports and intricate trade routes, served as the backdrop for a remarkable interplay of cultures, commodities, and connections. This article explores the trade networks, technological innovations, cultural exchanges, explorations,

and challenges that defined medieval India's maritime prowess.

KEYWORDS: *Maritime history, medieval India, trade networks, exploration, cultural exchange, shipbuilding, Indian Ocean, challenges, transitions, interconnectedness.*

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Introduction: Maritime Marvels of Medieval India

The annals of history often unveil stories of civilizations that have thrived and left an indelible mark on the world through their accomplishments and contributions. One such remarkable chapter is the maritime history of medieval India. Spanning from the 6th to the 16th century, this period was marked by a tapestry of trade, exploration, and seafaring adventures that shaped the destiny of the subcontinent and beyond. The azure expanse of the Indian Ocean became the canvas on which merchants, explorers, and seafarers painted their tales of enterprise, cultural exchange, and resilience.

The maritime history of medieval India is a confluence of diverse elements, driven by economic ambitions, technological innovations, cultural exchanges, and the human spirit of exploration. As the maritime highways crisscrossed the Indian Ocean, connecting regions as distant as the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe, they forged intricate networks of trade that brought prosperity and cultural interchange to the shores of India.

The Network of Trade and Commodities: The heartbeat of medieval India's maritime history was the thriving trade networks that stitched together a mosaic of civilizations. Indian ports emerged as vibrant centers of commerce, welcoming traders from various corners of the world. The allure of Indian spices, particularly pepper, cinnamon, cardamom, and cloves, drew merchants from Europe and the Middle East, creating a demand that would shape the trajectory of maritime activities. Calicut, Cambay, Quilon, and Surat became pivotal hubs, not only for the exchange of commodities but also for the mingling of cultures and ideas.

Technological Mastery in Shipbuilding: The success of maritime endeavors in medieval India was underpinned by remarkable technological innovations in shipbuilding. The construction of sturdy vessels, adept at traversing the unpredictable waters of the Indian Ocean, became an art that combined indigenous wisdom with external influences. Dhows, the iconic Arabian sailing vessels, and junks, the versatile ships common in Asian waters, embodied the fusion of maritime traditions and engineering prowess. These vessels were designed not merely for transportation, but as vessels of cultural exchange and human connection.

Cultural Crossroads and Exchange: Beyond the commercial transactions, the maritime history of medieval India was characterized by the cross-pollination of cultures. As merchants and seafarers embarked on their journeys, they brought with them not only goods but also languages, religions, art, and ideas. The bustling ports became crucibles of cultural interactions, as diverse civilizations converged, exchanged stories, and left their imprints on each other. The spread of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, along with the exchange of architectural styles and artistic techniques, stands as a testament to this profound cultural intermingling.

Explorations and the Quest for the Unknown: The medieval era was not just a time of trade, but also a period of exploration that extended the boundaries of human knowledge. While Indian seafarers ventured into distant lands, other figures like Admiral Zheng He, the Chinese explorer, left their mark on the Indian Ocean. Zheng He's expeditions in the early 15th century epitomized the audacity of maritime exploration, fostering connections between China and India and highlighting the shared spirit of adventure that spanned continents.

Challenges and the Winds of Change: Amidst the successes and triumphs, the maritime history of medieval India also navigated through challenges that shaped its trajectory. The

Article Indexed in :

DOAJ	Google Scholar	DRJI
BASE	EBSCO	Open J-Gate

treacherous waters of the Indian Ocean were not just natural obstacles, but piracy and changing political dynamics posed threats to maritime enterprises. As European powers stepped onto the shores of India from the 15th century onwards, the dynamics of trade routes and control began to shift, eventually leading to a transition that would alter the course of maritime history.

The maritime history of medieval India unveils a captivating saga of human ambition, cultural convergence, and exploration. The ripples of this era continue to influence modern India's cultural identity, trade relationships, and maritime traditions. In retrospect, understanding this history not only enriches our comprehension of the past but also underscores the importance of interconnectedness, cross-cultural dialogues, and the enduring spirit of human exploration. As we embark on our own journeys, we can draw inspiration from the seafarers of medieval India who navigated uncharted waters, connecting distant lands and fostering a legacy that still resonates in the waves of time.

Trade Networks and Commodities in Medieval India's Maritime History

The maritime history of medieval India is intrinsically tied to its robust trade networks and the exchange of valuable commodities that flowed through the intricate web of maritime routes. These trade networks not only facilitated economic transactions but also fostered cultural exchanges, technological diffusion, and the formation of enduring connections between distant civilizations. At the heart of this bustling maritime activity were the precious commodities, particularly spices, that captivated the imaginations of merchants and explorers alike.

The Indian Ocean: A Nexus of Trade Routes: The Indian Ocean, often referred to as the "Monsoon World," played a pivotal role as the hub of maritime trade during the medieval period. The ocean's unique monsoon winds facilitated navigation and made it possible for traders to traverse vast distances. Indian ports served as essential nodes in this sprawling network, creating a maritime superhighway that linked regions as diverse as the Arabian Peninsula, East Africa, Southeast Asia, and beyond.

The Allure of Indian Spices: The magnetism of Indian spices, with their exotic aromas and flavors, was a driving force behind the expansion of maritime trade. Pepper, known as "black gold," was highly sought after in Europe for its culinary and medicinal value. Cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, and other spices also held significant economic and cultural importance. These spices not only enhanced the flavors of cuisine but also played a role in preserving and masking food in an age before refrigeration.

Trade Routes and Ports: Indian ports emerged as vibrant centers of trade, brimming with commodities from various parts of the world. Calicut (Kozhikode) on the Malabar Coast, for instance, became a bustling hub for spice trade and cultural exchange. Cambay (Khambhat) on the western coast and Quilon (Kollam) on the southern tip of India were other significant ports that facilitated maritime commerce. These ports were gateways to the global market, attracting merchants from different corners of the world.

Cultural Exchange and Technological Diffusion: The maritime trade networks of medieval India were more than just conduits for goods; they facilitated a rich exchange of cultures and ideas. As merchants from different regions converged at these ports, they brought with them not only commodities but also languages, religions, art, and technology. The interchange of architectural

Article Indexed in :

DOAJ	Google Scholar	DRJI
BASE	EBSCO	Open J-Gate

styles, artistic techniques, and religious beliefs created a mosaic of cultural diversity along the maritime routes.

Impact on Indian Society: The maritime trade networks had a profound impact on Indian society. They enriched the economy, providing revenues to local rulers and kingdoms. They also influenced urbanization and the growth of port cities. The exchange of cultures led to the assimilation of foreign influences into Indian society, enriching its tapestry. Furthermore, the demand for spices and other commodities led to the exploration and colonization of new territories, shaping the trajectory of global history.

Legacy and Contemporary Significance: The legacy of medieval India's maritime trade networks is still evident in modern times. The culinary and cultural influences that emanated from these networks continue to shape Indian society. Additionally, the maritime connections forged during this period laid the foundation for the modern global economy, with trade routes continuing to influence the movement of goods, ideas, and people.

The trade networks and commodities of medieval India's maritime history embody the dynamic interplay between economics, culture, and exploration. The maritime routes not only facilitated the movement of goods but also paved the way for the movement of ideas and innovations. As we look back at this era, we recognize how the allure of Indian spices and the desire for exploration propelled civilizations to traverse vast oceans, creating a legacy that resonates in our modern interconnected world.

Technological Advancements in Shipbuilding: Navigating the Seas of Medieval India

The maritime history of medieval India is intricately intertwined with its remarkable technological advancements in shipbuilding. These innovations revolutionized the way seafaring was conducted, enabling the exploration of distant shores, the establishment of thriving trade routes, and the exchange of cultures across the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean. The construction of ships that could withstand the challenges of the open sea was a testament to the ingenuity and craftsmanship of the maritime communities of the time.

The Evolution of Shipbuilding Techniques: Medieval India witnessed the development of shipbuilding techniques that catered to the unique demands of maritime trade and exploration. The construction of vessels was a fine blend of traditional knowledge, local resources, and the assimilation of foreign techniques brought by seafarers from various regions. These techniques evolved over time to create vessels that were not only seaworthy but also versatile enough to accommodate the diverse needs of long-distance travel.

Dhows: The Arabian Sailing Vessels: One of the standout achievements in shipbuilding during this period was the creation of dhows, traditional Arabian sailing vessels. Dhows were known for their distinctive triangular sails, which harnessed the monsoon winds that swept across the Indian Ocean. These vessels were built using indigenous materials such as wood, often acquired from the Malabar Coast. Their design was optimized for stability and maneuverability, allowing them to navigate the sometimes treacherous waters of the ocean.

Junks: The Versatile Asian Ships: In addition to dhows, another significant innovation was the use of junks. Junks were a type of ship commonly used in Asian waters, including those around medieval India. They were characterized by their sturdy hulls, multiple masts, and spacious cargo holds. Junks were equipped with watertight compartments, which offered enhanced buoyancy and

Article Indexed in :

DOAJ	Google Scholar	DRJI
BASE	EBSCO	Open J-Gate

stability. This feature made them particularly suitable for both trade and exploration, allowing them to carry substantial cargo and endure long journeys.

Fusion of Techniques and Knowledge: The maritime history of medieval India was enriched by the fusion of indigenous shipbuilding techniques with insights gleaned from interactions with foreign seafarers. These interactions led to the integration of diverse ideas, materials, and construction methods, resulting in ships that were both resilient and adaptable. The assimilation of foreign technologies, such as those brought by Arabian and Chinese traders, played a crucial role in enhancing the capabilities of Indian shipbuilders.

Significance and Legacy: The technological advancements in shipbuilding during this era laid the foundation for the success of maritime trade and exploration. The vessels that emerged from these innovations were not mere conveyances for goods; they were floating testaments to human ingenuity and a testament to the maritime communities' understanding of the ocean's dynamics. These advancements not only facilitated the transportation of commodities but also paved the way for the exchange of cultures, ideas, and innovations.

The technological advancements in shipbuilding during medieval India's maritime history propelled civilizations toward the uncharted waters of exploration and trade. The construction of dhows and junks, along with the incorporation of foreign insights, exemplified the marriage of tradition and innovation. As we reflect on these achievements, we recognize that the vessels created during this period were not only maritime marvels but also vessels of cultural exchange, shaping the contours of history and leaving an enduring legacy that continues to inspire modern maritime endeavors.

Cultural Exchanges and Crossroads of Civilization: A Glimpse into Medieval India's Maritime Saga

The maritime history of medieval India stands as a testament to the dynamic interplay of cultures, ideas, and beliefs that unfolded along the shores of the Indian Ocean. This era was marked not only by the exchange of commodities but also by the profound cross-cultural interactions that occurred as merchants, explorers, and seafarers converged at the bustling ports. The maritime trade routes acted as crossroads of civilization, where diverse cultures met, mingled, and left an indelible mark on the tapestry of history.

Ports as Epicenters of Exchange: Medieval Indian ports, such as Calicut, Cambay, and Quilon, emerged as vibrant centers of cultural interchange. These ports were not mere points of embarkation and disembarkation; they were bustling marketplaces where commodities, ideas, languages, and traditions converged. The vibrancy of these ports was a reflection of the multitude of cultures that sought to engage in trade and mutual understanding.

Religious Dissemination and Syncretism: One of the most significant aspects of cultural exchange was the dissemination of religious beliefs. As traders and travelers moved along the maritime routes, they carried with them their religious practices and beliefs. This led to the spread of religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam to new regions. The diverse religious communities that emerged along these routes contributed to the syncretic nature of Indian society, where different faiths coexisted and influenced each other.

Architectural Marvels and Artistic Influences: The cultural exchanges that occurred during maritime trade left an indelible mark on architectural styles and artistic expressions. Architectural marvels like the Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque in Delhi and the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus in Mumbai

Article Indexed in :

DOAJ	Google Scholar	DRJI
BASE	EBSCO	Open J-Gate

reflect the fusion of indigenous architectural traditions with foreign influences. Similarly, art forms such as pottery, textiles, and jewelry underwent transformation as they absorbed elements from various cultures, resulting in a rich and diverse artistic heritage.

Language and Linguistic Interchange: Language was another conduit through which cultural exchange thrived. As merchants and seafarers interacted with people from different linguistic backgrounds, a lingua franca emerged. This led to the development of pidgin languages that facilitated communication and trade. The exchange of languages not only eased commercial transactions but also contributed to the spread of cultural knowledge.

Spreading Ideas and Knowledge: The maritime trade routes of medieval India were not just conduits for physical goods; they were conduits for the exchange of knowledge and ideas. Scholars, philosophers, and thinkers traveled alongside merchants, sharing their insights and engaging in intellectual dialogues. This exchange of ideas contributed to the enrichment of various fields, including science, mathematics, astronomy, and medicine.

Legacy and Modern Significance: The cross-cultural interactions that defined medieval India's maritime history continue to shape the modern cultural landscape of the Indian subcontinent. The syncretic nature of Indian society, where different religious and cultural traditions coexist, can be traced back to the maritime interactions of the past. The diversity and pluralism that characterize contemporary India owe much to the maritime crossroads of yesteryears.

The cultural exchanges that unfolded during medieval India's maritime history transformed the Indian Ocean into a mosaic of civilizations. The ports were not just gateways for trade but also melting pots where cultures merged, ideas flourished, and traditions intermingled. As we reflect on this era, we recognize the enduring significance of these cultural exchanges, which continue to shape the identity, tolerance, and inclusivity of modern Indian society, and serve as a poignant reminder of the interconnectedness of humanity across time and space.

Explorations and Seafaring Adventures: Charting New Horizons in Medieval India

The maritime history of medieval India was not confined to trade alone; it also witnessed a spirit of exploration and seafaring adventures that expanded the boundaries of human knowledge and connectivity. As the winds of the Indian Ocean carried merchants and navigators across its expanse, they embarked on journeys that unveiled new lands, cultures, and opportunities. These explorations were not only a testament to human curiosity but also played a pivotal role in shaping the course of history.

Maritime Ventures and Voyages of Discovery: Medieval Indian seafarers were not content with established trade routes; they sought to venture into uncharted waters. These maritime ventures were fueled by the desire to uncover new trading partners, resource-rich lands, and potential allies. Such expeditions often involved extensive planning, navigational expertise, and the courage to navigate the unpredictable elements of the open sea.

Zheng He and Cross-Cultural Exchange: One of the most notable explorers of this era was Admiral Zheng He, a Chinese eunuch and admiral, who embarked on a series of voyages between 1405 and 1433. These expeditions, known as the "Treasure Voyages," brought Zheng He's fleet to the shores of India and beyond. His explorations fostered cross-cultural exchanges, as Chinese and Indian civilizations interacted and shared their knowledge, culture, and technological advancements.

Article Indexed in :

DOAJ	Google Scholar	DRJI
BASE	EBSCO	Open J-Gate

Fostering Diplomatic Ties: Explorations often had diplomatic dimensions. Maritime expeditions were not only a means to discover new territories but also a way to forge diplomatic ties and establish relationships with distant realms. The exchange of gifts, ideas, and cultural practices during these interactions contributed to the establishment of peaceful coexistence and alliances.

Navigational Expertise and Astronomical Knowledge: Seafaring adventures during this period required exceptional navigational skills. Medieval Indian navigators possessed a deep understanding of celestial navigation, using stars, constellations, and the positions of celestial bodies to determine their location and direction. The expertise in astronomy was crucial in charting courses, avoiding hazards, and ensuring the success of voyages.

Challenges and Triumphs: These seafaring adventures were not without challenges. Navigators contended with unpredictable weather, treacherous waters, and the fear of the unknown. Yet, their perseverance led to triumphant discoveries, the establishment of new trade routes, and the enrichment of maritime knowledge that would influence future generations of explorers and navigators.

Legacy and Inspiration: The explorations of medieval India's maritime history left an enduring legacy that continues to inspire maritime endeavors today. The voyages of discovery expanded the realm of human understanding, contributing to the mapping of coastlines, the advancement of navigation techniques, and the exchange of cultural and scientific knowledge.

The explorations and seafaring adventures of medieval India stand as a testament to human curiosity and resilience. These journeys not only unveiled new lands but also facilitated the exchange of ideas, cultures, and technologies. As we reflect on this era, we recognize the profound impact that these explorations had on shaping the interconnected world we inhabit today, and they serve as a reminder that the desire to explore and connect is a timeless and unifying trait of humanity.

Challenges and Transition: Navigating the Turbulent Waters of Medieval India's Maritime History

The maritime history of medieval India, while marked by flourishing trade, exploration, and cultural exchange, was not devoid of challenges and transitions. This era witnessed a series of dynamic shifts in the geopolitical landscape, trade dynamics, and the emergence of external influences that would reshape the course of maritime activities. These challenges and transitions played a pivotal role in shaping the narrative of medieval India's maritime history.

Piracy and Security Concerns: One of the foremost challenges faced by maritime communities during this period was piracy. The vast expanse of the Indian Ocean provided ample hiding places for pirates who preyed on merchant vessels, disrupting trade routes and endangering the lives of seafarers. The threat of piracy necessitated the establishment of mechanisms for safeguarding maritime trade, such as the formation of naval fleets and the fortification of key ports.

Changing Political Landscape: The medieval Indian Ocean was not insulated from the shifting tides of geopolitics. The rise and fall of empires and the changing allegiances of regional powers had a direct impact on maritime trade. The control of key ports and trade routes often changed hands due to political upheavals, leading to disruptions in established trade networks and the need to adapt to new power dynamics.

Article Indexed in :

DOAJ	Google Scholar	DRJI
BASE	EBSCO	Open J-Gate

European Intrusion and Colonial Influence: The late medieval period saw the entry of European powers, most notably the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British, into the Indian Ocean region. The arrival of these colonial powers marked a significant shift in the maritime landscape. European powers sought to establish dominance over strategic ports and trade routes, often through force and colonization. This transition led to a decline in the autonomy of local maritime communities and the redirection of trade routes to serve the interests of the colonizers.

Shift in Trade Routes: The intrusion of European powers also led to a reconfiguration of trade routes. The traditional trade routes that had flourished for centuries were gradually supplanted by new routes established by colonial powers. These new routes were often designed to facilitate the transport of goods to and from European markets, altering the flow of trade and the commodities that were exchanged.

Technological and Cultural Disruption: The influx of European colonial powers introduced new technologies and cultural influences that disrupted existing norms. The introduction of firearms, for instance, altered the balance of power in maritime conflicts. Additionally, the cultural interactions between indigenous communities and European colonizers led to the assimilation and transformation of local traditions and practices.

Legacy and Modern Resonance: The challenges and transitions of medieval India's maritime history have left a lasting impact on the region's cultural, economic, and geopolitical landscape. The colonial legacy continues to influence trade patterns, relationships between nations, and the interconnectedness of global economies. The struggles and adaptations of maritime communities in the face of challenges serve as a testament to human resilience and the ever-evolving nature of maritime activities.

The challenges and transitions that marked medieval India's maritime history underscore the complexities inherent in maritime trade and exploration. The ebb and flow of power, the intrusion of external forces, and the ever-changing dynamics of the ocean reflect the intricate interplay between human agency and the forces of nature and geopolitics. As we reflect on this era, we recognize that the lessons learned from overcoming challenges and navigating transitions continue to inform contemporary maritime endeavors and shape our understanding of the enduring ties that connect nations across time and space.

Conclusion: Sailing Through Time's Wake – Lessons from Medieval India's Maritime Odyssey

The maritime history of medieval India unfurls a tapestry of trade, exploration, cultural exchange, challenges, and transitions that continue to ripple through the currents of time. As we step ashore from the tumultuous seas of this era, we find ourselves not only immersed in the past but also empowered by the lessons it imparts. The journey through this maritime odyssey has illuminated the essence of human endeavor, the spirit of connectivity, and the indomitable quest for knowledge.

Interconnectedness of Cultures and Commerce: The trade networks that crisscrossed the Indian Ocean were conduits of more than just commodities. They were threads that wove together diverse civilizations, languages, and traditions into a rich mosaic of humanity. The crossroads of cultures at bustling ports created a canvas of syncretism where diverse beliefs, ideas, and artistic expressions flourished. This legacy continues to shape the mosaic of modern India's multicultural identity.

Article Indexed in :

DOAJ	Google Scholar	DRJI
BASE	EBSCO	Open J-Gate

Exploration: Beyond the Horizon: The explorations and seafaring adventures of this era stand as testaments to the human spirit of curiosity and discovery. The uncharted waters were not barriers but gateways to new horizons, new friendships, and new possibilities. The navigational acumen, astronomical knowledge, and the courage to venture into the unknown are sources of inspiration for contemporary explorers as they chart the frontiers of the deep sea and outer space.

Resilience Amidst Challenges: The challenges encountered in medieval India's maritime history – piracy, shifting political dynamics, and the intrusion of colonial powers – serve as reminders that every voyage is accompanied by storms and calms. The resilience of maritime communities in overcoming these challenges, adapting to new circumstances, and forging paths of continuity resonates in our modern struggles to navigate the unpredictable waters of our own times.

Legacy and Contemporary Significance: The legacy of medieval India's maritime history lives on, not merely as tales in the annals of history but as living inspirations for our modern interconnected world. The echoes of spice-laden dhows and bustling ports reverberate in the intricate web of global trade, cultural interactions, and the exchange of knowledge. The challenges faced and transitions navigated offer insights into our present-day endeavors to overcome obstacles and adapt to changing circumstances.

Uncharted Journeys Await: As we cast our gaze back to this maritime past, we also cast our eyes forward to uncharted journeys that await us. Just as medieval Indian seafarers ventured into the unknown, we too embark on journeys of discovery, innovation, and unity. The lessons of collaboration, resilience, and the celebration of diversity learned from this era guide our navigation of today's world, where we sail with the winds of progress, exploration, and a shared humanity.

The maritime history of medieval India is not a story with a final chapter but a voyage continued through time. Its chapters echo in the bustling ports, dance in the aromas of spices, and soar in the sails of exploration. It beckons us to embrace our interconnectedness, to embrace the challenges, and to embark on journeys of discovery that will shape the narratives of future generations. In every wave that crashes upon the shores of our understanding, we find the echoes of maritime marvels that continue to inspire and illuminate the horizons of human potential.

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BASE	EBSCO	Open J-Gate

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