

Immortal sailor: A Life Sketch of Vasco Da Gama

DR. GURURAJ PRABHU K

Vasco Da Gama [1460-1524 AD] was a Portuguese explorer who sailed to India from Europe. Gold, spices, and other riches were valuable in Europe and had to navigate long ways over sea and land to reach them from Asia. Europeans during this time were looking to find a faster way to reach India by sailing around Africa and Da Gama accomplished the task. By doing so, he helped open a major trade route to Asia. Portugal celebrated his success, and his voyage launched a new era of discovery and world trade. He was the first to find an ocean trading route to India and he accomplished what many explorers before him could not do. His discovery of this sea route helped the Portuguese establish a long-lasting colonial empire in Asia and Africa. The new ocean route around Africa allowed Portuguese sailors to avoid the Arab trading hold in the Mediterranean and Middle East. Better access to the Indian spice routes boosted Portugal's economy. His voyage and explorations helped change the world for Europeans.

Vasco Da Gama was born in the town of Sines, one of the few seaports on the Alentejo coast, southwest of Portugal, possibly in a house near the church of Nossa Senhora das Salas. His father, Estêvão da Gama, had served as the household knight of Infante Ferdinand, Duke of Viseu, in the 1460s. He rose to the ranks of the Santiago Military Order. In the 1460s, Estêvão da Gama was appointed as the alcaide-mór (civil governor) of Sines. After 1478, he remained in the region as receiver of taxes and keeper of commendas of the monarchical Order.

Vasco Da Gama was the third son of Estêvão da Gama, a minor provincial nobleman who was commander of the fortress of Sines on the coast of Alentejo province in southwestern Portugal. Little is known of his early life. In 1492 King John II of Portugal sent him to the port of Setúbal, south of Lisbon, and to the Algarve, Portugal's southernmost province, to seize French ships in retaliation for French peacetime depredations against Portuguese shipping—a task that da Gama rapidly and effectively performed. His father's role in the court would have allowed young Vasco to have a good education. But because he lived close to a seaport town, he probably also learned about ships and navigation. Vasco attended school in a larger village about 70 miles from Sines called Évora. Here, he learned advanced mathematics, and studied principles of navigation. By fifteen he became familiar with trading ships that were docked in port. By the age of twenty, he was the captain of a ship. These skills would all make him an acceptable choice to lead an expedition to India.

In 1495 King Manuel ascended to the throne. The balance of power between factions at the Portuguese court shifted in favour of friends and patrons of the da Gama family. Simultaneously, a neglected project was revived: to send a Portuguese fleet to India to open the sea route to Asia and to outflank the Muslims, who had hitherto enjoyed a monopoly of trade with India and other eastern states. For unknown reasons, da Gama, who had little relevant experience, was appointed to lead the expedition. "Poor and small, Portugal was at the edge of late medieval Europe. But its seafarers created the age of 'globalization', which continues to this day." Gama's voyage had finally demolished the ancient authority of Ptolemaic geography, which held the Indian Ocean to be a closed lake. The *Lusiads*, epic poem by Luís de Camões, published in 1572 as *Os Lusíadas*. The work describes the discovery of a sea route to India by Vasco da Gama. The 10 cantos of the poem are in ottava rima and amount to 1,102 stanzas.

Vasco da Gama was the first person to sail directly from Europe to India, and one of the most influential in the European Age of Exploration. Commissioned to find Christian lands in the East by King Manuel I of Portugal (the king, was under the impression that India was the mythical Christian kingdom of Prester John) and to obtain Portuguese access to the commercial markets of the Orient, Vasco da Gama expanded the discovery of the sea route of his predecessor, Bartolomeu Dias, who had first rounded the Cape of Good Hope in Africa. Since Vasco da Gama was born into a noble family and in 1497, he was given command of a Portuguese government-equipped expedition tasked with discovering a maritime route to the East.

Vasco da Gama's maritime career was during the period when Portugal was searching for a trade route around Africa to India. The Ottoman Empire controlled almost all European trade routes to Asia. This meant they could, and did, charge high prices for ships passing through ports. Prince Henry of Portugal – also called 'Prince Henry the Navigator' – began Portugal's great age of exploration. From about 1419 until his death in 1460, he sent several sailing expeditions down the coast of Africa. In 1481, King John II of Portugal began sending expeditions to find a sea route around the southern shores of Africa. Many explorers made several attempts. It was Bartolomeu Dias who was the first to round Africa and make it to the Indian Ocean in 1488. But he was forced to head back to Portugal before he could make it to India. When Manuel I became king of Portugal in 1495, he continued efforts to open a

trade route to India by going around Africa. Although other people were considered for the job, Manuel I finally chose thirty-seven year old Vasco da Gama for this task.

The Vasco Da Gama ship names were: São Gabriel, commanded by Vasco da Gama; was a carrack of 178 tons, 27 m long, 8,5 m high, 2,3 m drawn, 372 m² sails, 27 m long, 8,5 m wide, 2,3 m drawn, 372 m² sails. São Rafael, under the direction of his brother Paulo da Gama; a dimension close to that of São Gabriel. A caravel, slightly smaller than the former two, commanded by Nicolau Coelho, Berrio (nickname, officially called São Miguel). Storage ship of unknown name, under the order of Gonçalo Nunes, doomed to be scuttled in South Africa's Mossel Bay (São Brás).

On 8 July 1497 Vasco Da Gama sailed from Lisbon with a fleet of four ships with a crew of 170 men and Vasco Da Gama commanded the 'Sao Gabriel'. Paulo da Gama, brother, commanded the 'São Rafael', a three masted ship. There was also the caravel Berrio, and a storeship São Maria. Bartolomeu Dias also sailed with da Gama, and gave helpful advice for navigating down the African coast. They sailed past the Canary Islands, and reached the Cape Verde islands by July 26. They stayed about a week, then continued sailing on August 3. To help avoid the storms and strong currents near the Gulf of Guinea, da Gama and his fleet sailed out into the South Atlantic and swung down to the Cape of Good Hope. Storms still delayed them for a while. They rounded the cape on November 22 and three days later anchored at Mossel Bay, South Africa. They began sailing again on December 8. They anchored for a bit in January near Mozambique at the Rio do Cobre (Copper River) and continued on until they reached the Rio dos Bons Sinais (River of Good Omens). Here they erected a statue in the name of Portugal.

They stayed here for a month because much of the crew were sick from scurvy – a disease caused by lack of Vitamin C. Da Gama's fleet eventually began sailing again. On March 2, 1498, they reached the Island of Mozambique. After trading with the local Muslim merchants, da Gama sailed on once more, stopping briefly in Malindi (in present day Kenya). He hired a pilot to help him navigate through the Indian Ocean. They sailed for 23 days, and on May 20, 1498 they reached India.⁷ They headed for Kappad, India near the large city of Calicut. In Calicut, da Gama met with the king. But the king of Calicut was not impressed with da Gama, and the gifts he brought as offering. They spent several months trading in India, and studying their customs. They left India at the end of August. He visited the Anjediva Island near Goa, and then once more stopped in Malindi in January 1499. Many of his crew were dying of scurvy. He had São Rafael burned to help contain the illness. Da Gama finally returned to Portugal in September 1499. Manuel I praised da Gama's success, and gave him money and a new title of admiral.

Vasco da Gama's later voyages were less friendly with the people he met. He sailed once again beginning in February, 1502 with a fleet of 10 ships. They stopped at the Cape Verdes Islands, Mozambique, and then sailed to Kilwa (in modern day Tanzania). Da Gama threatened their leader, and forced him and his people to swear loyalty to the king of Portugal. At Calicut, he bombarded the port, and caused the death of several Muslim traders. Again, later at Cochin, they fought with Arab ships, and sent them into flight. Da Gama was paving the way for an expanded Portuguese empire. This came at the cruel treatment of East African and South Asian people. Finally, on February 20, 1503 da Gama began the return journey home arriving on October 11 1503. King Manuel I died in 1521, and King John III became ruler. He made da Gama a Portuguese viceroy in India.⁹ King John III sent da Gama to India to stop the corruption and settle administrative problems of the Portuguese officials. Da Gama's third journey would be his last.

After he had returned from his first trip, in 1500 Vasco da Gama had married Caterina de Ataíde. They had six sons, and lived in the town Évora. Da Gama continued advising on Indian affairs until he was sent overseas again in 1524. After 20 years at home, in 1524, he was nominated as Portuguese viceroy in India and sent to deal with the mounting corruption among Portuguese authorities there. Vasco da Gama left Portugal for India, and arrived at Goa in September 1524. Da Gama quickly re-established order among the Portuguese leaders. By the end of the year he fell ill. Vasco da Gama died on December 24, 1524 in Cochin itself. He was buried in the local church and in 1539, his remains were brought back to Portugal.

Sanjay Subramanyam in his book has chronicled the oral and local sources about the Vasco Da Gama and has broadened the perspectives of maritime life. "The action of the poem begins after an introduction, an invocation, and a dedication to King Sebastian. Da Gama's ships are already underway in the Indian Ocean, sailing up the coast of East Africa, and the gods of Greco-Roman mythology gather to discuss the fate of the expedition (which is favoured by Venus and attacked by Bacchus)." The voyagers spend several days in Melinde on the east coast of Africa, and, at the request of the king of Melinde, da Gama recounts the entire history of Portugal, from its origins to the inception of their great voyage (Cantos III, IV, and V). These cantos contain some of the most compelling passages in the poem. When they re-embark, Bacchus tries to arrange the shipwreck of the Portuguese fleet but is prevented by Venus, and da Gama is able to reach his destination, Calicut on the Malabar Coast.

On their homeward voyage the mariners chance upon the island Venus has created for them, and the nymphs reward them for their labours. One of the nymphs sings of the future deeds of the Portuguese, and the entertainment ends with a description of the universe given by da Gama and the Nereid Thetis. The sailors again set sail for home. He became sick after arriving in Cochin. He died on December 24, 1524, and was buried in a Catholic church in Kochi but in 1538, his remains were returned to Portugal. The consequences of Da Gama's voyage to India include the development of the spice trade and the Portuguese colonization of Mozambique. It also created competition between European powers, which resulted in the need for and subsequent development of a halfway station in South Africa.

After decades of sailors trying to reach the Indies, with thousands of lives and dozens of vessels lost in shipwrecks and attacks, Vasco da Gama, a Portuguese explorer, was the first European to reach India by sea. His initial voyage to India (1497–1499) was the first to link Europe and Asia by an ocean route, connecting the Atlantic and the Indian oceans and therefore, the West and the Orient, ushering in a new era of globalization. This was to be the longest maritime journey of its time, giving the Portuguese crown unopposed access to the Indian spice routes there for boosting the economy of the Portuguese Empire. The total area under Portuguese control was 1,619 square miles (4,193 sq km). Goa accounted for the bulk of Portuguese India in terms of both territory and population. For judicial purposes, the province of Goa also included Macau in China and Timor in the Malay Archipelago. Portuguese India formed a single administrative province under a governor-general and a single ecclesiastical province subject to the archbishop of Goa, who was also primate of the East.

Vasco da Gama led a fleet of four ships with a crew of 170 men from Lisbon on 8 July 1497. The distance traveled to India and back around Africa was greater than around the equator. The navigators were Pero de Alenquer, Pedro Escobar, João de Coimbra, and Afonso Gonçalves, the most experienced in Portugal. How many individuals were in each ship's crew is not known for sure, but about 55 returned, and two ships were lost. Two of the vessels, newly constructed for the voyage, were carracks; the others were caravels and supply ships. He became sick after arriving in Cochin. He died on December 24, 1524, and was buried in a Catholic church in Kochi but in 1538, his remains were returned to Portugal. In 1539, his remains, which up to that time had lain in the Franciscan church there, were brought to Portugal and interred at Vidigueira. To commemorate the first voyage to India, the celebrated convent of the Hieronymites in Belem was erected. A large part of the "Lusiad" of Camoens deals with the voyages and discoveries of Vasco da Gama.

Vasco da Gama is best known as commander of the Portuguese fleet that pioneered the exclusive sea route from Portugal to the west coast of India and, by doing so, undermined what has been portrayed as a Venetian monopoly on the supply of spices to Europe. In the pantheon of national heroes, Gama is unique in that, within half a century of his death (1524), this voyage was central to a major epic poem of western literature, *Os Lusíadas*, where he was mythified and the voyage divinized. No less than Columbus, Magellan, or Cook, Gama has been seen as emblematic of imperial aspirations and, as such, an object of reverence or opprobrium. But, other than in the context of the voyage, Gama has been elusive. Subrahmanyam, author of studies on the political economy of southern India and on Portuguese trade and settlement in the Bay of Bengal, a political and economic history of the Portuguese in Asia, and a host of provocative essays, provides in *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama* a revisionist assessment of Gama based predominantly on published sources.

The Portuguese Empire (Portuguese: *Império Português*), also known as the Portuguese Overseas (*Ultramar Português*) or the Portuguese Colonial Empire (*Império Colonial Português*), was composed of the overseas colonies, factories, and the later overseas territories governed by Portugal. It was one of the longest-lived empires in European history, lasting almost six centuries from the conquest of Ceuta in North Africa, in 1415, to the transfer of sovereignty over Macau to China in 1999. The empire began in the 15th century, and from the early 16th century it stretched across the globe, with bases in North and South America, Africa, and various regions of Asia and Oceania.

Those who followed in the wake of Dias and da Gama sought one thing: total control of the Indian Ocean trade network, then dominated by traders on the Swahili Coast of East Africa and Muslim traders from the Persian Gulf. With inferior weapons and a lack of cooperation between city-states, the Swahili Coast was not able to put up much of a defence. Fortresses were built, for example, at Sofala in 1505, Mozambique Island in 1507, and Shama in 1526. However, the Portuguese were such ruthless traders and so many settlements were razed and ships sunk that African traders moved northwards to avoid them. India, meanwhile, proved too big a territory to dominate but the Portuguese did establish trading centres all along the western coast of the subcontinent.

More generally, the voyages of Vasco da Gama to India and Christopher Columbus to the Americas in 1492 opened up the world to European exploration and colonization. The Portuguese went even further east, establishing colonies at Macau in China, at Nagasaki in Japan, and even visiting Korea. Empires rose, Europeans benefited from

a cheaper and more varied range of products, flora and fauna were shifted about the globe, diseases found new victims, and the lives of millions of indigenous peoples on four continents were changed forever. In fact, Gama's navigational adventures led to the intercontinental interaction and development.

References:

1. 1997: Sanjay Subramanyam, The Career and Legend of Vasco Da Gama, Cambridge Univ. Press, Australia. ISBN 052164629
2. 2012: Nigel Cliff, The Last Crusade: The Epic Voyages of Vasco da Gama, pp.560 ISBN 006173532
3. 2015: Roger Crowley, "The First Global Empire", Vol 65 No.10, Oct. 2015, HistoryNet.com
4. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vasco-da-Gama>
5. <https://www.vedantu.com/biography/vasco-da-gama-biography>
6. <https://exploration.marinersmuseum.org/subject/vasco-da-gama/>

