

# Exorcising the Ghost of Vasco Da Gama: The Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004

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## European Domination of the Indian Ocean

With the arrival of the Europeans starting with Vasco da Gama, the Indian Ocean was never again the same; peaceful trade and cross-cultural exchanges that had existed over millennia amongst its peoples came to an end. In the European colonial struggle that ensued the British eventually came out on top and the Ocean remained a British lake until 1957 when they eventually withdrew from 'East of Suez' handing over the mantle to the United States.

The US in turn took illegal possession of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) carved out of Mauritius and established a naval and logistics base, an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier', on the island of Diego Garcia. Thereafter, based on inaccurate and incomplete Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reports of possible Soviet designs on the energy resources of the Middle East, many 'Red Storm Rising' type of scenarios were conjured and there followed creeping military deployments in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf starting with the constitution of the Rapid Deployment Force and culminating in the establishment of Central Command. The US Navy continues to be the major combatant force in the region supporting ongoing operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

## 1498: Da Gama Sights India

In early April 1498, da Gama was sailing up and down the Swahili East African coast on his flagship, the 'San Gabriel' with a tiny fleet of two caravels<sup>1</sup> as escorts desperately seeking information on how to get to India and thus be gone to his final destination. He had sworn to his king that he would reach Calicut, but his crew were homesick and were aware that India was several weeks more sailing away. All the Swahili mariners he had earlier,

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tried to persuade to pilot his tiny fleet to India had refused outright, either through fear or defiance, 'even though they were put to torture'.<sup>2</sup>

So it had been a great relief to da Gama when he recruited a willing pilot, experienced in making the crossing. In Malindi, his fortunes had changed.<sup>3</sup> The Sultan produced a Gujarati sea captain possibly of mixed Arab extraction, whose name was written down as Malema Can or Canaqua<sup>4</sup>. This elderly 'Moor of Gujarat' was well acquainted with the route to Calicut and declared himself willing to guide the Christian newcomers.<sup>5</sup> He displayed his navigational aids for finding positions at sea, had a chart of the western side of India, and was in no way over-awed when shown an astrolabe.

The Sultan of Malindi with great relief bade the cruel Portuguese admiral farewell, and their pilot set course for the northeast, keeping within sight of the African coast. Soon the land began to change, from the lush greenery of palms and mangrove trees to dry arid beaches. However, da Gama's crews were cheered to discern from the stars that they had once again crossed the Equator (first crossed eight months earlier on the southward passage in the Atlantic) and were in their own northern hemisphere whence they could see Polaris and no longer had to rely on Canopus and the Southern Cross for navigation as they had in the southern latitudes.

After five days the ships reached a long beach known to the pilot as the 'Saif al-Tawil', and there he turned away from Africa and steered almost due east for India keeping their latitude from the Pole star.<sup>6</sup> The navigational instruments he used, and his cheerful self-confidence impressed the Portuguese sailors knowing as they did that their fate lay in his hands. After twenty-three days of good weather and propelled by the 'khrareef' monsoon winds<sup>7</sup>, the lookouts shouted that the coast of India was in sight.

The date was 18 May 1498, da Gama had fulfilled his destiny after the longest sea voyage in history. Just to place this date in historical perspective, Babur, born on 14 February 1483, was 15 years old in Samarkand and the Lodhi dynasty were in command in Delhi.<sup>8</sup>

The pilot had made his landfall a short distance north of Calicut at Mount Deli (now the site of the new prestigious Naval Academy, INS Zamorin). The depth was sounded at forty-five fathoms, then the ships turned south amid thunderstorms. When they anchored off Calicut, it was exactly as they would have been led to expect from the accounts by previous European travellers including Marco Polo, who had come overland: an open harbour filled with many kinds of vessels from all over the Indian Ocean, a beach dotted with shops and warehouses and behind that a vast city. Flanking the harbour were inlets where ships could shelter from rough seas, and the port of Beypore famous for its shipyards building dhows for Arab captains, mainly from the Oman port of Sur.

### **The Zamorin and da Gama: A Tectonic Shift**

The arrival of the Portuguese, their sleek fast ships with huge sails emblazoned with huge red crosses of the faith, vessels unlike anything seen before in India caused excitement. Small craft came out filled with sightseers, bringing their children 'merrily to see the ships'. Although da Gama's men were at their furthest point from home, their spirits rose. The Portuguese were taken aback by the opulence of Calicut and the king's palace covered an area of a mile square and was surrounded by brightly lacquered walls.

Many powerful Arabs from as far away as Egypt were settled in Calicut, but they took care to honour the religious beliefs of their hosts and lived in harmony. It was plain to the Portuguese that those Arab ship-owners and traders played a dominant role in this rich Indian Ocean emporium. Their houses were vast and some owned as many as fifty ships capable of making the passage across the Arabian Sea to the Red Sea carrying cargoes and pilgrims for Mecca; the Arab mariners had taken control of the ocean routes from India, to both east and west, because Brahminical orders (issued to stem the brain drain when large numbers of Indian mathematicians and thinkers migrated to Baghdad the Silicon Valley of those days!) altered the tenets of Hinduism which inhibited its followers from making long sea journeys to foreign lands with the punishment of ostracism and 'loss of caste' for doing so. This was a major reason as to why Indians became insular looking inwards and strategically only northwards at the Himalayas wrongly perceived to be the subcontinent's natural frontier.

Although da Gama had always refused, since leaving Lisbon, to go ashore to meet the local rulers on the Swahili coast, he knew that he could not maintain such a stance in the important 'free entrepot' of Calicut. Now da Gama had to get ready for meeting the man he knew to be the most powerful ruler on the Indian coast, addressed as the 'Rajah of Calicut' in the letter he bore from his Portuguese King Manuel. He had time to prepare himself, because his emissary had returned to tell him that the Rajah, the Zamorin, the *Samudri* or Sea King, was away on a journey.<sup>9</sup> A display of respect to the Zamorin was vital. It was not going to be easy for him to present himself with dignity in his three small weather-beaten ships. He must also have realised by now that the gifts reserved for the Rajah would seem meagre and tawdry when unpacked from their watertight boxes. But he was sustained by a dual faith, in his God and his guns.

On receiving a message that the Zamorin was back and awaiting him, da Gama put on a scarlet cloak reaching to the ground, a blue satin tunic, white buskins and a blue velvet cap adorned with a feather. As a guarantee of his safety, a group of Zamorin's warriors, the Nairs, was sent out to the Portuguese ships to be held hostage for his safe return.<sup>10</sup>

As da Gama took his first steps on to Indian soil, with his escort around him, a palanquin was waiting and crowds lined the roads to see the procession pass. When the palace gates were reached, the Zamorin watched from a balcony as da Gama was helped down from his palanquin by a page in red satin. The Portuguese admiral walked slowly forward, his escort leading the way. A turning point in the history of the Indian Ocean is crystallized in this scene. Patterns of life and commerce, which had held good for many centuries, were about to be shattered. A tectonic geopolitical shift from the Indian Ocean peoples to the Europeans was about to occur.

Da Gama was led with elaborate ritual through a series of anterooms with massive golden doors, until he came to the royal chamber. The Zamorin, Mana Vikrama, lay on a green couch below a silken canopy. On his left arm, above the elbow, glittered a bracelet from which hung an immense diamond, and round his neck were strings of pearls. He also wore a heart-shaped emerald surrounded by rubies, the 'pathakkam', insignia of the Malabar

royalty. A meeting of cataclysmic proportions was taking place with the ground shifting below the Zamorin's feet.<sup>11</sup>

The mighty Zamorin, also known as 'Kunnaikkonathiri',<sup>12</sup> was extremely offended at the poor standard of gifts from Europe that were handed over to him. The Portuguese were then led away to captivity and held for several days in a house surrounded by armed guards where the conditions were hot and uncomfortable.

The leading Arab traders in Calicut were soon to be revealed as being behind this turn of events, for news had already reached them from East Africa about the cruel and inhuman behaviour of the Portuguese. They had also heard of the wars waged by the Portuguese in Morocco and the Iberian Peninsula against the Moors for almost a century. Even though these Christian newcomers were too few in number to start a fight at the moment, but now that they had finally found the sea route to India they would surely come back in greater force. Some of the captors may have wanted to kill the leader of the 'Christian Franks',<sup>13</sup> while he was in their grasp; but that was no solution. The three ocean going fast ships lying off Calicut were far superior to Zamorin's admiral Kunjali Marrikar's coastal policing ships and would certainly easily escape to sail home to tell the tale and bitter revenge would be certain.

If the entire Portuguese expedition could have been wiped out at this moment, leaving its fate a mystery, the Indian Ocean people might have been granted a short reprieve. However, the Zamorin would have vetoed any attempt to annihilate his uninvited guests because such a deed would have flouted those very principles, which had brought Calicut to prosperity: free trade and respect for law and foreign shipping. There was also a practical restraint: the Portuguese ships' cannons pointing shore wards were of greater range versus Calicut's coastal artillery. The three ships would have to be boarded and their crews overcome in hand-to-hand fighting, for Calicut had no long range cannons of its own: the recipe for gunpowder was well known but used mainly for personal weapons and fireworks.<sup>14</sup> This was a vivid example of non-appreciation by Indian kings of the importance of technology in warfare.

The Portuguese would certainly be back, da Gama said as he left, to punish Calicut for the humiliation meted out to him. The

time would come when the Zamorin would 'repent still more'.<sup>15</sup> Foreboding seized the Zamorin. The Portuguese did return as promised followed by the Dutch, the French and the British battling for colonies and for domination of the Indian Ocean. 500 years of insularity, stagnation and decay that followed da Gama's arrival as is often said is history.

### **Historical Exorcism: The Boxing Day Tsunami 2004 and The Navy**

The Boxing Day Tsunami of 26 December 2004, a rare phenomenon for the Indian Ocean, was undoubtedly a modern day international tragedy of biblical proportions. An underwater earthquake caused by the shifting Australasian geological tectonic plates with its epicentre off the western coast of the northern Sumatran province of Aceh at 8:24 am caused huge tidal waves, the tsunami, leading to unprecedented loss of lives and extensive damage to infrastructure in the coastal regions of Sumatra, Indonesia, off the beaches of western Thailand, the Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) islands, particularly in the Nicobars, the eastern and southern coasts of Sri Lanka, the Maldives and the coasts of the states of Tamilnadu and Kerala. This occurrence required an, immediate humanitarian response and disaster relief on a gigantic scale.

The Indian Navy took up the challenge posed by the ravages of the tsunami and converted a demoralising numbing tragedy into an unprecedented morale boosting opportunity to unwittingly display and test its 'rapid reaction' capabilities by deploying its forces to render succor to the affected populations not only domestically in Tamil Nadu and the A&N islands but also internationally in Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Aceh. This was indeed a unique reaction to a unique situation never executed by the Navy previously in its history.

Overcoming its traditional bureaucratic lethargy, the Government, the Ministry of Defence and the Navy displayed an exceptional and uncanny zeal for quick, high-speed decision-making to facilitate timely and effective deployments to mitigate the untold suffering. This was the Navy's fastest mobilization of its resources in peacetime. By the same evening as the tsunami, as the first naval aircraft with medical teams and supplies was landing in Colombo, four simultaneous relief operations were commenced,

Operations *Rainbow*, *Castor*, *Gambhir*, and *Madad* under the overarching Operation Sea Waves, and 19 ships, 4 aircraft and 14 helicopters were dispatched to the affected regions of the Indian Ocean from their bases in Mumbai, Cochin, and Visakhapatnam. Subsequently, three survey ships were converted into 46 bedded hospital ships and sailed.<sup>16</sup>

The Indian Navy had launched its biggest humanitarian relief effort ever in the Indian Ocean including in international waters. By the time these operations were terminated, 38 ships, 21 helicopters, 8 aircraft and about 5,500 personnel had been pressed into service and a total of 654 ship days of deployments had been completed.<sup>17</sup> A monumental effort by any standards whose key feature was the rapid provision of essential succor to the affected regions with appropriate first aid to the injured, food, water and shelters to the traumatized survivors and clearance of rubble to facilitate setting up of relief camps and the movement of relief material.

### Accolades and Capabilities

The Navy earned laurels with well-deserved laudatory reports and praise in both the international press and the national media for its swift decision-making and rapid and timely deployments of its assets to not only aid its own affected nationals but also for sparing a large proportion of its capacity for the international disaster relief missions. For example by the time the omnipresent US Navy arrived in southern Sri Lanka the Indian relief teams had already landed and were fully deployed in total control of the situation. Appreciating that there was very little they could contribute, the US Naval helicopter carrier *Bonhomme Richard* steaming toward Sri Lanka to support the US teams was ordered to change course for Indonesia.<sup>18</sup>

Taking note of India's prompt action in its neighbourhood, India was invited to be a member of the 'core group' constituting the US, Japan and Australia to further coordinate the relief effort. With this it became quite clear that India had arrived as a regional power, albeit a compassionate one.<sup>19</sup> "That's an important thing for India... to be involved as sort of an equal partner in that group," said writer Mira Kamdar, an expert in Indo-US relations and a senior fellow at the World Policy Institute in New York. "They have real capabilities there. It's not like they (First World nations) are doing some sort of favour by letting India into this club."<sup>20</sup>

The first capability the tsunami tested was the capacity of the Navy brass to react rapidly to a totally unexpected and rapidly deteriorating situation. This required immediate decisions with actions at the operational level. The need of the hour was to cut through military and governmental inertia and red tape on a long weekend (26 December 2004 was a Sunday!) to obtain permission and necessary financial approvals to not only attend to pressing national tasks but also divert a proportion of the naval effort with appropriate relief materials to devastated locations overseas.

With the 'go ahead' decision taken and approvals obtained, the next step in the decision making-action C2 loop was to activate the operational structures of the Navy. Orders to the naval commands were issued to bring the ships, aircraft and personnel to 'immediate notice' for deployment and to muster in the shortest possible time relief materials, medical and reconstruction teams and supplies. With preparations completed, the naval task groups proceeded on their relief missions the same evening to four destinations, just as the first relief aircraft was landing at Colombo. This test authenticated that the Navy did indeed have a latent capability, hitherto suspected even by naval planners, for 'rapid reaction' but never before tasked on such short notice operations.

In addition, the majority of naval forces were not only deployed as far away as Aceh from their bases and also sustained over a long period whilst they rendered yeoman service and assistance. With long 'sea legs' and 'staying power', this demonstrated the Navy's 'blue water' capability and of its capacity for distant operations. Also extensive co-operation and coordination with the other two Services, the Army and the Air Force, facilitated 'joint operations' overseas by deployment of combined relief teams under very trying and challenging conditions.

Finally the Navy cooperated extensively with foreign and other regional navies to provide effective assistance in the most efficient manner thus setting the standards for benchmarking interoperability for future cooperation and identifying measures to formulate common 'standard operating procedures' to further maximize effectiveness.

The post mortem of the operations highlighted the necessity for the Navy to suitably augment its nascent 'rapid reaction' blue

water capability with specialist ships, aviation and other assets including infantry and having the staying power to respond to unexpected fast developing situations in the future across the complete spectrum of peace and war in far away locations in the Indian Ocean.

### Exorcism of Vasco da Gama's Ghost

India had declined to accept any foreign relief assistance at home when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated, "Several countries had offered assistance, but...we have enough resources and would be happy to receive assistance when needed." New Delhi's message to the international community undoubtedly enhanced its posture as a self-reliant nation without an 'aid seeking mentality'.<sup>21</sup> India's position on aid "is a signal of its notion of itself as a player rather than a victim," Mira Kamdar said. "India has ambitions to play this kind of role, and it is in fact starting to play this role. It's not just a fantasy. India's response to the disaster was a significant test for a country that wants a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, and more generally in world affairs, one at the grown ups' table".<sup>22</sup>

Suddenly politicians and national policymakers stood up and took notice of the prospective capabilities of the Navy, identifying diplomatic and operational tasks that it could achieve in its traditional 'silent' manner, in far away lands over large oceanic distances and all this without cumbersome permissions and support from obdurate governments.

"This is a huge shift," C Raja Mohan, a professor at JNU said in a telephone interview, "What you're seeing is the Indian ability to constitute collective regional security arrangements. The attitude has shifted from being a lone ranger to...engagement with all the major powers."<sup>23</sup> When the potential of the navy and its capabilities of achieving national goals and objectives through the medium of the seas were realized, Indian strategic thought mired through history in the status quo altered direction overnight. The tsunami reversed India's strategic direction, focused over millennia northwards towards the perceived natural boundary, the Himalayas, to look for the first time southwards towards the oceanic frontiers.

India had suddenly transformed itself from an inward looking insular nation to an outward maritime one. The ghost of Vasco da

Gama had, at last, been exorcised five hundred years after the Portuguese Admiral had landed at the thriving medieval trading port of Calicut on the Malabar coast: precursor to the European domination of the Indian sub continent and its ocean, which had now become completely liberated. India could now seek its place in the Sun.

## References

1. A 'caravel' was a small, light, around 450 tons DWT, fast ship, chiefly of Spanish and Portuguese origin of the 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries.
2. Richard Hall, '*Empires of the Monsoon*', Harpers Collins, London, 1996.
3. For some odd reason ships from Cannanore on the Malabar Coast of India, south of Calicut, were the most frequent visitors to Malindi.
4. Portuguese name given by the Portuguese sailors.
5. Why he agreed to pilot the Portuguese is one of the mysteries of maritime history.
6. Ptolemy had written of the 'Great Beach' where ships from India reached the African coast. Saif al-Tawil means 'Long Sword'- as it might look from the sea.
7. The south westerlies!
8. RC Majumdar, General Editor, '*The Mughal Empire*', Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai 1994.
9. The Zamorin was frequently engaged in putting down warlords who controlled the hilly districts of the Western Ghats further inland from Calicut, the most famous being the Coorgs. In accord with local custom he would return their land to them after obtaining their submission on the battlefield.
10. KVK Ayyar in his book '*A Short History of Kerala*' states that the Zamorin's army numbered 60,000 and had many Muslims in it.
11. KVK Ayyar, *ibid.*
12. 'Lord of Hills and Waves', as many of the surrounding Malabar ports were also subject to the Zamorin's authority.
13. A person of western nationality.
14. Richard Hall, n. 2.

15. Da Gama was given a reward of 20,000 gold cruzadas by King Manuel when he returned to Lisbon, now probably valued around \$ half million at least. The King had welcomed Da Gama as 'Almirante Amigo' when the latter threw himself to the ground, wrapped his arms around the King's legs and cried, "Sire, all my hardships have come to an end at this moment and I am altogether satisfied, since the Lord has brought me to the presence of Your Highness at the end of all, very well as I desired". His voyage of 24,000 miles-had in all been four times longer than that made by Columbus to discover the New World. King Manuel took the triumph, p 6.
16. Report '*Indian Navy Leads with Assistance for Tsunami Affected Neighbouring Countries*' posted on the Navy's website <http://indiannavy.nic.in>, New Delhi: 04 Jan 2005.
17. Report '*Indian Navy Leads with Assistance for Tsunami Affected Neighboring Countries*', *ibid*.
18. John Lancaster, '*India Takes Major Role in Sri Lanka Relief Effort; Aid is Sign of Nation's Emergence as Regional Power*', *Washington Post*, 20 January 2005.
19. Surjeet Singh Panwar, '*The Tsunami and Aid Diplomacy of India*', Article No 27,03 Feb 2005, posted on website <http://www.sspconline.org>. Panwar, is a PhD Scholar at the School of International Studies, JNU, New Delhi.
20. Gaiutra Bahadur, quoted in '*India Holds to its Self-Reliance*', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 16 January 2005.
21. Surjeet Singh Panwar, '*The Tsunami and Aid Diplomacy of India*', *ibid*.
22. Gaiutra Bahadur, '*India Holds to its Self-Reliance*', n. 20.
23. John Lancaster, quoted in '*India Takes Major Role in Sri Lanka Relief Effort; Aid is Sign of Nation's Emergence as Regional Power*', *Washington Post*, 20 January 2005.