

coverstory

Was it the Spice Route? Or, the Spice Web? It was a network, yes. And, the story of the movement of more than spices. Here's looking at the yesterday and today of a few ports that made this magical migration of taste possible

BY MANDIRA NAYAR

It is a hot Sunday afternoon. Parangipettai, the white town, less than an hour's drive from Cuddalore, is deserted. The Dutch stayed here till the 18th century. The Portuguese called it Porto Novo, the new port; it was the first colonial outpost on the Coromandel coast. Barely a blip on the map now, its only brush with history was the battle that Haider Ali fought with the British. He lost disastrously: 40,000 of his men to 8,000 British led by Sir Eyre Coote. In Parangipettai, Dr K. Kanniah, a historian, stops every five minutes to ask where the Dutch cemetery is. The search is fruitless. It is like asking for directions in Delhi—everyone points in the wrong direction confidently.

An hour later, a young man comes bounding out. He has found it. He walks to the nearest house, jumps over a wooden bridge and stands next to a tubewell and clothesline. "This is it," he says. A tombstone. "It is used to wash clothes," the youth says helpfully. And, all that remains of Porto Novo is this tombstone. The letters on it help make the clothes whiter. While it makes a great argument about why history can be useful (the laundry stone and all that), it also emphasises a point—the Spice Route is a graveyard of empires.

"If you google Spice Route, you will find a restaurant in London," says Benny Kuriakose, conservation consultant

with the Muziris project in Kerala. "This is our story, our past and it has implications." The age of discovery—another grand title—where the west took to the seas to find new lands was also India's most exciting period. Part folklore, part fantasy garnished with facts, this is India's epic. Ships hugged the coast, carrying spices, textiles, animal hide, elephants—and ideas.

And, India was more than just an exotic Cleopatra being fought over. Unesco has recognised the Kerala government's efforts to connect 20-odd countries on a Spice Route. Muziris, the main trade-post of the ancient world, is closer to being found courtesy the Pattanam excavations. And, the Union ministry of culture has taken Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" seriously. Project Mausam, an answer to China's search for the Silk Route, is all geared up to chase the monsoon. Mausam comes from the Arabic word *mawsim*, the season when ships could sail safely. The project aims to rewrite history. And, in the right thinking way, not the right-winged way.

"We were not simply suppliers of spice," says Himanshu Prabha Ray, chairperson of the Mausam project. The Spice Route changed the world. It redrew maps. New continents were discovered. In India, revolution came on a plate. The search for spices may have added flavour to what the Romans ate—curried ostrich—but it brought change by the spade in



India. Vinegar came with the Portuguese; tamarind with the Arabs, coffee and cumin, too. Potatoes came with the Dutch or the Portuguese, but were relatively new till the 16th century. In 1780, Governor General Warren Hastings threw a dinner for his friends with a basket of potatoes gifted by the Dutch. The potato had already staged a revolution in Barrackpore, West Bengal, in 1823 before Mangal Pandey.

"Logically, the concept of a single spice route is indefensible," says John Keay in *The Spice Route*. "Spices grew and still do, in warm and widespread locations, and they reached markets even more widespread by a whole web of routes." Some spices did not have their passports stamped often; others were frequent fliers (sailors, rather). Saffron did a T.S. Eliot—"the



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Clean slate: Nothing of Porto Novo remains in Parangipettai, except this tombstone. Villagers now use it to wash clothes

the pope divided the world between these two powers through the Treaty of Tordesilla. It is not about the dates or about the Spice Route as a concept or about the way the Mausam Project wants to look at it. It is about interaction. It is about globalisation. About the butterfly effect. And all this happened before the world became a global village and before the internet made it claustrophobically small.

“Even elephants and rhinoceros, saplings of pepper and other plants were also transported through this route though it was called the Spice Route,” says Dr K.S. Mathew, a historian who has written extensively on Kerala’s connection with the Spice Route. “Scores of countries were linked with Malabar through this route. It served as a major transit for trade and commerce, technology, culture, ideology and religion.”

Christianity, Islam, Judaism all came to Indian shores. These were absorbed, embraced and adapted to create the tapestry that has become part of the Indian identity—pluralism. Dotted across the Indian peninsula are patron saints of ships. In Pulicat, from where the sarong and the Madras check went to the world, there is Our Lady of Glory. Fishermen firmly believe that she protects them.

In Mylapore’s San Thome, the oldest settlement in Chennai, is St Thomas Church. San Thome sugar sweetened Europe. THE WEEK visited the church on a cool winter evening in November, when the sky was like a painted Italian ceiling with perfect pink clouds. The church bells were ringing and the devotees who gather to pray were Hindu and Muslim, as well as Christian.

Brand new parents come carrying their baby, whose face was marked with three big black spots to ward off the evil eye. Barefoot, they posed for a photograph before the altar.

end of our exploring will be to arrive where we started”. It went from the west to the east and made its way back west. “There was no one single trading corridor.... Nor was the direction of the trade flow consistent,” writes Keya.

The Spice Route, or a web as Keya says, spans different millennia and disparate countries. There was the Roman trade, where Muziris was the centre of the world and Arikamedu on the Coromandel coast was a major entrepôt. Commodities travelled from

Malabar to Alexandria and to Rome, via the Red Sea. This continued till about the seventh century. The rise of Islam shut off the caravan routes. Arab merchants then took merchandise via the Levant, and merchants of Venice, not Shylock, dominated the trade. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 shut this passage. And, the world embarked on, what is termed rather poetically as, the age of discovery.

Sailors took to the seas, mainly from Spain and Portugal. So much so that

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