

BEFORE
EUROPEAN
HEGEMONY

The World System A.D. 1250–1350

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PART
III
INDEX

Asia

*The Indian Ocean System:
Divided Into
Three Parts*

In the thirteenth century and considerably before as well, the Asian sea trade that traversed the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the South China Sea was subdivided into three interlocking circuits, each within the shared "control" of a set of political and economic actors who were largely, although certainly not exclusively, in charge of exchanges with adjacent zones. (See Figure 10.) The primary basis for these divisions was geographic, although these geographically determined zones were gradually converted into cultural domains as well.

The westernmost circuit was largely inhabited by Muslims, with ship owners, major merchants, and their resident factors being drawn from the ports of the Arabian Peninsula or the more interior capitals of Baghdad and Cairo, earlier described in Chapters 6 and 7. As already seen, Muslim merchant ships exiting the Gulf made stops along the northwestern coast of India (usually at Gujarat) before proceeding to the Malabar Coast farther south, whereas those exiting the Red Sea, after a stop at Aden or Hadramaut, sailed directly to Malabar. Both at the port of Cambay in Gujarat and the Malabar port entrepôts of Quilon and Calicut they conducted their business through sizable resident "colonies" of Muslim merchants. Some of these merchants originally came from the Middle East but had settled, married, and generally assimilated to their new home; others, however, were indigenous to the region but, through the prolonged contacts of trade, had converted and adopted Muslim culture and language.

The middle circuit connected the south Indian coast—both Mal-

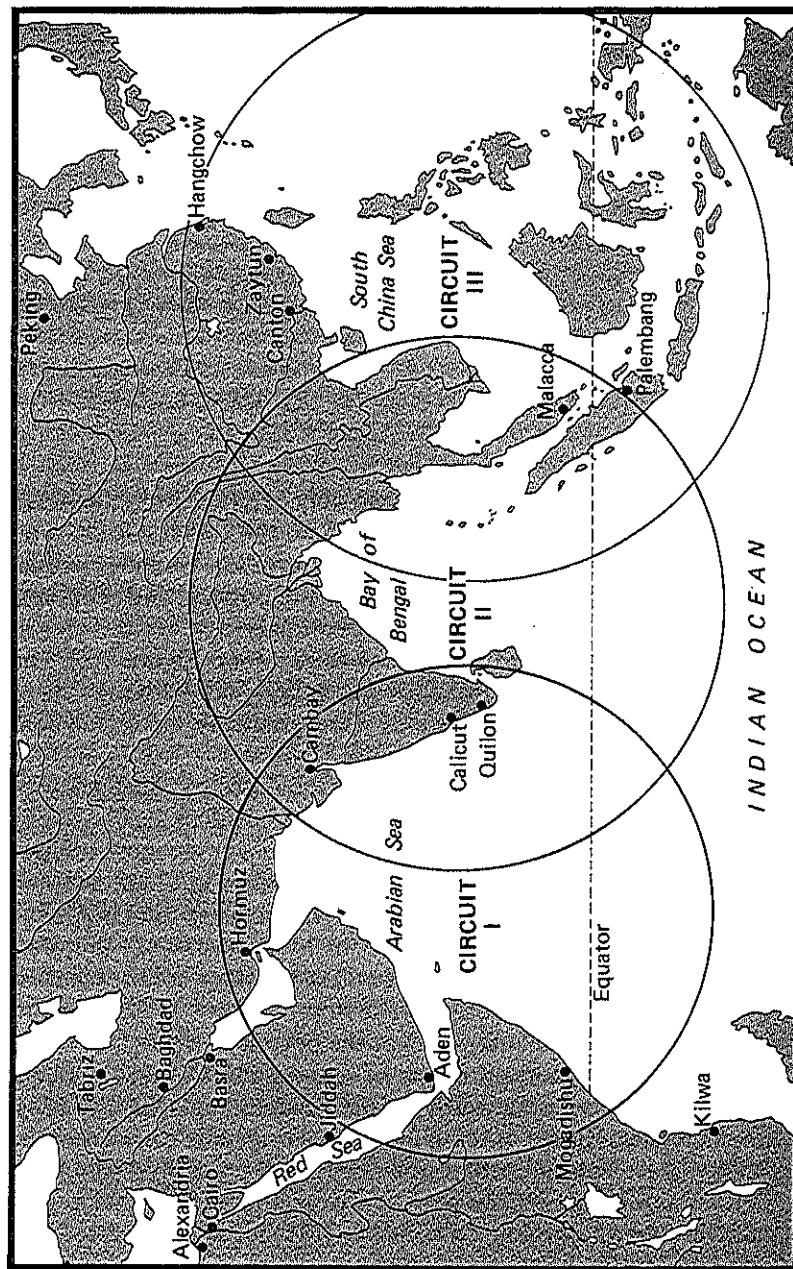


FIGURE 10 The three circuits of the Indian Ocean trade (based on Chaudhuri).

abar on the west and Coromandel on the east—with the region of Sumatra and Malaya that flanked the Strait of Malacca and with Java and the other islands of Indonesia just beyond. This zone was primarily “Hinduized” in culture, at least within its ruling circles, although there were also Buddhist connections and Chinese influences. Although Islam made major inroads from the fourteenth century onward, during the thirteenth century Muslim influences were still decidedly secondary.

The easternmost circuit was Chinese “space,” the sea that joined the east coast of Indochina and the northern shore of Java with the great ports of south China being under the hegemony of the Sung and then Yuan navies. This was the realm of Buddhism and particularly Confucianism and was the domain par excellence of what scholars have called the tribute trade.

Although it is thus possible to delineate three “great cultural traditions” in the Indian Ocean’s continuous expanse, it was not culture per se that set the boundaries between the three regions. Rather, cultural influences spread most freely *within* each of the three zones whose limits were, in the most fundamental sense, set by the wind patterns of the separate monsoon zones. Where countercyclical wind patterns met, as shown in Figure 11, they broke up the larger area into fairly discrete subsystems.

Although on occasion shippers of any subsystem might venture to trade in the adjacent circuit or even range freely over all three, the “natural” condition of the Indian Ocean was for several locally hegemonic powers to coexist; no single power ever exercised dominance over the entire system. (For a fuller exposition of this, see, *inter alia*, Chaudhuri, 1985.)

In the port emporia that were the meeting places for merchants and emissaries, representatives from the three culture zones were likely to mingle and to trade ideas as well as goods. Whenever there were major infusions from one cultural zone to another, such as the movement of Islam into Malaya and Indonesia, these were achieved through beachheads that had been established in the emporia. (See the discussion of Malacca in Chapter 9.) This was in sharp contrast to the situation in the hinterlands around the ports; regions off the “main track” of trade remained remarkably insulated from these international currents.

Because the boundaries between the major subsystems were set

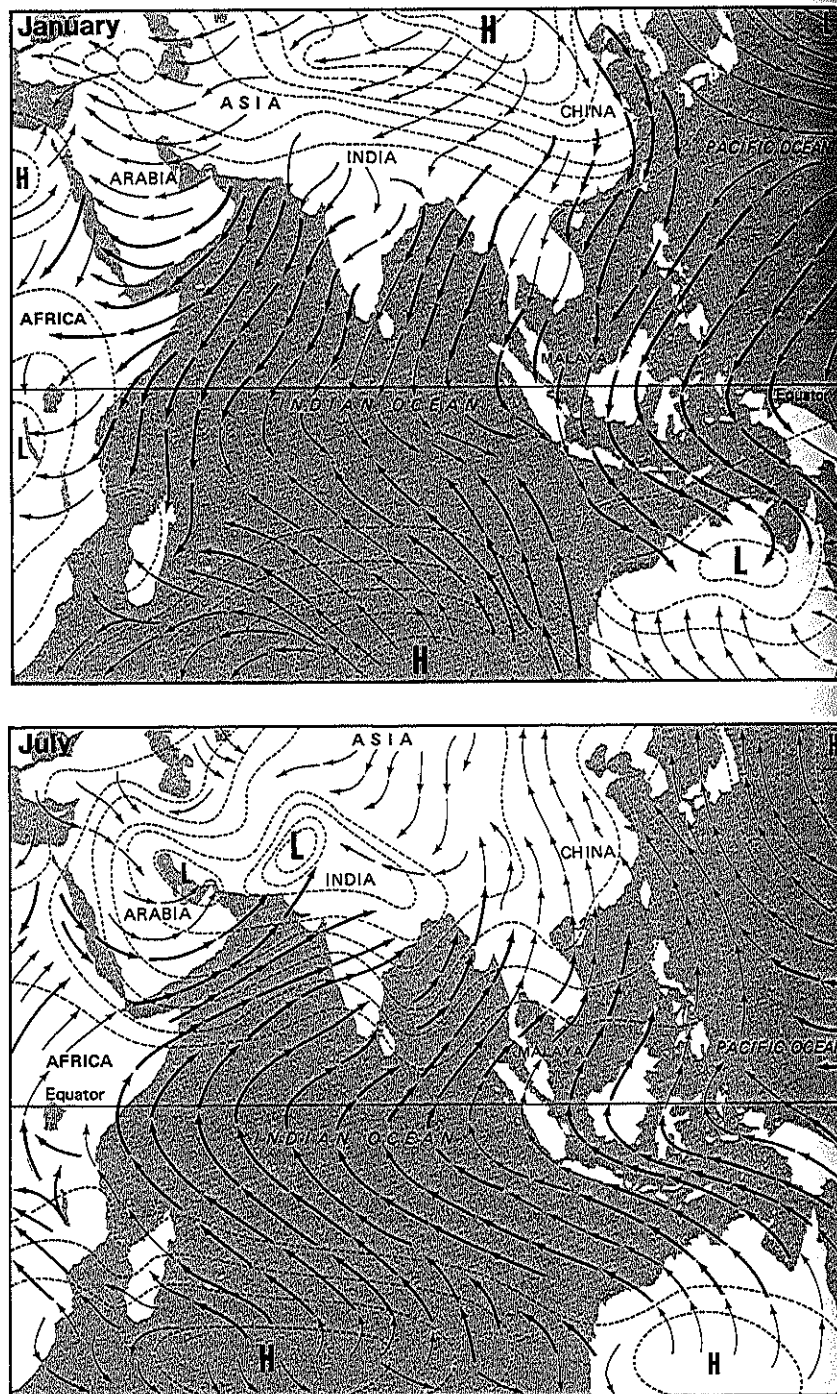


FIGURE 11. Monsoon wind patterns in the Indian Ocean.

by “natural” forces rather than imperial reach, the starting point for Part III must be the monsoon imperatives that routinely subdivided the long Indian Ocean journey into the three circuits shown in Figure 10: (1) the westernmost circuit, from the Red Sea–Arabian Peninsula–Persian Gulf to the southwest tip of India; (2) the middle circuit, from the southeastern coast of India to the Strait of Malacca and Java; and (3) the easternmost circuit, from the Straits of Malacca and Sunda and the Indian archipelago (Java and beyond) to the great ports of southeast China.

There is no better guide to the monsoon seasons than the navigators’ manual of Ibn Majid, written toward the end of the fifteenth century, just before the Portuguese arrived in the Indian Ocean. This manual was not innovative; it was not a description of new routes but simply a codification and detailed expansion of earlier Arab sea manuals. In the Eleventh Fa’ida of this work (see Tibbetts, 1981: 225–242), Ibn Majid gives detailed advice about the “monsoons (sailing seasons) in which one is *compelled* to travel, the intervals of the monsoons, their beginnings and ends, *showing what is not good in each*” (Tibbetts, 1981: 225, italics added). He makes explicit the break between the circuits and, as we shall see, his omissions are as significant as his inclusions (Table 1).

He first looks at the Arabia to India circuit. He discusses the timing of departures from the Arabian coasts (Yemen, Jiddah) and notes that to reach Malabar in India such journeys *must* be undertaken by the end of March or the beginning of April, but in no case later than early May. (It is possible to delay the time of departure a little if the destination is only Gujarat, and by as much as one month if the destination is merely Hormuz or the Persian Gulf.) The important thing was “to reach India before the Indian Ocean . . . closed” (Tibbetts, 1981: 226) since, apparently, there were ninety days during the year when it was suicidal to cross the open seas of the western circuit of the Indian Ocean. The consequences of missing the specific season for sailing were hardly trivial, since the crosswinds could immobilize an eastbound ship for up to a year.

Know that a man bound for India when he is forced to moor because of the Ayzab [monsoon] in Al-Shihr or Fartak and desires to go to India . . . must stay there for four months only, but he who is forced to moor in Yemen must stay there for a whole year when bound for India, but for seven months if bound for Hormuz.

Table 1. Monsoon Sailing Dates*

<i>Itinerary</i>	<i>Dates Given</i>	<i>Source</i>
Two Seasons from West to East (Arabian Peninsula to Malacca)		
<i>Long Monsoon Season (Kaws) between February and May</i>		
Arabian Peninsula to west coast of India		
Muscat to Malabar	2/20-4/11	Ibn Majid
Muscat to Gujarat	Leave until 5/1	Ibn Majid
Muscat to Sind	Leave until 5/11	Ibn Majid
Muscat to Malacca	Leave by 3/17-18	Celebi and Sulayman
Aden to Gujarat	3/17-5/6	Celebi
Aden to Gujarat	3/18-5/7	Sulayman
West Coast of India to Malacca		
Gujarat to Malacca	4/11-9/28	Ibn Majid
Gujarat to Malacca	Leave by 3/17-4/26	Celebi
Gujarat to Malacca	Leave by 3/18-4/27	Sulayman
Malabar to Malacca	Leave by 4/21	Ibn Majid
Malabar to Malacca	Leave by 4/16	Celebi
Malabar to Malacca	Leave by 4/17	Sulayman
<i>Short Monsoon Season (Damani) Mid-August to End of September</i>		
Arabian Peninsula to west coast of India and beyond		
Aden to India	8/29-9/18	Ibn Majid
Aden to India	Leave 8/24-28	Celebi
Aden to India	Leave 8/25	Sulayman
Aden to Malacca	Leave 8/14-15	Celebi
Aden to Malacca	Leave 8/15	Sulayman
Hormuz to Malacca	Leave 8/19	Ibn Majid
West coast of India to Malacca		
Gujarat to Malacca	Leave 9/3	Celebi
Gujarat to Malacca	Leave 9/14	Sulayman
Gujarat to Malacca	Leave 9/24	Ibn Majid
Malabar to Malacca	Leave 9/23	Celebi
Malabar to Malacca	Leave 9/24	Sulayman
Malabar to Malacca	Leave 9/28	Ibn Majid

Table 1. (continued)

<i>Itinerary</i>	<i>Dates Given</i>	<i>Source</i>
One Long Season from East to West (China to Arabian Peninsula)		
<i>Ayzab Monsoon (mid-October to mid-April)</i>		
China and Malacca to India and beyond		
China to Malacca	11/23-3/2	Ibn Majid
Malacca to Aden	1/1-2/20	Ibn Majid
Malacca to Aden	12/27-2/15	Celebi
Malacca to Aden	12/28-2/16	Sulayman
Sumatra to Aden	12/7-2/5	Celebi
Sumatra to Aden	12/8-2/6	Sulayman
Sumatra to Bengal	2/20-4/11	Ibn Majid
Sumatra to Bengal	2/15-4/6	Celebi
Sumatra to Bengal	2/16-4/7	Sulayman
India to the Arabian Peninsula		
Bengal to Aden/Hormuz	1/2-1/31	Ibn Majid
Bengal to Aden/Hormuz	12/27-1/26	Celebi
Bengal to Aden/Hormuz	12/28-1/27	Sulayman
Calicut to Gujarat	October-April	Ibn Majid
Gujarat to Oman	10/13-4/16	Celebi
Gujarat to Oman	10/14-4/17	Sulayman
Gujarat to Arabia	10/18-4/11	Ibn Majid
Gujarat to Arabia	10/13-3/27	Celebi
Gujarat to Arabia	10/14-3/28	Sulayman

*Adapted from information given in Tibbetts (1981).

In contrast to the tight schedule for open-sea sailing, however, it was always possible to hug the coastline and travel between the Persian Gulf and Gujarat (Tibbetts, 1981: 227) since this route was open virtually year-round.

The return trip from India to the Arabian Peninsula had to be made between late fall and early spring with a break in mid-winter;

Ibn Majid says that it is possible to set sail from Gujarat beginning around October 18, but that the return voyage should be delayed somewhat if setting out from Malabar, because otherwise the rains still falling there would soak the cargo. On the other hand, travel should be avoided after February 10, although it is possible, albeit slow, to hug the coastline to Gujarat. But Ibn Majid (Tibbetts, 1981: 231) adds the following ominous note:

He who leaves India on the 100th day (2nd March) is a sound man, he who leaves on the 110th will be all right. However, he who leaves on the 120th is stretching the bounds of possibility and he who leaves on the 130th is inexperienced and an ignorant gambler.

The second part of Ibn Majid's exposition concerns travel in the Bay of Bengal (i.e., the second or central circuit between India and the Strait). According to him, only in January is the weather propitious for rounding the tip of the Indian subcontinent. However, having attained the southeastern coast, there is a long sailing season (from about February 20th to the end of April) in which to journey across the Bay of Bengal to the Strait of Malacca. It is almost impossible to make a round trip within a single sailing season, however. Ships coming eastward from India arrive in the straits area either at the same time as or slightly after those heading westward from the straits to India, which means that a layover in the straits could possibly last a year!

By the time Ibn Majid was writing, Arab ships no longer went beyond the straits area. (The third and final part of his chapter refers to travel to the East African coast.) Although his voluminous manual details an incredibly varied set of itineraries—including sailing directions for going down the east coast of Africa, rounding the Cape of Good Hope, sailing up the west coast of Africa, and entering the Mediterranean through the Strait of Gibraltar, that is, the reverse of the route Vasco da Gama was later to take—Ibn Majid ignores the easternmost circuit of the Indian Ocean—South China Sea, namely, from Java to the south China ports. Although we know that Persian and Arab boats had traversed that circuit as early as the eighth and ninth centuries, the itinerary is omitted in this otherwise comprehensive fifteenth-century document.

The explanation, as will be seen in the coming chapters, is simple. Arab sailors no longer needed directions because, by the fif-

teenth century, their ships no longer sailed to Chinese ports. Chinese seaports were closed to foreign traders in the latter part of the fourteenth century, a fact of supreme importance in accounting for the collapse of the premodern world system. This topic will preoccupy us in Part III because it seems to hold the key to both the decline of the old system and the opportunity this afforded for a new Eurocentered world system. When, after 1435, the Ming dynasty withdrew a powerful Chinese fleet from the ocean via which, hitherto, her ships had regularly visited southwest India and occasionally reached the Persian Gulf, an enormous vacuum of power was created that, some 70 years later, the Portuguese intruders filled with their own brute fire power.

The Indian Ocean, then, must be conceived of as a trading zone divided into three circuits or subsystems shared by numerous groups: the Persians and Arabs who acted in their own right but also as intermediaries for Mediterranean Europe; the Indians on the west coast of the subcontinent whose Islamic beliefs gave them a special affinity to Middle Easterners; the Indians of the east coast whose Hindu and Buddhist culture bridged the Bay of Bengal; the diverse population of Malays, Sumatrans, Javans, and long-term "foreign" residents who made the Strait of Malacca area a cultural melting pot, at least in the numerous trading entrepôts that dotted the coasts; and the Chinese and later Chinese/Mongols who dominated the easternmost circuit between Java and China. The wind patterns that divided the expanse into three circuits yielded two interchange points that remained relatively constant: the south Indian coast and Ceylon, at which circuits one and two met, and the Strait of Malacca, at which circuits two and three intersected.

Part III is organized accordingly. Chapter 8 examines the two coasts of south India: Gujarat/Malabar, which looked westward to the Arab world, and the Coromandel Coast, which faced the opposite way toward the Strait of Malacca and the so-called Indian archipelago, Indonesia. Chapter 9 examines the Strait area itself (which the sixteenth-century Portuguese writer, Tomé Pires, referred to, with good reason, as the "gullet" of world sea trade) and demonstrates the limits of its power to affect the overall world system. Chapter 10 takes up the most puzzling case of all, China, which, under the indigenous Sung and then the Mongol-ruled Yuan dynasties, seemed fated in the thirteenth century to become the

hegemonic power if not of the world at least a goodly portion of it—via both the great land route across Central Asia and the great sea route across the Indian Ocean and its extensions. Chapter 5 analyzed the role the Black Death played in the collapse of the northern overland route. Chapter 10 chronicles the not unrelated collapse of the sea route.

This leads to the final question of the book, which will be explored in Chapter 11. Did the West rise or did the East fall? In Part III we intend to demonstrate that the East had already substantially “fallen” before the Portuguese men-of-war appeared in the Indian Ocean. That weakened world was a plum ripe for the taking. No special “virtue” inhered in the conquerors; they took control of the remnants of a preexisting world system, one they then ruthlessly honed to serve their own ends.

CHAPTER

8



The Indian Subcontinent: On the Way to Everywhere

During medieval times the Indian subcontinent, particularly its southern end, served as both a natural link and a divider in the great sea route that connected the Mediterranean region and the Middle East with China. South India was a major and logical landfall, on whose west coast ships from Africa and Mesopotamia landed and on whose east coast westward-bound ships from China or the islands and peninsulas of Indonesia, Malaysia, or Thailand found safe harbor. Evidence from antiquity and even prehistoric times suggests that even before the most distant termini were in direct contact with one another, south India constituted a true “hinge”¹ (albeit only for shorter segments) between the separate basins of the Indian Ocean—that great “highway” for the migration of peoples, for cultural diffusion, and for economic exchange.

South India, as Stein notes (1982a), does not constitute a monolithic and undifferentiated “natural” unit, although it is conventionally identified as the Dravidian area south of the Krishna River and the watershed of its major tributary. Rather, it contains two

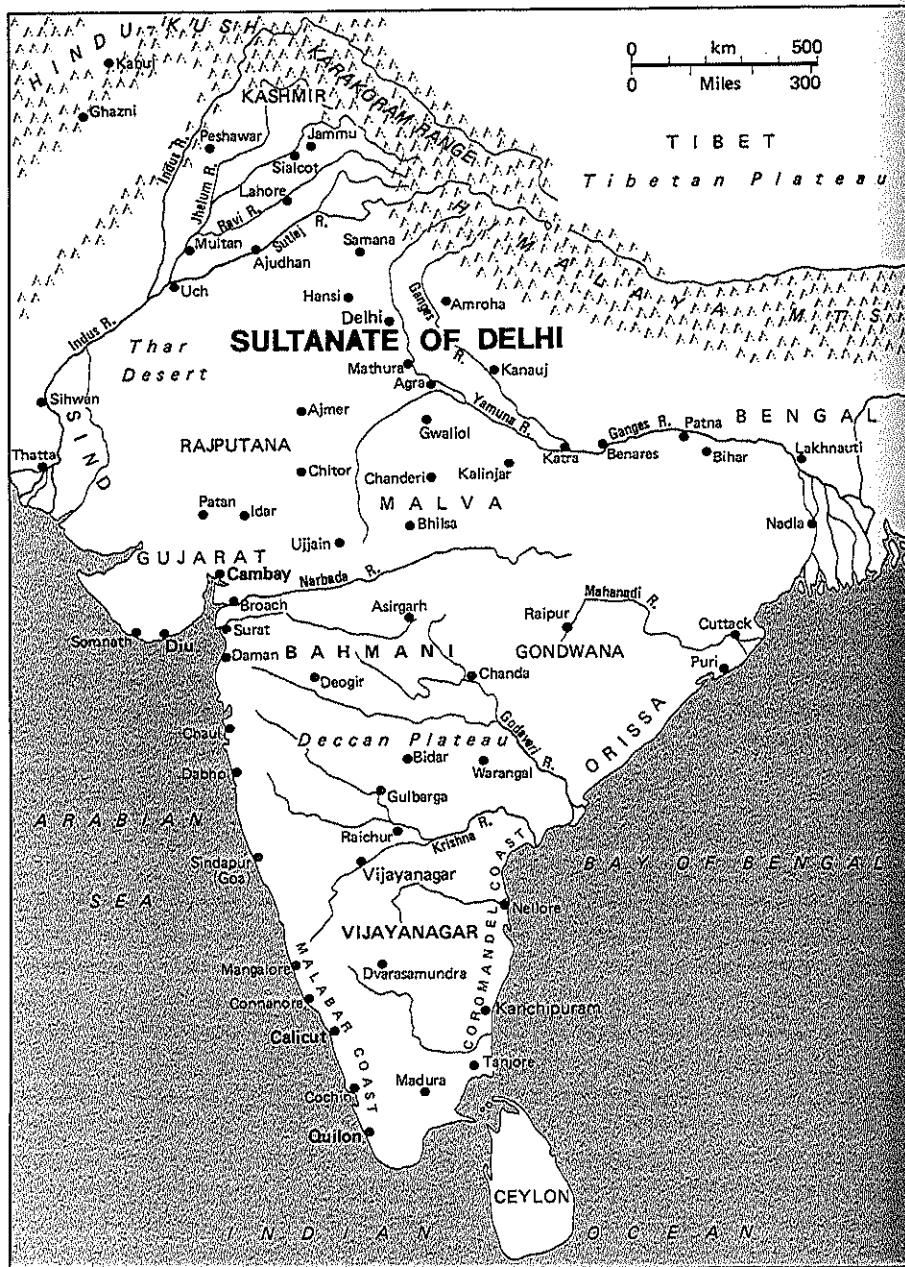


FIGURE 12. Continental India showing regions and cities.

macroecological zones: the Malabar Coast (now centered at the Indian province of Kerala), an isolated narrow coastal region along the western littoral, and, separated from Malabar by high ridges, the wider plains macroregion to the east, the land of the Tamils, whose coastal zone is referred to as Coromandel.² (See Figure 12.)

Most South Indianists, particularly those interested in the medieval period, have concentrated their studies on the Tamil plain since this is where a succession of "high" civilizations developed, beginning with Pallava rule in the third century A.D. (See, *inter alia*, Nilakanta Sastri, 1976: 101 *seq.*) The Pallavas, who had invaded from the north, were ultimately displaced by an indigenous dynasty, the Chola, who between the fifth and thirteenth centuries developed a remarkably advanced agrarian, mercantile, and industrial society. It is easy to understand why scholars have paid almost exclusive attention to this eastern region, since the social, linguistic, and cultural forms of Chola civilization "profoundly influenced people over a great portion of the southern peninsula" (Stein, 1982a: 16).

Stein is understandably reluctant to combine Malabar with this more agrarian "civilized" region, not only because the two subregions differ in terms of climate and social organization³ but because "after the tenth century . . . [Malabar] along with the rest of Chera country (Kerala) was a region of extreme isolation from other parts of the southern peninsula." Malabar, however, cannot be ignored because of the preeminent role it played in the trade system (Stein, 1982a: 14–15). It is this role that interests us most.

It is important to recognize that both subregions of south India were involved in primitive world economies long before the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It is therefore necessary to glance backward to trace their linkages to systems to their west and east.

Early Links Westward to the Mediterranean

For our purposes the westernmost "circuit" of the Indian Ocean arena, still functioning with vitality in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, had always existed, although the traffic over that early

route naturally expanded and contracted with the fortunes of the societies it linked.

Apparently, the sea trade to and from Gujarat and perhaps even the Malabar Coast was already part of a trade system connecting west and south Asia 4,000 years ago (Stein, 1982a: 18). Thus, long before the Christian era, the sea link between Mesopotamia (now Iraq) and what the Arabs referred to as "Sind" (today's Pakistan) was well established and was even beginning to stretch southward, possibly carried by the migration of northern peoples.

From the beginning, the people of the alluvial plains on which two of the world's earliest urban societies emerged—Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers that debouched into the Persian Gulf, and the valley between the branches of the Indus River whose mouth lay on the north Arabian Sea—were involved in trade, cultural contact, and perhaps even population exchange. Their trade with one another is attested to not only by the existence, on the soil, of each other's artifacts (Tibbetts, 1956: 183–184) but by excavations at important intermediate points, such as the island of Dilmun (now Bahrain), whose major function was to serve that transit.

The third riverine civilization developing in the Nile valley also seems to have maintained early sea links with other evolving centers, both at the eastern Mediterranean (Ebla north of contemporary Aleppo in present-day Syria, Byblos just north of today's Beirut, and possibly even southeastern Anatolia in present-day Turkey) and along the various coasts of the Arabian Sea: Punt (assumed to be Ethiopia), the southern littoral of the Arabian Peninsula, and perhaps even with the western edge of the Indian subcontinent, although evidence for this is more tenuous.

Certainly, by the first millennium B.C. commerce was already thriving between the Red Sea and northwest India. Control of this trade may have been captured by the Arabs of the peninsula as early as the third century before Christ, and in spite of growing Greek involvement, these sailors continued to dominate it for centuries to come (Spencer, 1983: 76; Ballard, 1984: 15–16).⁴ They were often the intermediaries in the Mediterranean world's growing commercial contacts with the east.

The nature of these contacts, which remains only conjectural for earlier epochs, becomes better documented during the "clas-

sical" Hellenic and Roman periods. By then the lines from the Mediterranean to the northern and western parts of the Indian subcontinent were more deeply, albeit selectively, etched. Routes went overland and also by sea, not only via the Persian Gulf but also by way of the canal in Egypt that connected the Mediterranean and the Nile with the Red Sea.

During this phase of European exploration into the westernmost parts of the Indian Ocean arena, the Arabian Sea became a known and exploited route, and a few westerners may even have ventured into the second "circuit" that already connected southeastern India with the multiple generating units of Southeast Asia. The *Periplus of the Eurythraean Sea*, written in the first century A.D., demonstrates that navigation manuals for the sea route to India were highly refined by that time, confirming Europe's long-standing trade with the subcontinent.⁵ Literary references also allude to this trade. Thus, Petronius (early first century) refers disapprovingly to the scandalous gossamer Indian cottons adorning Roman women, and Pliny (mid-first century) graphically describes the way to Indian ports through Egypt; the second century geography of Ptolemy even includes a description of the Malabar coast (Logan, reprinted 1981, I: 288–293). Christianity may have been introduced to the Malabar coast (present-day Kerala) as early as late Roman times, a factor that was later to feed Crusader rumors about the Kingdom of Prester John (Beckingham and Huntingford, 1961).

The Romans imported exotic animals, precious stones, woods and ivory, Chinese silk, spices, and even sugar, cotton and fruits from the subcontinent. But "since the Romans desired far more from India than Indians desired from Rome, the Romans had to make up the difference with precious metals" (Spencer, 1983: 77). The hoards of Roman gold coins⁶ found at coastal points of the subcontinent confirm that then, as it would be later,⁷ the balance of trade was overwhelmingly in India's favor (Spencer, 1983: 76–77; Richards, 1986: *passim* but particularly 31–34; Toussaint, 1966: 40).

The "fall" of Rome had serious implications for the Arab merchants whose trade underwent a sharp decline in the fifth and sixth centuries (Spencer, 1983: 79). South Arabia entered a period of economic stagnation, leaving the Persian Sassanids to keep the lines to the east open until the newly Islamized Arabs, from the

Abbasid capital in Mesopotamia, reentered the Indian Ocean trade in the eighth century. From that time until their defeat by the Portuguese in the first decade of the sixteenth century,⁸ Muslim traders dominated one, two, or sometimes all three of the Indian Ocean circuits.

As recounted in Chapter 6, as early as the eighth century Arab-Persian ships were already making the complete journey from the Persian Gulf to Chinese ports on the South China Sea. This lengthy voyage, however, was never efficient, since the wind patterns dictated long port layovers in liminal places at which separate monsoon patterns met in countercyclical directions. Ports on the southwest coast of India and in the Strait of Malacca area, flanked by Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, were such liminal points. By the tenth century the long journey was being broken at India and again at the strait, stopping places virtually dictated by the "seasons for travel," that is, the monsoons.⁹

In these locations resident colonies of foreign merchants were gradually established. (For the nature of the diaspora trade, see Curtin, 1984.) The reason was obvious. Faced with layovers of three to six months or longer, sojourners set up many of the communal institutions they needed to conduct their lives—ceremonial mosques and temples in which to pray, economic and legal institutions to govern their dealings with one another and with the indigenous inhabitants whom they occasionally converted and often married, and even whole residential quarters and bazaars in which to store transit goods and conduct transactions. The ninth century Arab historian, al-Baladhuri, for example, refers to settlements of Muslim merchants at the Indus mouth, the Malabar coast, and on Ceylon (Toussaint, 1966: 49). Goitein (1963) mentions Jewish merchant colonies not only at Malabar but on the Coromandel coast as well.

Resident factors, not used by the Italians until the fourteenth century, were thus an early feature of the Indian Ocean trade. As the scale of commercial operations expanded in the ninth century, and particularly in the tenth when Fatimid traffic from the Red Sea joined the stream of trade coming from the Persian Gulf, fewer shipowners made the complete circuit and fewer merchants accompanied their goods all the way to China. Instead, they tended to remain in their Indian colonies.

Foreign colonies of Middle Eastern merchants were established earliest on the northwestern coast of India where they blended with the local population. The Islamization of Gujarati merchants began in the first centuries of Islam. Conversions intensified at the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth centuries with the establishment of the Muslim so-called Slave or Turkish Sultanate of Delhi. Ever since Fatimid times, however, Jewish and Muslim merchants had also set up trade colonies farther south in the region called the Malabar coast.¹⁰ By mid-thirteenth century, one of these settlements, Calicut, became the prime "colonial" port for Muslims traders in that part of south India.

Before discussing these later developments, we briefly examine the early history of the opposite littoral of south India, the Coromandel Coast, which had as ancient a role in maritime trade with Southeast Asia as the west coast had with the Middle East.

Early Links Eastward to Southeast Asia

Contacts between India and Southeast Asia apparently go much farther back in time than earlier investigators had assumed. Originally, scholars believed that China and India were the civilizing influences on Southeast Asia (even D. G. E. Hall, 1981, perpetuates this view); "natives" of the islands of Southeast Asia were viewed either as passive recipients or, at best, active imitators of the more advanced cultures and technologies introduced from the continental core regions.¹¹

A new view now prevails. Spencer (1983: 67) emphasizes the importance of Wilhelm G. Solheim II's archaeological excavations in Thailand that suggest "Southeast Asians may have been the very first Asians to grind and polish stone tools, plant rice, make pottery, and cast bronze." Certainly, the results of excavations in the mid-1960s are dramatic. Solheim found evidence of the domestication of plants in Thailand as early as 10,000 B.C. and even an imprint of a grain of rice that has been carbon dated to about 3500 B.C., a thousand years before its presence has been verified in India or China. According to Solheim, Thai metallurgy began in about 4000 B.C., and fine quality bronze was already being

produced by the third millennium, some 500 years before it was found in India and 1000 years before China. The long-distance outrigger was also devised by about 4,000 B.C., and this seems to have initiated major outmigrations by water. "During the third millennium B.C., in a series of distinct migrations, the boat-using peoples entered the islands of Indonesia and the Philippines and also sailed westward, reaching Madagascar around 2000 years ago" (Spencer, 1983: 69-71).

If, as Solheim suggests, Southeast Asian sailors were sailing and trading in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea by the first millennium B.C., then it seems more likely that Indian and Chinese civilizations were infused by these mobile culture carriers than that the influence was in the opposite direction (Spencer, 1983: 72). Stein (1982a) acknowledges that sea contacts via the Coromandel coast were so ancient that the basic ethnic composition of the peninsula may have been influenced by overseas migrations from Southeast Asia.

And yet, although it may have been true that these Southeast Asian mariner/traders had a "virtual monopoly on this water until the Arab traders started coming in" (Solheim as quoted in Spencer, 1983: 72), such a monopoly could not have been complete because ever since the early centuries of the Christian era, strong cultural influences have operated in the opposite direction (Stein, 1982a: 17-18).

Indian culture spread eastward along the same routes, even before Pallava times. Thus, the question of when and how the Indian Archipelago (Indonesia) was "Indianized" is, to some extent, irrelevant. The connections had, for all practical purposes, always existed. That during the early Middle Ages it should have been Indian influences, via Hinduism and Buddhism, that shaped the so-called kingdom of Srivijaya along the Strait of Malacca was merely the continuation of influences traveling back and forth along ancient waterways. (Chapter 9 discusses this in greater detail.)

Once trade began to recover in the tenth and eleventh centuries, however, economies throughout Asia expanded markedly. New powers emerged, such as the Cholas in southern India, the Khmers in Angkor, the Burmese at Pagan, the Ly in northern Vietnam, and the Sung on the Chinese mainland. "Among other results,

these consolidations seem to have stimulated Asia's maritime commerce and precipitated a tremendous burst of energy among the community of international traders who traveled the navigation channels connecting eastern and western Asia" (Hall, 1980: 162).

Spencer (1983: 74, italics added) adopts the idea of an "archipelago of towns," cautioning us not to see this trade in terms of "nations." His comments are particularly apposite.

When we speak of Indian contacts with Southeast Asia during the centuries prior to about 1000 A.D., we are referring to a diverse set of relationships whose common background consisted of a tenuous but far-flung network of maritime commerce. Although it is convenient to speak of relations between "India" and "Southeast Asia," we must remember that both realms were very diverse and did not act or interact as politically or culturally unified entities. . . . It is likely that *inhabitants of some coastal settlements in Southeast Asia had better contacts and more interests in common with other such settlements in India or south China than they had with their own hinterlands. . . .* The Indianization of Southeast Asia . . . was both preceded and paralleled by the growth of cosmopolitan port societies. . . . *In general, goods traveled farther than men; few individuals traveled across the entire arc.*

Different groups of merchants were prominent at different times, and often the same ships carried merchants from a variety of places, since the largest could accommodate several hundred persons (Spencer, 1983: 75).

Indian merchants from the Coromandel Coast were actively journeying eastward in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries. There is some evidence of interchanges between the Cholas and the rulers of Srivijaya by the eleventh century; we even have an account of a raid the Cholas made against Srivijayan ports in 1025. Twelfth-century Chinese sources recognize Chola ports as first-class trade partners and list pearls, coral, betelnuts, cardomons, and cotton products among the items imported from Coromandel. Western sources list spices, aromatics, dyeing and varnishing plants, medicinal herbs, silk, and particularly cotton (Hall, 1980: 163). These goods were carried in ships owned by Tamil merchants with "home offices" on Ceylon and the Coromandel coast (Digby, 1982: 127). Clearly, south Indian exports required a network of relations to agricultural hinterlands and inland trading towns (Hall,

1980: 164), a point we shall return to later when we discuss industrial developments and commercial practices under the Chola.

The Western Coast of India: Gujarat and Malabar in Medieval Times

Because of the natural division of south India into two subregions with quite different ecological bases, forms of social organization, and international arenas for trade, it is necessary to discuss each separately. This does not mean that there were neither cultural linkages nor periodic political unifications. In general terms, however, the two faced opposite ways: the west coast looked to the Middle East, a region described in Chapters 6 and 7, whereas the east coast looked to Southeast Asia, to be discussed at greater length in Chapter 9. We therefore begin with Gujarat and Malabar.

Gujarat

The promontory of the Gujarat peninsula on the northwest coast of India, bordered by the Gulf of Kutch to its north and the Gulf of Cambay to its south, had harbored ships, sailors, and merchants since the dawn of its development. To this day, Gujaratis are noted for their business acumen. It is likely that the small number of Indian merchants whose presence is recorded in Egypt and possibly even in Rome during classical times came from that region (Toussaint, 1966: 60). Other contacts were traditionally maintained with ports in the Persian Gulf and along the Arabian littoral, since local documents specifically refer to them. By the early days of Islam, the ports of Cambay and Saymur had already absorbed resident colonies of Arab merchants, some extremely wealthy, as well as sailors from Siraf, Oman, Basra, and Baghdad, whose presence and permanent incorporation through intermarriage Mas'udi observed in the early tenth century when he sojourned there (Chaudhuri, 1985: 98).

The prosperity of Gujarat, sensitive to the transit trade and the demand for the raw and finished products of its hinterlands, fluctuated with conditions in the wider system. However, these forces,

rather than operating in a single direction, often set up cross-currents of influence. Thus, Richards (1986: 1) indicates that, because of the fragmentation of power and, it might be added, ensuing impoverishment, "North India in the eighth to the twelfth centuries did not attract precious metals at the same intensity that it had in earlier periods." This was perhaps because during the ninth and tenth centuries Baghdad imported only luxury goods from India and China. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, however, demand diversified and merchants from Baghdad and Cairo were purchasing large amounts of pepper and other spices and textiles, some destined for Europe (Richards, 1986: 2-3):

The really major change took place after 1200. By then the carrying capacity and the trading capacity of the great maritime routes had enlarged from the norm in late antiquity. . . . By the thirteenth century true bulk commodities to meet the most basic needs had entered these great arteries of trade. Contemporary descriptions list manufactured textiles, metals, utensils, weapons; semi-processed raw materials such as raw silk, raw cotton; and extracted forest or marine products. . . . Even live horses were shipped in this trade. The most surprising change is the inclusion of bulk foodstuffs such as grains, sugar, butter, salt and dried foods.

What accounted for this thirteenth-century transformation? The great expansion in Mediterranean trade was certainly a primary factor. This global process was reinforced by more local changes as well, to which the emergence of powerful Muslim states in north India contributed significantly. The "new large scale currencies, new state tax structures, and growing populations and markets all favored enlarged flows of precious metals . . . [to India, due to] the renewed role of India in the relationships of the medieval world economy during the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries" (Richards, 1986; but see also Habib, 1982: 82-85).

Counterforces, however, were also at work. Thus, the Mongol conquest of Persia and Iraq by mid-thirteenth century had deflected part of the trade that formerly passed through Gujarat's harbors, since some Mediterranean traffic shifted to the Red Sea and therefore to such southern (Malabar) ports as Quilon and later Calicut. But the fact that Gujarat was absorbed into the Muslim sultanate of Delhi in 1303-1304 reinfused it with vitality, since it became

the chief importer of the luxury goods demanded by the conspicuously consuming Delhi elite (Chaudhuri, 1985: 58). Foreign merchants dominated the trade. In the early fourteenth century, Ibn Battuta (Husain trans., 1955: 172) described Cambay, the major port of Gujarat, as "one of the most beautiful cities as regards the artistic architecture of its houses and . . . mosques;" these had been constructed by "the majority of its inhabitants [who] are foreign merchants."

Throughout the late Middle Ages, Gujarat continued to play an important role in international shipping and commerce, gradually gaining control over the trade in East African and Coromandel coast ports as well. Gujarati merchants and sailors were still very active in the Indian Ocean trade when the Portuguese made their sudden and frightening appearance at the end of the fifteenth century. Indeed, it seems likely that the navigator who guided Vasco da Gama from Malindi, on the East African coast, to Calicut was a Gujarati (Gopal, 1975: 1; Tibbetts, 1981: 10).¹²

The presence of Gujaratis in East Africa was neither unusual nor new. Cotton cloth was exported to Africa early and continued to find its way there as late as the 1500s, since "Barbosa, the Portuguese traveller who arrived in India some time around 1500 . . . witnessed ships from the kingdom of Cambay at the ports of Mombasa and Malindi. . . . [and] found further that the rulers of the island kingdoms of Zanzibar and Mafia, south of Mombasa, were dressed in fine silk and cotton textiles, purchased in Mombasa from Gujarati traders" (Gopal, 1975: 2). Barbosa also saw Gujarati ships laden with textiles anchored at Aden (Gopal, 1975: 3), as had Ibn Battuta 150 years earlier (Husain trans., 1955: xlv). When Hormuz on the Persian Gulf was captured by the Portuguese in 1507, "the conquerors stopped the export of horses to Gujarat in order to weaken the military might of the [Indian] Sultanate" (Gopal, 1975: 4), since horses were, of course, the "tanks" of medieval warfare. The close ties between Mamluk Egypt and Gujarat are further confirmed by the fact that it was their joint fleet that the Portuguese finally routed at Diu in 1509.

Malabar—Calicut

The merchants of the Malabar coast, although perhaps of slightly later vintage, were certainly as wealthy, powerful, astute (and

"foreign") as those of Gujarat. At least since the ninth century, Quilon in the extreme south had been an important port of call for Arab ships and, during the time when the Sung seriously took to the sea, for Chinese junks as well. It was still functioning in the 1330s when Ibn Battuta was shipwrecked nearby, although by then it was dwarfed by Calicut, its rival some distance north, which came to prominence in the mid-thirteenth century.

Accordingly to Das Gupta (1967: quotation from 4-5, italics added) Calicut's rise and fall mirrored shifts in west Asian trade routes, a point made earlier in Chapter 6.

Calicut itself was thrown up by a mighty upheaval of Asian trade in the middle of the thirteenth century. Before this time the ports of the Persian Gulf had maintained a predominance in the commerce of the Arabian Sea. Vessels had usually sailed from Bussora and Hormuz to Quilon and Colombo. Quilon . . . had been the centre for the numerous junks from China. Long-range arteries of maritime trade had spanned the Asian continent as Chinese junks and Arab *dhouws* obdurately sailed to and fro between southern China and the Persian shores. This structure broke down with the collapse of the Abbasiud caliphate [*sic*] at its western end. In February 1258, the city of Baghdad was stormed by the Mongols. . . . This political collapse caused a commercial decline. The area of the Persian Gulf lost its important role in the trade of the Arabian Sea. Egypt under its vigorous Mamluk sultans assumed control, and Arab traders of Cairo . . . known as the Karimi merchants began to sail from a revived Aden to the newly established Calicut. . . . [There had been a] grave political upheaval in Malabar sometime before the turning of trade. The coast . . . had been partitioned and a vigorous young family had come into possession of a tiny strip of territory. . . .

Thus, Calicut, under the new power of the "king of the seas," Samudri Raja (later distorted to Zamorin), came to prominence in the second half of the thirteenth century when Muslim merchants coming from the Red Sea flocked to the port because the Zamorins offered them attractive trading terms in return for their political and financial support (Krishna Ayyar, 1938, for more details).¹³

Although ships sailing between the Red Sea and the Strait of Malacca occasionally docked at Sri Lanka (Ceylon, called Sarandib by Arab geographers), most stopped at the commercial complex at Calicut where Gujarati and Jewish merchants shared in the

prosperous trade, although as Das Gupta (1967: 6) notes, "there is no mistaking the predominance of the Arabs especially in the carrying trade of the Arabian Sea." There is also no mistaking the dramatic effects of Calicut's sudden rise to prominence. In Das Gupta's (1967: 5-6) words:

The prosperity of Calicut meant the decline of Quilon and the victory of the Cairo merchants over their rivals from southern China. The Arabs made Calicut their home, assisted the Samudri in his territorial expansion and drew his support for their commercial ambition. The Chinese watched their long-established trade in the Arabian Sea go down in the face of this Arab-Indian combination. "In the fifteenth century a few junks from China still reached India but most of them stopped at Malacca; Indian-owned ships covered the section between Malacca and the Indian coasts; Arab-owned ships dominated the Arabian seas . . . [With this] the long-range network of Asian trade fell into disuse, although Arab *dhouws* still made the trip from Aden to Malacca." [W. H. Moreland, as quoted by Das Gupta]

The End(?) of Arab-Indian Hegemony in the Western Indian Ocean

Throughout the medieval period, Arab ships and merchants continued to dominate the western circuit between the Persian Gulf-Red Sea and the south Indian coasts; there, they were joined by Indian ships that shared with the Chinese, dominion over the second circuit to the Strait.

During the early Sung period, Chinese ships preferred to meet Indian traders in the Strait, but from time to time China allowed Persian, Arab, Malaysian, and Indian ships to enter a few select harbors in which their transactions were closely supervised by state officials. By the late Sung and Yuan periods, however, not only did the Chinese open more ports to foreign ships but Chinese junks were aggressively foraying to Indian ports to meet Arab vessels there. The founding of the Ming dynasty in 1368 did not immediately reverse this situation (Lo, 1958). During early Ming times the Chinese continued to maintain an impressive navy, a fact demonstrated in the opening decades of the fifteenth century by the wide-ranging large fleet of Admiral Cheng Ho. Nevertheless,

Chinese withdrawal from the Indian Ocean had become permanent and dramatically complete by the mid-1430s.

This "vacuum of power," created by the disappearance of the best organized and armed navy in the entire expanse, left only the small Mamluk fleet (albeit with its Gujarati allies) standing in the way of the Portuguese intruders. When viewed from the perspective of the Mediterranean, this vacuum was certainly unusual. In the Mediterranean, a perpetual state of naval warfare existed from the ninth century onward, and commercial ships, therefore, always traveled in military convoys. That was not true in the Indian Ocean since sea warfare did not characterize commerce there. We must ask why.

In spite of the existence of at least four sea powers sharing at least portions of the continuous ocean expanse that stretched from the Arabian to the South China Seas, such trade "was essentially peaceful" (Das Gupta, 1967: 7; also Toussaint, 1966: 101). Just as trade caravans were granted a mutually beneficial immunity from plunder on land, so apparently, sea traders from a variety of provenances respected the ships of others and, indeed, often carried the goods and passengers of each other. That does not mean that "piracy" was unknown. It certainly constituted a problem in the Indian Ocean (particularly in the straits area) that required constant vigilance, punitive raids, and occasionally even pay-offs in the form of "tribute." But the ships of the various "nations" participating in the trade did not seem to view each other as threats, nor did they throw the invective of "pirate" at one another. As Chaudhuri (1985: 14) stated so well:

before the arrival of the Portuguese . . . in 1498 there had been no organised attempt by any political power to control the sea-lanes and the long-distance trade of Asia. . . . The Indian Ocean as a whole and its different seas were not dominated by any particular nations or empires.

Merchants did not usually depend, as did the Italians, on state-armed convoys to guard their passage. Ships tended to travel together, but mostly for mutual assistance and because propitious sailing times were so strictly limited by the monsoon winds on which all, regardless of ethnicity, depended.

This system of laissez-faire and multiethnic shipping, established over long centuries of relative peace and tolerance, was clearly unprepared for an incursion by a new player following very different "rules of the game." Thus, toward the end of December 1500 when "the Portuguese captain Cabral decided to attack and seize two Muslim ships loading pepper at Calicut [then a town containing some 15,000 Muslim traders (Toussaint, 1966: 101)], he sinned against this unwritten law" (Das Gupta, 1967: 7). Das Gupta (1967: 8-9) concludes:

The Portuguese were important not because they were violent [although they certainly were] but because they were original. They brought with them a new kind of trading which was substantially different from Asian trade. Both of course were still medieval and the newness which was Portuguese could not alter the system of production and distribution prevalent in Asia. Still there was an important difference. . . . [The Arab merchants of Calicut were convinced that] the Portuguese were not traders but pirates. . . . [T]heir apprehensions, by and large, came true. The Portuguese gradually elaborated a complex system of compulsion.

On land, they forced a series of treaties that essentially gave them the right to buy products at below market prices and at sea they instituted a violently enforced pass system that required Asian vessels to purchase a Portuguese "permit." Through their military force, the Portuguese thus caused a radical restructuring of the ports of trade throughout the Indian Ocean; this restructuring eventually undermined Calicut, albeit only gradually and incompletely.

Although its Muslim (Arab and Indian) merchant aristocracy still prospered in the early sixteenth century (Das Gupta, 1967: 11), Calicut was declining. Once the Portuguese channeled most of the trade to the ports of Cochin and Goa over which they exercised exclusive control, the remaining ports of India were reduced to secondary stature contingent on Portuguese sufferance. By the eighteenth century, an English visitor described Calicut as a modest fishing village of low leaf-thatched huts, although it was still the primary metropolis of Malabar in which remnants of the Indianized Muslim merchant community continued to exploit a dying trade (Das Gupta, 1967: 1), albeit under the heel of European hegemony.

The Organization of Southeast Indian Societies in the Middle Ages

The agrarian societies on the eastern plains—the Pallava, Chola, Pandyas, and eventually even the Vijayanagar—although neither as isolated nor as exclusively concerned with trade as their counterparts on the Malabar coast, also participated in the great revival of commerce that began in the eighth and ninth centuries. Stein (1982a: 19, italics added) tells us that

From about the ninth century, *wealthy and prestigious associations of [Tamil] merchants*, trading over extensive portions of the southern peninsula and beyond, *were integrally connected with the dominant agrarian institutions*. Itinerant tradesmen . . . provided one of the means by which the scattered, advanced agrarian communities of the period were linked together.

By the eleventh century Tamil traders were organized into commercial corporations supported by the Chola state (Stein, 1982a: 20). The Chola had become more adventurous, establishing temporary control in Ceylon and the Maldives and raiding as far afield as Srivijaya, although they had "neither the tradition of, nor the apparatus suited to, the realization of state revenue through an orderly administrative system" (Stein, 1982a: 20) and were always more preoccupied with their agrarian hinterlands than their sea forays.

By the twelfth century, however, the Tamils were already losing their preeminence, as Muslim merchants from the western regions (many of them Indian) took over their roles (Stein, 1982a: 40). Interestingly, it was at this time that "spices, [and] . . . Indian and Middle Eastern silks and cottons entered Chinese ports in greater numbers" (Richards, 1986: 3). The Chola state, however, did not greatly benefit from this boom, since its interest in overseas trade seems to have come to an end some time in the thirteenth century (Stein, 1982a: 40).

As previously noted, in contrast to the freewheeling and fragmented political system of the Malabar coast, the agrarian states of southeast India, notably the Chola that lasted until 1279 (followed by an interregnum) and the Vijayanagar military feudal state that eventually succeeded it about 1350, were oriented more to-

ward the extraction of agricultural surplus than to long-distance trade. Stein (1982a: 24–25) offers a useful explanation for the connection between terrain and Tamil political organization:

Irrigated rice culture [as found on the Coromandel plains] permitted a high degree of routinization of cultivation practices. . . . The major tasks for the dominant people in such conditions have been to maintain control over the land and labour and extend the hydro-agricultural type of irrigation system. Where these conditions existed in south India, one found the early prominence of a powerful peasant society, of Hindu institutions and Brahmans as major recipients of agricultural surplus and of powerful regional overlords as that of the Cholas.

This yielded a very different class structure than was found at Malabar. Although agrarian labor in the hydraulic societies of southeast India was not exactly slave, it was “bonded,” that is, tied to the land (Stein, 1982a: 27, 30–31), which has given rise to interminable discussions as to whether India was feudalistic in the Middle Ages (see, for example, Mukhia, 1981; Sharma, 1965, 1985; Stein, 1985). Furthermore, unlike the situation in either north India or Malabar, the rulers were rarely part of a warrior caste.¹⁴

However, contrary to the system of “Oriental Despotism” posited by Wittfogel (1957) for societies dependent upon irrigation, the south Indian kingdoms were neither highly centralized nor despotic. In spite of the existence of a series of great kingships in the macroregion, centralized control over large areas was never achieved. Kings were ceremonially recognized as legitimate, but lacked imperial reach. Thus, kingship coexisted with a high degree of local autonomy vested in local assemblies of various sorts.¹⁵ Stein (1982a: 32, 35) stresses that

In . . . south India until the fourteenth century, . . . there is no evidence of local resources being legally and regularly transferred from local, nuclear areas of agrarian organization and production to the “state.” One hears of land records, land taxes, and trade duties only at the level of the locality, or later, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, at the level of clusters of localities. . . . It is only with respect to irrigation taxes that one finds systematic larger records of revenues, but these were expended locally.

Just as the government was not in full control of agricultural production, it was also unable to fully exploit the foreign trade

that tied its domains to the world market. Instead, local *samayam*¹⁶ organizations of itinerant merchants helped administer the Chola ports and “also assumed administrative control over major trade emporia of the hinterlands.” Hall (1980: 165) notes that Chola ports were administered “by royal officials who, together with groups of itinerant merchants and local assemblies, controlled the activities of the foreign merchants and their contacts with the indigenous commercial networks.”

Although the transit trade (albeit significantly supplemented by local pepper crops) was central to the prosperity of the Malabar region, on the Tamil plain such trade was integrated more closely with agrarian production and the processing of agricultural products. One of the crops was cotton. From an early time, the textile production associated with cotton gave some cities of the eastern region an industrial, or rather, a protoindustrial character, closer to that of Flanders than Malabar.

Textile Production in Kanchipuram

As early as the sixth century A.D., the Pallava capital of Kanchipuram (near present-day Madras) was an important urban center noted for its commercial as well as its religious functions (Mahalingam, 1969). Kenneth Hall (1980: 88–89) believes that its prominence was the result of its strategic location in one of the major cotton-producing regions of ancient South India, which led to its development as a weaving center.

Textile activity evidently continued into Chola times, even after Kanchipuram was no longer the capital city. Hall (1980: 89–90) reports:

Cola inscriptions describe a sophisticated system of cloth production characterized by specialization: raw cotton was acquired and then redistributed to spinners who spun the threads, these were then passed along to weavers who manufactured the various qualities of cloth, then the finished cloth was retailed or wholesaled by professional merchants who specialized in cloth sales. All this activity focused upon Kanchipuram.

We are still not certain how the textile industry was organized during Chola times, and Hall (1980: 115) is noticeably tentative in

his exposition. He suggests that wealthy cloth merchants controlled the supply of cloth which

may have involved a "putting out" of raw materials into the homes of spinners and weavers where the raw materials were manufactured into a finished product. In the weaving industry a group of merchants such as the *caliya-nagarattar* could well have supplied yarn to local weavers . . . [who] could have returned their finished product to the source of their raw materials . . . who then marketed the cloth. Whether a weaver received a share of the profits from the product's sale . . . is not recorded. Nor is there evidence that merchants exercised wage controls over artisans or for that matter that production standards were set or that fines were levied for poor craftsmanship.

There is some debate over the technological sophistication of Indian textile production. Irfan Habib, whose specialty is Mughul India, has been the primary proponent of the view that technology was primitive until quite late and that it advanced only through the import first of Middle Eastern and then European techniques. (See Habib, 1969, a view later revised in 1980 but also Habib, 1982.) The evidence from south India, however, reveals a different picture.

Ramaswamy (1980: 227) has demonstrated that in the south, the carding bow was employed by the sixth century A.D. and the vertical loom, apparently quite ancient, was in use by the twelfth century (Ramaswamy, 1980: 230). There is also evidence for the use of the jacquard or pattern loom from the eleventh century onward (Ramaswamy, 1980: 231) and of block printing from the twelfth century (Ramaswamy, 1980: 237). Only with respect to the late adoption of the spinning wheel was Habib's contention sustained. In the thirteenth century south Indian women were still using the spindle, since the spinning wheel was introduced into India from Turkey no earlier than the fourteenth century (Ramaswamy, 1980: 227-228). [It was not introduced into Europe until the sixteenth century (Ramaswamy, 1980: 241).] All of this suggests that "Indian loom technology was in no way inferior to that of the West or China as has so far been assumed by the majority of historians" (Ramaswamy, 1980: 231).

Although we may not understand exactly how the Chola textile industry was organized, we do know that production was at a

significant scale and that, at least in Kanchipuram, weavers occupied four quarters of the city (Hall, 1980: 91). We also know that the wealth and power of the merchant class grew as the industrial base of textiles expanded.

The Merchant Class

Even before Chola times, trading towns, called *nagaram*,¹⁷ had been established in each of the administrative districts (*nadu*) of the Pallava kingdom, in which local as well as long-distance trade could be conducted with relative freedom in return for transmitting taxes on transactions to the ruling power. This pattern continued into the Chola era. At Kanchipuram, the Chola kings maintained the same relationship with the *nagaram* (assembly of merchants) that had been established in Pallava times, giving merchants economic, administrative, and even religious control over the marketing sectors of the city in return for collecting local taxes (Hall, 1980: 93). Clearly, such autonomy was tolerated because the *nagaram* commanded "the loyalty of a vast regional commercial network" from which it generated "considerable commercially derived tax revenues for the royal treasury" (Hall, 1980: 94).

Such income depended in part on the level of textile production. The royalty profited from the taxes collected on the sale of cotton, the spinning of thread, weaving, and from fees for loom licenses. Thus, "Kancipuram's commercial activity was a direct benefit to . . . Cola monarchs." By the twelfth century such production and trade became increasingly sophisticated, as patron-client relationships gave way to more abstract ties. Producers "sold their own merchandise . . . or entered into relationships with a professional merchant class who acted as their intermediaries" (Hall, 1980: 96-97).

By the late twelfth century, international traders were making regular calls at ports on the Coromandel coast and local itinerant merchants ran a well-organized system that provided the pearls, betelnuts, spices, and cotton products demanded abroad. The Chola rulers took a positive stance toward this trade because they derived considerable financial benefits from it (Hall, 1980: 2-3). Gradually, however, they lost power to the growing strength of the merchant class who, as the Chola state decayed, "became more

visible, and in some instances formed the nucleus of the development of new centers of political authority" (Hall, 1980: 4).¹⁸

Urbanization

As a result of the healthy position of textile manufacture and the growing international demand for this product, the thirteenth century was, in south India as in western Europe, a period of heightened urbanization. According to Stein (1982a: 36), "at no time since the Classical period of . . . Tamil . . . in the early centuries of the Christian era did urban places possess the importance they had after the thirteenth century."

But urban expansion was attributable less to long-distance trade, which was moving into the hands of Muslim traders from the west coast, than to a concentration of power within the state. One of the means used to consolidate central control was the Hindu temple, many of which were constructed in the thirteenth century (Stein, 1982a: 37). Stein (1982a: 38–39) suggests that temple construction, because it brought together so many artisans and service workers, did as much to create towns as the centralizing states that gave rise to it. This pattern was continued by the Chola's successors.

Transformations in the Mid-Fourteenth Century

As noted in the discussion of the Malabar Coast, the dates of "rise" and "fall" that prove so powerful in analyzing medieval European and, to a lesser extent, Middle Eastern subsystems, seem less relevant to the west coast of India, whose mercantile trade was tied to Egypt—the only Middle Eastern power to survive the fourteenth-century contractions precipitated by the breakup of the Mongol empire and the devastations of the Black Death.

In contrast, 1350 is a significant cutoff date for both northern and southeast India, although for different reasons. By mid-fourteenth century, two events, one in the north, and the other in the south, conspired to alter the roles these regions played in the world system. Both reduced the importance of their trade, thus contributing to the power vacuum that was developing in the Indian Ocean arena.

In the north, the Delhi empire began to break up in the second half of the fourteenth century; the final coup de grâce was administered by Tamerlane who sacked the city in 1398. The great stores of gold and silver that had accumulated through the perpetual imbalance of trade were carted off to Samarkand (Richards, 1986: 15), not to be replenished until Mughul times.

In the south, a new Hindu state, the Vijayanagar or "Abode of Victory," had emerged and conquered not only the small Muslim sultanates along the coast, but much of the former domain of the Cholas that had long been subdivided among the contending Hoysalas and Pandyas (see, *inter alia*, the works of Mahalingam, 1940, 1951; Dallapiccola and Lallemant, 1985; Krishnaswami Pillai, 1964). The new power, whose capital lay deep in the interior on the Deccan plateau (for recent excavations, see Fritz et al., 1985), was oriented toward neither agrarian pursuits nor international trade. For the first time in south Indian history, the region was ruled by a centralized system of military feudalism whose alien soldiers were granted the rights to the surplus they could extract from the land and from trade, in return for allegiance and troops.¹⁹

They seem to have done very well with the former, and along with increased agricultural production came an efflorescence of "industrial" development, particularly in textiles. During the Vijayanagar period, the organization of textile production took on many of the characteristics associated with capitalism (Ramaswamy, 1985a), complete with a merchant class that owned small factories, innovations in technology, and considerable class stratification. This was particularly evident in the temple towns, but was also found in traditional weaving villages (Ramaswamy, 1985a: 302–303).

Although much of this textile production was geared to external markets, the Vijayanagar seem to have lost control over its foreign distribution. Again, Stein (1982a: 19, *italics added*) states it most clearly:

Changes in the political and economic organization of south India in the fourteenth century deprived itinerant trade associations of their former functions . . . [and they] ultimately merged with localized merchant groups in the internal trade. Many of the former itinerant travellers may have become part of the Muslim trade community on the

coast, taking advantage of the Muslim-dominated trade system of the Indian Ocean. *Until the fourteenth century, . . . overseas trade must be seen as the corporate extension of the south Indian domestic economy; after the fourteenth century, an expanded, more urbanized internal south Indian economy diminished the dependence upon this older trade network and its seaward extensions. Nor was the sea to have the same importance again until the late period of European control in south India.*

Increasingly, the trade between Coromandel and Southeast Asia was taken over by Gujarati and Malabari Muslim traders—both Arab and indigenous. This “overextension” of western basin traders into the traditionally somewhat independent circuit of the Bay of Bengal may have contributed to the growth of the potential vacuum in that area—a vacuum that the later withdrawal of the Ming was to make painfully obvious. But we reserve this story to Chapters 9 and 10.

Lessons from the Indian Case

If strategic location alone could ensure permanent hegemony, then south India—given her position as “hinge” between the eastern and western basins of the Indian Ocean, the center of the sea lane from the Mediterranean to China—should have enjoyed unrivaled dominance in the world system, both before and after the thirteenth century.

In fact, this was not the case; after the thirteenth century she played a somewhat more passive role. South India did constitute the inescapable destination for strong sea-oriented powers to her west (the Arabs) and her east (China), did, as will be seen in Chapter 9, exercise important cultural influences on the peninsular and insular sea powers of Southeast Asia, and did harbor along her coasts a set of crucial ports to which many traders came to buy locally produced or foreign products, often under the auspices and to the financial benefit of local rulers. But with the exception of the Gujaratis and some Muslim Indians intermixed with Arab or Persian stock who operated out of the Malabar and Coromandel coasts, Indians were not notably active in the sea trade itself.

Although from early times large merchant colonies of Tamil origin were well established in Ceylon (Indrapala, 1971) and on Sumatra (Nilakanta Sastri, 1932b), they are more properly understood as settlers than as itinerant seamen.

To some extent, the reason for India's somewhat passive role in the long-distance sea trade was that, throughout her history, India absorbed trade surpluses.

India (including Sri Lanka) produced products and goods much in demand in the world market . . . manufactured cotton and silk textiles, . . . dyes, tannins, spices, oil seeds and narcotics. . . forest products such as lac, pitch, honey and ivory. . . . On the other hand, the list of major imports . . . is much shorter. Indian traders imported battle and riding horses. . . . [They also imported] spices not grown in India such as cloves, mace and nutmeg . . . from Southeast Asia. [There was] Western glassware and Chinese porcelain. . . . Metals especially copper—and certain forms of armor and weapons were imported . . . [along with] rosewater and other perfumes . . . from the Middle East. And, finally, slaves primarily from Abyssinia . . . and Circassian slaves from the Middle East. (Richards, 1986: 33–34)

But, as Richards (1986: 34) concludes, “India was self-sufficient in or indifferent to many of the heavily-traded commodities on the medieval world market.” The wealth of India, the raw materials from jewels to spices, the high development of her agriculture, and the quality of her industrial output made her the object of other's desires. She sold more than she bought, although as we shall see, she was as fascinated by Southeast Asia as Europe was later to be with her. Ironically, wealth rather than poverty seemed to keep her from playing a more aggressive role in the thirteenth-century world system, a system driven more by need than satiety. Indeed, the more she was drawn into the world system that was integrating during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the less active she became in actually carrying that trade.

To some extent, her pivotal geographic position meant that she was always in danger of being supplanted by expansions in the sea power of those on either side of her. This seems to have occurred in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries when, on the west, Muslim merchants (including Islamized Gujaratis) expanded their control of shipping to the Strait, and, on the east, the Chinese

expanded their trade lanes to the subcontinent.²⁰ The result was a decline of sea activity at the center, as south India, particularly Tamil country under the Deccan-centered Vijayanagar, turned away from the sea to concentrate on the elaboration of large-scale agrarianism. This decline also spread to the Indianized zone at the Strait of Malacca, somewhat displaced by direct Chinese shipping.

This set the stage for a potential vacuum of power in the Indian Ocean, now monopolized by Muslims to the west and Chinese to the east. Rather than four great sea powers sharing the great expanse, by the second half of the fourteenth century only two were left. When one (the Chinese) withdrew, the zone was free to be taken, an opportunity the Portuguese later exploited. In the chapters that follow we examine in greater detail how this vacuum developed in the eastern basin of the Indian Ocean.

Notes

1. And here the term McNeill used to describe Venice is even more apropos.
2. The clearest exposition of the differences between these two regions can be found in Burton Stein's chapter, "South India" (1982a) in *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Volume I: c.1200–c.1750 ed. by Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib. In the section that follows I depend heavily on this work.
3. As Stein (1982a: 22–23) notes, there is a striking difference between the rich agrarian plains of the Coromandel, which require channel and tank irrigation, and the western coastal plain of Kerala in which monsoonal rains always provided sufficient moisture for two crops each year, geared to the dual monsoon cycle. This ecological contrast led to significant differences in social organization between the more centralized patriarchy of the "hydraulic" Tamil state and the smaller scale "matriarchal" (albeit protected by male warriors) agricultural society of Kerala.
4. Admiral Ballard (1984: 1) even claims that cross-sea travel most likely originated from the peninsula because its arid climate made fishing and trade a necessity not shared by other people in more favorable ecological niches; one must remain cautious, however, with respect to his purely speculative hypothesis.
5. The manual is most detailed for the west coast and there is little information for areas beyond. "Ceylon... was little known and seldom visited... [and] the Malay Archipelago, Madagascar... [etc.] were still *terrae incognitae* [to the Greeks]" (Toussaint, 1966: 39).
6. There is evidence that during classical times the Coromandel coast was also involved with Roman trade, if only indirectly and perhaps overland from Malabar. Significantly, "the find-sites of the Roman coin hoards are overwhelmingly located in south India, especially in Tamil country. The best-known example of a major

Indian entrepôt for Roman goods is... in the heart of the Tamil country" at present-day Pondicherry, south of Madras (Spencer, 1983: 77).

7. According to Richards (1986: 10–11), precious metals destined largely for Egypt and Syria left Europe through Italian ports. "The massive... movement of Venetian gold ducats to Alexandria was but the most visible aspect of the continuing drain of precious metals from Europe to the Mid-East." A similar process took place at Alexandria as Egypt's trade surplus with Europe went eastward. "The Mamluk mints issued great numbers of gold ashrafi and silver dinars that circulated throughout the Indian Ocean as far as Malacca and the East African coast" (Richards, 1986: 12). "On the main eastward track... ducats, ashrafi, grossi, tankas, or bullion flowed to the major ports of western India: to Cambay and its cluster of satellite ports in Gujarat; to Goa... to Quilon and the Malabar ports. Galle, the principal port of Sri Lanka (Ceylon) also received these western flows..." (Richards, 1986: 13). Much of this excess bullion was pulled into the capitals of the Indian interior in the form of tribute and plunder. From China in the other direction came great strings of copper coins to pay for her trade deficit. "The numerous kingdoms of Southeast Asia... lacked a sharply-defined coinage tradition... [so] gold bullion of a consistent purity assessed by weight sufficed for [their] larger transactions" (Richards, 1986: 16). "From [the region of] Malacca... the specie of Asia then moved to the emporia of the coast of India and Ceylon" (Richards, 1986: 18).

8. Stein (1982a: 18–19), in part because his dominant focus is on the Coromandel Coast, suggests a somewhat different periodization. He claims that the trade system tying south Indians to a wider world

persisted from the beginning of the Christian era until perhaps the thirteenth century when two developments brought it to an end. One was the deepening Muslim control over Indian Ocean trade which favoured the commercial ascendancy of Muslim trade from western India... under greater control by Muslims. Coromandel Muslims continued to participate in the Indian Ocean network, but the role of Coromandel diminished relatively after this time while that of western India grew.

9. See, inter alia, Chaudhuri, 1985: 23, 103, 107. Tomé Pires (see Cortesão, 1944), the early sixteenth-century Portuguese writer who so graphically and accurately described trade and navigation in the Indian Ocean, was not the first to notice that one simply could not traverse the entire length in a single monsoon season, although he was somewhat more accurate in explaining the reason than earlier Muslim geographers. Al-Idrisi, for example, reported that captains of the Sea of India and the Sea of China had told him that "the ebb and flow of waters occurs twice during the year; so that during the summer months, the flow of water takes place eastwards, and as against this, there is an ebb in the western part of the sea; and for the following six months, the flow takes place westwards" (Al-Idrisi, trans. by Ahmad, 1960: 35).

10. Goitein (1963: 189), who has used material from the Geniza papers to explore the role of Jewish merchant colonies in India, is the first to note that "the share of the Jewish merchants in India trade seems to have been comparatively modest."

Nonetheless, he uncovered a series of eleventh-century letters between Jewish merchants in Aden and the Malabar coast that contain references to Indian cottons and silks, Chinese porcelains and metal goods (iron and steel, brass and bronze), as well as to the more expected spices, dyes, aromatics, medicines, pearls, coconuts, and wood (Goitein, 1963: 196), demonstrating that even before the thirteenth century Asia's exports included a heavy proportion of industrial goods. Material sent from the Red Sea or Aden to the east also concentrated significantly on manufactured goods, with foodstuffs constituting only one-tenth of the items enumerated (Goitein, 1963: 197–198; see also his 1954 and 1980 articles). It should be pointed out, however, that these documents refer to a time when Jews were more prominent in Egyptian trade than they would be in late Ayyubid and Mamluk times and that he refers to a period before Calicut's Muslim merchants rose to prominence.

11. Spencer (1983: 68), indeed, accuses Indian as well as western scholars writing about the presumed influence of China and India on the "less-advanced peoples of South-East Asia of falling into the trap of European colonial attitudes, since discussions of Indian 'colonization' and 'Greater India' are in fact remarkably similar in tone to the tracts in which British authors once described Britain's alleged 'civilizing' mission in India."

12. The rumor that it was the great Arab mu'allim (master sailor), Ahmad Ibn Majid al-Najdi, author of a detailed if discursive fifteenth-century navigational manual (see Tibbetts, 1981), who led the Portuguese to the Indian Ocean is patently impossible, since he was already a very old man in 1490 when his *Kitab al-Fawa'id* ... was written.

13. A very similar strategy was used a century and a half later when a putative prince of the Palembang dynasty set up his rival port at Malacca and, through protection and financial inducements, gathered under his authority the merchant communities scattered throughout the Strait region.

14. The exceptions were in Kerala, where there were "warrior lineages" (Stein, 1982a: 32–33), and during the militaristic feudal period of the Vijayanagara from the mid-fourteenth century onward (see Nilakanta Sastri, 1976).

15. Indianists have emphasized the importance of self-governing bodies in villages and towns in the region during the Chola period, while at the same time insisting on the high degree of central state administration. See, for example, the various works by Nilakanta Sastri (1976, 1978, and particularly 1955) as well as Misra (1981). Stein takes them to task in his brilliant essay, "The State and the Agrarian Order in Medieval South India: A Historiographical Critique" (1975: 64–91), in which he suggests that the Chola state was neither as centralized nor as efficient as claimed, and that local self-rule, both in "secular" and Brahman villages, resulted less from ideology than from necessity.

16. By Chola times, itinerant trade was increasingly "governed by merchant fraternities of long-distance traders, called *samayam*, which represented the local marketing network within the larger system of Asian trade" (Hall, 1980: 141). "Candidates for induction swore by a code of mercantile conduct... which set them apart from other itinerant traders. Prosperous *samayam* members became 'merchant princes' who were allowed to follow high status life styles... and were

given monopoly privileges on certain goods" (Hall, 1980: 147). The *samayam* originated as "small groups of expeditionary merchants who serviced... isolated communities of the hinterland, ... band[ing] together for their mutual protection. Itinerants carried their own arms, even acted like bandits" (Hall, 1980: 151). Foreign goods coming into an ordinary *nagaram* required the attention of the head of the marketplace; in contrast was the *pattana* or port, "a place officially designated as a center for the exchange of goods which arrived by boat or caravan. ... In its South Indian context, this broad definition of 'port' was somewhat modified. During Cola times, *pattinam* was generally attached to the names of towns where international commerce was allowed, both port cities of the coast... and important emporia of the interior" (Hall, 1980: 142–143). It seems that local and foreign merchants in a *pattana* did not compete: local merchants handled local goods and the itinerant traders were confined to specific items of long-distance trade (Hall, 1980: 144). "While in the coastal ports... itinerant merchants enjoyed a special status, in the hinterland their position was more dependent on forming alliances with local institutions, [e.g.] *nagaram* assemblies" (Hall, 1980: 146).

17. According to Hall (1980: 52), "a *nagaram* was a physically defined area inhabited by a group of people known as *nagarattar* [who]. ... were members of a corporate assembly," among whom cloth and oil merchants were the most important (Hall, 1980: 53–54). The assembly of a *nagaram* seems to have been headed by a committee that employed an overseer to supervise the communal lands and a clerk and an accountant (Hall, 1980: 56). The community held land from the crown for which it paid taxes and from which it raised income (Hall, 1980: 57). "Due to the dramatic expansion of long distance trade during the Cola age, local merchants began to... [develop] institutional ties with itinerant merchant organizations. Such external contacts guaranteed the economic stability of local *nagaram* and... even allowed commercial centers to become the nucleus for the development of new centers of political authority" (Hall, 1980: 81). With their growing power the *nagaram* began to emerge from under the other local authorities and make direct revenue settlements with the Chola. In addition, during Chola times the *nagaram* even formed "their own military units from troops which were initially hired to police the local market-place and the overland trade routes" (Hall, 1980: 81). "But with the decline of Cola authority, these commercial institutions began to exert their own pressures upon their local domain and assumed independent control over local administrative responsibilities formerly shared with the agrarian institutions like the *ur* and the *nadu*" (Hall, 1980: 82).

18. Hall (1980: 2) hypothesizes that commerce was initially institutionalized via the *nagaram* to "contain the commercial penetration of foreign merchants within the region's designated market, usually the *nagaram* itself." Although this may have been the original intent, it eventually resulted in the growth of a relatively independent urban merchant-industrialist bourgeoisie, not generally found outside medieval Europe.

19. The military feudal system of the Vijayanagar empire presents some interesting parallels to the Mamluk system of Egypt. It seems to have combined a strong state exercising direct control over the cities and core agricultural areas with a system of more decentralized military "tax farming" with military chiefs (called

nayaka) assigned districts in the periphery, from which they extracted as much surplus as they could; in return for these "fiefs," they were obligated to provide a specified number of cavalry and foot-soldiers. (See, inter alia, Stein, 1982b; Krishnaswami Pillai, 1964; Mahalingam, 1940; Nilakanta Sastri and Venkataramanayya, 1946.)

20. China's technological superiority was certainly one of the reasons. Digby stresses that the "Chinese junk of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was technologically the most advanced and seaworthy vessel of its period," as well as the largest (Digby, 1982: 131-133).