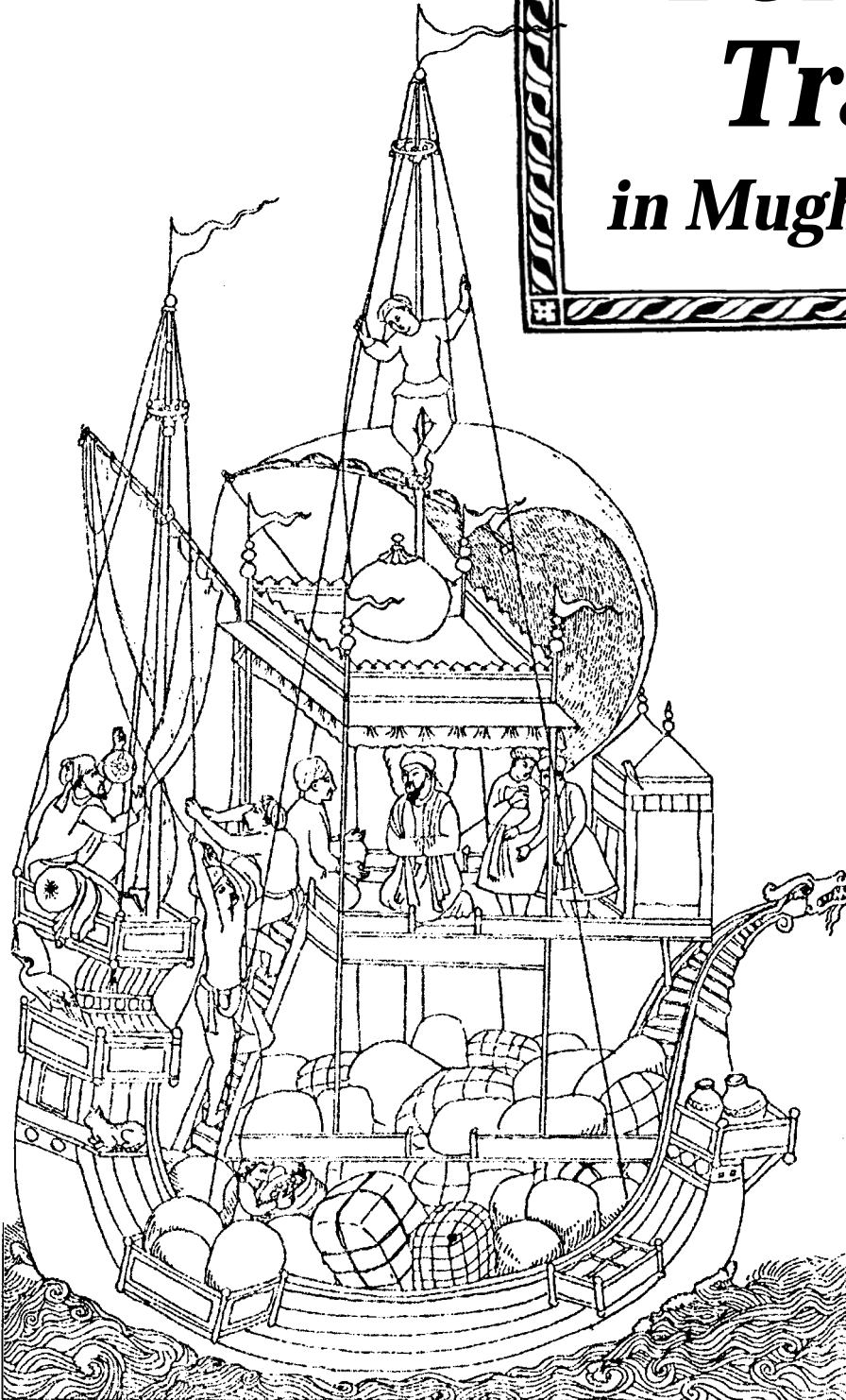


## Chapter 5

# Foreign Trade in Mughal Times



Look at this picture of an Indian ship loaded with goods. Do you see the man with the circular instrument? He is the *muallim* of the ship and he has an **astrolabe** in his hand. He uses the astrolabe to measure the positions of the sun and stars, which helps him know the position of the ship. This ship moves by the force of the wind pushing against the sails. The sailors turn the sails in order to make the ship go in the direction the *muallim* says.

Look at the top of the ship: a man stands there looking in all directions and wondering: "Can any land or island be seen in this infinite sea? Can any other ship be seen?" The ship's owner and the trader are sitting in the middle, discussing among themselves.

The ship is loaded mainly with bales of cotton cloth. They have been purchased from Maslipatnam, a port on the eastern coast of India. They are being taken to the port of Surat. Many ports, such as Chennai, Cochin, Calicut and Goa, have been crossed on the way. The ship is now nearing Surat.

The entire cargo will be unloaded at Surat, where there will be traders from home and abroad. The cloth from this ship will be shown and sold to them.

In Mughal times a large number of traders from different places like Arabia, Iran, Indonesia, and from different parts of India, like Malabar (Kerala), Konkan (Maharashtra), Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Bengal, Delhi, Agra, etc. came to port towns like

Surat. From the 16th Century onwards traders from European countries also began coming to India in large numbers. These traders purchased goods produced in different places and exchanged them for products from other places and for gold and silver at Surat. Usually these goods could be bought at cheap prices from the people who produced them. For this reason some of the big traders of Gujarat had their offices and agents in the towns of Indonesia, in various parts of India, Arabia, and coastal Africa. The goods could then be sold at very high prices to traders from other places. In this way, the traders made huge profits.

*Find each of the places mentioned above on a wall map or in your atlas.*

Surat was the largest and most important port of the Mughal empire. Come, let's visit Surat.

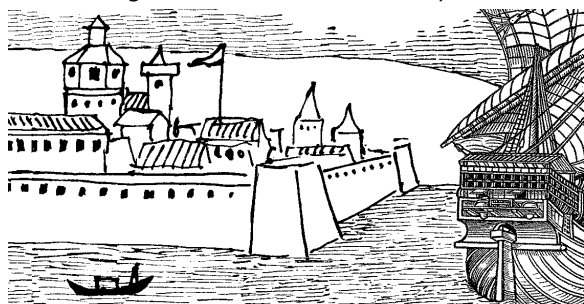
[The following account was taken from records written between 1650 and 1750 by Dutch traders from Holland.]

## A Stroll around the Port of Surat

*The city of Surat has been built at the place where the river Tapti meets the Arabian sea. Locate this area in a map.*

*Entering the Tapti from the sea we move towards Surat and come across many villages of fishing folk along the way. Then comes the village where the amirs of the Mughal kingdom have built a place for their ships to halt. It is here that ships lie during the monsoon, waiting for the weather to clear before they begin their voyages across the seas. Further up the river is the wharf for the ships of the richest trader of Surat, Mulla Abdul Gafoor. After that comes the wharf for the French ships, then the wharf for the ships from Turkey and finally the wharf for the ships from Holland.*

*After we cross these wharves we reach the city of Surat. In fact the wall of the fort of Surat runs along the bank of the river Tapti.*



### *The Customs House*

*We sail past the fort and land at the royal customs house. Here traders pay the customs duty on their goods. There is a tax of 2.5% to 5% on all goods that are brought here for selling. For example, if there is a bale of cloth costing Rs. 100, the trader will have to pay the government somewhere between two and a half to five rupees in customs duty on it.*

*The Mughal emperor earns a large revenue from Surat. The more trade there is, the more customs duty he will get. Hence the Mughal emperors are keenly interested in promoting trade.*

### *The Mint*

*Across the road from the customs house is the royal mint where coins are minted. Traders from foreign countries give gold and silver here and have coins of the Mughal Empire minted for themselves. It is with these coins that they*

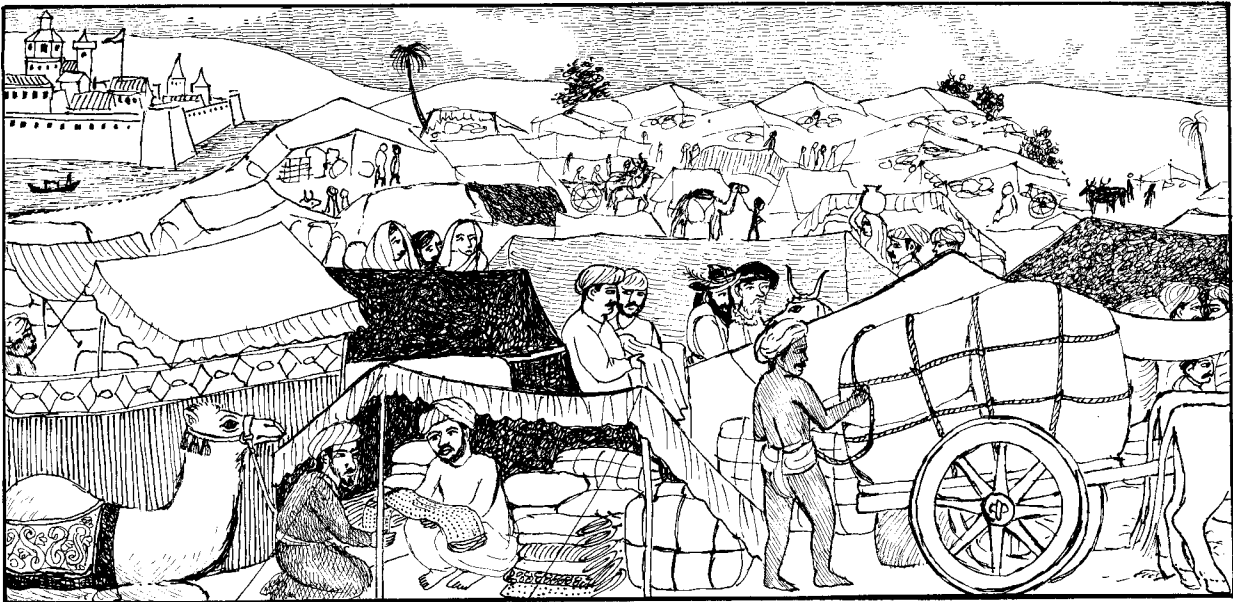
will purchase goods within the Mughal Empire. Adjacent to the mint is the *Dariya Mahal*, which is the residence of the high official in charge of the port.

## The Bazaar in the Maidan

Now let us get to the large *maidan* sprawling behind these buildings. Resting in the shade to one side we see bullock carts, bullocks, camels and horses that have come in caravans from far away places. Bales of cloth, and sacks of indigo and sugar are being unloaded from the carts and moved to the trader's tents. As the sun goes up, more and more people can be seen purchasing goods.

Middlemen are also running all around. Traders from outside need the help of middlemen to buy goods and then resell them. After all it is the middlemen who know what goods are being sold where and at what rate. For each item there is a different middleman - someone is a middleman for cloth, another for sugar, someone else for indigo. In this bazaar the middlemen have plenty of clout.

A view of the maidan in Surat in Mughal times



In 1608 Emperor Jahangir gave the English permission to build this place to store their goods in Surat. Such places were then called 'factories' .

Look, the officials of the royal tax house can be seen there, out on a tour of the *maidan*. After examining the goods in each tent they put their stamp on them to let people know that taxes have been paid on those goods.

## A Delayed Caravan

Standing near a caravan, a Gujarati trader, Lakshmidas scolds his man, Lalchand. Lalchand had bought indigo from Bayana, loaded it on a caravan of bullock-carts and brought it to Surat. But he got late by almost

20 days in reaching Surat and is very tired and hassled, only to hear his master scold him heavily.

Lalchand tries to explain, "It took time to hire the carts, Lakshmidasji! I kept making trips to the shop of Chaudhari Udayram at Agra. All his carts had gone out. Then a caravan of 20 carts returned from Lucknow. Only then did Udayram rent me the carts."

"Enough! Enough of your tales," the master Lakshmidas growled. His goods had come late, so everyone had already bought indigo from other sellers, and that too at very high prices. He knew that he would not be able to get high prices now. "Arrey, why couldn't you send me the news through post? The house of the *qasidas* is right next to the house of Udayram. If you had sent an urgent *harkara* (letter), it would have been here in twenty days. So what if the *harkara* had cost a lot, at least I would have gotten to know that the goods are on their way. I would have gone ahead and fixed a deal."

**The same story might sound different when it is told from different points of view.**

**(a) Suppose you are Lalchand. Write how you might tell your friends about this trip from Bayana to Surat.**

**(b) Now suppose you are Lakshmidas. Write how you might tell your trader friends why your indigo was late in coming to Surat.**



An abandoned sarai still exists at Shambhu, Punjab.

## A Journey from Agra to Surat

Come, let us move towards the camp of some Dutch traders. These people have travelled the long route from Agra to Surat, passing Gwalior, Sironj, Ujjain and Burhanpur on the way. They are telling others how after each long day's trudge in the dust and wind they had found shelter in the *sarai* of some town for the night - and once when the *sarai* was fully occupied they had to pass the night in a mango grove. They are also telling how the Mughal authorities have constructed good bridges over nullahs and rivers, thus making the journey easier. But the fear of dacoits haunted them all along their route, forcing them to change the route twice, which made them late by a few days in getting to Surat.

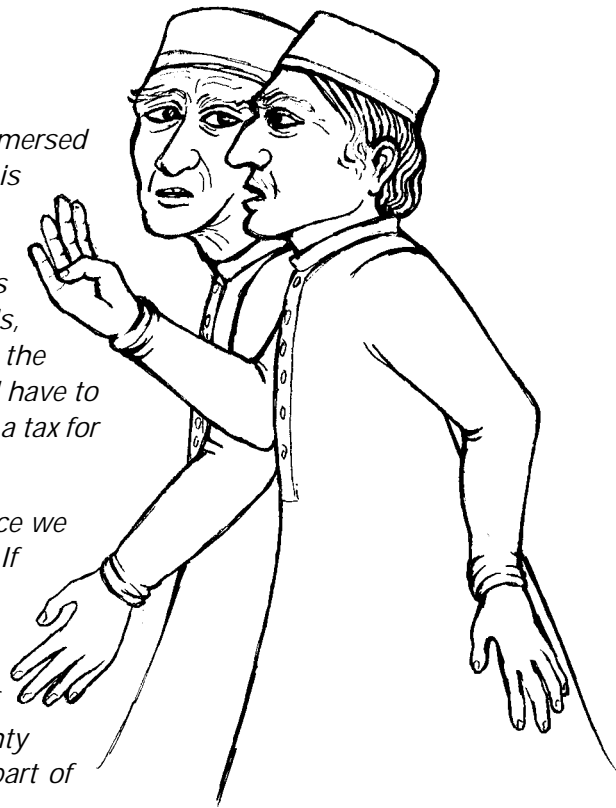


A caravan of traders resting, painted in Mughal times

## A Toll Here and a Tax There

Suddenly we are elbowed aside as the Parsi traders, immersed in their talk, march ahead at great speed. One of them is counting on his finger as he says, "Every time you move out of a town, you have to pay a toll. Then you have to pay taxes for the road, taxes for the sarais and the bridges - you even have to pay a grazing tax because the camels, oxen and horses pulling your carts graze grass along the way! And even then, sir, it isn't quite the end - now we'll have to pay taxes for boats, a tax for making use of the port, and a tax for selling our goods!"

"We'll pay all these taxes to the Mughal Empire and once we are on the sea, the Portuguese Empire will take over. If we don't purchase a trade `pass' from them, our ships will be looted. So the Portuguese have to be paid without a murmur. Pay this, pay that, it's surprising that we have anything left at all." With a guffaw of laughter they move ahead - obviously they do have plenty left over. Our attention moves from them to another part of the *maidan* where there seems to be a stampede.



## A Stampede for Labourers

*Arrey, arrey*, two traders have clashed over labourers!

"I'm the one who's hired them!"

"No, I've hired them."

Yes, now that it's the month of November and the monsoon is over, the ships have to be loaded as quickly as possible to cross the seas. There is a virtual stampede for labourers to do the loading.

## The Clout of Abdul Gafoor

The *qazi*, that is the judge of Surat, is quite troubled over this problem of labourers. Let's find out what's going on.

When we ask, we find out that the chief of the boatmen, Fakir Muhammad, had gone with 40 men of his clan to the biggest merchant of Surat, Abdul Gafoor, to ask for work. Abdul Gafoor's ship was being readied for a voyage to the Red Sea. He hired Fakir Muhammad and his men. The terms of the job were as follows: the chief would get Rs 10 per month and 2 maunds of rice, 8 sers of ghee, and 1 maund *dal*; the other *malla*hs would get Rs 5 per month, 1 maund rice, half a maund of *dal* and 4 sers of ghee. They would all work on the ship of Abdul Gafoor for two years.

But in addition to these terms there was another condition as well, and the *qazi* starts in surprise when he hears of it. Abdul Gafoor had told the *malla*hs that they would have to protect his ship while at sea. If pirates loot the ship and they are unable to save it, then their homes, possessions and families at Surat would all be handed over to him. The *malla*hs had agreed to this condition also.



The agreement between the ship owner and the sailors had to be registered with the *qazi* of the city. When the *qazi* read the last condition he said to the *mallahs* "Arrey, what kind of foolish step are you taking! If you are unable to save the ship your wives and children will become the slaves of Abdul Gafoor." Fakir Muhammad said, "Sahib, we're poor and helpless. What can we do?" The *qazi* said, "If you are poor, does it mean that you will do something foolish?" He refused to register such an unjust and unfair agreement. But eventually what Abdul Gafoor wanted, happened - the next day the sailors went and took charge of the ship under the same conditions.

So in this way, amid sorrow and pain, anger and guffaws, trading continues at Surat. At last all the preparations have been made and the ships set sail.

*You have just read about transport, posts, travel, taxation during the times of the Mughals. How are these similar to the experiences of the traders of today - discuss.*

*What terms of the agreement between Abdul Gafoor and the sailors were found unjust by the qazi and what was his response?*

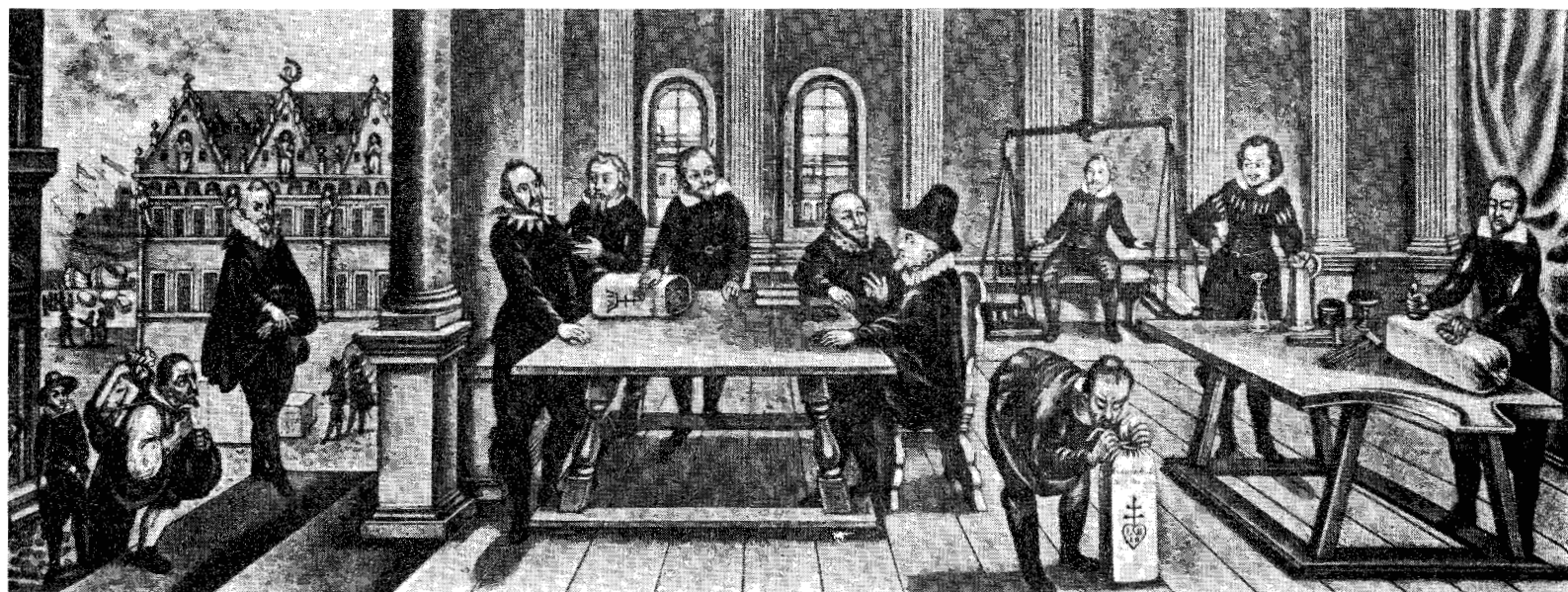
*How would you explain the action of the sailors in the end? How would you explain the action of Abdul Gafoor?*

These were the sounds and sights in the city of Surat. Here, you saw merchants coming from home and abroad. Merchants from Europe, Arabia, Iran, China, Indonesia and many parts of India would trade here.

## Goods from Asia reaching Europe

After a number of long journeys, saffron and other spices from Asia reach a trading centre in Germany

*Look at this picture and try to identify what the different people are doing, starting from left to right.*



# Trade in South Asia

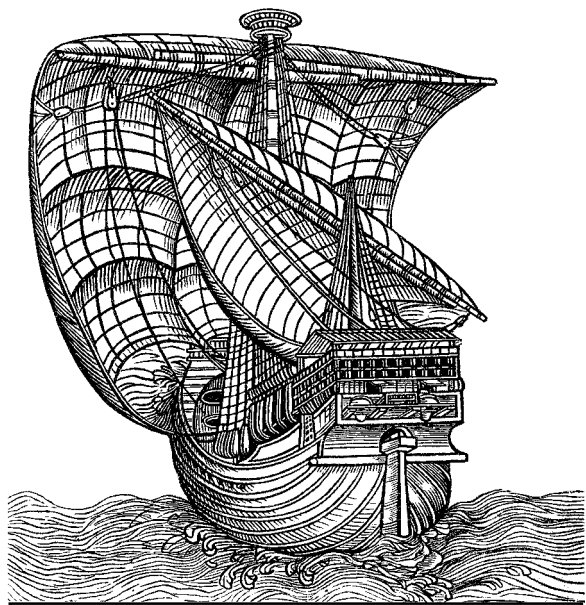
Now let's take a closer look at how and why sea trade was carried on and how it changed during the Mughal period.

## Wind direction and sea voyages

Traders transported bulky goods in ships. They also transported goods through caravans along land routes. However, carrying goods over high mountains, rivers and deserts took a long time and was very expensive. Hence traders preferred to use sea routes.

In those days the ships relied on wind to travel. The wind blows in certain fixed directions in the seas around India. From April to September the winds blow one way. And from December to March they blow another way.

After around 1850 big ships were powered by steam produced by burning coal. Since around 1920 they have been powered by diesel.



*Look at the maps showing wind direction at these two times of the year and answer the following questions:*

*When did ships sail from Surat to Mozambique?*

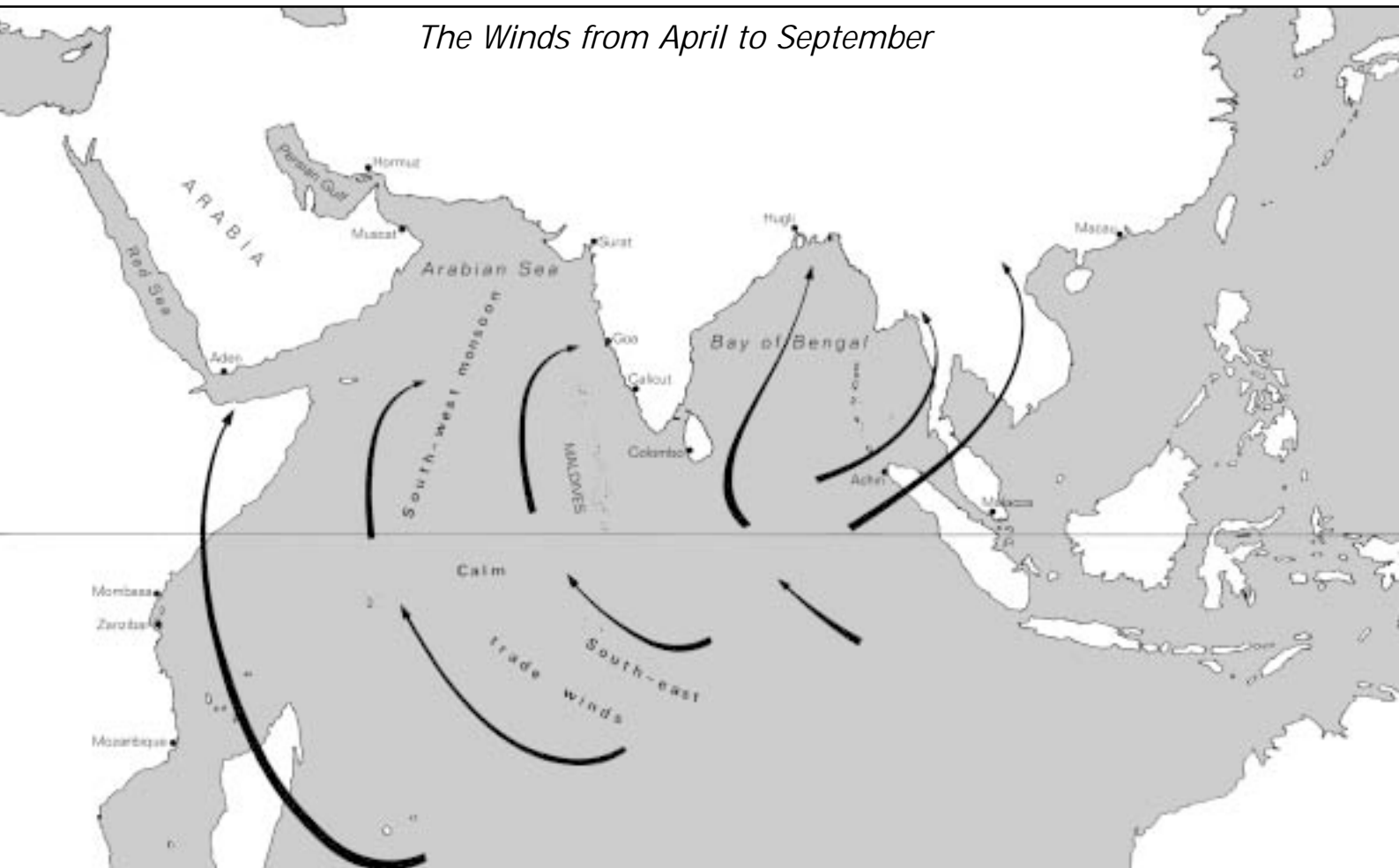
*When did ships sail from Maldives to Goa?*

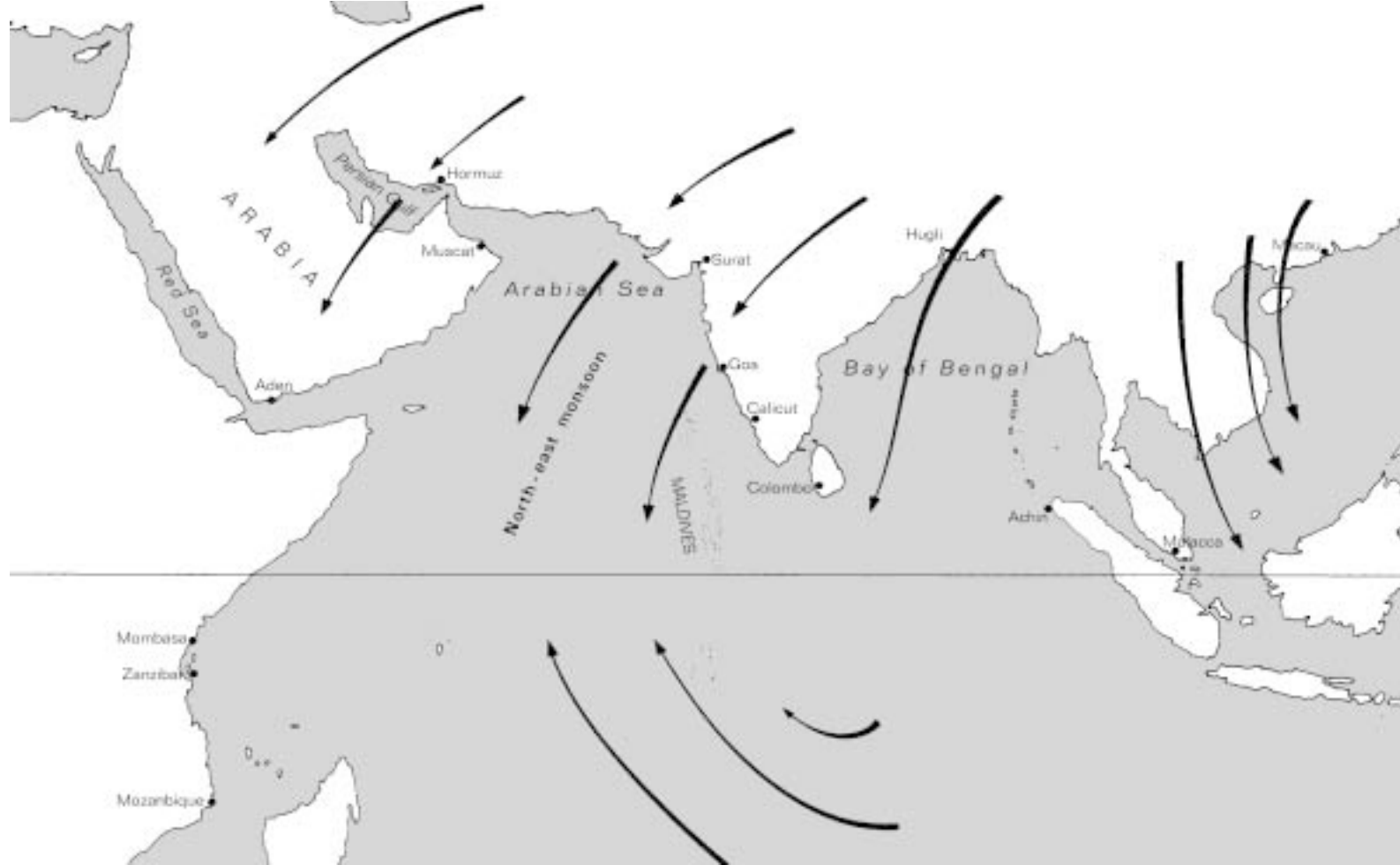
*When did ships sail from Hugli to Colombo?*

*Why didn't ships sail from Calicut to Zanzibar in July?*

*Look at a globe and try to find routes ships might have taken to travel between Europe and India.*

## The Winds from April to September





*The Winds from December to March*

From June to July ships from Arabia and eastern Africa would come to the western coast of India, to buy cloth, spices, and other things in exchange for gold and silver. In the same months, ships would go from the eastern coast of India towards Indonesia.

In Indonesia, the merchants would sell cloth from India and purchase spices such as cloves, cinnamon, black pepper, cardamom, etc. In October and November the direction of the wind would change, and it would blow the ships back to India, and then on to Arabia or eastern Africa.

### **The Coming of European Traders**

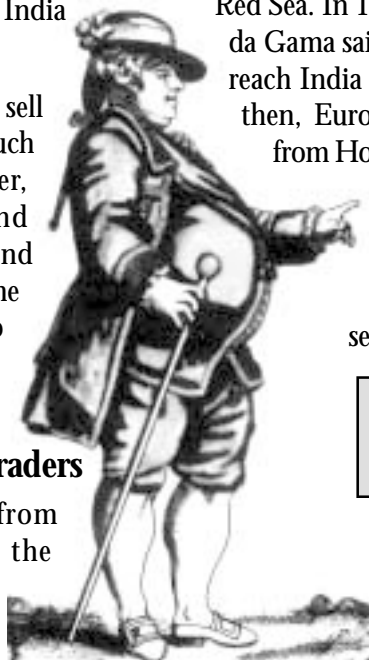
Before the Mughal times, ships from Europe (especially Italy) crossed the Mediterranean Sea to buy Indian

cloth and spices from Arabian traders. These goods would be sold at a great profit in Europe. In order to trade directly with India, European traders would have had to travel overland to reach the Red Sea. In 1492 a Portuguese sailor called Vasco da Gama sailed round the tip of South Africa to reach India by sea. Since then, European traders from Holland, France and England started coming to India by this sea route.

Since 1869 the Suez Canal has connected the Mediterranean and the Red Sea

Why do you think cotton and spices fetched high prices in Europe?

The traders wanted to get rich by buying and selling as they travelled from place to place.





For example, merchants might have brought gold and silver from Europe and Africa and bought silk and cotton in Surat, which they would sell in the Malabar coast and Indonesia. From the profit, they would buy spices. These spices would be taken to Europe and sold at very high prices. In the process the merchants made a 20-30 fold profit.

## The Portuguese Come to Rule the Indian Ocean

People from many parts of the world greedily eyed the trade in the Indian Ocean.

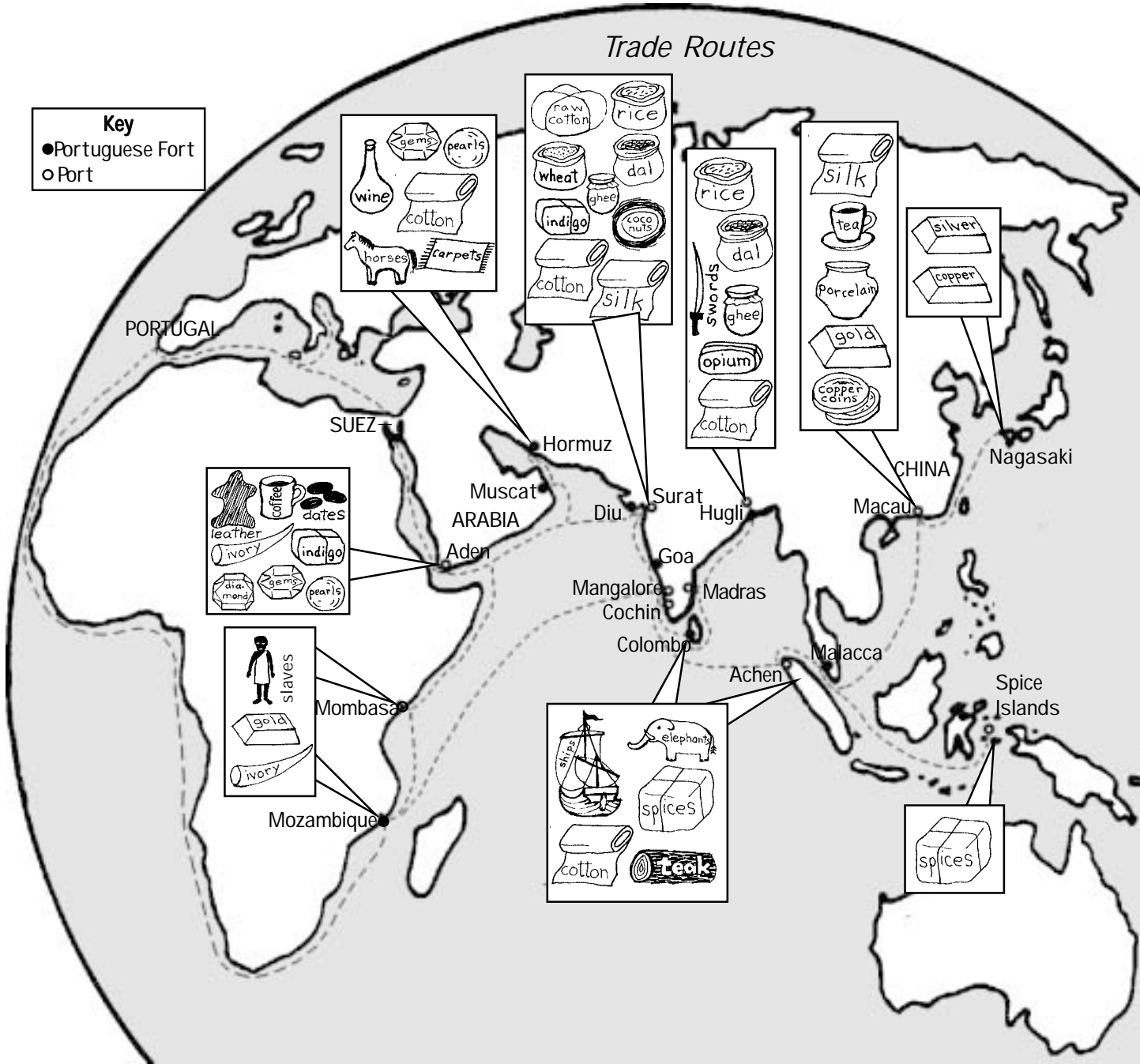
Look at the map and find out which goods were being traded in the continents around the Indian

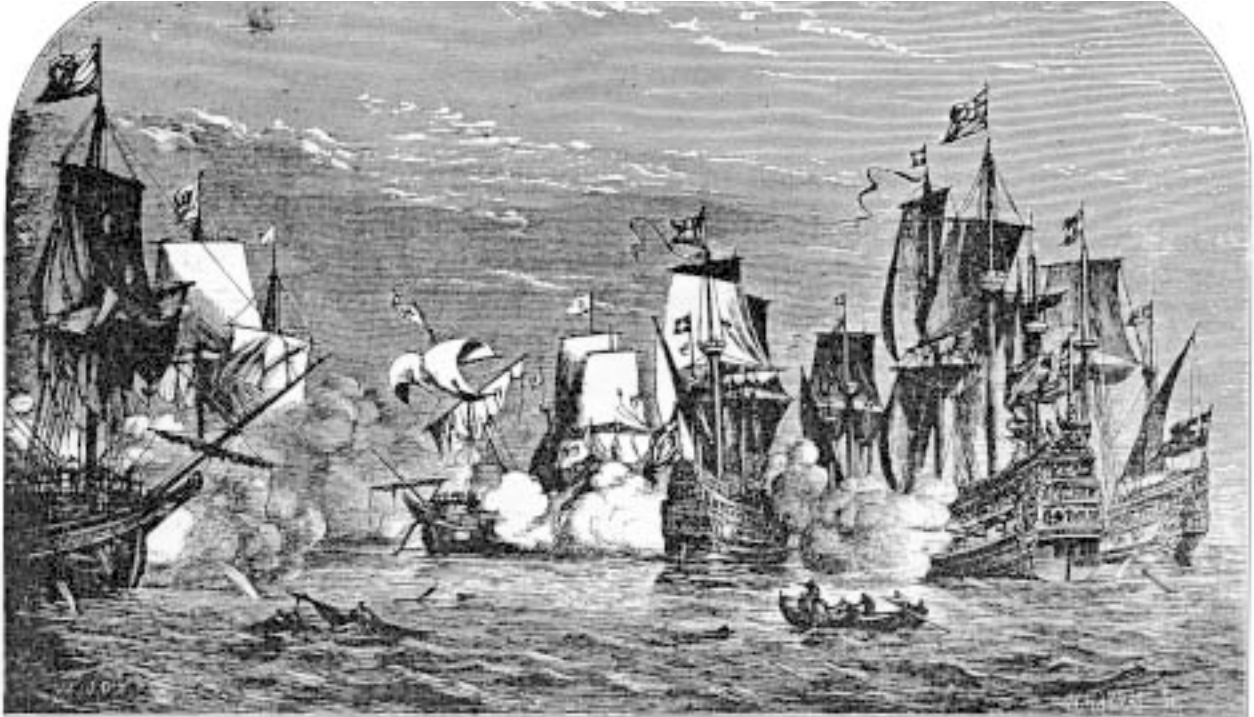
Ocean. The map also shows the main routes that ships took. Notice how India lies in between the trade routes connecting different places.

*Which were the ports that served the ships on their routes?*

*How might silk from China finally reach Europe? Through which ports might it pass along the way?*

Merchants were getting rich by trading over these routes. If someone could take control of the ports and the routes, all the trade could go into their hands.





A fight between Portuguese and English ships near Surat in 1612

Many countries of Europe - France, England, Holland, Portugal etc. - tried to establish their control over the trade in the Indian Ocean. This was not easy. It wasn't until around 1600 that the Portuguese were finally able to exert their control over the sea routes.

Look at the map. The Portuguese captured many places on the coasts of the Indian ocean and built their fortresses there. From these fortresses they were able to keep watch over all the routes on which ships plied.

In this way the Portuguese established their empire over the Indian Ocean. An empire over water? Yes. They declared that only Portuguese ships could trade in this ocean. Other traders could not bring their ships into this ocean without their permission. Hefty payments had to be made to purchase 'passes' from the Portuguese.

The Portuguese were able to do this because they had a strong navy. An army is not only made up of foot-soldiers and elephants and horses that move on the ground. There are also armies on the sea - ready to fight from ships armed with guns and cannons.

Every now and then the ships of Arabs, Gujaratis and others who challenged them were looted by the Portuguese navy or sunk in artillery attacks! The Portuguese navy also destroyed ports in which

the goods of other merchants were loaded and unloaded. For many years no one had a navy to match theirs. The Mughals and other rulers of this time were more interested in building powerful land armies than navies. Thus, the Mughals were able to prevent the Portuguese from challenging their authority on land.

### **Dutch rule over Indonesia**

Other European powers gradually succeeded in challenging the Portuguese on sea. The Dutch (from Holland) fought with the Portuguese. By the 1620's they established their own rule over Indonesia and thus came to control the trade in the spices that grew there.

### **European merchants try to control India**

Traders from other European countries kept trying to snatch the trade in India from the hands of the Portuguese. Gradually the Portuguese navy and forts grew weak. After this, several European countries fought among themselves to capture the trade with India, but for many years no country could emerge as the winner.

Traders from Europe were constantly engaged in efforts to purchase goods from India at as low a

price as possible. Then they could sell these goods at very high prices in Europe and earn great profits. They found that the goods brought by traders for sale to ports such as Surat and Masulipatnam were being sold at high prices. European merchants tried to send their own men or agents deep into villages to buy goods directly from the craftsmen so that the goods would be available at cheaper rates.

In bringing goods from villages, their men had to pay many taxes to the Mughals, which the European traders resented. Much money was spent in paying them and the cost of the goods went up. You can understand this issue better by discussing it with your teacher.

European merchants tried many ways to solve the problem of paying high taxes. They would send their envoys to the courts of Indian rulers and ask for full freedom to trade in India and get exemptions from taxes. In return for this they would make several valuable gifts to the rulers. Many a time they would get the desired

concessions. The rulers would often give them some tax concessions in the hope of attracting more trade, which would ultimately bring them more taxes.

Besides, the Indian kings were also under the influence of threats from the European traders. The Indian ships needed their protection from the attack of the Portuguese. The English, the French and the Dutch would say, "Only if you give concessions in trade will we give a guarantee on your ships. Otherwise, we cannot guarantee that they won't be looted and sunk at sea."

*Underline five important sentences about how the European countries tried to establish their control over trade in India.*

As a result of the circumstances described here, the merchants of Europe reaped huge profits. They got exemptions from many taxes. They bought land to build their own godowns, houses, ports and even their own fortresses. In the next chapter, you will read how these merchants went on to establish their rule in India.

## Exercises

1. *Why would the European merchants stop over at the ports of Africa and India on their way to Indonesia to buy spices?*
2. *What facilities were available to traders if they wanted to transport goods from one place to another in Mughal times?*
3. *During the Mughal period, what was the system for sending messages through post?*
4. *What did sailors get in return for working on ships?*
5. *How did the Portuguese establish their rule over the Indian Ocean? What advantage did they get from this control?*
6. *Tell two different things that a trader who bought spices in Indonesia might do with them.*
7. *What kind of concessions did Indian rulers give to European traders? What were the reasons for giving such concessions?*



A woman from the Deccan and her husband, a trader