

SELECTION 2:

The Portuguese in India

The Portuguese were hardly content with their African finds; India, a much more attractive goal, lay beyond. No one in Portugal knew for sure if a sea route existed, but it certainly seemed worth the effort to find out.

One Portuguese captain, Bartolomeu Dias, sailed as far south as modern Namibia when a gale blew his ship out to sea. When he regained his course he saw that the coast was turning northward, for he had in fact rounded the Cape of Good Hope, the southern tip of Africa, which he called the Cape of Storms. His crew then demanded to go home, so Dias had to turn back, leaving the voyage to India for another discoverer.

In 1498 the sea route to India was finally discovered when Vasco da Gama sailed around Africa and into the Indian port of Calicut. In the following selection, Gaspar Correa, the historian of da Gama's voyages, recalls this first direct contact between the Portuguese and the Malabar kingdom. Correa calls the Arab Muslims of the city "Moors," the universal name the Portuguese gave to followers of Islam. Note how the Portuguese understood the caste system of India, speaking of the Brahmans, the highest class, as nairs. He is accurate in explaining the progress of Islam in making converts from among the Indian population, especially from the lowest classes, for Muslims had no caste system.

The city of Calicut, as it was the principal one of India, on account of its great trade since ancient times, was all inhabited by foreign and native Moors, the richest that there were in all India. There were Moors of Grand Cairo who brought large fleets of many ships with much trade of valuable goods, which they brought from Mecca, and they took back in return pepper and drugs, and all the other richest merchandise of India, with which they acquired great wealth; and the people who are natives of the country have no profit from it nor income, but only enough to sustain themselves with; this sustenance is of little cost. . . . As they are ill off for wealth they are much subject to the Moors who are so rich, and this especially in the seaports, in which they are

rich from the great resources which they draw from trade with the Moors. From this trade the Moors were very powerful, and had so established and ingratiated themselves in the countries of the seaports, that they were more influential and respected than the natives themselves, so that many of the heathen became Moors in such manner that they were more people than the natives. . . .

In this region of Malabar the race of gentlemen is called *nairs*, who are the people of war. They are people who are very refined in blood and customs, and separated from all other low people, and so much do they value themselves that no one of them ever turned Moor; only the low people turned Moors, who worked in the bush and in the fields. And these people are so accursed that they cannot go by any road without shouting, so that the *nairs* may not come up suddenly and meet them, because they kill them at once, for they always carry their arms, and these

Gaspar Correa, *The Three Voyages of Vasco da Gama*, in *Lendas da Índia*, trans. Henry E.J. Stanley (reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, n.d.), pp. 154-57.

low people may not carry arms to defend themselves; and when they go along thus shouting if any nair shouts to them they at once get into the bush very far from the road.

The Moors, understanding that it was a good way to increase their sect, said to the king, and to the rulers of the places in which they traded, that they met with great difficulties with their merchandise, because they had not got laborers to cart it from one point to another, because the laborers, being low people, could not go amongst other people, as the nairs would kill them whenever they met them, and therefore they would esteem it a favor if those of the low people who might turn Moors should be able to go freely wherever they pleased; since, being Moors, they would then be outside of the Malabar religion and usages, and that they might be able to touch all sorts of people; because if this was not agreed to they would not be able to transport their goods to sell them in their provinces. . . .

As these things were so, the Moors of Calicut, in which city there were many who were acquainted with the affairs of Christendom, perceived the great inconvenience and certain destruction which would fall upon them and upon their trade, if the Portuguese should establish trade in Calicut, which they would immediately afterwards do throughout all the Indian countries. . . . With this design they spoke to the king's chief factor, who was the principal overseer of his exchequer [the treasury], also to the king's *gosil*, who is the minister of justice; and they spoke to him in secret, after the manner of true friends,

saying that they, as sincere friends of the king, for whose service they would spend their lives and property, told him, that they as persons so deserving of credit would tell the king and warn him to take precautions and consideration as to what he did with the Portuguese, because, without any doubt, they were men who had got such wealth in their own country, that they did not undergo all this labor for trade, but only to conquer countries and acquire honors by arms.

First they had been sent to see and spy, in order later to come and take these countries; for which reason it might doubtless be believed that these who came in these ships did not come for anything else, except under the cloak of merchants who come to establish peace and trade, and bring presents and feigned pretenses only to see and spy, and afterwards come to conquer and plunder; and this was easily seen, since they came from so distant a country with two ships to trade and take cargo; therefore they (the Moors) had given information and warning to the King that he might look to what he should do with the Portuguese.

After reading this selection, consider these questions:

1. What prompted the Portuguese to sail to Malabar?
2. What advantages came to Indian converts to Islam?
3. Why were the Muslim traders anxious about the Portuguese presence?

SELECTION 3:

October 12, 1492

The Spanish sovereigns, Ferdinand and Isabella, had no intention of being left out of the world trade that the voyages of the Portuguese opened. However, it was only in the last decade of the fifteenth century, after they completed the conquest of Granada, that the Spanish monarchs