

## Background:

Vasco da Gama was a well known explorer in the service of princes of Portugal who were carrying on the tradition of Prince Henry the Navigator. Vasco da Gama is most well known for rounding the southern end of Africa and being the first to lead a voyage all the way to India, on May 20th, 1498 when he arrived in the city of Calicut.

When he arrived in Calicut he interacted with several different sorts of people, at first talking to “Moors” or Muslims from Tunis who were able to translate and later discovering, to his surprise that the town was largely populated by people he thought were Christians. It turns out he was misinterpreting Hindu culture and thinking it was Christian culture.

This excerpt is an accounting by da Gama about his first arrival in Calicut, up to the point of



being received by an Indian king. In it you can see some of the misconceptions and suspicions of da Gama. It is likely that these same misconceptions and suspicions, along with a desire for greater wealth, later led da Gama to return to the city in 1502 and bombard it, opening the East up to unprecedented European trade.



# Vasco da Gama: Round Africa to India, 1497-1498 CE

(<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1497degama.asp>)

Underline instances where the da Gama demonstrates suspicion about the Indian people.

Why did da Gama need help finding Calicut?

Why was the expedition to India called a “lucky venture”?

How does da Gama describe the people of India?

1498. Calicut. [Arrival.] That night (May 20) we anchored two leagues from the city of Calicut, and we did so **because our pilot mistook Capna, a town at that place, for Calicut**. Still further there is another town called Pandarani. We anchored about a league and a half from the shore. After we were at anchor, four boats (almadias) approached us from the land, who asked of what nation we were. We told them, and they then pointed out Calicut to us.

On the following day (May 22) these same boats came again alongside, when the captain-major [Vasco Da Gama] sent one of the convicts to Calicut, and those with whom he went took him to two Moors [Muslims] from Tunis.... The first greeting that he received was in these words: "May the Devil take thee! What brought you hither?" They asked what he sought so far away from home, and he told them that we came in search of Christians and of spices. They said: "Why does not the King of Castile, the King of France, or the Signoria of Venice send thither?" He said that the King of Portugal would not consent to their doing so, and they said he did the right thing. After this conversation they took him to their lodgings and gave him wheaten bread and honey. When he had eaten he returned to the ships, accompanied by one of the Moors, who was no sooner on board, than he said these words: "A lucky venture, a lucky venture! **Plenty of rubies, plenty of emeralds!** You owe great thanks to God, for having brought you to **a country holding such riches!**" We were greatly astonished to hear his talk, for we never expected to hear our language spoken so far away from Portugal.

The city of Calicut is inhabited by Christians. [The first voyagers to India mistook the Hindus for Christians.] They are of **tawny complexion**. Some of them have **big beards and long hair**, whilst others clip their hair short or shave the head, merely allowing a tuft to remain on the crown as a sign that they are Christians. They also wear **moustaches**. They **pierce the ears and wear much gold in them**. They go **naked down to the waist**, covering their lower extremities with very fine cotton stuffs. But it is only the most respectable who do this, for the others manage as best they are able. **The women of this country, as a rule, are ugly and of small stature. They wear many jewels of gold round the neck, numerous bracelets on their arms, and rings set with precious stones on their toes. All these people are well-disposed and apparently of mild temper. At first sight they seem covetous and ignorant.**

When we arrived at Calicut the king was fifteen leagues away. The captain-major sent two men to him with a message, informing him that an ambassador had arrived from the King of Portugal with letters, and that if he desired it he would

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take them to where the king then was. The king presented the bearers of this message with much fine cloth. He sent word to the captain-major bidding him welcome, saying that he was about to proceed to Calicut. As a matter of fact, he started at once with a large retinue. A pilot accompanied our two men, with orders to take us to a place called Pandarani, below the place (Capna) where we anchored at first. At this time we were actually in front of the city of Calicut. We were told that **the anchorage at the place to which we were to go was good, whilst at the place we were then it was bad, with a stony bottom, which was quite true**; and, moreover, that **it was customary for the ships which came to this country to anchor there for the sake of safety**. We ourselves did not feel comfortable, and the captain-major had no sooner received this royal message than he ordered the sails to be set, and we departed. **We did not, however, anchor as near the shore as the king's pilot desired.**

Why might da Gama's ships not anchored as close to the shore as they were asked?

When we were at anchor, a message arrived informing the captain-major that the king was already in the city. At the same time **the king sent a bale, with other men of distinction**, to Pandarani, **to conduct the captain-major to where the king awaited him**. This bale is like an alcaide, and is always **attended by two hundred men armed with swords and bucklers**. As it was late when this message arrived, the captain-major deferred going.

Why was the bale sent to da Gama?

How is da Gama being treated by the Indians?

On the following morning, which was Monday, May 28th, the captain-major set out to speak to the king, and took with him thirteen men. On landing, the captain-major was received by the alcaide, with whom were **many men, armed and unarmed. The reception was friendly**, as if the people were pleased to see us, though at first appearances **looked threatening, for they carried naked swords** in their hands. **A palanquin was provided** for the captain-major, **such as is used by men of distinction in that country**, as also by some of the merchants, who pay something to the king for this privilege. The captain-major entered the palanquin, which was carried by six men by turns. Attended by all these people we took the road of Calicut, and came first to another town, called Capna. The captain-major was there deposited at the house of a man of rank, whilst **we others were provided with food, consisting of rice, with much butter, and excellent boiled fish**. The captain-major did not wish to eat...

**Summary:**

**Overall, were the people of da Gama's ship treated well or not? Give at least two examples.**

**Why was da Gama treated this way when he first arrived in India?**

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