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Portuguese, Dutch and Danish Trading Companies in India

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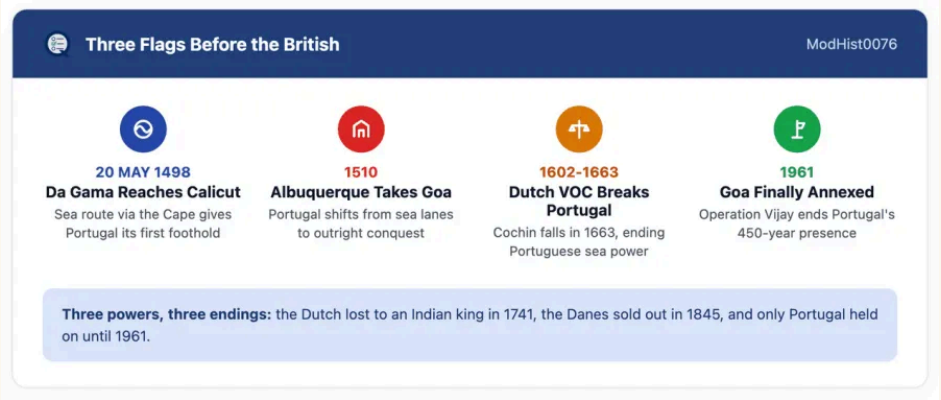
Three European flags flew over Indian ports before the British ever ran the country. Portugal arrived first, in 1498, chasing pepper and converts.

The Dutch and the Danes followed within a century. Each power left a different mark, and each lost out in a different way.



A period portrait of Vasco da Gama. His 1498 voyage opened the first direct European sea route to India. Public domain.



Three powers, three different endings. Only Portugal held on until 1961.

> **1498.** Vasco da Gama reaches Calicut by sea.
> **1510.** Albuquerque captures Goa for Portugal.
> **1560.** The Goa Inquisition is established.
> **1602.** The Dutch East India Company (VOC) is founded.
> **1663.** The Dutch capture Cochin from Portugal.
> **1845.** Denmark sells Tranquebar and Serampore to Britain.

Cartaz: a Portuguese licence. Asian ships had to buy one to trade safely in waters Portugal's navy controlled.

Casados: Albuquerque's settlement policy. Portuguese soldiers who married local women and settled in Goa permanently.

Factory: a fortified trading post, not a manufacturing site. European companies built these all along India's coasts.

1 How did Vasco da Gama's voyage open the door for Portugal?

One voyage ended centuries of Arab and Venetian control over the spice trade.

- **Vasco da Gama** reached Calicut on the Malabar coast on 20 May 1498, sailing around the Cape of Good Hope.
- The **Zamorin of Calicut**, the local Hindu ruler, allowed da Gama to trade on ordinary terms, not the warm welcome Portuguese accounts often claimed.
- This sea route broke the old monopoly held by Arab traders and Venetian middlemen over pepper and spices reaching Europe.
- Da Gama later died in Kochi in 1524, during his third voyage to India, by then serving as Portuguese Viceroy.

2 How did Portugal turn trade into conquest?

Within twelve years, Portugal shifted from trading partner to armed conqueror.

- **Francisco de Almeida** became Portugal's first Viceroy in India in 1505, and pursued a "Blue Water Policy" focused on naval dominance.
- **Afonso de Albuquerque** succeeded him and captured **Goa in 1510**, making it Portugal's permanent base in Asia.
- Albuquerque introduced the **casados** policy, encouraging his soldiers to marry local women and settle permanently in Goa.
- Portugal enforced the **cartaz** licence system, forcing Asian ships to pay for safe passage through waters its navy patrolled.

3 How did Portugal actually run its Indian colonies?

Portugal's rule mixed religious control with a shifting territorial base.

- The **Goa Inquisition** was established in 1560, urged by the missionary Francis Xavier, to police converts' religious practice.
- It was briefly suspended in the 1770s by the reformist minister Pombal, revived in 1778, then finally abolished in 1812.
- **Bombay** passed from Portugal to England in 1661, part of Catherine of Braganza's dowry on her marriage to Charles II.
- England leased Bombay to the East India Company in 1668 for just £10 a year, and the Company moved its headquarters there from Surat by 1687.

> **Quick check 1.** Afonso de Albuquerque's casados policy encouraged Portuguese soldiers to marry local women and settle permanently in Goa. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

4 How did the Dutch break Portugal's hold on the coast?

A newer, better-funded company dismantled Portugal's trading empire piece by piece.

- The **Dutch East India Company (VOC)** was founded in 1602, and opened its first Indian factory at Masulipatnam in 1605, then Pulicat in 1610.
- Between 1658 and 1663, the Dutch ran a sustained campaign against Portuguese Malabar, capturing Tuticorin, Nagapattinam and Quilon in turn.
- Admiral Rijckloff van Goens led the final capture of **Cochin in January 1663**, ending Portugal's naval dominance on the Malabar coast.
- The VOC's focus soon shifted east toward the more profitable Indonesian spice islands, leaving its Indian gains only partly developed.

> **Quick check 2.** The Dutch VOC captured Cochin from the Portuguese in January 1663, ending Portugal's dominance of the Malabar coast. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

5 What did the small Danish settlements achieve?

Denmark's footprint was tiny, but it left a surprising cultural legacy.

- The **Danish East India Company** made Tranquebar, on the Coromandel coast, its main Indian base.

- Admiral Ove Gjedde signed the **Tranquebar Treaty** with the Thanjavur ruler Raghunatha Nayak on 19 November 1620, building Fort Dansborg there.
- At **Serampore**, outside direct British Company control, the missionaries William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward founded the Serampore Mission.
- The “Serampore Trio” translated the Bible into Bengali and founded Serampore College, work the stricter British-run territories would have restricted.

6 Why did none of the three powers outlast the British?

Each power lost its grip in a different way, and at a different pace.

- At the **Battle of Colachel in 1741**, Travancore’s king Marthanda Varma defeated the Dutch, breaking their control of the Malabar pepper trade.
- Historians call Colachel the first clear victory of an Indian force over a well-armed European power.
- Denmark, never able to compete commercially, **sold Tranquebar and Serampore to Britain in 1845** for about 1.25 million rupees.
- Portugal held on longest. **Goa, Daman and Diu** stayed Portuguese until India’s Operation Vijay annexed them in 1961.

> **Quick check 3.** Denmark sold its Indian settlements, including Tranquebar and Serampore, to Portugal in 1845. *(True or False?)*
>
> See answer ↓

Remember: Portugal arrived first and left last, in 1961. The Dutch lost to an Indian king in 1741, and the Danes simply sold out in 1845.

Think it through: Why did Portugal, the weakest of the three powers by the 1700s, manage to hold onto Goa for so much longer than the Dutch or the Danes held their territories?

Goa had become deeply rooted, not just a trading post. Generations of casados settlement, the Catholic Church's institutions, and a mixed Luso-Indian population gave Portugal a genuine foothold the Dutch and Danish factories never built. Goa only fell to force, in 1961, while the others simply withdrew from unprofitable or defeated positions.

Practice MCQs

1. Francisco de Almeida served as the first Portuguese?

A. Governor-General only

B. Viceroy in India

C. Bishop

D. Trade commissioner

See answer ↓

2. India's first paper mill, built in 1812 at Serampore, failed for what reason?

A. It was destroyed by fire

B. A shortage of skilled workers

C. Lack of demand for its paper

D. A ban by the East India Company

See answer ↓

3. The Dutch were defeated by Marthanda Varma of the Travancore Kingdom in the battle of:

A. Wandiwash

B. Rakshasi-Tangadi

C. Pullalur

D. Colachel

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** Francisco de Almeida served as the first Portuguese Viceroy in India, appointed in 1505. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** India's first paper mill, built in 1812 by William Carey, failed from lack of demand for its paper. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** Marthanda Varma defeated the Dutch East India Company at the Battle of Colachel in 1741. ↑ Q3

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **True.** ↑ 2
3. **False.** ↑ 3

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