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How Different Crops Came to India: Ancient Routes, Indian Ocean Trade and the Columbian Exchange

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How Different Crops Came to India: Ancient Routes, Indian Ocean Trade and the Columbian Exchange

Walk through an Indian market and you will find rice grown here for thousands of years. Right next to it sits chilli and potato, which arrived only after 1492. Both feel equally “Indian” today. Telling them apart is exactly what two recent UPSC questions have tested.



A historical view of Goa, the Portuguese trade port that became a gateway for many New World crops entering India. Engraving by Aart Dircksz Oossaan, after 1680. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Columbian Exchange Plants, animals, and diseases moved between the Americas and the Old World after 1492
Old World in India Rice, wheat, pearl millet — grown here long before 1492
New World in India Chilli, potato, maize, papaya, pineapple, tobacco — arrived after 1492
2025 & 2019 PYQs Both test whether you can sort crops into Old World vs New World origin

Domestication: Selecting and growing a wild plant over many generations until it becomes a farmed crop.

Columbian Exchange: The exchange of plants, animals, and diseases between the Americas and the Old World that began after 1492.

Old World

- Rice, wheat, pearl millet — ancient South Asian and West Asian roots

African routes

- Pearl millet, sorghum, cowpea — pre-colonial Indian Ocean links

New World

- Chilli, potato, maize, papaya, pineapple, tobacco — after 1492

1. What does a crop's origin actually tell us?

1.1 What does "domestication" actually mean for a crop?

- **Domestication** means people selected and grew a wild plant over many generations until it became a farmed crop. A plant's wild range is not always the place where it was first farmed.
- The **Columbian Exchange** moved plants, animals, and diseases between the Americas and the Old World after 1492. It was the newest major wave in a much longer story of crops moving around the world, not the only one.
- Papaya, pineapple, and guava all have American roots. Portuguese trade helped carry them to India, though their exact first Indian dates remain uncertain.

1.2 Why can't old records give us a crop's exact arrival date?

- Seeds, trade goods, and plant DNA offer clues about a crop's history. Old written records can show that a crop was present by a certain date. Here's why they rarely settle the question of when it first arrived: a scribe only wrote down a crop once it was already common enough to mention. That could be decades after the first seed reached shore.
- That is why historians speak of a crop's origin as a **broad period**, not a first-arrival certificate. One port record may appear long after a crop's first seed reached India.

> **Quick check 1.** True or false: Papaya, pineapple, and guava all have American origins. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Now you try: In one sentence, explain why a crop's first written record in India is not the same as its actual first-arrival date.

2. Which Indian crops were already here before 1492?

2.1 Which staple crops have deep South Asian roots?

- **Rice** grew in ancient South Asia, though its domestication history is complex — Chinese and South Asian rice lineages later mixed. Mung bean, black gram, horse gram, small millets, sesame, and Old World cotton also show long South Asian histories.
- Ancient farmers in northwest South Asia grew **wheat and barley**, whose earlier domestication lay in Southwest Asia. People carried this seed across connected lands long before modern nation states existed — these crops are ancient in India, but not American.

- Calling wheat a “Portuguese introduction” would erase thousands of years of farming. Calling it South Asian in origin would also be wrong — it is genuinely both ancient and foreign to India, just not American.

2.2 How did African and Indian Ocean crops reach India before 1492?

- **Pearl millet, sorghum, finger millet, and cowpea** have African histories and reached South Asia before European colonial sea trade. A 2025 study found domesticated pearl millet at a Sindh site by about 2500 BCE, making these older routes plausible.
- Indian Ocean ports connected Indian, Arab, Persian, African, and Southeast Asian merchants long before Portuguese ships arrived. Here’s why that matters for the exam: a question may assume Portuguese trade was India’s first contact with foreign crops. Answering it well means knowing these older networks existed.
- Black pepper was already an Indian spice, carried outward by these older networks. It is a useful contrast case: American chilli later joined it on the same spice shelf, but never replaced it.

> **Quick check 2.** True or false: Wheat and barley first reached India with Portuguese ships. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember: “Old World” does not mean “originally Indian.” Wheat, barley, and pearl millet are all Old World crops that still travelled into India from elsewhere — just not across the Atlantic.

3. What arrived from the Americas, and what changed?

3.1 What crops crossed the ocean after 1492, and by which routes?

- European voyages connected American crops to Old World ports, and Portuguese ships mattered greatly in the Indian Ocean. Spanish, Dutch, and Asian traders also moved plants — a plant's American origin does not prove a single Portuguese voyage brought it to India.
- **Chilli, potato, maize, and tomato** reached India through post-1492 global sea trade, alongside cassava, groundnut, cashew, papaya, pineapple, guava, custard apple, and tobacco. Chilli and cashew in particular have strong, well-documented Portuguese trade links.
- Here's why this list matters for exam traps: questions often mix a genuinely American crop in with older Old World crops like coffee or cotton. They bet that "sounds foreign" gets mistaken for "came after 1492."

3.2 How did Indian food and farming change after these crops arrived?

- New crops widened food choices and farm income. Maize, groundnut, and potato later fit different Indian soils and markets.

Chilli became common across many cuisines, joining older flavourings such as black pepper, ginger, and turmeric.

- Not every effect was a gain. Tobacco use created serious health risks, and trade also moved pests and diseases. In the Americas, disease brought by newcomers caused enormous loss among Indigenous peoples — a reminder that the exchange ran in both directions, not simply a story of food gains.
- Farmers still shaped the result: they chose seeds, adapted growing methods, and built the local food traditions that make chilli and potato feel Indian today.

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: Cotton includes both Old World and American domesticated species, so its name alone is not a safe clue to origin. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Explain it back: In one or two sentences, explain why “arrived after 1492” and “arrived by Portuguese ship” are not always the same claim.

4. Exam Angle: The 2025 and 2019 UPSC Questions

Both questions test the same skill: sorting crops by true origin rather than by how “foreign” or “Indian” they feel today. The 2019 trap options paired a genuine American crop (tobacco) with Old World crops (cotton, coffee, wheat) in the wrong combinations. Cotton is the sharpest trap, since it has both Old World and American species — the plant family name alone never proves an American origin.

Practice MCQs

1. Pineapple, brought to India by the Portuguese around 1548, appears by the late 16th century in which Mughal court document?

A. Baburnama

B. Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri

C. Akbarnama

D. Ain-i-Akbari

See answer ↓

2. Which New World crop was known in 16th-century Goa as "Pernambuco pepper," named after a Portuguese colony in Brazil?

A. Maize

B. Tobacco

C. Potato

D. Chilli

See answer ↓

3. The potato, native to the Andes, was carried by the Portuguese to Goa via which route?

A. Directly across the Pacific

B. Via Dutch intermediaries in Ceylon

C. Via their African and Arabian trading posts

D. Via the Suez Canal

See answer ↓

4. Which of the following is native to India, unlike papaya, pineapple, guava, chilli, and potato, all Portuguese-era Columbian Exchange introductions?

A. Black pepper

B. Tomato

C. Maize

D. Tobacco

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** The Ain-i-Akbari, a record of Emperor Akbar's court, mentions pineapple cultivation by the late 16th century. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** Chilli was called "Pernambuco pepper" in mid-16th-century Goa, after the Brazilian colony it was shipped from. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** The Portuguese introduced the potato first to Africa and Arabia, then to their Asian trading posts including Goa. ↑ Q3
4. **A.** Black pepper is native to India's Malabar coast, unlike the other options, which all arrived via the Columbian Exchange after 1492. ↑ Q4

Quick-check answers

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

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