

Magadh Mahila College

Patna University, Patna

HISTORY

B.A. – I

PAPER – II

RISE OF MODERN WEST

Unit – 3

GEOGRAPHICAL DISCOVERIES

**Topic: - CAUSES OF GEOGRAPHICAL
DISCOVERIES**

By:-

Dr. Amit Raj (Guest teacher)

Department of History

Magadh Mahila College

Patna University, Patna

Email : amitr286@gmail.com

Mob : 9472811500

Introduction

Several factors were responsible for the geographical discoveries. In our discussion and analysis of the causes, we must lay stress on the core cause that led to the sudden and irresistible surge towards geographical discoveries in the mid-15th century, In this case the core cause was the fall of Constantinople. All other causes were subsidiary, and here too we have to present them in order of their importance. Of course, we must not lose sight of the chronology. The events narrated set in accordance with the dates of occurrence.



I. Fall of Constantinople and search for New Trade Routes:

The fall of Constantinople in 1453 led to a situation where in finding out new trade routes. Between the East and the West became indispensable. Constantinople was a city of great importance in that period. It was not only the capital of the prosperous and majestic Byzantine Empire, but also the prime seat of the orthodox Greek Christianity and a confluence of various cultural and intellectual streams. But the most remarkable from our viewpoint is that it was the chief commercial centre that linked the trade between the East and the West. The entire Northern Route trade and a fair quantum of Middle and Southern Route trade was dependent up on Constantinople.

It was indeed tragic that the Turks at last succeeded in annexing Constantinople in 1453. The fall of Constantinople signaled the end of the Christian Byzantine Empire and the establishment of the Muslim Ottoman Empire. Unfortunately the East-West trade was adversely affected under the Turkish rule at Constantinople. Trade and commerce through the Northern Route declined due to strong-arm tactics of the Turks. Trading activities did not stop at Constantinople, as some historians have wrongly assumed. But it became unsafe and insecure due to the arbitrary and extortionist attitude of the Turkish authorities.

Traders and merchants looked for peace and safety so that business could be smooth *and* thriving. Constantinople under the Turks failed to provide that peace and safety. This led to the avoidance of the land-dominated Northern Route and the search for oceanic routes.

Kings and merchants financed naval expeditions, which ventured into seas and oceans for discovering new routes in the most dangerous climatic conditions. Explorers, sailors and navigators were involved on a large scale in these expeditions. Voyages were made both westward and eastward. The impression some Europeans held was that if one sailed from Europe westward crossing the Atlantic Ocean they would eventually reach China, Japan and India. The other idea was that if one sailed southward down the Atlantic keeping close to the African shores, they would ultimately find access eastward to reach India.

The Portuguese explorer, BARTHELOMEW DIAZ, created history in his third attempt in 1488. He began his voyage from Lisbon, sailed down the Atlantic keeping close to the African shores, and eventually reached the southern most part of Africa to discover the eastward access to India through the Indian Ocean. Diaz was so much overwhelmed with joy that he named the southern tip of Africa as the Cape of Good Hope and immediately sailed back for home to inform the Portuguese King, Henry the Navigator, about the great discovery.

It is true that Diaz only partially discovered the sea route to India. Yet he laid the base. Another Portuguese explorer, VASCO DO GAMA, completed the work ten years later. Starting from Lisbon in 1497. Vasco da Gama, helped by the information provided by the diary and maps of Diaz, reached the Cape of Good Hope with less difficulty. From the Cape he sailed for India. He crossed the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea to reach Calicut, the port town situated on the southern shore of India, in 1498. The credit for discovering the Cape to Calicut part of the ocean-route to India belonged entirely to Vasco da Gama. It was an incredibly profitable visit for Gama as he sailed back home with goods worth 60 times the amount he spent on the voyage. This shows why the west was so eager for searching new trade routes to the East. Thus, a momentous event took place in world history i.e. the discovery of the ocean-route to India.

Meanwhile naval expeditions were being made eastward to find alternative trade route to the East. Success did not come at all so far as access to the East was concerned. But history was created again when in 1492 the Spanish explorer. CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, in his search for a route to Japan, reached a vast mass of land, to be known later as the continent of North America. Columbus thought that on his way to Japan he had reached India. He was not aware that it was an unknown land and that he would have to cross another vast ocean, the Pacific Ocean, before he could reach either Japan or India. This historic discovery, though not exactly of East-West trade, left a permanent legacy to posterity. This was the finding of the New World. Thus, we see that the fall of Constantinople led to a series of geographical discoveries.

II. Intention of Spain and Portugal:

Closely related to the above factor was the long-time objective of Spain and Portugal to break the monopoly of the Italian City-states over the Mediterranean trade. Geography definitely played a vital role in the expansion of trade and commerce, as far as Italy was concerned. The Italian peninsula stretches 700 miles into the Mediterranean, varying in width from 100 to 200 miles. To its east was the Adriatic Sea. Due to such access through the seas. Italy possessed several port-towns. Even some

Inland towns and cities became thriving trading centers. Venice, Florence, Genoa, Milan, Rome, Turin, Bologna, Naples and Palermo were known for trade and commerce. The Spaniards and Portuguese were also good traders, but they could not gain a hold on the huge eastern trade because of the Italians. They were extremely jealous of the Italians having upper hand in the Mediterranean trade. The demand for Asian goods was increasing in Europe with every passing decade. But these goods became costlier in Europe because the Italian City-states monopolised in the trade of these goods in the Mediterranean. The rulers of the new nation-states of Western Europe realised that they were in loss and an unfavorable balance of trade was draining their wealth to Italy and the Orient. When they failed to break the Italian monopoly, they thought of finding an alternative trade route to the East bypassing the Mediterranean. There is no surprise that most of the naval expeditions were made by the Spanish and Portuguese explorers.

III. Influence of Mercantilism:

Mercantilism played a role in the geographical discoveries. Mercantilism was the first stage of capitalism. It indicates the economic system prevalent in the pre-industrial society, when the concept of free market economy was absolutely unacceptable. The states monopolised trade and commerce and controlled their economies by imposing heavy tariffs on foreign imports, promoting exports and accumulating gold and silver. The mercantilist policies, pursued by states, proved very favourable for geographical discoveries. Trade and commerce was fast expanding. Every state was aiming at gaining more and more wealth, and for that reason pursuing policies that would bring more and more wealth. Naval expeditions were launched with the objective, not only of finding new trade routes, but also for searching new colonies that would bring raw materials as well as serve as markets for the commodities produced by the states.

There was also an irresistible craving for accumulating as much of gold and silver as possible. These *were* precious metals, and the mercantilists believed that the richness of a nation depended on the amount of precious metals it possessed. The naval voyages were motivated by the urge for finding new lands that would offer gold,

raw materials and market. Spain, Portugal, France and England, the nations which were in the forefront of geographical discoveries, were motivated by this urge for the purpose of enhancing their commercial prosperity.

IV. Interest of Monarchy and Church:

Another factor was the keen interest shown by the kings and rulers in trade and commerce. The 15th and 16th centuries taken together formed what we call the Age of Nation. States. New nations were in the process of formation chiefly under the leadership of kings and ruling elites. They needed constant sources of revenue for running the administration, forming strong army and navy and waging continuous wars against enemy forces. Trade and commerce acted as the main source of. In addition to the state interest, some of the kings had personal interest in business too. The growing trading activities lured them to make investments in commercial ventures.

Besides, some monarchs were great patrons of naval explorations. The most famous of them was the Portuguese monarch Henry the Navigator (1394 -1460). Henry had personal interest in the gold of Guinea and Gold Coast, situated in West Africa. The Arabs controlled this gold business. Henry wanted to oust the Arabs and establish Portuguese control over it. Again, it was the Portuguese monarch John II who encouraged and financed the expedition of Bartholemew Diaz. Queen Isabella of Castile, the future Queen of Spain, financed the expedition of Christopher Columbus, King Henry VII of England also encouraged the naval voyages of John Cabot in search of the New World.

The Church too had a role to play in the geographical discoveries. It is true that the Church was not directly involved in these ventures, in which economic and political issues held the upper hand. But Christianity held strong sway over the thought and feelings of the Spanish, Portuguese and French people. Christianity is the purest religion and humanity would be spared of evils by its spread—this was the typical feeling of the Spanish, Portuguese and French explorers. 'The heathens have to be purified by conversion to Christianity' reflected the motive of these men. The Pope too

very much encouraged it. These explorers and conquerors who went to the South American continent and the New World fully succeeded in Imposing Christianity on the indigenous inhabitants. It thus appears to be true that wherever these explorers went they carried the sword in one hand and the Gospel on the other.

V. Scientific and Technological Developments in Seafaring:

The 15th or early 16th century cannot in any sense be regarded as great in the domain of science and technology. But some remarkable inventions and innovations in the realm of naval expedition were recorded in this period. Under the patronage of Henry the Navigator noteworthy progress was made in Cartography, the science and art of map-making. The king appointed expert cartographers for surveying and drawing maps of the areas explored. It must be noted that the success of Vasco da Gama was chiefly due to Diaz's detailed maps and thorough description of the places covered in his journey from Lisbon to Cape down the Atlantic by the African shores.

Remarkable advancement was achieved in ship-building too. Henry the Navigator showed the way in this sphere also. The other kings and rulers, including Henry VII and Henry VIII of England, had their share of credit in financing ship-building work. Long-distance oceanic voyages in most hostile weather conditions needed special type of ships. This led to the building of caravel vessels, under the patronage of Henry the Navigator. Technological know-how of the experienced Arab Ship-builders was also fully applied to build strong caravel vessels. Sails were made in such a way as to make full use of winds in the long-drawn expeditions.

Improvement was also achieved in the making of the compass, which very much helped the sailors and navigators. In the 15th century another device, called Astrolabe, was widely used in sea voyages. It was used to determine latitude and longitude.

VI. Travelogues and Myth of 'El Dorado'

A fairly good number of diaries, memoirs and travel accounts helped to create popular Interest in sea-faring. Some of the accounts were immensely attractive. For

example, we can refer to the accounts of MARCO POLO, the Venetian merchant, who had gone to China in the 13th century during the good days of the Mongol rule, and stayed there for 24 years. His accounts presented a beautiful Chinese scenario, full of peace, plenty and prosperity, and it created instant interest among the Europeans about the dreamland of the East. Even in the 15th and 16th centuries the Marco Polo's accounts continued to stir the imagination of the European merchants, sailors and explorers. There were other accounts also. All these accounts attracted the Europeans towards oceanic voyage in order to know the unknown and to explore the unexplored.

A typical myth, the myth of 'El Dorado' dominated the thinking of the European travelers and explorers. El Dorado signified a land full of gold. The myth of such treasure island was very strong in the minds of the Spaniards and Portuguese. They had the impression that if one sailed far away westward he was sure to find the land of gold. No doubt, the myth contained an element of truth and the Spanish conquistadors did find gold in Mexico and Peru.

VII. Impact of the Renaissance:

The impact of the Renaissance could be found in motivating the geographical discoveries. The Renaissance and the geographical discoveries began and continued together, both were motivated tremendously by the effects of the fall of Constantinople. For that reason, both proved to be complimentary to each other. Both were fighting against the medieval systems — the Renaissance against the medieval Scholasticism and the discoveries against the medieval feudal economic system. Both aimed at searching the truth, knowing the unknown and exploring the unexplored. The Renaissance opened the doors of the domain of the New Awakening and New Learning, while the geographical discoveries unlocked the gates of the New World. The Renaissance immensely encouraged the spirit of adventure and inspired the zeal for exploration which was necessary for geographical discoveries.

Suggested Readings:-

1. Meenakshi Phukan : Rise of Modern West
2. G. Clark : Early Modern Europe
3. Raghubir Dayal : Modern European History
4. Jain and Mathur : World History (1500 – 1950)
5. G.M. Trevelyan : Social History of England
6. Parthsarathi Gupta (ed.) : आधुनिक पश्चिम का उदय
7. लाल बहादुर वर्मा : आधुनिक यूरोप का इतिहास
