

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**

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Introduction

The term "geographical discoveries" points to the sudden spurt in the achievement of explorers, navigators and traders of Europe in the second half the 15th and early 16th centuries their aim was to find out new oceans routes for maintaining trade relations with Asia. In that sense it was an effort to revive the trade and commerce between the East and the West, between the Orient and the Occident. Now the questions arises:

What was the traditional trade route between Europe and Asia?

What was the reason for the urgency to find out alternative sea routes?

Why were the Europeans so bent upon maintaining trade relations with the East?

If we find answers to these queries, we shall be able to understand the background of the geographical discoveries.

The East – West trade has a long history. The war between Christian and Muslims (1092 – 1292) had added a new chapter in world history by freeing both eastern and western Mediterranean from the Muslim powers and giving the control of the vast eastern trade to European states, particularly the Italian city-states. However, the Muslim merchants, mainly Arabs and Seljuk Turks, continued to bring valuable products from the Orient, sold them to the Italian merchants, who eventually sent them to the various markets of Europe.

The East – West trade was carried through three routes. The NORTHERN ROUTE, the MIDDLE ROUTE and the SOUTHERN ROUTE. The Northern Route was the main trade route. It was mainly a land route. Goods from China, India and other Asiatic countries were brought by numerous caravans and they passed through Central Asia, Iran, and Iraq. Crossed the Caspian and Black Seas to reach CONSTANTINOPLE. The capital of the Byzantine Empire. This was known as the Silk Route as well as the Spice Route, because silk and spices were the main commodities to be carried from Asia to Europe. From Constantinople they were sent to the various markets of Europe. Meanwhile, products from European states reached Constantinople, and from here they were carried back to Asia through the same route

by the same caravans.

The Middle Route linked up the East-West trade and India was very much involved in this route. The route began from the western and southern coasts of India, from where the merchant ships crossed the Arabian Sea, entered the Persian Gulf, and from there the goods were carried to Constantinople through land or sea ultimately to reach the European cities. By the same route the European goods reached the western and southern Ports of India.

The Southern Route was the third commercial linkage between the East and the West. The Indian trading activity was tremendous in this route too. It was operative chiefly during the monsoon session. The merchant ships started from the western coasts of India and with the help of the westerly 'winds they crossed the Arabian Sea, moved south-west to enter the Red Sea, and sailed through the Red Sea to reach the Egyptian ports of Cairo and Alexandria. Once they reached Cairo, the Eastern Mediterranean was open to them to have access to any major European port.

The attempts to discover trade routes, other than these, three, were being made since the mid-14th century. They were motivated by two factors. Firstly the European traders were under constant threat from the Turks, who always intended to establish their hegemony over the eastern Mediterranean zone. Secondly, the overthrow of the Mongol dynasty in China and its replacement by Ming dynasty as the new ruling authority in the late 14th century too created problems for the European traders. The period of favors and friendliness to European merchants and missionaries ended and was followed by that of the anti-west and anti-Christian Ming-rulers. These two developments obstructed European penetration into the Orient. So, the Europeans were looking for alternative trade routes, and new trade zones. The sudden increase in the enthusiasm and effort for the search was clearly evident from the mid-15th century. This was because the Turks had captured Constantinople in 1453 and established their dominance over the eastern Mediterranean, the event which we shall discuss later.

We must emphasise that the Europeans needed more of our goods than we

needed theirs. Spices (garlic, cardamom, ginger, cloves, cinnamon, turmeric etc.) from the East were used as preservatives for meat and fish during the hostile winter season. Besides spices, silk, cotton goods, muslin, precious stones, dry fruits and plants from Asia were brought to the markets, of Europe. Meanwhile, items like iron goods, dyestuff, chemicals, hide and skins were taken from Europe to the East. Thus, it is quite obvious as to why the Europeans were so much bent upon maintaining trade relations with Asia. Hence, the Europeans made all these geographical discoveries.



Effects and Significance

The geographical discoveries proved to be of great significance in the history of mankind. Their immediate as well as long-term effects left their permanent mark on the future course of history. We shall study the effects one by one.

To begin with they very much changed our concept of the earth. It revealed the truth that that earth is round-shaped; that Asia, Africa and the two Americas were different continents; that the earth contains more water surface than land surface. They not only found for us two new ocean-cum-sea routes to connect the East and the West, but also discovered the vast New World. One part of this New World became in course of time the most highly admired seat of modern civilization, based on technology, commerce and industry.

The importance of the geographical discoveries can be explained best by quoting the words of an unknown Spanish conquistador of that time. An English merchant asked him at the port of Madrid, "What for are you going to Peru and Mexico?" The conquistador replied, "I am going for OLD, GOD and GLORY". Indeed these were the things that took Europeans to the New World. 'Gold' stands for economic gains, 'God' symbolises the spread of Christianity and 'Glory' signifies the conquests and annexations made by the Europeans.

The geographical discoveries heralded the dawn of a new age in world history, the VASCO DA GAMA AGE OF EUROPEAN SUPREMACY, that lasted for a long period from 1498 to the end of the Second World War. And it witnessed the overwhelming economic, political and military supremacy of the European Powers over the rest of the globe.

1.4.1 Economic Consequences:

The economic consequences of the geographical discoveries were numerous :

(i) They restored the East-west trade by launching commerce through the Atlantic route, the Atlantic-Indian Ocean route and the Atlantic-Pacific Ocean route.

Thus the dependence on the Northern Route was very much lessened and In addition new areas of trade and commerce were found. In this way, it marked the beginning of European supremacy in world trade.

(ii) The geographical discoveries led to unprecedented growth in trade and commerce. The world trade passed from the 'thalassic' stage to the 'oceanic' stage. By the term 'thalassic' we mean that previously commercial activities were done mainly through the seas and land. The seas involved intrading activities were the Mediterranean, the Caspian, the Black, the Adriatic, the Red, the Arabian Seas and the Persian Gulf. These seas continued to be active, but much of the merchant marine activities now shifted to the three oceans namely the Atlantic, the Indian and the Pacific Oceans.

(iii) Closely connected with the preceding points, the geographical discoveries marked the extension of world trade from the regional stage to the global one. Big ships loaded with huge cargo went to all parts of the globe. Now every part of the world was accessible to the merchants. Between 1500 and 1550, world trade increased by 20 times in volume, and by 25 times in value even by conservative estimate.

(iv) The geographical discoveries gave a great impetus to mercantilism or commercial capitalism. The unbelievable rise in trade and commerce brought huge wealth to some states. The nation-states were rising and becoming more organised and powerful. They monopolised commercial activities with greater force and command. They put more emphasis on increasing their exports and acquiring more colonies for exploiting them as ready market and sources of raw materials.

All the four points discussed so far concerning the economic impact indicate such an overwhelming transformation in international commerce that the period (1500-1750) following the discoveries was termed the AGE OF COMMERCIAL REVOLUTION. How was it a commercial Revolution? The launching of banking, marine insurance and chartered companies, the rapid overseas expansion, the growth of ports and commercial cities etc. all show a fundamental change in the nature of world

trade.

(v) Intimately related with the preceding point was the irresistible urge among the powerful European nations towards bullion accumulation. This was a typical mercantile altitude among nations which became eager to amass more and more precious metals like gold and silver. Indeed the Spanish and Portuguese explorers went to South America in search of El Dorado. Spain was very fortunate in this respect. The Spaniards accumulated heavy quantum of gold and silver from Mexico and Peru. The Spanish ships which returned to Madrid with huge loads of silver and gold from these lands evoked the hostility of other European nations. Spain became the richest nation of Europe. Spain became the richest nation of Europe. Spain also made amazing fortunes as a result of her annexations of Cuba, Honduras, Chile, Argentina etc.

(vi) Portugal also gained economically as a result of the discoveries. Portugal's gains were overwhelming and they were next only to those of Spain. Portugal fully dominated the Vasco do Gama trade route. The Portuguese were gradually strengthening their hold over the Malabar and western coastal trade of India. They established important trading centres in the western coasts, like Goa, Daman, Diu, Salsette and Bombay. They extended their hold over the Middle and Southern Route zones as a result of their dominance over the Indian coasts, and their ships crossed the Arabian Sea to get into the Red Sea and Persian Gulf Trading zones. Thus, Portugal, through its control over most of the mercantile traffic between India and Europe, between India and the Far East and between India and the Arab world, was able to build up Europe's first commercial-cum-colonial empire. The huge quantity of spices, merchandise and silk that she took from India's coasts placed her into the forefront of the European trade in the 16th century, thus giving a severe jolt to the commercial supremacy of the Italian cities in the Mediterranean trade zone.

Though Portugal's gain in South America was confined only to Brazil, yet it was a tremendous economic gain in itself. Brazil was a land with immense economic potentiality.

The gains in the East so much added to the pride and prestige of the Portuguese that in 1516 the Portuguese king honoured himself with the title, "Lord of the Conquest, Navigation and Commerce of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia and China". In 1572, one of the greatest Portuguese poets, Luis de Camoens, proudly penned these lines in his epic poem, 'The Lusiads' :

In golden treasures rich,
Distant Cathay,
And all the farthest Islands of the East,
And all the seas,
To them shall homage pay,

(vii) England, France and some other European nations too made remarkable economic gains from the geographical discoveries. England got control over a major portion of North America. Through a policy of colonisation and colonialism, she first formed the 13 American Colonies and exploited them for her economic gains till they gained independence in 1776. England also got control over some islands in the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic. France too set her foothold in North America through her control over Canada.

(viii) The significant point is that a host of other European powers followed Portugal through the Vasco da Gama route to reach India. The English came when the English East India Company was launched through a Charter granted by Queen Elizabeth I in 1600 with "monopoly of commerce in eastern waters". The company traded with virtually full freedom, thanks to the extra generosity of the Mughal rulers, till 1757 i.e. for 157 years. The Company traders amassed enormous fortune through trade with India and other parts of Asia. Holland also entered the fray when the Dutch East India Company was set up in 1602 for trading in the East. The Dutch traders did good business in eastern India in the heyday of mercantilism in the 17th century with Patna as its headquarters. The Danes came in 1616. The French East India Company, set up in 1664 by Colbert, the financial genius among Louis XIV's ministers, was

destined to play an important role in establishing European commercial supremacy in the East. A Swedish East India Company was founded in 1731, but its commercial activities were confined only to China.

(ix) The economic consequences of the discoveries reflected a positive and forward moving aspect. But their one consequence 'was very tragic. It led to the cruel and barbaric practice of SLAVE TRADE which began in 1514 and continued for the next three centuries until it was abolished in the early 19th century. Slaves, both male and female, were recruited from western Africa, then they were brought to the thriving slave markets of the Portuguese capital, Lisbon and sold to the European merchants, who carried them to the New World as bonded labourers. Ships loaded with uncountable slaves in the most inhuman and unsanitary conditions (one-third of them died on the way) were carried to the various parts of two Americas for digging mines, cultivating lands, clearing forests, and doing all sorts of domestic work which a white labourer was incapable of doing. The New World offered enormous riches to the white merchants, but there was acute shortage of labour. Hence, the slave trade proved to be a solution. It was a trade through which not only European traders, but also Arab traders and African chieftains made amazing profits. They were put to long hours of work through coercion and torture.

1.4.2 Political Effects:

The desire for gaining economic interest was followed by the urge to establish political domination. The economic and political interests are intimately related. In that Age of Mercantilism, the nation-state felt proud to adopt a colonial policy and was very eager to annex territories and build up its political hegemony over them, so that economic benefits could flow continuously. The sword and soldiers of the king come forward to protect the cargo-laden ships of the merchants. As a result, the basic political effect of the geographical discoveries was that it strengthened monarchy and the nation-state and thereby dealt a severe blow to feudalism.

Another important effect was the advent of Spain as the supreme colonial-cum-

imperial power of Europe and she maintained this supremacy till the middle of the 17th century. The Spanish conquistadors went to the New World not only to search for riches, but also to carve out as much of territories as possible for themselves and their motherland. They established Spain's political hegemony over Mexico by ruthlessly wiping out the rich cultural heritage of the ancient Mayan and medieval Aztec civilizations and liquidating the ruling dynasty. They were equally merciless in uprooting the Inca rule and culture and creating Spanish hegemony over Peru. Besides these, they annexed Chile, Argentina, Cuba, Honduras and the large territory in and around Florida.

Portugal's gain in the New World was confined only to Brazil, where the Portuguese gradually established their political hegemony. More importantly, they built up political hegemony over some parts of India which lasted till 1961. Vasco da Gama made a second voyage to India in 1502, and this time he came as a conqueror with a strong fighting fleet of 21 vessels. With superior military power, the Portuguese got an edge over their Indian and Arab counterparts. Their victories in battles make a horrible tale of cruelty and barbarity. Thus the foundation of Portuguese power in India was laid. It was further consolidated by Alfonso de Albuquerque, who came to India in 1503. He was appointed as Governor of Portuguese Affairs in India in 1509. He and his successors set up Portuguese settlements in western coast, Malabar coast, Bengal and Madras. They also built up permanent fortified stations at Aden near the Red Sea, at Ormuz near the Persian Gulf and in East Africa.

England gained most politically in the long-term. She gradually established her political hegemony over the major part of the North American continent. This was done through the processes of colonisation and colonialism. The 13 American colonies, which grew up as a result of planned and religious minority immigration from the British Isles and later from the rest of Europe, were completely under the political tutelage of England. Thus, the foundation of the first British Empire was laid.

But it was England's political foothold in India in 1757 that gradually led to the formation of the largest empire in history, - the British Empire. After 157 years of stay

as traders, the East India Company's men with superior military power established their sway in India after their victory at the Battle of Plassey (1757). Thus was laid the foundation of British rule in India that lasted for nearly two centuries.

1.4.3 Cultural Impact:

Cultural impact of the discoveries proved to be lasting. Firstly, they helped the spread of Christianity. As said above, the Church encouraged the search of unknown lands where "the athens could be converted to Christianity to be civilised". Thus, the Bible followed the sword. But the conversion took place in the most ruthless manner. The Spaniards and Portuguese wiped out all traces of local cults and religious traditions in Mexico, Peru and Brazil, and imposed Christianity and their culture on these places with lasting effect. As regards India, after the explorers and conquerors, the Jesuit clergy started arriving. They were led by St. Francis Xavier, who, by 1550, had baptised thousands of men in India, Indonesia and Japan.

Secondly, it very much helped to promote the Renaissance. It produced a direct impact on the society. The endless efforts of explorers, navigators and sailors to explore the unexplored, to know the unknown and to conquer the unconquered instilled a spirit of adventure, self-confidence and courage among Europeans. They began to get out of the narrow confinement of a medieval world and enter into a wider and more open world where human endeavour was free to face any challenge. "More and more knowledge, wealth and power" became the ideal of the Europeans in the 16th century.

Conclusion

The geographical discoveries very much influenced the future course of history economically, politically and culturally. They inaugurated the Vasco da Gama Age of European Supremacy in world history. From the economic point of view, they restored the East-West trade by launching commerce through the Atlantic route, the Atlantic-Indian Ocean route and the Atlantic-Pacific route; led to unprecedented growth in trade and commerce, because the geographical discoveries signified the passing of the world trade from the thalassic to the oceanic stage, and from the regional to the global stage; gave great impetus to Mercantilism or phase of commercial capitalism, by promoting state control of trade and commerce, encouraging accumulation of gold and silver, boosting exports and acquiring colonies; opened the way for the rise of Spain, Portugal, England and France as mighty commercial-cum-colonial powers. But the shocking part of the economic consequences of the discoveries was the rise and spread of the slave trade and the continuance of such a condemnable practice for 300 years.

The political effects of the discoveries are remarkable too. They marked the rise, first of Spain and Portugal and later of England, as great imperial powers. The Spanish supremacy European politics and diplomacy was established and it continued for 150 years. It led to the growth of the First British Empire and also created the process by which England would in the 19th century would possess the largest empire in history.

The cultural impact of the discoveries was the spread of Christianity to the New World and the propagation of the Renaissance spirit throughout Europe. All these point to the immense significance of the geographical discoveries in the annals of human civilization.

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
