

From Dhows to Clipper Ships: The Decline of Indian Maritime Networks and the Rise of European Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean

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Abstract: *One of the oldest economic areas in the world was changed by the emergence of European naval supremacy in the Indian Ocean between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Indian traders, especially those from Gujarat, the Malabar Coast, and the Coromandel Coast, held a pivotal role in a vast network of trade connecting East Africa, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, South Asia, and Southeast Asia prior to the Portuguese arrival at the end of the fifteenth century. Instead of using military dominance, this marine system relied on existing merchant communities, monsoon navigation, and commercial collaboration. However, by the late eighteenth century, the Portuguese, Dutch, and British commercial enterprises had gained maritime dominance as European ships began to outnumber native ones on important trade routes. This article explores the historical mechanisms by which European shipping in the Indian Ocean eclipsed Indian maritime trade. The study makes the case that European dominance resulted from a combination of naval technology, state-backed monopolies, military coercion, strategic control of ports, and access to global capital rather than from innate commercial superiority. It does this by drawing on the works of historians like Ashin Das Gupta, K. N. Chaudhuri, Om Prakash, Michael N. Pearson, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, as well as the maritime perspectives found in the writings of Amitav Ghosh. The article goes on to argue that Indian traders did not vanish from international trade, but rather changed their roles from maritime carriers to financiers, brokers, and commercial intermediates in a trading system that was increasingly dominated by Europe. This study questions oversimplified accounts of European economic success and emphasizes the adaptability and tenacity of native merchant networks in the face of imperial change by placing European expansion within the larger framework of Indian Ocean history.*

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Introduction: The Indian Ocean has long been acknowledged as one of the world's most vibrant commercial hubs. The area served as an integrated maritime zone connecting East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf, the Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia for centuries prior to the advent of Europeans. By the time Portuguese sailors arrived at the end of the fifteenth century, the Indian Ocean already had an advanced system of trade, navigation, and cultural exchange, in contrast to the Atlantic realm, where European expansion established many of the main trading networks. In this arrangement, Indian traders held a particularly important position. Textiles, spices, precious stones, horses, metals, rice, and

luxury commodities were transported across great distances by traders from Gujarat, the Malabar Coast, Bengal, and the Coromandel Coast. These networks were bolstered by trade guilds, credit agreements, marine know-how, and a centuries-old, in-depth knowledge of monsoon wind patterns.

Many people consider Vasco da Gama's arrival at Calicut in 1498 to be a turning point in the history of the Indian Ocean. His journey started a new era of international communication by establishing a direct sea connection between Europe and India. However, the introduction of Europeans was significant not only for the growth of commerce but also for the change of the political and military underpinnings of maritime trade. The Portuguese developed a strategy based on armed intervention and naval coercion, although Indian Ocean commerce had historically been defined by rather open trading networks including numerous groups and nations. Through the construction of fortified ports, naval patrols, and the cartaz pass system which required merchants to gain Portuguese license for abroad voyage they attempted to control important maritime routes during the sixteenth century. Their actions signaled the start of a slow change in the balance of maritime power, even though their control was never total.

The emergence of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the English East India Company (EIC) in the seventeenth century brought about yet another change. These chartered businesses embodied a novel type of business structure that blended government assistance with private investment. They had advantages that went well beyond typical commercial rivalry thanks to their sizeable ships, military might, and monopolistic rights. European businesses progressively integrated themselves into pre-existing Asian commercial systems thanks to their capacity to raise finance, sustain naval forces, and build fortified trading towns. As time went on, they developed into important traders in the Indian Ocean and beyond, connecting Asian markets with those in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. By the seventeenth century, the movement of products was increasingly concentrated in the hands of Europeans, and European ships had grown in prominence on important maritime routes.

The expansion of European shipping has frequently been seen as proof of better economic efficiency, entrepreneurship, or technology. European expansion was often depicted in earlier imperial historiography as an inevitable result of Western progress and Asian decay. According to these explanations, more aggressive European rivals progressively replaced native traders. More recent research, however, has questioned these presumptions. Indian merchants continued to be active and prominent for a large portion of the early modern era, as historians like Ashin Das Gupta, K. N. Chaudhuri, Om Prakash, Michael N. Pearson, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have shown. Rather than disappearing from commerce, they adapted to changing economic and political circumstances, often collaborating with European companies while simultaneously preserving their own commercial networks. These scholars argue that European dominance emerged less from commercial superiority than from a combination of military power, state backing, monopolistic institutions, and strategic control of maritime infrastructure.

Amitav Ghosh's articles also offer insightful perspectives on the human aspects of Indian Ocean history. Despite being a writer first and foremost, Ghosh's writings, especially *In an Antique Land* and the *Ibis Trilogy*, provide light on the cosmopolitan character of pre-colonial maritime networks and the significant changes brought about by European imperial development. His stories highlight the interdependence of communities throughout the Indian Ocean and show how colonial authority changed long-standing patterns of trade, migration, and cross-cultural interaction. Literary works provide significant insights into the social and cultural contexts that supported maritime trade, even though they cannot take the place of historical evidence. This article examines how Indian maritime trade was gradually overshadowed and outnumbered by European shipping between 1500 and 1800. It argues that the transition from indigenous maritime predominance to European maritime supremacy was neither sudden nor inevitable. Instead, it resulted from a complex interaction of economic, political, military, and institutional factors. European powers succeeded

in expanding their maritime presence through naval force, corporate organization, and imperial support, while Indian merchants increasingly shifted their focus toward finance, brokerage, and inland trade. The article therefore challenges simplistic narratives of replacement and decline by demonstrating that European dominance was achieved through the restructuring rather than the destruction of existing commercial systems.

To explore this transformation, the study first examines the nature of Indian Ocean trade before European intervention. It then analyzes the impact of Portuguese maritime expansion and the militarization of commerce, followed by an assessment of the role played by the Dutch and English East India Companies in establishing European shipping supremacy. Finally, it considers the continuing importance of Indian merchant communities and evaluates competing historiographical interpretations of European dominance. Through this analysis, the article seeks to contribute to broader debates concerning globalization, empire, and the changing balance of power in the early modern world.

Literature Review: The transformation of maritime commerce in the Indian Ocean from indigenous predominance to European dominance has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Historians have debated the causes, timing, and nature of this transition, producing a rich body of literature that challenges simplistic narratives of European superiority and Asian decline. Earlier interpretations, often influenced by colonial historiography, emphasized European technological advancement, navigational skill, and commercial efficiency as the primary factors behind the rise of European maritime power. More recent scholarship, however, has shifted attention toward indigenous commercial networks, the role of state power, and the complex interactions between European and Asian merchants. The works of Ashin Das Gupta, K. N. Chaudhuri, Om Prakash, Michael N. Pearson, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and Amitav Ghosh have been particularly influential in reshaping our understanding of the Indian Ocean world and the gradual displacement of Indian shipping by European vessels.

One of the most significant contributions to the study of Indian maritime commerce is that of Ashin Das Gupta. His pioneering research challenged the assumption that European expansion led to the immediate decline of Indian merchants. In *Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat, c. 1700–1750*, Das Gupta examined the commercial history of Surat, one of the most important ports of the Mughal Empire. He demonstrated that Indian merchant communities remained active participants in overseas trade despite the growing presence of European companies. According to Das Gupta, the decline of Surat was not simply the result of European competition but was closely linked to political instability, changing commercial routes, and the weakening of Mughal authority. His analysis highlights the adaptability of Indian merchants, who adjusted their strategies in response to new economic realities rather than disappearing from commerce altogether.

Das Gupta's broader work on Indian Ocean trade further emphasizes the resilience of indigenous merchant networks. He argues that Indian merchants possessed extensive commercial knowledge, well-developed credit systems, and transregional connections that allowed them to compete effectively in many sectors of trade. European companies often depended on these merchants for financing, brokerage services, and market information. Consequently, Das Gupta rejects the notion of a straightforward European takeover and instead portrays the eighteenth century as a period of commercial restructuring in which Indian and European actors coexisted within an evolving economic environment.

The scholarship of K. N. Chaudhuri has also profoundly influenced the historiography of Indian Ocean commerce. In *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Chaudhuri presents the Indian Ocean as a highly integrated commercial system that long predated European intervention. He argues that maritime trade was sustained by networks of merchants who linked

diverse regions through regular exchanges of goods, information, and capital. Rather than viewing European expansion as a revolutionary break, Chaudhuri situates it within a broader historical continuum. He demonstrates that the commercial structures encountered by the Portuguese, Dutch, and English were already sophisticated and deeply interconnected.

Chaudhuri's analysis is particularly important because it challenges Eurocentric assumptions regarding economic development. He contends that Asian merchants were neither technologically backward nor commercially unsophisticated. Instead, they operated within a system that prioritized flexibility, partnership, and regional specialization. European success, therefore, cannot be explained solely by commercial efficiency. Rather, it must be understood in relation to military power, state support, and the capacity of European companies to operate across multiple oceans simultaneously. Chaudhuri's work provides a crucial foundation for understanding why European ships eventually came to dominate maritime transportation without completely eliminating indigenous commerce.

Another influential scholar in this field is Om Prakash, whose research focuses on the economic dimensions of European participation in Asian trade. Prakash examines the operations of the Dutch and English East India Companies and their integration into the wider global economy. His studies emphasize the importance of capital accumulation, precious-metal flows, and institutional organization in facilitating European expansion. According to Prakash, European companies benefited from access to large quantities of silver originating in the Americas. This influx of bullion enabled them to purchase Asian goods on an unprecedented scale and provided financial resources that individual merchants could rarely match.

Prakash also highlights the continued significance of Indian shipping and merchant activity during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He argues that indigenous fleets remained important in regional commerce and that European companies frequently relied on Indian merchants to sustain their operations. Nevertheless, the organizational structure of chartered companies gave Europeans a distinct advantage in long-distance trade. Their ability to mobilize investment, coordinate shipping, and maintain armed vessels contributed significantly to the expansion of European maritime influence. Prakash's work thus offers an economic explanation for the growth of European shipping while simultaneously recognizing the persistence of indigenous commercial networks.

The writings of Michael N. Pearson further enrich the historiography of the Indian Ocean by emphasizing the social and cultural dimensions of maritime exchange. Pearson rejects interpretations that portray the Indian Ocean solely as an arena of economic competition. Instead, he views it as a complex world of interactions involving merchants, sailors, pilgrims, migrants, and political authorities. In works such as *The Indian Ocean*, Pearson argues that maritime history must be understood through the movement of people and ideas as well as commodities. His analysis underscores the cosmopolitan nature of Indian Ocean societies and highlights the interconnectedness of regions that are often studied separately.

Pearson also stresses the significance of naval power in transforming maritime trade. He notes that European expansion introduced a more aggressive relationship between commerce and warfare than had previously existed in much of the Indian Ocean. Portuguese efforts to control shipping through force, followed by Dutch and British naval strategies, altered the balance of power at sea. Pearson's emphasis on maritime violence helps explain why European vessels eventually achieved numerical and strategic dominance despite the continued commercial vitality of indigenous merchants.

The work of Sanjay Subrahmanyam has added another important dimension to the historiography of European expansion in Asia. His studies of the Portuguese Empire challenge traditional narratives that depict European influence as uniformly successful or uncontested. Subrahmanyam emphasizes the limitations of Portuguese power and the extent to which European actors depended upon cooperation with local rulers and

merchant communities. He argues that empire-building was a negotiated process shaped by regional political conditions rather than a simple story of European conquest. This perspective is particularly valuable because it reveals the agency of Asian societies in shaping the trajectory of maritime commerce.

Subrahmanyam's research also demonstrates that European dominance emerged gradually and unevenly. Portuguese control over strategic ports such as Goa, Hormuz, and Malacca provided significant advantages, but these advantages did not automatically translate into complete commercial supremacy. Indigenous merchants continued to operate across the Indian Ocean, adapting to new circumstances and exploiting opportunities created by changing political environments. Consequently, Subrahmanyam encourages historians to view European expansion as part of a broader process of interaction and negotiation rather than as an inevitable triumph of one civilization over another.

While historians have provided detailed analyses of economic and political change, literary perspectives have also contributed to understanding the Indian Ocean world. The writings of Amitav Ghosh are especially significant in this regard. Although Ghosh is not a professional historian, his works draw extensively upon historical research and illuminate the human experiences underlying maritime commerce. In *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh reconstructs the interconnected world of medieval Indian Ocean trade through the story of a Jewish merchant and his Indian slave. The work highlights the cosmopolitan character of pre-European commercial networks and challenges assumptions about rigid cultural boundaries.

Ghosh's 'Ibis Trilogy'—*Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*—provides further insights into the transformation of maritime commerce under colonial rule. Through fictional narratives grounded in historical evidence, Ghosh explores how imperial expansion reshaped patterns of trade, migration, and economic dependency. His portrayal of merchants, sailors, and labourers reveals the social consequences of the growing dominance of European shipping and global capitalism. Although literary texts differ from conventional historical scholarship, they offer valuable perspectives on the cultural and human dimensions of maritime transformation.

Taken together, the scholarship reviewed here reveals a significant shift in historical interpretation. Earlier explanations that attributed European success primarily to technological superiority have been largely replaced by more nuanced analyses emphasizing political power, military organization, global capital, and institutional innovation. Historians increasingly recognize that Indian merchants remained active participants in trade even as European ships became more prominent. The replacement of Indian maritime predominance by European shipping was therefore not a simple process of displacement but a complex restructuring of commercial relationships within the Indian Ocean world.

This study builds upon these historiographical developments by examining how naval power, chartered companies, state support, and changing political conditions enabled European vessels to outnumber and eventually dominate indigenous shipping. At the same time, it acknowledges the resilience of Indian merchant communities and their continued importance within the evolving structures of early modern global commerce.

Historiography: The historiography of Indian Ocean trade and the rise of European maritime dominance has undergone significant transformation over the last century. Historians have moved from Eurocentric interpretations that celebrated European expansion as an inevitable consequence of technological and commercial superiority to more nuanced analyses that emphasize indigenous agency, regional networks, and the complex interaction between commerce and political power. The debate over how and why European ships came to outnumber Indian vessels in the Indian Ocean reflects broader discussions concerning colonialism, globalization, and economic change in the early modern world.

Early colonial and imperial historians generally interpreted European expansion in Asia as a story of progress and modernization. Influenced by nineteenth-century ideas of Western superiority, many scholars portrayed the Portuguese, Dutch, and British as dynamic innovators who introduced advanced navigation, superior shipbuilding techniques, and efficient commercial institutions into a stagnant Asian world. According to this perspective, the growth of European maritime power was the natural result of technological advancement and entrepreneurial skill. Indigenous merchants were often depicted as passive actors who were unable to compete with more modern European organizations. Such interpretations reinforced colonial narratives that justified European rule by presenting it as the culmination of historical progress.

One of the most influential examples of this approach can be found in the works of earlier European maritime historians who emphasized the achievements of explorers such as Vasco da Gama and the institutional success of the Dutch and English East India Companies. Their studies often focused on naval victories, commercial expansion, and imperial administration while paying relatively little attention to the existing commercial systems of the Indian Ocean. As a result, pre-European trade networks were frequently underestimated or treated merely as a backdrop to European achievements. During the second half of the twentieth century, this interpretation came under increasing criticism. Economic historians and scholars of Asian history began to challenge the assumption that European expansion represented a sudden break with the past. They argued that the Indian Ocean was already one of the most sophisticated commercial regions in the world long before the arrival of Europeans. Rather than creating maritime commerce, European traders entered a pre-existing network that had been sustained for centuries by Arab, Persian, Indian, and Southeast Asian merchants.

Among the most important contributors to this revisionist historiography was K. N. Chaudhuri. *In Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean*, Chaudhuri demonstrated that the Indian Ocean functioned as a highly integrated economic system linking diverse societies through regular commercial exchanges. His work challenged Eurocentric assumptions by showing that Asian merchants possessed advanced commercial institutions, extensive market knowledge, and effective financial networks. Chaudhuri argued that European participation should be understood as one component within a much larger commercial world rather than as the origin of that world. His interpretation shifted attention away from European achievements and toward the broader structures of Indian Ocean commerce.

The work of Ashin Das Gupta further transformed the historiography by focusing on the activities of Indian merchants themselves. Through detailed studies of Surat and other commercial centres, Das Gupta demonstrated that indigenous merchants remained active and influential even during periods of expanding European power. He rejected the notion that Indian commerce simply collapsed under European pressure. Instead, he argued that Indian merchants adapted to changing political and economic circumstances, often cooperating with European companies while maintaining their own networks. Das Gupta's research highlighted the resilience and flexibility of merchant communities and revealed the limitations of narratives centred exclusively on European success. Another major contribution came from Om Prakash, whose scholarship examined the economic foundations of European expansion. Prakash emphasized the importance of global capital flows, particularly the influx of American silver into Asian markets. According to his interpretation, European companies succeeded not because they were inherently more efficient than Asian merchants but because they possessed access to unprecedented financial resources and enjoyed substantial support from their respective states. His work challenged technological determinism by demonstrating that economic and institutional factors played a crucial role in the rise of European shipping.

The historiography has also been enriched by the contributions of Michael N. Pearson, who introduced a broader social and cultural perspective. Pearson argued that the Indian Ocean should not be viewed solely as

an economic space but as a complex maritime world shaped by migration, religion, cultural exchange, and political interaction. His approach encouraged historians to move beyond narrow commercial analyses and consider the wider human dimensions of maritime history. Pearson's emphasis on the relationship between trade and naval power further illuminated the ways in which European militarization altered the character of Indian Ocean commerce. More recently, historians associated with global and connected-history approaches have sought to transcend traditional distinctions between European and Asian histories. Sanjay Subrahmanyam has been particularly influential in this regard. His work emphasizes interaction, negotiation, and mutual influence rather than unilateral European domination. Subrahmanyam argues that European empires were deeply dependent upon local conditions, alliances, and indigenous intermediaries. This perspective challenges older models of conquest and highlights the agency of Asian actors in shaping historical outcomes.

Parallel to these developments, postcolonial scholars have questioned narratives that portray European expansion as inevitable or beneficial. Influenced by broader critiques of imperial historiography, these scholars emphasize the coercive dimensions of European power, including naval violence, monopolistic practices, and the disruption of existing commercial systems. They argue that European dominance resulted not merely from commercial competition but from the ability of states and chartered companies to combine economic objectives with military force. Such interpretations have drawn attention to the unequal power relations that underpinned the transformation of maritime trade. Literary scholarship has also contributed to historiographical debates, particularly through the work of Amitav Ghosh. Although not a historian in the conventional sense, Ghosh's writings challenge Eurocentric narratives by recovering the multicultural and interconnected character of the Indian Ocean world. *In an Antique Land* presents a historical vision in which merchants, travellers, and communities from different regions interacted across cultural boundaries long before European imperial expansion. Similarly, the Ibis Trilogy explores the human consequences of colonial trade and the integration of Asian economies into global capitalist systems. Ghosh's work complements academic scholarship by emphasizing experiences and perspectives often absent from traditional historical narratives.

Despite these advances, debates remain concerning the extent and timing of European dominance. Some historians continue to emphasize the significance of technological innovation and naval superiority, arguing that European shipbuilding and military capabilities provided decisive advantages. Others stress the importance of political and institutional factors, including state support, chartered companies, and access to global financial networks. A third group focuses on indigenous adaptation, suggesting that European success should not be interpreted as a complete displacement of Asian commerce. Instead, they argue that Indian merchants continued to play important roles as financiers, brokers, and commercial intermediaries even after losing control of maritime transportation.

The contemporary historiographical consensus increasingly rejects simplistic explanations based on either European superiority or Asian decline. Most scholars now recognize that the rise of European shipping was the result of multiple interconnected factors, including naval power, corporate organization, global capital flows, and changing political conditions within Asia itself. At the same time, there is broad agreement that indigenous merchants remained essential participants in commerce throughout the early modern period. The transition from Indian maritime predominance to European maritime supremacy was therefore a gradual and uneven process rather than a sudden replacement.

This article adopts this revisionist perspective. It argues that European ships came to outnumber Indian vessels not because indigenous commerce was inherently weak but because European states and companies developed new mechanisms for combining trade, military force, and imperial power. By examining the

interaction between these forces, the study contributes to ongoing historiographical debates concerning the nature of maritime transformation in the Indian Ocean and the broader history of global economic change.

Indian Ocean Trade before European Intervention: Before the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498, the Indian Ocean constituted one of the most extensive and sophisticated commercial systems in the world. Unlike the Atlantic Ocean, where large-scale maritime trade expanded significantly only after European exploration, the Indian Ocean had already supported centuries of commercial interaction among diverse societies. Arab, Persian, Indian, Chinese, and Southeast Asian merchants participated in an interconnected network that linked East Africa, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

Indian merchants occupied a central position within this system. Gujarati traders maintained commercial links with ports in the Red Sea and East Africa, while merchants from the Malabar Coast played a crucial role in the spice trade. The Coromandel Coast emerged as a major center for textile production and export. Bengal, with its rich agricultural resources and thriving textile industry, became another important commercial region. These networks were supported by merchant guilds, family partnerships, credit arrangements, and a detailed understanding of monsoon navigation. Trade in the Indian Ocean was characterized by cooperation rather than direct military confrontation. Commercial relationships were maintained through trust, reputation, and mutual dependence. Ports such as Calicut, Cambay, Cochin, and Surat welcomed merchants from different regions and functioned as cosmopolitan centers of exchange. Religious and cultural diversity did not prevent economic cooperation; Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, and Christian merchants regularly conducted business with one another.

Amitav Ghosh's historical reflections in *In an Antique Land* highlight this cosmopolitan world. Through the reconstruction of medieval trade networks connecting Egypt and India, Ghosh demonstrates that extensive cross-cultural interactions existed long before European imperial expansion. His work reinforces the argument that the Indian Ocean was already a vibrant arena of globalization before European arrival. Thus, when Vasco da Gama reached Calicut in 1498, he entered an existing commercial system rather than discovering a previously isolated region. European traders initially represented only one among many groups competing for access to Asian markets.

Portuguese Expansion and the Militarization of Commerce: The arrival of the Portuguese marked a significant departure from earlier patterns of Indian Ocean trade. Unlike most Asian merchants, whose primary objective was participation in commerce, the Portuguese sought to control and monopolize maritime trade. Their strategy relied heavily on naval power and military coercion. Following Vasco da Gama's voyage, the Portuguese Crown invested heavily in establishing a maritime empire known as the Estado da Índia. Strategic ports such as Goa, Hormuz, and Malacca were captured or fortified to create a network of bases controlling major commercial routes. These locations allowed Portuguese authorities to monitor and influence maritime traffic throughout the Indian Ocean.

One of the most important mechanisms of Portuguese control was the cartaz system. Under this arrangement, merchant vessels were required to obtain Portuguese licenses before sailing. Ships without valid permits risked seizure, confiscation of cargo, or destruction. This represented a fundamental change in the nature of Indian Ocean commerce. Whereas trade had previously been conducted in a relatively open environment, Portuguese intervention introduced systematic naval coercion into commercial activity. However, Portuguese power remained limited in several respects. Their population and financial resources were insufficient to dominate the entire Indian Ocean. Indigenous merchants continued to conduct significant trade despite Portuguese attempts at monopolization. Many adapted by negotiating with Portuguese authorities, purchasing licenses, or developing alternative routes.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam has emphasized that Portuguese expansion depended heavily upon cooperation with local rulers and merchant communities. Rather than exercising complete control, Portuguese authorities often relied upon alliances and compromises. Consequently, while Portuguese intervention disrupted traditional trading patterns, it did not immediately eliminate indigenous maritime activity. Nevertheless, the Portuguese established an important precedent. They demonstrated that naval power could be used to influence commercial outcomes, thereby linking military force and maritime trade in new ways. This model would later be adopted and expanded by the Dutch and English.

The Dutch East India Company and Corporate Maritime Power: The seventeenth century witnessed the emergence of a new form of commercial organization: the chartered company. Founded in 1602, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) combined private investment with state support. It possessed powers that extended beyond ordinary commerce, including the authority to wage war, negotiate treaties, maintain armed forces, and establish colonies. The VOC differed significantly from both Portuguese administration and indigenous merchant organizations. It operated through centralized management, extensive financial resources, and sophisticated administrative structures. Investors provided large amounts of capital, enabling the company to maintain substantial fleets and absorb commercial risks that individual merchants could not easily bear.

The Dutch focused initially on controlling the spice trade in Southeast Asia, but they soon became major participants in Indian Ocean commerce more broadly. Their ships connected markets across Asia and Europe, transporting textiles, spices, tea, metals, and other commodities. Because the VOC possessed both commercial and military capabilities, it could protect its shipping routes while simultaneously excluding competitors. The scale of Dutch operations contributed significantly to the growth of European shipping. Larger fleets, more regular voyages, and greater cargo capacity enabled European vessels to carry increasing quantities of goods. Over time, this expansion allowed European shipping to outnumber many indigenous fleets on important trade routes. Yet the success of the VOC should not be interpreted solely as a consequence of commercial efficiency. As Om Prakash argues, Dutch expansion depended heavily upon access to global financial resources, particularly silver originating from the Americas. These resources enabled the company to purchase Asian goods on a scale that exceeded the capabilities of most individual merchants. Thus, Dutch maritime supremacy emerged from the combination of capital, organization, and military force rather than from technological superiority alone.

The English East India Company and the Expansion of British Maritime Influence

The English East India Company (EIC), established in 1600, gradually became the most powerful European commercial organization in Asia. Like the VOC, it combined private investment with state support and enjoyed extensive political privileges. Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the company expanded its commercial operations across the Indian Ocean. Initially, English traders faced intense competition from Portuguese, Dutch, and indigenous merchants. However, the company gradually strengthened its position through strategic alliances, military victories, and commercial expansion. The establishment of trading settlements at Surat, Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta provided secure bases for British operations.

The acquisition of Bombay in 1661 proved particularly significant. Its natural harbor enabled the British to develop an important naval and commercial center on the western coast of India. From this base, British shipping expanded rapidly across the Arabian Sea and beyond. The eighteenth century marked a decisive turning point. Political instability following the decline of the Mughal Empire created opportunities for European intervention. The East India Company increasingly combined commercial activities with territorial expansion. Victories such as the Battle of Plassey (1757) provided access to enormous financial resources,

strengthening the company's ability to finance maritime operations. As British political influence expanded, so too did British shipping. Company vessels increasingly transported not only British goods but also commodities produced by Indian merchants. Many traders found it advantageous to use British ships because they offered protection against piracy, warfare, and commercial uncertainty. By the late eighteenth century, British shipping had become a dominant presence in the Indian Ocean. The East India Company's integration of commerce, naval power, and territorial authority created advantages that indigenous merchants found difficult to match.

Why Indian Shipping Declined Relative to European Shipping: The decline of Indian maritime predominance did not result from a single cause. Instead, several interconnected factors contributed to the growing numerical superiority of European vessels.

First, European companies possessed access to substantial financial resources. Capital markets in Europe allowed investors to fund large-scale commercial enterprises capable of maintaining extensive fleets. Indigenous merchants often relied upon family partnerships and regional credit systems, which, although effective, operated on a smaller scale.

Second, European states provided military support to commercial activities. Naval protection reduced commercial risks and encouraged merchants to use European shipping. Indigenous merchants generally lacked comparable military resources.

Third, the organizational structure of chartered companies facilitated long-distance coordination. The VOC and EIC maintained networks extending across multiple continents, enabling them to integrate Asian trade into global commercial systems.

Fourth, political developments within India altered the commercial environment. The weakening of Mughal authority, regional conflicts, and increasing insecurity encouraged merchants to seek protection from powerful European companies.

Finally, European ships increasingly benefited from economies of scale. Larger vessels could transport greater quantities of cargo at lower costs per unit. As shipping volumes increased, European companies gained further advantages, reinforcing their dominance.

Persistence and Adaptation of Indian Merchants: Despite the growing dominance of European shipping, Indian merchants did not disappear from commerce. Indeed, one of the most important findings of modern scholarship is the remarkable resilience of indigenous merchant communities.

Gujarati, Marwari, Bengali, Armenian, and Chettiar merchants continued to play important roles in trade throughout the eighteenth century. Many adapted by specializing in finance, brokerage, insurance, and inland distribution. European companies frequently relied upon these merchants for local knowledge, credit, and commercial expertise. Ashin Das Gupta's studies of Surat demonstrate that indigenous merchants remained economically influential even as European shipping expanded. Rather than being displaced entirely, they adjusted their strategies to operate within changing commercial conditions.

This distinction is crucial. European vessels increasingly dominated maritime transportation, but they did not completely replace Indian participation in commerce. The transformation of the Indian Ocean economy involved a shift in the distribution of commercial functions rather than the elimination of indigenous economic activity. Consequently, the rise of European maritime supremacy should be understood as a process of restructuring. Europeans gained control over shipping, naval protection, and international freight movement, while Indian merchants continued to occupy important positions within broader commercial

networks. The result was not the destruction of Indian trade but its incorporation into a global system increasingly shaped by European political and economic power.

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