

AGE OF DISCOVERY

15th and 16th Centuries of the World History are marked as the Age of Discovery. Geographical Explorations were those developments that prompted the Europeans to discover sea routes to the already known lands and to discover new routes unknown lands, seas and continents. These developments, for the first time, physically brought together almost all countries of the globe. The geographical explorations of the 15th and 16th centuries enabled Europe to expand to the non-European world. Further, these resulted in shaping world history primarily in favour of Europe

Causes for the Geographical Explorations

Economic factor was the main catalyst for the Explorations. The already risen middle wanted to acquire more wealth through trade and commerce; but the monopoly of Europe's Eastern trade was in the hands of Italians. This paved the way for extreme expensiveness of Eastern goods. Eventually, other European nations were in search of new sea routes to East that naturally led to the geographical Explorations.

The encouragement and financial support of the emerging national monarchs also contributed for the Explorations. The monarchs, who acquired political power, in order to stabilise their economies, fully supported the explorers to find out new routes.

The role of the missionaries in spreading religion cannot go unnoticed in the discovery of new routes and sea routes. It is said that Geographical Explorations were related with 3 'G's – **Gold, God and Glory.**

The fall of Constantinople to Ottoman Turks further acted as an immediate factor. The conquest led to the closure of

the land route to the East, which in turn compelled the Europeans to find out alternate routes to the East.

The inventions like Astrolabe and Mariner's Compass also furthered the Explorations. Along with this, the spirit of adventure and thirst for knowledge generated by the Renaissance also helped the Discoveries.

Portugal and Geographical Explorations

For many reasons, it was Portugal that led the Discoveries. This pioneering activity of Portugal was due to certain specific factors.



Henry the Navigator

The real driving force was Prince Henry, known in history as Henry the navigator. Actually he was not a navigator, but he had devoted his life to scientific Exploration and the extension of Portugal's empire and commerce. In 1419, he had set up a school for training sea personnel. Moreover, he provided all encouragement to voyages and navigators. This benefited Portugal to become the pioneer in Geographical Explorations.

The king John II also extended his patronage to navigators. He provided all encouragements to find out new sea route to India. This marked the beginning of the new discoveries. Thus, **Bartholomew Diaz** sailed up to the southern tip of Africa, which he named as '**the Cape of Storms**' as he had been caught up in terrible storms at this southern tip in 1488. But, this discovery was treated as a prelude to the explorations to come, and the king John named it as '**Cape of Good Hope**'.

Realising the significance of this discovery, **Vasco da Gama** followed the same route and from the help of an Arabian

merchant, he reached Kappad near Calicut in 1498. This has great significance in history, for it opened a new sea route from Europe to India. After two years, Cabral, by accident, discovered Brazil.

Geographical Explorations by other European Countries

Meanwhile, Spain had also been involved herself in finding out new sea routes to reach the East. In 1492, **Christopher Columbus**, an Italian Navigator, amply sponsored by Spain attempted to discover a new sea route to India. After an eventful voyage from Parlos in Spain, Columbus reached Bahamas Islands, which he mistook as India. Later in 1501, **Amerigo Vespucci**, another Italian, discovered the North American continent, which was named after him. Soon, Spanish navigator Balboa crossed the Isthmus of Panama.



Ferdinand Magellan

One of the epoch making discoveries was made by **Ferdinand Magellan**, a Portuguese navigator, who served for Spain. In order to find out a sea route to the East, he started his voyage westwards in 1519. He crossed the Atlantic and reached the southern tip of South of America, this part is known as the Straits of Magellan. Afterwards, he further moved westwards, and entered a new sea, which was more peaceful than the Atlantic and named the Pacific. Travelling westwards for three months, Magellan and his team reached Philippines. After unfortunate incident, in which Magellan was killed, the team continued their voyage along the known route of Indian Ocean and the coast of Africa. Finally they returned back and reached Spain in 1522. This has much in world history, for Magellan and his team happened to be the first navigators of the world. This also affirmed the helio- centric theory of universe.

In course of time, other European nations followed their suit. The nations like England, France and Holland participated in the explorations. In 1497, sponsored by England, the Italian navigator, **John Cabot** discovered Newfoundland in North America. **Francis Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh and Gilbert**, all English navigators discovered the Eastern coast of America, where, the colonies of England sprang up in course of time. Francis Drake is the first English to sail around the world.

The French also contributed their share in the Explorations. **Jacques Cartier** discovered the St. Lawrence River in North America. This was followed by the exploration of the Hudson River by Henry Hudson, the Dutch. The Dutch was also responsible for the discovery of the Australian continent. Thus, these discoveries made far reaching impact on the history of mankind in all spheres.

Results of Geographical Explorations

These discoveries effected remarkable changes in history. These explorations, at the outset widened human knowledge with regard to geography, physical features etc. It brought together, for the first time, almost all countries of the world physically.

In the economic sphere, enormous increase in the volume of trade was one of the lasting results. This increase in trade led the commercial revolution, which became the basis for the growth of capitalism, industrial capitalism. It also led to the emergence of a new economic doctrine- Mercantilism.

Moreover, the centre of European trade was shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. Thus the Italian monopoly in Eastern trade ended and new cities emerged on the Atlantic coast.

These developments dealt a heavy blow to medieval guild system of Europe, where new classes were on the offing. Finally, these discoveries led to the emergence of colonialism in history and European nations tried to establish colonies in the newly discovered as well as already known lands, which resulted in competition and later led to imperialism.

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