

# Marco's Malabar

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*Kings, ox worship, naked monks, magic and more—  
the coasts of southern India through the eyes of  
Marco Polo*



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*Marco Polo (Photo: Alamy)*

RETURNING HOME FROM China in 1292 CE, Marco Polo arrives on the Coromandel Coast of India in a typical merchant ship with over sixty cabins and up to 300 crewmen. He enters the kingdom of the Tamil Pandyas near modern Thanjavur, where, according to custom, 'the king and his barons and everyone else all sit on the earth'. He asks why they 'do not seat themselves more honorably'. The king replies, 'To sit on the earth is honorable enough, because we were made from the earth and to the earth we must return.' Marco Polo documented this episode in his

famous book, *The Travels*, as part of his rich social portrait of coastal India.

The climate is so hot that all men and women wear nothing but a loincloth, including the king—except his is studded with rubies, sapphires, emeralds and other gems. Marco calls this 'the richest and most splendid province in the world', one that, together with Ceylon, produces 'most of the pearls and gems that are to be found in the world'. Merchants and traders abound, the king takes pride in not holding himself above the law of the land and people travel the highways safely with their valuables in the cool of the night air. In this kingdom, justice 'is very strictly administered to those who commit homicide or theft or any other crime'.

The sole local grain produced here is rice, claims Marco. People use only their right hand for eating, saving the left for sundry 'unclean' tasks. They drink fluids 'out of flasks, each from his own; for no one would drink out of another's flask'. Nor do they set the flask to their lips, preferring to 'hold it above and pour the fluid into their mouths'. They are addicted to chewing a leaf called tambur, sometimes mixing it with 'camphor and other spices and lime'. They go about spitting freely—also using it to express serious offense by targeting the spittle at another's face, which can sometimes provoke violent clan fights.

They 'pay more attention to augury than any other people in

the world and are skilled in distinguishing good omens from bad'. They rely on the counsel of astrologers and have enchanters called Brahmins, who are 'expert in incantations against all sorts of beasts and birds'. For instance, they protect the oyster divers 'against predatory fish by means of incantations' and for this service receive one in twenty pearls the divers extract from the sea. Each day, people refrain from doing business during a preordained unlucky hour that differs across days of the week.

People 'worship the ox' and do not eat beef—except the gavi, a group of people with low social status, who 'eat cattle when they die a natural death' and are not admitted inside holy places. Marco also records a custom among some people in which a dead man's wife 'flings herself into the same fire and lets herself be burnt with her husband. The ladies who do this are highly praised by all'. People daub their houses with cow dung. In battle they use lance and shield and, according to Marco, are 'not men of any valor or spirit' and 'kill no beasts or any living thing. When they have a mind to eat the flesh of a sheep or of any beast or bird, they employ a Saracen [Muslim] or some other who is not of their religion or rule to kill it for them'. Most do not consume any alcohol, and do 'not admit as a witness or a guarantor either a wine drinker or one who sails on the sea'. They say that 'a man who goes to sea must be a man in despair'. Marco observes that people 'do not regard any form of

sexual indulgence as a sin'.

Their temple monasteries have both male and female deities, prone to being cross with each other, when they also 'refrain from [sexual] intercourse'. The priests know when this happens, and since estranged deities spell nothing but trouble in the human realm, bebies of spinsters gather there several times each month with 'tasty dishes of meat and other food'. They 'sing and dance and afford the merriest sport in the world', leaping, tumbling, raising their legs to their necks and pirouetting to delight the deities. After the 'spirit of the idols has eaten the substance of the food', they 'eat together with great mirth and jollity'. Pleasantly disposed by the evening showbiz, the gods and goddesses descend from the temple walls at night and 'consort' with each other—or so the priest announces the next morning—bringing great joy and relief to all. 'The flesh of these maidens,' Marco adds salaciously, 'is so hard that no one could grasp or pinch them in any place... their breasts do not hang down, but remain upstanding and erect.' For a penny, however, 'they will allow a man to pinch [their bodies] as hard as he can'. Marco doesn't say how common this custom was, or whether he himself partook in it.

*(Courtesy: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc)*

Dark skin is preferred by the people. 'When a child is born they anoint him once a week with oil of sesame, and this makes him grow much darker [for] I assure you that the darkest man here is the most highly esteemed and considered better than the others who are not so dark.' No wonder their gods are all black 'and their devils white as snow'. This detail is interesting though sesame oil, while beneficial for the skin, doesn't really darken it; perhaps Marco confused it with another oil. It is also worth noting that a higher value for lighter skin—correlated with the higher varnas and castes that emerged after the Indo-Aryan migration—doesn't seem to have penetrated folk culture this

far south. But cultural standards have long since changed, as evidenced by all the 'Fair & Lovely' fairness cream ads in the same regions today.

A group of their holy men, the yogis, eat frugally and live longer than most, some as long as 200 years, claims Marco. In one religious order, men even go stark naked and 'lead a harsh and austere life'. These men believe that all living beings have a soul and take pains to avoid hurting even the tiniest creatures. They take their food over large dried leaves. When asked why they do not cover their private parts, they say, 'We go naked because we want nothing of this world. For we came into this world naked and unclothed... It is because you employ this member in sin and lechery that you cover it and are ashamed of it. But we are no more ashamed of it than of our fingers.' Among them, only those who can conquer sexual desire become monks. 'So strict are these idolaters and so stubborn in their misbelief,' opines Marco.

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The king, however, aspires to a different standard. He has 500 wives and concubines, and 'whenever he sets eye on a

beautiful woman or damsel, he takes her for himself'. Even then, he covets a beautiful wife of his brother—who rules a nearby kingdom and also keeps many wives— and one day succeeds in 'ravishing her from him and keeping her for himself'. Naturally, war looms between the brothers, as it has many times before. Once again, their mother intervenes, knife in hand and pointing at her breasts, 'If you fight with each other, I will cut off these breasts which gave you both suck.' Her emotional blackmail succeeds once again; the brother who has lost one of his wives swallows his pride and war is averted. But it is only a matter of time, thinks Marco, before the mother is dead and the brothers destroy each other.

The region breeds no horses but imports them from Aden and beyond. Over 2000 steeds arrive on ships each year but, within a year, all but 100 die 'due to ill usage' and lack of horse-handling knowledge. Marco believes that foreign merchants 'do not send out any veterinaries or allow any to go, because they are only too glad for many of the horses to die in the king's charge'. Further north, in a little town near modern Chennai, is the tomb of St Thomas the Apostle, a place of pilgrimage for both the Christians and Muslims of the region. It's likely that Marco also visited Mamallapuram. He marked its location on the map he carried but didn't write about it.

A few hundred miles north is the port of Motupalli, writes

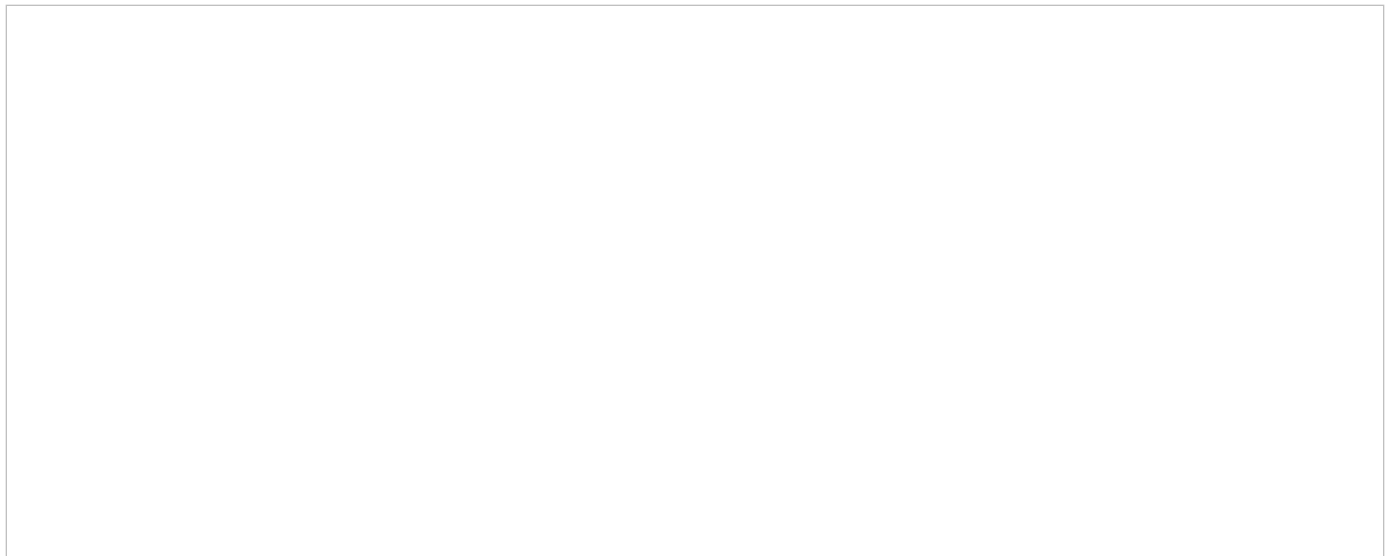


Marco. It's part of a kingdom 'ruled by a queen, who is a very wise woman'. Throughout 'her forty years' reign she has governed her kingdom well with a high standard of justice and equity'. Never was a 'lady or lord so well beloved as she is by her subjects'. Marco is talking about Rudrama Devi of the Kakatiya Dynasty of Warangal in modern Telangana. This kingdom, he writes, is a huge producer of diamonds and buckram cotton of 'the finest texture and the highest value' and people here live on 'rice, flesh, milk, fish and fruit'.

After the eastern Coromandel Coast, Marco sails up the western Malabar Coast, but his observations here are sparse. He speaks about Quilon (Kollam), which has 'some Christians and Jews'. The people 'make wine out of [dates], and a very good drink it is, and makes a man drunk sooner than grape wine'. Skilled astrologers abound, as do physicians, 'adept at preserving the human body in health'. Marco also makes cursory remarks about Camorin and Kannur.

Of the flora and fauna on the Malabar Coast, Marco says, 'Everything there is different from what it is with us and excels both in size and beauty... lions, leopards, and lynxes abound, as do peacocks and scarlet and blue parrots of which there is no lovelier sight in the world.' Some monkeys in the region have 'such distinctive appearance that you might take them for men'.

He notes pepper and indigo plantations, incense, a date wine that is 'a very good drink'. Further north in Gujarat, workshops make cotton and leather goods, shiploads of which go west every year. With such precious cargo plying the sea, piracy too operates on a large scale. In Aden, the cargo is transferred to smaller ships and carried via rivers and camels to the Nile and downriver to Alexandria and beyond. These goods include cushions and 'handsome mats of scarlet leather, embossed with birds and beasts and stitched with gold and silver... of more consummate workmanship than anywhere in the world... so exquisite that they are a marvel to behold'. Marco visits Cambay and the 'kingdom of Somnath', where people 'live by trade and industry, as honest folk ought to do'. This more or less ends Marco's travels in India spanning multiple months.



*A depiction of the port in Kozhikode from Georg Braun and Franz Hogenbergs' atlas Civitates orbis terrarum, 1572*

Other travellers in the next two centuries would help create a

richer portrait of the Malabar Coast. These include a diverse lot: Ibn Battuta of Morocco, Ma Huan of China, Abdur Razzaq of Persia, Niccolò de' Conti of Italy and Afanasy Nikitin of Russia. In 'the Malabar lands,' Ibn Battuta writes in the 1340s, there are twelve infidel kings (i.e., not Muslim, Christian or Jew), 'some of them strong with armies numbering fifty thousand men, and others weak with armies of three thousand. Yet there is no discord [whatsoever] between them, and the strong does not desire to seize the possessions of the weak'. Battuta notes that the entire road from Goa to Kollam,

*runs beneath the shade of trees, and at every half mile there is a wooden shed with benches on which all travellers, whether Muslims or infidels, may sit. At each shed there is a well for drinking and an infidel who is incharge of it. If the traveller is an infidel he gives him water in vessels; if he is a Muslim, he pours the water into his hands. It is the custom of the infidels in the Malabar lands that no Muslim may enter their houses or eat from their vessels; if he does so they break the vessels or give them to the Muslims. [Fortunately,] on this road there are houses belonging to Muslims, at which Muslim travellers alight, and where they buy all that they need. Were it not for them, no Muslim could travel by it.*

Battuta comes to Calicut in a trading vessel. He calls it 'one of the largest harbours in the world visited by men from

China, Sumatra, Ceylon, the Maldives, Yemen, and Fars [Persia], and in it gather merchants from all quarters'. His shipmates receive a rousing welcome by the ruling Zamorin, with drums, trumpets and bugles, and he stays as the king's guest.

WHAT KIND OF a man was Marco Polo? Raised in the cosmopolitan and mercantile city state of Venice, Marco embraced something of its spirit and brought a merchant's pragmatic eye to bear on the world. His father and uncle—both enterprising merchants of Venice who accompanied him on his famous journey but left no records of their own—were early role models. When Marco began this journey, he was only seventeen. He returned in his late thirties and a few years later, in 1298 CE, teamed up with a romance writer, Rustichello of Pisa, to tell his story—a vast panorama of countries largely unknown to his fellow Venetians.

Marco Polo spent many months in India. Barring a few cursory mentions of inland areas, his account of India is limited to the coastal belt and ends with this tantalizing remark, 'of the inland regions I have told you nothing; for the tale will be too long in the telling'

Marco was supremely inquisitive, attentive to a region's geography and natural resources, birds and beasts, climate and flora, foods and drinks. He was also drawn to the local arts and crafts, and assessed their commercial value for

fellow Venetians. In Marco's day, cultures were classified by religion, and so arriving in a new place, he described the locals simply as Christians, Jews, Saracens (Muslims) or 'idolaters' (catchall for Tartars, Buddhists, Hindus, Jains and others). He admired hard-working, law-abiding people, and criticized indolent, unruly ones. What makes his account truly worthwhile are his vignettes of social life, such as how the Tartars pitch their tents or go to war, how some Central Asians extract musk from gazelles, how a girl's virginity in Cathay is verified before marriage, why men in a Tibetan province prefer to take as wives women with lots of prior sexual experience, or how the Great Khan's 'admirably contrived' postal service works.

Marco was no scholar, however, and had scant interest in history, philosophy or language (unlike, say, Alberuni, the Persian traveller to India in the early eleventh century). Marco was a pious Christian and admired other cross-cultural expressions of piety. He believed in magic, incantations and the power of astrologers to 'bring on tempests and thunderstorms when they wish and stop them at any time'. He uses superlatives too readily and is prone to wild exaggeration (for example, he claims the city of Hangzhou has 12,000 bridges, the Great Khan goes hunting with 10,000 falconers, and every tree on the 7448 islands in the China Sea gives off 'a powerful and agreeable fragrance'). He was gullible too, lending credence to hearsay

about giant birds that lift up elephants, men with tails as thick as a dog's and a legendary Christian king of Asia called Prester John.

Marco Polo spent many months, perhaps the better part of a year, in India. Barring a few cursory mentions of inland areas, his account of India is limited to the coastal belt and ends with this tantalizing remark, 'Of the inland regions I have told you nothing; for the tale will be too long in the telling.' We would have happily read on, Marco.

**(This is an edited excerpt from Namit Arora's Indians: A Brief History of a Civilization (Viking; 304 pages; Rs 599), released in January )**

## **About The Author**