
The East India Company and Their Reasoning for Voyaging to India in the 17th and 18th Centuries

Dalton R. Dieu

Mr. Dieu is a senior history with teacher licensure major. He hails from Danville, Illinois, and he wrote this paper for Dr. Newton Key's HIS 2500: Research Methods. After graduation, he will be pursuing a position teaching high school history.

The East Indies are a group of islands in Southeast Asia rich in many valuable products. John Watts and George White founded the English East India Company on December 31, 1600 to pursue trade and profits with the East Indies. The Dutch East India Company was created in 1602 by the merger of several companies, which allowed the companies to work as one instead of competing against each other. Among the main products that these two companies traded were cloth and spices. These companies might have started as trading enterprises, but in the end, they were looking for much more. They became empire builders, and their goals began to extend beyond mere trade to learning about other people's culture. What started as trade turned into a mission to learn about culture, religion, and ideas. According to historian William Pettigrew, "The engagements of the English East India Company in South Asia also went beyond politics and trade. This engagement opened new forms of exchange between England and South Asia, resulting in a two-way dissemination of knowledge, ideas, institutions, social practices, languages, religion and dietary practices."¹ Historian Anthony Farrington adds, "Over the next 233 years, the Company came to dominate European trade with South and East Asia."² The East India Company became the most dominant trading power of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its far-reaching influence helped launch British imperialism.

According to historian Miles Ogborn, "The English East India Company was established in 1600 as a joint stock company with a monopoly on trade with the East Indies that was guaranteed by a monarch."³ It started as a joint stock company that focused on trade because the English needed more materials and resources, all of which could be found in the East Indies. During the seventeenth century, India had a successful cloth and spice industry. England was looking to export goods to serve markets back home. As historian Leanna Lee-Whitman states, "The charter was broad, granting power to cover all circumstances—company ships, for instance, were empowered to make war on any who refused to trade (as long as they were non-Christians)."⁴ England was willing to do anything and everything it could to get items it needed, even if that meant using force and intimidation. This allowed for England to trade their surpluses for the things it needed.

As *Gentlemen's Magazine* explained of the company in 1766: "In former times, when their flock was small and of little value, their trade confined, and their possessions nothing, it was viewed

¹ William Pettigrew and Mahesh Gopalan, *The East India Company, 1600-1857: Essays on Anglo-Indian Connection* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3.

² Anthony Farrington, *Trading Places: The East India Company and Asia, 1600-1834* (London: The British Library Publishing Division, 2002), 92.

³ Miles Ogborn, *Global Lives: Britain and the World, 1550-1800* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 78.

⁴ Leanna Lee-Whitman, "The Silk Trade: Chinese Silks and British East India Company," *Winterthur Portfolio – A Journal of American Material Culture*, 17, no. 1 (1982): 21.

all together in the light of a private adventurer.”⁵ This was one of the problems that the East India Company faced when it first started. Its fleet was too small, and many people thought they were not going to be able to succeed. To many the company appeared focused on adventure, rather than creating a sound business plan. It did not take long, however, for the company to grow large, become very successful, and profitable.

Trading with the East Indies not only allowed England to gain needed products, but also allowed them to learn how to manufacture these goods for themselves. In the beginning, the British were paying a lot of money for these products, because they did not have a choice. As time went on though, they were able to manufacture some of the products for a fraction of the cost at home—another reason for trading with India during this time related to fashion. Fashion was becoming more important for the upper classes in England, and India had everything one needed to be fashionable. According to Audrey Douglas, “the East India Company had discovered that the exploitation of fashion for profit is a more artful business than a mere dictatorship exercised by the ‘trade.’”⁶ The British hoped trade of this cloth and fabric would help start a booming fashion industry, and they were not wrong.

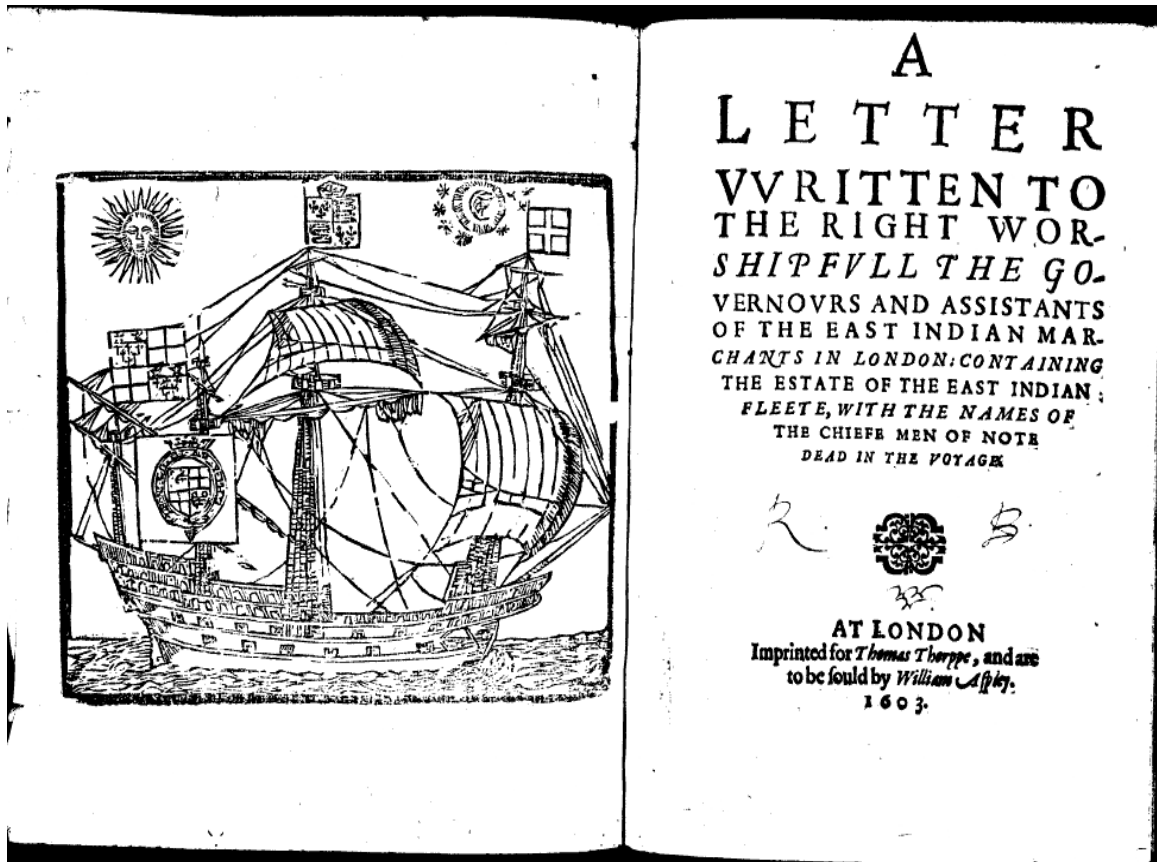
There were several other reasons to start trading with India. The British also hoped to test and improve open sea navigation. Understanding the ocean and general geography was a necessity for the island kingdom of England. For example, in times of war, the British would be able to navigate more effectively with an understanding of the ocean and what it was doing. In 1697, writer Charles Davenant explained that “it is as a great truth, that the strength of an island, as well as its treasure, depends more on trade and navigation, than that of a continent; the consideration whereof hath often prevailed with me to believe this nation might sooner bring France to its ancient bounds by our force in trade and Navigation.”⁷ So, people believed if England mastered trade and navigation, then it could unseat France as a power. The British monarchy believed that it did not need a strong army to dominate France. They were not wrong, mastering trade and navigation would advance English interests and advanced it as an empire. Times were changing, and countries did not have to have the strongest military anymore. As times changed, countries themselves needed to change, and that is exactly what England did. The British started trading companies and were willing to do what no one else at that time was doing. They changed themselves for the better, and that is why they were one of the first countries to master the art of trade and navigation. This would help England more than anything else in the long run.

During this time period, the English East India Company mostly traded in cloth and fabric. Meanwhile, the Dutch East India Company dealt largely with the trade of spice. Both carved out their own little niche in each aspect of trade. However, that did not stop the English East India Company from trying to intrude on the Dutch’s spice trade. The English East India Company’s

⁵ The East India Company was looked at as more of an adventure because they did not have the tools that they needed to succeed at the beginning. “A Brief State of the Situation of the East India Company’s Affairs, Abroad and at Home.” *The Gentlemen’s Magazine: And Historical Chronicle* 36 (September 1766): 395.

⁶ Audrey Douglas, “Cotton Textiles in England: the East India Company’s Attempt to Exploit Developments in Fashion, 1660-1721,” *Journal of British Studies*, 8, no. 2 (1969): 28.

⁷ Charles Davenant, *An Answer to a Late Tract, Entitled, An Essay on the East-India Trade*, (London: 1697): 2.



This illustration shows a ship from the East India Company's fleet sailing across open water. This is what one of the company's ships would have looked like at the beginning of the 17th century. In the upper right-hand corner of the picture at the top of the ship, looks to be the East India Company's flag. I cannot make out what the rest of the flags are but I assume they have something to do with the trading partners of the company or flags that have something to do with England. There also looks to be a sun and a moon at the top of the image, maybe representing the sun rising in the east and setting in the west.

interference with the Dutch company led to a war. A 1762 article, entitled *A Defence of the United Company of Merchants of England, trading to the East Indies*, notes:

There can be nothing more frivolous than this complaint: the factory in question overlooked Fort St. David's from a hill at the distance of seven hundred yards. The English who at the time apprehended the French would attack this fort, and avail themselves of the situation of the Dutch factory, came to an actual agreement with the Dutch factor, that the house should be demolished.⁸

Competition and bitterness grew between the two companies to the extent that the English company was willing to destroy a Dutch factory. Were they trying to send a message or were they trying to destroy some of their product? Either way, these two companies actively sought to intrude on each other's trade, resulting in significant damage. After the war, trade between the two

⁸ These companies were battling with each other so much that the English company was willing to demolish one of the Dutch factories. "A Defence of the United Company of Merchants of England, Trading to the East-Indies, and Their Servants...against the Complaints of the Dutch East India Company." *The Critical Review*. London (September 1762): 351.

companies ended. The English East India Company decided to stick to the textile trade and stayed away from the Dutch.

Not everyone in England supported trade. Late seventeenth-century pamphleteer John Cary argued:

trade which exports little or none of our product or manufactures, nor supplies us with things necessary to promote manufacturers at home, or carry on our trade abroad, nor encourages navigation, cannot be supposed to be advantageous to this Kingdom; especially when its imports hinder the consumption of our own manufactures, and more especially when those imports are chiefly the purchase of our Bullion.⁹

Many people thought the East India Company should stop trading with foreign countries. They argued England should focus on building its own manufacturing companies and stop spending money on voyages to get things that they could make in England. As time went on, however, the mindset began to change. According to *the Gentlemen's Magazine* in 1766 "at present there are near seven millions of property invested in that trade, an immense quantity of shipping employed, fleets and armies maintained, and great possessions acquired, every man almost in these kingdoms finds himself affected by its prosperity."¹⁰ With time, more and more people viewed trade with the East Indies as a positive thing. Supporters could point to the profits produced by the East India Company. They also stressed the jumpstart provided for manufacturing at lower costs. Additionally, there was the issue of cultural growth. As stated in the 1677 essay, *The East-India-Trade a Most Profitable Trade to the Kingdom*:

It is foreign trade, that is the great interest and concern of the kingdom; without foreign trade, all or the most part of those studies that that render persons so renowned, would be of little signification to the Public. What is all knowledge, if it be not improved to practice, but empty notions? If the people of the islands were learned in all languages, did know the situation of all places and countries of nature of all commodities; to what purpose would all be, if there were no foreign trade?¹¹

In short, the British could learn much about other countries' governments, laws, religion, society, institutions, language, and operations. In some senses, this was almost more important than the products being traded. In the long run, it was about how to better England and build empire. What is the point of going to these countries without gaining an understanding of diversity and other peoples' way of life? There is no reason to trade with these other countries unless the end game is to better every aspect of life.

The East India Company was a very successful company. It started as a company that mainly focused on trade because the times were changing, and it aimed to be a pioneer of trade. Trading patterns, consumer habits, and general economics, however, inevitably change. This proved true for both the English East India Company and the Dutch East India Company. Both continued to operate even as profits fell. Why you might ask? The East India Company, focused on trade in the beginning, but by the end, it sought knowledge about India's culture, religion, government, laws, society, institutions, and how the country operated in general. The East India Company took the information that it had gained and applied it to its own practices back home in England. The company had one agenda in mind when the company started, but at the end it adopted a completely different justification.

⁹ John Cary, *A Discourse Concerning the East-India Trade, Shewing it to be Unprofitable* (London: 1696): 1.

¹⁰ "A Brief State of the Situation of the East India Company's Affairs, Abroad and at Home." *The Gentlemen's Magazine: And Historical Chronical* 36 (September 1766): 395.

¹¹ Robert Ferguson, *The East-India-Trade a Most Profitable Trade to the Kingdom* (London, 1677): 1-2.