



# The Golden Age Of Spices: Ancient Indian Masala Trade And Its Global Legacy

**Author:**

**Pipasa Kundu<sup>1</sup>**

Ph.D. Scholar

## Abstract

A thousand-year-old Indian spice trade became the foundation of the global economic and cultural exchange. Other types of spices, including black pepper, turmeric, cardamom, cinnamon, and clove served not only as needed food but were also used in medicine, rituals, and perfumery. This study will examine the history, trade routes and the international legacy of Indian masalas. The study employs a qualitative and historical research approach in analysis of textual, archaeological and statistical data to figure out how India became the center of the ancient spice world. Since the busy ports of Muziris to the archives of the Roman Empire, Indian spices influenced the international relationship, even sparking colonialist desires and still within the food and wellness markets of the world. The paper concludes that the ancient masala trade history is still deeply entrenched in the global culture and economy to this day.

**Keywords:** Indian masala, Global spice demand, Ancient maritime trade, Roman-Indian trade relations, Ayurvedic spice use

## INTRODUCTION

The history of India as the Land of Spices has long been known not only due to the fertile land and climate, but also due to the widespread use and trade of spices. Spices such as turmeric, black pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, and cloves had dominated India since ancient times as not only being used in flavor, but also as medicinal, religious, and cultural. The earliest historical records are found in the trade guides such as the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea which refer to Indian ports such as Muziris, where merchants sold gold, silk, and other items to India and gathered pepper and spices in return. The Roman

emperors attached such importance to this trade that Pliny the Elder wrote in Natural History that "thanks to Indian spices, India annually sends seventy million sesterces of gold to the Roman Empire."

Recently, Gilboa & Namdar (2015) published a study analyzing organic remains found in Phoenician clay bottles from the Iron Age (11th–10th centuries BCE) and found the presence of cinnamon, which could only have come from South and Southeast Asia. This suggests that the spice trade between South Asia and the Mediterranean was established from relatively ancient times (Gilboa & Namdar, 2015).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**(Gilboa & Namdar, 2015)** When did the profitable spice trade begin between the West and South Asia? Recent organic residue tests on tiny Phoenician clay flasks from the early Iron Age (11th-late 10th century BCE) offer the first hard archaeological proof that this kind of sustainable trade occurred far earlier than previously thought. Several of the flasks were found to contain cinnamon, which, according to the study, could have only come from South/Southeast Asia during this time. First, we will review the study's background and findings. Afterwards, we present a revised assessment of all analytical, textual, and archeological materials that are pertinent to the current inquiry. Lastly, we provide some recommendations for further studies about the Western spice trade with Asia.

**(Khan, 2018)** Prior to the Silk Road's establishment, the spice routes had already been set up, some 2,000 years earlier, about 3000 BCE. When it came to therapeutic herbs, spices were the most prized and utilized in ancient times. Even after Europeans arrived in India, the spice route continued to be an important maritime channel for trade. The spice route connected many parts of the world, allowing people to share religion and culture. The establishment of strong links with the central Asian region through these trade routes led to the introduction of languages like Persian and Arabic to India. Similarly, Sufism arrived in India via similar commercial channels.

**(Tripathi, 2024)** From their use in ancient trade routes to their modern-day culinary and medical applications, spices have played an important and multifaceted part in Indian history and culture. Through a review of historical writings, archeological artifacts, and modern behaviors, this research delves into the cultural, religious, and economic effects of spices on India. This article delves into the rich history of spices in India, tracing their role in religious practices, Ayurvedic treatment, and trade throughout ancient and medieval times. It delves at how India rose to prominence as a modern-day spice grower and exporter, as well as the impact of colonialism on the spice trade. By also looking at the environmental effect and sustainability of spice production, the paper highlights the importance of sustainable agriculture methods and ethical sourcing. By examining the many functions that spices have performed throughout India's history, this research highlights the lasting impact that spices have had on the country's cultural heritage and economic development.

**(Ramannagol Shilpa K., 2025)** The export of Indian spices is a major contributor to the country's GDP, since it supports millions of people's livelihoods and brings in money from outside. The world's nations are becoming more interdependent in this age of globalization as a result of increased commerce and investment. Since India liberalized its commerce as part of the New Economic Policy in 1991, the country's spice exports have been competing with those of other countries. This is why the current research looks at how well Indian spices have done in international markets since 1991. Also compared is the time before trade liberalisation. To measure and analyze Spices' export performance, multiple regression analysis is used. Since government interventions and local consumption patterns reduced the effect of global market forces, cumin and chili exports during the pre-globalization period did not respond strongly to economic factors, according to multiple regression results. In the liberalized age, exchange rate changes became a major role in cumin and chilli exports, in contrast to the pre-globalization period when trade constraints reduced the influence of economic variables. Important factors influencing India's competitive position in the global spice trade in the post-globalization age include fluctuations in the currency rate, changes in foreign demand, and pricing dynamics. Spice exports have grown increasingly sensitive to global economic trends.

**(Shivanand D Ainapur, Maruthi Prasad BN, 2025)** As the "land of spices," India has been an important player in the international spice trade for thousands of years. Historical chronicles from the Roman period and European expedition highlight the ongoing significance of spices, which archaeological evidence goes back to 7000 BCE. Indian spice production increased by 5.92% in 2023–24, with a total output of 11.80 million metric tons from 4.76 million hectares of land. Major crops including cumin, garlic, ginger, turmeric, and coriander are grown in the country, along with 75 out of 109 spices recognized by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). With 3.21 million tons, garlic is the leading producer. The states of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Telangana are among the most important producers of spices. Chilies, cumin, spice oils, oleoresins, turmeric, and chilies were the main drivers of India's 16% rise in spice exports to ₹369.59 billion in 2023-24. America, China, Bangladesh, and the United Arab Emirates are the leading export destinations. Imports of spices, including pepper, clove, and asafetida, increased to ₹120.16 billion over the same time. The domestic market is projected to increase from ₹407.50 billion in 2020 to ₹761.50 billion by 2026, driven by factors such as increasing demand for packaged and e-commerce spices and the fact that almost 75% of the spices produced are consumed within the country. Persistent difficulties include variable yields, quality assurance, and worldwide rivalry. These are addressed by the government through efforts aimed at improving sustainability, value addition, productivity, and quality assurance through the Spices Board of India. India's worldwide market position is strengthened by crop-specific spice parks, SPICED initiatives, and branding activities, which include Geographical Indication (GI) marking. To keep India's competitive

advantage and guarantee the sector's continuous growth, it is crucial to embrace sustainable and creative agricultural practices and engage in research and development.

## METHODOLOGY

The research will use a qualitative and historical method of analysis to examine the history, impact, and international heritage of the ancient Indian spice trade. The paper does not use primary experiments or fieldwork, but instead uses secondary data sources to explain and understand the meaning behind Indian masalas in history and culture. The study is descriptive in character and seeks to comprehend the effects of spices on Indian interactions with the ancient civilizations and how this legacy is being applied in the modern global trade, cuisine, and culture.

The primary sources of data include academic journals, historical texts, archaeological findings, and institutional publications. Important ancient texts such as the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, Arthashastra, and Sangam literature provide insights into the early spice trade, economic systems, and cultural practices of ancient India. Scholarly works from historians and researchers published in journals like IJCRT, Cambridge University Press, and All Research Journal were reviewed to build a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Moreover, the current information of the governmental organizations such as the Spices Board of India and the Indian Institute of Spices Research (ICAR-IISR) has been incorporated in order to attract links between ancient and the present day spice trading activities.

The methods of analysis employed in this paper are: the content analysis of historical literature and the comparison of the trade systems of the past and the present. Owing to the availability, descriptive statistics are included i.e. export data, trade route maps and visual illustrations to reinforce historical claims. Although the work did not involve any experiments or laboratory work, the historical background of the topic also makes it rich in terms of analysis through literature and documentation.

## ANALYSIS

### The Rise of Indian Spices Trade

Ancient India's natural endowment of a wide variety of spices turned it into a prime centre of production and trade. Black pepper (*Piper nigrum*), turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*), cinnamon ( *Cinnamomum verum* or other species ), and clove (*Syzygium aromaticum* ) were among the most popular and the most valuable spices. These spices were not only valued due to their cooking purposes in different cultures but also due to their medicinal, preservative, and ritual uses in various cultures. Black pepper, especially found in Malabar Coast (now Kerala), was a notorious commodity that was referred to as black gold in history as it was very expensive in trade (see Kerala Spice Coast)

(Lemieux, 2012). Cards and cinnamon spices also cultivated and traded in coastal ports in Tamilakam (southern India). The climatic conditions and soil types in the Deccan region were a complement to the coastal regions since it grew spices and the areas were also used to help the trade routes inland. The historical literature such as Sangam literature and early Greek-Roman documents indicate that these areas were engaged in trade of aromatic substances such as masalas, dyes, and medicinal herbs(Nambiar, 2021).

The evidence for the very early spice trade between South Asia and the Mediterranean is further supported by archaeological and residue-analysis research. For example, the article “*On the Beginnings of South Asian Spice Trade with the Mediterranean Region: A Review*” by Gilboa & Namdar demonstrates that organic residue analysis of Iron Age Phoenician clay flasks (11th–10th century BCE) revealed traces of cinnamon a spice that, at that time, would have originated in South/Southeast Asia(Gilboa & Namdar, 2015). This puts the long-distance spice trade earlier than previously believed, suggesting that Indian masalas were traded across continents from very early periods.

On the Malabar Coast, the old trade records mention Muziris as a primary export point of spices. According to the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea and other sources, it was a hectic market, with Roman and Arab merchants exchanging gold, wine, and other goods with pepper and spices (Nambiar, 2021). Archaeological excavations of Pattanam, the location of ancient Muziris, located wharf bones, Roman jars and trade items of the Mediterranean. The results confirm its significance in global spice trade(Katti, 2017).

## **Ancient Trade Routes**

The success of the ancient Indian spice trade was largely due to the creation of complex and interconnected overland and sea trading networks. These roads were very important for moving spices like black pepper, turmeric, and cardamom from India to places as far away as Egypt, Rome, and China.

## **Maritime Trade: Indian Ocean Network**

The Indian Ocean maritime trade network was the most prominent and efficient route for spice movement during ancient times. The export of Indian spices was done through large ports such as Muziris in Kerala, Bharuch in Gujarat and Kaveripattinam in Tamil Nadu. Indian ships sailed west to Arabian ports like Aden, the Red Sea ports of Egypt and over the Nile to Alexandria. They were carried there to Rome and other regions in Europe by Roman merchants. The Indian ports are claimed to have been busy, as the 1st-century CE book, Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, reports that Roman merchants visited the country frequently to purchase black pepper and other products(Casson, 1989). This sea-based trade was supported by the predictable monsoon wind system, which made two-way voyages faster and more reliable.

## Land Trade: The Silk Road (Limited for Spices)

The Silk Road had a minor impact on the flow of Indian spices, despite being famous for its silk, jade, and other luxury goods. Spices are perishable and due to the long journeys on land they were hard to transport. Nevertheless, the Indian spices could have travelled to Central Asia and some regions of China by local trade routes. Chinese records reveal that they were aware of pepper and cinnamon, which was most likely through land trade with India, or by sea with the Southeast Asia (Turner, 2004).

## Major Trading Communities

The active involvement of several commercial organizations allowed the spice trade to develop. Indian merchants were key players in both maritime and inland trade. Arab traders, especially from Oman and Yemen, acted as intermediaries between India and the Mediterranean world. Chinese traders also interacted with Indian ports via Southeast Asia, as seen in records from the Tang Dynasty. The Romans, meanwhile, were some of the most enthusiastic consumers of Indian spices, particularly black pepper so much so that Pliny the Elder complained that Roman wealth was being drained into India (Elder, 1945).

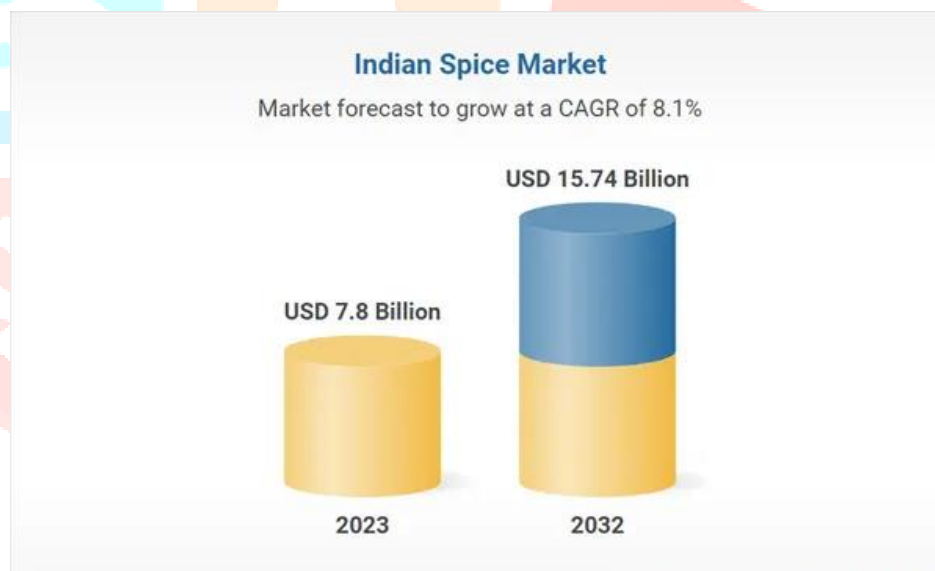


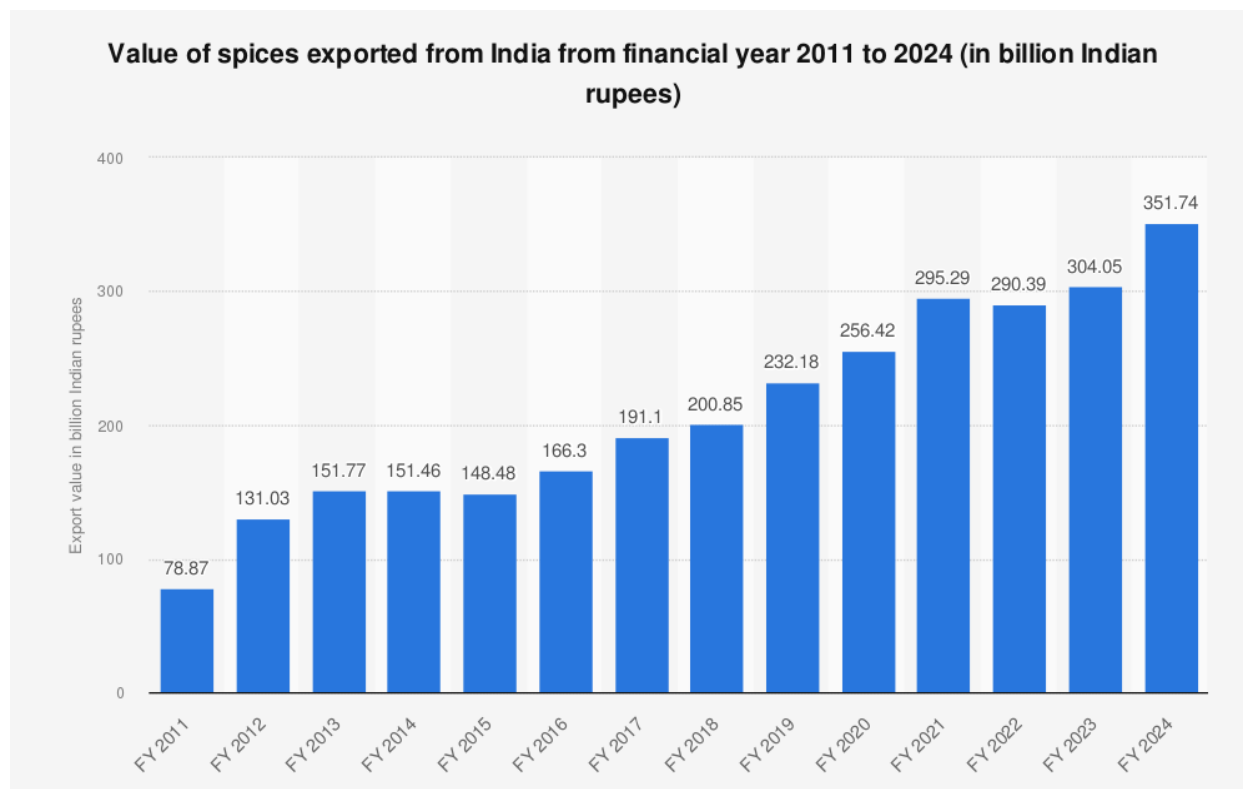
Figure 1: Indian spice market

Source; <https://uk.finance.yahoo.com>

## Global Demand & Cultural Value

Due to the peculiar tastes of Indian masalas and their economic, medicinal, and cultural values, the ancient Indian spice trade became global. Black pepper was the most valued spice that Romans referred to it as black gold. The fact that the Roman Empire was becoming more reliant on the luxuries of the East worked Roman writers, in particular, Pliny the Elder, who wrote that India was sucking us dry with spices (Elder, 1945). This depicts the poor demand and expensive nature of the Indian spices at the ancient West.





**Figure 2:** Value of spices exported from India from financial year 2011 to 2024

Source: <https://www.statista.com>

Indian masalas were also applied in other areas besides cooking. The use of Ayurvedic spices such as turmeric, cardamom, ginger, and clove were used to treat stomach problems, breathing issues, skin infections and inflammation. Turmeric in particular was particularly known due to its antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties and had been applied both internally and externally (Patel et al., 2025). Spice was also significant in religion and culture. Turmeric and sandalwood paste were common in Hindu worship, wedding and funerals rituals as a purity and holiness representation. Warm spices, fumes like cinnamon, clove and cardamom were also burned as incense or put into perfumes in religious ceremonies. These were Indian traditions demonstrating the spiritual worth of spices, other than their commercial application (Hancock, 2021), (Tripathi, 2024).

Interest in Indian spices was encouraged since they were transferable to the rest of the Indian Ocean by traders, both Arab and Chinese. One of the major reasons why Indian masalas were disseminated to the Mediterranean and Africa was due to Arab traders who now became a part of local cuisine and medicine. Gradually, the spices of India were taken as an essential element of world dishes, determining Persian, Chinese, and later European cuisines. The widespread use of curry, chai spices, and masala mixtures in the world today is the direct result of this ancient spice trade.

**Table 1: Ancient Indian Spices and Their Uses**

Spice	Culinary Uses	Medicinal Properties and Uses
<b>Black Pepper</b>	Flavoring agent in curries, spice blends	Aids digestion, acts as antihistamine, improves metabolism, traditionally used for respiratory relief
<b>Turmeric</b>	Coloring and flavoring food, key masala ingredient	Powerful anti-inflammatory and antioxidant, promotes skin health, supports joint function, used in Ayurveda for healing
<b>Cardamom</b>	Flavoring sweets, teas, biryanis	Improves digestion, reduces inflammation, antimicrobial properties, balances digestive fire (agni) in Ayurveda(Shrivastava, 2025)
<b>Cinnamon</b>	Used in desserts, teas, and spice blends	Controls blood sugar, anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, promotes heart health
<b>Clove</b>	Used in spice mixes, teas, flavor enhancer	Antibacterial, immune booster, relieves toothache and digestive issues
<b>Ginger</b>	Flavoring agent in sweets, teas, savory dishes	Relieves nausea, anti-inflammatory, aids digestion, may have anticancer properties
<b>Cumin</b>	Used in curries, spice blends, and pickling	Enhances digestion, supports metabolism, provides antioxidants, relieves bloating
<b>Coriander</b>	Used as seeds and leaves in curries, chutneys	Aids digestion, lowers blood sugar and cholesterol, antioxidant support
<b>Fenugreek</b>	Ingredient in spice mixes, medicinal preparations	Helps control blood sugar, reduces inflammation, supports lactation(Suhas, 2025)

These were the foundations of Indian cuisine, they were also useful in promoting health and wellbeing according to ancient Ayurvedic concepts. They were consumed in order to add flavor, preserve food, and treat bodies, which ranked them as historically and globally significant.

### Colonial Obsession & Legacy

Indian spices were in demand in the world which contributed to the start of the Age of Exploration that consequently led to the establishment of European colonization of India (Mohapatra et al., 2025). The arrival of Vasco da Gama at Calicut in 1498, with the beginning of direct contact between Europe and India by sea, was one of the first significant events. The Portuguese, the Portuguese expeditionary, who was sent by the King of Portugal, had virtually no aim other than to reach the rich Indian spice markets



and recede the Arab and Venetian intermediaries who controlled the spice markets in the Middle East(Mir & Publishers, 2025).

The Portuguese soon established the trading posts on the Malabar Coast and started to dominate the spice ports of Cochin and Goa and attempted to monopolize the black pepper and cardamom. Their rough ways resulted in bloody battles against the local rulers and other European empires, in particular, the Dutch and then the British. The spice trade was so lucrative that in 1600, Queen Elizabeth I decided to establish the British East India Company (EIC) to conduct the trades in spices, such as pepper, nutmeg, clove, and cinnamon(Make peace, 2025). The company has over time included textiles and tea in its business, but the primary factor that made it first enter India was spices. It was not a purely political rule but also an economic one with the spices becoming the major empire-building factors. Indian farmers were often coerced into growing export-oriented spices and other cash crops, contributing to colonial wealth at the cost of indigenous agricultural systems.

Despite centuries of exploitation, India retained its supremacy in spice production. India is now the biggest spice producer and exporter globally producing over 75 out of 109 spices under the ISO listing(Mani & Kabiraj, 2019). As some of the most well-known Indian spices, garam masala, chai spice, and turmeric latte (golden milk) have become known and are exported worldwide, including the USA, UAE, UK, Germany, etc. This legacy is an indication that the old traditions of masala in India continue to influence the global food, health and economic systems. Once a home-based ritual of the sacred and medicine in India, it has become a worldwide trend-colonial fascination and trendy wellness and food.

## CONCLUSION

The Indian spice trade has one of the most influential sections in the world economic and cultural history known as the golden age. Black pepper, turmeric, cardamom and clove were not just goods but they represented a symbol of health, wealth and religious practices. Thousands of years of spice production and trade made India the center of a good location and the rich farming. Indian spices were sold in distant countries in the kitchens, temples, and medicine shops due to the sea routes such as the Indian Ocean trade and land routes such as the Silk Road. The demand of these spices in the world made India a good trade partner and even a subject of colonial exploitation. European powers that were in search of the spice trade embarked on a journey which led to the transformation of the world history. This primitive trade is of current interest. India is the largest spices producer and exporter in the world. Indian masalas continue to provide flavor to food, Ayurveda cures people and connect cultures between countries. The Indian spices story is not only a tale of trade but also an evidence of how India continued to offer a lifelong contribution to the world history, economy, and health culture.

## Reference

- Casson, L. (1989). The Periplus Maris Erythraei: text with introduction, translation, and commentary. In *Princeton University Press: Vol. xvii*.
- Elder, P. the. (1945). Natural History, Book XII. In *Loeb Classical Library* (Vol. 4).
- Gilboa, A., & Namdar, D. (2015). On the Beginnings of South Asian Spice Trade with the Mediterranean Region: A Review. *Radiocarbon*, 57(2), 265–283. [https://doi.org/10.2458/azu\\_rc.57.18562](https://doi.org/10.2458/azu_rc.57.18562)
- Hancock, J. F. (2021). Origins of the spice trade in the Indian Ocean. In *Spices, scents and silk: catalysts of world trade* (pp. 65–79). CABI. <https://doi.org/10.1079/9781789249743.0006>
- Katti, A. & M. (2017). Muziris: A flavourful spice story. *Tribuneindia*. <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/travel/muziris-a-flavourful-spice-story-349904>
- Khan, D. N. R. (2018). The Spice Route: A Historical Survey. *International Journal of Applied Research*, 4(12), 131–133.
- Lemieux, P. (2012). Kerala's Spice Coast. *Cnewa*. <https://cnewa.org/magazine/keralas-spice-coast-33621>
- Make peace, M. (2025). A Brief History of the English East India Company 1600–1858. *Qatar Digital Library*. <https://www.qdl.qa/en/brief-history-english-east-india-company-1600-1858>
- Mani, A., & Kabiraj, A. (2019). Export potential of spices and its value added products. *AGRICULTURE & FOOD: E-Newsletter*, 1(8), 338–347.
- Mir, M. A., & Publishers, L. (2025). From Pepper to Power: The Spice Trade and Colonisation of India. *Historical Research: Journal of History and Archaeology*, 3(1), 16–21.
- Mohapatra, S., Ranjit, S., Pattnaik, G., Parida, P., Dutta, S., Ghosh, G., Rath, G., & Kar, B. (2025). Potential Role of Indian Spices in the Management of Diabetic Complication: A Pre-Clinical and Clinical Review. *Current Reviews in Clinical and Experimental Pharmacology*, 20(2), 140–157. <https://doi.org/10.2174/0127724328331153240918093157>
- Nambiar, S. (2021). Of Silk and Spice: A Tale of Two Empires. *Sarmaya*. <https://sarmaya.in/spotlight/of-silk-and-spice-a-tale-of-two-empires>
- Patel, S., Singh, S., Gupta, A. K., Dalimbe, A. Y., Muthoju, S. M. K., Pawar, A. R., Jha, S. K., & Gupta, A. J. (2025). Ayurveda and common Indian spices: A natural alternative for cancer therapy. *Ayush Journal of Integrative Oncology*, 2(2), 91–102. [https://doi.org/10.4103/ajio.ajio\\_20\\_25](https://doi.org/10.4103/ajio.ajio_20_25)
- Ramannagol Shilpa K., B. H. N. (2025). An analysis of export performance of major spices of India in the globalized regime. *Journal of Plantation Crops*, 53(3).
- Shivanand D Ainapur, Maruthi Prasad BN, I. P. and M. H. (2025). Flavors of legacy: The evolution and prominence of India's spice industry. *Agronomyjournals*, 8(9), 1866–1872. <https://doi.org/10.33545/2618060X.2025.v8.i7w.3902>

- Shrivastava, V. (2025). indian spices and their uses, and medicinal benefits. *Naturesafariindia*. <https://www.naturesafariindia.com/indian-spices/>
- Suhas. (2025). The Magic of Indian Spices: Traditional Uses and Modern Benefits. *Earthenconnect*. <https://earthenconnect.com/blog/2025/03/29/the-magic-of-indian-spices-traditional-uses-and-modern-benefits/>
- Tripathi, T. (2024). Spices in Indian history: A multifaceted exploration of trade, medicine and religious practices. *International Journal of Applied Research*, 10(8), 04–11. <https://doi.org/10.22271/allresearch.2024.v10.i8a.11909>
- Turner, M. (2004). Early Trade between India and Southeast Asia: A Link in the Development of a Regional System. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*.

