



Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze's "Columbus Before the Queen"



"First Landing of Columbus on the Shores of the New World"; painting by Dióscoro Puebla (1862)



J B Derbet's "Overseers punishing slaves on a rural estate".

OCTOBER 1492

Of Change, Exchange and 'X'-change

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On October 12, 1492, the world changed. It was a blind "date" that went awry. The poster boy of this historic(al) date is a maritime explorer, Christopher Columbus who was hell bent on finding a western route to India. His accidental small step onto an island of the Atlantic Ocean turned out to be a giant leap for mankind (read Europeans), not to mention the entire ecosystem. And when I say "giant", I mean it with all its humongous and monstrous attributes: the leap is a momentous occasion that brought two worlds across the Atlantic-divide together—not without disastrous consequences though.

The mythical analogy of this "Columbian" treading can be found in *The Ramayana* where Hanuman leapt to cross the ocean by jumping so high that his tail caught fire from the Sun or more realistically from the torches of the defending demons. Just like Hanuman used this burning tail to scorch Ravana's palace in Lanka, the tail of Columbus's tale was fired up by the Spanish interest in gold in the continent, and ushered in a trail of miseries such as ethnocide, trans-Atlantic slavery or mass migration. Depending on which side of the history you want to be in, be prepared to adjust your viewing lens, hearing aid and speaking voice to see-hear-speak (no)-evil involving the Columbus Day that is observed in the US as a national day.

The landing of Christopher Columbus in the Caribbean islands wrought irreparable damages to the lives and cultures of the local people. The popular narrative of the expedition, however, keeps on lionising the European navigator for making inroads in a vast territory where the Old World could find resources to improve itself as well as to use it for civilising (i.e. Christianising) purpose. Such a noble intention is nothing short of heavenly bliss as it involved the pontiff. The fact

internecine feuds in Spain and reenergised its campaign against the Muslim rulers. After ten years of fight for re-conquest, the Nasrid kingdom, the last of the Umayyad caliphates surrendered to the Spanish queen, and after 780 years of Muslim control, Granada, the capital city of the Emirate, was officially capitulated on January 2, 1492. As per the Treaty of Granada, both Muslims and Jews were forced either to convert to Catholicism or to leave Europe, and the principal mosque was consecrated as a church.

The end of the war allowed King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella to commission a pending proposal of a certain Christopher Columbus of Genoa, then a sovereign state and later to become a part of Italy, for an expedition seeking a trade route to Asia by sailing west. The eastern route to India and the Far East, controlled mostly by various Muslim tribes, was becoming increasingly difficult for Europe. Columbus's belief in a western maritime route eventually caused him to land in what is now known as the Bahamas on October 12.

Sailing for about three months, Columbus and his 52 men in three ships: the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria, came to an island which they

knowledge of fighting ... unless your Majesties' orders are that they all be taken to Spain or held captive on the island itself, for with fifty men we could keep the whole population in subjection and make them do whatever one wanted."

This is from notes he was keeping for his patrons in Spain, who had just freed Europe from a colonial rule, and were now planning to start one of their own. Columbus was convinced that he had reached India, and it was only matter of time to find a shorter route to China. His first job was to get information out

exchange ended up transforming the globe into a single ecological system by the nineteenth century—almost instantly, in biological terms. The creation of this ecological system helped Europe seize, for several vital centuries, the political initiative, which in turn shaped the contours of today's world-spanning economic system, in its interlaced, omnipresent, barely comprehended splendor."

Once the Europeans started colonising, they brought with them a menagerie of insects, plants, mammals,

holiday to honour an Italian Catholic explorer. At that time, most Italian Americans had their loyalties to their villages in Europe. Columbus proved to be an icon to highlight the prominence of Italy in the formation of the nation. The discourse further hinged on America as the Promised Land mentioned in the Bible. Ironically, Columbus was from Genoa, an independent State which unlike the Spanish monarchs engaged in the re-conquest, struck a deal with the Muslim rulers to trade with the Asians.

Further irony is noticed when in 1971, politicians and business people, many of them Italian Americans, succeeded in making Columbus Day a federal holiday. This they did at the backdrop of the civil rights movements when African Americans and other minority communities, including, Native Americans were fighting to establish their own rights. The prevalence of a Catholic Columbus became an assertion of white supremacy in a Protestant country.

One needs to go back to Columbus's journal to understand the myth of white supremacy that the West has created. While we need to credit Columbus for pursuing his dream, for making it happen; while we need to forgive his human errors in calculation in thinking the world smaller than it actually is; while we need to appreciate his beautiful language in which he recorded his encounters with the people and the place; we cannot forget the legacy of exploitations that his "discovery" ensued. Let me quote a passage from his journal to help you understand how one gold nose ring became the source of the consequent devouring gold rush. You may also want to ponder: is it possible to walk into an occupied inhabited land, and claim it as a discovery just because you are seeing it for the first time?

"The people were all like those already mentioned: like them naked, and the same size. They give what they possess in exchange for anything that may be given to them. I here saw some of the ship's boys bartering broken bits of glass and crockery for darts. The men who went for water told me that they had been in the houses of the natives, and that they were very plain and clean inside. Their beds and bags for holding things were like nets of cotton. The houses are like booths, and very high, with good chimneys. But, among many villages that I saw, there was none that consisted of more than from twelve to fifteen houses. Here they found that the married women wore clouts of cotton, but not the young girls, except a few who were over eighteen years of age. They had dogs, mastiffs and hounds; and here they found a man who had a piece of gold in his nose, the size of half a castellano, on which they saw letters. I quarrelled with these people because they would not exchange or give what was required; as I wished to see what and whose this money was; and they replied that they were not accustomed to barter."

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John Vanderlyn's depiction of Columbus' landing in the West Indies on October 12, 1492. He raises the royal banner, claiming the land for his Spanish patrons. The captains of the Niña and Pinta follow, carrying the banner of Ferdinand and Isabella. The crew displays a range of emotions, some searching for gold in the sand. Natives watch from behind a tree.

that the Americas were wrongfully "discovered" as India, the other European nations including the Portuguese started making their claims over the region. Eventually, the Pope had to intervene to negotiate between the two major jockeying parties—the Spaniards and the Portuguese—to decide the control over new lands discovered by the voyagers.

Fresh from its feat in the *Reconquista* (Spanish for re-conquest), the papal balance tilted towards Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragon, whose royal marriage ended the

named San Salvador (Holy Saviour). Columbus had survived a near mutiny just two days earlier when the frustrated crew wanted to give up the expedition altogether. The island that they came to was inhabited by the Arawak people who called the island Guanahani. These people were welcoming, as Columbus recorded in his journal: "They brought us sticks of the cotton candy thread and parrots and other little things which it would be tedious to list, and exchanged everything for whatever we offered."

It took two days, for Columbus to realise, "These people have little

of the natives by force. "As soon as I arrived in the Indies, in the first island which I found, I took some of the natives by force, in order that they might learn and might give me information of whatever there is in these parts. And so it was that they soon understood us, and we them, either by speech or by signs, and they have been very serviceable."

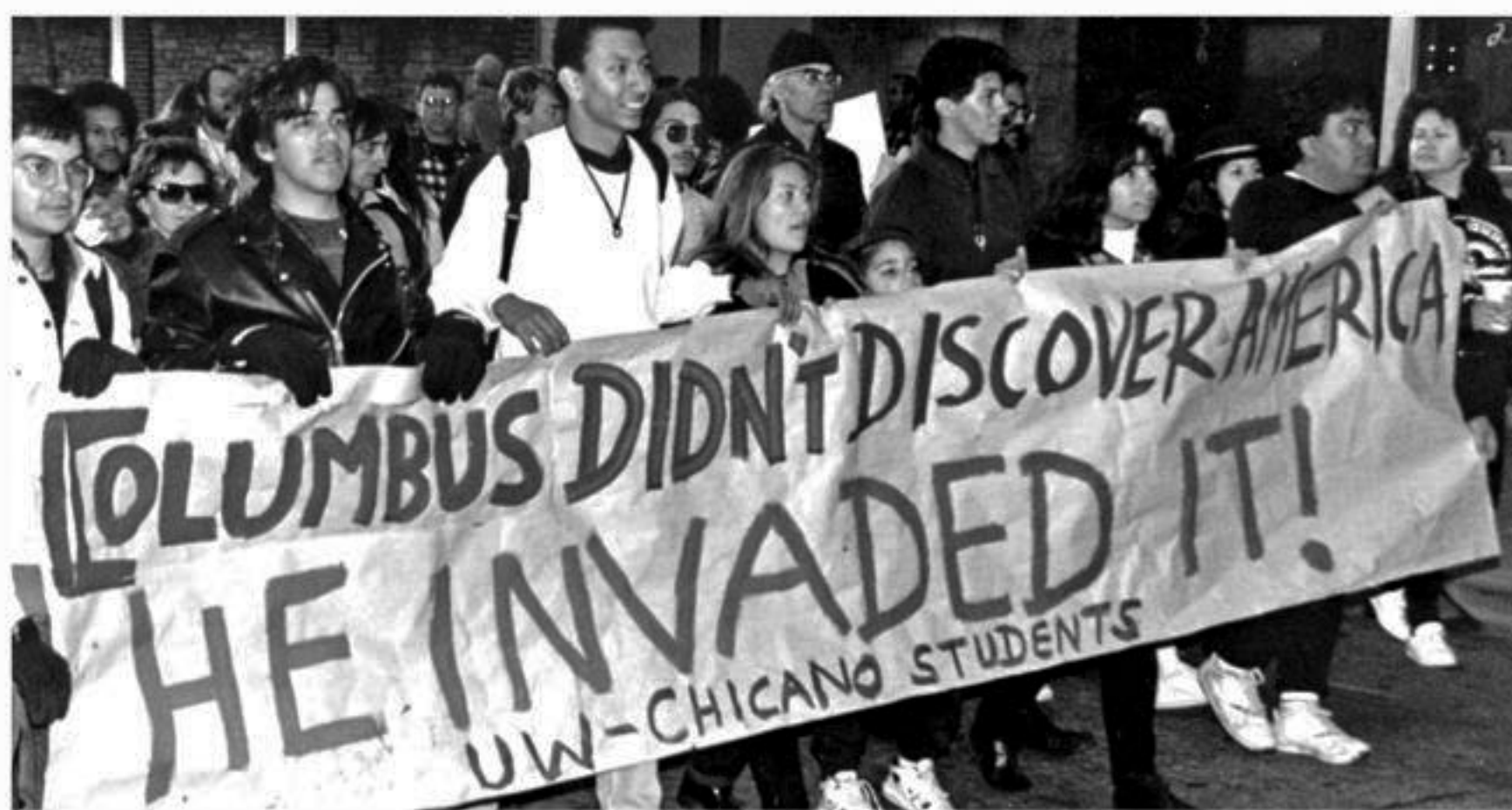
Columbus returned to Spain with stories that he had seen gold jewellery worn by some of the natives to incite his patrons for further assignments. Spain used its victory over the moors as its bargaining chip to lay a claim on the discovered territory. At the urging of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, Pope Alexander VI issued a bull, dividing the world commercially between two Latin nations. While most of the Americas were given to Spain, Portugal secured its rights over what is now Brazil and all lands in Africa and Asia. Legends has it, Portugal gifted the Pope an Indian elephant to get Brazil. Alexander's papal bull was the controversial basis of Doctrine of Discovery, which was challenged by other European nations, and eventually contributed to the split of Church. Different European monarchs questioned and protested the authority of the Pope in making such large scale sanctions to two Latin nations, and many freed themselves from the papacy.

While 1492 divided Christianity in Europe, it united the world in ways that were neither planned nor anticipated. Charles Mann, in a recent book, 1493: *Uncovering the New World Columbus Created*, dubbed the "discovery" as a Columbian exchange, that formed "a single new world from the collision of two old worlds—three, if one counts Africa as separate from Eurasia. Born in the sixteenth century from European desires to join the thriving Asian trade sphere, the economic system for

and micro-organisms. They introduced cattle, sheep, and horses, along with crops like sugarcane (originally from New Guinea), wheat (from the Middle East), banana (from Africa), and coffee (also from Africa) to a land which was unprepared for these new life forms. There were unwanted travel companions too: earthworms, mosquitoes, and cockroaches; honeybees, dandelions, and African grasses; rats, only to cause havoc to the New World.

As if the Spanish cruelty was not enough for the destruction of the native population, Columbus and those who followed his path brought to the Americas the epidemic diseases that were common in Europe and Asia but did not exist in the Americas. These include smallpox, influenza, hepatitis, measles, encephalitis, and viral pneumonia; tuberculosis, diphtheria, cholera, typhus, scarlet fever, and bacterial meningitis. Three-quarters or more of the people in the western hemisphere were killed by the aftermath of the Columbian landing. Mann rightly observed, "in the annals of human history there is no comparable demographic catastrophe."

Columbus never set foot on the mainland America. It was in 1501 that the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci landed on the tip of South America and understood that he was dealing with a new continent, not Asia as perceived by Columbus. In fact, it is now believed that the Vikings crossed the Atlantic Ocean in the 11th century and settled in Newfoundland of North America. So, why does America celebrate Columbus Day as a national day? The answer lies in a nineteenth century political ploy to unite Italian immigrants. In 1892, President Benjamin Harrison realised that the huge inflow of Catholic and Italian immigrants had changed the voter demographic. President Harrison declared Columbus Day a national



Columbus Day protests in 1992