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Published 25 November 2026

Our Lady of the Fangs and how Vasco da Gama mistook a Hindu goddess for the Virgin Mary

In Calicut, Vasco da Gama and his men believed they had entered a Christian church. One sailor had doubts about the image inside.

In May 1498, having survived four thousand leagues of tempestuous ocean and scurvy, as well as mutinous crews, Vasco da Gama finally stepped ashore near Calicut. He was convinced of two things, first that he had found the great spice emporium of the East, and second that the people of India were long-lost Christians who had simply spent a millennium waiting for the Portuguese to show up and remind them of Rome.

The local authorities were happy to welcome him. Before granting him an audience with the Zamorin, the *Kotwal*, who was the city's governor, escorted Da Gama and his weary officers into what appeared to be an immense monastery of dressed freestone. Its tiled roofs glowed beneath the heavy Malabar humidity.

At the entrance, everything seemed very familiar. Seven brass bells hung above the doorway. Before the porch stood a gleaming pillar as high as the mast of a carrack. It was covered in bronze wire and topped with a metal beast that the sailors took to be an eccentric weather-cock.

As they crossed the threshold, they were received by four Brahmans, bare-chested and draped in white calico from waist to knee. Over their bare left shoulders hung white cords passing under the right arm. The Portuguese immediately recognised these as the stoles worn by Romish priests. With

solemn dignity, the attendants dipped sponges into a stone fountain and sprinkled the visitors with holy water. They also offered powdered sandalwood paste. The Portuguese took it for Ash Wednesday ashes, though, as one chronicler noted with mild regret, they declined to rub it across their foreheads because their hats were already on.

It was only when they looked up at the chapel walls that theological doubts began to surface.

The frescoes did not depict gentle saints or pale martyrs. Instead, the plaster was alive with multi-limbed monsters and ferocious figures with sharp ivory tusks protruding more than an inch from their mouths. Da Gama and his men blinked in the smoky gloom, trying to fit these nightmarish demons into the New Testament.

Before they could ponder the iconography too deeply, they were led to the foot of a dark stone tower in the middle of the complex. High stone stairs led to a small sanctuary behind a grated metal door. Inside, barely visible through the haze of burning oil lamps, stood a dark, solitary statue.

At the sight of the image, the temple attendants threw their arms to the ceiling and cried out an invocation that sounded unmistakably like *"Mary!"*

That convinced them. Da Gama and his men dropped instantly to their knees and pressed their palms together, then began muttering fervent Ave Marias to the goddess.

Only one sailor, João de Sa, remained suspicious. Looking at the silhouette inside the darkened cell and remembering the four arms and the fangs on the frescoes outside, he hesitated before making his genuflexion. Leaning toward the floor, he muttered a prudent theological hedge.

"If this be the Devil, I worship God."

Da Gama, kneeling beside him in pious devotion, looked over and smiled.

The Portuguese sailed home convinced they had knelt in a sister church of the Holy See. Back in Lisbon, chroniclers like Faria y Sousa doubled down on the delusion, dryly recording that the four-armed, fanged idol in the gloomy Calicut shrine was indeed the Virgin Mary. For *"it could be no*

other," he insisted, since the natives had undoubtedly been Christians many ages before and had merely let their church architecture get a little out of hand.