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Keeping corruption at bay: A study of the VOC's administrative encounter with the Mughals in seventeenth-century Bengal

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Introduction: The Politics of Administrative Corruption

It was the winter of 1684. The Dutch East India Company (or the *Veerenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, the VOC) official Hendrik Adriaan van Reede tot Drakestein set sail in his ship *Bantam* from Texel in the Dutch Republic towards the Cape of Good Hope in Africa. He was appointed to the position of commissioner-general by the VOC directors in the Republic in order to investigate the Company's activities in certain parts of Asia. He was of course not alone but accompanied by two other officials – Isaac Soolmans and Johannes Bacherus, second and third in rank respectively in this venture. Together they formed a committee led by Van Reede that was instructed to sail out to all the other VOC factories in Ceylon and India (Bengal, Coromandel, Malabar, Surat). The plan was for them to investigate the Company employees in these places to prevent any 'corrupt' or illegal practices. Van Reede and his committee members had the power to put the accused officials on trial at the Company's court in Batavia (present-day Jakarta). But beyond all these special powers, there was something to this operation that deserves the reader's attention. The committee members were explicitly instructed by the VOC directors in the Republic to conduct careful and thorough investigations in all the factories of India and Ceylon, but particularly in those of Bengal for its notoriety in 'corruption'.¹

Accordingly, after stopping over at the Cape and in southern Ceylon, Van Reede and Soolmans finally arrived in Bengal in 1686 and started their investigations there. It resulted in the production of lengthy reports about their findings in this region where they accused certain Company officials of illegal trade and other malpractices. Consequently, the committee suggested stringent measures (such as building of stronger factories, reduction of excess employees etc.) to gain greater profit and insight into the activities of the Company officials abroad.² In his position as the Commissioner-General, Van Reede eventually wrote to the Company's governor-general

¹ NL-HaNA, Collectie Hudde, inv. nr. 38, Copy of the instructions of the *Heeren XVII* for Hendrik van Reede, lord of Mijdsrecht appointed as the commissioner of Bengal, Coromandel, Ceylon etc. in Amsterdam, 1684: f.1v.

² See Chapter 6 for details.

and *Raad van Indië* in Batavia in 1686. Complaining about the abundant illegal acts he had witnessed in Ceylon and Bengal, he proposed the introduction of an oath of corruption within the VOC administration. Such an oath was likely to encapsulate all possible violations of Company laws in a single domain that could be used for reference in the Company's legal forum. These suggestions of Van Reede and his committee were accepted by the VOC administration in the Dutch Republic and in Batavia and implemented as reforms. The then Dutch Governor-General Johannes Camphuys, along with the members of the *Raad van Indië* in Batavia wrote back saying – “The incorporation of the oath of corruption in Ceylon, as your Honour are inclined to introduce here, and in other places, is approved by us with the hope that the awaited results will ensue hereafter.”³ Van Reede and his committee's reports triggered further measures such as the installation of the office of *independent fiscaals* (supervisor of the maintenance of order and the public prosecutor) who were to check on illegal trade and all forms of corruption and report them to the VOC administration in the Republic.⁴ But soon this office failed to live up to its expectations and became ineffective in controlling the Company officials in India.

By the early eighteenth century, complaints of corruption soared as the VOC witnessed a number of Dutch *nabobs* (corruption of the term *nawab* implying the title of local Islamic rulers) emerging at its base in Bengal.⁵ This coincided with the increase in importance of Bengal from the late seventeenth century as a supplier of major commodities such as raw silk and textiles for

³ ‘Invoeren van den eed van corruptie op Ceylon, soo als U wel Ed, ook elders gesint te doen, keuren wij voor goet; in hoope dat het beoogde success daar uijt sal volgen, ...’

NL-HaNA, VOC, OBP, inv. nr. 1421, Missive from the governor-general and Council of the Indies in Batavia to Hendrik Adriaan van Reede, the commissioner-general of the VOC stationed in Bengal, 23 August, 1686: f. 364v-65r.

⁴ One independent *fiscaal* each was appointed in the factories of Ceylon, the Coromandel Coast, Bengal, Surat, Malacca and the Cape of Good Hope. These independent *fiscaals* stood above the local governors, directors and the councils of the Company in these regions. They were directly accountable to the Company in the Republic. See, F.S. Gaastra, “The Independent Fiscaals of the VOC, 1689-1719,” *Itinerario* 9, no. 2 (July 1985): 92–107.

⁵ Jos Gommans, Jeroen Bos, and Gijs Kruijter, *Grote Atlas van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie: Voor-Indië, Perzië, Arabisch Schiereiland*, vol. 6 (Voorburg: reAsia Maior/Atlas Maior, 2010), 29; Frank Lequin, *Het personeel van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie in Azië in de 18de eeuw: Meer in het bijzonder in de vestiging Bengalen* (Alphen aan de Rijn: Canaletto/ Repro-Holland, 2005), 97–98, 206–10; Marion Peters, *In steen geschreven: Leven en sterven van VOC-dienaren op de kust van Coromandel in India* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bas Lubberhuizen, 2002), 39–40.

the Europe-Asian trade.⁶ In the face of the growing concerns about corruption and the steady competition that the English East India Company (EIC) offered in the subsequent years, the VOC in the Republic tended to lay increasing emphasis on its monopoly rights over its direct Asian trade. Although the rules for its intra-Asian trade were relaxed in the eighteenth century, the EIC acquired an edge after purchasing the *zamindari* rights of three villages in Bengal in 1698 and eventually, acquiring the *divani* rights of that province in 1765.⁷ The VOC too had three villages leased out to it by the Mughal authorities in Bengal, but it began to suffer a setback from the end of the seventeenth century and its condition worsened in the subsequent years. The acquisition of Bengal in 1795 and in 1825 became the key to the English colonial success which cost the VOC their position in India. By the final decades of the eighteenth century, the Dutch East India Company had started heading down the path to bankruptcy which ultimately undermined its credibility in the Republic to an irreparable extent. The Company's last charter expired in 1798, and around 1800 the VOC no longer existed in the Dutch Republic.

On the basis of these ongoing developments, the political atmosphere in the Netherlands during the early nineteenth century took a conservative turn and championed the control of the Dutch state over all its trade in the Asian colonies.⁸ This, however, changed in the later years of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century when liberal politics began influencing the Dutch education policy and its academia. A narrative about the glorious past of the VOC came to be formed as a result of this liberal turn which fed the image of the Company's superior position in pre-colonial international trade and commerce.⁹ A variation in this contention emerged in the

⁶ Pius Malekandathil, "Indian Ocean in the Shaping of Late Medieval India," *Studies in History* 30, no. 2 (August 2014): 139–40.

⁷ See Chapter 4 for this.

⁸ Maarten Kuitenbrouwer, *Dutch Scholarship in the Age of Empire and Beyond: KITLV - The Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asia and Caribbean Studies, 1851-2011*, ed. Harry A. Poeze, trans. Lorri Ganger (Leiden, Boston: Brill Publishers, 2014), 13–17, 277.

⁹ Kuitenbrouwer, *Dutch Scholarship*, 73–74. A prominent example is by J. de Hullu who referred to the *advocaat*, Pieter van Dam's plea for private trade in the 17th century that was not approved by all the chambers of the VOC. It was published in the *BMGN* in 1918. J. de Hullu, "Een advies van Mr. Pieter van Dam, advocaat der Oost-Indische Compagnie, over een gedeeltelijke openstelling van Compagnie's handel voor particulieren,

early 1900s which pointed out that the policy of rigid state monopoly drove certain officials abroad to take to corruption, bringing about the Company's eventual downfall in the eighteenth century.¹⁰ This argument continued for a long time to pervade popular perceptions about the Company and its overseas corruption to almost such an extent that the acronym VOC came to be satirically termed as '*Vergaan Onder Corruptie*' meaning 'perished from corruption'.¹¹ Chris Nierstrasz in 2015, however, showed that the VOC and its officials were much more flexible than had been shown in the existent historiography and the *Heeren XVII* adjusted, from time to time, to the changing situation in the Republic and abroad.¹² In fact, he convincingly argued that corruption as a problem was not exclusive to any century and was, therefore, not particularly responsible for the VOC's decline. If this is true, it leaves us wondering what was happening to the committee sent under Van Reede towards the end of the seventeenth century. Why was corruption and its redress becoming an administrative concern in the VOC and why was Bengal becoming central to this rising concern? These are the questions that I attempt to address, examine and answer in this dissertation. I plan to do it through a particular emphasis on Bengal and the Company's encounter there with the Mughal authorities, at the time the Van Reede committee was operative in the late seventeenth century.

Historiography

The historiography on the VOC in Mughal India, though extensive, still lacks a socio-political analysis of corruption in the Company as an important episode in its history. For a long time, the

1662," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde/ Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 74, no. 1 (1918): 267–98.

¹⁰ See Schutte on De Jong and his criticism as a liberal on the monopoly of the VOC, G.J. Schutte, "Introduction," in *Dutch Authors on Asian History*, eds. M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs, M.E. van Opstall, and G.J. Schutte (Dordrecht: Floris Publications, 1988), 9.

¹¹ Chris Nierstrasz, *In the Shadow of the Company: The Dutch East India Company and Its Servants in the Period of Its Decline (1740-1796)*, vol. 15, TANAP Monographs on the History of Asian-European Interaction (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012), 27–28.

¹² Nierstrasz, *In the Shadow of the Company*. For a conventional view on the corruption of the VOC and its decline see, Leonard Blussé, "Four Hundred Years On: The Public Commemoration of the Founding of the VOC in 2002," *Itinerario, European Journal of Overseas History* XXVII, no. 1 (March 2003): 81; C.R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire, 1600-1800* (London etc.: Hutchinson, 1977).

dominant historiographical trend in studying the VOC followed an economic hard-line with emphasis on the commercial aspects of the Company.¹³ Describing its overseas dynamics, J.C. van Leur in the 1960s described the Indian world of coastal trade as ‘handicraft trade, peddling trade’ of the Indian Ocean.¹⁴ Such a description fostered the idea of the Dutch East India Company melting effortlessly into the existing commercial whirlpool. A large amount of scholarly work on this aspect of the Company appeared around these years from both Indian as well as Dutch historians. They reiterated the Company’s interactions with local merchants and brokers in the then familiar connotations of ‘competition’, ‘collaboration’ or ‘partnership’, invoking Holden Furber’s optimistic ideals of pre-colonial Indo-European relations.¹⁵ While they all dealt with commerce as the only reason for the sustenance of the VOC in India, Markus Vink added the idea of expansion to it. Through his concept of the ‘emporialists’, he attempted to justify the Company’s motives for expansion as trying to capture markets rather than territories.¹⁶

But it took some time before the VOC historiography in general could surpass the commercial analyses and focus on political and social dimensions related to the Company’s

¹³ F. S. Gaastra, *The Dutch East India Company: Expansion and Decline* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2003); Oscar Gelderblom and Joost Jonker, “Public Finance and Economic Growth: The Case of Holland in the Seventeenth Century,” *The Journal of Economic History* 71, no. 1 (March 2011): 1–39. Scholars whose works had a political focus but differed little from the economic historians in emphasising the VOC’s commercial character include Blussé, “Four Hundred Years On,” 79–92; F. S. Gaastra, “Succesvol ondernemerschap, falend bestuur? Het beleid van de bewindhebbers van de VOC, 1602-1795,” in *Kennis en Compagnie: De Verenigde Oost-Indisch Compagnie en de moderne wetenschap*, eds. Leonard Blussé and Ilonka Ooms (Leiden: Uitgeverij Balans, 2002), 55–70; Robert Parthesius, *Dutch Ships in Tropical Waters: The Development of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) Shipping Network in Asia 1595-1660* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010). Om Prakash, too, in his works has focused primarily on this commercial aspect of the VOC. Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1630-1720* (Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2012).

¹⁴ J.C. van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History* (The Hague: W. van Hoeve Publishers Ltd., 1967), 66, 187.

¹⁵ F.S. Gaastra, “Competition or Collaboration? Relations between the Dutch East India Company and Indian Merchants around 1680,” in *Merchants, Companies and Trade: Europe and Asia in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Sushil Chaudhury and Michel Morineau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 189–201; Michael N. Pearson, “Introduction,” in *The Age of Partnership: Europeans in Asia before Dominion*, eds. Blair B. King and Michael N. Pearson (Hawaii: University Press of Hawaii, 1979), 1–14; Ashin Das Gupta, “Indian Merchants and the Trade in the Indian Ocean,” in *The Cambridge Economic History of India, c.1200-c.1750*, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 407–32; Holden Furber, “Asia and the West as Partners before “Empire” and After,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 28, no. 4 (August 1969): 711–21.

¹⁶ George D. Winus and Markus Vink, *The Merchant-Warrior Pacified: The VOC (The Dutch East India Company) and Its Changing Political Economy in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Publishers, 1991), 5.

activities in the Indian Ocean. Several scholars from the last decades of the 1990s began bringing these more and more to the fore.¹⁷ Adam Clulow argued that despite repeatedly asserting that their interests were primarily business, the VOC in entire Asia ‘displayed a consistent appetite for territorial acquisition, seeing physical control of trading hubs as the swiftest and most secure way to profit.’¹⁸ Jurrien van Goor even went on to brand the VOC as ‘an early imperialist’ that ‘laid the foundation of the Dutch Indies.’¹⁹ These contentions essentially moved the dialogue to a direction where the reasons for and extent of VOC expansion came to be seen as varied for varying regions.²⁰ Gerrit Knaap argued that the VOC in Asia and Africa had different positions ranging from ‘extraterritoriality’ to ‘suzerainty’ to ‘sovereignty’.²¹ By ‘extraterritoriality’, he meant to indicate a situation in which the political force(s) of a certain region allowed the VOC to trade in their dominions with special privileges of separate jurisdiction, authority over some villages and so on. This was in contrast to ‘suzerainty’ where the VOC exercised its influence through the local overlords and ‘sovereignty’ where the Company wielded direct political control. In this mosaic of different positions, the VOC’s presence in Mughal India came to be seen as varied for varied regions. For instance, the Coromandel Coast and Malabar were seen as having VOC

¹⁷ Jurrien van Goor, *Prelude to Colonialism: The Dutch in Asia* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2004); Gert Oostindie, “Squaring the Circle: Commemorating the VOC after 400 Years,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 159, no. 1 (2003): 135–61; Remco Raben, “VOC-Herdenking ontloopt iedere controverse,” *Historisch Nieuwsblad*, 2002; Cátia Antunes, “Introduction,” in *Exploring the Dutch Empire: Agents, Networks and Institutions, 1600–2000*, eds. Cátia Antunes and Jos Gommans (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), xiii–xx; Erik Odegaard, “Colonial Careers: Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen, Rijckloff Volckertsz. van Goens and Career-Making in the Early Modern Dutch Empire” (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2018).

¹⁸ Adam Clulow, “The Art of Claiming: Possession and Resistance in Early Modern Asia,” *American Historical Review* 121, no. 1 (September 2016): 19.

¹⁹ Goor, *Prelude to Colonialism*, 25.

²⁰ P. Pott, “Willem Verstegen, een extra-ordinaris Raad van Indië als avonturier in India in 1659,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 112, no. 4 (1956): 355–82; Blussé, “Four Hundred Years On”; Gerrit Knaap, “De ‘Core Business’ van de VOC: Markt, macht en mentaliteit vanuit overzees perspectief” (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2014); Om Prakash, “European Trade and South Asian Economies: Some Regional Contrasts, 1600–1800,” in *Companies and Trade: Essays on Overseas Trading Companies during the Ancien Régime*, eds. Leonard Blussé and F.S. Gaastra (The Hague: Leiden University Press, 1981), 189–205; Gaastra, “Competition or Collaboration?,” 189–201.

²¹ Knaap, “De ‘Core Business’ van de VOC,” 18.

‘suzerainty’ while Surat and Bengal shared an ‘extraterritorial’ status.²² The result was a shift of focus on research about the VOC in India from mercantile to diplomatic encounters involving the local kingdoms and the Mughal administrators.²³ Recent researches have examined this aspect further in terms of court embassies, interstate understandings and the role of material culture (such as art, books and maps) that maintained and facilitated diplomatic relations.²⁴

But to return to ‘corruption’ within this historiography on the Company in India, not much has been written as of yet about this subject, thereby leaving room for further research. Scholars such as Om Prakash and Femme Gaastra have studied about the VOC corruption in Bengal in the seventeenth century from a purely economic stance, concentrating mostly on the illegal trade of the Company officials.²⁵ Another detailed work about the corruption of the VOC in India was produced by Chris Nierstrasz who, as mentioned earlier, challenged the notion that corruption led to the decline of the VOC in the eighteenth century. For works dealing with

²² Knaap, 19.

²³ Mughal India in the seventeenth century did not mean the entire stretch of the present-day political boundaries of India. There were the different Deccan Sultanates that emerged from the breaking off of the Bahmani dynasty, which Aurangzeb (1658-1707) attempted to conquer during his reign. Apart from this, there were the Nayaka kingdoms in the southern part of India that emerged after the disintegration of the Vijayanagara empire, and there was the Maratha confederacy in parts of western India.

²⁴ For some examples of works on diplomatic exchanges between the royal courts and the Dutch East India Company officials see, Lennart Bes, “Sultan Among Dutchmen? Royal Dress at Court Audiences in South India, as Portrayed in Local Works of Art and Dutch Embassy Reports, Seventeenth-Eighteenth Centuries,” *Modern Asian Studies* 50, no. 6 (Nov. 2016): 1792–1845; Guido van Meersbergen, “Dutch and English Approaches to Cross-Cultural Trade in Mughal India and the Problem of Trust, 1600-1630,” in *Beyond Empire: Global, Self-Organizing, Cross-Imperial Networks, 1500-1800*, eds. Cátia Antunes and Amélia Polónia (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 69–87; Guido van Meersbergen, “The Dutch Merchant-Diplomat in Comparative Perspective: Embassies to the Court of Aurangzeb, 1660-1666,” in *Practices of Diplomacy in the Early Modern World c. 1410-1800*, eds. Tracey A. Sowerby and Jan Hennings (London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 147–65; Frank Birkenholz, “Merchant-Kings and Lords of the World: Diplomatic Gift-Exchange between the Dutch East India Company and the Safavid and Mughal Empires in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Practices of Diplomacy in the Early Modern World c. 1410-1800*, eds. Tracey A. Sowerby and Jan Hennings (London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 219–36; Michael North, “Production and Reception of Art through European Company Channels in Asia,” in *Artistic and Cultural Exchanges between Europe and Asia, 1400-1900: Rethinking Markets, Workshops and Collections*, ed. Michael North (Germany: Ashgate, 2010), 96–100.

²⁵ Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 83-84; F. S. Gaastra, “Constantijn Ranst en de corruptie onder het personeel van de VOC te Bengalen, 1669-1673,” in *Bestuurders en geleerden: Opstellen over onderwerpen uit de Nederlandse geschiedenis van de zestiende, zeventiende en achttiende eeuw, aangeboden aan Prof. Dr. J.J. Woltjer bij zijn afscheid als hoogleraar van de Rijksuniversiteit te Leiden*, eds. S. Groenveld, M.E.H.N. Mout, and I. Schöffer (Amsterdam: De Bataafsche leeuw, 1985), 126–36.

corruption in a socio-political context, the most relevant references emanate from the works of Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Ernst van den Bogaart, Markus Vink and Guido van Meersbergen which shed light on the association of ethnography with moral ‘corruption’ as were found in the Dutch (and in general European) accounts of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁶ These works have not only triggered my interest in the study of ‘corruption’ in the administrative discourse of the Company but have also left vital hints for exploring its importance in connection with the political atmosphere of the Dutch Republic as well as the regional interactions overseas. Inspired by the highly informative and dynamic analysis of these existent works, I aim to study ‘corruption’ through the political link between the VOC in the Republic and overseas as distinctive and yet mutually influential units of administration.

Another work that has explored this aspect from an intellectual historical dimension is that of Arthur Weststeijn who provided an explanation for the concerns regarding corruption in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic and how they were reflected in the contemporary writings on the chartered East and West India Companies.²⁷ He argued that the anxieties of a precarious Dutch empire that feared collapse was the reason for its government’s paranoia about moral decay and corruption. Weststeijn linked this situation to the classical Roman philosophies that were current in the day and stressed the need for taking this link into account in order to understand the Republic’s growing concerns about corruption. In his other work on the philosophy of the De La Court brothers, he pointed out the intellectual stimulus that the

²⁶ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Forcing the Doors of Heathendom: Ethnography, Violence and the Dutch East India Company* (Amsterdam: Centre for Asian Studies Amsterdam, 2003); Ernest van den Bogaart, *Civil and Corrupt Asia: Image and Text in the Itinerario and the Icones of Jan Huygen van Linschoten* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003); Markus Vink, *Encounters on the Opposite Coast: The Dutch East India Company and the Nayaka State of Madurai in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Guido van Meersbergen, “Ethnography and Encounter: Dutch and English Approaches to Cross-Cultural Contact in Seventeenth-Century South Asia” (PhD diss., UCL, 2015). Mention must be made of Benjamin Schmidt, *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe’s Early Modern World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). Another work that extensively engages with VOC ethonography by following this line, though not specifically dealing with corruption is that of Kruijtzter. Gijs Kruijtzter, *Xenophobia in Seventeenth-Century India* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2009).

²⁷ Arthur Weststeijn, “Republican Empire: Colonialism, Commerce and Corruption in the Dutch Golden Age,” *Renaissance Studies* 26, no. 4 (Sep. 2012): 491–509.

Republic received in the seventeenth century and the large amount of political theories that were being produced in connection with ‘public’ service.²⁸ These theories, to which the brothers Johan and Pieter de la Court themselves contributed, did bring the focus to administrative behaviour and corruption. These works of Weststeijn have been influential in this research to overcome the separation of the two historiographical worlds – the political theories in the Republic about commerce and the VOC’s activities in Mughal India (or in the Indian Ocean in general), and to connect the political thoughts and practices of the Company in the Republic with its overseas situation. The Van Reede committee in Bengal provides an excellent opportunity to carry out such an exercise precisely. It allows overseas activities to be analysed against the backdrop of the foreign settings as well as in light of the political developments in the Republic that, in turn, shaped the policies of the VOC at home and abroad. It is also a fruitful source of information about the VOC’s presence in seventeenth-century Bengal as seen through the ‘Dutch’ – ‘Mughal’ administrative interactions there.

Conceptualising Corruption

Before proceeding further, it is however necessary to understand how ‘corruption’ has been conceived in this dissertation. The challenge of trying to conceptualise this term for my research is threefold. The primary challenge involves an attempt to find a general definition of ‘corruption’ at a universal level that can be functional in all sectors. This in turn leads to two subsequent problems. It gives rise to the difficulty of being able to find a definition that not just applies everywhere to everyone but also fits, in this case, all seventeenth-century moral standards. The other problem is to find a definition specifically that works well in both the context of the Dutch and the Mughal administrative worlds in our study. Thus, the primary challenge of trying to clarify the concept or rather perception of ‘corruption’ includes – (i) a temporal issue, that is, trying to perceive it against the particular setting of the seventeenth century and (ii) a spatial

²⁸ Arthur Weststeijn, *Commercial Republicanism in the Dutch Golden Age: The Political Thought of Johan and Pieter de La Court* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 14–23.

aspect, that is, contextualising the perception of corruption with respect to the different political settings and their administrative cultures.

To begin with the challenge of seeking to define corruption, one is confronted with a wide range of differing perspectives – namely economic, political, historical, sociological and anthropological. The many approaches that have been adopted over the years for studying corruption are based on a number of theories. They range from the Weberian to the institutional-economics approach, the use of the systems theory, the criminological approach and so on.²⁹ The most widely used definition for this situation remains that of Michael Johnston. He wrote – ‘I define corruption as *the abuse of public roles or resources for private benefit*, but emphasise that “abuse”, “public”, “private”, and even “benefit” are matters of contention in many societies and of varying degrees of ambiguity in most.’³⁰ His idea of corruption, as is evident from this definition, was thus subjective throughout history and dependent on the three questions of ‘who, where and when’.³¹ This brings us to the major difficulty in conceiving a stable universal definition of corruption. Opinions on standards of morality and corruption have never been unanimously held. They have differed from one person to another or between different groups

²⁹ For an analysis of Weber’s ideal-bureaucratic type see, Max Weber, *Max Weber: The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York, London: Free Press of Glencoe, Collier MacMillan, 1964), 329–54. For a discussion on Weber’s theory see, William D. Rubinstein and Patrick von Maravic, “Max Weber, Bureaucracy, and Corruption,” in *The Good Cause: Theoretical Perspectives on Corruption*, eds. Gjalte de Graaf, Patrick von Maravic, and Pieter Wagenaar (Opladen: Barbara Budich Publishers, 2010), 21–35; Naoshi Yamawaki, “Rethinking Weber’s Ideal-Types of Development, Politics and Scientific Knowledge,” in *Max Weber’s ‘Objectivity’ Reconsidered*, ed. Laurence H. McFalls (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 206–24; P.M. Blaut, *Eight Eurocentric Historians*, vol. 2, *The Colonizer’s Model of the World* (New York etc.: The Guilford Press, 2000), 19–30. For an understanding of the institutional-economics approach see, Ackerman, “The Institutional Economics of Corruption”. For the systems theory see, Petra Hiller, “Understanding Corruption: How Systems Theory Can Help,” in *The Good Cause: Theoretical Perspectives on Corruption*, eds. Gjalte de Graaf, Patrick von Maravic, and Pieter Wagenaar (Opladen: Barbara Budich Publishers, 2010), 64–82. For a criminological approach see, Gjalte De Graaf, Patrick Von Maravic, and Pieter Wagenaar, “Introduction: Causes of Corruption – The Right Question or the Right Perspective,” in *Introduction: Causes of Corruption – The Right Question or the Right Perspective*, eds. Gjalte de Graaf, Patrick von Maravic, and Pieter Wagenaar (Opladen: Barbara Budich Publishers, 2010), 17–20.

³⁰ Michael Johnston, *Syndromes of Corruption: Wealth, Power and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 12.

³¹ Antoon Dirk Nicolaas Kerkhoff, “Hidden Morals, Explicit Scandals, Public Values and Political Corruption in the Netherlands (1748-1813)” (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2013), 9.

dwelling in the same place owing to differences in their perspectives. Time too has been a factor in creating such diverse perceptions.

The seventeenth century, in our case for example, was a different world. The grounds on which one can define corruption in its modern connotation were rather different in the ‘early-modern’ world. The task of finding a definition of ‘corruption’ for this period has been likened to ‘tracking the snark’ by Mary Lindemann, the ‘snark’ being the imaginary creature that was invented by Lewis Carroll in his poem, ‘The Hunting of the Snark’.³² There are two important technical differences that play a major role in accounting for the peculiarities of seventeenth-century ‘corruption’. Firstly, the existence of the economic, political, theological and religious worlds at this time were often overlapping and the segregation of these domains had not happened in the then society as it is understood now. The very understanding of ‘corruption’ was diverse and the word could be used in administrative vocabulary in several ways. For instance, when talking about ‘corruption’, the one pressing question that emerges is whether or not the term ‘corruption’ itself existed in the ‘early-modern’ vocabulary. If at all, did it actually imply the same meaning as ‘modern’-day corruption? Through a lexicographical analysis done by Maryvonne Génaux on the English and French cases, she showed how ‘early-modern corruption’ represented a diversity of vocabulary and meanings. There was no list of established corrupt practices that one could refer to in the seventeenth century. Using words from dictionaries in the French language and English repertoires, Génaux demonstrated that a diverse vocabulary of ‘corruption’ made it laden with political implications in the society. The technical meaning in dictionaries was usually combined with the usage of the word in different moral, jurist and humanist context. This made the definition of ‘corruption’ in these times allusive yet central to the political discourse. Génaux’s work confirmed the problem of trying to have a single

³² Mary Lindemann, *The Merchant Republics: Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Hamburg, 1648-1790* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 116.

definition of ‘early-modern corruption’ because of the bundled existence of multiple elements that affected the seventeenth-century administrative discourse.

The second major difference lay in the boundaries between ‘public’ and ‘private’, which by the seventeenth century was not yet stable and well-demarcated, although existing to a limited extent.³³ The differences in the elements that distinguished the seventeenth-century ‘public’ and the ‘private’ from their present-day counterparts, defined a world with very different social values. Such differences are relevant for understanding that ‘corruption’ was possibly perceived in a different way in the seventeenth century in contradiction to our current definitions. Using the existent literature on ‘pre-modern’ corruption in this case does not bring one any further either. The distribution of available literature for the seventeenth century remains an unequal process where most of the research is still focussed on ‘early-modern’ Europe. There are abundant studies of administrative corruption regarding the ‘early-modern’ states of Italy, France, England and the Netherlands.³⁴ As regards research on corruption in ‘early-modern’ Asian societies, there have been considerable scholarly works on the seventeenth- and the eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire and on the Ming and the Qing empires in China.³⁵ But for research on

³³ Manon van der Heijden, “Conflict and Consensus: The Allocation of Public Services in the Low Countries 1500-1800,” in *Serving the Urban Community: The Rise of Public Facilities in the Low Countries*, eds. Manon van der Heijden, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Griet Vermeesch and Martijn van der Burg (Aksant: Amsterdam, 2009), 23.

³⁴ Most of these comparative studies focus on comparison within western European societies. See, J.C. Kennedy et al., “Corruption and Public Values in Historical and Comparative Perspective,” *Public Voices* X, no. 2 (2008): 3–6; A.D.N. Kerkhoff, D.B.R. Kroeze, and F.P. Wagenaar, “Corruption and the Rise of Modern Politics in Europe in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: A Comparison between France, the Netherlands, Germany and England. Introduction,” *Journal of Modern European History* 11, no. 1 (2013): 19–30.

³⁵ On China see, Nancy E. Park, “Corruption in Eighteenth-Century China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 4 (Nov. 1997): 967–1005; Shawn Ni and Pham Hoang Van, “High Corruption Income in Ming and Qing China,” *Journal of Development Economics* 81, no. 2 (Dec. 2006): 316–36; Edgar Kiser and Xiaoxi Tong, “Determinants of the Amount and Type of Corruption in State Fiscal Bureaucracies: An Analysis of Late Imperial China,” *Comparative Political Studies* 25, no. 3 (Oct. 1992): 300–331; Peer Vries, “Introduction,” in *State, Economy and the Great Divergence: Great Britain and China, 1680s-1850s* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 1–68. On the Ottoman Empire see, Halil İnalcık, “Tax Collection, Embezzlement and Bribery in Ottoman Finances,” in *Essays in Ottoman History*, ed. Halil İnalcık (Istanbul: Eren, 1998), 173–95; Linda T. Darling, *Revenue-Raising and Legitimacy: The Collection and Finance Administration in the Ottoman Empire, 1560-1660* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Bernard Lewis, “Some Reflections on the Decline of the Ottoman Empire,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 9 (1958): 111–27; Caroline Finkel, “The Treacherous Cleverness of Hindsight: Myths of Ottoman Decay,” in *Re-Orienting the*

corruption in India, most of the studies are limited to the ‘modern’ era and to post-colonial India.³⁶ The book of Bernadus J.S. Hoetjes has been acclaimed as a pioneering work for studying corruption in decolonised India. Hoetjes suggested using the four social devices of ‘formal laws’, ‘public opinion’, ‘the best opinion or moral standard of the time’, and the ‘shopfloor codes’ for analysing corruption in a particular society.³⁷ But such devices are difficult to use in a seventeenth-century Mughal Indian context with pluralistic legal jurisdictions, widely varying socio-cultural norms, vague formal/informal rules and the insufficient number of sources for tracing public opinion. All these reasons and the last one especially, namely the lack of proper sources, explains the inadequacy of extensive research on the historical conceptualisation of corruption for Mughal India. Other corruption-related studies pertaining to colonial India, concentrate mostly on the British-Indian civil servants and do not specifically deal with the production of knowledge about India’s pre-colonial administration.³⁸ The situation is not entirely without hope though. A treasure trove of legal sources called the *mahzar-namas* has been rescued recently by Nandini Chatterjee and deserves special mention here.³⁹ Chatterjee has tried to retrace the Mughal judicial administration and its participants at various social levels from these

Renaissance: Cultural Exchanges with the East, ed. Gerald MacLean (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), 148–74. I am grateful to Prof. Peer Vries and Dr. Hasan Colak for the relevant literature.

³⁶ An excellent contribution to studying the state in modern India with reference to its corruption as reflected in the public discourse at a grass-root level is done by Akhil Gupta, “Blurred Boundaries: The Discourses of Corruption, the Culture of Politics and the Imagined State,” *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 2 (May 1995): 375–402.

³⁷ Cited in Pieter Wagenaar, Otto van der Meij, and Manon van der Heijden, “Corruptie in de Nederlanden, 1400-1800,” *Tijdschrift voor sociale en economische geschiedenis* 2, no. 4 (Dec. 2005): 6–7.

³⁸ There is abundant literature on smuggling in India by EIC servants and the rising *nabob*-culture with rich upstarts entering the ranks of the upper-class English society by making illegal money in India. See, Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 9; John T. Noonan Jr., “The Bribery of Warren Hastings: The Setting of a Standard for Integrity in Administration,” *Hofstra Law Review* 10, no. 1 (1981): 1073–1120, HeinOnline; Mithi Mukherjee, “Justice, War, and the Imperium: India and Britain in Edmund Burke’s Prosecutorial Speeches in the Impeachment Trial of Warren Hastings,” *Law and History Review* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 589–630, HeinOnline; Robert Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 100–140.

³⁹ Nandini Chatterjee, “*Mahzar-Namas* in the Mughal and British Empires: The Uses of an Indo-Islamic Legal Form,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58, no. 2 (April 2016): 379–406; Nandini Chatterjee, “Reflections on Religious Difference and Permissive Inclusion in Mughal Law,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 29, no. 3 (Oct. 2014): 396–415.

sources in order to produce more knowledge in this terrain. One can only be optimistic about this ongoing project and hope for its steady contribution to understanding corruption in the Mughal administration.⁴⁰ It is partly with the help of Chatterjee's works and the existent literature on Mughal administrative ethos that this dissertation aims to address the aspect of corruption in the historiography of Mughal India.

The extensive, multidisciplinary scholarship on corruption demonstrates that it is not possible to employ a single definition that meets all spatial and temporal coordinates. Here I can only but agree with Davide Torsello and Bertrand Venard who urge to contextualise research on corruption in different areas based on its immediate socio-political surroundings while understanding it as a process and product of these local factors.⁴¹ Such a practical and flexible approach allows corruption to be understood in all its (in)commensurabilities in a connecting, 'global' setting, as has been done in this dissertation.⁴² Although corruption involves political, economic, moral and many other domains, in this study I have focused specifically on what I have termed 'administrative corruption' in the context of the late seventeenth-century VOC in general, and of its establishment in Mughal Bengal in particular. In other words, what conduct the VOC was expecting of its servants, both at home and more in particular at its factories in Bengal? Rather than defining administrative corruption, the research question of this dissertation deals primarily with the discussions on corruption at that specific time and place. Indeed, what makes the VOC establishment in Bengal such a fascinating case is its location at the interface of two very different political settings: the Dutch Republic and the Mughal Empire. Hence, in this

⁴⁰ The description of this project can be found here -

<http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/history/research/projects/forms-of-law/>, accessed 11 June, 2018.

⁴¹ Davide Torsello and Bertrand Venard, "The Anthropology of Corruption," *Journal of Management Inquiry* 25, no. 1 (April 2016): 39–40.

⁴² By saying 'global' I do not want to make extravagant claims about writing a large-scale world history. All that I mean is incorporating a more holistic approach by putting the ideas of corruption in the context of a non-European empire alongside those in the Dutch Republic's form of governance in the context of the historiography on corruption. For an overview on 'incommensurability' and its influence in studying historical encounters see, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge etc.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1–33.

study I have zoomed in on the VOC in Bengal from both a Dutch and a Mughal point of view. By taking a dual perspective I have attempted to understand how administrative corruption was perceived in two very different political cultures and how this affected Dutch perceptions of VOC servants in the Mughal province of Bengal.

In dealing with the issue of corruption, I will more specifically explore the way accusations of corruption were used for political ends. To study the process of how administrative corruption was conceived and used in making allegations, I have used two parameters. The first parameter involves the difference in political structures which affect the way corruption is perceived in different political systems and the way corruption allegations are used. The second parameter involves the difference in the ideas of morality within different political structures that are manifested in their formal administrative rules. Using these two parameters, I have studied the different contexts in which corruption allegations were formed and used in the administrative worlds of the Dutch Republic and Mughal Bengal.

While such parameters might be helpful in penetrating the world of the Dutch and Mughal administrators, it is worth inspecting whether they are useful in studying an organization that is often seen as ‘merely’ a trading company. While reflecting on the nature of the English East India Company and its administration, Philip Stern concluded that it was a Company-state. By this he meant that just as the ‘early-modern’ English state was an evolving hybrid of politics, religion, military, commerce and several other functions bundled together, the English East India Company was also an amalgam of similar features of a corporate body and a state in England.⁴³ This argument was applied to the VOC by Arthur Weststeijn.⁴⁴ Using the discourse of three prominent men who had financial stakes in the Company, Weststeijn concluded that the VOC was considered to be more than just a corporate body by its contemporaries. Sometimes it was

⁴³ Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.

⁴⁴ Arthur Weststeijn, “The VOC as a Company-State: Debating Seventeenth-Century Dutch Colonial Expansion,” *Itinerario* 38, no. 1 (April 2014): 13-34.

seen as competing with the Dutch state, sometimes as an overseas extension of the state and sometimes as a state within the state. Much like the English government, the Dutch state in the seventeenth-century was also a bundle of religion, politics, commerce and other elements which came to be reflected in the institution of the VOC. The Company had its own system and set of formal rules and operated in connection with the metropolis and overseas factories in Asia. It is therefore possible to use the parameters mentioned above for studying the perception of corruption and the use of corruption allegations among the Company officials by viewing the VOC as a Company-state.

The dual perspective of this study requires a scholarly engagement with the political worlds of the Dutch Republic and Mughal India. Hence, I have decided to take Amsterdam and Bengal as representational backdrops in which VOC officials raised corruption accusations. Amsterdam was one of the most important cities known for its commercial dominance in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic and the chamber of Amsterdam in the VOC held substantial number of shares. Several prominent regent and merchant families that were part of the urban high society also lived in and officially represented this city. Consequently, Amsterdam became a hotbed of sensational scandals and corruption accusations in the Republic. This explains it being a focal point for the subject of this dissertation. Bengal, on the other hand, despite not being the political core of the Mughal Empire, is an important region for studying non-courtly encounters between Europe and Asia. As a region, it became the political core of British-India in the eighteenth century. But before that, it had been a 'shadow empire' of the Portuguese *Estado da India* in the sixteenth century.⁴⁵ In the seventeenth century, after the *Estado*

⁴⁵ The term 'shadow empire' was first coined by George Winus to explain how there was a 'Portuguese colonial genius' that emerged in the Bay of Bengal through the network of free agents, beyond the official control of Goa. See, George Winus, "The 'Shadow Empire' of Goa in the Bay of Bengal," *Itinerario* 7, no. 2 (July 1983): 83–101. Subrahmanyam, in addition to this contended that from the second half of the sixteenth century, Portuguese private traders were not just confined to riverine commerce but also connected long-distance oceanic trade from Bengal to three other regions – firstly, to Malacca; secondly, to Sri Lanka, Cochin and Goa; and thirdly, to Ormuz through direct trade. See, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Notes on the Sixteenth Century Bengal Trade," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 24, no. 3 (Sep. 1987): 265–89. Rila Mukherjee

came to be dismissed for its supposed corruption in India, the VOC replaced it in Bengal and this region's importance began growing.⁴⁶ It also started attracting the English, the Danish and the French East India Companies which settled there next to each other in close proximity. This was in combination with the Portuguese presence there, formed by the *mestizo* population and the former *Estado* agents who had remained in Bengal and continued living there informally.⁴⁷ The presence of the VOC personnel in the midst of these other Europeans made the Company directors in the Republic increasingly worried about their position in this region. A 'shadow empire' of the yesteryears, a problem zone for the VOC, and a growing political base for the English, Bengal witnessed speedy political and socio-economic transitions in India in these centuries. It is because of this dynamism and the fact that the VOC officials here had frequent informal interactions with the Mughal nobles that Bengal is relevant for my study on corruption. Understanding the use of corruption allegations in both the Dutch and Mughal administrative worlds of Amsterdam and Bengal is thus important in contextualising the VOC's operations in these settings. In this respect, it should be mentioned that this dissertation is an attempt to make an analysis of the perception and uses of corruption allegations in Mughal India and the Dutch Republic. In addition, it tries to understand and contextualise the VOC in the Republic and in the Mughal administrative worlds that they are studied.

The process of studying corruption and uses of corruption allegations in the VOC has however two sides to it. On the one hand, there is the discourse on corruption and policies that were implemented to check corruption among the Company officials in the seventeenth century.

added to this the importance of the island of Sandwip in the Bay of Bengal as a Portuguese node, that arguably lay somewhere between the 'major'/'minor' and 'formal'/'informal' divisions. See, Rila Mukherjee, "The Struggle for the Bay: The Life and Times of Sandwip, an Almost Unknown Portuguese Port in the Bay of Bengal in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Revista de Faculdade de Letras: História* 9, no. 1 (2008): 67–88.

⁴⁶ Nandini Chaturvedala, "Imperial Excess: Corruption and Decadence in Portuguese India (1660-1706)" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2010), 31.

⁴⁷ For an overview of the continued Portuguese presence in the Bay of Bengal, often in the service of other European Companies as well as local rulers see, Stefan Halikowski Smith, "Languages of Subalternity and Collaboration: Portuguese in English Settlements Across the Bay of Bengal, 1620-1800," *The International Journal of Maritime History* 28, no. 2 (Apr. 2016): 237–67.

On the other hand, there are cases of corruption that emerged as a result of investigations conducted overseas which reveal how the officials actually engaged in such acts. My dissertation tries to combine both these aspects through the operations and reports of the Van Reede committee in the second half of the seventeenth century (roughly between the 1670s and 1680s). In the process, it explores the institutional façade of the VOC with its administrative system and formal rules under which personal connections informally thrived. Such connections are revealed while analysing cases of violation of the rules of the Company which further establishes the relevance of corruption and the uses of corruption allegations in its administration as a Company-state.

Sources

To say that such an endeavour needs to be attempted is easy but translating it into concise historical research is much more difficult. It proves to be particularly challenging when it comes to the selection of sources and their analysis. With the vast stretch of different types of sources for studying ‘administrative corruption’ in the seventeenth century (thanks to the overlapping economic and political spaces), it is impossible to dedicate equal attention to all of them. The volume of sources for the political administration of the Dutch Republic alone is so huge, that I have used only previous researches done on corruption in the Republic. Besides this, a few pamphlets, books and other published documents that are available through the online databases of Dutch literary productions have also been referred to. Since the core of this dissertation revolves around the Dutch East India Company, it is the VOC archives in The Hague that have formed the major part of my archival research. Both formal reports of the Company, as well as private letters of relevant regents from the Amsterdam chamber have also been consulted. The official Company reports that have been used here include missives dispatched by the governor-general and his Council to the *Heeren XVII* at different points of time, the resolutions drawn up by the *Heeren XVII* for the relevant years, and the correspondences that were sent back from the

Republic to Batavia on matters concerning corruption. As for the private papers, I have consulted the collections of prominent VOC regent-directors like Johannes Hudde and the family archives of the Governor-General Rijkloff van Goens. In addition to that, the personal journal and private letters of the Amsterdam *burgemeester* and VOC director, Joan Huydecoper van Maarsseveen en Neerdijk (1625-1704) that are currently preserved as a part of the Huydecoper Family documents in the Utrecht Archives have also been used here.

It is necessary to mention at this point that informal alliances are not always spelled out in the sources, least of all in the official documents that are easily available. Yet as crucial elements of this dissertation, such alliances and personal relations cannot be left out of this dissertation. I have, therefore, tried to construct them through networks of family and friends of the relevant administrative personalities. The private journal of Huydecoper, for instance, and other biographical information has helped in this process. The missives and investigation reports of the Van Reede committee also form a substantial part of this dissertation. As my primary case study, it has been used to study the legal cases that were raised by the committee against the accused Company officials in Bengal. In order to comprehend the weight of the Company's presence in the Dutch Republic, the archival documents have been combined with published books, pamphlets and travelogues written about certain VOC officials in Asia, that were later circulated for the wider European audience.⁴⁸ Most of the VOC missives and resolutions used here are from the period concerning my case study and do not include all missives from all the years between 1602 and 1700. While it means that this dissertation reflects the Company's situation and policies at that time particularly, it also leaves room for further research on the changing phases of the Company's concerns and policies on corruption (possible through a research project).

⁴⁸ For a critical note on the use of archival sources solely for research on the Company in India see, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History: Mughals and Franks* (New Delhi: Oxford University Publishers, 2005), 9–10.

For the study of the Mughal Indian administrative space, English translations of royal chronicles such as the *Akbarnama* and its administrative extension, *The Ain-i Akbari* (composed by Abul Fazl, one of Emperor Akbar's most powerful and closest *munshis*), the *Shahjahanama* (composed by Inayat Khan, one of Emperor Shah Jahan's *munshis*), the *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri* (which is considered Jahangir's own autobiography) and the *Abkam-i Alamgiri* commonly attributed to Hamiduddin Khan composed under Aurangzeb have also been used. These sources have been employed in combination with the secondary literature on Mughal administrative culture. However, when it comes down specifically to corruption, the existent scholarly works on the seventeenth-century Mughal Empire are few in number. This can be ascribed to the lack of availability of neatly compiled legal records or cases from the sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century Mughal administration. As mentioned earlier, Nandini Chatterjee has recently demonstrated in 2017 the use of *mahzar-namas* as valuable legal records for the Mughal administration. Her research project possibly awaits further work that may culminate in a historical analysis of administrative corruption in the Mughal Empire.

For this dissertation, I have used royal chronicles as official versions of the Mughal emperors' reign as recorded by their favourite *munshis* or administrators. They are nevertheless problematic, characterised as they are by strong political bias and narrow affiliations. But I have precisely taken that into consideration and seen it as an advantage for studying the politics of corruption through the dialogue of the accuser and the accused. As Harbans Mukhia pointed out, 'Often the (Mughal) historians, as courtiers, were themselves party to one or another faction, or were at the least sympathetic to one or another faction. They were thus eyewitnesses to, when not active participants in, the events they narrated. As such they were frequently aware of the motives that drove nobles or princes or, for that matter, denizens of the *harem*, to undertake an action that would enter their chronicles.'⁴⁹ These royal narratives also made it possible to see the ideal administrative behaviour that was approved by the Mughal Empire against corruption and

⁴⁹ Harbans Mukhia, *The Mughals of India* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 7.

misconduct. But it is difficult to study the actual practices and uses of administrative corruption that existed beyond these ideal images. The insufficient availability of legal papers and registers, in combination with my own lack of language skills in Persian is the main cause. This explains the limited research on Mughal uses of corruption allegations in this dissertation.

As a significant part of this dissertation focuses on Mughal Bengal, relevant Bengali sources such as the *Mangalkavya* poems have been used for understanding the local socio-economic space of this region. Despite being fictitious compositions, these poems are historically important as they reflect the social, political and economic background of the times when they were composed in Bengal.⁵⁰ They lend to some extent a local voice to this story, while tapping into the connections between the regional and the global interface.⁵¹ Added to this, the autobiography of a seventeenth-century merchant, Banarasidas (from Jaunpur) has also been used in this connection. As for the VOC sources, while using information from them generously, it has been my constant endeavour to extract the political intentions, personal motivations and interpersonal interactions behind the available discourse. That is why it is deemed necessary to study the Company's formal problems from an informal angle to unveil the uneven edges behind the polished, official language of the administrators.

Chapter Layout

In the first chapter of this dissertation, the reader is introduced to the Dutch political administration in the seventeenth century in order to understand the atmosphere in which the VOC worked. Through an analysis of its governing system as a Republic, I show how and why administrative corruption gradually became a politicised subject for debate in the public forum.

Chapter 2 focuses more specifically on the VOC administration of the seventeenth century and

⁵⁰ For the historical validity and importance of this genre of texts see, David Curley, "The "World of the Text" and Political Thought in Bengali Mangal-Kavya, c. 1500-1750," *The Medieval History Journal* 14, no. 2 (Oct. 2011): 183–211; David Curley, *Poetry and History: Bengali Mangal-Kavya and Social Change in Precolonial Bengal* (Washington: Western Washington University, 2008); Kumkum Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal* (India: Oxford University Publishers, 2009), 90–122.

⁵¹ Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration," 745.

shows the essential connections between the political space in the Republic and the Company's domain. It reveals how the anxieties about corruption in Dutch society had their impact on the Company administrators and what was their reaction in turn to deflect the tension. In Chapter 3, the overseas dimension comes into play. Bengal under the Mughal administration is analysed to provide a context to the VOC's operations. It further tries to decipher how corruption came to be perceived by the Mughal emperors and where and how Bengal featured in this perception. When we have seen how the tension about corruption has built up within the Company in the Republic, Chapter 4 goes on to show how Mughal Bengal played a major role in triggering these anxieties. It investigates the nature of the VOC-Mughal administrative encounter in this region to show how Mughal perceptions of corruption about Bengal added a new dimension to the Company's perception of overseas corruption.

Having analysed the background in which the Van Reede committee was installed and sent, Chapter 5 studies the process of the committee's formation in response to its heightened concerns in the Republic. Chapter 6 looks into the scene of action in Bengal where the committee combats corruption among its officials. Through the study of the legal cases that were sent to Batavia by the Van Reede committee against officials charged of corruption, it is shown how the VOC officials in Bengal inhabited both administrative worlds of the Mughals and the Dutch. The written reports of Van Reede, on the other hand, catered clearly to the demands of the Dutch administrative world but were again not free of entangled influences of the Mughal administrative world. Bengal as a region, however, remained the core of corruption in this discourse as will be shown in this dissertation.

Finally, one should remember that writing in English presents its own challenges. Trying to translate certain words while being true to their meanings has always been a struggle for academic researchers. For the sake of avoiding any confusion, therefore (that I have personally encountered with different authors providing different translations for the same word), I have stuck to using the original terms for all administrative positions and other relevant concepts

throughout this text. A separate glossary clarifying their meanings has been attached at the end for further reference. All translations from Dutch to English and from Bengali into English are mine, unless it has been mentioned otherwise. I am, therefore, solely responsible for all mistakes and slips in them, if any. The English translation of Persian and Urdu texts have been taken from other published works and the references have been mentioned in relevant footnotes. All Persian words have been put here without diacritical marks as they should appear in their English transliteration. The plural form of Dutch nouns that should be in their *-en* form have been replaced with a *-s* in English for the convenience of writing in the English language. Similar is the case with Persian plural forms of *-an* and *-ha* that have been changed into the English *-s*.

Last but not least, I wholeheartedly admit that this work does have its limitations. Covering a time span of almost a hundred years is no mean task. Neither do the chapter on the Dutch political system, nor the chapter on Mughal India seek to disregard the detailed scholarship that exists on numerous aspects of seventeenth-century Dutch and Mughal governance. Notwithstanding these limitations however, it is still important to include them as chapters in order to contextualise the VOC in its political setting at home and abroad. The Company's history is not just about share prices, profits and losses, illegal practices, factories and warehouses, ships and maritime policies. It is linked to the people in it – about their pursuit of power, personal interests, alliances and confrontations, about their observations and experiences in assimilating with the 'other'. To be able to bring to light that part of the Company's history, it is essential to place it in the larger political setting where it functioned. To give up on such an endeavour because of an apprehension of limitations, would probably be wasting an opportunity to expose the important connections in the history of seventeenth-century global encounters. It is thus, by building upon the excellent literature that exists for both the Dutch Republic and the Mughal Indian administration, that this dissertation attempts to trace their entanglement through the Dutch East India Company, in terms of corruption as a yet insufficiently explored terrain of historical research.