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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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Chapter 4

The ‘Corrupt’ and the ‘Incorrupt’: Written and Unwritten Dynamics of an Administrative Encounter

There is nothing here in Hooghly, however, that dazzles more than the Dutch lodge. It is situated on a remarkable square at a musket-shot’s range from the large river, the Ganges, in order to not be washed away. The lodge resembles more of a robust castle: its walls and bastions are carved out elegantly of fine stones... There are also stone warehouses, where both foreign as well as local commodities are stored daily... We strolled through the nice pavements and reached the beautiful and densely populated villages. The English were building their new lodge here, as the older one with its houses, walls and everything else was eroding by bits and pieces, due to the strong currents of the Ganges, every day.¹

This is how Wouter Schouten described the VOC factory at Chinsurah during his visit there as the Company’s *chirurgijn* (physician) in 1663. The progress of the Dutch East India Company’s administrative role in Bengal was unique in that the Company started off rather late here (in comparison to the other regions like Coromandel, Malabar and Surat), and hastened to gain greater control in the final decades of the seventeenth century. Greater energy was invested from the second half of the seventeenth century onwards as the English East India Company (EIC) had also entered the scene. The VOC seemed to have been doing well in the second half of the seventeenth century, as the above extract of Schouten shows.² The Company’s lodge resembling ‘more or less a big castle’ reflected a stable Dutch presence vis-à-vis the EIC in Bengal. But significant changes crept in in the eighteenth century as the EIC caught up in the race for

¹ ‘Niets schittert echter meer in Hooghly dan de Nederlandse loge. Deze staat op een aanzienlijk plein en, om niet te worden weggespoeld, op een musketschot afstand van de grote rivier de Ganges. De loge heeft meer weg van een flink kasteel: Muren en hoekpunten zijn heel netjes en sierlijk van louter steen opgebouwd... Ook zijn er steen pakhuizen, waar dagelijks buiten- en binnenlandse handelswaar wordt opgeslagen... Langs plezierige wandelwegen kwamen wij in mooie, dichtbevolkte dorpen. De Engelsen waren hier bezig om een nieuwe loge te bouwen omdat de oude door de sterke stroom van de Ganges, met woningen, muren en alles wat er bij hoorde, iedere dag wat meer wegspoelde.’

See, Schouten, *De Oost-Indische voyage*, eds. Michael Breet and Marijke Barend-van Haeften, 374.

² There are similar references of the VOC factory’s stately presence in English and French accounts of the seventeenth century. See, Lequin, *Het personeel*, 118.

colonial pursuits and the Dutch East India Company kept slipping from its former position. In 1784, Isaac Titsingh was appointed as the VOC director of Bengal (1785-92) with the purpose of reviving the Dutch trade there against the English.³ During his stay, he wrote about his experiences in the following manner –

Since my arrival here I have found little enjoyment; the landscape, which many appreciate, I do not like; I have little taste in company, every day one meets the same people, among whom hate and envy ensuing from former troubles are kept alive for ages; it is like purgatory in which it is my task to open the doors to Paradise so that trade can pick up again...⁴

Titsingh's writings, as seen in the above extract, reflected his awareness of everything that had been said and written by his predecessors in praise of Bengal. And yet his bitterness with the unrealistic hopes of success of the *Heeren XVII* against the strong English presence there, revealed his despair in trying to recover a lost position.⁵ There was not much space left there for the VOC to claim anymore. By the end of the eighteenth century, this territory had slipped out of Mughal hands and fallen under British control. The Dutch had to evacuate all other workplaces in the Indian subcontinent, except Bengal where they were allowed to retain their factory and trade, albeit under strict vigilance till 1825.⁶ In 1824, the then Dutch resident of Bengal, D.A. Overbeek, lamented the situation while writing his *verslag* (report) to Batavia –

³ C.R. Boxer, *"The Mandarin at Chinsura"; Isaac Titsingh in Bengal, 1785-1792: A Paper Read to the Royal Asiatic Society and the Royal India and Pakistan Society, London, 10 February* (Amsterdam: Indisch Instituut, 1949), 4.

⁴ Cited in Harm Stevens and Sam A. Herman, *Dutch Enterprise and the VOC, 1602-1799* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1998), 89. This was reportedly resolved after the official, C.L. Eilbracht was transferred to the Coromandel Coast from Bengal with whom Titsingh did not get along very well. See, Boxer, *"The Mandarin at Chinsura"; Isaac Titsingh*, 11.

⁵ For an overview of the reforms and its implications as suggested by Titsingh for the VOC see, Boxer, 11–12.

⁶ The Dutch possessions in Bengal were eventually surrendered to the British in 1795, before it was returned to the Netherlands in 1814, to be given back again to the British in 1825. See *archiefbeschrijving* (description of the archives) from NL-HaNA, Nederlandse bezittingen Vóór-Indië (Dutch Settlements in India), Residentie Bengalen. The summary of the entire process as recorded in these archives has been penned by Kemp in the wake of the 20th century through the use of primary sources. P.H. van der Kemp, "De Nederlandsche factorijen in Vóór-Indië in den aanvang der 19de eeuw," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 53, no. 1 (1901): 285–357; P.H. van der Kemp, *De jaren 1817-1825 der Nederlandsche factorijen van Hindostans Oostkust*," *Bijdragen tot de Taal, Land en Volkenkunde* 74, no. 1 (1918): 1–72.

It speaks for itself that the welfare of a country, or of a ... (illegible/destroyed part of folio) or of a special place would diminish if the resources meant for it are blocked. It is well-known that the reason for the decline of this colony (indicating Chinsurah-Hooghly) is the building of the British port at the chief town of Calcutta nearby, which has attracted all trade. What Calcutta has become nowadays, is what suited Hooghly and Chinsurah earlier. But from the time this change has come about, we have kept declining gradually, step by step, to be reduced to this current level of usefulness.⁷

Overbeek, thus, regretted the lost glory of Chinsurah owing to the damages brought upon them by the British in Calcutta.

It is interesting to note that both Chinsurah and Calcutta were among the few villages that were leased out to the Dutch and the English East India Companies respectively by the Mughal authorities in the seventeenth century. The EIC held a lease over the three villages of Sutanuti, Gobindpur and Kalikata (later these were renamed as Calcutta but then the region was known as Dihi-Kulkatta) until they bought their *zamindari* rights in 1698 from the *zamindars* of that area, the Majumdars, with the approval of the Mughal authorities (the EIC also purchased land from a *zamindar* in Malda in 1681).⁸ The VOC, too, had acquired the three villages of Chinsurah, Bazaar Mirjapur and Baranagore in lease from the Mughal *subahdar*, Shah Shuja in 1656 but there was no mention of having purchased them later at any point as *zamindaris*.⁹ The

⁷ 'Het spreekt van zelve dat de welvaart van een land, een ... [illegible part of the text] of van een bijzondere plaats moet afnemen, als de bronnen daartoe worden opgestopt, de bekende oorzaak van't verval deser colonie is de nabij ... [illegible part of the text] der Britsche Haven in Hoofplaats Calcutta, welke alles wat maar naar handel zveemt na zig trekt. Wat Calcutta nu is, was wel ter Houghly en Chinsura, dog sinds de ommekeer voorgevallen, zijn wij van trap tot trap gedaald, tot de tegenwoordige staat van nuttigheid.'

NL-HaNA, Hoge Regering van Batavia (HR), inv. nr. 298, General report about Chinsurah for the governor-general and Council of the Indies in Batavia from the resident at Chinsurah, D.A. Overbeek, 22 August, 1824: folios not numbered.

⁸ Stern, *Company-State*, 129–30; Habib, *The Agrarian System*, 195–96, 217. Later in 1717, the EIC acquired more *zamindari* rights over other villages from the Mughal Emperor Farrukhsiyar. See, Travers, *Ideology and Empire*, 33.

⁹ This is recorded in the missive written by Van Reede, while describing his arrival in 1684 in Bengal in the villages which were once leased out to the Dutch East India Company. NA, VOC, inv. nr. 1421, Missive written by Hendrik Adriaan van Reede to the Heeren XVII from Hooghly, Bengal, 9 December, 1686: f. 75v. Also see, Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 40; NL-HaNA, VOC, OBP, inv. nr. 1212, Memoir for the honourable Peter Sterthemius, *extraordinaris raad van Indië*, and the director appointed to control the important commerce of Bengal and Orissa, left by the then commissioner Joan Verpoorten when he departed from this place for Batavia, Hooghly, 31 January, 1656: f. 216v.

Dutch, thus, started on a relatively equal footing with the English when it came to having villages on lease in Mughal Bengal. But while the EIC was able to successfully penetrate the Mughal administrative framework and begin their colonial career by acquiring *zamindari* rights over Dihikulkatta and then moving on to holding the *divani* of Bengal in the eighteenth century, the VOC declined ‘gradually, step by step’, to borrow Overbeek’s words, into a ‘state of (minimal) usefulness’. While this issue of eighteenth-century Dutch – English – Mughal dynamics is beyond the scope of our current dissertation, the purpose of mentioning this point here is to draw the reader’s attention to the administrative presence of these Companies (the VOC and the EIC) within the Mughal administrative structure of seventeenth-century Bengal. More on this will be highlighted later.

This naturally leads the researcher on to raise certain questions about the turn of events concerning the VOC in seventeenth-century Mughal Bengal. How did the Mughal administrators view the Dutch East India Company officials within their administrative structure and conversely, what did it entail for the Company in Bengal? In other words, what did the ‘Dutch’ – ‘Mughal’ administrative encounter look like in Bengal with respect to the region’s specificities, as explored in the previous chapter? The answers to all these questions will be examined here in order to highlight the role of corruption in this administrative encounter. It is worth considering that this encounter in Bengal fanned the region’s notoriety for breeding corrupt Company servants in the seventeenth century. As Van Dam reported to the directors in the Republic, the governor-general and the *Raad van Indië* wrote in 1661, ‘that the enormous dirt in Bengal that has come to light eventually, has made them shriek, and fear that the same would be in vogue in other places as well.’¹⁰ Van Dam then continued writing, ‘And on that note, it has since then been only growing.’ Corruption in Bengal was highlighted as a menace in the VOC reports, which called for the *Heeren XVII*’s fast intervention. It is, therefore, through this window of ‘corruption’ and

¹⁰ ‘Integendeel schryven de Generael en de Raden in ’t jaar 1661, dat de grote vuyligheden, in Bengale aen den dagh gekomen, haar deden verschricken, en verse hebben, dat deselve op andere plaetsen mede in swangh mogten gaan. En op die voet is dat alsoo voort blijven continueren.’ See, Dam, *Pieter van Dam’s Beschryvinge*, Book II, Part II, 16.

its use in raising allegations that the Mughal-VOC administrative encounter is examined here. However, a vital distinction that has been made in this chapter is between the formal side of this encounter and its informal side. This is relevant for understanding how informal practices shaped the formal VOC discourses and the role that corruption played in them. It also makes a compelling case for investigating the presence of the VOC in Bengal beyond the obvious commercial stance that historians have so far emphasised.¹¹

The Company in Bengal

The VOC had to start yet in Bengal when it had already set up trading posts successfully in other parts of the Indian subcontinent, like the ones on the Coromandel Coast, in Malabar, Surat, and in the interior of the subcontinent, near Agra. All of these areas, together, with Persia and Ceylon were designated as the *Westerkwartieren* (the Western Quarters) in the Company's records and Bengal consequently came to be a part of these western quarters. The administration of the VOC in Bengal revolved around the director and the council in Hooghly, which served as the main factory in that region. Being the chief governing body, the director and the council were answerable to the *Hoge Regering* in Batavia and the *Heeren XVII* for everything that happened in the *binnen-comptoiren* (subordinate factories inland) of Bengal. The factories that were in the *binnen-comptoiren* included the ones located at Kasimbazaar, Malda, Falta, Dhaka, Rajmahal and those built in Patna, Balasore, Sjopra, Singia and Pipli in the provinces of Bihar and Orissa. Besides the director and the council, there were also a handful of other VOC personnel working at these factories in Bengal in the rank of the *opperkoopman* (the senior merchant or factor). They occupied different positions like that of the *negotieboekhouder* (trade-bookkeeper), the *fiscaal* (for maintaining the rules at the ports and other jurisdictional policing functions) and so on. A special position as that of the *opperhoofd* (the chief) existed in the factory at Kasimbazaar which served as

¹¹ Gerrit Knaap categorised it as a zone of 'extraterritoriality' where the VOC was granted certain privileges by the local political authorities for trading. The Company's base in Bengal, along with Japan, China, Persia and Surat fell into this category. Knaap, "De 'Core Business'," 18.

the second most important factory for the VOC in Bengal. Apart from this rank, there were several other Company servants performing different duties in the rank of the *onderkoopman* (junior merchant) like the *pakhuismeester* (warehouse manager), the *cassier* (cashier), the *soldijboekhouder* (wages clerk) etc., one of whom also acted as the secretary to the director's council in Bengal.

The historiography of the VOC in Bengal focuses strongly on its commercial aspect. Om Prakash's seminal work on this theme provides an excellent study of the Company's involvement in the trade of Bengal with links to South East Asia (Arakan, Pegu, Tenasserim, Aceh, Kedah, Malacca etc.), the Coromandel and Malabar Coasts, Ceylon, the islands of the Maldives, Surat and Cambay, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea as well as directly to the Republic.¹² The major commodities that Bengal supplied to the VOC were textiles, sugar, saltpetre, opium, rice and clarified butter, all of which were either utilised for its intra-Asiatic trade or for its direct trade with the Republic.¹³ Om Prakash pointed out that the share of exports from Bengal in the Company's trade with Europe was between 7 and 10 percent in the 1660s and 1670s.¹⁴ It was only in 1665-66 that the goods from Bengal counted for half of the total value sent to the Republic. However, at this time, the intra-Asian silk trade between Bengal and Japan provided the *Heeren XVII* with 'the largest amount of capital'.¹⁵ With the changes in fashion in Amsterdam in the last two decades of the seventeenth century, the demand for textiles and raw silk from Bengal increased more than before. Between 1675-76, textiles from Bengal accounted for 22 percent of the total exports from India and by 1701-03, the figure went up to an impressive 54 percent.¹⁶ Bengal silk constituted 83 percent of the total Asian raw silk sold in Amsterdam

¹² Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 28.

¹³ Om Prakash, *European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India*, vol. II, *The New Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 338; Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556-1707*, 78–79.

¹⁴ Prakash, *European Commercial Enterprise*, 2: 202.

¹⁵ Prakash, 199.

¹⁶ Prakash, 212.

between 1697 and 1718.¹⁷ Bengal became the principal supplier of goods for Europe during the 1690s accounting for almost 40 percent of the total imports there.¹⁸ In fact, the profits from Bengal seemed to constitute, if the Dutch poet Antonides van der Goes is to be believed, an extremely vital part of the Company's trade. Van der Goes wrote in 1671 – "The rich settlement of Bengal in the lands of the future/ Gives the Batavians, a sea of treasures at best."¹⁹ Not just the trade in material goods, but also the VOC's slave trade at this time was boosted by Bengal.²⁰ This region (along with Arakan, Malabar and Coromandel) formed one of the most important circuits for the Company's forced labour till the 1660s in the Indian Ocean, while also being known to contribute commodities that could be exchanged for buying slaves in the trans-Atlantic trade of the *West Indische Compagnie* (WIC).²¹ At the same time, it was also located at a strategic zone between the two regions of Ceylon and Batavia where the VOC had, at different points of time, expressed their political plans and colonial ambitions.²² It meant that plans to bring it under control as a cushion or buffer zone between Ceylon and Batavia could facilitate the colonial projects of the rival factions within the VOC that were keen on either of these two regions as their base.²³ Bengal thus was of more use to the Company than just for its commercial profits in the seventeenth century.

¹⁷ Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 73.

¹⁸ Prakash, 218.

¹⁹ 'Bengale, 't ryke kantoor der Morgenlandegewesten/ Geeft aen den Batavier een zee van schat ten besten.' See, J. Antonides Van der Goes, *De Ystroom begrepen in vier boeken* (Amsterdam: Peiter Arentsz., 1671), 46.

²⁰ Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 35.

²¹ After the 1660s, the focus shifted to Southeast Asia but that did not mean that Bengal was put out of the picture. Markus Vink, "'The World's Oldest Trade': Dutch Slavery and Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century," *Journal of World History* 14, no. 2 (2003): 140–42; Edward A. Alpers, "Africa and Africans in the Making of Early Modern India," in *The Indian Ocean in the Making of Early Modern India*, ed. Pius Malekandathil (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2016), 67.

²² Bengal was advantageous because of its food supplies and other resources sent from there to Batavia and Ceylon. See, J.A. van der Chijs, *Dagh-Register gehouden int casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Nederlands-India, anno 1665* (Batavia, 's Gravenhage: Landsdrukkerij, Martinus Nijhoff, 1894), 225.

²³ Vink argues that in the years following 1650 there were two groups – the Ceylon-centric faction in the Company, followed by the Batavia-centric administration that emphasized the cutting down of costs and expenditure. See, Vink, *Encounters*, 118-35; H.T. Colenbrander, *Jan Pietersz. Coen bescheiden omtrent zijn bedrijf in Indië* ('s Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1919), 781.

Attempts to explore the possibilities in Bengal began from 1612. VOC ships filled with *facteurs* on board were sent now and then from the Coromandel Coast to the regions of Balasore and Pipli (in current-day Orissa but which were then part of *subah* Bengal), not only for procuring raw materials like silk, but also for reporting back on the risks and opportunities for setting up a VOC base in this province.²⁴ Considering that Hooghly (Bandel) had till then been a Portuguese port, it made sense that the Dutch first tried to access its neighbouring ports. But the conflict between the Mughals and the Portuguese escalated when the latter extended their support to the local *zamindars* who were resisting the Mughal suzerainty.²⁵ It finally culminated in the official ousting of the *Estado* from Hooghly around 1632. The Dutch were quick to seize this opportunity and the first VOC factory was established at Hooghly in 1634. Formal permission to establish a factory there was granted by Azam Shah as the then *subahdar* of Bengal on condition that the Company promised to pay custom duties like all other merchants for using the port. The Company also received a formal recognition from the Emperor Shah Jahan in 1635 through a royal *firman* acknowledging their rights to trade in Bengal. There were simultaneous attempts in these years to set up factories in other places such as Hariharpur, Patna, Dhaka and Kasimbazaar though not all of them were successful.²⁶

²⁴ For more on the Dutch early settlements in Bengal see, Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 34–52; Gommans, Bos, and Kruijtzter, *Grote Atlas*, 6:387–416.

²⁵ It is crucial to mention here that there were vague Portuguese visions of conquering Bengal from the Mughals, that were not endorsed by the *Estado* at Goa. See, footnote number 56 in Jorge Flores, “The Mogor as Venomous Hydra: Forging the Mughal-Portuguese Frontier,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 19, no. 6 (2015): 555.

²⁶ Om Prakash, “The Dutch East India Company in Bengal: Trade Privileges and Problems, 1633-1712,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 9, no. 3 (July 1972): 258–87.



Fig 7: Map of the river of Bengal, from its point of origin to the Dutch lodge in Hooghly, 17th century, Reproduced from NA, Kaarten Leupe, access number 4. VEL, inv. nr. 258.



Fig 8: Map of the Bay of Bengal with Pegu and Arakan, 17th century, reproduced from NA, Kaarten Leupe, access number 4. VEL, inv. nr. 257.

The Company first started out to set up its base in Bengal but the process was speeded up through the recommendations of Joan Verpoorten. Verpoorten as a commissioner was sent with a committee, by the *Hoge Regering*, to report on the situation of the VOC in Bengal and it was his suggestion that an independent directorate be established there. From 1655, this directorate began operating on its own, freed from the control of the Governor and his Council in the Coromandel. Hooghly started functioning as the chief factory with the director residing there along with his council. When the flood of 1656 washed away this factory at Hooghly, the only alternative left was to use the factory at Kasimbazaar that came to serve as the functional headquarters then. In that same year, however, the Company managed to secure a lease (possibly semi-*zamindari/ijaradari* rights and some more privileges) on the three villages of Chinsurah, Bazaar Mirzapur and Baranagore from the *subabdar*, Shah Shuja. This ignited fresh investments in replacing the damaged factory at Hooghly with a new one being constructed in its place. Only this time the foundation lay in a different area, in one of these newly acquired villages called Chinsurah (close to Hooghly, which henceforth in VOC archives continued to be referred to as Hooghly). By the end of the century, the VOC had, however, managed to come up with formalised plans for an armed fort to be built there that came to be eventually completed in the following century as Fort Gustavus (Fig 9).²⁷ The Dutch East India Company was not the only one with fortification plans in Bengal around this time. With this region's importance growing in the Europe-Asia trading circuit from the late seventeenth century, fortification talks were also rife among the English, Danish and French East India Company there.²⁸ It is in the context of

²⁷ For the plan of the fort Gustavus in 1743 see, NL-HaNA, Kaarten Leupe, access nummer 4. VEL, inv. nr. 1104. It was destroyed by the British in 1827. Also see, G.C. Klerk de Reus, "De vermeerstering van Chinsura in 1781 en 1795," *Verhandelingen van het Bataviaasch Genootschap der Kunsten en Wetenschappen* 38, no. 1 (1875): 3.

²⁸ Plans for the building of Fort William by the EIC and Fort d'Orleans in Chandannagore by the French were sanctioned by the Mughal in Bengal along with the Dutch plans for building Fort Gustavus around the 1690s. The Danes were more active around Serampore or Fredericksnagore in the eighteenth century where a Danish fort also came to be built. The Dutch, French and Danish forts were later destroyed by the British in colonial Bengal. It might be important to remind the reader here that military fortifications of the EIC made in Bengal in 1696 and the plan to erect Fort William was actually done in the name of Willem III, the King of England and the *stadhouder* of the Dutch Republic.

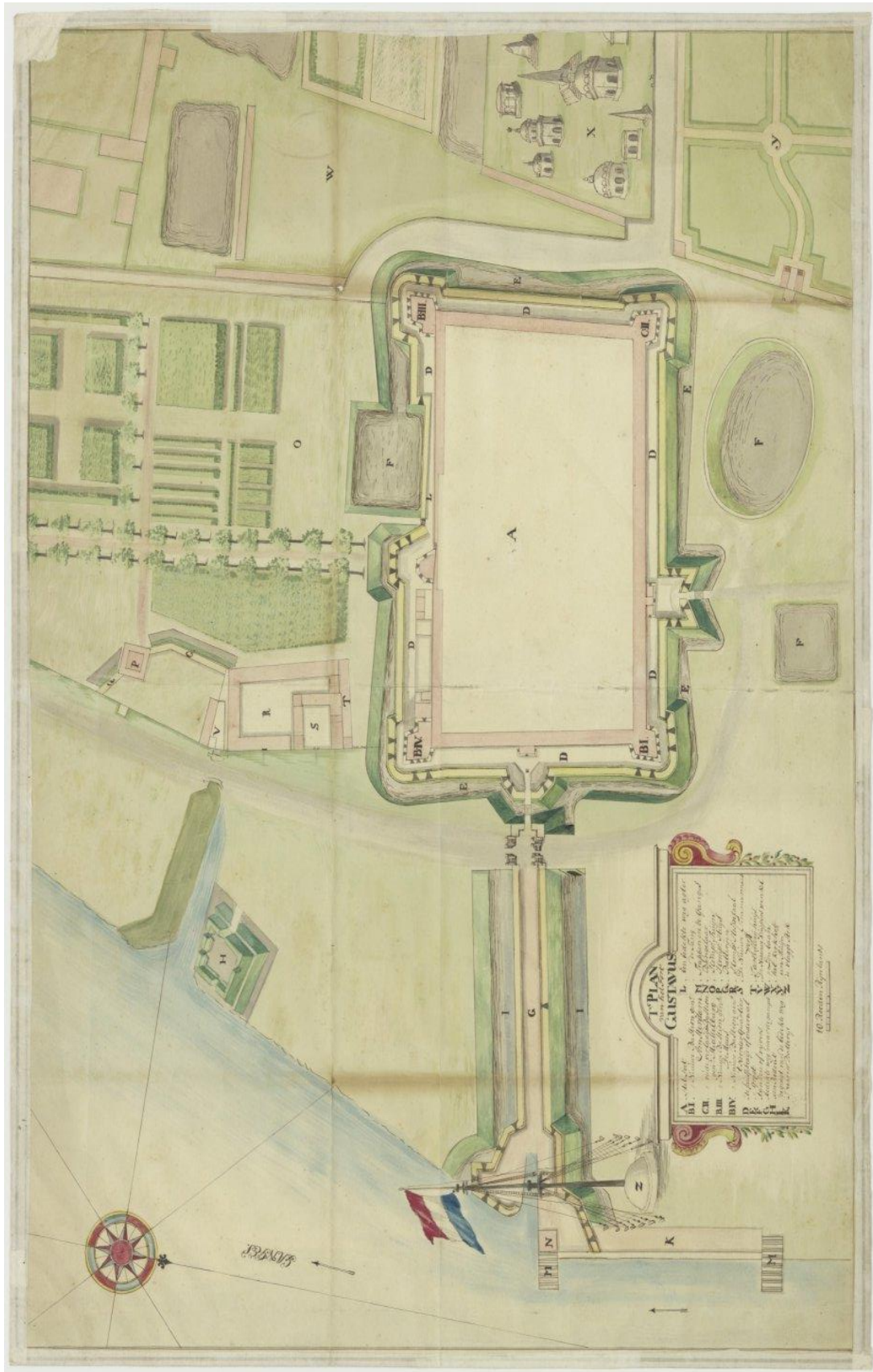


Fig 9: Plan of Fort Gustavus to be built in Chinsurah in 1743, reproduced from NA, Kaarten Leupe, access number 4. VEL, inv. nr. 1103.

this dynamic setting where not just the position of the VOC was changing but also the political and economic situation of Mughal Bengal, that our analysis of this seventeenth-century administrative encounter is done.

The Formal Face-Off

On paper, the Mughal administrators from the very beginning dealt carefully with the Dutch, owing to their previous experience with the Portuguese who built their ‘shadow’ empire in Bengal.²⁹ All fortification moves and building projects as such, were initially forbidden by the Mughal governors for the VOC in Bengal. The *firman* issued in 1636 by the Mughal *subahdar* in Dhaka, Islam Khan contained the following injunctions – (i) the Company should comply with the orders of the *karori* and the *faujdar*, and not try to subjugate and conquer the local population, (ii) the Company officials were required not to make requests for transforming their mud warehouse into a stone building or demand excessive freight charges from the Portuguese ships that arrived at the ports of Hooghly and Bally (close to Hooghly, in present-day Howrah district of West Bengal), (iii) they were not allowed to trade in saltpetre and slaves, which apparently comprised two of the most lucrative commodities for the European traders against the interest of the Mughal *mansabdars* in Bengal.³⁰ These regulations made it evident that the Mughal administrators were clear about not giving any political or commercial edge, at least on paper, to the Dutch East India Company officials. However, as political personages with vested commercial interests, the Mughal administrators also could not help but encourage the presence

²⁹ On the nature of Luso-Mughal relations in Bengal see, Flores, “The Mogor as Venomous Hydra,” 554–55, 557, 560–62.

³⁰ Dam, *Pieter van Dam's Beschryvinge*, Book II, Part II, 1–2. It is to be noted that the Mughal authorities in Bengal repeatedly forbade the capture of their subjects as slaves by the Portuguese and later the Dutch and the English East India Companies. But a large part of this populace was also used by the local traders for supplying eunuchs to the Mughal court and the royal *harem*. A Mughal prohibition was however placed against this trade. For this see, Richard M. Eaton, “Introduction,” in *Slavery and South Asian History*, eds. Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (Bloomington etc: Indiana University Press, 2006), 11; Gavin Hambly, “A Note on the Trade in Eunuchs in Mughal Bengal,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94, no. 1 (Jan.-Mar. 1974): 128-29. Added to this was the fact that several Mughal *mansabdars* themselves traded in saltpetre from Bengal as Bengal was the principal supplier of this commodity in the Asian trade. See, Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 33.

of the VOC in Bengal's mercantile space. This would have enhanced their chances of maximum appropriation of custom duties, subsidiary profits and the influx of silver bullion.³¹ They, thus, allowed the Company officials to operate on promise of paying customs duties and honouring the rules enumerated in the *firman*s. The commercial sustenance of the VOC in Bengal was, thus, dependent on these formal orders of the Mughal administrators and the emperor.

There was, however, one element that remained undefined in the fluid tangle of the Mughal administration in Bengal. This was the arrangement about the three villages the resources of which the VOC could utilise, in return for a timely payment of customs to the Mughal administration. The Company's documents described this reception of the villages as having them 'in lease' (*in paght genomen*), which is the same way in which the Dutch sources also referred to the Mughal administrators as *jagirdars* acquiring their *jagirs* (*oversulkes sijn dese landen in veel provintien verdeelt, door gouverneurs en superintendenten der selver financien geregeert, en om die te bestieren als in paght gegeven*).³² Probably, this convinced Lequin to conclude that the VOC in Bengal had *jagirdari* rights over the three villages of Chinsurah, Bazaar Mirjapur and Baranagore in the seventeenth century.³³ While it is true that this process of leasing out territories made room for the VOC in Bengal within the Mughal administrative machinery, it still cannot be asserted with certainty that a lease always implied *jagirdari* rights in the Mughal political world. Habib in his analysis of the revenue system of Mughal India mentioned that *zamindaris* could also be transferred on 'lease' (*ijara*) without gaining *milkiyat* (ownership) over them.³⁴ This meant that the VOC could have also had semi-*zamindari/ijaradari* rights there, that is jurisdiction without ownership. When compared to the EIC that was able to buy the *zamindari* of the three villages of

³¹ Om Prakash, "Bullion for Goods: International Trade and the Economy of Early Eighteenth Century Bengal," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 13, no. 2 (April 1976): 159–86.

³² '...den koningh Orangtsjab of Orangsab, aan dien vorst sijn dese landen nijtgegeven, om daar een uijt derselver inkomsten te fronturen te versterken, de lasten der militie te betalen, sijn eigen hof te onderhouden, midsgaders bovendien tot de schatkeist van't rijk, nogh enige somma op te brengen oversulke sijn dese landen in veel provintien verdeelt, door gouverneurs en superintendenten der selver financien geregeert, en om die te bestieren als in paght gegeven...?'

NA, VOC, inv. nr. 1421, Missive from Van Reede to the *Heeren XVII*, 9 December, 1686: f. 73v- 74r.

³³ Lequin, *Het personeel*, 117.

³⁴ Habib, *The Agrarian System*, 196.

Dihi-Kulkatta later, such possibilities make all the more sense. In the memoir left by Louis Taillefert, the director of the VOC in Chinsurah (1755, 1760-63) to his succeeding director, A. Bisdom written in 1755, he mentioned the following –

The *zamindari* or the inheritance right over Baranagore belonged previously to the Company's translator, Rammissser, who seeing no chances of being able to protect himself and the inhabitants of his village against the violence of the Moors, had given it away to the Company in 1681 under the ratification of the Moorish government, along with the condition of paying the rent for the ground to the Moors. But, whether we acquired Tjoentjoera (Chuchura) and Mirzapur also from him is not known to me. All I know is that the Nawab Shaista Khan recognized the Company's legal rights over these two villages and the *bazaar* and had issued a *perwanna* in that regard, for which Chinsura was to pay *f*1652, 1, 12; Baranagore was to pay *f*903, 8 and bazaar Mirzapur paid *f*440, 4 annually to the Moors.³⁵

While it is possible that these three villages or at least the village of Baranagore had been former *zamindaris* that were transferred to the Company, two vital points in the existing historiography on the VOC in Bengal can be established. Firstly, from the Mughal viewpoint, the VOC did come to enjoy a certain administrative status in Bengal that was more than the usual designation of simple foreign merchants. Secondly, it meant that the Mughal officials in Bengal informally recognised the right of the VOC to collect revenue from the villages under their control and exert their civil jurisdiction over its people, as long as the Company paid their customs duty to the Mughal *subahdar*. In fact, it conferred three very important rights to the VOC that were part

³⁵ 'De Djemiedary of het erfscoutschap van Baranegger heeft eerst toegehoort aan 's Comps tolk Rammissser, die geen kans zijnde zig zelfs en dies inwoonders voor de vexation en geweldenaarijen der Mooren te decken, Ao. 1681 hetselve met uijtdruckelijke ratificatie van de Moorese regeering aan de Comp. heeft afgestaan, mits de grondpact ook aan de Mooren te betalen, maar of wij Tjoentjoera en Mirzapoeer ook van hem of van een ander bekomen hebben is mij niet gebleeken. Alleen weet ik dat de Nawab Cha-Estachan de Comp voor de wettige besitter van die twee dorpen en bazaar erkent en daaraan eene perwanna g'expedieert heeft, werdende voor Tjoentjoera *f*. 1652, 1, 12; voor Bernagoer *f* 903, 8, en voor de bazaar Mirzapoeer *f* 440, 4 jaarlijks aan de Mooren betaald, ook heb ik nergens kunnen vinden, hoe en wanneer de Comp.' See, Reus, "De vermeerstering van Chinsura," 3–4. The word 'grondpact/ grondpacht' occurred later in the eighteenth-century Dutch sources as 'grondrente' or *Raiyati Khasanah*. See, Reus, 59. For another article on the VOC in Bengal that extensively uses Taillefert's memoir for Bisdom see, A.K.A. Gijsberti Hodenpijl, "De handhaving der neutraliteit van de Nederlandsche loge te Houghly, bij de overrompeling van de Engelsche kolonie Calcutta, in Juni 1756," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 76, no. 3/4 (1920): 258–83.

of the general *zamindari* rights in Bengal – the right to provide protection, jurisdiction (not criminal though) and the right to extract revenue from these three villages. Unlike actual *zamindars*, the VOC of course exercised these rights without gaining any concrete ownership over these villages.

This semi-*zamindar* or *ijaradari* equation takes on a whole new dimension when one thinks about how it could have been translated for the *Heeren XVII* to comprehend in the Republic. The existing historiography on the interactions between the Mughal state and the VOC have shown the different angles of diplomatic relations that were carried out between the two worlds.³⁶ The VOC had to approach the Mughal state for securing trading privileges with caution as the knowledge that the Dutch East India Company had gathered from former accounts of the Portuguese showed them how the *Estado* struggled to keep its servants under control in this region. The last thing that the Company in the Republic wanted to happen was for their officials to cut loose from their obligations to the *Heeren XVII* and infiltrate the local political world. The *Heeren XVII*, therefore, insisted that the Company officials should deal diplomatically with the Mughal authorities to earn profit for the VOC but also follow the rules that restricted such interactions to important limits. This approach became especially relevant after the 1650s, when naval expenditure abroad began to be reduced and the VOC in Bengal were compelled to adopt a more compliant attitude towards the Mughals for their trading privileges.³⁷ In order to prevent this compulsion of the Company officials from turning into a formal assent of the *Heeren XVII* to permeate the Mughal administrative world, regular *plakkaaten* (ordinances) containing codes of exemplary conduct were issued for the officials from time to time. These placards forbade the Company officials to accept gifts or have any private

³⁶ See relevant footnote on p. 10 of this chapter.

³⁷ The Company was not always constant in terms of its decision-making process throughout the seventeenth century. Military expeditions were sometimes encouraged and at other times not. By the time, Bengal became important towards the end of the seventeenth century, the *Heeren XVII* came to be controlled by directors who were interested in reviving the Company financially with minimal expenditure. See, Gastra, *Bewind en beleid*, 42; Winus and Vink, *The Merchant-Warrior*, 4.

dealings with the locals beyond the *Heeren XVII's* knowledge.³⁸ They prohibited the copying of local elite clothing styles and the appropriation of status-symbols like the holding of parasols by slaves as a sun-guard in imitation of the local kings and emperors (excepting the officials in the *Raad van Indië*) and the transportation of personal servants from the Indies to the Republic.³⁹ Though most of these rules specifically came to be drafted in the context of Batavia and its surrounding islands, they were also meant to be implemented everywhere in Asia where the VOC operated amidst kings and emperors.⁴⁰ This is evident from the fact that these articles were used at the court of the *Raad van Justitie* whenever officials working in Bengal came up for trial, as will be seen in Chapter 6 and here in the subsequent section. At least on paper, thus, there was an administrative culture that the VOC created and wanted to preserve as being distinctly different from that of the Mughals in India. All interactions were consequently to be limited to a diplomatic nature, but the two administrative worlds were to remain separated from each other.

The *Hoge Regering* in Batavia, accordingly, projected itself as the delegated wing of the Dutch state in Asia to communicate with the Mughal world. The Mughal administrators responded the same way in return – that is, addressing the *Hoge Regering* as more than just a commercial concern. This is evident from the way the Mughals used their formal epistolary style (*insba*) while writing letters to the Company's higher officials and adopting their gift-giving rituals. On a certain occasion for instance, the Mughal *subahdar*, Shaista Khan at Dhaka asked the Company for help with naval forces in trying to conquer Chittagong from the ruler of Arakan. He wrote to the Governor-General Joan Maetsuyker equating him to the political superior of the VOC officials in Hooghly. The formal letter was adorned with all epistolary greetings according

³⁸ Chijs, *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakkaatboek*, 1:160, 328, 480; J.A. van der Chijs, ed., *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakkaatboek, 1602-1811, tweede deel 1642-1677*, vol. 2 (Batavia: 's Hage, 1886), 201.

³⁹ Chijs, *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakkaatboek*, 2:88, 111, 250, 406, 473, 512, 306; J.A. van der Chijs, ed., *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakkaatboek, 1602-1811, derde deel 1678-1709*, vol. 3 (Batavia, 's Hage: Landsdrukkerij, Martinus Nijhoff, 1886), 47–48.

⁴⁰ The rule on reducing pompous lifestyle was part of the 36 regulations of the *Heeren XVII* passed in 1676, to which the Governor-Generals Speelman and Camphuys also added another 20 points. See, Gastra, *Benind en beleid*, 129-30.

to the Mughal etiquette for addressing other nobles, which read as follows – ‘The noblest and the most powerful among his esteemed peers and dignitaries, the champion and protector of the merchants of this age, a lion in the show of courage, a crocodile in the sea of manhood, Joan Maetsuyker, General of the Hollanders.’⁴¹ This was accompanied by gifts of tribute not only for the VOC in general but also personally for Maetsuyker that comprised two red *saloes* with golden heads, a white piece of cloth with golden stripes, a cloth with embroidered borders, a *lancol* with painted borders, a stitched *dekontie* along with a special Bengali variety of *cassa*.⁴² Such language and ways of writing were not meant for addressing ordinary merchants but were reserved for conversing with men of administrative status. On a formal level thus, this fitted neatly into the description of a restrained, diplomatic encounter. But it also meant that the VOC officials in Bengal tried to share this special status, especially in connection with their *semi-zamindari/ijaradri* rights in the Mughal administrative world. The peculiarity of their administrative arrangement in the context of Bengal’s fluid geo-political setting failed to be translated and conveyed clearly in the Company’s official papers. Consequently, it turned out to be the most important hinge in the door that opened up to the world of the Mughal-VOC informal interactions, beyond the direct comprehension and control of the Mughal emperor and the *Heeren XVII* and Batavia.

The Informal Dynamics

The process of accommodating the VOC in the Mughal administration of Bengal initiated deeper informal interactions which did not always follow the same trajectory as the prescribed goals of the *Heeren XVII* and Batavia. Sometimes these interactions managed to make their way into the formal reports in cases of serious conflicts breaking out between individual Mughal and

⁴¹ ‘Den edelsten ende groot mogesten onder de agtbare synes gelycken ende syner grooten, het puycq ende de beschermer van de cooplyden deser eeuw, een leeuw in de wercken der dapperbeyt, een crocodil in de zee der manhaftigheyt, Joan Maetsuyker, Generael der Hollanderen.’ J.A. van der Chijs, *Dagh-Register gehouden int casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Nederlandts-India, anno 1666-67* (Batavia, ’s Gravenhage: Landsdrukkerij, Martinus Nijhoff, 1895), 40.

⁴² *Saloes* refer either to boats or to the Salempuri variety of textile. *Lancol*, *dekonties* and *cassa* are all different varieties of textiles. See, Marc Kooijmans and Judith Schooneveld-Oosterling, *VOC-Glossarium: Verklaringen van termen, verzameld uit de Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicatiën die betrekking hebben op de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (Den Haag: Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 2000), 100, 67, 37, 27.

VOC administrators. But for the rest, such informal interactions continued unperturbed and kept adjusting to the changing circumstances of seventeenth-century Bengal. The incentive of the Mughal administrators to let these informal interactions proliferate was to retain their control over the commercial arena of Bengal. *Subah* Bengal was filled with mighty Mughal merchant-officials whose private trading interests were connected to the Company's trade. Trade in general around this time was conducted in the Indian subcontinent not only through the coastal ports but also through long-distance inland routes by caravans of merchants (*qafilas*), mostly *banjaras* who moved with their herds of bullocks.⁴³ But this form of inland trade was not the most profitable option as it was dependent on the availability of pasture along the way for the bullocks and therefore remained seasonal. Consequently, the riverine and overseas trading ventures remained the most attractive options for the merchants in seventeenth-century India. The Mughal merchant-officials too tapped into this coastal trading network for their private commercial venture.

While it is evident from the previous chapter that trading activities in Bengal remained very intense under the Mughals, the question remains as to what extent they formed a part of the Mughal revenue system. Habib points out that despite the Emperors Akbar, Jahangir and Aurangzeb repeatedly issuing orders prohibiting the imposition of dues like *baj*, *tamgha* and *zakat* on trade, there was evidence that such orders were not enforced and taxes on trade continued to be imposed and collected by the Mughal *jagirdars* and other officials.⁴⁴ For instance, the transit duties at large ports had a fixed rate (that Aurangzeb changed under his rule) but there were other cesses and tolls called *rahdari* that were levied as protection costs for using certain routes, ports and water channels. The Mughal emperor in theory provided protection for all trade in his empire but this task was to be executed by the officials in different areas and provinces with

⁴³ Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 69; Irfan Habib and James D. Tracy, "Merchant Communities in Precolonial India," in *The Rise of Merchant Empires: Long Distance Trade in the Early Modern World, 1350-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 371–99.

⁴⁴ Habib, *The Agrarian System*, 73–74.

specifically assigned jurisdictions. Such a mechanism provided an informal leverage to the Mughal administrators who were also merchants themselves to use this opportunity to advance their own trading interests. Thus, vital ports in provinces like Bengal could be controlled by clusters of Mughal officials who could then exert considerable autonomy in the name of executing their duty of protecting the sea-borne trade and the traders. For the European Companies who paid customs to these Mughal administrators, it was seen as the payment due to the Mughal authorities for securing their own protection as traders at the ports of Bengal. The duty was charged on the basis of *talikas* supplied by the Company which were statements containing details of the physical quantities and the value of the goods imported and exported.⁴⁵ In case of the VOC officials in Bengal, their obvious status as merchants combined with an informal administrative presence meant that the annual customs and trading dues doubled up as payment for protection of the Company's trade and acceptance of the symbolic authority of their Mughal overlords.

These informal trading enterprises of the Mughal officials culminated in their monopolising tendencies in Bengal which were often not under the direct control of the Mughal emperor.⁴⁶ There were plenty of such examples like that of Prince Azim-ush-Shan as the *subahdar* of Bengal and Bihar who declared the entire import trade of these regions to be under his control, styling it as *sauda-i-Khas-o-aam* (the private and public trade).⁴⁷ Mir Jumla, the *subahdar* of Bengal (1660-63) was known to have been involved in a contract of monopoly over indigo purchase in the whole of the kingdom on condition of payment to the Emperor Shah Jahan at the end of three years. Even though the contract was signed in the name of a certain Munnodas Dunda (Munnoardas/ Manohar Das Danda), the real mover and shaker behind this project was

⁴⁵ Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 46.

⁴⁶ Prakash, 29–33. On an early work on the Mughal state's involvement in trade see, Jagadish Narayan Sarkar, *Studies in Economic Life in Mughal India* (Delhi etc.: Oriental Publishers and Distributors, 1975), 177–85. On a recent debate on the intermingling of politics and trade see, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Of Imârat and Tijârat," 750–80.

⁴⁷ Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History*, 234.

reportedly Mir Jumla.⁴⁸ The names of the *diwan* of Orissa, Malik Beg; the *faujdar* of Hooghly, Ahmed Beg and the *faujdar* of Rajmahal, Nawazish Khan were also found to be featuring in the lists compiled by the VOC for tracing the owners of the vessels that engaged in trade with Kedah (in present-day Malaysia), Tenasserim (around present-day Burma), Aceh (Banda Aceh in present-day Indonesia), Malacca (officially known as Melaka, situated now in Malaysia) and such other places from Bengal.⁴⁹ Om Prakash points out that individual Mughal officials made frequent attempts to control the trade of certain commodities in certain areas. For example, the saltpetre trade in Bengal was attempted to be controlled by the *subahdar* of Bengal in 1636, by the *subahdar* of Bihar in 1653, by the imperial *diwan* at Patna in 1660, by the provincial *diwan* at Patna in 1675 and by the *subahdar* of Bengal again in 1699.⁵⁰

These huge financial stakes also became the cause of vulnerability for the Mughal merchant-administrators who were themselves responsible for securing their profits in the given circumstances. External naval assistance and financial capital were sometimes required by these nobles to keep their private ventures rolling. On the other hand, as custodians of law and protection at these ports, they also had authority over the VOC officials. This relation of symbiotic understanding often led to personal coalitions at individual levels between the Company and the Mughal officials. There have been sufficient examples of such coalitions under the *subahdars*, Mir Jumla and Shaista Khan with individual VOC officials.⁵¹ These alliances were most of the time made informally, but the lid blew off now and then when a conflict broke out

⁴⁸ Sarkar, *Studies in Economic Life in Mughal India*, 179.

⁴⁹ Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 229–30.

⁵⁰ Prakash, 33. What however Om Prakash does not mention is that saltpetre as a highly profitable commodity was also a target for the VOC servants which explains their attempts to gain greater control and concessions in saltpetre trade in Bengal that led to the consequent conflicts with the Mughal nobles having their financial stakes in it.

⁵¹ There are instances of naval assistance provided by the VOC to the Mughal authorities in Bengal. See, Chijs, *Dagh-Register, anno 1659-61*, 77, 391; J.A. van der Chijs, *Dagh-Register gehouden int casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Nederlandts-India, anno 1663* (Batavia, 's Gravenhage: Landsdrukkerij, Martinus Nijhoff, 1891), 665; Chijs, *Dagh-Register gehouden, anno 1665*, 75, 155; Chijs, *Dagh-Register, anno 1666-67*, 38; F. de Haan, *Dagh-Register gehouden int casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Nederlandts-India, anno 1679* (Batavia, 's Gravenhage: Landsdrukkerij, Martinus Nijhoff, 1909), 569.

or something went wrong. For example, Malik Kasim, the *faujdar* of Hooghly, had his ship returning from trade when it met with an accident in the Gulf of Mannar. Loaded with cargo, the ship broke down and a number of Dutch sailors who were on board then reportedly plundered the cargo and left the ship to sink there. Malik Kasim was quick to demand a financial compensation from the VOC, that turned into a long negotiation with the Company officials in Bengal before he threatened to make it formal by taking strict action. Malik Kasim while asking for the money that the Company officials owed him in Bengal, wrote –

...and since after the arrival of the *nachodas* and from the declarations of other men in my ship, it appears that the Hollanders in Mannar did all of this (that is, plundered the cargo of my ship and had sold them all out)...I have had earlier brought this matter to the attention of (Willem) Volger, the then director of the lodge in Hooghly, to which he had answered that the magnitude of the case required it to be forwarded to the governor-general...When he, the aforementioned director passed away and the director, (Jacob) Verburg succeeded him, he promised to have the affair about the ship resolved and advise the governor-general and have all my money to the last penny returned to me...after he died, captain (Herman) Fentzel... assured me that he would write to the governor-general...Assuming that your highness have by now received the letter with all the details and the testimonies, I would like to remind you about the good bond of friendship and devotion between Your honourable (Company) and my late father, Murtabad Khan. It was during his (Murtabad Khan's) rule as the *subahdar* of Orissa, that the Company was allowed to erect its lodge in Balasore and Pipli...at the time of Prince Shah Shuja's rule, when the full disposition of the *subahdari* of Orissa and the *faujdari* of Balasore and Pipli, lay with me, I too have had extended all the possible help and hospitality for the directors and captains of Hooghly and Balasore. I have written a recommendation for them to acquire a *firman* from the *subahdar*, Shah Shuja...It is because of this good relation that had been cultivated by my father and me throughout these years, that I have been patient until now...I hope that your honour would do justice and no longer make delays in taking the right action.⁵²

⁵² *...en vermits naer de komste van den nachoda en uyt de verklaringh van de lieden die op het schip geweest zyn gebleken is, dat de Hollanders op Manaer dit zoodanigh geklaart hebben, zoo is daarvan een attestatie onder het zegel ende getuygenisse van ettelycke personen in forma beleid, makende daarop de gantse toedraegentheyt en gelegentheyt van dese zaek aan Volger, den directeur van de logie tot Ougly, bekend, die daerop tot antwoord gaff dat dese gantse zaek aan de Heer Generael overschryven en*

These were such moments when informal deals threatened to spill over into the formal domain due to conflict between the two groups. Such incidents also revealed the weaknesses or dependency of the Mughal merchant-officials which created a porous space for the Company officials to penetrate deeper into Bengal's administrative scenario. The VOC officials were aware of the vulnerabilities of the Mughal governors who were trying to juggle their offices and businesses simultaneously as is apparent from the Company's director, Mattheus van den Broecke's description of the *subabdar* of Bengal, Mir Jumla. Van den Broecke wrote – 'The *nawab* manages to control his wars on the one hand, while simultaneously not forgetting to keep up with his commerce on the other.'⁵³ The letter of Malik Kasim, on the other hand, was written to the Company's director in a highly formal tone (that was eventually translated and forwarded to the *Hoge Regering*), as was done while addressing not just ordinary foreign merchants but men holding respectable positions. This entire tussle between the formal and informal, between vulnerability and assertion of power, showed the precarious balance struck in the dual domains of this administrative encounter.

het daertoe brengen soude dat al het geroofde weder aan ons toekomen soude, ... Wanneer hy voorsz. directeur nu overleden en den directeur Verburgh in zyn plaats trad, zoo heeft Verburgh insgebyx beloofd dat de gantsche geschapentheynt omtrent dit schip sonder yts het minste af te doen aan den Heer Generael soude adviseren en maken dat alle de goederen tot den laesten minsten penning aan my gewierden, en alsoo dees oock door de beschickinge Godes overleden zy, zoo is den capteyn Fenzel, die nu de directie waerneemt, de geheele gestalte van die saek met alle haer omstandigheden uyt de voorsz. attestatie vertoont, die mede aengenomen heeft dat de geheele constitutie daarvan in het largo en particulier aan de Heer Generael by een missive bekend soude maken en het daertoe brengen dat alle de goederen die doen gerooft zyn weder aan my gerestitueert wierden, sullende dan zyn Ed. uyt het schryven van hem voornoemt en uyt de voorsz. attestatie een volcomen bericht van alles krygen; een aangesien tusschen zyn Ed. en myn vader zaliger een volmaekte vruntschap en verknogtingh geweest en ten tyde van de regeringh van Mootabad Chaan, Zoebadaer van Oedesag off Brixia, de logien van zyn Ed. door het toedoen van myn vader en de zeecoopplaats van Bellesoor en Pipely staende en in esse gebleven zyn, als oock dat den tyde der regeeringh van den Prince Sias Doiedzja, wanneer de volle dispositie er vermogen over het soebaschap van Oedesah en den fausidarye van de zeecoopplaats Bellesoor en Piply aan myn patroon specteerde, en ick oock van den beginne myner gouverno aff aen de directeuren en capitains van de zeecoopplaats Oegely en van de zeecoopplaats Bellesoor alle hulpe en accommodatie toegebracht en myn patroon altyt de bevelschrijften van Siaach en Sjoedsiaa en de schriftelycke ordonnantie van de Soebedaren in der tyt tot vorderingh van den dienst der E. Compagnie geprocureert, ... soo heb ick ten reguarde van de vyfftyghjarige kennis en vruntschap, zoo door myn vader als my met U Ed. gecultiveert, eenige jaeren langh tot nu geduld genomen, ... Aldus dan zoo neme Zyn Ed reguard op God en zyn eyge religie, in zoodaniger voegen dat op het schryven van den tegenwoordigen directeur het voorsz. volgens de constitutie van dese zaeck ordonnere en geen langer dilay en make, alsoo ick niet wel langer gedult soude kunnen hebben; en meer en hoeff ick niet te schryven. ...?'

See, F. de Haan, *Dagh-Register gehouden int casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Nederlandts-India, anno 1681* (Batavia, 's Gravenhage: Landsdrukkerij, Martinus Nijhoff, 1919), 125–27.

⁵³ Chijs, *Dagh-Register, anno 1659-61*, 392.

The VOC, in itself, was not a static body as is known from its factional segregations in the administration. The case of the Mughal administrators in India was similar. Striking informal deals with each other opened up for the Mughal officials the world of factionalism among the Company administrators and vice-versa. Factionalism proved to be one of the robust factors that helped the VOC officials to bargain for more than they were allowed to have in the shadow of this undefined informal juncture. For instance, Jacob Verburg, during his days as the *gezaghebber* of Kasimbazar seemed to have had a special understanding with the *divan* of Bengal, Raynandalal, whom he used against his factional opponent, Constantijn Ranst. Ranst, as the director of Bengal in 1672, came to be involved in a case pertaining to the death of the Company weaver, Bholeram Chaudhuri's (Boleram Sjauduri) widow.⁵⁴ The *faujdar* of Bengal, Malik Qasim had lent money to Bholeram which Bholeram failed to return before his death. Malik Qasim then asked Ranst, as Bholeram's employer, for the money but the latter refused to pay. When Malik Kasim pressed with his soldiers, Ranst brought Bholeram's widow to the Company's lodge for interrogating about the money. The next day, the widow was found dead and this blew everything out of proportion. Malik Qasim blamed Ranst for the death and passed on the matter to Shaista Khan, as the then *subahdar* of Bengal. Shaista Khan put a stop to the Company's trading privileges there and forbade the locals to provide supplies, until the due amount was paid back. This inevitably meant that the VOC director and the council in Bengal had to write to the *Hoge Regering*, and the *Heeren XVII* also got pulled into the affair.⁵⁵ In his explanation to the *Heeren XVII*, Ranst defended himself by saying that the widow had committed suicide by poisoning and he was not to be blamed for this death. While Ranst, defended himself saying that the widow had committed suicide, Verburg put the blame on Ranst. Verburg framed his case against Ranst for

⁵⁴ Gaastra, "Constantijn Ranst," 126–36.

⁵⁵ NL-HaNA, Collectie Hudde, inv. nr. 36, A small note regarding the 1960 rupees the honourable Company has been charged with paying to the Moors in Bengal addressed to the *Heeren XVII* from Constantin Ranst, 12 May, 1682: folios not numbered; Advice given by the *Haags besogne* to the *Heeren XVII* on the case of the 1960 rupees that Ranst was charged to pay to the Mughal authorities in Bengal, 18 February, 1682: folios not numbered.

which he garnered the support of the *divan*, Raynandalal. The *divan* claimed that Verburg was more familiar with the local populace and therefore knew his duties far better than Ranst.⁵⁶

Such strategic support showed how the VOC officials in their position within Bengal's Mughal administrative hierarchy were already swift in building alliances with individual Mughal officials. It also gave them the proximity to learn how to decode Mughal etiquette, mannerisms and political intrigues better than the heavily adorned courtly rituals. It was, therefore, not always comfortable when changes or transfer of positions occurred. Nicolaas Schagen, who was the director of the VOC in Bengal between 1685 and 1688, remarked that it was not in the best interests of the Company to frequently change their officials posted in a certain place employed in its service, as it disrupted the balance of trust in these relations and hampered the Company's operations in Bengal.⁵⁷ Ranst left a memoir for Verburg as the succeeding director of the VOC in Bengal, wherein he complained of the provincial *divan*, Rai Balchand from whom the VOC officials were to maintain safe distance.⁵⁸ But Verburg as the Company's director in Bengal between 1678 and 1680, insisted on maintaining good relations with the very same *divan* for the benefit of the Company in Bengal. He reasoned in a letter to the *Hoge Regering* that his closeness to the *divan*, Rai Balchand was because of the latter's great power in Bengal which could have been useful for the Company in the long term.⁵⁹ Such examples confirmed the fact that informal relations were extremely important for the Company officials in Bengal who were trying to fulfil their individual aspirations there.

⁵⁶ Gaastra, "Constantijn Ranst," 130.

⁵⁷ NL-HaNA, HR, inv. nr. 241A, Consideration of the *Raad-extraordinaris* Nicolaas Schagen on the instructions of the commissioner, Hendrik Adriaan van Reede for the directors and council in Bengal, 1691: folios not numbered. Also see its copy available in NL-HaNA, Collectie Heeres, invf. nr. 13, Consideration of the *Raad-extraordinaris* Nicolaas Schagen on the instructions of the commissioner, Hendrik Adriaan van Reede for the directors in Bengal, 1691: folios not numbered.

⁵⁸ NL-HaNA, VOC, OBP, inv. nr. 1283, Memoir left by Constantijn Ranst for Jacob Verburg, *opperkoopman* and in his absence, for the *koopman* Harman Fentzel, *opperhoofd* and second in rank in the factory of Kasimbazaar, written from Kasimbazaar, 20 August, 1671: f. 1893r.

⁵⁹ F. de Haan, *Dagb-Register gehouden int casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Nederlandts-India, anno 1680* (Batavia, 's Gravenhage: Landsdrukkerij, Martinus Nijhoff, 1912), 724.

While factionalism was one of the ways to achieve this, there were other ways, as the following evidence shows, by which many officials tried to informally penetrate deeper into the administrative domain of the Mughals. One of the most dominant ways of manifesting this individual aspiration of the officials was by their attempts to imitate the behaviour of local administrative elites (of different ranks and religious backgrounds), like their clothing and pompous lifestyles. The director of Bengal residing in Hooghly was instructed to visit, twice every year, the factory at Kasimbazaar to investigate the state of affairs there.⁶⁰ This journey from Hooghly to Kasimbazaar was made by land and was a ceremonial and conspicuously grand procession. Pieter van Dam wrote – ‘Earlier, it was customary for the director to travel annually in person to Kasimbazaar, with a grand parade, incurring huge expenses owing to the numerous tents, the horses and several newly appointed and hired mercenaries that had to be sent forth in advance.’⁶¹ It clearly showed the appropriation of elite symbolic authority by the Company officials to mark their administrative status and power in Bengal. As they passed through the villages which lay on their way, the director seized the opportunity to impress upon the general inhabitants the significance of his social position and might in Bengal. Van Dam argued that the explicit intention of these VOC officials, was to be recognised by the Mughal authorities as men of high status for which they adopted visible traits of princely attitude and manners.⁶²

The painting of the Company’s factory at Chinsurah-Hooghly (Fig 10), by Hendrik Schuylenburg, in 1665 possibly depicted one such procession manifesting the pomp and show of the VOC director. Martine Gosselink concluded that this could have been Schuylenburg’s patron, Pieter Sterthemius’s journey back from Kasimbazaar to Hooghly during his tenure as the

⁶⁰ Chijs, *Dagh-Register gehouden, anno 1663*, 142.

⁶¹ ‘Het gebruyck in vorige tyden is geweest, dat de directeur jaarlijcx een opreyse in person nae boven en Cassimbasaer quam te doen, met een groote parade, omslagh en kosten, sendende tot dien eynde vooruyt tenten, paerden en veel nieuw aengenome en gebuurde soldaten, ...’.

Dam, *Pieter van Dam’s Beschryvinge*, Book II, Part II, 27.

⁶² Dam, Book II, Part II, 27.

director of Bengal.⁶³ In fact, all the directors till the late seventeenth century, conducted this ceremonial journey of travelling back and forth from Hooghly to Kasimbazaar. One can see in this painting, a palanquin carrying two Dutch officials and some other Europeans on horseback following them (Fig 11). A retinue of foot soldiers accompany these officials, with a man in front blowing the trumpet to herald the advance of this stately procession. The villagers are shown to witness this display of power and pomp, along with possibly the Mughal *subahdar* or a high-ranking noble, whose tent is pitched next to the Company's factory. Such scenes clearly revealed the outright appropriation of elite administrative behaviour by the Company officials to emphasise their status in Bengal. By the eighteenth century, such lifestyles were unapologetically appropriated and reflected in the residences of the Dutch *nabobs* like Jan Albert Sichterman.⁶⁴ Sichterman, the VOC director in Bengal in 1744 was even convinced that the Company officials required more knowledge about 'the nature of the moors' (*de aard van de moren*) and as proven by another official, C.L. Eilbracht's efforts in mastering the Persian language, linguistic training was by the mid-eighteenth century, a common practice.⁶⁵ With the political changes in Bengal that saw the establishment of the independent *nizamat* in 1717, these desires came to be unabashedly materialised and exposed in the English and Dutch *nabob* cultures. The problem appeared when the *Heeren XVII's* focus on corruption increased and these activities came under their scrutiny from the end of the seventeenth century. As will be seen later, these gradual developments in Bengal came to be portrayed as corruption and were followed by a

⁶³ Martine Gosselink, "Schilderijen van Bengaalse VOC-loges," *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 46 (1998): 400.

⁶⁴ J.A. Feith, *Bengaalse Sichterman* (Groningen: B.v.d. Kamp, 1914); Gommans, Bos, and Kruijtzter, *Grote Atlas*, 6: 29.

⁶⁵ Lequin, *Het personeel*, 199–200.



Fig 10: The Painting of the VOC lodge at Hooghly, Bengal by Hendrik van Schuylenburg, 1665, courtesy Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (online collection), object nr. SK-A-4282.



Fig 11: Detailed view of the above painting showing the procession of possibly the director of the Company returning to the factory in Hooghly. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

vigorous momentum of reforms, meant to boost the Company's corporate image in the Republic. Nevertheless, the VOC officials in seventeenth-century Bengal played along to the regional dynamics in the informal sphere for strengthening their position in the Mughal world, beyond the confines of the *Heeren XVII*.

As factional alliances and the appropriation of elite lifestyles provided the Company officials greater access to the Mughal administrative world, the problem of jurisdiction became another issue. This had to do with the plural jurisdiction over local brokers as well as the inhabitants of those villages that were leased out to the VOC in these years. In the midst of the

formal and informal presence of the Company in Bengal, it turned out to be a sore point between the Company and the Mughal officials. At the very outset, the VOC in Bengal had its own jurisdiction (both civil and criminal) over its own employees which meant that the court of the Mughal *qazi* were not to meddle in the Company's affairs. But, as discussed earlier, the Company was subjected to the fiscal jurisdiction of the *subahdars* and other administrators in Bengal who had the discretion to act in cases of non-payment of demanded dues. In this way, the Company in Bengal was subjected to a certain extent to the Mughal jurisdiction. However, endowed with semi-*zamindari/ ijaradari* rights in the Mughal system over the previously mentioned three villages, the VOC enjoyed a certain amount of jurisdiction over the inhabitants of these villages (excepting the power to exercise death penalties).⁶⁶ Some of these villagers, moreover, were regularly hired by the Company in Bengal as workers, servants and menial service providers. One can get a glimpse of the kind of services that were provided by these villagers to the Company from a list of persons that were working at the factory in Hooghly. They included functions such as that of the overseer, the *peons* (guards), coolies, porters, water-carriers, barbers, washer-men, gardeners, market-goers (for getting groceries), sweepers, cooks, smiths, carpenters, rowers and so on.⁶⁷ This list also confirmed the fact that these workers came mostly from the villages in the area surrounding the factory.⁶⁸ These villagers were not just subjected to the Mughal administration, but also to the VOC jurisdiction. They were also dependent on the Company as their immediate protector, and the Company in turn paid tribute to the Mughal authorities as a symbolic acceptance of the Mughal protection. Benton and Clulow argued that the idea of gaining legitimate authority in the political domain emanated from the ability to provide protection and the symbolic payment of tribute further sealed this process.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Hodenpijl, "De handhaving," 261.

⁶⁷ NL-HaNA, HR, inv. nr. 241, Instructions and regulations made by Van Reede, 1687: folios not numbered.

⁶⁸ NA, HR, inv. nr. 241, Instructions and regulations made by Van Reede: folios not numbered.

⁶⁹ Lauren Benton and Adam Clulow, "Legal Encounters and the Origins of Global Law," in *The Cambridge World History*, eds. Jerry H. Bentley, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and Merry Wiesner-Hanks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 80–100.

The VOC officials were doing exactly the same in Bengal which helped them acquire an administrative status and the chance to assert their presence in the Mughal world. For the villagers who were bound to the plural jurisdictions of both the Company and the Mughal administrators in Bengal, they could seek protection and thereby, participate in both these worlds as and when it suited them. On the other hand, it initiated a jostling of jurisdiction between the Company and the Mughal officials on both sides. Retaining control over these locals was important for the Mughal officials to establish their administrative status and credibility in this region with strong local loyalties. The Company officials too wanted to control the villagers in the villages under their jurisdiction to maintain their mercantile-administrative status. The villagers thus had to shuttle between both these jurisdictions and the VOC and Mughal authorities had to keep that in account and operate accordingly.

Besides these villagers, there was also another category of locals over whom there arose a similar problem of plural jurisdiction. These were the brokers who provided a multitude of services in Bengal and came from different backgrounds. They were divided into subcategories of agents (*dalals*) who conducted trade for the bigger merchants in return for commissions. Some of them were called the *nakhudas* and were commissioned by both powerful Indian merchants and officials of the European Companies to trade on their behalf. While the *nakhudas* could function as brokers for the larger merchant-magnates in exchange for commissions, they could also conduct their own trade at the same time. Then there were the *gomashbas* (factors) who acted as agents of the chartered European Companies to procure goods for them in return for commission.⁷⁰ Apart from this, there was also another type of broker who provided accounting and translation services. Mentioned in the VOC sources as Persian scribes, their function was comparable to that of Mughal *munshis*. They were proficient in reading, writing, speaking, translating and keeping accounts in Persian. However, we get very little information about them except occasionally their names and scribal designation. When Van Reede was in Bengal, he

⁷⁰ Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 33–34.

mentioned for instance, the name Achon who was the Company's Persian scribe.⁷¹ All these brokers entered the Company's service after signing temporary contracts and were even bound to formal oaths, like other Company personnel.⁷² They were the ones who sometimes worked as intermediaries for both the Mughal merchant-magnates and the Company officials. It was also common for a broker to have served as a Mughal noble first before going on to work for the VOC later, or even for the EIC after that.⁷³

The brokers were prized agents, thanks to their ability to deliver supplies for the commercial sustenance of both the VOC officials and the powerful Mughal merchant-administrators. They also acted as important sources of information in terms of revealing business tricks of former employers, secret trade networks and so on. This made them the target group of individual Company officials who desired to forge an alliance for enhancing their (the officials') own positions. Control over the brokers could aid the VOC officials with their appropriation of commercial resources which could keep up their semi-*zamindari* elite lifestyles in the administrative space of Bengal. But control over the brokers was equally desired by the Mughal merchant-administrators who also needed to secure their position and power in this *subah*. The brokers themselves, on the other hand, were left with the option to move between these two administrative worlds of the VOC and the Mughals. As long as the balance on all sides could be maintained, the system ran through a prolonged process of negotiations and tact. But it stirred up friction at times, ensuing from a contesting of authority, that could spill over from the informal to the formal administrative arena. One of the VOC reports, for instance, contained complaints about Mir Jumla trying to exploit the smaller brokers of Bengal for supplies.⁷⁴ On the other hand, Shaista Khan wrote to Van Reede complaining about the Company's men using his

⁷¹ NA, HR, inv. nr. 241, Instructions and regulations: folios not numbered.

⁷² For the oath of the brokers who have had entered into the service of the VOC see, Chijs, *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakkaatboek*, 1: 305-08.

⁷³ Charles Fawcett, *The English Factories in India: Eastern Coast and Bay of Bengal*, vol. IV (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 158.

⁷⁴ Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 32.

brokers in the villages with VOC factories for cheating on the customs that the officials were due to pay to the Mughal administrators.⁷⁵ Personal conflicts between the VOC and Mughal officials became intertwined with formal administrative demands that exposed their informal relations. Such incidents have been discussed earlier in the case of Ranst when Shaista Khan stopped the Company's trade in Bengal and in the case of Malik Kasim's strict warning to the Company after incurring losses with his cargo in Mannar that made the intervention of the *Heeren XVII* inevitable. The brokers involved in such instances, were in a state of plural jurisdiction and were compelled to choose sides and participate in the legal process of both the VOC and the Mughal officials. This aroused further confusion. The VOC and the Mughal jurisdictions at such times competed with each other, revealing the Company officials' ambiguous administrative presence in Bengal. It was during these times that the Company officials felt the need to justify their informal actions to the *Heeren XVII*.

To sum up the situation of this formal and informal administrative encounter once again, it needs to be emphasised that the rights of the VOC in Bengal were formally sanctioned by the Mughal *subabdars* through *firman*s. These rights could be likened to a semi-*zamindari/ ijaradari* in the terminology of the Mughal administrative world. The VOC in general was further treated and addressed as more than a group of mere merchants in Mughal India. Consequently, individual VOC officials acting as merchant-administrators in Bengal compared themselves to the local political potentates, and tried to informally strengthen their position there. They did this by building factional alliances with certain Mughal *mansabdars*, through conspicuous appropriation of elite lifestyles and a jurisdictional tussle with the Mughal authorities over brokers and villagers (from the villages that the Company held on lease) in Bengal. Only on occasions of such informal actions being spilled in the open, did the *Heeren XVII* become aware of the transgression of the Company's formal limits by its officials. Under such circumstances,

⁷⁵ NA, VOC, inv. nr. 1422, Translation of missive written in Persian by Nawab Shaista Khan to Van Reede on 6 June, 1686, 16 December, 1686: f. 1255rv.

the VOC officials felt the pressure to provide justifications, which in turn led to the production of certain narratives about Mughal Bengal that were sent to the *Heeren XVII*.

The Role of Corruption in Writing about Encounters

The non-transparent nature of their informal dealings with the Mughal administrators had to be concealed in the formal narratives of the Company officials to justify their actions in foreign territories. This need was even more important because of the extended patronage networks of the *Heeren XVII* in the Republic and in Batavia which determined the position of all officials within the formal VOC structure. At the same time, as seen in Chapter 3 and here, the Mughal administration in Bengal was based on fluid and informal mechanisms of control due to the strong, local forces in the region. In their bid to preserve their position between the home authorities in the Republic and the Mughal administration in the *subah*, the VOC officials in Bengal also participated in this informal regional political atmosphere. But to justify their activities that from time to time were exposed and were not entirely in accordance with the *Heeren XVII*'s prescribed rules, they composed a discourse on paper that targeted the powerful, experienced and well-networked Mughal *subahdars* and administrators in Bengal, and not so much the Mughal emperor. Before proceeding further with the examination of these discourses, we must note that the VOC documents written for and by the Company personnel were not meant to be circulated among the wider public. The first concise compilation by the VOC in Asia and the Cape by Van Dam, was believed to have been locked away in a chest which required three different directors to have their own keys each to open it.⁷⁶ However, the ideas expressed in these papers was not always limited to the Company's inner circle and they often spilled out, as Manjusha Kuruppath pointed out, unabashed and uncontrolled in all forms – to be read and heard by the wider audience in the Republic.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Schutte, "Introduction," 4.

⁷⁷ Manjusha Kuruppath, "Dutch Drama and the Company's Orient: A Study of Representation and Its Information Circuits, c. 1650-1780" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2014), 44.

The dominant idea consistently expressed in the Company's papers about the Mughal administrators was that they were greedy, unscrupulous and cunning figures with unjust ways of working. Van Dam made the following remarks in his report about the Mughal government in Bengal –

The Mohammedans, who, as it is said, rule and govern these lands, are by the nature of their sect hugely arrogant, mighty and greedy. The regents, have a very small piece of land, in comparison to their king, who happens to be a great and powerful monarch...and there emerge arrogant regents and slavish subjects, who are further false, malicious, also eloquent, and exhibit such moral virtues as are meant to sustain themselves and encourage their parties, rather than righteously implementing them in practice...This being the inherent nature of the regents, one should try as hard as possible to please them, due to the fact that they are capable of causing much damage and harm to us, if we provoke and disrespect them... The common populace (in Bengal) is poor and slavish, and repressed harshly by the Moorish government.⁷⁸

The Mughal *subabdars* in Bengal were equally regularly described as being immoral and ruthless to their people. Mir Jumla, one of the *subabdars* of Bengal, was described as someone who did not present himself to the Emperor Aurangzeb as his powerful vassal but as someone in the capacity of almost a 'sovereign prince'.⁷⁹ He was busy devising new means for draining all the money from this land, so that he could enrich himself and strengthen his own position vis-à-vis the emperor. The VOC commissioner sent to Bengal, Joan Verpoorten wrote – 'It is known that the Company in this land has found it difficult to trade from the beginning without vexation,

⁷⁸ 'De Mahometanen, dewelcke, volgens het gesejde, die landen beheeren en regieren, sijn na de wyse van die secte nytnemende groots, hooghmoedigh en wellustigh, hebbende de regenten een seer kleyn gebieth in vergelyckingsh van dat van haeren koninck, een groot en maghtigh monarch sijnde, ... en hieruyt komt dan voort hooghmoedige regenten en slaefachtige onderdanen, sijnde voort valsch, arghlistigh, oock welspreekende, vertoeneende een morale deught, meer om haar selven te doen bestaan en haere parthyen te verkleecken, dan dat sulcx in opreghtigheyt soude geschieden...Dit dan sijnde het inwendigh humeur der regenten, moet men haer tragten sooveel mogelijk te complacieren, nyt orrsaecke sy ons veel be leth en schade kunnen aendoen en toebrengen, soo ny haer tergen en veragten...Het gemene volck is arm en slaefs, door de Moorsche regeringh seer verdruckt wordende.'

Dam, *Pieter van Dam's Beschryvinge*, Book II, Part II, 17–18.

⁷⁹ Chijs, *Dagh-Register*, anno 1659-61, 391.

extortion and violence because of the natural violence and selfishness of the Moors'.⁸⁰ This report was Verpoorten's justification of the inappropriate behaviour of the Company officials, who, in their defence, had to work in a naturally dishonest setting dominated by the corrupt administration of the Mughals.

The most common complaint of the VOC officials was about the gifts demanded by the Mughal governors, which was noted down as evidence of their insatiable lust for money and desires. On one occasion, some elephants and horses presented to the *nawab* of Dhaka by the Company were reportedly rejected. The director of Bengal then described the *nawab* in the following manner – 'He, however, knows his credit in accumulating money by extracting it from both the great and the small, as the Mughal against everyone else, who hate him, in order to maintain himself and keep growing more everyday'.⁸¹ The *divan*, Ray Balchand was received at the Company's lodge in Hooghly and given a certain amount of money for obtaining a *parwana* (imperial order) after which he was described as a 'shrewd money-grabber, who sought to empty the area under his jurisdiction'.⁸² It has been shown in the previous chapter that gift-giving was part of the Mughal etiquette but extortion or bribery was forbidden in their administration. It was similar to the Dutch etiquette of receiving and sending foreign delegates and high officials with a symbolic exchange of gifts.⁸³ It is true that the Emperor Shah Jahan expressed his interest in possessing good elephants and the Emperor Jahangir had the royal artist make sketches for him of rare plants and animals.⁸⁴ But in the same way, it was also true that the *stadhouder*, Willem

⁸⁰ NA, VOC, inv. nr. 1212, Memorie for Pieter Sterthemius, *extraordinaris raad van Indië*, and director of the important commerce of Bengal and Orissa proposed by the commissioner Joan Verpoorten in Bengal, 21 Jan 1656: f. 211r.

⁸¹ 'Hij weet evenwel zyn credit door het opbrengen van de schatten die hy van groot en kleen apherst, by den Mogol tegen alle, die hem haten, noch al staende te houden en meer en meer te doen aengroeyen.' Chijs, ed., *Dagh-Register, anno 1659-61*, 240.

⁸² Haan, *Dagh-Register, anno 1680*, 725.

⁸³ Irma Theon, *Strategic Affection? Gift Exchange in Seventeenth-Century Holland* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).

⁸⁴ For Mughal gifts see, Wayne Edison Begley and Ziyaud-din A. Desai, eds., *The Shah Jahan Nama of 'Inayat Khan': An Abridged History of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, Compiled by His Royal Librarian* (Delhi: Oxford

III wished for an elephant to be shipped over to him from India, while many of the elite regents of Amsterdam like Nicolaes Witsen and Johan Huydecoper van Maarsseveen amused themselves with their exotic collections, received as gifts from their friends in the Company.⁸⁵ It surely must not have been too difficult for the VOC servants to have understood this very familiar and universal practice of political gift-giving.⁸⁶ But every time the Company was supposed to pay a tribute for seeking trading privileges from the Mughal government, it was recorded in the papers as personal gifts (*geschenke, present*) that had to be given in order to get work done by the greedy, money-loving (*geldgierig*) Mughal officials.⁸⁷ The grievance expressed by the Company officials surrounding the practice of gift-giving almost implied accusations of bribery against the Mughal *mansabdars*. Such repeated stereotyping created the picture of Bengal being ruled by tyrannical and corrupt governors.

These ideas also came to be reflected in the books that were published on Asia in the Dutch Republic. Olfert Dapper in his book *Asia of Naukeurige Beschryvingen van het rijk des grooten Mogols*, for instance, described Bengal as a land where –

The kings (of India, Cambay and Bengal) maintain all those of the Moorish or Mahomedan faith; as a result of which the *Moors*, that had been brought to India as

University Press, 1990), 33, 48, 80, 84–87, 211, 221, 282, 327, 469; Rogers and Beveridge, *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, 105, 143.

⁸⁵ For gifts for Willem III see, Heniger, *Hendrik Adriaan van Reede*, 44. The cargo list of one of the ships departing from Bengal in 1677 also mentioned carrying rounded horns of an ibex and a peacock for the Prince of Orange. J.A. van der Chijs, *Dagh-Register gebonden int casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Nederlandts-India, anno 1677* (Batavia, 's Gravenhage: Landsdrukkerij, Martinus Nijhoff, 1904), 394. For the collections of regents see, Peters, *De wijze koopman*; Kees Zandvliet and Leonard Blussé, *The Dutch Encounter with Asia, 1600-1950* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, 2002), 22; Marion Peters, “Nicolaes Witsen and Gijsbert Cuper: Two Seventeenth-Century Dutch Burgomasters and Their Gordian Knot,” *LIAS: Sources and Documents Relating to the Early History of Ideas* 16, no. 1 (1989): 113. Some of these commodities were even privately smuggled as Herbert de Jager tried to do when sending objects to Witsen. See, Peters, 111–50; Kooijmans, *Vriendschap*, 137.

⁸⁶ Kim Siebenhüner, “Approaching Diplomatic and Courtly Gift-Giving in Europe and Mughal India: Shared Practices and Cultural Diversity,” *The Medieval History Journal* 16, no. 2 (Oct. 2013): 525–46.

⁸⁷ NA, VOC, inv. nr. 1421, Missive from Van Reede to the *Heeren XVII*: f. 74r-77v.

slaves, have now been made masters of it, and the pagans in many places, are now kept under their whip and they have implemented their own doctrine everywhere.⁸⁸

Both Wouter Schouten and Nicolaus de Graaff worked for the VOC and wrote books on their observations that were published later in the Republic. They both talked about the local administrative elites and merchant-officials in Bengal whose corrupt lifestyles, they claimed, influenced the behaviour of the Company servants. De Graaff was employed in the service of the VOC as a physician (*chirurgijn*) and sailed from Batavia to Bengal around 1668. On reaching the shores of Bengal, he claimed to have seen numerous incidents of corruption that he later published in a book in order to hold a mirror, in his own words, to the *Heeren XVII's* face for reflecting the Company's state of affairs there. De Graaff complained that after reaching Hooghly, all the men in his ship went inland and mixed freely there with the local elites, having dinners at their houses or visiting courtesans at night while conducting illegal trade during the day, together.⁸⁹ Schouten, the other VOC physician had visited Hooghly earlier and expressed his concerns in his book about the Company servants drinking and rolling in the streets, which was an unlikely sight in the Republic. He reported them as being stripped of all honour, availing themselves of the services of prostitutes which was openly allowed by the Mughal authorities and the local elites of Bengal.⁹⁰ To add to these stories, extracts from travelogues like De Graaff's *Oost-Indise spiegel* were circulated as pamphlets among the citizens in the Republic which

⁸⁸ 'De Koningen van Indiën, Kambaye en Bengale onderhouden alle den Moorschen of Mahometaenschen Godsdienst: uit oorzaak de Moren, die voor-slaven in Indien gebragt wierden, zich al eens meester daer van gemaekt, d'afgodsdienaers op veele plaetsen onder zweep gehouden en overal hunne leere ingevoert hebben.'

Olfert Dapper, *Asia of Naukeurige Beschryvingen van het rijk des grooten Mogols en een groot gedeelte van Indiën: Behelsende de landschappen van Kandabar, Kabul, Multan, Ha'ikan, Bukkar, Send of Diu, Jesselmeer, Attak, Peniab, Kaximir, Jangapore, Dely, Mando, Mahva, Chitor, Utrad, Zuratte of Kambaye, Chandisch, Narvar, Gwaliar, Indosten, Sanbar, Bakar, Nagrakat, Dekan en Visiapour, beneffens een volkome beschryvinge van geheel Persie, Georgie, Mengrelie en andere gebuur-gewesten vertoont in de benamingen, grens-palen, steden, gewassen, dieren, zeden der inwoonders, drachten, bestiering en Godsdienst* (Amsterdam: Jakob van Meurs, 1672), 142.

⁸⁹ Graaff, *Oost-Indise spiegel*, 93.

⁹⁰ Schouten, *De Oost-Indische voyagie*, 372.

aggravated the existing notions about the VOC officials in Bengal, being corrupted by the foreign people and their ways of life.⁹¹

Although not related to Bengal, a particular instance concerning a dispute over the ownership of the VOC lodge in Ahmedabad deserves mention here. While describing the case, Hendrick Zwaardecroon (director of Surat from 1699-1703 who also worked as a *secretaris* in the Van Reede committee) openly reasoned in his memoir (written for his successor in 1702) that ‘we should use corruption’ if it ever looked as if the *qazî* was not going to decide in the Company’s favour.⁹² On paper, the officials reasoned that they needed to deal with these foreign men through bribery, treachery and other practices that were otherwise morally condemned in the Republic but were needed to survive in this land.⁹³ Yet there is another side to it as revealed by Van Reede’s comment about the *karori* of Hooghly, Abdul Ghani Beg (Abdul Gennibek). Van Reede described him as having such a high esteem of himself that he could not be persuaded or bought with any amount of gold to withdraw his complaints against the VOC officials.⁹⁴ Such remarks gave an insight into the fragility and farce of the VOC discourse about corruption, by revealing the inherent tendency to overlook the Company officials’ corruption as

⁹¹ Hullu, “Het Oost-Indische sacspiegelte,” 173.

⁹² Tracy, “Asian Despotism?,” 277.

⁹³ On the reference to Machiavellianism as a usual logic of resort to forbidden administrative rules for conquest overseas in foreign empires see, 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), 71. J.H. Maat too confirms that ‘in the past bribery among one’s own administrators and politicians was forbidden, but bribing foreign officials and political figures was allowed.’ See, J.H. Maat, “Buitenlandse corruptie en de aanpak door de rijksrecherche,” *Justitiële Verkenningen* 5 (2005): 65. For a comprehensive discussion on the ideas of Machiavelli being introduced to the Mughal court through the Jesuits and later by the Dutch, during the production of the ‘Mirror for Princes’ literature, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Lecture 2: Travelling Mirrors for Princes” (presentation, The Ehsan Yarshater Lectures Yale, Iran India, and Europe: Early Modern Connected Histories, Iran, April 26, 2017). (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mv4dMqEk65I&feature=youtu.be>). What is also relevant in this connection is Subrahmanyam’s discussion of Aurangzeb’s interest in the politics of Europe by the end of the seventeenth century. See, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “On the Hat-Wearers, Their Toilet Practices, and Other Curious Usages,” in *Europe Observed: Multiple Gazes in Early Modern Encounters*, eds. Kumkum Chatterjee and Clement Hawes (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2008), 67. In this connection, one can find an explicit emphasis on the use of deception (*bilat*) and stratagem in Aurangzeb’s political wisdom, which is applied cautiously with reference to the Quran. See, Sarkar, ed., *Abkam-i Alamgiri*, 96–97.

⁹⁴ NA, VOC, inv. nr. 1421, Missive from Van Reede to the *Heeren XVII*, 9 December, 1686: f. 77r-77v.

a result of the natural rule of Mughal governance. As has been explained in Chapter 3, the Mughal administration did not endorse bribery and the ethos of the *munshi* could not have been unfamiliar to most of the VOC administrators. By the second half of the seventeenth century, there were Dutch envoys like Johannes Bacherus at the Mughal court who were well-versed in the Indo-Persian language and etiquette, while in the provinces the Company's men interacted daily with the Mughal officials. And yet the fact that the VOC accounts chose to interpret and narrate the story of immoral Mughal administrators revealed the role that administrative corruption played in covering up the informal side of the administrative encounter between the Company and the Mughal officials in Bengal.

Ultimately, this mechanism of perceiving VOC corruption was beneficial for three reasons – (a) it accommodated the factional infighting of the Company officials and allowed them to accuse their opponents of illegal trade and other forbidden actions and try to remove them from their profitable positions, (b) it still left room for the officials to keep pursuing their individual interests and ambitions and (c) it generated a response of producing an 'incorrupt' self-image of a VOC servant by 'corrupting' the other. Subrahmanyam has argued that the Portuguese were the ones who first circulated in Europe this image of an 'oriental despot' for describing the Indian Sultans.⁹⁵ While this might be true, the VOC remained essentially the first to have introduced this policy of 'corrupting' the Mughal administrators to portray an 'incorrupt' image of their own officials in Bengal on a prolific scale, facilitated by the printing machinery of the Republic.⁹⁶ It led to the fast dissemination of the idea that James Tracy called 'Asian despotism' in the language of the VOC administration.⁹⁷ Robert Travers later used this label

⁹⁵ Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History*, 14.

⁹⁶ If true, I would agree with the argument of Benjamin Schmidt that the print machinery of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic led to the production of innumerable images and pamphlets, that in fact speeded up the dissemination of these ideas to profuse levels and proportions, perpetrating the invented 'exotic' and the 'orient'. Benjamin Schmidt, *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe's Early Modern World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

⁹⁷ Tracy, "Asian Despotism?"

under the name of ‘Asiatic despotism’ to study the English expansion and their imperial ideology in eighteenth-century Bengal.⁹⁸

But there was yet another layer to it that made it specifically about Bengal in this narrative on corruption. In the Republic, books published in connection with the VOC in Asia assigned a negative moral connotation to the geography of Bengal. It is interesting to remember that not just Dutch books but the Mughal chronicles themselves engaged in similar denigrations of Bengal as a seditious and uncouth area in the empire as seen in Chapter 3. Such tales about Bengal, moreover, were appropriated by the Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth century and adapted to suit the political and religious context of Portugal. Jorge Flores pointed out their frequent occurrence in the Portuguese texts from the sixteenth century which were replete with mysterious and monstrous depictions of the region.⁹⁹ It is noteworthy that in contrast to these literary publications, the memoirs left by the VOC directors in Bengal in the seventeenth century remained silent on this aspect of the region.¹⁰⁰ In the kilometres of missives sent to the *Hoge Regering* or the *Heeren XVII* by the director and his council in Bengal in the seventeenth century (all of which are not humanly possible to read in detail in any given number of PhD years), what appears most frequently are regular commercial details and certain specific reports on encounters or conflicts with the Mughal authorities. But there, too, one rarely notices anything being mentioned explicitly about the moral geography of Bengal. The first time such ideas about Bengal are reflected in the Company’s official accounts is at the time Van Reede as the

⁹⁸ Robert Travers, “Ideology and British Expansion in Bengal, 1757-72,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 33, no. 1 (Jan. 2005): 7–27.

⁹⁹ Jorge Flores, “Distant Wonders: The Strange and the Marvelous between Mughal India and Habsburg Iberia in the Early Seventeenth Century,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no. 3 (July 2007): 553–81.

¹⁰⁰ NA, VOC, inv. nr. 1212, Memoir from Joan Verpoorten for Pieter Sterthemius, 28 October, 1655: f. 211r-225v; NL-HaNA, VOC, OBP, inv. nr. 1246, Memoir of Matheus van den Broeck for Rogier van Heijningen, 14 February, 1664: f. 437r-463v; NL-HaNA, VOC, OBP, inv. nr. 1277, Memoir for *opperkoopman* Jacobus Salderus in Patna, 20 December, 1669: f. 1421-27; NL-HaNA, VOC, OBP, inv. nr. 1284, Memoir for *koopman* Cornelis Portier from the commissioner Willem Volger during his departure from Pipli, 23 September, 1671: f. 1903-1905.

commissioner introduced them in his reports for Bengal's succeeding directors and the *Heeren XVII* in 1686.¹⁰¹

But the books published by geographers in the Dutch Republic or those written on Asia by Dutch botanists and scientists incorporated this peculiarity of portraying Bengal in a negative light in their texts from a much earlier period. In the seventeenth century, there was already a booming Dutch market for books with stories (*verhalen*) about voyages to Asia that ranged from adventures of shipwrecks to claims of accurate scientific descriptions (*naauwkeurige beschrijvingen*) of the flora and fauna, customs and inhabitants of territories across the oceans. Bengal, too featured, repeatedly in these varied literary productions, albeit in a particular fashion. The rivers of Bengal and its adjacent terrain were portrayed consistently as a 'lawless', wild and unruly zone where riches were to be found in abundance. But it was also this environment that was shown as evoking vile desires. The first such detailed description of Bengal, appeared in Dutch in Jan Huygen van Linschoten's *Itinerario*. Published in Amsterdam around 1596, the geographer Linschoten prepared the ground for the stereotypical description of a flourishing and prosperous Bengal that was to be repeated systematically by most of the later travel accounts on Asia. He wrote –

The country is wondrously abundant and fertile of all life forms, primarily of rice...numerous ships from all places come here to load themselves (with this rice)... and it is so cheap that if told (to someone) it would sound incredible...there is ample sugar and all other commodities which makes one realise the abundance of everything here...Besides rice, a lot of cotton textiles are produced that are very fine and are held in high esteem all over India; they are not only distributed and shipped within India and the entire Orient but also to Portugal and elsewhere (in the world).¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ See chapter 6 for more details on this.

¹⁰² 'Het landt is wonder abundant en vruchtbaer van alle lijftochten/ ende principelijck rijs/ ...want laden jaerlijcks veel schepe die daer van alle weggen comen/ ...ende so goedencoop/ datter alhier te vertelle soude ongelooflick wesen:...Suyker en ander waren naer advenant/ waerby men mach consideren die overvloedighbeyt van alle dinghen...Behalve het rijs wort er gemaect veel Cattoene hmaet dat seer fijn is/ en wert in Indien seer gheestimeert/ en niet alleenlijck verspreyt ende vervoert naer Indien en gheheel Orienten: maer oock naer Portugael en ander weggen.'

In this account of Bengal's abundance, Linschoten also added the elements of wilderness and unruliness that were part of its riverine tracts and the people living in the nearby region. He wrote –

...the water (of the Ganges)...is so pristine and clear, that it seems to be like paradise...it has crocodiles, like the Nile in Egypt...for all Indians this water is considered holy and blessed and they believe for certain that washing and bathing in its waters would rid them of all sins and make them pure and clean again...The Portuguese have some of their trade and traffic there and their settlements in some of the places...but they have no permanence, nor any police or government as in (the rest of) India. They live by themselves like wild men and untamed horses, to do whatever they wish, being masters of themselves and do not pay much attention to the legal system and if they do, they are often to laws of Indian origin, and in this way some of the Portuguese there sustain themselves.¹⁰⁵

This set the trend in describing Bengal and was picked up voraciously by all VOC officials writing later about Bengal. The rivers and the adjacent terrain filled with chaos became a standard stereotype which was reiterated in almost every subsequent account.

Geographers like Dapper reproduced this image of Bengal in their own works. Dapper, published his book *Asia, of naukeurige beschryving van het rijk des Grooten Mogols* in 1672 where he put forward similar ideas on Bengal. Dapper wrote –

Jan Huygen van Linschoten, *Itinerario: Voyage ofte Schipvaert van Jan Huygen van Linschoten oost ofte portugaels indien inhoudende een corte beschryvinghe der selver landen ende zee-custen/ met aemysinge van alle de voornaemde principale havens/ rivieren/ hoecken ende plaetsen/ tot noch toe van de Portugesen ontdeckt ende bekend; waer by ghecoecht zijn/ niet alleen die conterseytsels van de habuten drachten ende wesen so van de Portugesen aldaer residerende als vande ingebooren Indianen/ ende haere tempels/ afgoden/ huysinge met die voornaemste boomen vruchten keruyden speceryen en de diergelijcke materialen, als ooc die manieren deselfden volckes so in hunnen Godts-diensten als in politie en huis-boudinghe; maer ooc een corte verhalinge van de coophandelinge hoe en waer die ghedreven en ghevonden worden/ met die ghedencksweerdichste geschidenissen/ voorghevalen den tijt zijnder residentie aldaer* (Amsterdam: Cornelis Claesz., 1596), 21.

¹⁰⁵ ‘...die revier opwaerts gesonden/ die sommige maenden inden wegh versette/ tot dates quamen daerse een seer lieffelicken rueck ontvinghen/ ende eenen seer claren ende ghetemperde hemel/ stil ende seer liefflick water/ so dat het haer scheen te wesen/ gelijk een paradijs...Dese revier heeft ook crocodilen/ gbelijck die Nilus in Ægypten...welcke wert van alle die Indianen voor een heyligh ende gebenedijt water gheboude/ ende ghelooven voor seker/ dat alle de ghene die hem daer eens in wast ende baeyt (al is hy noch so groote sondaer) dat hem dan alle zijn sonden verghen zijn/ ende dat hy so reijn e suyver is/ als nieu herboren...De Portugesen hebben daer haer traffijcken ende handelinge/ ende sommige plecken bewoont...maer en hebbender geen vastigheden/ noch sonderlinghe gheen policie noch regeringhe/ als in Indien: maer leven by naer gbelijck wilde meschen ende onghetoomde peerden: want eenjegbelijck doet wat hy wil/ ende zijn haer eygen heere/ en passen niet veel op Justitite/ so daer eenighe is ofte comt uyt Indien/ ende op dees manier onthouden haer daer sommige Portugesen.’

Linschoten, 21.

Those from Bengal, as Linschoten shows, claim that the Ganges originated in the earthly paradise which is why they also consider its water sacred. It even attracts thousands of *Banias* and other Indian heathens who bathe in its waters...In the middle of the Ganges there lie innumerable small and big islands, which are very fertile, and bear wild fruit trees, pineapples and all other sorts of vegetables, while being criss-crossed with several canals or water-channels (distributaries).¹⁰⁴

But this image of prosperity was coupled with the usual portrayal of danger and lawlessness in this region. Dapper wrote that most of the islands towards the east of Bengal were not under proper control and were left to be ‘wild and desolate’, infested by Frankish pirates (by which he possibly meant pirates of Portuguese origin) from Arakan.¹⁰⁵ They were also teeming with ‘tigers, that swam from one island to another, making it very dangerous to move in there.’¹⁰⁶ Dapper’s narrative reinforced the stereotypical picture of a rich province filled with chaos and disorder. He emphasised the tiger as a dangerous, exotic creature that was to be found –

In several places in the interiors of India... especially in Bengal...He has...glistening eyes, sharp teeth, giant paws with bent claws, and long hairs on the lips: that are so poisonous that if one of these hairs get into a man or even an animal, they succumb to the poison...nobody should, as forbidden by the *Great Mogols*, keep such hairs of a dead tiger for themselves, but on penalty of death (if violated), should send them to the court of the *Great Mogol*, where the King’s physicians then made deadly poisonous pills from these hairs, that would be given secretly to anyone, the King wished to kill.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ ‘Die van Bengala, zoo Linschooten getuigt, stellen den oorsprong van den Ganges in het aerdsch paradijs: waerom ook zijne waten by hen voor heilig worden gehouden: ja trekken de Benjanen en andere Indiche Heidenen by duizenden na denzelven ter beevaert, om hetzelve te hebben of zich daer in te baden...In het midden van den Ganges leggen ontelbare groote en kleine eilanden, die zeer vruchtbaer zijn, en alle bewassen met wilde en vrucht-boomen, ananas en allerlei slag van groente, en worden doorsneden met duizenden van kanalen of watergangen.’

Dapper, *Asia of naukeurige beschryvingen*, 11.

¹⁰⁵ Dapper, 11.

¹⁰⁶ Dapper, 11.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Op veele plaetsen van Indien te landewaerts hont de tiger, inzonderheid in Bengala,...Hy heeft...glinsterende oogen, veele scherpe tanden, veelklonige voeten, met kromme nagels: aen de lippen langachtige hairen: die zoo vergiftig zijn, dat zoo iemand, ’t zy mensch, of ook het beest zelf, slechts een eenig van deze hairen in kreeg, door zijn eigen zelfs vergif zou omkomen...niemand, by verbot des Grooten Mogols, zoodanige hairen van een gedooden tyger by zich mag behouden, maer moeten alle, op penne van den lijve, na het hof van den Grooten Mogol gezonden worden: alvaer door’s Konings artzen doodelijke vergiftige pillen van deze hairen gemaekt worden, welke den gene, die de Koning heimelijk wil doen sterven, ingegeven worden.’

Dapper, 14.

Without having ever visited Bengal himself, Dapper produced such detailed images that inevitably played up to the dualism of prosperity and peril in this region. Schouten, the VOC physician, who on the other hand actually had visited the Company's factories there, published his book from Amsterdam in 1676. His accounts, as well as the illustrations in his book, also reflected similar ideas. He commented on the availability of abundant rice in Bengal which formed the primary constituent of the diet of the local inhabitants. He wrote about the numerous magicians, soothsayers, tarot card readers etc. that inhabited its terrain.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, he too brought back the geographical imagery of a riverine Bengal like Linschoten and Dapper. Schouten reported about the affluence abounding the land and its people, while emphasising on the dangers of the region. He observed –

Bengalen or Bengala is a great and mighty land...Bengal is one of the most beautiful and productive countries of India. With the produce of this region, the people can feed not only themselves, but also the inhabitants of other areas of India...We saw that Hooghly lay, great and beautiful, along the banks of the famous river, the Ganges. There were wide but unpaved streets, beautiful footpaths (*wandelwegen*) and occasionally, here and there some respectable buildings, wealthy warehouses, and houses built in the Bengali style. There were also shops filled with all kinds of commodities, especially beautiful silk cloth and other oriental textiles.¹⁰⁹

On the contrary, he wrote –

With daybreak, we reached the village of Baranagore where a large number of *jentives*, both men and women, disregarding the sharp chill, went shamelessly naked...to plunge themselves in the river. This was without consideration of the fact that crocodiles and

¹⁰⁸ Schouten, *De Oost-Indische voyagie*, 413.

¹⁰⁹ 'Bengalen of Bengala is een groot en machtig land...Bengalen is één van de mooiste en vruchtbaarste landen van India. Met de opbrengst van het land kan de bevolking niet alleen zichzelf voeden, maar ook bewoners van andere landen van India...Wij zagen dat Hooghly groot en prachtig langs de befaamde rivier de Ganges ligt. Er zijn brede, maar ongeplaveide straten, fraaie wandelwegen en ook hier en daar aanzienlijke gebouwen, rijke pakhuizen en woningen op Bengaalse manier gebouwd. Ook zijn er winkels die vol liggen met allerhande goederen, in't bijzonder mooie zijden kleedjes en andere oriëntaalse stoffen.'
Schouten, 373.

alligators were found daily in these waters and were known to have preyed on many people.¹¹⁰

A print illustration depicting the landscape of Bengal along with the text in his book, reiterated this impression. As can be seen in Fig 12, scenes of cremation, a tiger attacking a woodcutter and crocodiles in the water – all the elements of the wild and perilous are put together in a single frame. This is set against the background of ships and commerce portraying the image of fortune and wealth in the region. It presumably depicted the peculiarities in Bengal that the author wished to show. It is *not* to say that these descriptions were untrue or fabricated in the seventeenth century. Rather, what is interesting to notice is the way these accounts represented Bengal and chose to provide information about the region repeatedly in a particular fashion– in this case, its richness coupled with its mysterious and dangerous rivers.

How such ideas about Bengal steadily made their way into the Dutch books on flora and fauna can possibly be explained in the light of their transmission from elsewhere. As mentioned earlier, the Islamic sources were an inspiration for the Portuguese accounts and Linschoten drew most of his descriptions from Portuguese accounts.¹¹¹ But other works produced by university trained authors had more probable sources than Linschoten's. Abul Fazl while talking about Bengal's 'base' air and soil as being responsible for its dissident nature, referred to the origin of such knowledge in 'old writings'.¹¹² It is possible that certain ideas associated with Bengal were contained in ancient writings that had made their way into the Mughal and other Islamic chronicles in India. Francis Zimmermann pointed out how classical Sanskrit medical treatises

¹¹⁰ *'Bij het aanbreken van de dag bevonden wij ons b't dorp Barnagor waar een groot aantal jentieven, zowel mannen als vrouwen, ondanks de hevige koude zich zonder enige schaamte naakt had uitgekleed...en in de rivier begeven. Dit zonder acht te slaan op de vele krokodillen en kaaimannen die hier dagelijks in de Ganges worden aangetroffen en die veel mensen levend verslinden.'* Schouten, 369.

¹¹¹ Linschoten worked for the Archbishop of Goa in the last decades of the sixteenth century, when it was under the control of the *Estado da India*. See, Arun Saldanha, "Linschoten's Itinerario and Dutch Expeditions to the Indian Ocean, 1594-1602," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 101, no. 1 (Jan. 2011): 153.

¹¹² Beveridge, *The Akbarnama of Abu'l-Fazl*, III:427.

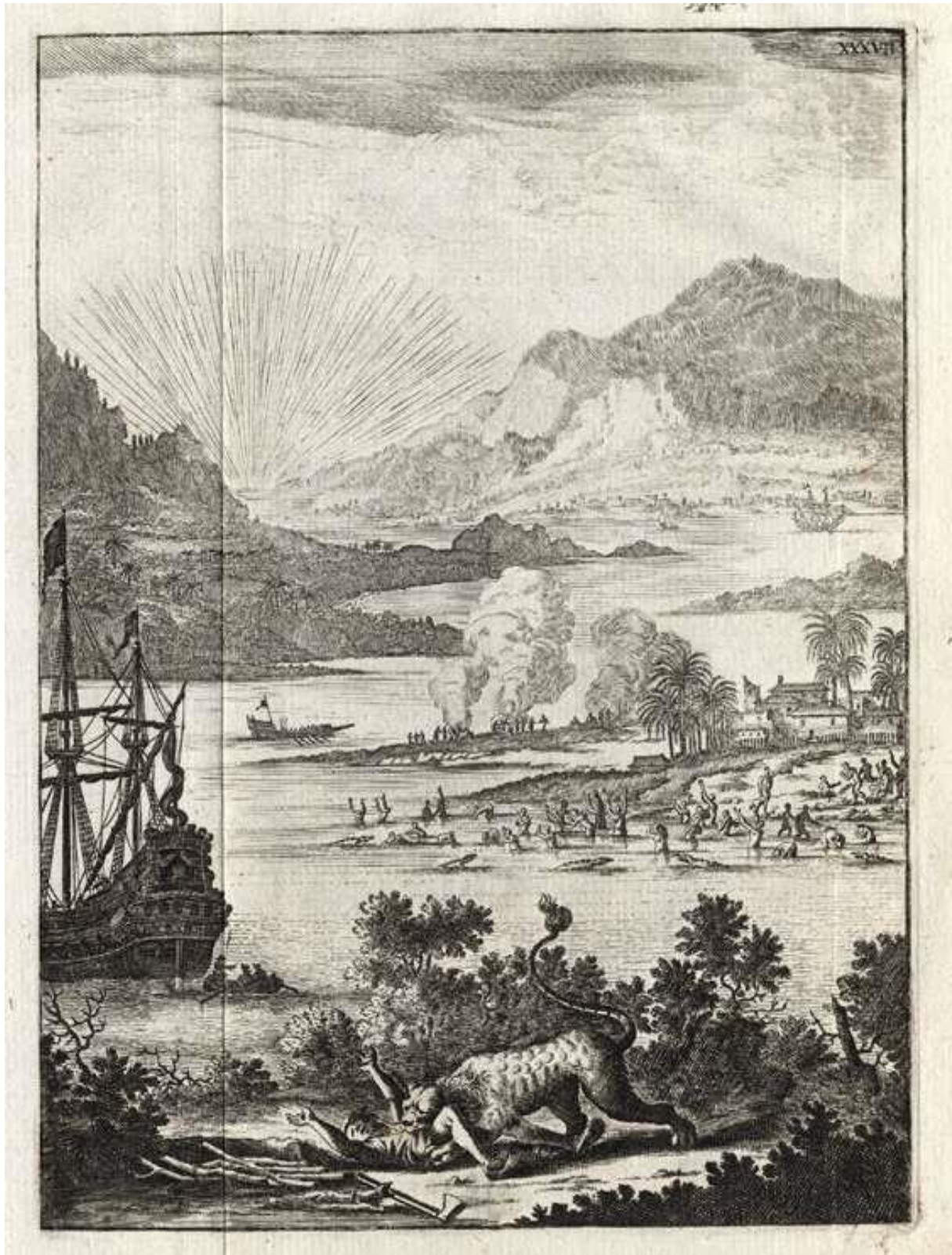


Fig 12: The Ganges in Bengal, reproduced from Wouter Schouten, *Wouter Schoutens Oost-indische voyagie*, Book III, 62.¹¹³

¹¹³ Wouter Schouten, *Wouter Schoutens Oost-Indische voyagie, vervattende veel voornamē voorvallen en ongemeene vreemde geschiedenissen...* (Amsterdam: Jacob Meurs, 1667): 62.

had created a hierarchy of areas based on humor (wind, bile and phlegm) according to which the savour (sweet, acid, salty etc.) and qualities of life (smooth/rough, cold/hot, sluggish/lively, tender/crude etc.) differed. In this category, areas such as Bengal with its wet, marshy texture of land (*anupa*) was placed on a contrasting polarity to the arid, dry lands in the west (*jangala*). In Zimmerman's words, "This polarity was expressed in the food (wheat to the west, rice to the east), the pharmacy and the bodily techniques of human communities, giving rise to people of thin, dry and bilious temperament at one extreme, and at the other to rotund people who were susceptible to the disorders of phlegm. Consumption was a characteristic malady of the *jangala*, and elephantiasis of the *anupa*."¹¹⁴ There were also Persian medical treatises (*tibb*) which reflected similar ideas of humour and the nature of men.¹¹⁵ With nature being a point of interest for the Dutch scholars and geographers, the Indian medical treatises containing knowledge about plants and herbs could have made their way into European texts and sensibilities. *Hortus Malabaricus*, which was one such VOC production made under the initiative of Van Reede was drafted with the help of Brahmanic and local physicians from Malabar who had access to the ancient Sanskrit texts and *Ayurvedic* knowledge.¹¹⁶ More information on this point is given in connection with Van Reede and his factional allies who were known for their ideological connections, in chapters 5 and 6. In this light, it is possible to claim that the source of Van Reede's information about Bengal and that of other Dutch geographers and botanists could have been such medical treatises which were either available in written or recirculated orally and preserved through Islamic renditions and other European translations in the seventeenth century. He adapted such information but obviously lent it a new context that would suit his purpose.

¹¹⁴ Francis Zimmermann, "The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats: An Ecological Theme in Hindu Medicine," *Social Science Medical* 27, no. 3 (1988): 198.

¹¹⁵ Subrahmanyam, *Europe's India*, 20; Fabrizio Speziale, "The Encounter of Medical Traditions in Nūr al-Dīn Šīrāzī's 'Ilājāt-i Darā Šīkōbi,'" *eJournal of Indian Medicine* 30, no. 2 (2010): 53-67, file://vuw/Personal\$/Homes/S/surb1/Desktop/24731-28860-1-PB.pdf.

¹¹⁶ Saraswat Brahmins like Ranga Bhat, Vinayaka Pandit (with knowledge of Sanskrit), Appu Bhatt as well as an *Ayurvedic* expert from Karapurram in Malabar like Itti Achudem were involved in this project. Apart from this there were other local collaborators from the Chogan caste who had first-hand experience of working with plants, flower and fruits of all types.

The relevance of this was also established in the book by the VOC physician, Schouten which contains detailed accounts of Bengal in the seventeenth century. At the very beginning of his book, he revealed his interest in exploring the limits and miracles of nature around the world, albeit described in a religious connotation as the wonders of God.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, he went on to write at length about the different flora and fauna he encountered during his journeys. When it came to Bengal, he commented explicitly on the local physicians, their methods of healing and their books recommending medical practices like massages and the drinking of herbal sap as remedies for diseases.¹¹⁸ This could be any medical treatise in Indo-Persian or Sanskrit, including the *Ayurveda* itself. One can only speculate about these probable connections which merit deeper research in future. These old texts and the Mughal chronicles together, however, created a chain of certain ideas that came to be associated with the riverine landscape of Bengal which were further adapted in the Portuguese, Dutch, and later French and English writings to suit the European East India Companies' context. As mentioned earlier, such ideas were not found in the reports of the Company officials in the beginning. But in the Republic, Dutch literary publications repeatedly chose to portray Bengal in this manner. Consequently, when Van Reede was visiting Bengal, such ideas about this region were already rife and commonplace in the minds of average VOC officials.

The fact that the source of menace was found in Bengal and in its Mughal governance can be better understood by looking back at the developments in the Republic and in Bengal. As seen in Chapters 1 and 2, corruption was becoming a rising concern both in the political administration of the Republic and within the VOC concerning its overseas affairs. Among other things, acceptance of gifts or bribes by officials for performing their duties was perceived as administrative corruption. On this ground, the Company officials dismissed their Mughal counterparts as being greedy for gifts and therefore prone to extortion and corruption. By the

¹¹⁷ Schouten, *De Oost-Indische voyagie*, 25.

¹¹⁸ Schouten, 412.

second half of the seventeenth century, the political atmosphere in the Republic was against a monarchical form of government and this disapproval was reflected in the writings of the VOC officials while describing the Mughal administration. Added to this was the situation of the Company in Bengal as has been exemplified in Chapter 3. The fluidity and complexity of this region, its increasing importance in Europe-Asiatic trade, and the non-transparency of the Company's participation there in the Mughal administrative world made the VOC try to get a better grip on Bengal. The inability to do so led to concerns about uncontrolled and unchecked corruption among the Company officials there. By such corruption was meant violation of the Company's monopoly by indulging in illegal trade, or disregarding prohibitions on informal contact with locals and appropriation of elite lifestyles abroad.¹¹⁹ Within the Company, therefore, the official reports described the region from the 1660s as a den of corruption. It blended with the moment of Dutch publications on Asia incorporating ideas about Bengal's wealth and wilderness, prosperity and monstrosity from the existing non-Dutch sources. For the citizens in the Republic at least as also for the *Heeren XVII* and Van Reede, which will be seen in Chapter 6, the image of corrupt Mughal ways of administering a corruptible area as Bengal was already formed. It provided a justification for the Company officials to explain their informal practices in Bengal. Conversely, it also led to the addition of new connotations to the VOC perception of 'corruption' in the form of an inefficient Mughal governance in Bengal.

At least on paper, a gradual moral hierarchy of the Dutch administration began being established over the Mughal governance in Bengal. Intimate interactions with Mughal officials and behaving like the administrative elites was, therefore only, seen as conforming to corrupt behaviour. This was not how an exemplary VOC official ought to have conducted himself abroad. It served the purpose of not only reinstating the moral credibility of the Company

¹¹⁹ Note that recent research has shed light on the Portuguese discourse on decadence and contamination in connection with Christianity and the contact with the local Hindus in Goa. See, Nandini Chaturvedala, "Preserving Purity: Cultural Exchange and Contamination in Late Seventeenth Century Portuguese India," *Ler História* 58 (2010): 99–112.

servants at the cost of the Mughal administrators, but it also conferred on them the power to claim administrative superiority in having to survive and work in this corrupt atmosphere. In a way, thus, the formal administrative encounter became a process of perpetrating the ‘politics of difference’ between the Mughal and the VOC administration by ‘corrupting’ the former to project an ‘incorrupt’ image of the latter.¹²⁰ At the same time on the informal side, the fluidity in Bengal’s political arena allowed more room for personal negotiations and unsolicited penetration of the Company officials into the Mughal administrative structure. But this ‘lived’ experience came to be concealed in the VOC narratives where the image of the Mughal administrators was systematically tarnished as corrupt. This explains why in pocketbooks like that of Daniël Havart’s *Persiaanse Secretaris* meant to inform the Company servants about Mughal epistolary style and other ethnographic information (to understand the Mughal style of administration), there was no mention of the Mughal *munshigiri* ideas of ‘public welfare’ and ‘good governance’.¹²¹ This aspect of ‘corrupting’ the image of Mughal Bengal to implement the reforms of the Van Reede committee was a VOC phenomenon; but the process continued in the subsequent century when Warren Hastings, the Governor-General of British-India (1772-74) managed to remove the Mughal *munshi* in Bengal, Muhammad Reza Khan from his office with corruption allegations for implementing his own legal reforms.¹²² Nierstrasz was, therefore, right in claiming that corruption per se had never been a special problem of the VOC in the eighteenth century or of

¹²⁰ On the politics of difference see, Lauren Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes in World History, 1400-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17,147.

¹²¹ Neither Francis Gladwin nor Daniël Havart has acknowledged Chandar Bhan who wrote on the skills and requirements of a Mughal *munshi*. Kinra argues that sections from his *Chabar Chaman* were freely copied by Gladwin, without acknowledging the source and the author. It was meant to educate the British civil servants in pre-colonial Indian administration. Designed as a small pocket-book, Havart’s *Persiaanse Secretaris* was designed to serve the same purpose of training Company’s personnel in Persian administration. See, Kinra, “Secretary-Poets in Mughal India,” 29; Rajeev Kinra, “Master and Munshi: A Brahman Secretary’s Guide to Mughal Governance,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 2010): 553; Kinra, “Secretary-Poets in Mughal India,” 147; Francis Gladwin, *The Persian Moonshee* (Calcutta, reprint London: Oriental Press, 1801); Daniël Havart, *Persiaanse Secretaris, of een nette beschrijving van de stijl die de Persiannen gebruiken in hare brieven en notariale stukken* (Amsterdam: Jan van Hoorn, 1680). For more on Havart and his book see, Jos Gommans, *De verborgen wereld: Nederland en India vanaf 1550* (Rijksmuseum: Uitgeverij Vantilt, 2018), 45-53.

¹²² Chatterjee, “Reflections on Religious Difference,” 411.

any century, for that matter.¹²³ Its mention in the Company's administrative reports increased simply because of its increased importance as a political agenda in the Republic that was echoed in its overseas settlements and factories. With an increased accountability of the Dutch regents *cum* VOC directors to their 'citizens' in the Republic, the Company's overseas project of expansion gradually began to gain a 'public' audience. The ongoing debates on administrative behaviour and corruption in the political domain of the Republic, therefore, came to be used by the VOC and the *Heeren XVII* for intervening in Bengal from particularly this time period (1660s onwards).

Conclusion

In this chapter, it is shown what happened when the partially incommensurable yet largely commensurable worlds of the Mughal and the VOC administrators came together. This encounter is studied against the backdrop of Bengal, whose importance had risen from the latter half of the seventeenth century as a commercially advantageous region for the Company and a politically permeable space for its individual officials. It has been shown here that the pressures from the VOC in the Republic to account for the forbidden actions of its officials in Bengal led to the region's incorporation in the VOC perception of corruption. As has been alleged in Chapter 2, the *Heeren XVII* had been focusing on the corruption of Company officials overseas, to subdue the pressure back home from its shareholding citizens. Consequently, they wanted to have greater control exerted abroad. It was also demonstrated in Chapters 1 and 2 that the changing political context of the seventeenth century led to the factional shuffling of the *Heeren XVII*, which in turn increased the pressure on every new group of directors. They had to prove their administrative efficiency to the citizens through corruption allegations and anti-corruption reforms. The force of a newly pervading political energy triggered by the contemporary philosophers also added to this drive of the VOC in implementing experimental measures. All

¹²³ Nierstrasz, *In the Shadow of the Company*, 6.

these developments combined together to place more accountability on the shoulders of the Company officials overseas to report to the *Heeren XVII*, which compelled them to draw up lengthy justifications for all their actions. Often their actions were not in compliance with the prescribed rules of the *Heeren XVII* which accounted even more for a formal justification to cover up the informal side of the encounter.

In this process of writing about such justifications, corruption accusations against the Mughal *mansabdars* operating in an atmosphere as Bengal became a tool for portraying an incorrupt image of the Dutch officials there. Their discourse was fixated on churning out ideas about Mughal immorality and corruption. Although such justifications were intended only for the eyes and ears of the *Heeren XVII* in the Republic, they spilled over inevitably into the 'public' domain. To kindle the pleasure of Dutch readers, literary works of varying genres about Asia that were published in the Republic, incorporated such ideas and made them more widespread. It was also through such books that a steady influx of information about the geographic peculiarities of Bengal came to be disseminated. Either borrowed from earlier Portuguese texts or Islamic sources, these ideas pervaded the Dutch literary market. Bengal in this discourse consequently came to acquire a negative connotation, that was coupled with the story of Mughal mismanagement there. Through this process of writing about corruption, the VOC administrators ended up assigning a higher moral authority to the Dutch administrative ethos in their encounter with the Mughals.

While this represented the formal side of the encounter, the informal side to it thrived at the same time. In the relatively fluid setting of Bengal, the 'lived' reality, as has been shown in this chapter, was more porous than the tight categories of the written reports. Neither was the VOC a fully developed coherent administration, nor were the Mughals. The presence of different networks, political factions, and actors with multiple loyalties and legal identities on both sides made it difficult to reconcile formal categories with the lived situation. The informal dynamics between these two administrative groups, therefore, continued to exist, driven by

personal ambitions and factional interests. But the writing of the encounter from the Dutch perspective, tilted the symmetry in favour of the 'western' administrative superiority while nullifying the other.¹²⁴ 'Corruption' thus became the perfect façade under which formal discourses took a specific shape in Mughal Bengal to camouflage the informal politics and negotiations of the Company officials there. The following chapters dealing with Van Reede as the commissioner with his investigation committee, both in the Republic and in Bengal would explicate these points further.

¹²⁴ It is not to say that this thwarted the administrative development on the Mughal side in any way, whose momentum has been discussed earlier in Chapter 3. But in the written accounts of the VOC (and probably later in the EIC), this bureaucratic growth of the Mughal entity came to be systematically erased.

Chapter 5

Behind the Scenes: The Making of the Van Reede Committee in the Dutch Republic

We have bound ourselves to the Company by an oath, by which we call upon the God Almighty to not only be a witness to our sincere intentions but also we are, as it were, taunting and provoking God's punishing powers to be provoked if we do anything other than what we have promised; as we are God-fearing Christians, we should remain faithful, do well and induce ourselves to love our lords and masters because they have received not only the power of the state from our fatherland to punish miscreants but have also themselves given us ample opportunities to prosper, to flourish, and to add to our honour and respect by which we have had come to obtain a kind of temporal happiness, that we could not find in our fatherland.¹

This was what Hendrik Adriaan van Reede wrote from Hooghly in his position as the commissioner-general in 1687 for the future VOC directors and the council working in Bengal. He was doing what he had been sent to do in India – namely to remind the Company servants in the factories there about their duty to remain ‘faithful’ to their ‘lords and masters’ in the Republic. If they failed in this duty, they could be punished as miscreants by virtue of the ‘power of the state’ sanctioned by the *Heeren XVII* and by the ‘fatherland’. This entire process, as has been alleged in the previous chapters, was necessitated against the background of intense discussions on overseas corruption. In their effort to prove to the Dutch citizens and the VOC investors that remedies were being adopted, the *Heeren XVII* strengthened the Company's monopoly and persistently drafted new rules and regulations. In chapter 2, we mentioned that this opened up

¹ ‘...denijle wij onszelven door een eed daar aan hebben verbonden; in zig vervattende wij God almagtigh niet alleen tot getuijge aan roepen van onse sincere intentie, maar dat wij boven dien Gods straffende magt als versoeken en over ons uijtlocken zoo wij anders komen te doen als het geen wij beloven; zulcx zoo wij Christenen zijn en God vreesen moeten wij getrouw wesen, wel doen en onse beeren en meesters bewegen ons te beminnen want deselve hebben niet alleen van den staat onser vaderlands verkregen de magt van quaad doenders te straffen maar sij hebben ook bij haar zelven zoo veel gelegentheid ons te begunstigen, groot te maken, en in haer dienst toe te voegen eere en aanzien waar door wij een tijdelijk geluk bekomen, diergelijk wij in ons vaderland niet en zoude kunnen vinden.’

NA, HR, inv. nr. 241, Instructions and Regulations made by Van Reede as commissioner, c. 1687: folios not numbered.

the possibility of factional alignment between the political institutions in the Dutch Republic – the VOC in the Republic – and the VOC in Asia (as the governor-general in Batavia had direct ties with the dominant faction in the *Heeren XVII*). In order to see if this was true or not, it is necessary to examine a case study involving one such investigation committee. This committee was different from the usual committees because it was sent to India in 1684 with a commissioner appointed by the *Heeren XVII*, unlike other commissioners that were sent by the *Hoge Regering*.

This was the committee constituted in December 1684, and Van Reede was put in charge as the commissioner-general with instructions to inspect all the Company's factories in the western quarters – those along the coasts of Coromandel and Malabar, and in Ceylon, Surat, Agra and especially in Bengal (fig 13).² Van Reede was to be on board the ship, *Bantam* that would sail from the Republic along the Cape where he was to change over to the yacht, *De Purmer* that would be accompanied by another fluyt (*fluyjt*), *Adrichem* sailing together towards Ceylon.³ After the loading and unloading of commodities, *De Purmer* full with *arrecq* (areca nuts), *chiancoes* (big horns) and other goods from Ceylon was to carry Van Reede to Bengal while the fluyt, *Adrichem* was to leave for Coromandel.⁴ On reaching the factory of Chinsurah-Hooghly in Bengal, he was supposed to read out the letter from the *Heeren XVII* so that the officials serving there were made aware of his authority and obeyed him.⁵ Van Reede was allowed to enter the lodges of the Company and was to be allocated his own desk for working, the cost of which had

² NA, Collectie Hudde, inv. nr. 38, Instructions of the *Heeren XVII* for Hendrik Adriaan van Reede appointed as the commissioner of the committee to be sent to Bengal, Coromandel, Ceylon etc. in Amsterdam, 1684: f. 1v-2v.

³ NL-HaNA, VOC, inv. nr. 109, Copy-Resolutions of the *Heeren XVII* in Amsterdam, 27 February, 1681- 8 October, 1685, 23 November, 1684: folios not numbered.

⁴ Anonymous, *VOC Glossarium* (Den Haag: Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 2000): 13, 30; NA, Collectie Hudde, inv. nr. 38, Instructions for Van Reede, December, 1684: f. 1v.

⁵ NA, Collectie Hudde, inv. nr. 38, Instructions for Van Reede, December, 1684: f. 2v.



Fig 13: The Western Quarters that were granted to the VOC by the charter of the States-General were included in the stretch between the Cape of Good Hope and Japan in the Indian Ocean. NA, Kaarten
 Leupe, access number 4. VEL, inv. nr. 312.

to be covered from the Company's accounts.⁶ His position and power was designated as being above those of all the governors and directors of the places he was supposed to visit. He even had permission to preside over any meeting that was convened during his stay on behalf of the *Heeren XVII*.⁷

The explicit orders however were to report all cases of malpractice, fraud and abuse against anyone to the *Hoge Regering* in Batavia so that it was the *Raad van Justitie* that had the final say in the trial and punishment of the accused.⁸ From Bengal he was to later move on to Coromandel, Ceylon and thereafter to Malabar. From there, the orders were to let him go further to Surat before returning back to Ceylon again. In Ceylon, he could embark on any of the returning ships and return back to the Republic. Van Reede was to be assisted in this mission by two other men, the second and next in rank being Isaac Soolmans who had earlier written to the directors complaining about the chaotic state of affairs of the Company in Bengal.⁹ Soolmans was instructed to take over the position of Van Reede in case of his sudden death or under any other unpredictable circumstances.¹⁰ The third person, Johannes Bacherus who had been the former *opperkoopman* in Surat was appointed as the final member of this committee for assisting both Van Reede and Soolmans in their investigation duties.¹¹ It thus seemed to be a fully-equipped and a sound attempt by the *Heeren XVII* to try to combat corruption among the Company's servants in India. But why was there the need to send this committee at this hour in the first place? How did the plan to send this committee reflect the anxiety about corruption and especially that of corruption in Mughal Bengal, towards the end of the seventeenth century, among the *Heeren XVII* in the Republic? It is in order to find the answers to these questions that

⁶ NA, Collectie Hudde, inv. nr. 38, Instructions for Van Reede: f. 2v.

⁷ NA, VOC, inv. nr. 109, *Resoluties*, 19 October, 1684: folios not numbered.

⁸ NA, Collectie Hudde, inv. nr. 38, Instructions for Van Reede: f. 3r.

⁹ NA, VOC, inv. nr. 109, *Resoluties*, 28 November, 1684: folios not numbered.

¹⁰ NA, VOC, inv. nr. 109, *Resoluties*, 26 October, 1684 and 28 November, 1684: folios not numbered.

¹¹ NA, VOC, inv. nr. 109, *Resoluties*, 25 November, 1684: folios not numbered.