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

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Conclusion: Studying the VOC through its Corruption

The subject of corruption has never ceased from appearing in the headlines of newspapers. What is striking, however, is its growing use in the recent years as a political agenda in almost every part of the world.[1] It is possible today to discuss high-level corruption in the open (albeit with its limits), thanks to social media and the political presence of the citizens. But it leads us to wonder what the situation had been in the past, in the seventeenth century for example when 'modernity' had not yet been manufactured. With vague boundaries between politics and commerce and the absence of an all-pervading social media, how did corruption accusations work? When did corruption began being used as a political agenda in the public domain to sustain or destroy administrators? It is imperative to raise these questions and go back a few centuries to see how corruption allegations started becoming more frequently used to reach our current stage. In this dissertation, I have tried to look into these issues in order to understand the importance of corruption allegations in the 'early-modern' times. The VOC, as a global organisation, encompassed both politics and commerce and operated in the Dutch Republic as well as Asia.

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[1] Associated Press in Riyadh, "Saudi Arabia: 201 people held in $100bn corruption inquiry," *The Guardian*, 9 November, 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/09/saudi-arabia-201-people-held-in-100bn-corruption-inquiry, accessed August 9, 2018; Associated Press and Reuters, "Tens of thousands protest against corruption in Romania," *The Guardian*, January 21, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/21/tens-of-thousands-protest-against-corruption-in-romania,; Dom Philips, "Brazil braces for corruption appeal that could make or break ex-president Lula," *The Guardian*, January 24, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/23/brazil-luiz-inacio-lula-da-silva-corruption-appeal-verdict-election, accessed 12 June, 2018; Lily Kuo, "China sentences former political rising star to life in prison for corruption," *The Guardian*, May 8, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/08/china-sentences-former-political-rising-star-to-life-in-prison-for-corruption, accessed 12 June, 2018; Jason Burke, "Kenyan authorities detain 50 in anti-corruption drive," *The Guardian*, May 28, 2018. https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/28/kenya-authorities-detain-50-anti-corruption-drive&sa=U&ved=0ahUKEwiFuci8083bAhVSyqYKHaNiCycQFggFMAA&client=internal-uds-cse&cx=007466294097402385199:m2ealvuxh1i&usg=AOvVaw3nIgqDjjoprY2hZD3m3VG8, accessed 12 June, 2018.

Research on its officials, therefore, seemed to be the most suitable option for having a holistic picture of 'early-modern' administrators.

The Company was active in the Dutch Republic at a time that the Republic was one of the leading powers in the world and possessed substantial monetary, military and cultural influence. The VOC administrators dealt with large amounts of wealth and power daily, not only within the Republic but also overseas where the Company had its bases. Problems of administrative mismanagement and reports of corruption under such circumstances were inevitable in the Company, which forms the area of my research interest in this dissertation. The VOC has been studied from various perspectives in the past; Markus Vink has summarised them in his book *Encounters on the Opposite Coast*.[2] He showed how the VOC could be studied as a Company split between following a military and a commercial approach with different factions vying for different places to colonise (Batavia for the mercantile-centric faction versus Ceylon for the imperialist-centric faction). Besides this, the VOC was also an organisation that was represented and understood differently by different groups in the Dutch Republic and overseas. There was, for instance, the Indian perception of the Company which varied according to the varied interactions of the VOC officials with different social groups there (such as the emperor, the local rulers, merchants, religious groups, scholars etc.). On the other hand, the Company also represented itself in different ways in the context of its various operations abroad in the Cape of Good Hope and in Asia. One of the predominant ways was through its theocratic vision (the works of Calvinist preachers) which made the Company officials the true upholders of the Reformed faith vis-à-vis the Indian and Catholic religions. Then there was the 'bottom-up' view of a common soldier and his representation of the Company through popular publications in the Republic. Vink pointed out another perspective – the 'outsider view' which was mostly the external representation of the Company by 'vicarious tourists', 'armchair travellers' and scholars in the Republic and in Europe. It is usually difficult to focus on all these representations and

[2] Vink, *Encounters*, 30-147.

layers of the VOC in a single dissertation but most of them surprisingly come to the surface when the Company's policies and debates on corruption are explored. I have therefore used this subject of administrative corruption in the VOC to study the Company in the Republic and in Bengal in the seventeenth century.

The question that I raised at the beginning of this dissertation is why corruption and its redress became an administrative concern in the VOC and why Mughal Bengal became central to this concern. Such a question is relevant in the context of the Van Reede Committee which was formed in 1684 to investigate the factories of India and Ceylon, especially those in Bengal. Hendrik Adriaan van Reede was appointed as the commissioner and was sent to these places along with Isaac Soolmans and Johannes Bacherus as the second and third members of the committee. It was on the basis of this committee's reports that a formal oath of corruption was introduced in the VOC in 1687. It indicated the extent to which corruption had become a pressing concern for the Company in the Republic and explained why Van Reede enjoyed such exclusive powers as the commissioner-general. But the office of the commissioner was conceived way earlier in 1626 meaning that discussions about corruption in the Company had already begun back then. This is enough reason as a historian to go back to the early years of the seventeenth century and start our story of corruption in the VOC from there. I have attempted to tell this story through the six chapters of this dissertation, by bearing the relevant temporal and spatial dimensions in mind – that is, the socio-political developments throughout the years of the seventeenth century and their differences in the settings of Amsterdam and Bengal. The story thus told captures the momentum towards the formation of the Van Reede committee and shows how the focus on corruption in the VOC increased with Bengal becoming central to such concerns. Several developments in both the socio-political space of the Dutch Republic and the administration of the Company (in the Republic and abroad) arguably led to this increased focus on corruption. But more importantly, the regional dynamics of Mughal Bengal also played a crucial role in adding new meaning to the perception of VOC corruption. I have thus concluded

that the interactions between the administration of the VOC, the Dutch Republic and Mughal Bengal were responsible for the growing concerns about Company corruption and the extra dimension of Bengal in it.

These interactions happened at different levels and proceeded simultaneously through multiple negotiations. For this reason, they remained largely overlapping within their given institutional confines. Firstly, there was the primary connection between the VOC directors (including the *Heeren XVII*) and the political administrators in the city councils of the Dutch Republic. This was further extended to a secondary level of administrative connections between the *Heeren XVII* and the *Hoge Regering* in Batavia through the governor-general and the *Raad van Indië*. Of course, the *Hoge Regering* needed to connect itself with all other subsidiary administrative bodies of the Company, spread across the Indian Ocean. This link between the *Hoge Regering* and other VOC factories formed the third level of interactions which further spiralled back to the *Heeren XVII* in the Republic and the regent-administrators in the Dutch city councils. But the VOC also had to deal with the political administrators of different areas overseas where they had their bases. This meant that in Bengal, the Company officials had to deal with the Mughal *mansabdars* and the local *zamindars* there who were, in turn, connected to the Mughal emperor at the centre in the Delhi-Agra region. This level of connection – the VOC-Mughal regional interactions in Bengal formed the fourth and one of the most elusive links within the Company's administrative setting. At this level of interaction, the Company's men-on-the-spot were formally accountable to their higher authorities in Batavia and the Republic. But there was no compulsion to reveal their informal deals made with the Mughal administrators in Bengal. Such interactions, therefore, remained opaque to the rest of the Company. This explains why the fourth level of interaction between the Mughal and the VOC officials in Bengal was elusive and beyond the frequent scrutiny of the *Hoge Regering* or the *Heeren XVII*. Unlike the other level of interactions, such regional interactions remained partially beyond the formal cadre of the VOC.

Another entirely informal level of interactions which connected the Company administrators on a personal level was rendered possible through factionalism. Factions fostered informal interactions among the Company administrators as allies or opponents while being camouflaged under an institutional façade. Formed by patronages through familial and friendship bonds, such forces constituted the core of Dutch administration in the seventeenth century. All appointments and distribution of offices were made on the basis of factional preferences in the political institutions. Officials who served both in these political institutions and the VOC at the same time or were connected by friends and family, brought in their factional links from the political space of the Republic into the Company administration. The political institutions of the Republic thus became connected to the *Heeren XVII* in this way through factions. Although fully functional in practice, factionalism in the Company was not officially permitted and was condemned in the formal oaths of the administrators. Factional interactions as such remained an informal part of the VOC administration. All of these multiple interactions that the Company administrators had at different levels represented varied interests – personal and institutional. On one hand, there were the formal interactions between the *vroedschap*, the VOC chambers in the Republic, the *Hoge Regering* in Batavia and other subordinate factories overseas. They were tied to institutional goals prescribed by the VOC directors. On the other hand, there were the informal interactions among different Company officials as factions and their elusive links with the political actors of different regions overseas (in our case Mughal Bengal). These were related to personal goals and ambitions of the Company officials. This complex of interactions led to a precarious balance of the formal and the informal in the administration of the VOC. The official reports of the Company did not make this complex explicit. But the situation of personal interests remaining embedded in the institutional order evoked occasional tensions which led to disruptions in the Company administration. Such disruptions exposed incidents of corruption which in turn revealed the informal side of the Company, that thrived under its formal façade. This is especially valid for Bengal where such interactions are otherwise difficult to capture if not

exposed in the context of incidents of corruption charges and legal trials. Studying the VOC through its corruption thus helps in revealing this formal-informal balance by going into the hidden depths of the archives and accessing information that usually lay beyond the controlled discourse of the Company.

But given the ambiguity and vast scope of the term 'corruption', defining it in its early-modern context is a challenging task. The introductory chapter undertakes this task by adopting an anthropological approach which acknowledges the fact that different political systems shape perceptions of corruption in different ways. Based on the two parameters of (a) difference in political structures and (b) the ideas of morality as represented through formal rules, corruption can be percieved as '(dis)loyalty' of the administrators to their authority and its rules with specific uses of its allegations in a given seventeenth-century political structure. Such a definition accommodates the varieties in systems of governance and studies the way they affect the understanding of corruption. The term 'administrative corruption' is used in order to accommodate all seventeenth-century peculiarities, mostly having to do with vague boundaries between political, economic, religious and other sectors of governance. On the basis of this definition and terminology, the rest of the chapters study the perception of corruption in the VOC, in the background of corruption as it was understood in the Dutch Republic and in Mughal Bengal.

By examining corruption in the Dutch political space for understanding its effect in the VOC administration, it is seen how corruption in the Dutch Republic became a growing administrative concern in the seventeenth century. The Republic in these years saw the production of a number of new political theories which received a spur because of the printing machinery there. It made the production and circulation of political ideas easier and faster. Inspired by a group of political theorists, some of whom were also prominent regents, existing administrative practices came to be questioned and experimented upon in the Republic's political forum. Concern about administrative behaviour and corruption rode on this wave of political

experimentation and gradually became the focus from the latter half of the seventeenth century. What was the perception of corruption in the Dutch Republic and what were the uses of corruption allegations? The answer can be sought by assessing the two parameters laid out for defining corruption – the formal laws and the political system. The sovereignty of the Dutch Republic was represented in the States-General that shared its sovereign authority with the constituent provinces (which were further divided into cities). All administrators were consequently expected to display 'loyalty' to their respective provinces and city councils as repositories of this shared sovereignty. Added to this were the formal rules contained in the oaths of the officials which forbade the use of bribery and undue favouritism while executing administrative duties and making appointments. Being institutional laws, these prohibitions were to be adhered to by the Dutch officials. Violation of these rules was perceived as 'disloyalty' towards the political institutions that advocated them (namely the States-General composed of the provinces and city councils) and came to be seen as corruption in the Dutch administrative space.

While there was a focus on corruption as defined above on the lines of favouritism and bribery, the Dutch political system in practice revolved around factionalism. This demanded personal loyalty of the administrators to their political allies and patrons which was as important as loyalty to cities and provinces in the Dutch administrative world. While being condemned on paper as corruption, favouritism in the form of factionalism nevertheless dominated the Dutch political system. Although this was not directly attacked as a corrupt administrative practice every day, Hoenderboom and Kerkhoff argued that it did come to be alleged as corruption on certain occasions when norms of seniority, rotation etc. were transgressed. Using Price's argument, I have demonstrated here that there were other instances when such acts came to be accused under the label of corruption allegations. The paradox of labelling factionalism as 'corrupt' in the formal space while practising it in the informal space left open the opportunity for rival factions to use it against each other. Charges of nepotism thus were often used by administrators to

tarnish the image of their factional opponents. Corruption allegations, as such, were also triggered by factional infighting which made it a major political tool in the Dutch administrative world. Its usefulness was enforced by the presence of the 'public' (citizens with political rights) in the political space. Relevant pamphlets, petitions and books were addressed to this 'public' and to their need to be informed of all the corruption in the government. Of course, such pamphleteering was generously sprinkled with the language of specific political ideas of the day, and was interwoven with discussions of administrative corruption and reforms. Such repeated discussions, along with the political presence of the 'public' increased the focus on corruption and catalysed its political use in the Republic.

It was in this air that the VOC too, lived and breathed, at least in the Republic. The VOC, besides struggling with its own financial problems, was affected by the ongoing socio-political developments in the Republic. Moreover, the administration of the Company in the Republic remained deeply connected to the factional changes in the political institutions. The changing composition of the *vroedschap* of Amsterdam, for instance, was reflected in the composition of the *Heeren XVII* and the Amsterdam chamber of the VOC throughout the seventeenth century. This was further linked to the governor-general in Batavia who it seemed was often favourably inclined to the dominant faction in the *Heeren XVII*. With pertinent examples, I have shown this proximity between the political administrators in the Republic, the Company in the Republic and the Company in Batavia. Of course, when *burgemeesters* of Amsterdam were also members of the *Heeren XVII*, their political accountability was combined with their financial responsibility to the Company's shareholders. This meant that they had an image to save as political power-holders and a credibility to preserve as Company directors in the Republic. With the ongoing discussions on corruption, such social-*cum*-financial accountabilities became even more pronounced for the administrators in the Republic.

Corruption in the VOC, as was perceived by these administrators, came to be described mainly as the violation of the Company's monopoly. This was applied in combination with the

general prohibition against the use of bribery and favouritism in making appointments and executing duties. Corruption in the Company was, thus, perceived as violation of the loyalty to the *Heeren XVII* and the 'fatherland' that formed the underlying principal of the administrative behaviour of the Company officials. In the Republic, direct factional links between the *vroedschap* and the *Heeren XVII* ensured that politically there was an alignment of interests and ideas. Instances of corruption allegations against VOC officials in the Republic were, therefore, far fewer than overseas. In Batavia, excepting the governor-general, it was hard to align all political factions in the factories abroad with the *Heeren XVII* in the Republic. Only corruption allegations provided the opportunity to the *Heeren XVII* to disturb the factions abroad and realign them according to their preferences. It was in the Company's overseas factories that corruption in its strictest sense – that is, violation of monopoly and disloyalty to the 'fatherland' through illegal trade and other malpractices could happen. The *Heeren XVII* struggling with its financial and political responsibility to its investors and citizens in the Republic therefore diverted their attention to this form of overseas corruption among its officials.

The way the *Heeren XVII* did this was to send commissioners for investigating the VOC factories and the officials in Asia. From 1626 onwards, confronted by the heat of growing debates about corruption in the Republic and the struggle of the VOC to maintain its financial credibility, the *Heeren XVII* set up the office of the commissioner to investigate the Company's activities overseas. He was to be assisted by a committee that could accuse officials of corruption and displace them from their positions, if proven guilty. This mechanism made it possible to disturb the overseas network of factional safety and try to align it to the *Heeren XVII's* preference. Throughout the subsequent years therefore, despite attempts to challenge the monopoly of the Company, the *Heeren XVII* sternly held on to it. It showed how the *Heeren XVII* in the Republic that was so closely attached to the Dutch state (along with its inherent factionalism) was reluctant to let go of their most important means of overseas control – namely, the Company's monopoly. In the process, attention came to be focussed on the corruption of the Company

officials overseas. All these factors – the political situation in the Republic, the financial pressures within the Company, the ideological drive of a clique of philosophers and the factional strife together built up the momentum towards the events of 1684. After frequent deliberations and elaborate planning, Van Reede came to be appointed as the commissioner-general for investigating the Company's factories in India, and in Bengal in particular.

It brings us to the other side of our story – why Bengal? What was happening in Bengal around 1684 to make it the primary concern of the Company's corruption abroad? This question is answered through the study of the regional dynamics in Mughal Bengal in order to understand its effect on the presence of the VOC officials there. Bengal as a Mughal *subah* had earned the notoriety of being a corrupt area in the royal chronicles and was as much problematic for the Mughal emperors as it was for the *Heeren XVII* and the *Hoge Regering*. To understand why Bengal was considered corrupt, one needs to understand what corruption meant in the Mughal administrative world. Although perceived on the similar parameters of formal laws and the sovereignty in its governing system, corruption in the Mughal world was shaped in a different fashion than the Dutch Republic. Sovereign authority here rested in the single unit of the emperor unlike the Republic where it was shared by the provinces. All Mughal administrators were therefore required to display their love and loyalty to the emperor and his laws. The emperor however ruled his vast empire with the help of numerous *mansabdars* connected to him through the *mansabdari* system. This was the formal edifice of the informal factionalism which constituted the core of Mughal administration but was never acknowledged in the royal chronicles. To keep this large number of *mansabdars* and their factions in distant provinces under control, the Mughal emperors needed a pervading administrative ethos. It was more so in regions like Bengal which formed a volatile geo-political frontier of the empire with several active political forces as the local *zamindars*. These *zamindars* though, not formally allowed to participate in the vast Mughal administrative apparatus, were informally incorporated by the *mansabdars* in their daily administration of Bengal. The informal presence of these regional forces

in the formal Mughal machinery meant that the local political scenario remained highly fluid. Central control, therefore, needed to be continuously creative and flexible in order to sustain itself in this area. It was in order to control the Mughal officials in such regions with fluid relations that an administrative ethos was created and imposed. This ethos was shaped by the *munshis* (Mughal administrators) at higher levels in the court and it was expected that all *munshis* at all levels, including the emperor himself, were to adhere to this ethos. It was an impersonal code of conduct that advocated aloofness from wealth and non-favouritism while demanding personal loyalty to the sovereign and his laws. Corruption in this administrative system thus came to be perceived as violation of the *munshi* code of conduct which was disloyalty to the emperor through 'rebellion', acts of non-payment of revenue, bribery and undue favouritism. The fluid political space of Bengal with the informal *mansabdar-zamindar* nexus was always prone to instability and disruptions. As long as an equilibrium existed in this nexus, Bengal remained under the control of the Mughal administration. But on occasions of this alliance not working, the *zamindars* were likely to provide resistance to the Mughal administrators in Bengal. On the other hand, a stable *mansabdar-zamindar* alliance could also become powerful and pose a formidable threat to the Mughal throne. Both these cases created disruptions in the region and triggered allegations of 'rebellion' or corrupt thoughts and actions in the Mughal administrative world. It contributed to Bengal's notoriety of being disloyal to the Mughal emperors and this idea of Bengal as corrupt made its way steadily into the Mughal chronicles.

But the abundant resources of this region in the seventeenth century and its vibrant commercial connections with the rest of the world made it, despite its challenges, a lucrative province. This affluence coupled with its elusiveness were already reasons for anxiety for the *Heeren XVII*; the existing non-Dutch narratives about Bengal aggravated such anxieties even more. It is demonstrated here that it is through this way that these narratives and other VOC-Mughal administrative interactions influenced the perception of VOC corruption. From the 1670s with the increasing importance of this region for textiles in the Company's Europe-Asiatic

trade, accusations of corruption among the Company officials there began to be reported more. This had to do with the nature of the Company's presence in the fluid political space of Bengal which produced an informal encounter in practice that was different from the formal encounter in the Company's papers. In Bengal, the VOC officials held an administrative status as semi-*zamindars/ijaradars* within the Mughal governing machinery. It led to the pursuit of luxuries and personal ambitions by the Company officials there through forging links with local brokers and provincial Mughal *mansabdars*. The VOC officials in Bengal thus, as I have argued here, gained more leverage in the fluid political space of the region than their higher authorities desired. The *Heeren XVII's* efforts to keep a tight control over them was comprehensible in light of the *Estado's* earlier experience in Bengal, where the Portuguese officials detached themselves from the directives issued by the authorities in Goa and built a 'shadow empire' in and around the Sandwip islands. The *Heeren XVII* did not want the same to happen to the Dutch officials. But the regional dynamics of Bengal facilitated informal interactions between the Company and the Mughal officials which the *Heeren XVII* could not control; nor did they understand the nature of the Company officials' administrative presence there as semi-*zamindars/ijaradars*, interacting with the local brokers and villagers. This 'lived' encounter remained beyond the *Heeren XVII's* grasp which added to their anxieties and preoccupation with the region. Consequently, pamphlets in the Republic started complaining about the activities of the Company officials there. The fluidity and lack of transparency about the Company's position in Bengal and the elusiveness of their informal dealings with the Mughal *mansabdars* and the locals began shaping the formal discourse about the Company in Bengal towards a certain direction.

From quite early on in the seventeenth century, a rising market in the Dutch Republic for literary productions on Asia emerged. The pamphlets and books that were circulated in these years had a particular way of depicting the region of Bengal. Publications made both by outsiders as well as VOC employees tended to portray Bengal as a prosperous but perilous region where lawlessness was to be found in abundance. Most of this were narratives incorporated from

Portuguese texts and other existing European and Islamic accounts. Added to this, were the reports of the Company officials themselves about the corrupt Mughal administrators in this region. While being part of the Mughal administration informally, the Company officials also had to defend their position and factional connections to the *Heeren XVII*. They, therefore, chose to justify their opulent lifestyles and dealings with local potentates and Mughal nobles as necessary to survive the naturally corrupt setting in which they were operating. Bengal gradually acquired the stereotypical image of an unruly wealthy province with corrupt Mughal rule in the Company's papers. The encounter of the VOC officials with Mughal Bengal in theory created a formal hierarchy of a superior Dutch administrative ethos vis-à-vis the Mughal administrative world, which was distinctly different from the 'lived' encounter in practice. As much as it increased the focus on overseas corruption, it also resulted in the region of Bengal being connected to the perceptions of corruption in the VOC.

The year of 1684 when the Van Reede committee was sent to India with specific instructions to investigate Bengal was a result of the momentum set by all these ongoing developments. Studying the process behind the committee's formation, composition and the appointment of Van Reede as the commissioner reveals how it went. The political situation after 1672 saw the force of Valckenier and his faction in the States of Holland as well as in the Company's administration in the Republic. There was a need to prove to the citizens that the new administrators were capable of running the governance, both at home and abroad across the oceans and high seas. By then the VOC have become more than just a commercial Company and its expansion was accompanied by increasing profits. Back home in the Republic, the investors wanted their share of dividend at a time that money was deficit owing to bonds issued by the *Heeren XVII* to the state during 1672. Thus, the VOC administrators faced both political and financial pressure in these years in the Republic. Not surprisingly therefore, the dominant rhetoric that the VOC propagated in these years was that of corporate integrity and economic redress. The Company became more inclined towards a commercial image rather than a military

approach overseas. In the backdrop of criticism on how the Company officials were living princely and lavish lifestyles abroad, the VOC administration reacted by re-emphasising on its monopoly and its attempts to prevent corruption overseas. The clique of directors with new political ideas initially revolving around Hudde and joined later by men such as Van Beuningen, Huydecoper and others from the 1680s began focussing more on the concept of redress within the Company. This political, financial and ideological drive increased the urgency of sending a committee and a commissioner overseas. From 1626, commissioners had been appointed by the *Hoge Regering*. But this time, Van Reede and his committee was appointed by the *Heeren XVII*. There were long deliberations about who was to be chosen as the commissioner and the final decision of Van Reede being chosen was a matter of deep factional motives. The group of directors behind the redress committee of the 1680s in the VOC, mainly Huydecoper were allied to Van Reede and supported him. Van Reede had openly criticised his former patron, Van Goens' plans for colonising Ceylon which Huydecoper, among others, was also not particularly impressed with. Sharing commong interests and ideas, Van Reede became close to the dominant Huydecoper faction in the Republic. Thus, besides the political, economic and ideological factors, factionalism too played a massive role in the formation of the committee and the choice of Van Reede as the commissioner. From the 1660s, a number of commissioners were sent to Bengal in response to the growing complaints about corruption in this region. The reports of these commissioners confirmed such complaints provoking the *Heeren XVII* to take matters to notice. Moreover, the existing discourse about this region, written by men from both within and outside the Company increased the urgency of instructing the committee to specially investigate the factories of Bengal, along with other places in India and Ceylon.

The committee's operations and Van Reede's impression about corruption in Bengal showed that he accused certain officials working there of corruption. The way he formed his cases by collecting evidences show the formal-informal balance in the Company administration. His investigations also revealed the contrast between the 'lived' encounter of the Company

officials in Bengal and the formal discourse in the committee's reports. Van Reede eventually accused and targetted officials who belonged to the Van Goens faction. He did this under the formal façade of the Company in the capacity of a commissioner trying to inspect factories in Asia. It showed how corruption was politically used to realign factions in the VOC. Van Reede used many local brokers to assist him with his investigation and wrote about certain Mughal *mansabdars* who were more approachable than other Mughal officials. This showed the 'lived' experience of the VOC officials in Bengal where informal interactions were a regular part of their daily activities. Moreover, the contents of the allegations brought by Van Reede showed how certain Company officials in Bengal were used to appropriating elite lifestyles through illegal trading profits while asserting their influence on the local brokers and villagers. It revealed the personal ambitions of Company officials in Mughal Bengal as semi-*zamindars/ijaradars* which Van Reede failed to comprehend and convey to the *Heeren XVII* or the *Hoge Regering*. In a bid to impress upon its officials the Company's commercial rhetoric, Van Reede noted down instructions for the director and his council in Bengal reminding them to behave like merchants and not as princes or kings. In order to justify the Company officials' transgressions, he wrote a report about how the climate of Bengal and the corrupt ways of the 'Moors' had a bad influence on the Company administrators. Van Reede tapped in the existing discourse about Bengal and connected it to the problem of corruption. His rhetoric provided a corporate camouflage to the Company officials who otherwise held an informal administrative status in the Mughal political world of Bengal. Such an arrangement in fact made room for the *nabob* culture of the subsequent century to flourish in this region. The elusive regional dynamics of this place, thus, led to its notoriety of being a corruptible area in both the Mughal and the VOC discourse. But the Dutch East India Company elevated itself as having a superior administrative ethos by denigrating the Mughal administrators as a part of the local corrupted world of Bengal.

To conclude, this dissertation not only shows the political use of corruption allegations and its power in serving personal interests and in shaping stereotypical discourses, but also helps

the historian study the VOC in its overseas context. The Company, as this dissertation proves, was not a stable structure with a single, well-defined aim. It was filled with factional infighting and differences among its own administrators. The VOC was also unique in the way it had deep connections as a chartered Company with the Dutch state. Many directors in the *Heeren XVII* were simultaneously members of the city councils and the VOC represented the State's political and financial interests. The Company moreover functioned as an organisation that evolved gradually through different policies of expansion depending on the kind of regional authority it encountered in different places. As Arthur Weststeijn argued, expansion always remained a clear aim but as seen through this case study of Bengal, the ways to achieve it varied from one region to another. Most of the time it was a matter of negotiations but the degree of the negotiations too varied depending on the local factors. This roused tension between the *Heeren XVII* and the officials abroad trying to function along similar lines of set objectives. As much as the *Heeren XVII* would have liked to see it running in a unilineal direction, this was often not the case. Officials in different areas had their own informal channels to pursue power and personal profit. At the same time, they had to abide by the instructions and regulations of the *Heeren XVII*. In addition to this, there were occasional cliques of officials who were interested in different areas such as Batavia, Ceylon or Malabar and tried to promote their colonial interests in that region, under the façade of the monopoly of the Company. The VOC officials were not just expected to act according to the prescribed instructions of the *Hoge Regering* and the *Heeren XVII* but also produce a steady flow of information about everything. Such information catered to certain needs and pressure situations both in the Republic and abroad. Sometimes, they served as justifications for the actions of certain officials who otherwise did not comply to the VOC rules. At other times, they were used to form new administrative guidelines according to changed policies and decisions. Often, extracts from such official papers were published as pamphlets and books in the Republic in order to preserve the Company's image and give it a boost. The narratives of the Company found throughout the span of the seventeenth century depended on

who produced it and under what circumstances. They differed constantly and as discussed in this dissertation, took on an increasingly commercial turn in the final decades of the seventeenth century. Studying the VOC as a fixed organisation is thus less useful than seeing it as a prolonged process of experimentation and evolution where different goals came to be articulated by different administrators in different ways. As is reflected in this dissertation, the corporate image became the dominant policy and discourse of the Company in the 1680s. Corruption allegations, too, formed a vital part of both the Company's discourse and practice and revealed all the possible dimensions of studying the VOC. It revealed the administrative instability and factionalism, the formal and informal elements of the VOC-Mughal encounter and its association with Bengal that showed the importance of the regional dimension in studying the VOC in the seventeenth century.