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CHAPTER 8

DUTCH AND ENGLISH APPROACHES TO CROSS-CULTURAL TRADE IN MUGHAL INDIA AND THE PROBLEM OF TRUST (CA 1600-1630)*

Guido van Meersbergen

Introduction

The people of this country are generally faithless, without truth and honesty; exceeding subtle, covetous without mean or measure, never ceasing to beg and crave most basely, and impudently admitting to trade with us for fear and not for love; not to be gained by good usage nor any benefits; but their turns being once served the remembrance of it is straight forgotten.¹

I find the Mughals to be a nation whose word cannot be trusted, being highly experienced in the doctrine of Machiavelli. It is rare enough that they act in accordance with the king's edict or *farman*, and without the king's *farman* it is impossible to trade here, since the governors change annually and only seek to fill their pockets.²

The above-cited statements offer a taste of the ethnographic language used by representatives of the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) and *East India Company* (EIC) in Mughal India. These assertions, recorded by the English Captain Henry Pepwell and the Dutch senior merchant (*opperkoopman*) Pieter Gillis van Ravesteyn respectively, are drawn from a virtually endless stock of similar reflections on the presumed character of Asian people found in the archives of the East India Companies. Both Pepwell and Van Ravesteyn wrote down their impressions after a short stay in Surat,

* I would like to thank the editors of this volume and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. In addition, I gratefully acknowledge the input and support of my doctoral supervisors, Prof. Benjamin Kaplan and Prof. Stephen Conway.

¹ Henry Pepwell to Company, aboard the *Charles*, 7 March 1617: Frederick Charles Danvers and William Foster, eds., *Letters Received by the East India Company from its Servants in the East. Transcribed from the 'Original Correspondence' Series of the India Office Records*. 6 Vols. (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Company, 1896-1902), 5:157.

² 'Ick bevinde de Mogullen een natie, die men haer woort niet en mach geloven, sijnde seer ervaren in de leere van Machiavel, 't is qualick genoeg, dat coninckx schrijft ofte firman naer comen ende sonder coninckx firman is 't hier niet mogelijk te negotieeren, doordien de gouverneurs jaerlijckx veranderen, niet soeckende als haeren sack te vollen': Remonstrance about the present state of Surat by Pieter Gillisz van Ravesteyn, 22 October 1615: H. Terpstra, *De Opkomst der Westerkwartieren van de Oost-Indische Compagnie (Suratte, Arabië, Perzië)* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1918), 207-208. All translations are mine.

the principal port city of the Mughal Empire where the English opened a trading station in 1613 and the Dutch in 1616. The parallels between their experiences extended further. Like most Europeans engaged in global encounters during this period, Pepwell and Van Ravesteyn regarded their culturally different counterparts with varying degrees of suspicion, focusing their judgments on the issue of trustworthiness.

Economic historians have directed much attention to the question of what enables individuals to trust one another with money or goods in situations where information is limited and coercive power to enforce agreements is wanting. The answer famously offered by Douglass North is that, throughout history, institutions have fulfilled the role of reducing uncertainty in exchange and ordering human interaction.³ A textbook example of such an institutional innovation is the joint-stock company. While North's thesis provides a ready explanation of the flourishing of the East India Companies in terms of reduced transaction costs, its articulation of the problem of trust remains limited to principal-agent relations.⁴ Likewise, the work of Avner Greif did much to clarify the monitoring of agency relations within social or ethnic groups, yet tells us comparatively little about how trust functioned across cultural borders.⁵ If anything, the literature seems to suggest that cross-cultural trade was almost universally perceived as involving greater risks than trade relations based on kinship or ethnicity.⁶ As the East India Companies dealt almost exclusively with people who not only belonged to other political and legal entities but were also ethnically and religiously different, a fuller understanding of the implications of perceived otherness for such encounters is needed.

This chapter focuses on ethnographic discourse as a means to explore the mentalities of commercial agents. It suggests that cultural assumptions, prejudice, and anxieties about outsiders were just as important in shaping VOC and EIC approaches to overseas trade as was economic rationality. Clad in hyperbole, Pepwell's characterisation of Gujarat's inhabitants outlines the three most potent stereotypes about Indian traders and government officials contained in seventeenth-century Company writing; namely that they were deceitful, avaricious, and more susceptible to force than to peaceful means. Given that such claims were interwoven into first-hand accounts, the extent to which they

³ Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Douglass C. North, "Institutions," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 5, no.1 (1991): 97-112.

⁴ Douglass C. North, "Institutions, Transaction Costs, and the Rise of Merchant Empires," in *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires: State Power and World Trade 1350-1750*, ed. James D. Tracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 22-40.

⁵ Avner Greif, *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy: Lessons from Medieval Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁶ Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Janet Tai Landa, *Trust, Ethnicity, and Identity: Beyond the New Institutional Economics of Ethnic Trading Networks, Contract Law, and Gift-Exchange* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994).

rested on received notions is often concealed. Van Ravesteyn's assertion exemplifies this point. Ostensibly based on personal observation, his sociological explanation of the moral qualities of Mughal government – their lack of job-security induced office-holders to neglect the common good – in fact drew on the trope of Oriental despotism, in particular the notion that the emperor could arbitrarily dispose of all lands, goods, and persons.⁷ In addition, the generic reference to Machiavellianism served to reinforce his depiction of the Mughals as crafty, unscrupulous, and greedy. To dismiss such prose as merely rhetorical would be to overlook the profound influence of cultural discourse on the commercial strategies of the EIC and VOC.

The Dutch and English presence in seventeenth-century Mughal India was characterised by three overlapping approaches to cross-cultural trade. In line with policies pursued throughout maritime Asia, the East India Companies primarily endeavoured to obtain trading concessions from Indian authorities through a mixture of political negotiation and gunboat diplomacy.⁸ Early commercial interactions in Gujarat convinced EIC and VOC representatives of the desirability of soliciting privileges directly from the emperor. Citing questionable moral character and the unreliability of agreements made with local governors in support of their standpoint, Van Ravesteyn and others argued that written imperial commands (*farmans*) offered the highest obtainable degree of security for Company goods and personnel. However, formal diplomacy in the manner of Sir Thomas Roe's embassy to the court of Jahangir (1615-1618) proved extremely costly and only marginally successful. Furthermore, there were concerns about the efficacy of institutional arrangements with the central government, caused by doubts about its effective degree of control over officials in coastal Gujarat.⁹ As the practical limitations of imperial *farmans* became clear during recurrent disputes with Mughal administrators, Company agents increasingly suggested alternative strategies. A sizeable number of Dutch and English factors in Surat and elsewhere continued to call for the periodic use of naval force to complement diplomacy. In addition, a less conspicuous informal approach based on reaching accommodations with individual

⁷ See Joan-Pau Rubiés, "Oriental Despotism and European Orientalism: Botero to Montesquieu," *Journal of Early Modern History* 9, no. 2 (2005): 109-180.

⁸ See also: Adam Clulow, "European Maritime Violence and Territorial States in Early Modern Asia, 1600-1650," *Itinerario* 33, no. 3 (2009): 72-94.

⁹ Local governors were said to rule "as if they were kings themselves" ("off self coningen waeren"): W. Ph. Coolhaas, ed., *Pieter van den Broecke in Azië*. 2 Vols. (The Hague: Linschoten Vereeniging, 1962-1963), II:383. See also the remark that "The Governour of Suratt breaketh his promises and playeth rex with our people and busines." Thomas Rastell et al. to Company, Surat, 7 November 1621: William Foster, ed., *The English Factories in India 1618-1621 [to] 1668-1669. A Calendar of Documents in the India Office, British Museum and Public Record Office*. 13 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906-1927), I:323. (Hereafter *EFI*).

Mughal officials based on mutual benefit gradually emerged as the preferred mode of cross-cultural interaction for many agents on the ground.¹⁰

As this chapter seeks to demonstrate, ethnographic assumptions about Indian people and cultural notions of trust played a defining role in shaping each of these three lines of action. Before taking up the analysis of Dutch and English approaches to cross-cultural contact in Gujarat in the spheres of trade and politics respectively, the following section will briefly draw attention to the formative influence of previous experiences of extra-European encounter.

Preliminary Encounters

The attitudes displayed by the first generation of EIC and VOC agents in Mughal India is reminiscent of earlier responses to overseas encounter found in the vast literature of European travel writing. One observation about accounts of inter-oceanic voyages is that they are revealing of the degree of violence that characterised cross-cultural commerce. Not surprisingly, this antagonistic reality amplified the suspicion which accompanied dealings between strangers. The mindset betrayed by many narratives of encounter corresponds to what James Tracy called “the psychology of an interloper,” namely the manifestation of “anxieties that were proportional to the fragility of their own position in a vast and alien world.”¹¹ Apprehension was fuelled by ignorance about the inhabitants of little-known regions. Such was the case in 1595 on the first Dutch voyage to Asia, when none of the crew members dared to land at the Cape of Good Hope out of fear that “those African savages would have beaten us to death, even eaten us.”¹² Nonetheless, precaution was not unwarranted as fatal confrontations were far from uncommon. The ill-fated decision of the English trader William Bats to go on shore at Cape Verde unarmed may stand as an example.

This episode, which took place in 1566, is related in Richard Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations* as follows: “by the counsel of William Bats both Captaine and marchants and divers of the companie went

¹⁰ See also: Farhat Hasan, “Conflict and Cooperation in Anglo-Mughal Trade Relations during the Reign of Aurangzeb,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 34, no. 4 (1991), 351-360.

¹¹ James D. Tracy, “Introduction,” in ed. Tracy, *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires*, 1-21, at 9, 13.

¹² “dat ons die Africaense wilden soudon doot geslaeghen, jae opgegeeten hebben.”: J.K.J. de Jonge, ed., *De Opkomst van het Nederlandsch Gezag in Oost-Indië, 1595-1610: Verzameling van onuitgegeven stukken uit het Oud-Koloniaal Archief*. 13 Vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1862-1888), II:299.

without armour: for he sayd, that although the people were blacke and naked, yet they were civell.”¹³ Bats’ reasoning that the Cape Verdians were “civil” and therefore could be trusted was dismissed by Hakluyt as “foolish rashnes.”¹⁴ Although the editor’s comment was made after the small landing party was ambushed and almost wiped out, it reflects the widespread assumption that danger and deceit should always be expected a priori. Similar sentiments were expressed in an early EIC advice about cross-cultural dealings: “take heede you come not within their daunger, still expecting & feareing evill though there be noe cause.”¹⁵ Likewise, before setting out to the East Indies, Dutch Captain Cornelis de Houtman was instructed not to trust locals nor allow them to carry weaponry on board to prevent being overpowered.¹⁶ Ironically the latter was exactly what happened in September 1599 in Aceh, causing Cornelis’ death and the imprisonment of his brother Frederik. The record of comparable occurrences is long, and although one could with even greater ease compile a list of atrocities committed by Europeans, in the event of collisions the presumed “treachery” of non-Europeans was usually held responsible.

Besides resembling descriptions of encounters taking place prior to the commencement of EIC and VOC trade in India, the distrustful portrayals of Indians recorded in the first phase of Company activity also echo ethnographic ideas generated elsewhere in Asia. When Pieter van den Broecke visited the Arabian Peninsula in 1614, he noted about the *bania* traders in Shihr that “these *banias* are very treacherous and cunning, so that I truly want to have warned about them.”¹⁷ This judgment prefigured Van den Broecke’s long-term engagement with Gujarat and as such emphasises the importance of pre-obtained ideas in setting the scene for future encounters. Intentionally or not, his depiction dovetailed neatly with sixteenth-century characterisations of *banias* as “very ready to deceiue” and “great liars” by the Dutch traveller Jan Huygen van Linschoten and the Portuguese factor Duarte Barbosa respectively.¹⁸ Strikingly similar denouncements are found in different contexts across the Indian Ocean world. To name only two examples: EIC agent Edmund Scott wrote from Java that “[t]he Chyneses are very craftie

¹³ Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nation*. 12 vols. (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1969), VI:270.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Commission Third Voyage, 9 March 1607: George Birdwood, ed., *The Register of Letters &c. of the Governour and Company of Merchants of London trading into the East Indies: 1600-1619* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893), 117.

¹⁶ “betrout u op de innewoners des lantz niet, noch laetende deselve met geen gewere aen boort commen, opdat ghy in u schepen niet overweldicht wordt.” Instructions to Cornelis de Houtman, March 1598: W.S. Unger, ed., *De Oudste Reizen van de Zeeuwen naar Oost-Indië 1598-1604* (The Hague: Linschoten Vereeniging, 1948), 32.

¹⁷ “dese banjannen sijn hier zeer bedriechelijck en durtrapt, soodat ick zeer voor haar gewarschoudt wil hebben.” Coolhaas, *Pieter van den Broecke* 1:45.

¹⁸ John Huigen van Linschoten, *His Discours of Voyages into ye Easte & West Indies* (London: John Wolfe, 1598), 71; Mansel Longworth Dames, ed., *The Book of Duarte Barbosa: An Account of the countries bordering to the Indian Ocean and their inhabitants* 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1918-1921), 1: 112.

people in trading, using all kind of cosoning and deceit which may possible be devised,”¹⁹ while Captain Nicholas Downton when anchoring near Mocha (al-Mukha) declared that “there is no faithful performance to be expected from these truthless Turks.”²⁰

Whilst ardently scrutinising others, Company agents were not unaware that the reverse was true as well. In determining their actions they habitually considered how these might come across to others, even though the manner in which they envisioned this depended on their own perceptions. Regarding attempts to trade with the Islamic Governor of Mohéli, one of the Comoro Islands, Joris van Spilbergen remarked that it was important for the Dutch to show signs of good intentions, “because the Turks and Moors have the nature of Jews, [namely] that they do not trust easily.”²¹ Turning the usual suspicion inside out and projecting it onto the other party, Spilbergen arrived at a mirrored representation. If an opinion about the trustworthiness of Muslims and Jews remained unstated here, Spilbergen’s published account from 1605 featured a copperplate accompanied by a verse which warned that non-Christians should not be trusted.²² The equation of Muslims with Jews underlines that concrete experiences with specific groups overlapped with ideas about other people who were regarded as sharing a similar degree of otherness, thereby increasing the general sense of distrust about others which impregnated the discourses of Company agents and guided their actions.

Economic and anthropological studies assert that familiar identities are commonly treated as a proxy for a trading partner’s trustworthiness, which explains the importance of particularistic exchange relations along kinship or ethnic lines. Rituals and insignia that help to determine group identity are consequently seen as crucial signalling devices.²³ What is needed for our purposes is to consider how the problem of distrust was overcome between culturally different trading partners. As Philip D. Curtin pointed out, unfamiliar customs appear as unpredictable and therefore threatening to foreign

¹⁹ Edmund Scott, *An Exact Discourse of the Subtilties, Fashions, Pollicies, Religion, and Ceremonies of the East Indians, as well Chyneses as Javans, there abyding and dwelling* (London: Walter Burre, 1606), in William Foster, ed., *The Voyage of Sir Henry Middleton to the Moluccas 1604-1606* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1943), 174.

²⁰ Nicholas Downton to Henry Middleton in Mocha, aboard the *Darling*, 17 March 1610/11: *Letters Received* I: 63.

²¹ “want de Turcken ende Mooren hebben den aert vande loden datse niet geerne vertrouwen.” F.W. Wieder, et al., eds., *De Reis van Joris van Spilbergen naar Ceylon, Atjeh en Bantam, 1601-1604* (The Hague: Linschoten Vereeniging, 1933), 28.

²² “T’onchristen geslacht (wilt)/ niet te veel betrouwen/ want door hun onverstant/ compt men by haer in rouwen.” Ibid., 3. The copperplate depicts an incident in which Spilbergen and his crew were attacked by indigenous people off the West-African coast.

²³ Landa, *Trust, Ethnicity, and Identity*, ix-xiii, 133-135. Note that economic experiments indicate that people preferentially trust similar-looking partners: Karl Sigmund, “Sympathy and Similarity: The Evolutionary Dynamics of Cooperation,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 106, no.21 (2009): 8405-8406.

onlookers.²⁴ More recently, Harry Liebersohn emphasised that the stranger two cultures are to one another, the greater is the importance of symbolic acts, in particular gift giving.²⁵ It follows that a climate for trust could be created once a common ground in which signs and rituals have shared meanings had been established.²⁶ Practically every account of cross-cultural interaction described the documents and speeches that were exchanged during the first meeting, the material objects and foodstuffs presented and received, and the honorific ceremonies performed. Signs of hospitality and goodwill and reciprocity of gift exchange appear to have been the most effective means of creating an impression of trustworthiness.²⁷ When both sides understood the aforementioned rituals as codes of polite and peaceful interaction, their repeated performance created routines of communication which rendered expectations about behaviour more predictable.²⁸

Knowledge about successful previous encounters provided an additional stimulus to trust. Take, for instance, the Portuguese traveller Duarte Lopes, who from the record of peaceful interactions between his compatriots and the inhabitants of Malindi on the East-African coast deduced that: “[a]s a rule, the people are friendly, truthful, and familiar with strangers.”²⁹ Their reputation for reliability (truthfulness) was incorporated into the geographical works of Linschoten and John Pory, who embedded Lopes’s positive characterisation of Malindi’s inhabitants in a discussion of their social condition, mentioning housing, dress, and wealth. “In briefe,” Pory concluded, apparently implying a connection between such societal attributes and moral character, “the inhabitants are a kind, true-hearted, & trustie people.”³⁰ This example confirms two important points: evaluations of a foreign society as a whole had bearing on the reputation of its individual members, and those characteristics that corresponded to European norms of civility led to estimations which impacted positively on trust.³¹

²⁴ Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade*, 1.

²⁵ Harry Liebersohn, *The Return of the Gift: European History of a Global Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 6.

²⁶ Insights from game-theory suggest that the meaning of signals is entirely based on convention: Brian Skyrms, *Signals: Evolution, Learning, & Information* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1-7.

²⁷ Michael Harbsmeier, “Gifts and Discoveries: Gift Exchange in Early Modern Narratives of Exploration and Discovery,” in *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange*, eds. Gadi Algazi, Valentin Groebner and Bernhard Jussen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 381-410.

²⁸ See also: Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

²⁹ *A Report of the Kingdom of Congo, and of the Surrounding Countries; Drawn out of the Writings and Discourses of the Portuguese, Duarte Lopez, By Filippo Pigafetta, in Rome, 1591*, trans. Margarite Hutchinson (London: John Murray, 1881), 123.

³⁰ *A Geographical Historie of Africa, Written in Arabicke and Italian by Iohn Leo a More, borne in Granada, and brought up in Barbarie*, trans. John Pory (London: George Bishop, 1600), 28; *Discours of Voyages*, 213.

³¹ About norms of civility: Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250-1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 111-117; Ernst van den Boogaart, “Colour

Commercial Interactions

Practically all business in early modern Gujarati port towns was conducted through the intermediation of brokers, as few European observers failed to point out.³² One of the fullest descriptions of this practice is provided by the sixteenth-century Venetian traveller Cesare Federici, who reported that in Cambay trade was handled by “certain Brokers which are Gentiles and of great authority.”³³ Upon a merchant’s arrival on shore one of these brokers took charge of all goods and ordered his servants to unload them, pay custom charges, and carry the merchandise into the lodgings reserved for its owner. All of this took place, Federici asserts, with “The Marchant not knowing any thing thereof, neither custome, nor charges.”³⁴ In Federici’s account this appeared like the ideal settlement: the foreign merchant had nothing to worry about besides the decision whether or not to sell and buy against the prevailing price, and the broker was guaranteed of the exclusive right to transact on the merchant’s behalf. However, for this practice to work it was crucial that the merchant trusted that his broker would not cheat him, which added to the risks that accompanied selling on credit. This factor complicated the picture painted by Federici and caused many of the real or imagined difficulties which Company employees ran into.

The earliest documented dispute involving sale on credit by the EIC occurred in 1609, when Muqarrab Khan, *mutasaddi* (town governor) of Surat, bought a cargo of lead from the English factor William Finch and arranged for the merchant-broker Tapidas Parekh to reimburse the sum of 15,000 *mahmudis*. Following news that a ship which Tapidas owned had been seized by the Portuguese and wrecked near Goa, the broker was imprisoned by Surat’s authorities on account of outstanding debts.³⁵ His house and goods were seized upon to pay his creditors, of whom the EIC was just one. To make matters worse, Tapidas’ associate fled Surat to escape payment claims. In a letter to Captain William Hawkins, Finch admitted that the full sum would not be recovered, yet stressed in his defence that: “If you shall think it very indiscreetly done by me to trust him, I would have your Worship to take notice, that as then no man in the city mistrusted or once dreamed of so strange an accident.”³⁶ Finch’s

Prejudice and the Yardstick of Civility: The Initial Dutch Confrontation with Black Africans, 1590-1635,” in *Racism and Colonialism*, ed. Robert Ross (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 1982), 33-54.

³² D.W. Caland, ed., *De Remonstrantie van W. Geleynssen de Jongh* (The Hague: Linschoten Vereeniging, 1929), 9-10. See also: Michael N. Pearson, “Brokers in Western Indian Ocean Port Cities Their Role in Servicing Foreign Merchants,” *Modern Asian Studies* 22, no. 3 (1988): 455-472.

³³ Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations*, 5:375.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 376.

³⁵ William Foster, ed., *Early Travels in India 1583-1619* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921), 131.

³⁶ William Finch to William Hawkins, Surat, 12 July 1609: *Letters Received I*: 25.

explanation suggests that a reputation mechanism based on available information about Tapidas' past conduct had encouraged him to trust the broker, and according to economic theory this experience would rule out future transactions with this individual.³⁷ However, the conclusion Finch drew from the incident had bearing on the collective, given that he regarded it as a proof of "the villainy of these people and the little confidence that ought to be reposed in them," and resolved that it was to serve as "a warning to me for ever trusting more whilst I am in Surat."³⁸

Finch's exclamation was matched by countless contemporary statements expressing similar sentiments, underlining that fierce mistrust and prejudice about cultural others was a dominant and stable feature of EIC and VOC correspondence. One could quote the belief of the EIC factors in Surat that "[t]here is no trust to the promises of Moors if the performance tend not to their profit,"³⁹ Van den Broecke's statement that "one may not belief nor trust the words of Moors,"⁴⁰ or the assertion of two Englishmen in Cambay that little credence should be given to their Indian brokers: "wee knowe they are men that have little faith, troth, nor honesty, and this our opinion of them that they practize nothinge more then to cozen us and gett our monny."⁴¹ John Browne revealed his discomfort when trading in the Indian marketplace, ruled as it was by unfamiliar customs that to him appeared counterproductive to trust: "We are here never sure of any bargain till we have it in our hands; custom here (though an ill one) giveth advantage to make a shameless retreat from their words."⁴² Finally, Van Ravesteyn warned his countrymen against supplying merchandise to Indians without receiving prior payment, claiming that "these nations are not to be trusted, and even if they have agreed on a price, once the goods are in their possession they will give whatever they want."⁴³ Persistent misgivings about the trustworthiness of Indian brokers notwithstanding, the Companies could not do business without them. This predicament was acknowledged in an instruction issued to the Dutch Surat factors in 1632, which explicitly ordered

³⁷ On reputation mechanisms: Greif, *Institutions*, 58-59, 62-71.

³⁸ William Finch to William Hawkins, Surat, 12 July 1609: *Letters Received*, 1:25. Note that, despite these inauspicious beginnings, Tapidas and his kinsmen continued to work with the EIC throughout the seventeenth century: Makrand Mehta, *Indian Merchants and Entrepreneurs in Historical Perspective* (Delhi: Academic Foundation, 1991), 65-90.

³⁹ Surat Factors to Thomas Roe, Surat, 23 July 1616: *Letters Received*, 4:323.

⁴⁰ "dat men de mooren woorden geen gelooff geven mach noch vertrouwen." Dutch National Archives, The Hague (hereafter NL-HaNA) 1.04.02 (VOC), inv. no. 1084: Pieter van den Broecke to Batavia, Surat, 22 April 1625, f. 48r.

⁴¹ Joseph Salbank and Richard Lancaster to Surat, Cambay, 27 November 1621: *EFI 1618-1621*, 344.

⁴² John Browne to Company, Swally, 10 February 1617: *Letters Received*, 5:76.

⁴³ 'alsoo dese natien niet en sijn te betrouwen, ende al is 't schoon dat se prijs hebben gemaect, als 't goet wech hebben, geven daer naer wat selver willen': Terpstra, *Westerkwartieren*, 215.

them to continue to buy through local middlemen because the latter possessed superior knowledge of the market.⁴⁴

One method through which the EIC sought to ensure the loyalty of their brokers was by moving them away from their native environment, which was intended to make them more fully reliant on the Company and less free to pursue their own agenda.⁴⁵ Another preferred strategy was to engage in long-term dealings with the same individual or family network, thus increasing predictability and building up understandings based on mutual advantage. If relatively steady commercial relationships with some Indians took shape through these means, this did little to alleviate group prejudice. Thus, in 1617 the English factors in Surat acknowledged that their broker had proven his endeavours on behalf of the EIC, but retained their judgment that “otherwise he differeth not from the rest of his profession, base, disordered and deceitful.”⁴⁶ In the absence of stable business connections, the decision which broker to confide in ultimately depended on personal judgment. The advice which Richard Cocks gave to a fellow factor in Japan expressed this position clearly. According to Cocks, it was better to entrust Asian intermediaries with goods than to sell no goods at all, provided that they were reputable: “you may trust men which you know are to be trusted. For though I advise you not to trust the Company’s goods without ready payment, yet that is to be understood such as are not to be trusted.”⁴⁷ Unsurprisingly, finding this delicate balance proved too subtle for many Company agents, the majority of whom never quite shook off the fear of being cheated.

Commercial interactions also had a second, official, side to them. In Surat the two principal office-holders exerting control over trade matters were the *mutasaddi* and the *shahbandar* (harbour master), who were in charge of civic administration and the customs house, respectively.⁴⁸ Goods could not be cleared before their price was fixed, tolls were paid, and a stamp of approval was received. Moreover, permission was required for ships to load or unload and for persons to come upon shore.⁴⁹ Consequently, the *mutasaddi* was in a position to impose terms on the Companies and, if wishing to do so, impede their trade, although he could not act with impunity. Complaints from the merchant

⁴⁴Ann Bos Radwan, *The Dutch in Western India 1601-1632: A Study of Mutual Accommodation* (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd, 1978), 97.

⁴⁵ See for example: Edward Knipe and William Jesson to Surat, Agra, 12 November 1645: *EFI 1642-1645*, 300.

⁴⁶ Surat factors to Company, 26 February 1617: *Letters Received*, 5:115.

⁴⁷ Richard Cocks to Richard Wickham in Edo, Firando, 25 July 1614: *Letters Received*, 2:69.

⁴⁸ About the office of *mutasaddi*: Jorge Flores, “The Sea and the World of the *Mutasaddi*: A profile of port officials from Mughal Gujarat (c. 1600-1650),” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 21, no. 1 (2011): 55-71.

⁴⁹ M.P Singh, *Town, Market, Mint and Port in the Mughal Empire 1556-1707: an Administrative-cum-Economic Study* (New Delhi: Adam Publishers, 1985), 194-206; Murari Khumar Jha, “The Mughals, merchants and the European Companies in the 17th century Surat,” *Asia Europe Journal* 3, no.2 (2005): 269-283.

community repeatedly led to the dismissal of port town governors, yet this check on their power hardly altered the image conveyed by Dutch and English accounts, which are filled with allegations of arbitrary use of power and the breaking of promises.⁵⁰

Before the English had even settled in Surat, Nicholas Downton ascribed the difficulties which the EIC experienced to the excess of confidence that was put in “the show of welcome made by this dissembling and faithless people,” voicing his frustration at what he considered as the deceptive political manoeuvring and “fickle favour” of the Mughal authorities.⁵¹ Dutch views regarding local government in Surat neatly resembled those of their English colleagues.⁵² We already noted Van Ravesteyn’s argument that trade without imperial license was impossible because of “the untrustworthiness of this nation,” to which he added that even *farmans* hardly restrained the rapacious conduct of local governors.⁵³ Like Francisco Pelsaert a decade later, Van Ravesteyn told his superiors that Mughal office-holders used every means to amass income at the expense of the commonwealth, motivated thereto by uncertainty of maintaining their administration.⁵⁴ He also believed that the VOC faced a more immediate consequence from the rotation of office-holders, which had direct bearing on the problem of trust. Namely that decrees issued by sitting governors could not be depended upon because they were frequently disregarded by their successors.⁵⁵

While soliciting imperial *farmans* remained a principal strategy aim, Company agents stationed in India increasingly recommended informal strategies which complemented, or provided alternatives to, institutional arrangements. The Dutch authors of the “Cordt relaes” (ca. 1617-1620) remarked that import and export duties were negotiable as long as one cultivated a good relationship with the officers of the custom house.⁵⁶ Furthermore, rather than spending lavishly on an official embassy, they recommended acquiring the assistance of a Mughal courtier to act as the VOC’s solicitor. To ensure his or her continuous patronage it was essential to sustain personal relations, to which end periodic gifts in cash or kind were advisable.⁵⁷ Alternatively, Wouter Heuten and his co-authors suggested the brokerage

⁵⁰ Farhat Hasan, “The *Mutasaddi* of Surat – Evidence of Persian Records of the 17th Century,” in: *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress. 53rd Session (1992-93) Warangal* (Delhi: Indian History Congress, 1993), 276-280.

⁵¹ Instruction by Nicholas Downton, Dabhol, 24 February 1612: *Letters Received*, 1:157.

⁵² See also: James D. Tracy, “Asian Despotism? Mughal Government as seen from the Dutch East India Company Factory in Surat,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 3, no. 3 (1999), 256-280.

⁵³ “om de ongetrouwicheijt deser natie”: Terpstra, *Westerkwartieren*, 211.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 209; D.H.A. Kolff and H.W. van Santen, eds., *De Geschriften van Francisco Pelsaert over Mughal Indië, 1627. Kroniek en Remonstrantie* (The Hague: Linschoten Vereeniging, 1979), 251.

⁵⁵ Terpstra, *Westerkwartieren*, 213.

⁵⁶ Coolhaas, *Pieter van den Broecke* 2:382.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 391-392.

of individuals such as Abraham de Duits, an Antwerp jeweller employed at Jahangir's court who was said to possess intimate knowledge of local culture and customs.⁵⁸

EIC and VOC representatives universally agreed that gifts were essential to gain favour with influential persons in the imperial administration and smooth the process of social and political communication. Experience in dealing with Mughal officials taught them which items were in demand and they defined their gift-giving strategies accordingly. Thomas Kerridge asserted that “[t]hings best for presents generally with all the people of these countries are novelties and things of little worth,”⁵⁹ while Heuten advised that “presents should not be expensive but artful.”⁶⁰ Both descriptions implied exotic curiosities that would appeal to the so-called “curious” nature of the inhabitants of Mughal India.⁶¹ Again we see that cultural assumptions about Indian people were influential in determining Dutch and English approaches to cross-cultural exchange, as likewise they were in conditioning the manner in which encounters were perceived. Pepwell's complaint that “their turns being once served the remembrance of it is straight forgotten” was only one of many truisms employed to illustrate the alleged fickleness of Indians.⁶² It served to support his argument that neither material benefits nor agreements based on mutual understanding sufficed to bind local traders and functionaries to the English, which seriously compromised their reliability as partners. The distrustful attitude which permeates testimonies of commercial interactions also informed approaches to political and diplomatic dealings, and constituted an important factor in justifying the use of naval aggression by the Dutch and English Companies.

Accommodation and Conflict

In 1615 the EIC made their most impressive bid at securing an imperial *farman* when King James I was persuaded to send a royal ambassador to the Mughal court.⁶³ As a diplomatic assignment with royal authorisation aimed at establishing official relations, Thomas Roe's embassy was an archetypal institutional undertaking aimed at creating formal arrangements to safeguard the legal status of English

⁵⁸ Ibid., 389.

⁵⁹ Thomas Kerridge to Nicholas Downton, Ajmer, 22 November 1614: *Letters Received* 2:152.

⁶⁰ “dat de presenten niet costel. maer cunstich mosten wesen”: Coolhaas, *Pieter van den Broecke*, 2:389.

⁶¹ “nyschierich”: Ibid., 385.

⁶² Henry Pepwell to Company, aboard the *Charles*, 7 March 1617: *Letters Received*, 5:152.

⁶³ William Foster, ed., *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India 1615-19 as Narrated in his Journal and Correspondence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926).

trade in Mughal domains. However, reality proved more haphazard and English hopes and expectations were repeatedly thwarted. Exasperated by his failure to obtain the desired document, Roe wrote to the English ambassador in Constantinople that Jahangir was not willing to bind himself upon terms of reciprocity, but only permitted the EIC to stay for the duration of his favour. Consequently, no general license but only restricted permits were forthcoming, “and those revocable at pleasure and subject to daily alterations.”⁶⁴ After having spent more than two years at Jahangir’s court, Roe advised the Company that the idea of procuring permanent capitulations should be discarded: “All the government depends on the present will, where appetite only governs the lords of the kingdom.”⁶⁵ On the eve of his departure, Roe was at last granted the long-awaited articles by Prince Khurram, who acted as *subahdar* (provincial governor) of Gujarat. The ink on this document was hardly dry when the English factors resumed their complaints that the Mughal officials in Surat only respected those stipulations that accorded with their personal opinions.⁶⁶

Frustrated by the protracted nature of dealings at the Mughal court, the seemingly limited assurance of formal agreements, and the recurring disputes at the local level, employees of both Companies increasingly advocated the use of maritime power. Justifications of naval display were supported by conjectures about the character of the people at whom they were aimed, emphasising their supposed dishonesty, susceptibility to force, and haughtiness. Thomas Kerridge stated that the arrival of English ships in Surat would serve to “affright this people whom nothing but fear will make honest,” and Wouter Heuten suggested that the presence of a Dutch fleet was desirable “to gain some esteem with these arrogant Moors.”⁶⁷ The idea that remedies for perceived abuses were more readily obtained by arresting native shipping than by seeking formal redress was a strong current in European activity all over India as well as beyond.⁶⁸ In 1620, the EIC agents in Surat explicitly used ethnological assumptions to endorse such forceful action: “The inborne cunning of the people of India is incredible. The abuse of the Guzerates will not be remedied but by one meanes only, namely, by deteyning their junckes.”⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Thomas Roe to Constantinople, Mandu, 21 August 1617: *Letters Received*, 6:298.

⁶⁵ Thomas Roe to Company, Ahmadabad, 14 February 1618: *EFI 1618-1621*, 14.

⁶⁶ Thomas Kerridge and Thomas Rastell to Company, Surat, 9 and 15 February 1619: *EFI 1618-1621*, 59.

⁶⁷ “om bij dese superbieuse Mooren wat in aensien te geraecken”: Coolhaas, *Pieter van den Broecke*, 2:390; Thomas Kerridge to Surat factors, Agra, 7 September 1613: *Letters Received*, 1:282.

⁶⁸ Subrahmaynam convincingly argued this point supported by examples of Portuguese, Dutch, English, French and Danish aggression: Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India 1500-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 155-160, 275-281.

⁶⁹ Surat factors to Company, Surat, 18 February 1620: *EFI 1618-1621*, 183.

This policy led to the first significant break in Anglo-Mughal and Mughal-Dutch relations. In September 1621, the Dutch ships *Sampson* and *Weesp* attacked six Indian vessels in the Red Sea, thereby violating the passes of safe conduct granted by the Dutch chief factor in Mocha, Willem de Milde. Although in line with orders to arrest ships which belonged to Portuguese allies or which transported Portuguese goods, this rash undertaking was unjustifiable even by VOC standards and caused a serious outcry. In the aftermath of this event, De Milde was imprisoned in Yemen and the VOC's personnel in Surat put under house arrest by the local authorities.⁷⁰ Likewise in 1621, EIC ships detained a large vessel owned by Prince Khurram in an attempt to put pressure on Surat's officials. Mughal repercussions revealed the immense imbalance between European ascendancy at sea and vulnerability on the mainland. EIC activity in Surat, Agra, Ahmadabad, and Cambay was brought to a halt and English goods were seized, while English merchants suffered imprisonment in Agra and Surat. On their part, the EIC captured a total of eight Indian ships and kept its crews and passengers hostage. A final settlement with Surat's government was reached in September 1624, after which President Thomas Rastell informed the Company that a more peaceful line of action would henceforth be advisable.⁷¹

With this change of direction the English factors adopted a stance which the Dutch chief in Surat, Pieter van den Broecke, had been promoting for some time. His deployment of a language of honour and prestige is telling about the ways in which Company agents imagined they could acquire a reputation for credibility with local merchants and authorities. Upon hearing of the actions of the *Weesp* and *Sampson*, Van den Broecke lamented that the VOC's reputation had been blemished for the whole world to see by an act that went against "the nature of our pious Batavians," and feared that as a result "our honest name of word-keeping people will remain obscured."⁷² If the VOC wished to continue to trade in Surat, he pleaded in 1624, it would be necessary to deal "more civilly" with the inhabitants. Counter to a deep-seated discourse, he argued that friendship would accomplish more than force. Following a practice which the EIC had already begun to implement, Van den Broecke suggested that the

⁷⁰ Surat factors to Abraham van Uffelen, 30 May 1622: NL-HaNA, VOC, 1076, f. 239r; Pieter van den Broecke to Heren XVII, Surat, 11 January 1624: NL-HaNA, VOC, 1079, ff. 225v-226r.

⁷¹ Thomas Rastell et al. to Company, Swally, 14 February 1625: *EFI 1624-1629*, 60.

⁷² "buyten de natuere van onsse vromen batavieren": Pieter van den Broecke to Jan Pieterszoon Coen, Surat, 1 February 1622; NL-HaNA, VOC, 1076, f. 41r; 'onsen eerlycke naem van woort houdende lieden verduijstert sal blijven': Surat factors to Abraham van Uffelen, 30 May 1622: NL-HaNA, VOC, 1076, f. 239r.

ideal way for the Dutch to ingratiate themselves and restore credit was to freight Indian-owned goods on Company ships going to Persia and the Red Sea ports.⁷³

Transporting Indian goods was a means to utilise otherwise unused space, but it also offered a loophole for private traders to transport goods on the account of Asian merchants, especially since influential persons such as Surat's *shahbandar* and the so-called merchant-prince Virji Vohra were exempted from paying freight costs by the VOC. In defiance of an official prohibition issued by Governor-General Jan Pieterszoon Coen in 1629, the Dutch factors in Surat continued to transport Indian goods on freight.⁷⁴ Their decision was realistic considering the demands of their position, which required them to steer a course between corporate interests and local logics and codes. Since the VOC had to borrow large sums of money from local merchants to finance their trade in Gujarat, the Dutch factors knew they could not afford to alienate them. Representing an often obscure power, Company employees had to make the most of their abilities to build up personal networks and attain social status in Indian commercial and political society. The very nature of a commercial enterprise covering vast geographical expanses tied together by slow communication lines accounted for a certain degree of autonomy for agents on the ground, and an expectation to adapt policy directives to local circumstances was implied in many instructions.⁷⁵ What directors were unequivocal about, however, was that the modes that were adopted should be befitting merchants, in other words: cost-efficient.

This position is reflected in the instructions given to Jan van Hasel in 1628 upon succeeding Van den Broecke as head of Dutch trade in Surat. Coen criticised the habit of VOC officials to incur great costs for pomp and ostentation in order to "seek honour and reputation with the Moors." He believed that expenses could be diminished by two thirds, mainly by cutting down on excesses in the maintenance of large retinues consisting of native servants and horses.⁷⁶ Coen's reprimand is revealing of the representational strategies used by VOC agents in Mughal India, which were intended to mimic the ceremonial language through which local elites expressed their power and standing. Describing his visit to Surat in 1623, the Italian traveller Pietro Della Valle asserted that the chief English and Dutch

⁷³ "salder sivilder met de inwoonders gehandelt moeten worden": Pieter van den Broecke to Heren XVII, Surat, 16 January 1624: NL-HaNA, VOC, 1079, f. 232r. See also: Van den Broecke to Heren XVII, Surat, 16 March 1623: NL-HaNA, VOC, 1079, f. 224v; Van den Broecke to Amsterdam Chamber, Surat, 12 March 1624: NL-HaNA, VOC, 1082, f. 10r; Van den Broecke to Heren XVII, Surat, 24 April 1625: NL-HaNA, VOC, 1084, f. 135r.

⁷⁴ Hans Walther van Santen, *de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie in Gujarat en Hindustan, 1620-1660* (Meppel: Krips Repro, 1982), 52-56.

⁷⁵ See for example: Concept regulations Heren XVII, Amsterdam, 26 August 1626: NL-HaNA, VOC, 314, ff. 382-384.

⁷⁶ "met groote onkosten te doen, pracht ende staet te voeren, eere ende reputatie by de Mooren soecken": Instruction for Jan van Hasel, Batavia, 18 July 1628: NL-HaNA, VOC, 1095, f. 321r.

officials “live in sufficient splendor and after the manner of the greatest persons of the Country.”⁷⁷ Their use of flags, banners, horsemen, armed foot soldiers, and typically Asian status symbols such as palanquins and peacock-feather fans, signals the willingness of European Company agents in India to adapt to local norms.

By the end of the 1620s, despite the enduring influence of cultural prejudice and distrust, there were various individuals on both sides of the encounter who displayed the flexibility required for effective cross-cultural dealings. Wollebrant Geleynssen de Jongh, whose prolonged stay in Gujarat made him a well-placed adviser, suggested that to win the favour of Mughal governors it was imperative to “accommodate oneself to his humours,” which could be achieved by visiting him often and spending time in his company, by presenting him with liquors, or going out hunting together.⁷⁸ In similar fashion, President Kerridge and his Council assured their directors in 1628 that they strove to preserve social contacts with Surat’s elites, “which by often visiting, presents, and invitations we have obtained in an unwonted measure.”⁷⁹ The personal networks built up through these means benefitted Company trade greatly, and few individuals had a better grasp of the value of this social capital than Van den Broecke. Upon his final departure from Surat he went around town to take his leave from the principal merchants and government officials, while making sure to introduce Van Hasel in a stylised attempt to transmit the goodwill and relationships he had built up in more than a decade unto his successor.⁸⁰ While such accommodations did not prevent future breaches of relations, they probably kept them from occurring as frequently as they otherwise might have.

Conclusion

In the opening decades of the seventeenth century and beyond, ethnological assumptions, cultural stereotypes, and distrust were central to the strategies of Dutch and English East India Company agents for dealings with their Asian counterparts. It has been possible to speak of the VOC and EIC jointly as “the Companies” within the context of this chapter because both their written discourses and their policies regarding trade in Northwest-India displayed striking similarities. Most of the cited sources dealt

⁷⁷ Edward Grey, ed., G. Havers, trans., *The Travels of Pietro Della Valle in India: From the Old English Translation of 1664*. 2 Vols. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1892), 1:41.

⁷⁸ “u selven te accommoderen naer sijn humeur”: Caland, *Remonstrantie*, 46.

⁷⁹ President Kerridge et al. to Company, Surat, 4 January 1628: *EFI 1624-1629*, 211.

⁸⁰ Coolhaas, *Pieter van den Broecke*, 2:357.

with Muslims, who constituted the majority among Mughal elites, yet references to *bania* merchants show that accusations of untrustworthiness were not reserved for a single group. Quite the contrary, descriptions of dissembling, greedy, and inconstant people are found in accounts written by Company servants in all parts of Asia. To a certain degree, proximity could serve to familiarise the other and create the mutuality conducive to social exchange and trust. This becomes more fully visible in the later seventeenth century, when brokerage relations and communications with Indian officials had become more firmly entrenched as a normative part of Company agents' daily routine. Still it should be stressed that cultural suspicion continued to be a dominant feature of Dutch and English discourses and that individual bonds of trust did not efface negative group stereotypes. Hence, cultural preconceptions remained a crucial factor alongside a person's reputation based on past performance in determining the degree of trust placed in them.

The lasting significance of such intangible matters as cultural understanding, honour, and prejudice for Company attitudes demonstrates that to account for the complex factors that shaped cross-cultural interaction solely in terms of institutional arrangements is insufficient. Although the Companies looked towards institutions for legal protection of their persons and goods, access to courts of justice or the possession of written agreements did not suffice to solve the problem of trust. As we have seen, employees of the Dutch and English Companies drew upon a variety of informal methods to negotiate economic and political relations with Indian merchants and magistrates, which functioned in conjunction with the corporate deployment of official diplomacy and maritime force. Agents with knowledge of local customs and languages, or intermediaries capable of adapting to foreign etiquette, played a key role in making or breaking the precarious relations between the Companies and local elites, as well as in upholding the reputation of the trading group they represented. Given that cross-cultural commerce ultimately took shape through interpersonal relations on the ground, it is evident that the accommodative strategies of individual Company agents and their Indian counterparts were indispensable in enabling the framework nominally erected through formal agreements to function in practice.

It is hoped that this contribution has revealed that our comprehension of VOC and EIC involvement in Asian trade is greatly enriched when approaching it not primarily from the perspective of monopolies, profit margins, and protection costs, but through a focus on the experiences and mentalities of the individuals who forged cross-cultural links on the level of face-to-face contact. Further research needs to ask how local perceptions of Europeans mediated commercial intercourse and influenced cross-cultural trust from the South Asian point of view. Initial investigations suggest that, as

the mirror image of the European idea of Indian treachery, enmity and the notion of “Frankish deceit” were likewise present in South and Southeast Asian accounts.⁸¹ Additional work in this field is likely to shed more light on the crucial role of cultural (mis)understanding and mutual suspicion in establishing viable means of operating between strangers.

⁸¹ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Taking Stock of the Franks: South Asian Views of Europeans and Europe, 1500-1800,” *Indian Social History Review* 42, no.1 (2005): 69-100; Anthony Reid, “Early Southeast Asian categorizations of Europeans,” in *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Stuart B. Schwartz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 268-294.