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Chapter 2

Diplomacy in a provincial setting: The East India Companies in seventeenth-century Bengal and Orissa

Guido van Meersbergen

On 22 October 1634, the clerk responsible for keeping the diary drawn up in Batavia Castle (*Dagh-Register gehouden in't Casteel Batavia*) diligently summarized the latest intelligence about trade in the Bay of Bengal. His employer, the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, had just commenced trading operations in the Mughal provinces of Bengal and Orissa, and a barque arriving that day carried initial snippets of information concerning the first Dutch factory in the region, recently established in the small port town of Hariharpur.¹ So far trade had been slack, hampered by a shortage of merchandise and high prices. This unpromising yet otherwise rather ordinary entry took a surprising turn, however, when discussing another recent entrant into the Bengal trade, the English East India Company.² The building of an English factory in Hariharpur had commenced with the consent of the *nawab* (provincial governor) of Orissa, but, according to Dutch reports, once the structure was nearly completed, the *nawab* had it entirely 'destroyed and pulled down again'.³ The reason given for this reversal of fortunes was that 'a certain English merchant named Mr. Cartrijcq' and 'the wife of a prominent Moor there residing' were found to be 'having carnal conversation through a large hole in the wall of said lodge'. To make things worse, when Cartwright left on Company business to nearby Balasore, he had attempted to take the married woman with him.⁴

While we cannot be certain of its accuracy,⁵ the story of the amorous encounter, and of Ralph Cartwright's alleged arrest, imprisonment, and payment of a thousand rupees to

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obtain his release, was deemed credible by Batavia's administrators.⁶ Although it seems inconsequential at first, the Cartwright episode captures a larger truth about the East India Companies in seventeenth-century Mughal India. As this chapter argues, the Companies' global operations depended to an important extent on what I term 'provincial diplomacy', a mode of political negotiation structured through political and social interactions between Company agents and lower-tier officials in the empire's frontier regions. Such exchanges mainly took place at provincial courts, including Rajmahal and Dhaka, as well as in port towns such as Hugli. Given the centrality of interpersonal relations on the ground, controversial conduct such as that attributed to Ralph Cartwright could make or break diplomatic arrangements. Provincial diplomacy was essential to the operations of the Companies because the interests and attitudes of local government representatives were just as significant, if not more so, for the everyday practice of trade on the ground as imperial commands in the form of *farmans*; a situation that stemmed in part from the considerable degree of autonomy enjoyed by Mughal officials in the eastern provinces.⁷ Port towns and provincial courts were also, in quantitative terms, the sites where most of the diplomatic action happened.⁸ My focus in this chapter on negotiations at the local and provincial levels of the Mughal administration argues against the common tendency to concentrate attention exclusively on diplomatic proceedings at the highest seat of power. This trend is nowhere clearer than in the steady stream of publications focused on the embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to the court of Jahangir (r. 1605-1627).⁹ While of course important, such an emphasis on what was happening in the imperial centre can only illuminate part of the intricate relationship between diplomacy, trade, and violence that shaped the Companies' presence in South Asia. Sustained attention to provincial and local sites of political negotiation is needed to fill in the picture.

By calling attention to diplomacy in provincial settings, this chapter seeks to advance two further goals. First, it aims to bring East India Company history into closer conversation with the flourishing field of early modern diplomatic history.¹⁰ Second, it addresses the ways in which the Companies became integrated into local political contexts. Borrowing from a range of disciplines, 'New Diplomatic History' has called attention to the prominent role of social networks, cultural practices, and non-state and non-elite actors in the development of early modern diplomatic exchange.¹¹ In the process, our notion of early modern diplomacy has been markedly expanded. No longer viewing diplomacy as the exclusive preserve of high politics bounded by a Eurocentric chronology, scholars have also begun to take account of the many contributions of non-European actors to the wider development of diplomatic institutions and practices.¹² While the contours of a 'diplomatic turn' are increasingly evident in scholarship on the VOC and EIC, neither these organizations nor the Asian polities they interacted with have thus far played more than a minor role in the renewal of diplomatic history.¹³

My discussion of Company diplomacy in the Mughal provinces of Bengal and Orissa combines exploration of diplomacy at 'sub-state levels' with the recent interest in 'sub-state diplomatic actors' such as trading companies.¹⁴ I start by examining the foundations of the relationship between the Companies and the Mughal administration in Bengal and Orissa through a focus on Ralph Cartwright's mission to the provincial court in Cuttack (Katak) in 1633.¹⁵ Addressing questions of diplomatic communication and cultural commensurability, this section argues that provincial diplomacy was characterized far more by immediacy than by cultural distance.¹⁶ The next section argues that the Companies gradually became incorporated into the Mughal political landscape as a result of localized conflicts in which provincial authorities sought to exploit European naval power. It does so by charting the

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VOC's entanglement in Mughal imperial politics during the mid-century war of succession (1657-1659) and its immediate aftermath, as successive Mughal governors of Bengal sought to co-opt the Company's military resources. In this way, it mirrors some of the patterns sketched out by Peter Good's chapter in this volume; although here the focus is on the role played by provincial officials.

Enter the Companies

The account of Cartwright's mission to the *nawab's* court in Cuttack, written by the English quartermaster William Bruton and published in London in 1638, offers a useful starting point for an analysis of how Company diplomacy functioned in a provincial setting. Bruton's detailed description of Cartwright's mission provides a picture of what may well have been a typical diplomatic encounter at a provincial court, and allows us to contrast it to diplomatic proceedings at the seat of imperial power in capital cities such as Agra and Delhi. Compared to the better-known English and Dutch embassies to the Mughal imperial centre – including Roe's mission to the court of Jahangir (1615-1618) and Dircq van Adrichem's embassy to the court of Aurangzeb (1662) – diplomatic engagements at the lower rungs of the imperial hierarchy stand out for their more strikingly ad hoc character, decentralized decision-making, and informal rituals of interaction.¹⁷ They were also more specific in focus. To a far greater degree than diplomacy at the imperial court, provincial diplomacy dealt directly with the regulation of, and disputes arising from, site-specific political and commercial interactions. In the case of Cartwright's 1633 journey to Cuttack, what was at stake were English rights to trade freely within the *nawab's* domains and the containment of both the

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EIC's potential for violent action and the harmful consequences to local trade of Anglo-Portuguese conflict.

The Mughal Empire, founded in 1526, came to comprise most of northern India during the reign of Akbar (r. 1556-1605). The Sultanate of Bengal was conquered in 1575-1576 and the annexation of Orissa followed in 1593, although imperial authority in the region remained hotly contested until the 1610s.¹⁸ Once incorporated into the empire, the Mughal province (*subah*) of Bengal was governed by a viceroy or provincial governor (*subahdar*) appointed by the emperor. Orissa was made into a separate province in 1607, although it continued to fall under the authority of the governor of Bengal, his deputy, or someone recommended by him.¹⁹ Reflecting its importance as one of the empire's richest provinces, the government of Bengal was only entrusted to noblemen of the highest rank, including imperial princes such as Shah Shuja (1639-1660) and other relatives of the reigning emperor such as Aurangzeb's maternal uncle, Shaista Khan (1664-1678, 1679-1688). Traditionally regarded as a highly centralized empire, recent studies have argued for the relative autonomy of Mughal government in the provinces and its crucial reliance on the participation of local power holders.²⁰ They have also stressed the vital importance of political and military support networks centred on princely households as a means by which members of the dynasty strengthened their own power bases.²¹ The point was picked up by contemporary European observers, who commented that some Mughal governors in the provinces ruled as if they were kings themselves.²²

Seventeenth-century Bengal retained the character of a frontier region, and internal resistance from subordinate chieftains as well as armed conflicts against neighbouring Assam and Arakan (comprising parts of modern-day Bangladesh and Myanmar) continued during the reigns of Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1658) and Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707).²³ Bengal was

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also the home of largely autonomous groups of Portuguese mercenaries and private traders, whose activities in the region predated the arrival of the Dutch and English Companies by about a century. Their presence created a precedent for the government's dealing with Europeans. Due to their involvement in slave raiding, Portuguese freemen caused recurrent moments of tension in the relationship between the *Estado da Índia* and the Mughal state.²⁴ In 1632 matters came to a head when Qasim Khan, then *subahdar* of Bengal, attacked Hugli, the principal Portuguese settlement in the region. His successful siege asserted Mughal control over the Ganges delta and curbed the political threat the defiant 'Franks' (*firangis*) posed to imperial authority.²⁵ While Portuguese influence in Bengal before 1632 or the extent of its decline afterwards should not be overstated, the fall of Hugli nevertheless served to expedite the establishment of English and Dutch factories in the region from 1633 onwards.²⁶ The Companies certainly did not lack encouragement from local authorities, who welcomed additional outside parties as means of expanding economic activity within their districts and boosting tax income.²⁷ It was such 'promises [...] for Traffick, and to be Custome-free' which encouraged John Norris, the EIC's Agent on the Coromandel Coast, to dispatch Ralph Cartwright's party to Orissa.²⁸ (IMAGE 3 BELONGS WITH THIS PARAGRAPH, filename: 2 Guido SK-A-4282.jpg)

Having set out from Masulipatnam aboard an Indian junk hired for the occasion, Cartwright, William Bruton, and six other Englishmen arrived in the small town of Harishpur Garh at the mouth of the Mahanadi river delta on 21 April 1633.²⁹ Cartwright, Bruton, and a third EIC agent soon travelled onwards by river bark and by land to Cuttack, the capital of the Orissa *subah*, but not before fending off a surprise attack from the Pipli-based *nachoda* (captain) of a Portuguese-owned frigate.³⁰ In parallel to Cartwright's journey, the captain of this vessel, now detained by the English, also made his way to Cuttack to plead his case.

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Arriving in Hariharpur, the three Englishmen were received by a nobleman named Mirza Momein, who accompanied them on their last day's travel to the court of his master (referred to as 'the King' in Bruton's account). Although Bruton's text fails to mention the *nawab's* name, it is likely that it would have been Mu'taqad Khan, a close confidant and possibly a foster brother of Shah Jahan, who served two stints as *subahdar* of Orissa during the latter's reign, the first commencing in 1632.³¹

On 1 May 1633, scarcely twelve hours after his arrival in Cuttack, Cartwright's first of six audiences took place in the *darbar* (audience hall) of the stately palace built for the last Hindu ruler of Orissa, Mukunda Deva (r. 1559-1568).³² Attended by some 40 to 50 courtiers besides a hundred armed guards, the *nawab* maintained a sumptuous court which duly impressed Bruton. His detailed descriptions of the palace and the spatial configuration of the *darbar* underline the fact that provincial courts were essentially smaller versions of the royal household, with similar business conducted as in the emperor's *Diwan-i-Am* or Hall of Public Audience.³³ Bruton's depiction of courtiers sitting cross-legged around the *nawab* and the English representative engaging in unmediated interaction with the ruler, however, suggests a level of proximity much greater than at Shah Jahan's heavily scripted public audiences, where few Company envoys enjoyed the honour of being received, and opportunities for direct communication were extremely limited.³⁴ Having been introduced by Mirza Momein, Cartwright bowed before the *nawab*, kissed his foot, and was directed to sit down beside the *nawab's* brother. Next, the visitors offered up their somewhat modest assortment of gifts, consisting of 20 pounds each of cloves, mace, and nutmeg, small quantities of damask and cloth, a gilded mirror, a rifle and a double-barrelled pistol.³⁵

Apparently without prior negotiations or indeed the composition of a written petition, Cartwright (or rather his interpreter) proceeded to explain the English requests to the

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nawab and his counsellors, who conferred to discuss the matter on the spot. Together with the speedy arrangement of Cartwright's reception, this direct handling of state affairs offers clear indications as to the impromptu nature of provincial diplomacy. Even more striking, certainly when compared to the rigid protocol of diplomatic audiences at the imperial court, is that during his second appearance at the *darbar* Cartwright not only had the audacity to walk out in the midst of proceedings (or so Bruton claimed), but also faced no consequences for doing so.³⁶ Further evidence of the heightened degree of immediacy in this courtly encounter is provided by the absence of references to interactions with scribes and lower-tier administrators, the two-way dialogue between Cartwright and the *nawab*, and the fact that the latter publicly authorized the *parwana* (decree) with his own seal in the presence of the English. What is more, when the *nawab* hosted a banquet for the principal noblemen under his command, he invited Cartwright to eat with the Muslim courtiers, summoned the Englishman to sit beside him, and personally clad him with a robe of honour. The significance of this personalized act of investiture was not lost on Bruton, who emphasized that the *nawab* 'with his own hands did put it upon our Merchant'.³⁷ Commonly referred to by its Arabic name of *khil'at* (or *kel'at*), the granting of robes of honour was widespread in South Asia and adjacent regions as an important public ritual in which a superior gifted a subordinate with a special mark of favour as a means to establish or reaffirm bonds of loyalty and service.³⁸ With this ceremonial gesture the *nawab* symbolically incorporated the English representative into his client network – a concrete reminder both of the continuity of languages of political authority between the imperial centre and provincial courts and of the close entanglement between diplomatic relationships and interpersonal ties.

The Company's request to trade in Orissa and the *nawab*'s decision to confiscate the Portuguese-owned vessel which the English had meant to seize for themselves were

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conclusively dealt with during Cartwright's third audience. It is by looking at these negotiations that the purposes of provincial diplomacy become more apparent. Persian merchants attending the court were invited to provide intelligence about English trading activities, the Company's maritime strength, and its practice of seizing Indian ships not carrying a pass issued by the English, Dutch, or Danish. Given the tendency of all European participants in Indian Ocean trade to employ maritime force as a means to back their commercial ambitions, there is certainly something to be said for Bruton's suggestion that it was the potential economic damage which the EIC could inflict by hampering commercial activity in Orissa that induced the *nawab* to grant Cartwright the desired exemption from custom duties and license to build a factory.³⁹ Concern about English maritime strength certainly underpinned the *nawab*'s insistence that the English not seize any vessel belonging to the *nawab* or his subjects, nor attack any other ship within the boundaries of Orissa regardless of its origins. Asserting control over a potentially unruly outside element was also at work in the *nawab*'s demand that disputes between the English and his subjects were to be judged by himself, which came with the veiled admonition that the English were expected to 'behav[e] themselves as Merchants ought to doe'.⁴⁰ Contemporary Mughal edicts concerning the VOC confirm this picture. A *parwana* granted in 1636 by the *subahdar* of Bengal, Islam Khan Mashadi, stipulated that the Dutch should not hinder the Portuguese trading in Hugli and that they were not allowed to export gunpowder and saltpetre nor carry away Bengali slaves or workmen.⁴¹ In the same year, Shah Jahan issued a *farman* that sought to limit the Dutch presence in Bengal to no more than 30 unarmed men at a time.⁴²

While the threat of maritime force thus clearly played a role, Bruton's explanation ignores the larger benefits that accrued to the Mughal administration as a result of its commercial policy vis-à-vis the Europeans. Cartwright agreed to provide English assistance

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to the *nawab's* subjects when finding the latter 'in distresse either by foule Weather, or in danger of Enemies', and to supply them with hardware and victuals in case of need.⁴³ Islam Khan decreed that local officials should have the first right to inspect and buy any exotic rarities imported by the VOC. And Shah Jahan roundly proclaimed that the Dutch were to be shown all favour because their trade would further enrich Bengal, enlarge his income, and bring profits to local administrators.⁴⁴ The challenge for Mughal officials in the maritime provinces was to profit economically from the largely mutually beneficial relationship they forged with European traders, while reining in the potentially harmful effects of the latter's presence in their domains. Often this meant exploiting competition between parties as well as identifying the right horse to back. During Cartwright's stay in Cuttack, one Mir Qasim, governor of the coastal town of Balasore, initially spoke on behalf of the Pipli-based *nachoda*. Then, upon observing the turn of events, he shifted his support to the English, presented Cartwright with various gifts, and successfully induced the merchant to settle the EIC's second factory in Orissa under his jurisdiction. Especially when customs duties had been assigned or farmed to a local official, the latter had every incentive to increase the volume of trade in the relevant district as a means to achieve higher returns on his investment. More generally, the imperial administration looked favourably upon European trade because it channelled much-needed quantities of precious metals into the Mughal economy.⁴⁵

Recounting the final audience at Cuttack on 8 May 1633, Bruton describes how 'our Merchant (reverently) took his leave of the King, and the King (with his Nobles) did the same to him, wishing him all good successe in his affaires in his Countrey'.⁴⁶ The picture that emerges in accounts such as these is of a provincial diplomacy characterized by mutuality and apparently unhindered by any serious form of cultural barrier. Save for a stock

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reference to Cartwright's initial refusal to kiss the *nawab's* foot, the Englishmen's participation in Mughal court ceremonial is nowhere problematized or made to appear less than self-evident. Indeed, the remark that the *nawab* and Cartwright were able to communicate in 'Moore's language' – presumably referring to the colloquial Hindustani spoken in northern India, and here contrasted to the formal Persian used during court proceedings – serves to underline the impression that the principal actors in this encounter were conversant in the same diplomatic idiom.⁴⁷ This seeming reciprocity in the communicative sphere was mirrored by the forging of mutually beneficial commercial relations. Still, so shortly after Qasim Khan's startling attack on Hugli, few European observers would have failed to recognize that, ultimately, the terms of the diplomatic relationship were principally set by the *nawab* and the state power he represented. It was this message that in 1634 found its way into the Batavia *Dagh-register* in the form of the perhaps apocryphal story about the fate of the newly-built English Hariharpur factory.

Co-opting the Companies

In charting the establishment of diplomatic arrangements between representatives of the East India Companies and governors of the easternmost Mughal provinces during the 1630s, I have discussed the precarious balance between European attempts to exploit maritime power and the push by local authorities to rein it in. From the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, a succession of extraordinarily powerful *subahdars* of Bengal – the Mughal Prince Shah Shuja (1639-1660), the entrepreneur and general Mir Jumla⁴⁸ (1660-1663), and the senior nobleman and uncle to the emperor, Shaista Khan (1664-1678, 1679-1688) – introduced a new element into the relationship, namely the demand for money, material,

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and military support to be used to advance their geopolitical ends. Shaista Khan's requests to the VOC's High Government (*Hoge Regering*) in Batavia for naval support in the run-up to his campaign against Chittagong and Arakanese territories further east during the mid-1660s are well known, described by Om Prakash as the VOC's first 'major involvement' in a military operation carried out by the Mughal government against a neighbouring state or insubordinate vassal.⁴⁹ Yet this was by no means the first occasion at which the imperial administration sought to co-opt the VOC's maritime power. Similar requests of naval assistance against Arakan had been made by Shah Shuja in 1657 and Mir Jumla in 1660; again appeals issued by the provincial authorities, not the central government.⁵⁰ Furthermore, proposals discussed during Van Adrichem's 1662 embassy to Delhi included a joint Mughal–Dutch attack on the Portuguese stronghold of Daman – a plan put forward by Aurangzeb but soon thereafter abandoned – as well as the emperor's request for Dutch assistance in capturing Shah Shuja, his elder brother, who had gone missing after his flight to Arakan at the end of the Mughal war of succession.⁵¹ (IMAGE 4 WITH THIS PARAGRAPH, filename: 2 Guido Shaista Khan.jpg)

This proposal, although it seems eccentric at first glance, was a natural continuation of the role forced upon the VOC over the course of the conflict, when the Company first became embroiled in imperial politics. The ad hoc exaction of material or military support from Company representatives in Bengal and elsewhere during the civil war and its aftermath is significant as it foreshadowed the more institutionalized forms of co-optation of European naval power that developed in later years. The best known examples of this are the convoying duties which Aurangzeb imposed on the Dutch, English, and French in the 1690s and 1700s in an attempt to extend protection to his subjects engaged in maritime trade and hold the European Companies responsible for losses in the event of piracy on the

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high seas.⁵² Furthermore, these examples fit a larger pattern of formidable Asian states drawing naval assistance from the Companies, visible at different points during the seventeenth century in relations with Safavid Iran, Tokugawa Japan, and Qing China.⁵³ The next section traces this process of incorporation by focusing on the VOC's role as a political actor in Mughal Bengal in the period leading up to and immediately following Aurangzeb's consolidation of power. It was in the provinces rather than the court where the key action played out as VOC agents based in different parts of the empire had to deal locally with a host of conflicting political demands emanating from powerful officials representing the various warring parties.

The main events of the Mughal succession conflict can be swiftly summarized. By the late 1650s, Shah Jahan's four adult sons – Dara Shukoh (1615-1659), Shah Shuja (1616-1660?), Aurangzeb (1618-1707), and Murad Bakhsh (1624-1661) – each possessed personal client networks and extensive experience in provincial governance. When the reigning emperor fell ill in September 1657, Dara Shukoh, the heir-apparent and the only one among the princes present at court, quickly assumed command of day-to-day management of the empire.⁵⁴ Upon hearing about their father's indisposition, both Murad Bakhsh (*subahdar* of Gujarat and Malwa) and Shah Shuja (*subahdar* of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa) took the step of crowning themselves emperor. Shah Shuja led his troops in the direction of Agra, to be repelled near Varanasi by an imperial army sent by Dara Shukoh. Around the same time, Aurangzeb marched north from his government in the Deccan and joined forces with Murad Bakhsh.⁵⁵ At the decisive battle of Samugarh on 29 May 1658, their combined armies defeated the imperial troops under Dara's command, putting their elder brother to flight. In the weeks that followed Aurangzeb occupied Agra and confined Shah Jahan to the fort. He subsequently imprisoned Murad Bakhsh and took possession of Delhi. The victorious prince

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spent the next two years in the pursuit and eventual defeat of his two remaining rivals. Dara Shukoh was betrayed into Aurangzeb's hands and executed in August 1659, yet Shah Shuja continued the war effort from Bengal. After a string of defeats the prince eventually sought refuge in Arakan, where he is believed to have been killed in late 1660 after falling out with the Arakanese king.⁵⁶

The effects of these events were felt by the Company, since the crisis of imperial power at the centre caused authority to fragment locally. In Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, until the imperial army under Mir Jumla succeeded in driving out Shah Shuja, administrative control was temporarily divided between the prince's officers and those of the new Mughal governor. Internal rebellion and aggression along the eastern borders further destabilized the region.⁵⁷ The co-existence of two contesting power blocks along a rapidly shifting frontier posed pressing challenges to VOC merchants in the region. While the Company's official policy was one of neutrality, in practice it proved impossible to maintain this position because the warring parties treated the Dutch as a welcome source of money and weaponry.⁵⁸ This became most clear as the military balance shifted. Shah Shuja was dealt a crushing blow at Varanasi in February 1658. Later that year the prince undertook a second westward advance from Patna which was halted by Aurangzeb's troops in January 1659 at the battle of Khajwa. In April 1659, the remnants of Shah Shuja's retreating army were forced to abandon Rajmahal and withdraw to the eastern bank of the Ganges. However, aided by the strength of the Bengal flotilla, a turn of military fortunes took place during the summer months as Shah Shuja's riverine forces managed to retake Rajmahal and advance against Mir Jumla. Successive confrontations continuing into 1660 once more forced Shah Shuja on the defensive, until, hopelessly outnumbered and with Aurangzeb's generals in hot pursuit, he fled from the eastern capital of Dhaka in May 1660.⁵⁹

Shah Shuja's recovery of Hugli on 2 July 1659 drew the VOC into the heat of the conflict. Forces loyal to the Mughal prince, who had governed Bengal as *subahdar* since 1639, plundered the town, killed its governor and other magistrates, and apprehended several administrators and merchants for their support to Mir Jumla. Among those detained were two VOC employees, the merchant Dirck Essinghs – acting as factory chief in the absence of *directeur* Mattheus van den Broeck – and the Indian broker Bhola Ram.⁶⁰ After being forced to witness the decapitation of five dignitaries, the two men were threatened with the same punishment because the local VOC representation had, on the one hand, delivered five pieces of cannon to Mir Jumla and, on the other, refused to provide ships to the governor loyal to Shah Shuja. The Company had moreover turned down the prince's request for a loan of 100,000 rupees.⁶¹ The prompt recovery of Hugli by the imperial army enabled Essinghs and Bhola Ram to escape unharmed, yet further difficulties ensued for the Company's personnel in Dhaka. On 26 August 1659, troops belonging to Shah Shuja's son Buland Akhtar attacked the Dutch factory, took 51,000 guilders in cash and goods, imprisoned the merchants François Santvoort and Harmen Voorburgh and two Dutch assistants, and killed one of their Indian servants.⁶² In an attempt to extort greater sums of money, the Dhaka merchants were told that the VOC servants in Hugli had been massacred and that they could expect to meet the same fate. The charge levelled against the Company was that the director of its trade in Bengal had not only gone off to visit Mir Jumla in his army camp but had also supplied him with eighteen pieces of cannon, two ships, and 300,000 rupees in cash.⁶³

While the extent of their assistance was inflated, there was indeed plenty of reason to suspect that the Dutch were siding with Aurangzeb's general, whom Van den Broeck was visiting when the take-over of Hugli took place.⁶⁴ As years of experience had taught the

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various European traders, Mir Jumla was uniquely able to exert pressure due to his extensive political and mercantile influence. At this point in time the VOC owed the *nawab* over 500,000 guilders borrowed to finance its Coromandel trade, with a further 400,000 rupees received in Bengal in exchange for uncoined Japanese silver. The latter transaction enabled Dutch trade to proceed at a time when the mint in Rajmahal had ceased operation as a consequence of the war, another example of the importance of good relations with the *nawab*.⁶⁵ Add to this the awkward circumstance that in 1658 the VOC had detained 25 elephants belonging to Mir Jumla, and it becomes clear that the Dutch in Hugli were not in a position to turn down the general's demands for cannon, gunpowder and gunners, despite being aware of the likely repercussions for their colleagues still residing under Shah Shuja's jurisdiction.⁶⁶ Using threats to bring Dutch trade in Bengal to a standstill, and having issued orders to that effect to his subordinate officers, Mir Jumla obtained cannons, gunpowder and sulphur from the Dutch ships anchored at Hugli. When, in December 1659, Shah Shuja made another temporary advance, Mir Jumla moreover made good use of the presence of Dutch ships for the safekeeping of seven chests of silver.⁶⁷ In total the Company supplied at least eleven pieces of iron cannon and six bronze cannons to be deployed in the war, part of which it received back in 1661 and part of which remained among Mir Jumla's possessions when the latter died in 1663.⁶⁸

Requests for men and materiel continued to mark the relationship between the VOC and Mir Jumla after the end of the succession war. In September 1660, Mir Jumla detained Dutch ships to pressure the Company into supplying assistance in his pursuit of Shah Shuja, while also demanding the service of a Dutch galliot for his expedition to establish imperial authority over Hijli, a small island in the Ganges estuary.⁶⁹ Dutch sources claim that it was indeed the support offered by the yacht *Ougly* and its commander, Jan van Leenen, which

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secured the eventual conquest of the island.⁷⁰ Mir Jumla further leased Dutch shipbuilders, mariners, and the surgeon Gelmer Vosburg. This episode offers a helpful insight into the mechanics of the VOC's diplomacy in Bengal. To begin with, because of his proximity to Mir Jumla, the Company regarded Vosburg as best placed to carry out day-to-day dealings with the *nawab*. In addition, Batavia expected the Dutch resident in Dhaka to visit Mir Jumla once a week. Finally, *directeur* Van den Broeck was expected to maintain contact through regular correspondence and the occasional gift, providing a good example of the division of labour in provincial diplomacy.⁷¹ Over and above these interactions, Mir Jumla also corresponded with the VOC's Governor-General in letters conveyed through the Company's factors in Bengal, a communication that again involved the issue of cannons.⁷² Only if and when matters could not be resolved locally did the VOC take its grievances to the emperor, as happened with its claim for compensation for the attack on the Dhaka factory which Van Adrichem unsuccessfully put forward during his embassy to Delhi.⁷³

In closing, it is helpful to return briefly to Shaista Khan's Chittagong campaign. The viceroy's dispatch of an envoy to Batavia was significant from a diplomatic-history point of view because it involved a rare instance of a seventeenth-century Mughal emissary travelling to the capital of a European Company-state. Whilst exchanges of ambassadors took place between Mughal emperors and Goa, such reciprocity was absent in relations between the imperial court and the East India Companies. The fact that the *subahdar* reached out on his personal initiative once more underlines that provincial diplomacy comprised a relatively independent sphere. On 3 March 1665, the envoy, one Khwaja Ahmad, presented his master's gifts and letter at Batavia Castle. The Dutch reaped great benefit from their trade in Bengal, Shaista Khan wrote, yet they simultaneously traded in the lands of his enemies, the Magh pirates from Arakan. He threatened the Company that if

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it did not close its Arakan factory and support his expedition with ships and cannons, the Dutch would be forced not only to leave Bengal but to cease their operations throughout the empire.⁷⁴ While the *Hoge Regering* did decide to close its lodge in Arakan, it initially put off naval assistance on the grounds that the *nawab's* request lacked sufficient practical detail. The governing council only consented in July 1666 after a second envoy sent by Shaista Khan had delivered a *farman* authorized by Aurangzeb.⁷⁵

Of particular interest are Batavia's reasons for not establishing direct contact with the emperor to discuss his viceroy's demands: 'we have considered that the *nawab* in Bengal resides far from the court, and that if we forward the letter he sent us to His Majesty, and if [Shaista Khan] ends up being reprehended for it, [...] he and his subaltern governors will make us feel the consequences in Bengal, while our complaints, as we have experienced repeatedly, will not carry much weight at court.'⁷⁶ Doubtful of the efficacy of diplomacy at the central level of the Mughal administration, and cognizant of the fact that Company trade throughout Bengal depended on political cooperation from the *subahdar* and his subordinate officials, the *Hoge Regering's* reasoning embodied the rationale behind provincial diplomacy as the VOC saw it. The Company continued to focus diplomatic efforts at the sub-state level, which was considered cheaper and less troublesome than diplomacy at the imperial court, while the attendant forms of political incorporation by the Mughal government of Bengal were deemed a price well worth paying for the substantial commercial benefits reaped from this prosperous region.

Conclusion

This chapter has dealt with the topic of provincial diplomacy through a focus on two episodes that highlight different aspects of the political and commercial relationship between the seventeenth-century East India Companies and the Mughal state. It has argued that the provincial setting is a vital albeit often neglected site to explore the place of the Companies in the Mughal political landscape, and that diplomacy offers an appropriate lens through which to analyse the complex politics of trade and violence that shaped Mughal–European interactions. Many of the diplomatic arrangements that set the parameters for such interactions were worked out along the empire’s maritime frontier rather than at the centre, thus challenging notions of centre and periphery with regard to diplomatic decision-making. This chapter has attempted to promote an integrated perspective on Company diplomacy that moves beyond an exclusive focus on formal embassies to the imperial court, by drawing attention to the importance of the Companies’ more frequent communication with provincial governments and the everyday practice of political interactions in port towns.

As shown by my reading of William Bruton’s *Newes from the East-Indies*, the perspective of provincial diplomacy invites explorations of cross-cultural encounters on the basis of a category of Asian-European interactions that were regular and on the whole characterized by proximity rather than cultural distance. Whereas an older historiography has portrayed early Anglo–Mughal encounters as meetings between different diplomatic systems hampered by semiotic disparities, Ralph Cartwright’s reception by the *nawab* of Orissa instead points towards individuals operating within a common sphere of trade and politics according to established routines of interaction.⁷⁷ Furthermore, both case studies

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examined in this chapter underline the fundamental importance of Asian agency in shaping diplomatic interactions and arrangements. Initial trade agreements reached in the 1630s aligned with the economic and political interests of the provincial Mughal elites, while military upheaval during the late 1650s and early 1660s accelerated the co-opting of the Companies by the provincial Mughal authorities. Both go to show just how much the Companies depended on Indian political and commercial cooperation to advance their trade.

As a closer look at the VOC's position in mid-century Bengal makes clear, the perspective of provincial diplomacy is also useful in scrutinizing diplomacy's blurred edges. When did a trading relationship shade into one of political vassalage, and when should we forego the prism of inter-state relations and think in terms of domestic frameworks for political solicitation instead? Answers to these questions will provide better insight into the diverse ways in which the Companies came to be incorporated into existing political structures across Asia. In much the same way that economic historians have positioned the role of East India Company trade within global networks of production and consumption, the study of Company diplomacy has the potential to highlight how macro-processes of global integration took shape through cross-cultural interactions in a variety of local sites.⁷⁸ Such future work is likely to accentuate the vital importance of the incentives, constraints, and power differentials encountered in various local contexts in shaping diplomatic relationships, and through the latter, the Companies' larger commercial and political presence in early modern Asia.

In: Adam Clulow and Tristan Mostert (eds.), *The Dutch and English East India Companies: Diplomacy, Trade and Violence in Early Modern Asia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

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¹ J.A. van der Chijs et al. (eds.), *Dagh-Register gehouden int Casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Nederlandts-India*, 31 vols, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague/Batavia, 1887-1931 (hereafter: *Dagh-Register Batavia*), 1631-1634, p. 415; see also pp. 241-242.

² The East India Companies referred to the wider trading region encompassing the Mughal *subahs* (provinces) of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa collectively as “Bengal”. While constituting different administrative units of the Mughal Empire, at times the *subahdar* of Bengal also governed Bihar and/or Orissa. Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy*, p. 24.

³ *Dagh-Register Batavia 1631-1634*, p. 415.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ There is substantial reason to doubt the accuracy of the report, as its source cannot be traced back to Dutch letters still extant today, and surviving English records make no mention of the episode. Foster, *The English Factories in India 1634-1636*; Nationaal Archief, The Hague, access number 1.04.02: Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) (hereafter: NL-HaNA, VOC), inventory number 1113, ff. 314-331.

⁶ Above all, the story resonated with the recent track record of disputes with local governments in port towns such as Surat and Masulipatnam. Numerous examples of such low-level conflict are discussed in: Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce*.

⁷ Farhat Hasan has shown that the EIC’s trading privileges in Bengal relied not on imperial *farmans* but on decrees issued by a series of provincial governors. Local officials even consciously contravened imperial edicts to encourage English investment and promote their own trading interests: Hasan, ‘Conflict and Cooperation’.

⁸ The exact scope of provincial diplomacy has yet to be established. For an initial examination of the interrelatedness of diplomacy at the provincial and central levels, see van Meersbergen, ‘Kijken en bekeken worden’.

⁹ Roe attended Jahangir’s court between December 1615 and September 1618. Recent studies of the embassy include: Mitchell, *Sir Thomas Roe and the Mughal Empire*; Barbour, *Before Orientalism*; Subrahmanyam, ‘Frank Submissions’; Flüchter, ‘Sir Thomas Roe vor dem indischen Mogul’; Das, ‘“Apes of Imitation”: Imitation and Identity’; Chida-Razvi, ‘The Perception of Reception’; Mishra, ‘Diplomacy at the Edge’.

¹⁰ For a recent overview, see Sowerby, ‘Early Modern Diplomatic History’.

¹¹ An early example of this trend is Watkins, ‘Toward a New Diplomatic History’.

¹² See the articles in the special issues ‘Cross-Confessional Diplomacy and Diplomatic Intermediaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean’, ed. Maartje van Gelder and Tijana Krstić, and ‘Diplomacy and Cultural Translation in the Early Modern World’, ed. Tony Osborne and Joan-Pau Rubiés: *Journal of Early Modern History* Vol. 19, Nos. 2-3, 2015, pp. 93-259, and *Journal of Early Modern History* Vol. 20, No. 4, 2016, pp. 313-428. This perspective is also present in the argument, if less so in the subject matter, of Jeremy Black, *A History of Diplomacy*, Reaktion Books, London, 2010.

¹³ Of course, predating and separate from the New Diplomatic History, there exists a rich and growing body of scholarship on VOC and EIC embassies. Important early studies include Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, and Blussé, *Tussen Geveinsde Vrunden*.

¹⁴ Osborne and Rubiés, ‘Introduction: Diplomacy’, pp. 313, 319. Philip Stern has stressed the role of Companies as state actors in their own right; see Stern, *The Company-State*. Compare the view of William A. Pettigrew, who maintains that trading corporations were subject to higher state authority but stresses that they ‘proved more agile transnational interlocutors than the states who authorised them’; Pettigrew, ‘Corporate constitutionalism’, p. 490.

¹⁵ Bruton, *Newes from the East-Indies*.

¹⁶ For these themes, see Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters*; Ghobrial, *The Whispers of Cities*; Burschel and Vogel, *Die Audienz*.

¹⁷ Foster, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe*; Kempers, *Journaal van Dircq van Adrichem's Hofreis*. About the latter, see van Meersbergen, 'The Dutch Merchant-Diplomat in Comparative Perspective', pp. 147-165.

¹⁸ Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*; Flores, *Nas Margens do Hindustão*, pp. 153-157, 181, 307.

¹⁹ Saran, *The Provincial Government of the Mughals*, pp. 65-67, 162.

²⁰ See in particular Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India*. For the view stressing centralization, see Ali, *Mughal India*.

²¹ Faruqi, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire*.

²² Illustrative in this respect is William Bruton's consistent use of 'king' to refer to the *nawab* of Orissa. See also the remark of Pieter Hofmeester, VOC envoy in Dhaka in 1672, that at the provincial court it was openly stated that Shaista Khan was king in Bengal: Constantin Ranst and Council of Hugli to Batavia, Hugli, 8 September 1672, NL-HaNA, VOC 1288, ff. 50r, 54r.

²³ For the latter, see: Rishad Choudhuri, 'An Eventful Politics of Difference and its Afterlife: Chittagong Frontier, Bengal, c. 1657-1757', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* Vol. 52, No. 3, 2015, pp. 271-296.

²⁴ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500-1700: A Political and Economic History*, 2nd ed., John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 2012, p. 157; Flores, p. 374.

25 Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire*, pp. 176-177; Flores, pp. 372-375.

26 Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, p. 36. Compare: Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empire: Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal 1500-1700*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1990, p. 127.

27 Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, p. 43.

28 Bruton, p. 3.

29 This identification is based on: Thomas Bowrey, Sir Richard Carnac Temple (ed.), *A Geographical Account of Countries Round the Bay of Bengal 1669 to 1679*, Hakluyt Society, Cambridge, 1905, p. 129, n. 1.

30 Bruton, pp. 4-5.

31 Nawwāb Samsām-Ud-Daula Shāh Nawāz Khān and 'Abdull Hayy, H. Beveridge (trans.), *The Maāthir-ul-Umarā: Being Biographies of the Muhammadan and Hindu Officers of the Timurid Sovereigns of India from 1500 to about 1780 A.D.*, 2 vols. Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1911-1952, II, pp. 347-350. Regarding the identity of the *nawab*, Bruton only mentions that the incumbent succeeded Baqir Khan. M. Athar Ali's standard work states that Mu'taqad Khan (also known as Mirza Maki) was appointed *subahdar* of Orissa in AH 1041/AD 1631-1632: M. Athar Ali, *The Apparatus of Empire: Awards of Ranks, Offices and Titles to the Mughal Nobility (1574-1658)*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1985, p. 117. Dismissing the accuracy of Mughal chroniclers, C.R. Wilson has claimed that the *nawab* in question must have been Muhammad Agha Zaman Tihrani, who is known to have served in this capacity during the 1640s: C.R. Wilson (ed.), *The Early Annals of the English in Bengal, being The Bengal Public Consultations for the First Half of the Eighteenth Century*, 3 Vols. W. Thacker & Co., London, 1895-1917, I, p.8. The case for Muhammad Agha Zaman's brief term in office between Baqir Khan and Mu'taqad Khan is unconvincingly made by: P. Thankappan Nair, *Bruton's Visit to Lord Jagannatha 350 Yers [sic] Ago: British Beginnings in Orissa*, Minerva Associates, Calcutta, 1985, pp. 105-108.

32 Wilson, I, p. 4, n. 2.

- 33 Stephen P. Blake, *Shahjahanabad: The Sovereign City in Mughal India, 1639-1739*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 96-97; John F. Richards, *The New Cambridge History of India I.5: The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 61; Eaton, p. 160.
- 34 This marked a sharp contrast with Jahangir's reception of Thomas Roe a generation earlier.
- 35 Bruton, pp. 13-14.
- 36 Ibid., 17-18.
- 37 Ibid., p. 22.
- 38 Stewart Gordon, (ed.), *Robes of Honour: Khil'at in Pre-Colonial and Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003; Willem Floor, "Kel'at," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, XVI/2, pp. 226-229; available at www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kelat-gifts (accessed 13 January 2017).
- 39 For a discussion of these dynamics involving the Danish Company in the same region, see: Kathryn Wellen, 'The Danish East India Company's War against the Mughal Empire, 1642-1698', *Journal of Early Modern History* Vol. 19, No. 5, 2015, pp. 439-461.
- 40 Bruton, p. 19.
- 41 J.E. Heeres and F.W. Stapel (eds.), *Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlandico-Indicum: Verzameling van Politieke Contracten en verdere Verdragen door de Nederlanders in het Oosten gesloten, van Privilegiebrieven, aan hen verleend*, enz., 6 Vols, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1907-1955 (hereafter: *Corpus Diplomaticum*), I, p. 283.
- 42 Ibid., 289.
- 43 Bruton, p. 19.
- 44 *Corpus Diplomaticum* I, pp. 282-283, 286-287.
- 45 Om Prakash, 'The Dutch East India Company in Bengal: Trade Privileges and Problems, 1633-1712', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* Vol. 9, no. 3, 1972, pp. 258-287, at 273-274.
- 46 Bruton, p. 24.
- 47 Ibid., pp. 14, 19.
- 48 Since entering Mughal service in 1656, this merchant-entrepreneur and former general and chief minister of Golconda, born as Muhammad Sayyid Ardestani, bore the title Mu'azzam Khan. I will refer to him by the title he held in Golcondan service and under which he is generally known, that of Mir Jumla.
- 49 Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, p. 49. The VOC's effective contribution to taking Chittagong was negligible as it only sent two small ships which moreover arrived at the port more than eight months after the Mughal expeditionary force had completed its siege.
- 50 W.Ph. Coolhaas, J. van Goor, J.E. Schooneveld-Oosterling, and H.K. s'Jacob (eds.), *Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, 13 Vols., Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1960-2007 (hereafter: *Generale Missiven*), III, pp. 189-190; *Dagh-Register Batavia 1661*, p. 6.
- 51 Bernet Kempers, p. 16. The idea of a joint Mughal-Dutch attack on Daman was first suggested by Shah Jahan in 1635 and was raised again by Aurangzeb in 1639. The scheme was revived in the 1650s, only to be definitely abandoned after Van Adrichem's mission. *Generale Missiven* I, pp. 528-530; *Generale Missiven* II, 46, 730, 799-800; *Generale Missiven* III, 104, 334.
- 52 Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, pp. 50-52; Om Prakash, *The New Cambridge History of India II.5: European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 144-146.

- 53 Rudolph P. Matthee, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran: Silk for Silver, 1600-1730*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 106; John E. Wills Jr., 'Trade and Diplomacy with Maritime Europe, 1644-c. 1800', in John E. Wills Jr. (ed.), *China and Maritime Europe, 1500-1800: Trade, Settlement, Diplomacy, and Missions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, pp. 183-254, at p. 188; Adam Clulow, *The Company and the Shogun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2014, pp. 95-97.
- 54 Faruqui, pp. 38-40, 242-243.
- 55 Richards, pp. 158-160.
- 56 Ibid, pp. 160-162. See also the very detailed account of the Mughal succession war in: Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib, Mainly based on Persian Sources*, 5 vols. M.C. Sarkar & Sons, Calcutta, 1912-1924, I, pp. 172-387, and II, pp. 1-288.
- 57 Anjali Chatterjee, *Bengal in the Reign of Aurangzib 1658-1707*, Progressive Publishers, Calcutta, 1967, pp. ix, 16-19; B.C. Ray, *Orissa under the Mughals: From Akbar to Alivardi, a fascinating Study of the Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Orissa*, Punthi Pustak, Calcutta, 1981, pp. 50-52.
- 58 For the official stance of neutrality: *Generale Missiven III*, p. 303.
- 59 Sarkar, II, pp. 129-161, 237-288.
- 60 I am following the spelling used in Om Prakash, 'The Dutch East India Company', pp. 286-287. In VOC sources, the broker's name is usually spelled 'Bolleram'.
- 61 *Generale Missiven III*, 290; Prakash, 'The Dutch East India Company', p. 281.
- 62 Santvoort and Voorburgh remained under arrest until 24 October 1659. They were first allowed to leave Dhaka in February 1660 after paying for their release. The assistants, Tido Geestdorp and David van den Hemel, would remain as hostages in Dhaka for several more months: *Generale Missiven III*, pp. 311, 341-342.
- 63 *Generale Missiven III*, 302.
- 64 Van den Broeck in a letter to Batavia extolled the good treatment received from Mir Jumla and expressed his wish to see Shah Shuja's downfall sooner rather than later: *Generale Missiven III*, p. 267.
- 65 *Generale Missiven III*, p. 299; H.W. Stapel (ed.), *Pieter van Dam's Beschryvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie*, 7 vols., Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1927-1954, II.2, p. 8. A sum of Rs. 150,000 paid by the VOC in 1672 was calculated as f. 210,000, or 1.4 guilders to the rupee: *Generale Missiven III*, p. 826. The exchange rate fluctuated, and around 1700 a silver rupee equalled 24 Dutch stivers, or 1.2 guilders: Van Dam, *Beschryvinge*, II.3, p. 101.
- 66 *Generale Missiven III*, pp. 291, 301.
- 67 *Generale Missiven III*, pp. 300-302, 340.
- 68 *Dagh-Register Batavia 1661*, p. 389; *Dagh-Register Batavia 1663*, p. 664.
- 69 *Dagh-Register Batavia 1661*, p. 6.
- 70 Ibid., pp. 241, 315.
- 71 Ibid., p. 239.
- 72 See for instance: *Dagh-Register Batavia 1661*, pp. 480-482.
- 73 Bernet Kempers, p. 187.
- 74 *Dagh-Register Batavia 1665*, pp. 42-45.
- 75 Ibid., pp. 191-192; Resolutions of Batavia Castle, 27 July 1665, Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia (ANRI), Archive of the Governor-general and Council of the Indies (K66a), inventory number 877, ff. 251-257. When the Hoge Regering finally decided to send the yachts *Landsmeer* and *Purmerlandt* to Chittagong, news of Shaista Khan's victory against Arakan had already reached them: Resolutions of Batavia Castle, 2 July 1666, ANRI, K66a, 878, f. 243.

76 Resolutions of Batavia Castle, 27 July 1665, ANRI, K66a, 877, ff. 257-258.

77 A classic formulation of the incommensurability thesis is: Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996, p. 18.

78 A recent collection situating the Companies within global consumer networks is: Maxine Berg, Felicia Gottman, Hanna Hodacs, and Chris Nierstrasz, eds., *Goods from the East, 1600-1800: Trading Eurasia*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, 2015.