“What other people has written its history in its art?” wrote the nineteenth-century critic-politician Theophile Thore, about the Dutch. Quoting him, Simon Schama, in his Introduction to *The Embarrassment of Riches*, points out that “the quality of social document inherent in much of Dutch art does indeed make it an irresistible source for the cultural historian.” If one has to tap that source, then the best place to visit is the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. It is a veritable treasure-trove, housing more than two thousand Dutch masterpieces from the 17th century, the Dutch Golden Age. Some are more celebrated than others, making it into the popular museum ‘Guidebook’, whilst there are several that are neither acclaimed nor popular, yet which remain arresting nevertheless. Hendrik van Schuylenburg’s 1665 painting *The Trading Post of the Dutch East India Company in Hooghly, Bengal*, is one such example.2


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**Of Spices & Botany, Sanskrit & Bollywood**

**Rituparna Roy**

The collapse of the VOC at the end of the eighteenth century marked the end of the formal Dutch presence in India. All that seemingly remained were factories, forts, churches, cemeteries and some garrisons. Seemingly, but not quite. For, though the relationship between India and the Netherlands started with trade, no doubt, it was later continued in other spheres. In fact, even at the time that the VOC was a strong presence in India, trade was not off that happened. As is so common in East-West encounters, trade actually became a starting point for eventual cultural ties. And this mostly happened through the conduit of Company officials.

In the case of the VOC in India, the first such figure was Johan Josua Ketelaar (1659-1718) mentioned in the Rajput painting above. He was a native of Poland, and an envoy of the Dutch East India Company in India. But apart from being a diplomat, he was also a scholar, and is today chiefly remembered for writing the oldest Hindi grammar, in Dutch in 1688. Interestingly, his seminal work was never published, and was, until the 1930s, considered to have been lost. There are now only three surviving copies of the manuscript, of which one lies in the state archives of The Hague. Keteelaar was the first in a line of very distinguished VOC officials who used their time in the Company to increase the knowledge of and understanding about the foreign lands in which they were stationed. After Keteelaar, Hendrik Adriaan van Rheede tot Drakenstein (1636-1697), a Utrecht nobleman, deserves special mention. As a VOC commander, Drakenstein compiled a series of books on the flora of Malabar (present federal State of Kerala), which were published between 1678-1703, under the title of *Hortus indicus Malabaricus*, Controversi Regni Moluccorum opus Indico celeberrimi omnium plantarum rariores, usually referred to as just *Hortus Moluccensis*. *Hortus Moluccensis* has become famous in the history of botany for various reasons – because of its ample size of twelve folio volumes, its detailed descriptions of plants, and its magnificently produced engravings; for the fascinating account of its genesis (which Drakenstein himself described in the preface to the third volume); but most importantly, for being one of Linnaeus’ main resources for his knowledge of the tropical flora of Asia. Drakenstein’s work was, and still is, consulted by taxonomists in their cultural studies of Linnaean species. Drakenstein is usually discussed alongside his contemporaries and fellow-servants of the Company: the Ceylon botanist Pau Hermann and the Ambon naturalist Georg Everhard Rumphius. The three men laid the foundations for Dutch knowledge of the tropical flora of Asia. Quite contrary to Keteelaar and Drakenstein’s experiences as VOC officials, Jacob Gottfried Haafner (1755-1809), “witnessed the Dutch East India Company’s death agony and demise.” Haafner was German by birth, and quite early in life joined his surgeon father in the service of the VOC. While in India (in the 1780s and 90s) he served as a clerk of the Company, and later as a trader in Calcutta. He wrote profusely during this time and produced a whole series of books about his adventures in late 18th century Malabar and Ceylon. During his lifetime, he published two travel stories on India, of which the two-volume *Travels in a Peloponnis* is his key work. His biographer, Paul van der Velde says: “His direct, catchy way of writing and his adventurous life made him one of the most popular writers of the beginning of the 19th century in Holland. His books remain attractive to this very day – because of its lively descriptions of everyday life in the tropics.”
Four centuries of Indo-Dutch connection

Jean Philippe Vogel (1871-1958) was an active archaeologist in India for more than 30 years. As the art historian Gerda Thens-de Boer says in a Vision of Splendour: Indian Heritage in the Photographs of Jean Philippe Vogel, 1901-12: “If it weren’t for Vogel’s years at the A.S.I. (Archaeological Survey of India), the Kern Institute would never have been founded.” It grew out of a wonderful Netherlands-India archaeological cross-fertilization.

In the course of his 12 years at A.S.I. (1901-1912), Vogel had helped formulate the leading principles of monument care in India, been instrumental in instrumental in increasing the number of institutions and monuments in the subcontinent, and had contributed to a growing awareness of and appreciation for the Indian heritage. Most importantly, he had excavated some of the main sites of Buddhism and Jainism and had carried out an in-depth epigraphical-archaeological study in Chamba.

Back in the Netherlands, Vogel was fortunate to have access to Krom. Krom was the first director of the Archaeological Service of the Netherlands East Indies, and shared both Vogel’s passion for archaeology and vision about the institute they co-founded. In the initial years, both Vogel and Krom gave full priority to the acquisition of research materials, which introduced elements of both Hinduism and Buddhism to the public in the West. As private secretary to Charles W. Leadbeater, the theologian of modern thinking, van Manen cut off for himself a career as the Society’s International Headquarters at Adyar in Madras, where he officiated for six years (1910-1916) as an Assistant Director of the Adyar Library.

The next phase of his life in India started when he then settled in the Darjeeling District of Bengal (in order to dedicate himself to Tibetology, in which he had developed a great interest, with the assistance of native tutors. Van Manen later moved to Calcutta, where he successively held several important posts – first in the Imperial library (1919-1921), then in the Indian Museum (1922), and finally, the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, to which he was elected General Secretary in 1923 and served until 1939.

Diplomatic relations since 1947

From the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, the nature of the contact between India and the Netherlands had been primarily academic and cultural. However, diplomatic relations between the two countries entered a new era after India became independent in 1947. Their relation of six decades since then has always been an active interest in Indian art and culture in the Netherlands and there are, in fact, several institutes of Indian music and dance in the country. Indian food is also popular with the Dutch, attested by the fact that there are more than 100 Indian restaurants in the Netherlands. In recent years, India has also become a popular tourist destination for Dutch people.

The Indo-Dutch connection has come a long way from the trading of spices and cloth in the 17th century. The association has embraced a wide range of culture since then, and it is hoped that the two nations will continue to forge many more ways of understanding, exchange and cooperation in the future.

Fig 2 (above left): Print from the Hertz Malabaricus. The entire publication, including all the illustrations, can be accessed through www.botanicus.org.

Fig 2 (above right): The native or sandalwood archaeologist Jean Philippe Vogel.

Smitten by ancient India: Sanskrit & monuments

After the collapse of the VOC, Indo-Dutch relations entered a whole new phase in the second half of the 19th century, starting with the establishment of the ‘Sanskrit Chair’ at Leiden University. This would have far-reaching consequences for future scholarly contact between the two countries, and its impact would continue well into the 21st century. This next phase of Indo-Dutch relations was significantly different from what had come before. The importance of ‘space and botany’ in the trade/colonial phase of the Indo-Dutch connection had a kind of historical inevitability to it, given the moment in history, these were the most (probably, only) possibilities of interaction. The whole trading enterprise of the Dutch in the 17th century began, after all, with the search for spice, and botany, too, was part of a wider European interest in the natural sciences. Hence, what the Dutch officials did in these respects was nothing unique.

But the ‘second wave’ of Dutch officials in India brought the quality of selfless scholarship to their efforts to understand the sub-continent. The imperial logic, i.e., the policy of colonizers to know more about the colonized in order to dominate them, which was the whole project of Orientalism according to Edward Said, no longer applied to the Dutch in India during the next, and more scholarly, phase. These extraordinary 19th and 20th century Dutch scholars worked with a totally different set of ideals, even though they were still placed within the British colonial framework.

One of these “scholars extraordinaires” was Johan Hendrik Casper Kern (1833-1917), who was first appointed to the Chair of Sanskrit at Leiden University in 1865. This happened shortly after his teaching stint in India, where he taught Sanskrit at Brahmana and Queen’s Colleges in Benares (Varanasi), from 1863-1865. Kern was to teach at Leiden for almost four decades until his retirement in 1903. Together with Herman Neuronger van de Tuuk, he is regarded as one of the founding fathers of Oriental Studies in the Netherlands.

Kern’s pioneering work would already have been sufficient, yet his real fame was ensured when two prominent Dutch archaeologists – Prof. Jean Philippe Vogel (1871-1958) and Nicolaas Johannes Krom (1883-1945) – decided to name an institute after him. Vogel and Krom founded the Kern Institute Association in December 1924. The new institute was created to become Europe’s first educational and research centre for Indian antiquities of the Indian subcontinent and its sphere of influence in Southeast and Central Asia, as well as the study of the ancient history of these countries, the history of their arts, their epigraphy and numismatics.

The Indian Museum (1922); and finally, the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, to which he was elected General Secretary in 1923 and served until 1939.

The next phase of the relations between the two countries started in 1962, when the Netherlands joined the ‘Aid India’ consortium of countries and India became the first, and in time, the largest recipient of development assistance. In the 1970s, the Dutch chose to concentrate on a few development projects, which were valuable for India and for which Dutch resources were available.

The Dutch development co-operation projects in the states of Gujarat and Kerala are noteworthy in this regard.

The Indo-Dutch relations between 1947 and 1962 were generally distant and subdued. During this period both countries were busy in consolidating their economies and rebuilding their respective institutions. During this period, whenever India faced a natural calamity or any other emergency, the Dutch lent India generous and spontaneous support.

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The 1980s turned out to be a very fruitful period and was marked by a number of important agreements between the two countries. In 1981, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, paid a visit to India in March 1987; and then President of India, Mr. Venkataraman, visited the Netherlands in October 1988. As a direct result of these and other intensive consultations, a number of important and important initiatives were signed – and this, in turn, increased the interaction between the two countries substantially.

Indians in the Netherlands

Ever since the inception of diplomatic relations in the middle of the 19th century, Netherlands has had an immigrant population from India. From 1950, an estimated 20,000 Indians have settled in the Netherlands. They are active in various professions and businesses – in spite of their presence in the IT sector. In addition to the Indian population, there are about 150,000 persons of Indian origin who came to the Netherlands from Surinam, which was once a Dutch colony. The colonial framework of the trading of spices and cloth in the 17th century. The association has embraced a wide range of culture since then, and it is hoped that the two nations will continue to forge many more ways of understanding, exchange and cooperation in the future.

The Indo-Dutch connection has come a long way from the trading of spices and cloth in the 17th century. The association has embraced a wide range of culture since then, and it is hoped that the two nations will continue to forge many more ways of understanding, exchange and cooperation in the future.

References

3 The most recent book to come out on the subject is Baucke Van Der Pol’s, The Dutch East India Company in India: A Heritage tour through Gujarat, Malabar, Coromandel and Bengal. The launch of the book in India last year coincided with two significant initiatives, in two states where the Dutch had had a presence: the launch of the website ‘The Dutch in Chinsurah’, an initiative of the Digital Humanities Department of the Presidency University of Kolkata, West Bengal; and the digitisation and preservation of the Dutch records in the Tamil Nadu Archives. The latter initiative was funded by the Dutch Government.
4 An interesting IASIS Outreach Program in 2012 focused on the continuing relevance of the pioneering book: http://tinyurl.com/malabaricus

Fig 3 (left): The Trading Post of the Dutch East India Company in Hooghly, Bengal, Hendrik van Schouwenburg (1655). Reproduced courtesy of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Fig 3 (above): Print from the Hertz Malabaricus. The entire publication, including all the illustrations, can be accessed through www.botanicus.org.

Fig 3 (below right): The native or sandalwood archaeologist Jean Philippe Vogel.