The project title ‘Dutch sources on South Asia’ perhaps evokes an idea of archives and libraries within the Netherlands, but many such sources can actually be found outside the country. In an effort to trace these, Lennart Bes and Gijs Kruitzer searched collections the world over. The resulting guide adds a new dimension to what we may think of as the Dutch East India Company archive.

IN MAY 1698 a worried official of the VOC, or Dutch East India Company, in South Asia wrote to his colleagues in the southwestern Malabar coast (present-day Kerala) that the VOC secretariat has the misfortune that the papers not only must be kept with difficulty from the injuries by the Malabarans, but, moreover, so many of the papers of importance have been found damaged or missing among them, that it is a sham [...] because they may often come in useful, even when one least thinks of it. And therefore it is a very bad habit, which also has been in fashion in Malabar for some time, that various papers [...] like extracts from proceedings, memorials and such [...] have been taken and removed by various people to whom those [papers] relate [...]. And in such a case, anything, when it comes up, the death or transfer of those people, [while] the office remained void and the orders fell into oblivion.1

These words would prove foretelling in two respects. First, notwithstanding the Dutch official’s warning, many VOC documents kept in Malabar and elsewhere in South Asia did eventually vanish. The local climate, pests, neglect, theft, archival transfers and changing record-keeping practices all contributed to the fact that the records of the Dutch settlements in India and Sri Lanka have only partly survived—unlike the Company’s archives created in the Dutch Republic itself, of which much has remained. The other sources, like the other VOC official could hardly have been aware, concerns his view that these documents “may often come in useful, even when one least expects it”, a view that the present statement rather accurately sums up the current position of Dutch sources in the historiography of South Asia: despite these materials’ great value, relatively few historians consult them, even though a certain mystique surrounds them among scholarly circles.

South Asian history, Dutch reporters, global collectors

To improve the accessibility of the materials drawn up and collected by people connected to the VOC in the course of their contacts with South Asia, Jos Gomans of Leiden University’s Institute for History launched an initiative to produce a series of archival guides. After joining the project, Bes and his colleague Lennart Bes (L. Bes, l.p.j.bes@hum.leidenuniv.nl) decided to produce a guide to the sources that can be found in the National Archives of the Netherlands in the Hague, which cover the period of the VOC and its successors in South Asia (c. 1600 to 1825). That volume appeared in 2001. We compiled a second volume, which cover the period of the VOC and its successors in South Asia (c. 1600 to 1825). The secretariat has the misfortune that the papers not only must be kept with difficulty from the injuries by the Malabarans, but, moreover, so many of the papers of importance have been found damaged or missing among them, that it is a sham [...] because they may often come in useful, even when one least thinks of it. And therefore it is a very bad habit, which also has been in fashion in Malabar for some time, that various papers [...] like extracts from proceedings, memorials and such [...] have been taken and removed by various people to whom those [papers] relate [...]. And in such a case, anything, when it comes up, the death or transfer of those people, [while] the office remained void and the orders fell into oblivion.1

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References
2 The first two volumes of this series were published by New Delhi and discussed in the IIAS Newsletter, nos. 25 and 48 (see: tinylit.com/iaas25-48 and tinylit.com/iaas4822).