

# Reading seventeenth century Dutch

## The Alumnus



Early in May this year, the IAS welcomed back an old friend from India. Professor Om Prakash, retired from the Delhi School of Economics, is a renowned specialist in the early modern economic history of the Indian subcontinent, and the relationship between India and the Netherlands.

Willem Vogelsang

PROFESSOR PRAKASH'S association with the IAS goes back to May 1995 when he was invited to deliver the second annual Institute lecture. The topic of the lecture was "Asia and the Pre-Modern World Economy", and it was later published by the IAS. He has also published in the Institute's quarterly, *The Newsletter*. In 1999, he was invited to serve on the International Review Committee to evaluate the IAS. He was invited by the IAS as a Senior Fellow in 2005-06 and again in 2007. He has been a Member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences since 2000, and in April 2005 he was awarded the Royal Decoration "Knight in the Order of the Netherlands Lion" by Her Majesty, the Queen of the Netherlands. Willem Vogelsang, IAS institute manager, spoke to professor Om Prakash about his research and his personal relationship with IAS and the Netherlands.

#### When did you first come to the Netherlands?

That was in September 1961. I was still rather young, for the first time outside of India. Yes, I was homesick, but fortunately I found some Dutch people who helped me, and in the end I stayed for two years in The Hague, going to the National Archives (at that time called the General State Archives) almost every day. But again, I had always lived with my family in Delhi, had gone to University there, and then to find myself all alone in a foreign country: the first few weeks were indeed difficult!

#### Why did you become interested in the Netherlands?

I studied economics at the Delhi School of Economics, but all that time I was also interested in history. In 1959 a new course was being offered, namely that of economic history, and of course I opted for that course, although I should add that I was the only student. During my studies I thus became interested in the Indian overseas trade in the seventeenth century, especially with the Netherlands. Did you know that by the end of that century, India had become the most important trading partner for the Dutch East India Company, more important even than Indonesia? The VOC exported Indian textiles to Europe, raw silk to Japan, and opium to Indonesia, from where some of it reached China. Especially Bengal was an important source of Indian products. The VOC trade with India remained larger than that of Britain until the early eighteenth century.

#### Who stimulated you to pursue this line of study?

When I studied in Delhi, one of my teachers was Tapan Raychaudhuri, who had already studied the archives in The Hague and who defended his second PhD thesis in Oxford in the mid 1950s ("The Dutch in Coromandel, 1605-1690"). Then there was Professor Ashin Das Gupta, who completed his PhD in Cambridge. He had also worked in the National Archives in The Hague, and in 1967 published his book, "Malabar in Asian Trade, 1740-1800". But I also received much support from a diplomat who worked at the Dutch embassy in Delhi. He taught me Dutch. The embassy also arranged a Dutch government fellowship to enable me to go to the Netherlands, at first for one year, but it was later extended to a second year. That is how I ended up in The Hague in September 1961. So you see, I received a lot of support and encouragement from various people.

#### Were people not surprised with you specialising in the Dutch trade with India?

Well, yes. At that time there were very few people in India interested in this subject. Many of my friends advised me to pursue a career in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). But I must say that I got a lot of support from my father, who had been a civil servant himself, although not in the IAS. I should add, that an academic career in India, in those days, was perhaps not as risky as it may be now; there were, and there still are, many universities and colleges and it is not too difficult to find a lectureship somewhere. Nevertheless, a career in the IAS was regarded as being far more prestigious. But, as I said, my father always supported my decision.

#### How did you feel when you first came to the Netherlands?

Rather lost, to tell you the truth, especially when I saw the documents I was supposed to study. I had learnt a bit of modern Dutch in India, with the help of my friend at the Dutch embassy, but reading handwritten seventeenth century Dutch was quite another matter. So, I think I was really lucky to meet the right people. An official from the Ministry that had given me the grant to come over to the Netherlands, arranged for a retired teacher to help me learn to read seventeenth century Dutch. At first it was rather funny, because he could not read the documents either, but he was native Dutch, and together we picked it up and in fact I soon noticed that I was reading the texts with much more ease. You may understand that at that moment I felt rather relieved.

#### How did your work go?

At first I focussed on the VOC trade in Gujarat, in western India, but later I concentrated on the archives that related to Bengal. The amount of material was really enormous, and that is why I received an extension of my fellowship for another six months. I then went to London for some three to four months to study the British sources, and after that I returned to the Netherlands for another six months. So, in total I worked for two years in The Hague.

#### So what happened when you returned to India?

In the winter of 1963/1964 I returned to India, by boat from Marseilles to Bombay. I had collected a wealth of information, and by 1967 I could submit my thesis, which was accepted in 1968. A few years later I could travel again, this time to Harvard. I had received a fellowship

from the Rockefeller Foundation, and I was lucky in being able to stay there for two years. I could revise my thesis manuscript and prepare it for publication. I returned to Delhi in 1972 and was appointed as associate professor at the Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi.

#### When did you go back to the Netherlands again?

That was in 1976, when I received a fellowship from the University of Delhi. My friends and colleagues were once more surprised that I opted to go to the Netherlands, rather than Britain or the United States, but I wanted to go back and study the archives again. I met some Dutch historians during this visit, who would remain close friends ever after: Jan Heesterman, Henk Wesseling, Dirk Kolff, Femme Gastra, Leonard Blussé, Ivo Schöffer, Hugo s'Jacob, Jaap Bruyn, Jur van Goor.

#### Did you ever consider leaving India permanently?

No, my wife and I always wanted to work and live in India. I have over the years received many invitations to work abroad, but I have always declined them. That did not mean that I did not like to go abroad for some months or longer. In 1982-1983 I received a fellowship from the Netherlands to spend time at IAS in Wassenaar (Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences). During that year I finished a book manuscript for Princeton University Press. I went back to IAS in 1992-1993, to work with some of my Dutch friends, including Femme Gastra, Leonard Blussé, and Jur van Goor. Together we worked on a project that covered the trade of pre-modern Asia. And in 1998 I again returned to IAS for a few months as Guest of the Rector, who at that time was Henk Wesseling.

#### You are now at the International Institute for Asian Studies.

##### How did you initially get into contact with us?

Well, that must have been in the early 1990s when the IAS was still in its infancy. I met the then director of the IAS, Wim Stokhof, in Delhi, and he invited me to deliver the (second) IAS Annual lecture, in 1995, and I have been back as a guest of the IAS many times.

##### What has been your relationship with the IAS?

The IAS has always been extremely helpful, and my many visits to the IAS have always been very fruitful and stimulating. That is, for me at least, one of the great boons of the IAS. Being a fellow allows you to meet so many other scholars, from all over the world and from various disciplines, and talking with them is always exciting. In the past, when the IAS was still housed in the Nonnensteeg, there were the communal lunches every day, and those were always moments I looked forward to. Not just for the food, you will understand, but especially for the opportunity to meet other people. Nowadays, the IAS is housed on the beautiful Rapenburg; there are monthly lunch lectures and many other moments at which fellows and other scholars can meet. Yes, the IAS is a very exciting place.

##### What do you think about the IAS alumnus network?

An excellent idea. The network will provide scholars who have spent time at the IAS, at one time or another, the opportunity to get into contact with each other. They all share the wonderful experience of having stayed in Leiden or Amsterdam with the IAS.

##### And of course the main question: What do you think of *The Newsletter*?

Absolutely a great innovation. As a source of information about Asian studies I do not know of any other publication that equals it. One of the special attributes of *The Newsletter* is that it is sent free of charge to all subscribers. There is no hassle of subscribing, or transferring money, which you may forget. No, four times a year you find *The Newsletter* on your desk. It is full of information, with articles, book reviews, announcements of conferences, etc. It is really something any scholar in Asian studies cannot do without. And besides all that, for you it is a way to put the IAS on the map. Not only the IAS, but also the Netherlands.

##### How does it feel now, to walk around in the Netherlands, some 50 years after you first came here?

It is still wonderful to see people and to work with the archival material. It is also a bit sad, since many Dutch historians working with me have retired, just like me, of course. But I am still in touch with them and enjoy meeting them whenever I can.

##### What's next?

I will go on working, because that is what keeps you going. And I am very lucky, I can do what I really like doing. I am indeed very privileged that I could always do so. And I certainly hope to return to Leiden again. I have so many pleasant memories of this place, and the National Archives in nearby The Hague will always attract me.