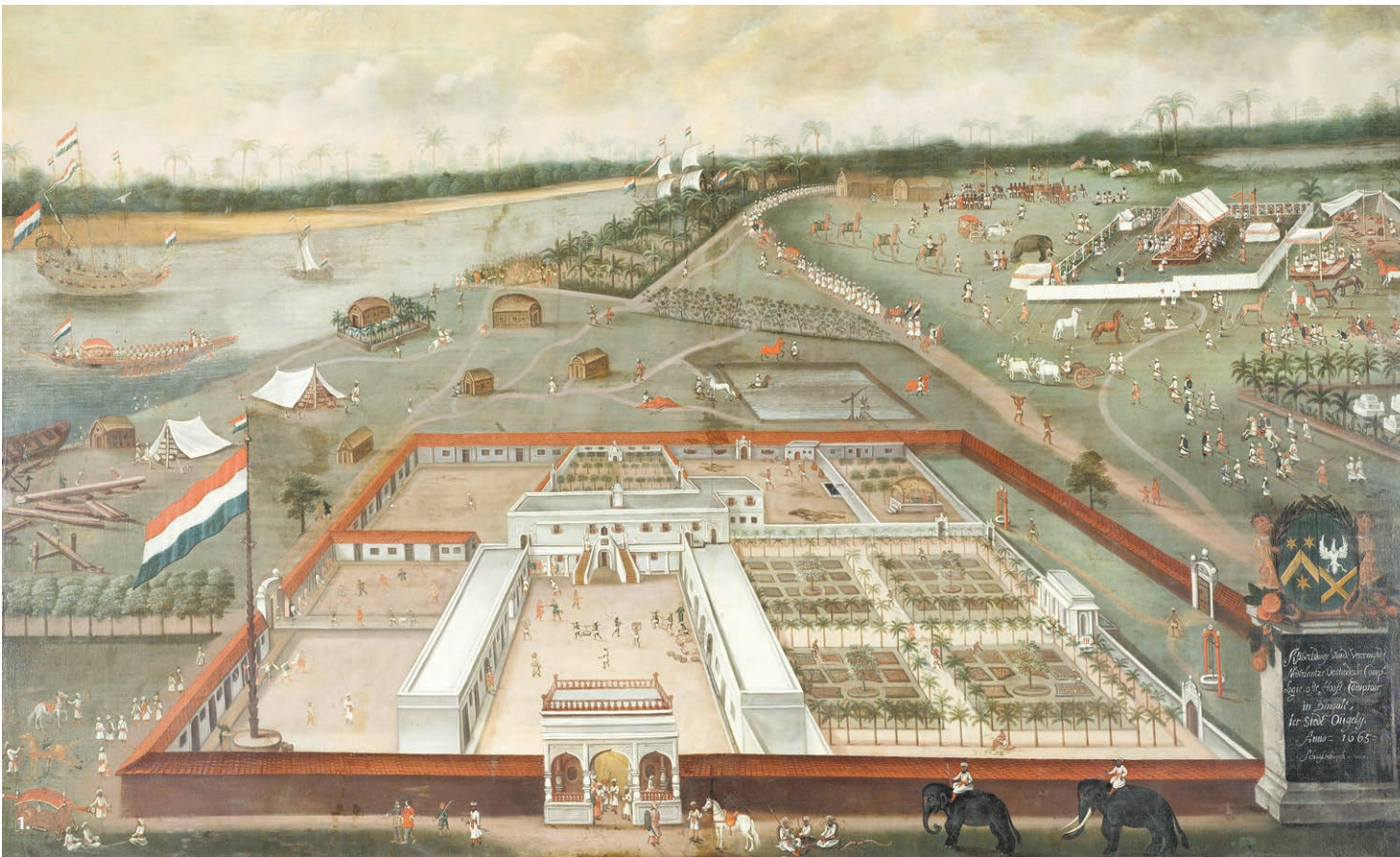


Of Spices & Botany, Sanskrit & Bollywood

“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.”¹ 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

Rituparna Roy



VOC: point of first contact

Trade was what made Amsterdam great, and this canvas – which happens to be one of the biggest paintings in the museum – is but a small representative of the people and places that could make that possible, India being one of them. It is testament to the maritime trade of the United Dutch East India Company, or VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie), that was established in 1602, and encapsulates a very important chapter of the four centuries’ old Indo-Dutch connection.

However, it was not only the Dutch who recorded their presence in India. Indian artists, too, shared in the enterprise. The Rajput painting *Maharana Sangram Singh of Udaipur entertaining members of the Dutch East India Company led by Johan Josua Ketelaar* (c. 1711) is proof of that. Taken together, these pieces – one showing a coastal settlement, and the other a diplomatic meeting – illustrate important facets of the trade relationship between India and Holland in the 17th century.

India was one of the cornerstones in the all-Asia trading system that the VOC had developed during the 17th and 18th centuries. From here they exported pepper, cotton cloth, silk, opium and a host of other goods; and imported spices from the Moluccas, silver from Japan, and some European goods. Though this trading relationship with India did not evolve into a colonial relationship as was the case in Indonesia, it was undoubtedly important – especially along the coasts of (the modern Indian federal states of) Gujarat, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal. In Bengal, for instance, thousands of weavers depended upon the VOC demand for cotton and silk; in Kerala, the VOC played a significant role in the politics of the day; and in Gujarat, it established itself as the largest foreign trader at a time of stiff competition from other trading companies.³

Company officials and cultural ties: Ketelaar, Drakenstein, and Haafner

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 *all* 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 1698. 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.

Ketelaar 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 Ketelaar, Hendrik Adriaan van Rheede tot Drakenstein (1636-1691), 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, Continentis Regni Malabarici apud Indos celeberrimi omnis generis Plantas rariores*, usually referred to as just *Hortus Malabaricus*.

Hortus Malabaricus 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.⁴ 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 Ketelaar and Drakenstein’s experiences as VOC officials, Jacob Gotfried 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 proficiently 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 Palanquin* 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.”⁵

Four centuries of Indo-Dutch connection



Fig 1 (top left): *The Trading Post of the Dutch East India Company in Hooghly, Bengal*, Hendrik van Schuylenburg (1665). Reproduced courtesy of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Fig 2 (below left): *Maharana Sangram Singh of Udaipur entertaining members of the Dutch East India Company led by Johan Josua Ketelaar* (c. 1711). Reproduced courtesy of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

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

Fig 4 (below right): The Dutch Sanskritist and archaeologist Jean Philippe Vogel.

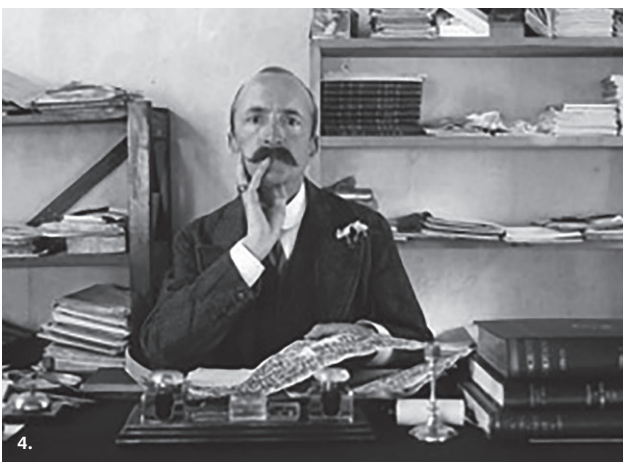
Smitten by ancient India: Sanskrit & monuments

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 'spice 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 likely (or probably, only) possibilities of interaction. The whole trading enterprise of the Dutch in the 17th century began, after all, with the search for spice;⁶ 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 logic 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 extraordinaire' was Johan Hendrik Caspar Kern (1833-1917), who was the first to be 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 Brahma 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 Neubronner van der 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 archaeology "in its widest possible sense," i.e., for the study of the 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.



Jean Philippe Vogel (1871-1958) was an active archaeologist in India for more than a decade. As the art historian Gerda Theuns-de Boer says in *A Vision of Splendour: Indian Heritage in the Photographs of Jean Philippe Vogel, 1901-1913*: "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."⁷ 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 increasing the number of protected 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.⁸

Back in the Netherlands, Vogel was fortunate to come across 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, and through their efforts, the Kern Institute became a repository for books, manuscripts, lithographs, photographs and epigraphic rubbings. The acquisition of manuscripts for the Kern Institute reached its peak in 1928, when Tibetologist Johan van Manen added 380 manuscripts to the collection.

Johan van Manen (1877-1943) had a strong India connection, having spent half his lifetime in India – first in Madras and then Calcutta. In the words of his biographer, Peter Richardus, his was "a remarkable walk through life, which led from behind Dutch dikes to Himalayan heights." Initially, it was theosophy that bridged this expanse. In his youth, van Manen had become an active member of the theosophical movement, which introduced elements of both Hinduism and Buddhism to the public in the West. As private secretary to Charles W. Leadbeater, the ideologist of modern theosophy, van Manen set off for the Theosophical Society's International Headquarters at Adyar near 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 1939.⁹

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 can be divided broadly into three periods: from 1947-62; the 1960s and 70s; and from the 1980s to the present time.

Indo-Dutch relations between 1947 and 1962 were generally distant and subdued. During this period both countries were busy recovering from their respective traumatic experiences, India from the partition of the country and the Netherlands from the ravages of the Second World War; 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.

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 Dutch 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 and expertise could make a difference. The Dutch development co-operation projects in the states of Gujarat and Kerala are noteworthy in this regard.

The 1980s turned out to be a very fruitful period and was characterized by a number of high profile visits between India and the Netherlands. The Dutch Prince Claus visited India in 1981; Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, visited the Netherlands in October 1985; Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands and Prince Claus visited India in January 1986; Mr. Ruud Lubbers, then Prime Minister of the Netherlands, 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 agreements between the two countries 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 20th century, the Netherlands has been home to a sizable immigrant population from India. From 1950, an estimated 20,000 Indians have settled in the Netherlands. They are active in various professions and businesses – of late, particularly 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. They are Dutch citizens whose ancestors were taken from India to Surinam as indentured labourers, and have thus strong cultural bonds with India.

There 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. However, the Indian cultural artefact that has most caught the imagination in the last few years is Bollywood. In this, it no doubt reflects a global trend, but the hosting of the IFFA Awards in Amsterdam in 2005 was also a contributory factor in garnering greater interest in Hindi films.

The first decade of the new millennium, in fact, saw several new things happen on the Indo-Dutch cultural front. The Amsterdam India Festival of 2008, which was the largest celebration of Indian art and culture in Amsterdam, deserves special mention. It was followed soon after by the creation of an 'India Chair' at Leiden University, by the ICC; and the inauguration of the Gandhi Centre in The Hague in 2012 after a year-long commemoration of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's 150th birth anniversary in the country.

The Indo-Dutch connection has come a long way from the trading of spices and cloth in the 17th century. Their 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.

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