

CHAPTER FOUR

JAN COMPANY IN CANNANORE (1663-1723)

... because this fortress owns neither landed property nor possesses jurisdiction [on land], our people cannot enjoy recreation anywhere, but are shut up inside like prisoners¹

Introduction

The endeavours of the Dutch and the English trading companies to appropriate a share of the Euro-Asian spice trade hardly had a decisive impact on the Arabian Sea trade in the early decades of the seventeenth century.² The South-East Asian spice-producing areas, lying beyond the control of the *Estado da India*, were the initial focus of the English and the Dutch entrepreneurs. The early Dutch exploratory voyages conducted by what are known as the ‘pre-companies’ (*voorcompagnieën*) did not venture to Malabar, which was the principal source of pepper for Europe until the end of the sixteenth century.³ The Dutch attempt to control the European spice trade received a powerful stimulus with the formation of the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* in 1602.⁴ Avoiding conflict with the *Estado da India* in the Arabian Sea, the VOC successfully established its commercial presence in South-East Asia. Before long, the Portuguese lost their sway over the European spice market as both the English and the Dutch Companies began to control the major share in the supply of spices which they procured mainly from South-East Asia.⁵

¹ ‘...omdat dan dese fortesse sonder eenige landeryen off jurisdictie wesende soude end ons volk nergens de minste uytspanningh kunnen genieten, maar als gevangenen binnen geslooten sitten...’. VOC 1261, Instructions to the *Onderkoopman* Gelmer Vosburg, 14 december 1664, fo. 312v.

² As pointed out by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, the official procurement of the European Companies in Malabar and Canara during the first half of the seventeenth century would very seldom have exceeded 1,000 to 1,200 tons. Subrahmanyam, *Political Economy of Commerce*, 249.

³ John Bastin, ‘The Changing Balance of the Southeast Asian Pepper Trade’, in M. N. Pearson (ed.), *Spices in the Indian Ocean World* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), 283-316 at 290.

⁴ The *Generale Vereenichde Geotroyeerde Oost-Indische Compagnie* was chartered on Mar. 20 1602 with a total capital of 6, 424, 588 *florins*. See for details, F. S. Gaastra, *De Geschiedenis van de VOC* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2002), 17-22.

⁵ It has been argued that, while the Portuguese controlled 75 per cent of pepper imports to Europe up to about 1550 and again in the 1570s and the 1580s, the VOC was far ahead of them by the second decade of the seventeenth century. C. H. H. Wake, ‘The Changing Pattern of Europe’s Pepper and Spice Imports, ca. 1400-1700’, *Journal of European Economic History*, 8 (1979), 361-403.

The Malabar commercial scenario on the eve of the Dutch conquests

The nature of the Portuguese commercial presence in the Arabian Sea was undergoing a transition in the seventeenth century. As argued by Niels Steensgaard, by the beginning of the seventeenth century, the *Estado da India* had transformed into more of a tax-gathering and redistributive enterprise than being a real commercial power in the Arabian Sea.⁶ Moreover, Portuguese attention was increasingly shifting towards the new colony of Brazil.⁷ Correspondingly, the *Estado da India* was gradually losing its control over the Malabar spice trade.⁸ Although, the total pepper output from Malabar increased significantly during the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the share enjoyed by the *Estado* in this branch of trade had hardly grown.⁹ Consequently, the Malabar spice trade was left principally in the hands of Asian merchants. The re-emergence of Calicut and Cannanore as the major ports of trade in Malabar by the beginning of the seventeenth century was the consequence of this changing commercial atmosphere in the Arabian Sea.¹⁰ However, the growing influence of the Dutch East India Company in the western quarter of the Indian Ocean introduced a new drift to the course of developments in Malabar. The Dutch occupation of the Portuguese settlements in Malabar by 1663 initiated a struggle to gain control of the spice trade between the VOC and those Asian traders who had so far been enjoying a free hand at these ports.

The Dutch in Malabar

The Dutch conquests in Malabar were not the outcome of a well-thought-out plan devised the Company. The irregular visits of the Company ships to Malabar in the first half of the seventeenth century were not intended to create a permanent commercial presence in the region.¹¹ If the

⁶ Niels Steensgaard, *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: The East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 86.

⁷ George D. Winius, 'India or Brazil? Priority for Imperial Survival in the Wars of the restauração', in Pius Malekandathil and T. Jamal Mohammed (eds.), *The Portuguese, Indian Ocean and European Bridgeheads, 1500-1800* (Tellichery: MESHAR, 2001), 181-90. Ernst van Veen, *Decay or Defeat? An Inquiry into the Portuguese Decline in Asia, 1580-1645* (Leiden: CNWS, 2000).

⁸ A. R. Disney, *Twilight of the Pepper Empire: Portuguese Trade in Southwest India in the Early Seventeenth Century* (Harvard University: Harvard University Press, 1978).

⁹ Pius Malekandathil argues that, though there was a steep increase in the production of pepper in Malabar by the seventeenth century (around 600 per cent), the share of the *Estado da India* in the pepper trade was only 3.1 per cent of the total production. Pius Malekandathil, 'The Mercantile Networks and the International Trade of Cochin 1500-1663', Paper presented at the International conference on 'Rivalry and Conflict, European Traders and Asian Trading networks: Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', 23-26 June 2003, Leiden/Wassenaar.

¹⁰ Sinnappah Arasaratnam links this phenomenon to the rise of Surat in the north and to the expansion of the westward trade to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Arasaratnam, *Maritime India in the Seventeenth Century*, 95.

¹¹ On the early relations between Malabar and the VOC in the first half of the seventeenth century see, Roelofs, *De Vestiging der Nederlanders ter Kuste Malabar*.

Company remained for long uncertain about its Malabar policy, the conquests in Ceylon changed the situation altogether.¹² The continuing presence of the Portuguese in Malabar was henceforth considered a threat to the security of Dutch settlements in Ceylon.¹³ Furthermore, there was concern about the possibility of an English take-over of the Malabar trade which could seriously undermine the plan of the Company to control the European spice market.¹⁴ This circumstance prompted the subsequent conquests and establishment of a chain of Dutch settlements along the Malabar Coast, including Cannanore, by 1663.

The establishment of the earliest European bridgehead in Cannanore by the Portuguese goes back to the first decade of the sixteenth century.¹⁵ The factory soon developed into a fortified settlement of commercial and political significance. In spite of their weakened control over the Malabar trade and the changing nature of the European commercial presence in the seventeenth-century Indian Ocean, the Portuguese succeeded in holding onto their settlement in Cannanore until it fell into the hands of the Dutch in 1663. Although, the earliest contact between Cannanore and the VOC dates back to 1604 when the VOC ships under Admiral Steven van der Hagen appeared in the Arabian Sea, the interaction between the Dutch Company and the local Mappila traders remained inconsequential until the second half of the century.¹⁶ Admittedly, the Dutch were invited by the local 'Xabunder'¹⁷ to establish a factory in Cannanore in 1608, but this did not become a reality until 1663.¹⁸ The first expedition of Van Goens in 1658 to expel the Portuguese from Cannanore was unsuccessful, but with tactical assistance from the Ali Raja, the Dutch succeeded in ousting the Portuguese garrison in 1663 and established themselves as the masters of the Fort St Anjelo.¹⁹

¹² In 1654, the Batavia government asked the Ceylon Council to decide over whether to continue Malabar trade or not. VOC 1208, General Missive, 7 Nov. 1654, fo. 80r.

¹³ Hugo K. s'Jacob, 'De VOC en de Malabarkust in de 17^{de} Eeuw', in M. A. P. Meilink-Roelofs (ed.), *De V.O.C in Azië* (Bussum: Fibula-Van Dishoeck, 1976), 86. Els M. Jacobs, *Koopman in Azië: De Handel van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie Tijdens de 18^{de} Eeuw* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2000), 85-99 at 55.

¹⁴ Leonard Blussé and Jaap de Moor, *Nederlanders Overzee: De Eerste Vijftig Jaar, 1600-1650* (Franeker: T. Wever. B.V., 1983), 251.

¹⁵ K. S. Mathew, 'Trade and Commerce in Kerala (1500-1800)' in P. J. Cherian, *Perspectives on Kerala History: The Second Millennium*, vol. II, part II, (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Gazetteers Department, 1999), 180-221 at 185.

¹⁶ *De Opkomst van het Nederlandsch Gezag in Oost-Indië [1595-1610]*, ed. J. K. J. Jonge, III ('s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1865), 32.

¹⁷ The 'Xabunder' (*Shah Bandar*) mentioned by the Dutch was probably the Ali Raja himself who had become the dominant figure at the Cannanore port town by the beginning of the seventeenth century.

¹⁸ VOC 545, Letter sent by Jacob de Bitter to the Captain of Cannanore, 18 Oct. 1608, fo. 1r.

¹⁹ Roelofs, *De Vestiging der Nederlanders ter Kuste Malabar*, 172; *Dagh-Register [1663]*, 178. For more details about the Cannanore conquest, VOC 1239, Letter by Jacob Hustaert from Cannanore to *Heren XVII*, 19 Sept. 1663, fo. 1646r-1646v.

The Cannanore fort

The Cannanore fort served as a safe haven in which the Portuguese interest had been able to flourish for more than one and a half centuries. It was built on a rocky pinnacle in the Bay of Cannanore jutting out into the Arabian Sea. The roadstead provided the best defence, encircling one-third of the fort's premises and providing only a single opening towards the land.²⁰ The fort which was 'inherited' by the Dutch from the Portuguese was a formidable structure. The portion that was facing the land side included mainly housing, probably of common soldiers and other ordinary inhabitants, making a sort of 'lower town'. This was protected by three bastions and a wall, stretching from one end to the other end on the water. The main centre of the fort, built on a rocky cliff, was completely detached from the rest by a moat around twenty feet deep and sixty feet wide. This citadel was built along the edge of the moat on the other side, making it even more inaccessible. The safety of the fortress from an outside attack was assured by the rocky cliff on the sea side, which was almost inaccessible by nature and was reinforced by strong walls and flanks on its slopes.²¹

Under the Portuguese, fort St Anjelo constituted a fort town in itself, consisting of soldiers, officials, their families and institutions such as a hospital, a church and other facilities. Notwithstanding the possession of a stronghold on the fringe of the pepper country, the initial idea of the Dutch was to dismantle the fortress completely and to replace it with a small trading settlement.²² Its destruction, however, faced obstacles from the very beginning. Commander Jacob Hustaert succeeded in postponing the initial plan by citing the unavailability of a sufficient work force to dismantle the strongly built fortress. He also pointed out the possibility of an English take-over or the imminent return of the Portuguese to Cannanore. He judged a garrison of seventy or eighty men sufficient to keep the settlement.²³ Van Goens also shared Hustaert's opinion in his letter to the *Heren XVII*.²⁴ The Company's provisional decision was to maintain the fortress by a reduction of its size in order to economize on the settlement. Initially the houses in the 'lower town' were demolished and the surrounding coconut grove was cleared out.²⁵ Consequently all that remained was the grand structure of the fort, strictly aimed at promoting the Company's commercial designs.²⁶

²⁰ VOC 1239, Missive from Cannanore to *Heren XVII*, 19 Sept. 1663, fo. 1646r.

²¹ For a brief description on the Cannanore Fort as inherited by the Dutch from the Portuguese see, *Dagh-Register [1663]*, 178-179.

²² *Dagh-Register [1663]*, 179.

²³ VOC 1239, Missive from Cannanore to *Heren XVII*, 19 Sept. 1663, fo. 1646r-1646v.

²⁴ VOC 1239, Report from Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 19 Feb. 1663, fo. 1699r.

²⁵ VOC 1242, Missive from Rijkloff van Goens to Batavia, 10 Nov. 1663, fo.1006r.

²⁶ *Dagh-Register [1663]*, 179.

The maintenance of the Cannanore settlement was as subject of perpetual debate as there were always attempts on the part of the Company management to give away it. However, the pro-Cannanore officials were able to prevail and scupper over Batavia's plans to dismantle or relinquish the settlement at different stages, citing a range of reasons pertaining to its strategic and political importance. It was argued that generally speaking the Cannanore settlement was not at all profitable, but this was counterbalanced by pointing out its strategic importance in controlling the spice trade in Malabar. In the end, it was the location which tipped the scales in the debate. Even Hendrik van Reede, a Malabar commander who favoured a less aggressive, more laissez-faire policy than that of his predecessor and rival Rijcklof van Goens, feared that the abandonment of the fortress would undermine Dutch control along the western coast, because this could provide ample opportunities for the local Mappila traders, especially the Ali Rajas, to supply spices to other parties.²⁷ Later Marten Huijsman was also quite adamant in pointing out that the Company should maintain Cannanore as a base from where it could manage the affairs of the Canara and Mysore regions, which not only supplied rice and pepper but also could be developed as lucrative markets for Company goods.²⁸ Moreover, the Company always kept an anxious eye on their European competitors: the Portuguese might return and the English and French were waiting for an opportunity to take over the Dutch position in Cannanore.²⁹ These circumstances ensured that the fort St Anjelo survived, albeit being subjected to structural changes under the Dutch.

However, the failure of the Company to turn Cannanore into a commercially important settlement, even after years of effort, questioned the rationale of maintaining the fortress in its actual condition. Commander Isbrand Godske was doubtful about the feasibility of keeping a large garrison in Cannanore because of its paltry trade and even less promising future. He suggested keeping only a tower with fifteen or twenty men there.³⁰ Van Goens, however, did not share Godske's view and was far more optimistic about the increasing profitability of the settlement.³¹ How far the personal conflicts between Van Goens and Godske could have influenced their opposing views about the prospect of the Cannanore settlement can no longer be fathomed.³² As long as Van Goens was able to maintain a strong rapport with the *Heren XVII*, he could pursue his plans without much difficulty.

But in 1679, the increasing imbalance of trade in Malabar forced the *Heren XVII* to suggest a thorough organizational restructuring in Malabar by giving up some of the settlements, including

²⁷ VOC 1284, Letter of van Reede to Batavia, 27 May 1671, fo. 2114r; *Dagh-Register [1663]*, 180.

²⁸ VOC 1360, Letter from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Council of Cochin to Batavia, 28 Apr. 1680, fo. 1756v.

²⁹ VOC 1321, Letter written by van Reede to *Heren XVII*, 9 Dec. 1675, fo. 910r.

³⁰ VOC 1255, Report from Commander Isbrant Godske to *Heren XVII*, 10 Mar. 1667, fos. 999-1001.

³¹ VOC, 1256, Missive from Van Goens to Batavia, 18 May 1666, fo. 67v.

³² There were severe disagreements between Godske and Van Goens on various administrative and commercial matters concerning Malabar. For more details see, s'Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, p. LXVIII.

Cannanore.³³ Another suggestion from Amsterdam was to exchange Macao for Cannanore with the Portuguese. This made good financial sense as the Chinese tea was attracting more and more attention from the European Companies.³⁴ None of these ideas was put into effect foundering on the opposition of a faction who continued to put their faith on Cannanore. In 1684, a former protégé of Van Goens, Commander Gelmer Vosburgh, and the Cochin Council recommended the Company maintain the status quo in Malabar.³⁵ Even Van Reede, who visited Cochin in 1691 as a commissioner, was of the same opinion and continued to express hope that the conditions in Malabar would improve.³⁶ Consequently Cannanore continued to be a part of the Dutch Company's commercial establishment in the Arabian Sea region till it was transferred to the Ali Raja in 1770.³⁷

From the time at which Malabar was detached from Ceylon in 1669, Cannanore came under the jurisdiction of the Malabar Commandement.³⁸ The civil and military affairs of the fort were organised under one chief official or factor (*Opperhoofd*). He was also entrusted with the running of the commercial affairs of the settlement. In cases of special importance, the *Opperhoofd* was advised to seek the consent of the Cochin Council. In other matters it was suggested he allow himself to be advised by the local council (*Raad van Cannanore*) consisting of, besides the factor himself, the troop leader (*Vaandrig*) of the garrison, the accountant (*Boekhouder*), the navigation officer (*Stuurman*) of the cruising ship stationed in Cannanore and the seniormost sergeant. All the criminal matters concerned with the settlement remained under the authority of the Cochin Council.³⁹

The Dutch garrison in Cannanore

There was a continuous fluctuation in the size of the Cannanore garrison. At the beginning, two hundred military men were stationed there to supervise the demolition work, but soon it was found necessary to reduce the defence force to a more reasonable size.⁴⁰ Earmarking Cannanore as the

³³ It is noteworthy that, although Van Goens became the Governor-General in Batavia in 1678, his power was weakened by the factional conflicts within the administrative council (*Raad van Indië*). This declining influence of Van Goens may have influenced the changing policy of the *Heren XVII* regarding Malabar. VOC 320, Missive from *Heren XVII* to India, 19-5-1679, not foliated. s'Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, p. LXXIII.

³⁴ *Generale Missiven, IV: 1675-1685*, 575. VOC 1352, Report on the important information in the letter of Marten Huijsman sent from Cochin to Batavia, 11 Mar. 1680, fos. 357v-358r.

³⁵ VOC 1396, Missive from Commander Vosburg and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 18 Nov. 1684, fo. 769v.

³⁶ 'Instruction by Commissioner Hendrik Adriaan van Reede to Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Malabar Council, 23 Nov. 1691', in s'Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, 232.

³⁷ The fort was transferred for 1, 00,000 rupees. 'Memorandum of Adriaan Moens (1781)', in Galletti, *Dutch in Malabar*, 148.

³⁸ s'Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, p. LI.

³⁹ VOC 1261, Instructions to *Onderkoopman* (Junior Merchant) Gelmer Vosburg appointed as the *Opperhoofd* (Factor) of the Cannanore fortress, 11 Jan. 1668, fo. 313r.

⁴⁰ *Dagh-Register [1663]*, 179.

'key to the North' and 'the frontier of Cochin', Van Goens recommended a garrison of eighty to hundred men at Cannanore as essential to control the local trade and protect the commercial interest of the Company there.⁴¹ Jacob Hustaert was confident enough to envisage a strong settlement with thirty or forty men after the completion of the ongoing renovation work there.⁴² Yet, apprehension of an imminent attack by either the local Mappilas or European competitors made it hard to reduce the garrison to a minimum.⁴³ It was known all too well that once the fortress was lost from their hands, it would nigh on impossible to win it back.⁴⁴

The Cannanore garrison was served by a variety of functionaries. Besides the '*gequalificeerden*', the upper echelon of officialdom, the soldiers and civil professionals like the bookkeeper, surgeon, blacksmith, clerks and such like constituted social life within the fortress.⁴⁵ The soldiers were drawn from various European nationalities, but were mostly of Dutch or German origin. This policy, on occasions, created trouble as there was a risk that these soldiers could run away to other European settlements near by. There were also instances of desertions by the Dutch soldiers.⁴⁶ Desertion was considered a criminal offence and if caught, these renegades meted out severe punishments.⁴⁷ Contrariwise, fugitives from other camps were mostly welcomed.⁴⁸ Poor working conditions, minor crimes or the search for a better fortune often motivated these 'traitors'.⁴⁹

Apart from various European nationals, local people were also recruited as a part of the labour force in Cannanore Fort. In 1679, there were ten local people employed in various positions as linguist, postman, gardener and the like, a number which increased to twenty-nine in 1692, and again reduced to a bare minimum of three by 1698.⁵⁰ In times of emergency the Company did not

⁴¹ VOC 1239, Missive from Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 19 Feb. 1663, fo. 1699r.

⁴² VOC 1242, Missive from Cannanore to Batavia, 11 Feb. 1664, fo. 1060v.

⁴³ In 1692 the total number of employees in Cannanore was 100. By 1720 the number had reduced to twenty-three. However, the political turmoil in Cannanore compelled the Company to send more soldiers there in the following year. VOC 1527, Muster Roll of Cannanore-1692, fos. 519v-520r, 522r. VOC 1942, Missive from Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 16 Oct. 1720, fo. 110v. VOC 1977, Resolution taken in the Cochin Council, 4 Dec. 1721, fos. 203r-205r.

⁴⁴ VOC 1284, Missive from Commander Hendrik van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 27 May 1671, fo. 2114r.

⁴⁵ VOC 1351, Muster roll of the Cannanore fort, 6 June 1679, fo. 2575r.

⁴⁶ VOC 1295, Missive from Commander Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 22 Apr. 1673, fo. 273v. VOC 1304, Missive from Cochin to Batavia, 15 May 1674, fo. 646v. VOC 1474, Report from Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 17 Dec. 1690, fos. 718r-718v.

⁴⁷ It has been reported in 1674 about the escape and the capture of five soldiers from Cannanore who were suggested to be punished 'as an example for others'. VOC 1308, Missive from Commander Van Reede to Batavia, 15 May 1674, fo. 356v.

⁴⁸ VOC 1942, Resolution taken in the Council of Cochin, Friday 12 Jan. 1720, fos. 292r-292v.

⁴⁹ VOC 1284, Missive from Hendrik van Reede to Batavia, 20 Apr. 1671, fos. 2087v-2088r.

⁵⁰ VOC 1351, Muster roll of the Cannanore fort, 6 June 1679, fos. 2575r; VOC 1527, Muster roll of the Company servants in Malabar in 1692, fos. 519v-520r; VOC 1625, Missive from Commander Magnus Wichelman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 31 Dec. 1698, fo. 17.

hesitate to entrust these people with military responsibilities.⁵¹ A glance at the names of such *inlandse dienaren* (native servants) in the employees' lists reveals they were mainly recruited from the Portuguese *toepazes* and *mestiços*.⁵² They, along with their wives and children, constituted an important social class within Cannanore during the seventeenth century.⁵³ Slaves were another important service group living within the walls of the fortress. The Dutch officials were the main slave owners, but occasionally a native servant also possessed a few.⁵⁴ Local workers were also recruited as bricklayers and carpenters for occasional construction and maintenance work.⁵⁵ Menial jobs in the fortress were reserved for the lowest classes of the Malabar society, such as Pulayas, who were usually categorized under the title 'coolies' in the muster roll of the Company.⁵⁶

The local Nayars were employed by the Company in various jobs as letter-bearers, security men and were at times assigned to escort the Dutch Company servants on their journeys into the interior.⁵⁷ The Nayar employee 'Oenjanbar' (?), who was held in high esteem, was described as a man who had formerly enjoyed a high position under the Kolathiri raja.⁵⁸ This man was even excluded from the reduction of the Cannanore garrison as the Company thought that he could be helpful in winning assistance of local Nayar soldiers should the need arise.

In an attempt to cut down on the size of the garrison, religious functionaries were not appointed to the Cannanore Fortress, but the local Dutch employees were exhorted by Van Goens to uphold a moral way of life by reciting Christian prayers, singing psalms and reading out from the Bible on Sundays, and furthermore 'meticulously observing their duties and obligations'.⁵⁹ In brief, the Cannanore garrison was designed strictly to serve the commercial purpose of the Company and

⁵¹ In 1717, to protect the fort from a possible Mappila attack, the garrison was strengthened by recruiting three *inlanders*, possibly Portuguese *mestiços*, with a monthly salary of 2 *rixdollars* and a *para* of rice. VOC 1891, Letter from Cannanore to Cochin, 13 June 1717, fo. 44r-v.

⁵² *Mestiços* were of a mixed origin—born to Portuguese men and Indian women. Later, this term was also used to denote the Dutch-Asian offspring to distinguish them from the 'white *castizos*' or Asia-born persons of pure European parentage. *Toepazes* were dark-skinned Malabar Roman Catholics, who claimed Portuguese descent. The Dutch Chaplain Canter Visscher gave a detailed note on the *toepazes* who lived in Cochin in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, II, 36-40. Also see, Baldaeus, *True and Exact Description*, 717. For a discussion on these racial divisions in Dutch Cochin see, Anjana Singh, 'Fort Cochin in Kerala, 1750-1830: The Social Condition of a Dutch Community in an Indian Milieu' (Diss., Leiden University, 2007), especially pages 42 and 101.

⁵³ VOC 1528, List of the Company servants in Cannanore, 30 June 1693, fo. 546v. VOC 1434, List of the Company men in Cannanore, 1687, fo. 264v.

⁵⁴ For instance, the Company interpreter Ignatio possessed three slaves. VOC 1434, List of the Company men in Cannanore, 1687, fo. 264v.

⁵⁵ VOC 1274, Missive from the Commander and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 14 Aug. 1670, fo. 112r-v.

⁵⁶ VOC 1958, Letter from Cannanore to Cochin, 20 Aug. 1721, fo. 191r.

⁵⁷ In 1692 thirteen Nayars were employed in Cannanore. VOC 1527, Muster roll of Company's employees in various fortresses of Malabar, 30 June 1692, fo. 520r.

⁵⁸ VOC 1625, Missive from Commander Magnus Wichelman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 31 Dec. 1698, fo. 17-18.

⁵⁹ VOC 1261, Instruction to the *Onderkoopman* Gelmer Vosburg from Van Goens, 14 Dec. 1664, fo. 313r-v.

its size was kept to a minimum with a view to be consistent in striving for the economic viability of the settlement.

Jan Company and the local political élites

The interaction between the pre-colonial European trade settlements along the Indian Ocean rim and their host societies varied considerably. While some of these trade settlements developed as integrating nodes of maritime empires with significant socio-political implications for the local societies, at the other end of the spectrum there were commodity-gathering entrepôts which remained peripheral to the regional social life.⁶⁰ Between these two extremes emerged a string of commercial establishments of varying importance.

This complex nature of the Dutch maritime empire was replicated in the commercial settlement pattern in Malabar. Cochin continued to enjoy its strategic position as the centre of the Dutch commercial interest in Malabar, but in spite of their continuous efforts to subjugate the Zamorins, the Dutch commercial and political presence in Calicut was insignificant.⁶¹ In Cannanore the Company was confronted with a completely different situation. Even though the Company was able to obtain a strong foothold in the port city, its commercial and political influence was rather limited. It was not from the local political elite, but from the Mappila Muslim traders that the Company faced stiff resistance.

The Kolathiris and the Dutch entertained two distinct perspectives regarding the political position of the VOC settlement in Cannanore. From the Dutch point of view, this trading settlement was regarded as an 'exclave', incorporated by virtue of conquest from the *Estado da India* and administered by an overseas bureaucracy.⁶² The inhabitants of this trade settlement were claimed to be under the jurisdiction of the Company and, as such, were supposed to maintain an identity of their own, distinct from their surroundings. But Dutch influence did not extend much

⁶⁰ Goa and Batavia, the headquarters of the *Estado da India* and VOC respectively, greatly influenced the socio-political life of the host societies. The British settlements like Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta can be included in the same category. For in-depth studies on the social dynamics of Batavia, see, Hendrik E. Niemeijer, *Batavia: Een Koloniale Samenleving in de 17de Eeuw* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2005) and Leonard Blussé, *Strange Company: Chinese settlers, Mestizo women and the Dutch in VOC Batavia* (Dordrecht: Foris, 1986).

⁶¹ A detailed study on the subject see, s'Jacob, *Rajas of Cochin*.

⁶² The viewpoint about a 'conquered territory' is clear from the treaty signed between the Portuguese and the Dutch after the conquest of the fort in 1663, in which the sanction of the local ruler is not regarded as a necessary prerequisite for the occupation of the settlement. VOC 1239, Articles of the treaty signed between Jacob Hustaert and Captain Anthony Cardoso, 15 Feb. 1663, fos. 1647r-1648v.

beyond the reach of the cannons of the fortress.⁶³ The direct contact between the VOC men in Cannanore and the local people was limited and was riddled with suspicion and distrust.⁶⁴

Yet, the Dutch Cannanore settlement could not afford segregation from its local environment. Interaction at commercial and political levels was necessary for its survival. Cultural brokerage was a necessary corollary to such a situation. In order to overcome both linguistic and political limitations, middlemen were employed as linguists, informants, commercial and political intermediaries and other such functions.⁶⁵ It was through these cultural brokers that the Company carried on its everyday commercial and political dealings with the local people.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that, contrary to the claims of the Company, the Kolathiris maintained an opposite view about the political status of the Cannanore settlement. In their eyes, the Dutch settlement was just another form of foreign mercantile presence in Cannanore and not an independent political entity. Although the virtually autonomous status of the Company in the Cannanore fortress was accepted by the Kolathiris, the latter continued to claim suzerainty over the entire realm, including the fortress. This approach was in line with the general treatment of other foreign trade settlements in Malabar.⁶⁶ Accordingly, the Company was supposed to pay homage to the Kolathiris by observing the customary obligations on such special occasions as a succession to the throne and official visits to the Company fortress. This ran completely counter to the Company claims to sovereignty in Cannanore. Nevertheless, accepting the reality, the Company men were forced to adapt themselves to the local situation if they wished to promote their commercial aims.

The Dutch and the local political practice of gift-giving

Operating within the complex power relations of Malabar in general and Cannanore in particular, the Company had to adopt a pragmatic political outlook to succeed in its commercial ventures. Company servants were not averse to complying with the indigenous ritual systems to the extent that they felt it could be of use to bolstering their commercial aims in the region. The customary practice of gift-giving was paid special attention. The ritual relationship articulated through gift donation and reception envisaged a sort of hierarchical power relationship between the recipients

⁶³ VOC 1333, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 14 Dec 1678, fo. 454.

⁶⁴ For example, negative representations of Malabar people are abundant in Dutch reports. VOC 1242, Missive from Cannanore to Batavia, 11 Feb. 1664, fo. 1059v. VOC 1891, Letter from Cochin to Cannanore, 30 Aug. 1717, fo. 56v. VOC 1993, Missive from the Commander and the Council in Cochin to Batavia, 21 Apr. 1723, fo. 90v.

⁶⁵ The Portuguese also depended heavily on such 'linguas' to communicate effectively with Asian societies. Dejanirah Couto, 'The Role of Interpreters, or Linguas, in the Portuguese Empire during the 16th Century', *e-Journal of Portuguese History* [online journal], 1/2 (winter 2003),

http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Portuguese_Brazilian_Studies/ejph/html/issue2/pdf/couto.pdf, accessed 1 July 2007.

⁶⁶ The concept of mercantile extra-territoriality was more or less generally accepted throughout Asia before the European intervention. Owen C. Kail, *The Dutch in India* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1981), 101-2. For a specific reference to the functioning of pre-European foreign trade settlements in Malabar ports see, Barbosa, *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, II, 76.

and the donors of the gifts. As indicated by Nicholas Dirks, it linked individuals and corporations, symbolically, morally, and politically with the sovereignty of the king and created both a moral unity and a political hierarchy.⁶⁷

This ritual practice gained particular significance in Malabar where the hierarchical order of power was not clearly demarcated but was dispersed in the society. In such a political situation, efforts to attain and sustain a distinct political identity through ritual expressions were very important to the members of the Malabar elite. Moreover, the practice of receiving gifts was considered as an eligible, though irregular, form of tax gathering and supplemented its meagre income.⁶⁸ Combining both the ritualistic and materialistic realms of power together, the customary practice of gift-giving gained considerable political significance in Malabar. The continuous demands for gifts from the Company by the Kolathiri princes, though despised by the Dutch as an expression of their avariciousness, have to be analyzed from this viewpoint.⁶⁹ The Dutch were obviously aware of this too.⁷⁰ Since political power was distributed even within the ruling lineages, the number of gift-receivers tended to be more than one as is shown by the list of the Company.

In Cannanore, there was a pecking order of gift-receivers from the Kolathiri downwards who were given presents on various occasions. The *ariyittuwaꝛcha* or the accession of a new Kolathiri was such an event when the elites of the region were supposed to pay a customary obligation to the raja.⁷¹ Besides, the visits of various princes of Kolaswarupam and other neighbouring principalities, including the Ali Rajas, to the fortress were also marked by gift-giving by the Company.⁷² The local elites reciprocated the ritual gifts by conferring sanctions and concessions on the Company within the area of their influence.⁷³ Hence, instead of maintaining a political identity strictly independent of the local body politic, the Company in practice was forced to function within the structure of a local ritual system with a political status analogous to that of a local elite house or *taravadu*.

⁶⁷ Dirks mainly refers to the grants of titles, honours, and lands bestowed upon the subjects by the king as 'gifts' and tries to define the ritual-cum-political hierarchy accordingly. The reception of gifts from his subjects by the king could also have functioned in the same direction by envisaging a hierarchical ritual-political order. In Malabar, where rajas functioned more or less as big landholders, reception gifts would have been more akin to the accumulation of surplus production from the cultivators, reflecting a kind of Lord-Vassal relationship. Nicholas B. Dirks (ed.), 'From little King to Landlord', in id., *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press 1992), 175-208 at 179-80.

⁶⁸ Canter Visscher noticed that the Company gifts were usually sold by the Cochin king for their real value and 'they would be better pleased if money was given them instead as they deem it no disgrace to receive pecuniary gifts.' In this respect it is also important that the Dutch noticed the sheer poverty of the members of the Kolaswarupam. Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, II, 33. s'Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, 152.

⁶⁹ VOC 1270, Missive from the Commander and the Council of Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 16 Feb. 1670, fo. 938v.

⁷⁰ Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, II, 19.

⁷¹ VOC 1582, Missive from Commander Adriaan van Ommen and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 30 June 1696, fo. 21.

⁷² VOC 1634, Missive from Commander Magnus Wickelman and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 20 Nov. 1700, fo. 8v. VOC 1912, Missive from Cochin to Cannanore, 4 Aug. 1717, fos. 316-7. The gifts were usually consisted of various valuable items of textiles and fine spices. See; VOC 1852, Missive from Barent Ketel to Batavia, 9 May 1714, fo. 64v.

⁷³ VOC 1370, Translated letter from Kolathiri giving toll concessions to the Company, 14 Mar. 1681, fo. 2274v.

The Company and local communicators

Apart from the great walls around the settlement, the language barrier limited the access of the Cannanore fortress to the outside world.⁷⁴ Its occupants depended on linguists to carry on their contact with the locals. It is likely that the Portuguese language served as the medium of correspondence between various European company men as well as between the Europeans and the locals in Cannanore.⁷⁵ Local linguists (*dvibhashis*) served as the intermediaries between the locals and the Company, both in commercial and political matters. In particular circumstances, the interpreter could be assigned such confidential political tasks as spying on the movements of rivals or tapping secret information from the Kolathiris.⁷⁶

Unsurprisingly the dependence on local linguists was not unfraught from difficulties. Mostly the *tolk* or the local translator was a *mestiço*, versed in the local language, Malayalam, as well as in Portuguese.⁷⁷ This meant that the Company had to manage the remaining task of translation from Portuguese to Dutch. The problem was exacerbated as the locals used various scripts to write Malayalam. Hence it was requested the Ali Raja write in 'Sanskrit letters' instead of *kolezhuttu*, as it was difficult for the local Company linguist to translate the latter script.⁷⁸ To what extent the

⁷⁴ Report of Hendrik Adriaan van Reede. Quoted in, J. Heniger, *Hendrik Adriaan van Reede tot Drakenstein (1636-1691) and Hortus Malabaricus: A contribution to the History of Dutch Colonial Botany* (Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1986), 21.

⁷⁵ VOC 1993, Missive from Commander and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 21 Apr. 1723, fo. 114v.

⁷⁶ VOC 1299, Missive from Hendrik van Reede and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 15 Dec. 1674, fo. 411r.

⁷⁷ One Ignatio d' Orousjo appears as the main Company linguist in the Cannanore Fort. In a report of 1689, he had already been described as 'old interpreter' and passed away before the end of 1691. VOC 1474, Missive from Cannanore to Cochin, 16 Dec. 1689, fo. 199r. VOC 1527, Report on the debts of various Cannanore merchants incurred during the period of Pieter van de Kouter, 6 Nov. 1691, fo. 450r.

⁷⁸ VOC 1741, Letter from Commander Willem Moerman to Ali Raja, 2 Nov. 1706, 662v. The 'Sanskrit letters' may refer to the preference of, for example, Konkani interpreters who preferred to use the *devanagari* script, but it is far more likely that it refers to the use of the *arya-ezhuttu* script which was a relatively new script initially preferred by Nambutiri Brahmins but also used by, for instance, Emanuel Carneiro, one of the interpreters used by Van Reede for his *Hortus Malabaricus*. In this case, it could imply that the older, more common *kolezhuttu* were still in use in the less 'Brahmanized' northern part of Kerala. This may have created problems for the Company's interpreters who often came from the south. See, Heniger, *Hendrik Adriaan van Reede tot Drakestein*, 148-9 and A. Govindankutty, 'Some Observations on Seventeenth Century Malayalam', *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 25 (1983), 241-5; According to the seventeenth-century report of Vincenzo, who met the Kolathiri twice, the Malabar language used three types of script: those in common use, the *sampsahardam* (*sampradayam?*), and the sacred letters of Tamil. Probably this refers to the respective *kolezhuttu*, *arya-ezhuttu*, and *vattezhuttu*. He added that to write to princes in ordinary characters was considered improper. Donald F. Lach and Edwin van Key, *Asia in the Making of Europe: A Century of Advance*, vol. III, book II (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 899. Considering the complicated linguistic situation in Kerala, the Dutch probably decided to invest in the knowledge of the more official *arya-ezhuttu*. s'Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, 76-7. But Anquetil Duperron's report seems to be conclusive in this regard as he notes that all Muslims along the coast (from Cochin to Mangalore) used *vattezhuttu*. Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil Duperron, *Voyage en Inde, 1754-1762: Relation de Voyage en Préliminaire à la Traduction du Zend-Avesta* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1997), 220.

linguistic limitations of the Company in Cannanore affected its performance is a complex issue to unravel, but it seems that the Company did not ignore the possibility of such a ‘communication gap’ as one of the reasons behind its poor performance in Cannanore.⁷⁹ The Malabar Commandement anticipated that the appointment of Pieter Vertangen, who had experience with Muslims traders in Surat and a better knowledge of their language, could improve the relations between the Mappilas and the Company in Cannanore.⁸⁰

The local interpreters served as a sort of bridge between this European enclave and the outer world. Unquestionably, it seems that, the functioning of this information channel received a severe setback after the reduction of the strength of the local servants by the end of the seventeenth century. The consequence is clearly manifested in the poor functioning of the information system during the violent political upheavals in Cannanore in the second and third decades of the eighteenth century.⁸¹

The upshot was the interaction with the local society of the Dutch in Cannanore was the restricted and riven by apprehensions and mistrust. In a broader perspective, the Dutch settlement in Cannanore tallies with Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s ‘contained conflict’ model to represent the general character of the pre-colonial European interaction with Asiatic societies. He argues that European commercial enterprises in *Asia in toto* did not segregate violence from trade, but used it as an integral part of their commercial strategy. The limit to violence was set largely by the costs it might entail.⁸² The commercial and political approaches espoused by the VOC in Cannanore largely support this view.

Jan Company’s commercial policy in Cannanore

The initial idea of the Company had been to dislodge the Portuguese from their possessions and inherit their assumed monopolistic rights in the region by engaging in a formal treaty with the local raja. The treaty of surrender signed between the Portuguese and the Dutch at Cannanore typifies

⁷⁹ Although the Company servants stressed the ‘meanness’ of the Mappilas as the foremost cause of trouble in Cannanore, they were not hesitant in agreeing that their inexperience and misunderstandings did contribute to it too. VOC 1252, Missive from Van Goens from Colombo to Batavia, 30 Apr. 1665, fo. 465.

⁸⁰ It is not clear whether the ‘*Moorse spraak*’ (Moorish tongue) mentioned by the VOC officials was Persian or Arabic. It could also have been possible that, in the initial stages of their contact with Malabar, the VOC officials were not particularly aware of the linguistic and cultural differences between the Mappilas with other Muslim communities and assumed a uniform ‘Islamic’ linguistic-cultural identity throughout the Arabian Sea. VOC 1256, Missive from van Goens to Batavia, 18 May 1666, fo. 68r.

⁸¹ The failure of the local Company officials to obtain prompt information on important incidents and the long delays in informing Cochin were severely criticized by the Cochin Commandement. VOC 1982, Letter from Johannes Hertenberg and the Cochin Council to Cannanore, 17 July 1721, fos. 294-5. VOC 1982, Letter from Cannanore to Cochin, 1 Aug. 1721, fos. 297-8.

⁸² Subrahmanyam, *Political Economy of Commerce*, 252-4, 295-7.

the latter's misunderstanding of the actual position of the Portuguese in the local socio-political sphere. Considering itself the master not only of the fortress but also of the town, not to mention the entire Kolathunadu, the VOC assumed the position of a conquering authority in the region.⁸³ Under this assumption, the VOC began to deal with the local elites. Putting itself on an equal footing with the local elites, the Company preferred to deal directly with the local raja and not with the Muslim 'royal merchant' Ali Raja—the overlord of the Mappila traders of Cannanore.⁸⁴ Gradually, the realization that the Ali Raja and his merchants at the Bazaar enjoyed the actual control over the trade in the region forced the Company to renegotiate a trade agreement with the former.⁸⁵ Although, the first two treaties signed between the Ali Raja and the VOC concerned a mutual understanding about sharing the trade of the region, the third one was aimed at obtaining a complete control over the trade of the Ali Raja and the local bazaar.⁸⁶ This radical change in the policy of the Company towards the Ali Raja and his men had much to do with its failure to oblige the latter to operate within the orbit of the Company's commercial designs in Cannanore. Hendrik Adriaan van Reede's memoir exemplifies this change in attitude. All of a sudden, the Ali Raja was 'revealed' to the Dutch as only a powerful vassal of the Kolathiri and not an independent king of the Muslims in the area—the mistaken identity the Company had attributed to him in the beginning.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the Ali Raja's 'deprivation' of royal status and the demotion to that of a common merchant in the Company's outlook did not fundamentally alter the reality of the situation. Cannanore trade continued to be dominated by the successive Ali Rajas and their men. The failure to make any headway in their commercial dealings with the Ali Rajas forced the VOC to search for alternative local links.

The Company and local commercial partners

The shortage of manpower and the intricacies of the hinterland trade compelled the VOC to depend on local merchants to engage in business transactions in Cannanore. The relative success of the Company in running its business in Cochin with the help of the Konkani Brahmin traders, such

⁸³ '.....dat de Portugesen der stadt, forteresse ende gebiedt van Cananoor deselve sullen overgeeven weegen de Majesteyt van Portugal, aen den Neederlandsen veldt heer Jacob Hustaert in naeme der Edele Oostindisse Company.....'. VOC 1239, Articles of the treaty signed between Jacob Hustaert and Anthony Cardoso, 15 Feb. 1663, fo. 1647r.

⁸⁴ The first treaty with the Kolathiri Raja was signed on 26 Mar. 1663. *Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlandico-Indicum: Verzameling van Politieke Contracten en Verdere Verdragen door de Nederlanders in het Oosten Gesloten, van Privilege Brieven, aan hen Verleend, enz.*, II, ed. J. E. Heeres ('s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1931), 246-51.

⁸⁵ VOC 1251, General Missive from Batavia to *Heren XVII*, 30 Jan. 1666, fo. 283.

⁸⁶ The first was signed on 18 February 1664; the second, actually an enlargement of the first one, on 13 December. The third treaty was signed on Apr. 9 1680. For details on these treaties see, *Corpus Diplomaticum*, II, 263-6, 297-301. *Corpus Diplomaticum*, III, 214-7. Also see, Appendix IV and V.

⁸⁷ Interestingly, Van Reede also admits that the first contracts were already against the Ali Raja's benefit 'that depended entirely on commerce and shipping' ('die geheel in de negotie en scheepvaart bestaat'). 'Memoir of Hendrik Adriaan van Reede to Commander Jacob Lobs, 14 Mar. 1677', in s' Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, 154.

as Baba Prabhu, would have tended to propel it in this direction.⁸⁸ This influential Cochin trader, as the Dutch had noticed, was originally a native of Cannanore who later migrated to Cochin.⁸⁹ It is probable that the dominance of the Ali Rajas in Cannanore had forced Baba Prabhu to make this move. Konkani Brahmin traders enjoyed a close rapport with the Company in Cannanore too. Unlike the Mappila traders of Malabar, the Konkani Brahmins did not pose a direct challenge to the commercial interests of the Company. Their trade was overwhelmingly land and coastal-oriented, which did not collide directly with the maritime interests of the Company. Furthermore, their ritual status as Brahmins gave them close access to the power structure in Malabar society and this invariably helped them in their business ventures.⁹⁰

The Company officials were conscious of the strategic problems involved in dealing with a few local merchants, as they constantly feared that the latter could manipulate their near-monopoly rights.⁹¹ Despite such misgivings, in practice, the Dutch had to depend on a few trustworthy indigenous merchants as they did not have direct access to the production centres of the region. In the light of their failure to establish a consistent commercial relationship with the local Mappila traders, the VOC had to depend on these *paradesi* traders.⁹² As a native of Cannanore and still maintaining his family relations there, Baba Prabhu naturally took control of the Company affairs in the region. Although this solved a problem, it was feared that Baba Prabhu could manipulate these favourable conditions to his own commercial advantage.⁹³ It was even alleged that Baba Prabhu had been maintaining undercover commercial dealings with the Ali Rajas and the Zamorins against the interests of the Company.⁹⁴ Without any alternative possibilities, the Company had no option but to enter into a commercial agreement with this merchant magnate to endorse its plan to open up a commercial link with the Mysore kingdom through Cannanore.⁹⁵

Besides Baba, other members of his family, among them his brother Abuga Prabhu and his son Nanoe Prabhu, also took a keen interest in doing business with the Company in Cannanore. In order to obtain an ample pepper and cardamom supply from the hinterland of Cannanore, the Company was quite eager to conclude trade contracts with these Konkani traders. In 1699, the Company made an arrangement with Nanoe Prabhu, in conjunction with Malpa Pai and Venidas, to supply cardamom to the Company. In August 1700, another trade contract was signed between the Company and Nanoe Prabhu and Malpa Pai for the same end. Malpa Pai signed a contract with

⁸⁸ For more details about Baba Prabhu see, Hugo K. s' Jacob, 'Babba Prabhu: The Dutch and a Konkani Merchant in Kerala', in Leonard Blussé (ed.), *All of One Company: The VOC in Biographical Perspective* (Utrecht: HES, 1986), 135-50.

⁸⁹ VOC 1360, Missive by Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 28 Apr. 1680, fo. 1756v.

⁹⁰ s'Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, 203-4.

⁹¹ Ibid. 28.

⁹² Canara Brahmins, as were Tamil *Pattar* Brahmins, were considered 'foreigners' in Malabar. Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, III, 9. Barendse, *Arabian Seas, 1640-1700*, 241.

⁹³ s'Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, 35.

⁹⁴ VOC 1360, Report from Marten Huijsman from Cochin to Batavia, 11 Mar. 1680, fo. 1676r.

⁹⁵ For more details about this new plan, see below.

the Company in 1701 to supply 250 *kbandil* of pepper at Cannanore at the rate of 13 ½ European gold ducats per *kbandil*. Venidas, a Bania merchant, also entered into individual contracts with the Company to supply spices in Cannanore.⁹⁶ These local merchants were crucial to the successful implementation of the commercial strategy of the Company devised to find markets for its imported goods in Cannanore rather than paying in ready cash for the spices. Regular contracts were signed between the Company and these local traders concerning the retailing of various imported merchandise.⁹⁷

As might have been expected, the relationship between the Company and its local commercial collaborators was not free from troubles. In spite of claiming a superior authority over its *inlandse dienaren*, the Company did not exercise any actual control over their activities. Confined within the walls of their settlement, the Company men were never in a position to supervise and dictate the commercial engagements of these merchants in the interior markets.⁹⁸ As noticed earlier, the prominent Konkani merchant Baba Prabhu was constantly subjected to the suspicious observation of the Company servants, in spite of being the most important commercial collaborator of the Company in Malabar. On the other hand, the Company was careful not to offend these traders who 'have the hearts of the rajas in their hands'.⁹⁹ Their ritual position as Brahmins made them influential intermediaries in Company's dealings with the political elites of Malabar.

Another significant factor which mired this commercial partnership was bad debt. For the prompt delivery of goods at the VOC settlements in Malabar, local merchants, demanded payments in advance as they had to pay the local producers, mostly small-scale farmers, in advance.¹⁰⁰ Since the Company insisted on paying for pepper and other spices such as cardamom in merchandise, this problem became acute. The merchants had not only to supply spices to the Company, but also to find markets for its imported goods. As much of this Dutch merchandise did not find a ready local market, small local merchants were hesitant about dealing with the Dutch. This compelled the

⁹⁶ VOC 1559, Missive from the Cochin Council to Batavia, 22 Jan. 1694, fos.145r, 295r, 296v. VOC 1582, Missive from Commander Adriaen van Ommen and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 18 Oct. 1696, fo. 499; VOC 1619, Cardamom contract between Commander Magnus Wichelman and the Cochin Council with Nanoe Porboe, Malpa Pooy and Venidas Trombagoda, 1699, fos. 142r-143r; VOC 1634, Missive from Commander Magnus Wichelman and the Malabar Council to *Heren XVII*, 20 November 1700, fo. 6r-v; VOC 1665, Missive from Extraordinary Council of India and the Governor General at Colombo to Batavia, 31 Dec. 1701, fo. 18; VOC 1607, *Dagregister* of Malabar Commission held under Swardekroon, 1 December 1697 to 15 Apr. 1698, fo. 344v. VOC 1619, Missive from Magnus Wichelman and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 18 Nov. 1699, fo. 6v.

⁹⁷ VOC 1627, Contract between merchant Venidas and the VOC in the Cannanore fort, 8 Dec. 1698, fo. 230r-v. VOC 1619, Missive from Commander Magnus Wichelman and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 18 Nov. 1699, fo. 5v.

⁹⁸ VOC 1708, Missive from Willem Moerman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 29 Nov. 1705, fo. 89v.

⁹⁹ '... die de herten der rajas in hare handen hebben'. 'Marginale aantekening bij de Memorie van Godske, 1668', in s'Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, 79.

¹⁰⁰ Giving advance payment on future delivery was a customary practice in pre-colonial Malabar. VOC 1652, Letter from Cannanore to Cochin, 25 Sept. 1702, fos. 340v-341r. Jan Keniewicz, 'Pepper Gardens and market in Pre-Colonial Malabar', 1-36. Especially page numbers 20-4.

VOC to depend more heavily on a few merchants who had more resources and more extensive commercial connections to earn a profit from this import trade. This dependency does not mean that the plight of the Company ended there. Many of the Company brokers, including Baba Prabhu, incurred huge debts to the Company.¹⁰¹ By 1687, the Company in Cannanore had acquired a total debt of f. 34,816.--.7 from its local partners.¹⁰² Some of these were declared as bad debts by the Company, without any hope of recovery. This is how one Nana Pattar, a local trader in Cannanore who was in arrears, escaped to Coromandel without paying off his debt.¹⁰³ This incident reveals the vulnerability of the Company in its dealings with the local merchants.

The incessant commercial competition the VOC faced from its rivals, particularly the English and the Zamorins of Calicut, also had repercussions in its relationship with the local traders. The loyalty of the Company's local partners was constantly at stake as there was always a chance that they might change their allegiance in response to a more attractive offer from its competitors. Venidas and Nanoe Prabhu, the Company's most important local partners, were no exception to this. The Company accused the English and the Zamorin of promising high rewards to persuade these merchants to join their ventures.¹⁰⁴

Yet, it was the challenge posed by the Ali Rajas and other Cannanore traders which hampered the growth of the Company's commercial presence in Cannanore most. The Company officials complained that the Mappilas were neither ready to maintain a sustainable commercial partnership with the Company, nor to allow other local merchants to do so.¹⁰⁵ The Company blamed the Ali Raja for being eager to obstruct the functioning of the Company's local merchants in Cannanore under various pretexts. The conflict between Venidas Trambagoda, a Bania merchant settled at Cannanore, and the Ali Raja substantiates this accusation. An attempt of the Ali Raja to impose a toll on Venidas' commercial dealings with the VOC at Cannanore instigated a dispute between the VOC and the Ali Raja about the political status of the Company's local servants in Cannanore. Although the dispute was settled amicably after the intervention of Kolathiri princes, this incident indicates the attempts by the Ali Rajas to enforce their commercial authority in the region.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Baba Prabhu, according to the Company records, was indebted f. 101, 975.1.8 and an additional sum of £4915.8.6 which he incurred from his business ventures in Cannanore between 1678 and 1679. s'Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, 341-2.

¹⁰² VOC 1434, Letter from Commander Gelmer Vosburg and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 30 Apr. 1687, fo. 98r-v.

¹⁰³ VOC 1527, Memoir about various Cannanore merchants indebted to the Company during the time of the *Opperboofd* Pieter van de Kouter, 6 Nov. 1691, fo. 450r.

¹⁰⁴ VOC 1634, Missive by Commander and the Council in Cochin to Batavia, 24 Feb. 1700, fo. 143r-v. The English report mentions that the Dutch broker Venidas refused to accept the employment offer of the English Company. *English Factories in India [1665-1667]*, 99.

¹⁰⁵ VOC 1361, Report from the *Opperboofd* of Cannanore Jacob Schoors to Commander Marten Huijsman, 26 Apr. 1680, fo. 487r-v

¹⁰⁶ VOC 1619, Report from Cannanore to Cochin, 14 July 1699, fos. 433r-434v.

Notwithstanding the opposition from the Ali Rajas, the Company was able to attract small-scale traders, including Mappilas, to do business with it.¹⁰⁷ The most prominent Mappila merchant in the service of the VOC in Cannanore was the Company *saraaf* China Mayna, who had been at the service of the Ali Raja before joining the Company service. His rise from a humble betel trader under the Ali Rajas to that of an influential figure under the patronage of the Company points to the attempts of the latter to build an alternative trade outlet beyond the control of the Bazaar traders.¹⁰⁸

Jan Company and its rivals in trade

The Dutch East India Company's efforts to control the pepper trade of Cannanore met with stiff resistance from both Asian and European traders. Although the Company officials were initially under the impression that they could control the trade of the region through diplomatic manoeuvres and commercial contracts, this proved to be a misapprehension in the long run. The Mappila-dominant northern Kerala ports continued to operate as a free trade zone frequented by traders from various parts of the Indian Ocean and European entrepreneurs during the period under discussion.

1. *The Mappila merchants of Cannanore*

The combined force of the Ali Raja and other Mappila traders of the Cannanore bazaar, which dominated a commercial network that combined both hinterland and maritime spaces, posed the main challenge to the trade interests of the Company in Cannanore.¹⁰⁹ The regional trade in pepper was, to a great extent, dependent on the Ali Raja and the Company was well aware of this situation.¹¹⁰ Moreover, the Ali Raja's barter trade in opium for pepper with the ports of South Kerala brought him into direct conflict with the interest of the Company in that region too.¹¹¹ Apparently, as observed by the VOC officials at Cannanore, the Ali Raja was capable of throwing the entire commercial strategy of the Company in Malabar into disarray.¹¹² The Company resorted to both diplomacy and force to manipulate the Ali Raja's control over the regional trade in its

¹⁰⁷ Although it is not possible to make out the regularity of their commercial dealings with the Company, the names of such local Mappila traders as Kunjamu, Pokker, and Hassen appear in the trade account of the Company in Cannanore. VOC 1625, Missive from Commander Magnus Wichelman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 31Dec. 1698 with an appendix dated 17 Jan. 1699, fo. 12.

¹⁰⁸ VOC 1425, Instruction of Commander Vosburg to the residents of Cannanore, 16 Mar. 1686, fos. 130v-131v. China Mayna later moved to Calicut and died there a poor man with an unpaid debt to the Company. VOC 1528, Report concerning the *Onderkoopman* Pieter van de Kouter, 11 May 1692, fo. 162v.

¹⁰⁹ *See*, Chapter Three.

¹¹⁰ VOC 1242, Missive from Cannanore to Cochin, 11 Feb. 1664, fo. 1058v.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* fo.1060r.

¹¹² 'soo blyckt het oocq dat desen Adersia de handen ruym hebbende een bequaem instrument soude wesen om alle des Edele Comp. concepten in den Mallebaersen handel te confunderen'. *Ibid.* fo. 1060r.

favour; but to no avail.¹¹³ Taking advantage of their sway over the neighbouring satellite ports lying away from the VOC fortress, the Ali Raja and his Mappila traders could continue to trade uninterrupted. Spices were easily redirected from Cannanore by land routes to these harbours by land routes and the transactions were carried out over there.¹¹⁴

Fuelling such an alternative commerce, other European trading companies, especially the English, provided the Ali Rajas with other channels to deliver spices under favourable conditions.¹¹⁵ Regardless of his treaty commitments to the VOC, the Ali Raja signed a contract with the English on 21 November 1669 to promote the trade of the latter in Baliapatanam.¹¹⁶ In spite of the presence of the VOC in Cannanore, the Ali Rajas succeeded in delivering large quantity of pepper to the English and the French. The *Dagh-Register* of Batavia [1681] reported that the English and the French were able to amass 1,000 *kbandil* of pepper or 50,000 lbs of pepper from North Malabar alone with the help of the Cannanore Mappilas.¹¹⁷ The VOC was also aware of the secret deal made by the Mappila traders of Cannanore to supply 3,000 *kbandil* of pepper to the English at Tanore in 1676.¹¹⁸

Although the Company men entertained plans to deal directly with inland merchants, they were careful to conceal such moves from the Ali Rajas.¹¹⁹ None of them materialized as the indigenous merchants were neither competent nor daring enough to override the control of the Ali Rajas.¹²⁰ Paradoxically, the increasing competition from other European companies forced the VOC to maintain a more cordial relationship with the Ali Raja in order to prevail over the growing challenge from them.¹²¹ Capitalizing on the uncertainty of the Company officials, the Ali Rajas openly defied

¹¹³ The Company's plan to appropriate Cannanore trade from the Ali Rajas through diplomacy and threats is clear from the instructions to Gelmer Vosburg, the new *Opperhoofd* of Cannanore in 1668. See, VOC 1261, Instructions to Gelmer Vosburg, 11 Jan. 1668, fo.310r.

¹¹⁴ In one occasion it was reported that spices were taken to Dharmapatanam over land, transported to Calicut by small coastal crafts, and finally supplied to the buyer. VOC 1360, Missive from Marten Huijsman to Batavia, 28 Apr. 1680, fo. 1719v.

¹¹⁵ 'Illegal' transactions between Cannanore Mappilas and the English and French frequently appear in Dutch reports. VOC 1321, Missive from Commander Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 23 June, 1676, fo. 953v. VOC 1370, Report from Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 30 Apr. 1681, fo. 2133v. VOC 1474, Missive from Isaack van Dielen to the Commissioner van Reede, 20 Mar. 1690, fo. 592r.

¹¹⁶ The draft of this treaty was prepared in 1668, though the actual treaty was signed only one year later with slight modifications to the earlier draft. OIC, Home Miscellaneous Series, vol. 629, Treaty between the Ali Rajas and the English, 1668, fos. 29-37. See, Appendix VI.

¹¹⁷ *Dagh-Register* [1681], 488-489.

¹¹⁸ VOC 1321, Missive from Commander van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 23 June 1676, fo. 953v.

¹¹⁹ VOC 1261, Instructions to Gelmer Vosburg, 11 Jan. 1668, fo. 312r.

¹²⁰ '.. dat veel cleynne particuliere coopliden genegentheyt hebben om met ons te handelen, dogh door vrees van Adrasia en Carnoor dreygementen derven zij zulcx niet ondernemen'. VOC 1361, Report of Jacob Schoors from Cannanore to Marten Huijsman, 26 Apr. 1680, fo. 487r-v.

¹²¹ VOC 1360, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 28 Apr. 1680, fo. 1752r

the Dutch control system by undertaking free voyages across the Arabian Sea without asking for a pass. The report sent by Isaack van Dielen to the *Heren XVII* in 1691 highlights the waning control of the Company over the Ali Rajas. According to him, the Ali Raja deployed heavily armed frigates to protect his shipping along the coast.¹²² The ports under the Zamorins, which served as the safest havens for the Asian traders in Malabar, also witnessed a remarkable increase in Asiatic shipping during this period.¹²³

Maritime control system and its failure

After their establishment in Malabar, it did not take long for the local Company officials to realize the futility of their diplomatic manoeuvres to achieve their commercial ends. Jacob Hustaert had serious reservations about the effectiveness of the treaties with the local rajas as an instrument to accomplish the commercial plans of the Company in Malabar. He did not believe that these ‘pernicious and untrustworthy’ Malabar rajas would honour the treaty promises. He argued that, because the Company had made commercial contracts with rajas along the coast who exercised no jurisdictional power in the hinterland, it would not be possible to control the inland trade. He explicitly pointed out that these rajas were not powerful enough to force the local merchants to deliver pepper to the Company.¹²⁴

The ineffectiveness of the political contracts was not enough to make Van Goens give up his grand design for the Malabar trade. He was all set to pursue a more active policy of interference in Malabar commerce by resorting to military strength.¹²⁵ Van Goens was certainly astute enough to identify Cannanore and Calicut traders as the most serious potential threat to the commercial interest of the VOC in Malabar.¹²⁶ The Company was convinced that local shipping originating from the southern ports of Malabar was insignificant, as the Portuguese were successful in exercising complete control over Cochin and Quilon. The thriving local shipping in the northern regions he attributed to the Portuguese failure to control the Zamorins and the Ali Rajas.¹²⁷ Consequently the VOC was forced to set up an extensive trade control mechanism to enforce the commercial privileges which it had received from the local rajas. Following the example of their Portuguese precursors, the Dutch also employed a ‘sea-pass’¹²⁸ system which was aimed at not only at the control of the local trade, but also at deriving an income for its settlements in

¹²² VOC 1474, Missive from Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 31 Jan. 1691, fos. 503v-504r.

¹²³ VOC 1406, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 11 Apr. 1684, fo. 828v.

¹²⁴ s’Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, p. LX.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* p. LIX-LX.

¹²⁶ VOC 1251, Missive from Van Goens and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 6 Mar. 1666, fo. 1722

¹²⁷ VOC 1242, Missive from Jacob Hustaert and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 25 Feb. 1664, fo. 1119v.

¹²⁸ For a discussion on Portuguese *cartaz* system, see, M. N. Pearson, ‘Cafilas and Cartazes’, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 30th Session*, Bhagalpur, 1968, 200-7.

Malabar.¹²⁹ These sea passes entitled the Company cruisers to inspect and confiscate all the ‘unlicensed’ pepper and other spices from the local vessels.¹³⁰

Theoretically a good idea, the successful implementation of the pass system was not an easy task to achieve in Malabar. From the point of view of its main aim of controlling the trade in spices, it proved to be a total failure. The efficacy of the sea-pass system was confined to maritime trade in which VOC naval power was supposed to have an upper hand over local shipping. However, the Malabar Commandement was frequently in short supply of the men and cruising ships it required to enforce the Company regulations on local trade.¹³¹ Much less geographically restricted, the local traders were not confined to their shipping out of Cannanore alone. It was only one of the nodal points in the maritime space of the Mappila traders who were spread along the coast.¹³² Commodity movement was not confined by a particular political boundary within Malabar either. All the port towns along the Malabar Coast provided opportunities for maritime trade. This created difficulties for the VOC men in Cannanore. Nearby Mappila ports like Baliapatanam and Dharmapatanam, away from the direct observations of the Cannanore fort, were used as immediate alternative outlets by the Cannanore traders.¹³³ Naturally, the local Mappila traders tried to hide information on this alternative commerce.¹³⁴

Given these adverse circumstances, it was not accidental that, in a report directed to Cochin, the Cannanore *Opperboofd* Jacob Schoors was eager to point out a regulation enforced by the Portuguese in the past by which all the ships belonging to Kolathunadu, including those from Dharmapatanam and Baliapatanam, were forced to assemble in the Bay of Cannanore.¹³⁵ This could be carried out again, but at an expense that the Company did not want to bear. The control of the Ali Rajas over the Lakshadweep-Maldiva Islands also offered an alternative outlet by which to divert the local trade away from the vigilance of the fort.¹³⁶ These island groups, which provided a safe opportunity for the Malabar traders to bypass the Portuguese control system along the Malabar Coast in the sixteenth century, were used for the same purpose by the Cannanore traders

¹²⁹ The Cannanore settlement charged an amount of 200 ducats for a sea pass from Cannanore to Mocha and a Cannanore-Muscat pass cost 40 *Sao Tome*. VOC 1333, Letter from Commander Marten Huijsman from Cochin to Cannanore, 7 Dec. 1678, fo. 493r. VOC 1474, Missive from Isaack van Dielen to the Commission van Mydrecht, 3 July 1690, fo. 635r.

¹³⁰ VOC 1242, Missive from Jacob Hustaert and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 25 Feb. 1664, fo. 1119v.

¹³¹ VOC 1256, Missive from Commander Isbrant Godske from Cochin to van Goens, 12 Sept. 1666, fo. 385v.

¹³² VOC 1261, Instructions to *Onderkoopman* Gelmer Vosburg appointed as the *Opperboofd* of Cannanore, 14 Dec. 1664, fo. 307r.

¹³³ In 1681, the Cochin Council reported the inability of the Company to control the trade in Cannanore, because the Cannanore traders were sailing their ships out of Dharmapatanam and Baliapatanam instead of Cannanore. VOC 1370, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 30 Apr. 1681, fo. 2208v.

¹³⁴ VOC 1256, Missive from Van Goens to Batavia, 12 Nov. 1666, fo. 159v

¹³⁵ VOC 1361, Report from Jacob Schoors to Marten Huijsman, 26 Apr. 1680, fo. 487r.

¹³⁶ VOC 1299, Report from Hendrik van Reede and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 15 Dec. 1674, fo. 410r.

to elude the Dutch. Besides, the VOC was never in a position to oversee the deliberate changes in the course made by the local ships which were carrying sea-passes issued by the Company with specified destinations. The Dutch records mention the voyage of two ships belonging to the Cannanore merchants Koykuttiali and Mussa to Muscat and Surat, though they were actually entitled only to trade with Canara in rice.¹³⁷ The situation worsened when the local merchants set sail with their ships flying Dutch flags, but with no sea passes issued by the Company.¹³⁸

It was difficult for the Company with its limited man power to supervise all local shipping. It was therefore widespread among local merchants, who were not permitted to carry pepper and opium, to transport these commodities in their coastal boats. In 1666 the Surat factory reported the appearance of Malabar vessels in Broach and Cambay carrying sea passes issued from Cochin. These vessels, although strictly prohibited to do so by the Company, traded in pepper and cinnamon and brought back opium. The Surat factory complained that this parallel trade greatly damaged the trade of the Company in these commodities.¹³⁹ The frustration of the Company servants in failing to prevent local shipping was explicit in the letter of Van Reede to *Heren XVII* in 1675.¹⁴⁰ The Company's idea of controlling the local trade through sea passes received a severe jolt when the local merchants began to carry freight with the passes issued by other European maritime powers.¹⁴¹

Persistent requests to send patrol frigates to cruise along the Malabar Coast met with a favourable response from the High Government in Batavia in 1680. It was reported from Cochin that, as a result of the successful cruising of the Coast, 'the crooked Muslims have not been able to embark on any shipping this year'.¹⁴² This accomplishment had a positive reflection on the Company's pepper trade with Persia. The Gamron Council was convinced it would now bring in a good profit from its pepper retail as the usual shipping of pepper by Malabar traders to Muscat failed to eventuate that season.¹⁴³ Yet, the strict patrolling along the northern Malabar Coast had its disadvantages too. The Company men learned that as a result of this other European competitors could easily obtain the surplus resulting from the prevention of local trade.¹⁴⁴ As a matter of fact,

¹³⁷ VOC 1256, Missive from Commander Isbrant Godske and the Cochin Council to Admiral Rijkloff van Goens, 18 June 1666, fo. 314v.

¹³⁸ VOC 1343, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman to *Heren XVII*, 18 Oct. 1679, fo. 425r.

¹³⁹ VOC 1256, Missive from Commander Isbrant Godske to Van Goens, 12 Sept. 1666, fo. 392r-v.

¹⁴⁰ 'maer zulx kan niet werde belet al hadt d' Edele Compagnie geheel Malabaer verlaten en al de Malabaeren tot vyanden want de groote zee en breede landen kunnen met geen muer omtrocken, en beslooten worden, veel minder met scheepen, vaertuygen en waghten soo nauw beseth dat daer geen gaten off wegen open bleven deselve ter sluyk door te brengen.' Hoge Regering te Batavia [H. R.] 680, Letter of Commander Hendrik Adriaan van Reede and the Council of Cochin to the *Heren XVII*, 1675, No folio numbers are given.

¹⁴¹ VOC 1349, Missive from Marten Huijsman to Batavia, 13 Feb. 1679, fo.1460r.

¹⁴² VOC 1360, Missive from Marten Huijsman to Batavia, 11 Mar. 1680, fo. 1706r.

¹⁴³ VOC 1360, Missive from the Governor General and the Council of Gamron to Batavia, 21 May 1680, fo. 1940r.

¹⁴⁴ VOC 1360, Missive from Marten Huijsman to Batavia, 11 Mar. 1680, fo. 1707v.

strict surveillance along the Coast could have easily encouraged the redirection of spices across the Ghats to the Coromandel Coast and elsewhere.¹⁴⁵ Preventing this trade carried out through a hinterland ‘full of forest and untrustworthy inhabitants’ was far beyond the power of the Company.¹⁴⁶ As a result, the Company tried to make pre-emptive arrangements with the local elites to prevent such practices being pursued far away from its control.¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the rulers usually ignored the requests and complaints of the Company to prevent the cross-country trade of the local merchants.¹⁴⁸ The rajas, according to the VOC men, remained unreliable as long as this could promote their own interests.¹⁴⁹

The Company was well aware of the discontent among the local rajas as a result of its attempts to chase the Asian traders away from their respective ports. Malabar rajas and common people were both upset by the impact of the Company’s policy on the trade in coconut and related products which formed the backbone of the local subsistence economy. Pertinently, this bulk trade in coconut products also contributed significantly to the rajas’ incomes in the form of tolls.¹⁵⁰ Cochin thereupon issued a recommendation that the considerable trade in coconut products with Surat should be undertaken while maintaining strict vigilance along the coast. This would not only satisfy the rulers, but it could also eliminate a section of Asian traders from Malabar trade.¹⁵¹ The Company apparently believed that, by taking over the role of Asian merchants as participants in the trade in bulk commodities, it could dissuade the latter from visiting the Malabar Coast. In this way it would be able to control the ‘smuggling’ trade in pepper, cardamom, wild cinnamon, and opium. Ultimately, the failure to rein in the Mappila traders in the northern Malabar ports put an end to this scheme.

To what extent the private interests of the Company servants limited the success of pass restrictions cannot be verified in the absence of sufficient data. The misuse of office was not altogether absent among the upper echelon officials in Cannanore. The case of Pieter van de Kouter points in this direction.¹⁵² Van de Kouter, though overtly in insoluble conflict with the Ali Rajas, actually engaged in private dealings with the latter for his own benefit. In a letter to Gelmer Vosburg, the Ali Raja mentions the attempt of Van de Kouter to invest in one of his ships bound

¹⁴⁵ VOC 1360, Missive from Marten Huijsman to Batavia, 11th Mar. 1680, fo. 1708v.

¹⁴⁶ VOC 1242, Missive from Cannanore to Batavia, 11 Feb. 1664, fo. 1059v.

¹⁴⁷ VOC 1261, Instructions for Gelmer Vosburg from Colombo, 11 Jan. 1668, fos. 311v-312r.

¹⁴⁸ VOC 1270, Missive from Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 16 Feb. 1670, fos. 938v-939r.

¹⁴⁹ ‘Den lantaart.... is niet veel te vertrouwen wanneer zij hun eygen voordeel kunnen bewercken.’ VOC 1349, Memoir by *Koopman* Daniel Joncktus to *Onderkoopman* Jacob Schoors at Cannanore, 21 Sept. 1678, fo. 1492v.

¹⁵⁰ ‘om dat het een voornaemste middel en incomst tot haer onderhout is’. VOC 1360, Report from Marten Huijsman from Cochim to Batavia, 11 Mar. 1680, fos. 1689v-1690r.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Pieter van de Kouter came to India in 1668; was appointed Assistant in 1673; took the charge as Bookkeeper in 1677 and continued until he was promoted to *Onderkoopman* and the head of the Cannanore Fort in 1680. VOC 1474, Roll book of all the Company servants in Cochin, Quilon and Cannanore, 1687, fo. 480v.

for Cambay.¹⁵³ In another instance, Constantyn Coup, who served as the head of the Cannanore Fort between 1710 and 1712, was dismissed because of his unduly favourable disposition to the Ali Raja at the cost of the Company's interest. He was accused of granting the Ali Raja sea-passes for Bengal, which was declared a reserved commercial route by the Company.¹⁵⁴ An anonymous letter written by a Company servant in Kayamkulam to Commander Johannes Hertenberg amply testifies corruption that was rampant among the Company officials in the southern ports of Malabar and this venality facilitated Mappila traders to a great extent in their 'smuggling' of pepper into the northern ports.¹⁵⁵ Although, it is unsafe to make any definite conclusions from such limited data, the above-mentioned incidents indicate the probability of informal co-operation between the Mappila traders and the local VOC officials which eventually contributed to the failure of the Dutch control system in the region.

2. *The English and the French*

Besides the local Mappilas, European competitors, especially the English and the French, enjoyed an influential commercial presence in Malabar. The English East India Company posed a formidable challenge to the Dutch. The so-called Amboina massacre [1623] and the subsequent weakening of the English presence in insular South-East Asia are said to have increased the significance of Malabar as an alternative spice procurement centre of the English Company.¹⁵⁶ But the Dutch establishment of control over Bantam, Jambi, and Palembang in the mid-1680s truly limited the access of the English to South-East Asian pepper-producing areas.¹⁵⁷ This actually forced them to focus more on Malabar as an alternative source of pepper for Europe.¹⁵⁸ The Dutch anticipated a steep decline in the supply of pepper to England after their successful establishment of a string of Dutch settlements along the Malabar Coast in Malabar.¹⁵⁹ But, the English and later the French were gradually able to appropriate a considerable share in the local

¹⁵³ VOC 1429, Letter from the Ali Raja to Commander Gelmer Vosburg, 28 Dec. 1685, fos. 1367v-1368r.

¹⁵⁴ VOC 1825, Letter from Barent Ketel to Batavia, 13 May 1712, fos. 86v-87v. VOC 1824, Resolution taken in the Political Council of Cochin, 26 Apr. 1712, fos. 506v-509r.

¹⁵⁵ VOC 1978, An anonymous letter to Commander Johannes Hertenberg, 9 Dec. 1721, fos. 405v-407r.

¹⁵⁶ Bal Krishna, *Commercial Relations between India and England, 1601-1757* (London: Routledge, 1924), 90-1. For more details of the Amboina incident, see, W. Ph. Coolhaas, 'Notes and Comments on the so-called Amboina Massacre', in M. A. P. Meilink-Roelofs, M. E. van Opstall and G. J. Schutte (eds.), *Dutch Authors on Asian History: A Selection of Dutch Historiography on the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (Dordrecht: Foris, 1988), 198-240.

¹⁵⁷ K. N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 316.

¹⁵⁸ VOC 1396, 'Missive from Commander Vosburg to Batavia, 18 May 1684', fo. 721v. *English Factories in India (New Series)*, III: 1678-1684, 397.

¹⁵⁹ VOC 1239, Report from Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 19 Feb. 1663, fo. 1695r.

trade. In the second half of the seventeenth century, notwithstanding the Dutch attempts at control, the English were able to collect substantial quantities of pepper from Malabar.¹⁶⁰

Initially operating from their factory in Kottakunnu on the bank of the Baliapatanam River, the English seriously contested the efforts of the Dutch Company to make itself master of the trade in Kolathunadu.¹⁶¹ Although the Dutch wished to drive the English out of there and extend their jurisdiction over the river under the pretext that the Portuguese had enjoyed the same privilege, they failed to win any support from the Kolathiris.¹⁶² In 1675, the English gave up their settlement in Kottakunnu and left for Calicut.¹⁶³ However, to the great disappointment of the VOC, the English returned to Kolathunadu in 1682 when they succeeded in acquiring the trade house abandoned by the French in Tellichery.¹⁶⁴ Since Batavia was keen to avoid direct conflicts with other European nations in Malabar, the Company tried to foil the attempts of the English by influencing the local lord.¹⁶⁵ However, outplaying these diplomatic schemes, the English succeeded in developing the Tellichery Factory as an important spice procurement centre for the European market.¹⁶⁶

The presence of the French in Kolathunadu added a new dimension to the European competition for spices in the region. On 5 March 1670, the French resident Flacour assisted by four men established the first commercial settlement of the French in Kolathunadu in Tiruvangadu near Dharmapatanam. It was described by the VOC officials as ‘not more than a ruined clay house, surrounded by a walled garden, but able to be developed as a strong settlement’.¹⁶⁷ However, by 1679 the French moved their factory to Tellichery.¹⁶⁸ Following the French departure from Tellichery in 1682, their nearest settlement in Northern Malabar was in Panoly, lying close to the

¹⁶⁰ Bal Krishna, *Commercial Relations*, 147.

¹⁶¹ The English established at Kottakunnu on May 4th 1670. *English Factories in India (New Series)*, I: 1670-1677, ed. Charles Fawcett (Oxford: Clarendon, 1936), 289-90.

¹⁶² VOC 1270, Missive from Ceylon to *Heren XVII*, 9 Jan. 1670, fo. 6r.

¹⁶³ The English had already begun to move from Kottakunnu to Calicut by the middle of 1674 and had completely abandoned the settlement by the beginning of 1675. VOC 1308, Report from Commander Van Reede from Cochin to Batavia, 15 May 1674, fo. 631v. *English Factories in India (New Series)*, I: 1670-7, 340-41.

¹⁶⁴ *English Factories in India (New Series)*, III: 1678-1684, 394-5.

¹⁶⁵ VOC 1373, Report from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Council of Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 21 Dec. 1682, fo. 344r.

¹⁶⁶ Soon after the establishment of the English in Tellichery, it became an important pepper procurement centre for the English in Malabar. The subsequent growth of the Tellichery Factory under the English substantiated the fear of the Dutch of this new English settlement. See, *English Factories in India (New Series)*, III: 1678-84, 406. Kurup, *History of the Tellichery Factory*.

¹⁶⁷ VOC 1274, Missive from the Commander and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 14 Aug. 1670, fo. 113r.

¹⁶⁸ VOC 1349, Report from Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 9 Mar. 1679, fo. 1522r. VOC 1343, Report from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 18 Oct. 1679, fo. 425r-v.

Mayyazhi (Mahe) River.¹⁶⁹ Their residence there was short as the internal political turmoil forced the French to give up this settlement as well in 1706.¹⁷⁰ The continuous efforts of the French to possess a factory in Kolathunadu finally bore fruit in 1710 when the Vazhunnavar of Vadakara granted them a place south of the Mayyazhi River.¹⁷¹

The presence of these European competitors in Kolathunadu played a significant role in thwarting the commercial ambitions of the VOC in Cannanore. While the VOC was not bound to respect the commercial freedom of Asian merchants in Cannanore under the pretext of its commercial contracts with the local elite, the Company's position remained vulnerable in its relationship with other European maritime powers. The VOC was keen to avoid direct conflict with other European powers in Malabar, especially with the English, as this could be economically disastrous. The Dutch also had to reckon with the changing European political atmosphere.¹⁷² This situation promoted a healthy commercial competition among the European commercial companies in Malabar.

The English and the French traders were able to appropriate a large quantity of spices from local traders by virtue of their commercial strategy which outwitted the VOC.¹⁷³ Conscious of their weak position in the region as opposed to the VOC, the English and the French were keen to comply with local demands to sustain their commercial presence in the region. The English and the French enjoyed the reputation for paying in cash for their purchases and usually tried to procure spices at a higher market price.¹⁷⁴ This competitive atmosphere created a seller's market in Kolathunadu and a steady increase in prices.¹⁷⁵ As a result, the local merchants and elites were

¹⁶⁹ It is not clear when they established the settlement at Panoly. According to the information from the Dutch sources, they were already in Panoly by 1705. VOC 1731, Letter from Cannanore to Cochin, 3 July 1705, fo. 210.

¹⁷⁰ VOC 1741, Resolution in the Cochin Council, Wednesday, 23 June 1706, fos. 341r-342r.

¹⁷¹ Vadakara is not traditionally included in Kolathunadu, but formed a part of the region called Walluvanadu. VOC 1790, Letter from Checoetty Poker from Cannanore to Cochin, 22 June 1710, fo. 473r. VOC 1807, Missive from Cochin to Batavia, 24 May 1711, fo. 88r.

¹⁷² After the Treaty of Westminster in 1674 that ended the Third Anglo-Dutch War, there was a favourable change in the relationship between England and Holland. The accession of the Dutch *Stadholder* William III as the King of England by 1689 joined both countries together politically until 1702.

¹⁷³ This is apparent from the English report that, during 1670s, the English still managed to obtain two-thirds of their pepper from the south of Cochin, where the control of the VOC was supposed to be tighter, by making the local merchants considerable advance payments. *English Factories in India [1670-1677]*, 351.

¹⁷⁴ Surprised by the high price at which the English bought pepper from Canara, the Malabar Commandement exclaimed 'hoe sij daermede behouden kunnen blijven is voor ons wat duyster'. (How they [the English] could in this way maintain [their business] is unclear to us). VOC 1373, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 21 Dec. 1682, fo. 345r.

¹⁷⁵ VOC 1343, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 18 Oct. 1679, fo. 433r.

more inclined to trade with them than the VOC.¹⁷⁶ Surreptitiously supplying large quantities of pepper to the English, the Cannanore Mappila traders refused to comply with Company's contract under various pretexts.¹⁷⁷ The English not only bought pepper at a higher price than the VOC, they also successfully marketed a part of it at a competitive price within Asia.¹⁷⁸

The English successfully penetrated the local markets with the active support of the private merchants who were operating outside the English East India Company structure, but in practice co-operating with it. The presence of this private element facilitated the English Company in overcoming the limitations of its official structure and closely following the commercial trends in the region. In another sense, as commented by P. J. Marshall, private merchants helped to extend the British influence well beyond the normal sphere of the Company's own trade.¹⁷⁹ The English private merchants, who traded in bulk commodities as cardamom, arrack, ginger and the like for which less capital investment required, were able to obtain easy access to the local spice markets. While the costly pepper found its way to England through the English East India Company, the bulk products were traded by English country traders within Asia.¹⁸⁰ Manipulating the legal privileges of the English East India Company and co-operating intimately with the Asian merchants, these individuals easily outmanoeuvred the VOC control system.¹⁸¹ In this context it is not surprising that the Dutch chaplain Jacobus Canter Visscher observed that it was not the English Company, but the English private trade which posed the greatest challenge to the Company in Malabar.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁶ Hence, the Ali Raja justified his continuing trade with the English, in spite of his contract with the VOC by saying that the former were ready to pay a higher price for his merchandise than the Company. VOC 1474, Missive from Isaack van Dielen and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 31 Jan. 1691, fo. 504.

¹⁷⁷ In 1680, for instance, the Company complained that the Cannanore merchants delivered 200-*kbandi* pepper to the English, but only four and a half to the Company, excusing themselves by saying that the new pepper had not yet ripened. VOC 1355, Missive from Commander and Council from Quilon to *Heren XVII*, 24 Dec. 1680, fo. 274v.

¹⁷⁸ It was reported from Gamron that, in 1677, the English sold Malabar pepper in Persia at 11 *larins* for 30 lbs. At the same time, the Dutch price for the same was 12 ½ *larins*/30 lbs. VOC 1329, Missive from the Director and the Council of Gamron to Batavia, 5 June 1677, fos. 1548v, 1551v.

¹⁷⁹ P. J. Marshall, 'Private British Trade in the Indian Ocean before 1800', in Om Prakash (ed.), *European Commercial Expansion in Early Modern Asia* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1997), 237-61 at 238. There are several studies which deal with the important role played by English private traders in the Indian Ocean trade in the seventeenth century. For the English private trade in India during the sixteenth and the seventeenth century see, Ian Bruce Watson, *Foundation for Empire: English Private Trade in India, 1659-1760* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1980).

¹⁸⁰ VOC 1270, Missive from Ceylon to *Heren XVII*, 9 Jan. 1670, fo. 5r.

¹⁸¹ Consequently, it is reported in 1680 on the arrival of a 'Zurat Bania or private English ship' with English flags and manned by six or eight English, Surat Muslims, and Banias. It was chartered in the name of the Governor of Muscat in agreement with the Ali Raja of Cannanore. VOC 1360, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council directed to Batavia, 28 Apr. 1680, fo. 1719v.

¹⁸² Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, I, 33.

Besides the English country traders, it appears that the French also did brisk business in such various local bulk products as copra, coir and such like and supplied cotton and opium to the local market.¹⁸³ Both the English and the French tried to remain in close propinquity to the local political and economic requirements which were indispensable to their survival in the regional trade. As we have seen, gift giving to the political elites in the region was often practised as a means to achieve commercial goals.¹⁸⁴ The English fully realized the political importance of obtaining access to the power circle in the region.¹⁸⁵ The tactical interventions of the English in the struggle between the VOC and the Zamorins won the former considerable influence in the port town of Calicut and its adjacent areas.¹⁸⁶ This eventually helped the English to assume a strong presence in the regional commerce and contributed to their success in the pepper trade with Europe.¹⁸⁷

Conclusion

The Dutch did not appear in a commercial vacuum when they established themselves in Cannanore in 1663. The presence of a formidable local commercial group with enough resource base and extended commercial links across the Indian Ocean and the hinterland of Malabar limited the possibility of an easy takeover of the regional trade at the minimal expenditure envisaged by the Company. The attempts of the Company to control the Mappila trade with the help of patrol ships did not produce expected results. The existence of alternative land routes and parallel routes along the coast nullified the viability of such control exercises. Moreover, the Malabar Commandement usually failed to obtain prompt assistance from Batavia in the form of the men and ships needed to cruise the coast. The plan of the Company to reduce the Cannanore garrison to the bare minimum in order to reduce the mounting losses of the Malabar Commandement severely affected the functioning of its coastal control system. Local flotillas sailed along under the eyes of the Cannanore garrison without any hindrance from the VOC cruisers. The growing commercial activities of the English and the French traders in and around Cannanore during the 1680s further weakened the VOC plan to control the regional trade with the help of its naval power.

The Dutch designs to overcome the commercial influence of the Ali Rajas and other Mappila traders in Cannanore with the help of other local traders also did not succeed completely. The

¹⁸³ VOC 1274, Missive from the Commander and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 14 Aug. 1670, fos. 113v-114r. VOC 1284, Report from Commander Hendrik van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 20 Apr. 1671, fo. 2086v.

¹⁸⁴ VOC 1291, Report from Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 23 Nov. 1673, fo. 588v.

¹⁸⁵ In a letter to Surat [1669] Alexander Grigby commented on the importance of gifts in Malabar; 'there being noe accesse amongst them but by that key'. *English Factories in India [1668-1669]*, 262.

¹⁸⁶ It has been reported that, in 1717, the Zamorin pawned the toll at the Calicut port for the money he had borrowed from the English to meet the expenses of his war against the Dutch. VOC 1891, Report from Commander Johannes Hertenberg and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 25 Nov. 1717, fos. 12v-13r.

¹⁸⁷ In 1736, the English Company was able to import as much pepper to London as the VOC in Batavia was receiving from the entire Archipelago. Kristof Glamann, *Dutch-Asiatic Trade, 1620-1740* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1958), 90.

commercial strategy of the Company did not dovetail with the local market demands. While the local traders preferred to supply spices for ready cash, the Company preferred to exchange them for merchandise. Moreover, the Company was never in a position to control the activities of the local traders, who were ready to collaborate with the Company, in the inland. A detailed analysis of the VOC trade in Cannanore between 1663 and 1723 would be able to provide us with a clear-cut picture of the Company's influence in the regional economy.