Chapter

21. Dutch Slavery in South Asia

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By the late seventeenth century, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) had become the first European political force to carve out a substantial empire in Asia. In contrast to the sometimes even larger contiguous land-based empires in Asia at the time, the VOC empire was made up of islands and a widely dispersed conglomeration of lands bordering an extensive coastline. The VOC organized its imperial bureaucracy as a connected but deeply hierarchical network of all these places, within which people with very different statuses were constantly on the move. Movement of enslaved people formed an important link to all the crucial nodes of the VOC empire. Judging from its most prominent possessions, namely Batavia, Ceylon, and the Cape Colony, which are present-day Jakarta, Sri Lanka, and South Africa, the VOC empire can be seen as one massive slave society. Within this network of slavery, the Indian subcontinent played a crucial, yet virtually unknown role. This chapter will delineate the place of the Indian subcontinent in the VOC's Asian networks, summarizing the research produced in the past three and a half decades. In doing so, the chapter will take stock of what is known, identify blind spots, and recommend avenues of future research.

Dutch Slave Trade in South Asia

As the VOC emerged in the seventeenth century as a major slaveholding power in the Indian Ocean world, the Indian subcontinent provided much of its enslaved population. These slaves came primarily, though not exclusively, from the Arakan–Bengal, Coromandel, and Malabar coasts of the Indian subcontinent. In moving slaves from these regions to its different

settlements across the Indian Ocean and Indonesian archipelago, the VOC had created a functional linkage within its Asian empire. The VOC utilized these enslaved people for all forms of labor in the making of their colonial enterprise in Asia—as craftsmen and menial workers on waterfronts, as agricultural workers on plantations and privately held farms, and as domestic workers in households.

The Bay of Bengal region, with the Arakan, Bengal, and Coromandel coasts, formed the earliest and steadiest supplier of slaves up until the late seventeenth century. The VOC had arrived in the Arakanese kingdom of Mrauk U (modern-day Myanmar), as early as 1608, and by 1635, had established a permanent factory in Arakan. From the early 1620s onward, the VOC bought large numbers of enslaved people from there, especially for export to Batavia and Banda. Arakan satisfied the VOC demand for slaves from the ports of Chittagong and Dianga, the island of Sandwip, and the coastal zamindaris of Bhalua and Hijli. The number of slaves that the VOC could procure from Arakan varied vastly. Some years, the VOC procured over a thousand slaves, but in other years, as few as one hundred. The Arakanese rulers relied on Portuguese independent merchants or pirates, with whom they had a long-standing relationship, for bringing slaves to the market. In the years 1647–1653, when the relationship between Arakan and the VOC had soured, leading the Company to abandon its trading post, the Portuguese slave traders directly sold slaves to the VOC in the Company's Bengal settlement. Just as the VOC roiled its relationship with Mrauk U in 1647, they found a second important source of slaves from the Bay of Bengal region, the southeastern coast of peninsular India, or the Coromandel coast.[1]

Throughout the seventeenth century, the VOC bought slaves at several ports all along the Coromandel coast. The VOC's main interest in the Coromandel coast was commodities, and especially cotton textiles, which they could use in the spice trade in the Indonesian archipelago. Following the foundation of Batavia in 1619, however, slave trade too emerged as an important interest in this region. A shipment of one thousand enslaved people from the Coromandel ports arrived in Batavia as early as 1622, followed by seven hundred the next year and then two hundred the year after. These earliest recorded slave exports coincided with the major famine in South Central India. Cycles of warfare and famines ensured that there was a spasmodic supply of slaves from the Coromandel coast. Thus, in 1646, the revolt of the Nayaka rulers of Thanjavur, Senji, and Madurai against

the overlordship of Vijayanagar resulted in an agrarian crisis and led to a steady supply of slaves. This conflict was especially auspicious for the VOC as they began seeking an alternative source of slaves due to their conflict with the Arakanese ruler from 1647. Although these slaves were initially taken to Batavia, after the 1650s, they were increasingly sent to Ceylon and the Cape Colony. In Ceylon, these slaves performed a whole range of tasks from extremely skilled work to the most menial labor. Entire enslaved families of weavers and cloth painters were deployed to set up a weaving and cloth dyeing center in Jaffna. Many worked in agriculture, construction in Colombo, Galle, and Jaffna, and in the households of Dutch free burghers and wealthy Indigenous people.[2]

The southwest coastline of India, the Malabar coast, formed another important source of slaves for the VOC. The VOC possessions in the Malabar coast were arguably the most prominent of all Company territories in the subcontinent. In 1663, the VOC had defeated the Portuguese at Cochin, whereupon it transformed their lands on the Malabar coast into the third-largest possession in Asia with its center in Fort Cochin. For the few years for which we have demographic information, slaves comprised between 35 and 42 percent of the population at Fort Cochin, an overwhelming majority of whom were men.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the VOC discontinued its trade in slaves from Arakan under pressure from the governor of Bengal, a province of the Mughal empire bordering on Arakan. This also coincided with the VOC's new source of large-scale slave trading from the Makassar region (South Sulawesi) of the Indonesian archipelago from the 1660s onward. The Mughals were keen on ending the slave trade on their eastern frontier, which, amongst other things, challenged their sovereignty in a politically highly volatile region. This ultimately forced the VOC to leave its trading post in Mrauk U and assist the Mughal governor in its military expedition against Mrauk U. Despite all these shifts, the slave trade from Bengal did not completely dry up as new research on slave sales in Chinsurah from the eighteenth century suggests. Even though the VOC had retracted from this business, private merchants associated with the VOC regularly bought and sold slaves in Bengal. In the 1740s and 1750s, the overwhelming majority of slaves sold in Chinsurah came from the Bengal hinterland.[3]

An increase in the number of European private traders engaged in slave trading should not come as a surprise if one takes into account the major shifts in the mercantile world of the Indian Ocean starting in the latter half

of the seventeenth century. The VOC's position within this Bengal–Coromandel–Southeast Asia trade improved dramatically following its string of territorial conquests in the Indonesian archipelago, especially its victory in the Makassar war in 1666. This victory principally affected Asian traders from Bengal and the Coromandel as they had to re-direct their trade from these eastern ports to elsewhere. The beneficiaries of these changes were not just the VOC but also a whole host of European private traders. It is in this context that the Coromandel ports had seen a total of 3,859 slaves traded in the period 1694–1696, all by private traders. Almost nothing is known of the condition of slave trading from the Coromandel coast in the eighteenth century. Only new research can reveal what the dominant form of slave trading was there and whether it was private or company controlled. New research from Cochin, however, clearly shows that private merchants were the dominant force behind the slave traffic from the Indian subcontinent to other parts of the VOC empire. Their private trade was not clandestine, as the VOC authorities provided the necessary registration for these transactions. In all likelihood, these intra-Asiatic slave sales were a permitted means of supplementing their wages.[4]

This private trade demonstrates perhaps one of the most neglected aspects of slave movements in the VOC empire in the Indian Ocean world: the multiple directions of slave movements. The Indian subcontinent was not just a place from where the VOC sourced and transported their slaves but was also a destination to which the VOC brought slaves from multiple outposts. Even though most VOC settlements and slave holdings in the Indian subcontinent paled in comparison to the slave holdings in Batavia, Ceylon, or the Cape, these smaller or subordinate outposts had considerable numbers of slaves, especially within the households of the VOC officials. The majority of these slaves were women from other parts of the VOC empire. Thus, in Bengal, a VOC directorate, court records and slave transfer deeds from the eighteenth century mention slaves coming from places such as Batavia, Makassar, Bali, and Padang.

An etching made by Wouter Schouten in 1676, depicting Bengalese captives in Pipely, Orissa (Baliapal, Odisha). Arakanese captors sold these Bengalese to VOC representatives. Most of the captives were probably women.

Slave Trading and Enslavement in a Complex Political Landscape

Slave trading was crucial to the VOC, but was also deeply influenced by political and diplomatic relations. Transactions in relation to slaves structured the diplomacy between the European powers and Indigenous states in the Indian Ocean world, for example. In 1653, when the Arakanese king, Candasudhammaraja, invited the VOC back to Mrauk U after a period of

tensions, he drew up a treaty for both parties detailing the several forms of protection that the VOC could expect. Royal officials of Mrauk U systematically supervised the slave sales to ensure these clauses. A few years down the line, the VOC was again drawn into an agreement with the Mughal officials in Bengal, but this time it was only to relinquish its slave trade in Arakan, a demand to which it reluctantly acceded.[5]

The relationships between the VOC and the surrounding Indigenous polities determined who could be enslaved and traded. The Arakanese state had put in place a complex system of registration dividing the population into free people excluded from slavery, royal slaves working for the Arakanese king, all skilled slaves, and the slaves meant for sale to the VOC. The VOC could not buy slaves identified as royal or skilled. Additionally, the 1653 treaty between Arakan and the VOC stipulated that people who either spoke Arakanese or had lived in Arakan for at least seven years could not be sold. Similarly, the Mughal provincial governor of Bengal repeatedly issued orders prohibiting European companies from enslaving Muslim subjects. The Mughal governor also intervened in cases where high-caste Hindus were sold into slavery. To what extent the local rulers in Coromandel intervened in the slave trade is unknown. All we know is that in northern Coromandel, the sultans of Golconda shielded Muslim subjects from enslavement. Further information from the Coromandel coast is scarce. Farther south, as the Maratha ruler, Shivaji, expanded his territory into the Eastern Carnatic, he issued an edict in 1678 prohibiting Europeans from slave trading in the region.[6]

In Cochin, slave sales required a special certificate or *ola* that the King of Cochin issued to slaves available for sale. Apart from the Raja of Cochin, the VOC maintained working relationships with all other rulers in the region, especially the Kolathiri raja, the Ali rajas of Cannanore, and the rulers of Calicut and Travancore. The mutuality was also reflected in the legal system within the Malabar command. It was mandatory to have the *ola* for all slaves captured from the Malabar hinterland and sold on VOC territory. These certificates mirrored the caste hierarchy of the Malabar society; the elites were the Brahmins and the Nairs, the primary landholders of Malabari society who lorded over a vast array of lower castes, such as Pulayas and Parayars. These people, who were attached to lands belonging to the elites and obligated to provide all forms of labor, were available for sale. Muslims of Malabar, it seems, could not be sold as slaves. Any transaction without an *ola* was illegal and the buyer and seller were subject to

prosecution in a VOC court if they were Christians, or otherwise handed over to the local rulers for appropriate punishments. In VOC courts, such offenses were punishable by death or other severe sentences.[7]

Slave transfers not only articulated the legal connections among the various far-flung corners of the VOC's Asian empire, but also connections between the various legal domains within one region. Thus slave transfers in Bengal show the legal nexus of private merchants of Chinsurah, the headquarters of the VOC, and the headquarters of the British East India Company in Calcutta. In Cochin, these documents, which clearly stated the caste status of the enslaved and the sellers, articulated the legitimate forms of slave transfers that all legal authorities in the region had agreed upon. Thus, in 1743, when the VOC intervened to declare null and void an attempted sale of a slave girl named Cali by an Indo-Portuguese soldier (toepass) named Joan Dias, the Court of Justice refused to hand the slave girl over to the owner, a Payancheri Nair, to whom Cali initially belonged. By the time she had appeared in court, Cali had converted to Roman Catholicism under the supervision of a Jesuit priest, thereby dissolving her slave status. The indigenous non-Christian population could not keep a Christian slave; caste-based slavery did not extend to Christians. The VOC thus decided not to return Cali to her owner but to keep her within the bounds of Cochin. Even the property rights of the Payancheri Nairs, who were influential local landlords and would later become the VOC's tax collectors on the Company's lands in the Malabar, were undermined to uphold the VOC's jurisdictions over Christians and a key pillar of the Dutch colonial order, namely the immunity of Christians from enslavement by non-Christians.[8]

The Social World of Enslaved Workers

Slaves intimately understood the legal maze within which the VOC was imbricated and navigated it to their own benefit with remarkable dexterity. In all its settlements in the Indian subcontinent, the VOC constantly had to contend with various legal jurisdictions of Indigenous rulers or even rival European powers. As Cali's case indicates, conversion was an important strategy taken to alter one's status with the caste–religion nexus of legal rights, privileges, and taboos in and around VOC settlements. At the first threat of being sold off to a new buyer, a common threat that masters used to discipline their slaves, she took the necessary step of running away to the

Jesuit priest of Puthechira. The VOC was deeply unhappy with the situation. The Jesuit priest who converted Cali not only disinherited her Nayar owner, but also subverted the VOC's ability to uphold the property rights of its most important partners in Cochin. A similar case arose in Bengal in 1729, when Jaget van Bali and Anjou van Mandhaar ran away with a freed man, Tambi van Macassar. Caught with stolen goods, all three were mercilessly whipped and sentenced to 25 years of hard labor in chains in Batavia. They were to be taken to Batavia aboard the VOC ship *De Putter*, but they escaped and took refuge with the local government. VOC officials then found that they had all converted to Islam, thereby making it impossible for the VOC director to cajole the Mughal officials into returning the slaves to Company territory, as the sale of Muslim subjects was not permissible. Often, slaves moved to areas under the jurisdiction of the VOC's rivals, including the British and French East India Companies, to evade recapture.[9]

Court records and even the periodical letters sent from the various outposts to Batavia reveal important glimpses of the slaves' social world. Resistance played an important part in this. The social history of slavery and the slave trade in European settlements in South Asia is still in its infancy, and only recently have historians begun reconstructing it in detail. One important aspect of this social world was the extent to which slaves were permitted to move around. In Bengal, slaves could move unfettered within each settlement and interact with a whole host of working people, both free and unfree. In an attempt to flee from his master in 1739, Simon van Orissa received crucial help from a mason at work at his master's home at the time. While the mason was working in the master's house, he asked Simon multiple times, "Why are you still here?" As part of a workforce which exchanged labor for money and moved in and out of the settlements, it was probably evident to the mason that household slaves comprised only a fraction of the workforce in Bengal. He thus planted in Simon's mind the idea that the condition of slavery was an unnatural one. In the words of the VOC prosecutor, the mason had "corrupted" Simon.

In Cochin, too, slaves were allowed to move around. Often, they performed hired labor, but sometimes they even visited their family members. Cali, the slave owned by Ittij Laien Nairo in 1743, for instance, had worked for eight years for the soldier, Joan Dias, with her master's permission. Cali also received a meager bit of compensation for her work, which she apparently did not share with her Nair master. Not only did Cali move in and out of the walled city of Fort Cochin for her work, but she also regularly kept

in touch with her family, especially her mother. This arrangement worked perfectly well for both masters until Dias threatened to sell her off to some far-away place.

The coerced movements set in motion by the slave trade and slavery deeply impacted social relations across the Dutch empire and in the societies which it touched. It led to the creation of new identities and communities, such as the Portuguese and Free Christian communities in Bengal. Similarly, the Dutch colonial slave trade and regulation influenced how local regimes of slavery were shaped on the Malabar coast; masters of assumed land-bound slaves could legitimately sell off their slaves on far-away overseas markets.[10]

Conclusions

Slavery and slave trade in the Indian subcontinent were cornerstones of the VOC empire in Asia. Immediately after the foundation of Batavia, the VOC organized large-scale export slave trade from South Asia to its new colonies in Southeast Asia. Under the umbrella of the VOC's colonial empire, the VOC as a corporate entity, along with a host of actors with varied mercantile and political interests, kept this traffic alive and profited from it. The institution of slavery was shaped in colonial and local contexts. In their interactions, the VOC and various Indigenous polities articulated what they understood as slavery, who could be enslaved, who could be exported, and what the permissible and transgressive elements of this institution were. Significantly for the history of South Asia, slavery in these settlements formed new identities that left lasting marks on the Indian subcontinent. The social world of slaves in these colonial settlements reveals the possible life trajectories for enslaved people at the different ends of the VOC's Asian empire. Although we can see the first contours of slavery and Dutch colonialism in South Asia, much of these histories and their legacies remain underexplored, from the large-scale export slave trade from South Asia to Southeast Asia and the Cape, to the entanglements between local and colonial regimes of slavery, to the lived experiences of the enslaved.

Notes

1 Stephan van Galen, "Arakan and Bengal: The Rise and Decline of the Mrauk U Kingdom (Burma) from the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth century AD" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2008); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Slaves and Tyrants: Dutch Tribulations in Seventeenth century Mrauk-U," *Journal of Early Modern History*, 1, no. 3 (1997): 201–53; Wil O. Dijk, "An End to the History of Silence? The Dutch Trade in Asian Slaves: Arakan and the Bay of Bengal, 1621–1665," *International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter*, The Hague, no. 46 (Winter 2008): 16.

2 S. Arasaratnam, "Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century," in *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans: Studies in Maritime History*, ed. K.S. Mathew (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), 195–208; Markus Vink, "'The World's Oldest Trade': Dutch Slavery and Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century," *Journal of World History* 14, no. 2 (2003): 131–77.

3 Titas Chakraborty, "Slave Trading and Slave Resistance in the Indian Ocean World: The Case of Early Eighteenth-Century Bengal," *Slavery and Abolition*, 40, no. 4 (2019): 706–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2019.1606525.

4 Vink, "'The World's Oldest Trade'"; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Political Economy of Commerce Southern India 1500–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Om Prakash, "European Trading Companies and Merchants of Bengal 1650–1725," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 1, no. 3 (1964): 37–63; Linda Mbeki and Matthias van Rossum, "Private Slave Trade in the Dutch Indian Ocean World: A Study Into the Networks and Backgrounds of Slavers and the Enslaved in South Asia and South Africa," *Slavery and Abolition* 38, no. 1 (2017): 95–116.

5 Van Galen, "Arakan and Bengal."

6 Chakraborty, "Slave Trading and Slave Resistance"; Arasaratnam, "Slave Trade."

7 Matthias van Rossum, Alexander van Geelen, Bram van den Hout, and Merve Tosun, *Testimonies of Enslavement: Sources on Slavery from the Indian Ocean World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

8 Matthias van Rossum, Alexander van Geelen, and Merve Tosun, "Enslaveability, Slavery and Global Micro Histories: Reflections through the Case of Cali," *Slavery & Abolition* 43, no. 3 (2022): 482–98; Anjana Singh, *Fort Cochin in Kerala, 1750–1830* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

9 Chakraborty, "Slave Trading and Slave Resistance"; Van Rossum et al., *Testimonies.*

10 Titas Chakraborty, "The Household Workers of the East India Company Ports of Pre-Colonial Bengal," *International Review of Social History* 64 no. S27 (2019): 1–23; Van Rossum, et al., "Enslaveability."

Abstract

This chapter is an introduction to the history of Dutch slavery in colonial Indonesia. It questions the long-standing perception that colonial and local forms of slavery were distinct from one another. An analysis of the enslavement practices in the eighteenth century reveals that colonial and local slavery were in fact entangled, and that Dutch colonialism shaped the local practices of enslavement, while the Dutch legal apparatus was used to conceal this complicity.

Keywords: Indonesia; slavery; enslavement; colonialism