

Anjana Singh, *Fort Cochin in Kerala, 1750-1830: The Social Condition of a Dutch Community in an Indian Milieu.* TANAP Monographs on the History of Asian-European Interaction 13 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010). ISBN: 978-90-04-16816-9 (hbk.).

Markus Vink¹

The volume reviewed here is part of a series on the history of Asian-European interactions and a result of the highly successful TANAP (Towards a New Age of Partnership) program that was carried out at Leiden University, the Netherlands, from 2001 to 2006 by a score of young Asian, South African, and European scholars. Seeking to better understand the Asian-European interactions in early modern maritime Asia, the authors strive to match their research conducted in the depositories of the former Dutch East India Company (VOC) held in the archival depositories at The Hague, Cape Town, Colombo, Madras, and Jakarta with local Asian sources and the latest scholarly literature. As such, these monographs provide new insights into the integration of the Asian theatre into global history. Patna-born Anjana Singh, a product of the TANAP program, obtained a doctorate in History from the University of Leiden in 2007 and currently serves as a Research Officer at the Department of Economic History, London School of Economics, as part of the URKEW (Useful and Reliable Knowledge in Global Histories of Material Progress in the East and the West) project, headed by Patrick O'Brien.

Fort Cochin in Kerala, 1750-1830 studies the early modern fortress town of Cochin (the former Portuguese *Cochim de Baixo*) in modern-day Kerala, India, based on extensive research undertaken in India, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Singh's endeavors to paint an intimate portrait of a Dutch urban community of East India Company (VOC) servants and their dependants living in the larger social environment of the Malabar Coast from the mid-eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century. Her aim is "to re-create the world of Fort Cochin from the archives created by the people themselves...to bring to life and tell the forgotten stories of individuals, the inhabitants of the fort and discover the individual journeys of the people living there" (12). Thus, Singh sets out to show how, in

¹ State University of New York at Fredonia, USA. *E-mail:* markus.vink@fredonia.edu

the wake of the Battle of Colachel (1741) and the subsequent treaties of Mavelikara (1743; 1753), the population of this Dutch settlement adapted to the fundamental political and economic changes that occurred as a result of local state formation processes, the relative decline and ultimate demise of the VOC, and the regime change that occurred when English administration was imposed on Fort Cochin in 1795, until the final disappearance of the small Dutch community and its merger with the larger Malabar milieu around 1830.

The book reflects a renewed interest in social history and the process of identity formation in urban settings in early modern maritime Asia in general and in the Dutch Indian Ocean World in particular over the last three decades. At the same time, it also more fully and openly engages the existing corpus of scholarship on the Company history in India in general and in Malabar in particular.

Fort Cochin in Kerala itself consists of an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, endnotes, eight appendices, a bibliography, and an index. The “Introduction” includes sections on Singh’s “inspiration for research,” a “note on sources,” and “points of discussion.” Chapter One, “Getting to Know Places and Peoples: Cochin ca. 1750,” is an introduction to the places and people of Malabar and specifically Fort Cochin from Cananur in the north to Kanyakumari in the south in the mid-eighteenth century. Cochin itself, the headquarters of all VOC activities on the Malabar Coast since 1663, was a “twin establishment,” consisting of two separate, yet intricately interconnected, settlements and communities: Fort Cochin (*Cochim de Baixa*) occupied by increasingly “localized” (Indo)-Europeans (Company servants, free-burghers and their dependants) and Mattancheri (*Cochim de Cima* or “native Cochin”), the residence of “an admixture of peoples”— St. Thomas Christians and Roman Catholics, Malabar Hindus, “Cochinis” or Malabar Jews, and *paradeshi* (“foreign”) and indigenous Mappila Muslims (33-41). As other studies have shown, this policy of spatial segregation could also be found in other fortified port-cities under European administration, such as Batavia, Colombo, Madras, and Calcutta.

Chapter Two, “The Metamorphosis of the Malabar Command (1750-1784),” discusses the realignment of power among Europeans and the changing nature of the Dutch presence in Malabar in the aftermath of the Battle of Colachel (1741), the two treaties of Mavelikara (1743; 1753), and the conclusion of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War in 1784. The Malabar Command had to come to terms with the reality that it had “forfeited its position as a dominant power on the Malabar Coast” to the English East India Company (53). It was unable to compete in the lucrative trade in pepper or the “black gold” of Malabar, “the bride around whom everyone dances,” in part due to what Singh sees as

the narrow-minded “Batavia-centric” policies of the High Government (69-70, 88). Thus, this period witnessed the “partial transformation” of the Company from a “pacified merchant-warrior” or a group of “exclusive emporialists” to a “proto-colonial” landlord on the Malabar Coast (74, 89), with a shift from trade to taxation as a source of income. This process of territorialization based on the taxation of both land and land occupation noted by Singh paralleled developments elsewhere on the islands of Java and Ceylon (VOC) and the Indian subcontinent (EIC) in the eighteenth century.

Chapter Three, “The Social World of Cochin” presents a portrait of Fort Cochin and the influences of the larger Malabar milieu on fort society. Singh points to the gap between the VOC’s “inconsistent” administrative policies of inclusion and exclusion imposed from above, based on race, religion, and occupation, and the everyday practice of personal, commercial and legal interactions of Company servants and their dependants inside Cochin with the indigenous people of Malabar outside the fort walls. The Christian population, especially the *mestizos* and *topazes*, and the Malabar merchants were the “primary facilitators,” playing an important role as go-betweens in narrowing the distance between those living inside and those living outside, “resulting in interconnection and interdependence” (144-145, 228). Singh’s argument, in fact, corroborates many of the recent findings of Ulbe Bosma and Remco Raben’s *Being “Dutch” in the Indies* (2008) on the disparity between the attempts at racial and ethnic engineering by the administrators of the VOC and the porousness and permeability of boundaries in reality, leading to “Creolization” or “mestization,” the rise of “local VOC dynasties” within one generation after conquest (much earlier than Singh suggests), and the vital role played by (Indo)-Portuguese communities at Colombo, Cochin, and Melaka in this process.

Chapter Four, “Days of Reckoning (1784-1795),” covers the decade from 1784, the end of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, and 1795, when the Dutch Republic was invaded by the French. The Dutch experience in Asia, as Singh notes in her conclusion, had much in common with that of the Portuguese in Asia. While the *Estado da Índia* suffered massive attacks from the Dutch in the decades after 1630, the Dutch lost valuable parts of their Asiatic “seaborne empire” due to the revolutions in Europe and the Napoleonic Wars (231). The British capture of Fort Cochin in October 1795 marked the end of 132 years of VOC rule, but it merely capped a gradual process of the parting of ways or “great divergence” between the local Dutch community and the Company accelerating in the 1780s. Linked to the VOC’s economizing and reforming zeal, leading to a “dramatic” reduction in the number of VOC establishments after 1750, Cochin’s inhabitants were

“moving beyond the pale of the fort and the Company” (160). Similar to Batavia after 1733, a trend described by P.H. van den Brug’s *Malaria en Malaise* (1994) and noticed by Singh in the following chapter (184), Company servants and free-burghers moved out beyond the fort’s unhealthy walls into the surrounding countryside, increasingly securing their livelihood through means that were not directly connected with the VOC’s commercial business.

Chapter Five, “Life After the VOC,” shows that, following the British takeover, a majority of the Dutch, *mestizo*, and indigenous people once linked to the VOC decided to stay on—including even the highest, European-born officials. With families and estates and extended networks of commercial, social, and personal ties, they were simply “too rooted to leave” (186). In fact, the new EIC administration proved to be even more favorable—in terms of the emerging possibilities and opportunities in private trade—with the result that, although there were frictions among the different communities, new social and family relations were established between the Dutch and British (200).

Chapter Six, “Adapting to British Cochin (1798-1830),” focuses on the “general withering away of the Dutch community, its institutions, and individuals” and the “lingering shadows” of the Dutch presence “forgotten by the people in Batavia and the Netherlands, and considered as a burden by the new British administrators” (210, 216). The destruction of the walls and bastions of Fort Cochin, the former political, social, and commercial hub, by the British in early 1806 was symbolic in this respect. Though a number of Dutch continued to live in Cochin, their special status, the fort, and its institutions—the Council of Justice, the Orphan Board, the hospital, and the leper house—all were lost. By physically moving out of the fort and joining other mercantile communities, they were now more closely integrated into the changing social milieu of Malabar, unlike the larger Burgher community in Ceylon, which survived as a distinct group. In passing, Singh points to the need for members of the Dutch community to reinvent themselves in view of the changing political, social, and economic realities of the period (209) and the noticeable loss of both an emotional attachment to the Netherlands and the “need to consider themselves Dutch” (220). Indeed, the contingent and constructed nature of identities is one of the main themes in the recent conference volume edited by Nigel Worden, *Contingent Lives: Social Identity and Material Culture in the VOC World* (2007).

To use the now famous formulation of J.C. van Leur, Singh’s deliberate and conscious choice to focus on the Dutch community of Fort Cochin results in an

unapologetic view from “the deck of the ship, the ramparts of the fortress, the high gallery of the trading house,” leaving much of the surrounding milieu of Malabar “grey and undifferentiated.” One can certainly not fault Singh for this “VOC Fort Cochin-centric” perspective (including recurrent condemnations of the “Batavia-centric” view of the High Government and the Gentlemen Seventeen), as it is after all the focus of her study, but to what extent does she succeed in her stated objective to “re-create the world of Fort Cochin” and “bring to life the forgotten stories of individuals...living there?” Here she is both mistress and captive of her sources, and the book displays both their potentialities and their pitfalls. She shows a deft command of the materials uncovered during her extensive archival research. Her narrative, however, is unevenly divided between the various population groups, shedding most light on the Europeans (especially the higher ranks of the local 600-700 VOC personnel), but the picture becomes increasingly “grey and undifferentiated” with regard to the other members of the “Dutch” community *in situ*, rising from some 2,040 (1760) to 2,317 (1790) overall. Like most other pre-modern European overseas settlements, Cochin was also both a *mestizo* and a slave society—with slaves comprising more than half of the population—and VOC documents are less illuminating here. Nevertheless, *Fort Cochin in Kerala* deserves serious attention and serves as an important case study of the process of “glocalization” (a term popularized by Ronald Robertson and Anthony Reid), the interaction between the local and the global, at the intersection of social history and urban studies, identity formation and institutional history, and late pre-colonial and early colonial studies.