

Dutch East India Company in Cochin – Politics and Trade in 17th century

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Abstract:

The Dutch East India Company played a big role in Cochin from 1663 to 1795, and this article looks at how politics and business were connected back then. The company's main goal was to get its hands on Malabar pepper without spending too much money on taking over land and running the military. To do this, they made treaties, formed alliances, and used military force to influence who was in charge, how taxes were collected, and how laws were made in Cochin. They also got involved in Cochin's relationships with neighbouring rulers. Cochin became a key spot for the Dutch, where they collected and exported pepper from the surrounding areas. The company even protected Cochin from the Zamorin because it was an important place for getting pepper and stopping Calicut from expanding. But here's the thing: the Dutch couldn't have done it without the help of local merchants, like the Konkani, Jewish, Chetty, and Baniya traders, who provided pepper, loans, shipping, and connections to other trade networks in the Indian Ocean. This article shows how the Dutch East India Company's control over trade and politics were closely tied, even though local leaders and merchants often pushed back and found ways to work around the company's rules.

Keywords: Dutch East India Company (VOC); Cochin; Malabar; pepper trade; commercial monopoly; political alliances; treaties; revenue administration; Zamorin of Calicut; merchant communities; Konkani merchants; Jewish merchants; Indian Ocean trade.

Vasco da Gama's arrival in 1498 in Calicut marked the direct European maritime contact with Malabar. Between Portuguese fort at Cochin in 1503 to the Dutch conquest in 1663 may broadly be described, following K. N. Panikkar and P. C. Alexander, as the 'Portuguese period of Kerala's early modern history'. Although Malabar had long participated in Indian Ocean commerce, the Portuguese connected its existing networks more directly with Western Europe and the Atlantic world. Through naval warfare, alliances, forts, and the Cartaz system, they attempted to regulate shipping and monopolise the spice trade. While Goa became their principal settlement after 1510, the Malabar establishments remained important to Portuguese influence on India's western coast. After capturing Cochin, the VOC adapted this political-commercial framework to its own objectives between 1663 and 1795.

Dutch entry into Indian Ocean began with Cornelis de Houtman's 1595–1596 expedition from the Netherlands to Bantam, Java¹. Several rival Dutch companies entered Asian trade before merging in 1602 as the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC). Initially the trade focused on obtaining cloves, nutmeg, and mace directly from the Indonesian archipelago. However, Dutch eventually established their

capital at Batavia in 1619 which thereafter became the administrative capital of the VOC in Asia and the centre of an expanding intra-Asian Dutch commercial network.ⁱⁱ

Dutch expansion towards western Indian Ocean developed alongside its prolonged conflict with the Portuguese. Between 1616-18, VOC had trading posts at Surat, Broach, Ahmedabad, Cambay, Vadodara, and even Agra. Ceylon's cinnamon trade and strategic position led to capture of Colombo (1656)ⁱⁱⁱ Ceylon under complete control of VOC by 1658 provided them both control over the cinnamon-producing coastal regions and a strategic base for further operations against Portuguese possessions in Malabar.

Dutch contact with Malabar began in November 1604, when Admiral Steven van der Hagen concluded a treaty of offensive-defensive nature with Calicut Zamorin.^{iv} However, it didn't develop into any long-term alliance. Eventually, Van Goens captured Quilon (1661) & Cranganore (1662) & Cannanore (1663)^v

Cochin at that time possessed one of the most favourable maritime environments on the western coast of India owing to its natural harbour, extensive backwater system, navigable rivers, and protected coastal configuration. Its sheltered inner harbour, connected to the Arabian Sea through a navigable channel, and its outer roadstead provided safe anchorage for ocean-going vessels. The backwaters extended northwards to Ponnani and southwards towards Travancore, while rivers such as the Karuvannur, Chalakudi, and Alwaye (Periyar) linked the port with its hinterland. Numerous alluvial islands further sheltered the harbour. Despite periodic sandbars at the river mouths, continuous river scouring maintained navigable channels, enabling Cochin to function as a major entrepôt connecting inland and maritime trade.^{vi}

Portuguese interference into the Cochin royal family factional dispute gave the already expanding Dutch the pretext to invade Portuguese forts in Malabar and on the request of Vira Kerala Varma to VOC in Colombo in 1661 and also supported by the Zamorin & the Paliyath Achan, Dutch forces besieged Cochin and captured it in 7 January 1663^{vii}. The VOC thereby acquired the major Portuguese positions at Quilon, Cranganore, Cochin, and Cannanore and established the territorial and commercial foundation of Dutch influence on the Malabar coast.

Rijklof van Goens restored Vira Kerala Varma of the Muttatavazhi branch to the throne. The Treaty of 20 March 1663 formally established the VOC as protector of the ruler and his kingdom; Vira Kerala Varma transferred Fort Cochin, its associated territories, and the privileges formerly enjoyed by the Portuguese to the VOC, and accepted Dutch military protection.^{viii} Company obtained extensive political and commercial privileges and a significant role in the affairs of the Cochin kingdom. Dutch authority was symbolically expressed during the coronation, when the prince was invested with a specially made golden crown bearing the VOC insignia, representing the Company's protection of his sovereignty.^{ix} The treaty also divided judicial authority: Hindu subjects remained under the Cochin ruler's courts, while Christians formerly under Portuguese jurisdiction were placed under VOC judges at Cochin.

In 1669, Malabar was constituted as a separate VOC command under Hendrik Adriaan van Rhee in 1669^x, the commander and Council at Cochin supervised the Company's forts and factories at Quilon, Cranganore, Pallippuram, Cannanore, Purakkad, Kayamkulam, Chettuvay, and other coastal settlements, while remaining answerable to the Governor-General and Council at Batavia. Thus, Fort Cochin became

the headquarters of their Malabar Command and it housed the commander's residence and the Political Council. became the principal administrative and fortified centre of Dutch Malabar.

Several agreements post-1663 treaty, progressively enabled the VOC to intervene in royal succession, administrative appointments, coinage, jurisdiction, relations with subordinate chiefs, and disputes within the royal family. Treaty of 1674 during Van Rheede's tenure enabled VOC to expand its influence over succession, relations among Cochin's subordinate chiefs even forming a league against common foe such as Zamorin of Calicut.^{xi} The kingdom of Cochin was ruled by Rajas who belonged to one of the five *tavazhi* or ruling houses.^{xii} The VOC simultaneously intervened in disputes among the five *tavazhis* of the Cochin royal house - Mutta, Palluruthy, Chazhur, Elaya, and Madathumkil—whose competing succession claims threatened political stability.

The later treaties of 1678, 1681, and 1684 increased VOC control over Cochin internal administration including even the royal household and gave permission to exercise sovereign power without interference from royal princes, and administration matters required the ratification of Dutch commander after Paliyat Acchan consulted with Cochin ruler, and the principal nobles (Rajadores) and even the new appointment of new counsellors required permission from VOC commander and in many cases Dutch caption himself assuming the role of prime minister.^{xiii} Thus, all of these measures reduce Cochin king to a dependent ally. The VOC extended this system to Purakkad, Kolattiri, Ali Raja, Kayamkulam, Quilon, Travancore, Tekkumkur, Vadakkumkur, Mangat, and other regional authorities, maintaining these alliances through diplomatic missions, political arbitration, presents, military assistance, and troops stationed in strategic forts. Violations were met with blockades, threats, or armed intervention, as in Purakkad, the Zamorin's territories, and Paravur. Dutch authority in Malabar thus rested on negotiated alliances, protection, and dependency backed by military force rather than extensive territorial conquest.

The commercial objective of these Treaties and agreements was to control Malabar's pepper and other valuable commodities. The commercial policy of the VOC in Malabar has appropriately been described by K. M. Panikkar as the pursuit of the "maximum pepper trade at minimum expense." The Company attempted to establish a monopsony—that is, to become the principal authorised buyer of pepper—through treaties with the ruler of Cochin and numerous other Malabar rulers. These agreements required rulers and chiefs, at least in principle, to deliver the pepper produced in their territories to the VOC at prices offered by the Company.^{xiv}

Cochin stood at the centre of the VOC's commercial system in Malabar, serving as its administrative headquarters and principal centre for collecting, storing and exporting pepper. Under the Treaty of 1663, all pepper and wild cinnamon produced in Cochin and its dependent territories extending towards Purakkad were reserved for the VOC, while opium imports were placed substantially under Dutch control. The Company could maintain forts at Cochin, Palliport, Vypeen, and Purakkad to prevent clandestine pepper trading and protect the waterways carrying commodities to the coast.^{xv}

1663 Treaty explicitly states VOC monopoly over the purchase of Pepper and cinnamon in the cochin kingdom. 1664 Treaty gave VOC exemptions for tolls payments for moving goods into Cochin port or fort^{xvi}. On 25 February 1664, Jacob Hustaart concluded a supplementary agreement exempting the VOC

from port tolls and permitting unrestricted trade with local merchants without royal interference. 1674 further allowed VOC interventions into revenue administration such as fixing incomes for royal family. 1674 Treaty gave VOC control over Cochin revenue administration including fixing the income of the royal family including the king.^{xvii}

The regulation of 1678 prevented the princes from interfering in government, while the financial agreement of 1681 placed the treasury under the joint supervision of Paliyath Achan and the Dutch officer Hendrik Reijnst, reserved about 35 per cent of royal revenue for defence, and allowed the VOC to retain pepper tolls as security against the Raja's debts, which had reached 203,762 fanams by 1678.^{xviii}

A treaty concluded with Rama Varma in April 1698 granted the Raja a share of the customs duties collected at Cochin. Francis Day mentions in his work "Land of the Perumal", the treaties dated 1663, 1664, 1674, 1678, 1681, and 1698, together with additional written and oral agreements. Agreements with other rulers similarly restricted the sale of pepper, cardamom, and cinnamon to rival European and Asian merchants, limited opium imports by outsiders, and sought to exclude the English, French, and Portuguese. Toll exemptions, passports, warehouses, resident factors, Company protection, fixed purchasing prices, and compulsory deliveries to VOC factories further strengthened this system. Political alliance and commercial monopoly were therefore inseparable, although rulers and merchants repeatedly undermined the monopoly by selling pepper to competitors offering higher prices.

The Dutch policy in Malabar was primarily directed towards securing the largest possible supply of pepper while keeping administrative and military expenditure to a minimum. Their principal objective was to maximise profits from the pepper trade. To secure a steady supply, the VOC concluded treaties with local rulers that required them to sell pepper and other commodities to the Company at favourable prices, while restricting local merchants from exporting more than limited quantities of pepper. The Dutch also relied on their naval strength to curb the activities of competing European trading companies and to maintain their dominance over the spice trade.^{xix}

The VOC consequently combined military enforcement with diplomacy, treaties and contracts with commercial intermediaries, increasingly favouring negotiation when warfare became prohibitively expensive. The VOC's political influence in Malabar was therefore principally intended to secure its commerce while limiting the costs of territorial expansion and a permanently enlarged military establishment.

The best-quality pepper was produced around Cochin and farther south towards Quilon, while the interconnected rivers and backwaters carried pepper from the producing hinterland to the coast. Pepper accumulated in Cochin and its adjoining regions were weighed, packed and sealed at principal warehouse in Fort Cochin where it was before being loaded onto ships arriving from Ceylon or Batavia. Considering Cochin's authority over the neighbouring regions of Purakkad, Tekkumkur and Vadakkumkur, it should also receive pepper from these regions.^{xx} Important VOC imports into Cochin included opium and cotton, with opium functioning as the principal commodity that the Company could offer directly in return for pepper. Textiles, sugar, cloves, copper, tin and iron also circulated through Cochin as part of its wider intra-Asian commerce. Thus, considering the commercial significance it became imperative for VOC to

protect Cochin against outside threat while also through its interventions into Cochin internal matters sought to regulate the revenue administration for maximum profits while also maintain its political stability.

VOC as Cochin ally also help protect Cochin against Zamorin invasions. Although the Zamorin had initially assisted the Dutch against the Portuguese, relations deteriorated when the VOC rejected his expectation that former Cochin territories and Vypin would be transferred to Calicut after the conquest. Protecting Cochin became essential because the kingdom provided the territorial base of the Dutch headquarters, access to the pepper-producing hinterland, and a political barrier against the southward expansion of the Zamorin. Dutch forces consequently intervened in conflicts with Calicut in 1669–1672 (Treaty of 6 February, 1672), 1701–1710 (Treaty of 10 February 1710), and 1715–1718 (Treaty of 17 February 1718), with Chettuvay, Pappinivattam, Cranganore, and the northern territories of Cochin becoming recurrent points of conflict. Following 1718 Treaty Zamorin was compelled to recognise Dutch possession of Chettuvay and Pappinivattam and pay an indemnity of 85,000 fanams.^{xxi}

Various mercantile communities in Cochin

Konkani merchants occupied an influential position after the Dutch established themselves in Malabar. Babba Prabhu reportedly dominated the distribution of Company commodities and possessed sufficient influence to affect VOC relations with the Zamorin. His relatives Rama Prabhu, Baboecca Prabhu and Nannoe Prabhu also served the Company, while the Prabhus remained commercially important in Cochin after their earlier dominance declined^{xxii}. Jewish merchants were similarly prominent. After Jewish families moved from Cranganore to Cochin in 1565, Ezechiel Rahabi arrived from Aleppo in 1647, followed by his son David in 1664. David became one of Cochin's wealthiest merchants and developed close commercial ties with the Prabhus. His son Ezechiel became the VOC's chief merchant after 1726 and was recognised by the Malabar Council, Van Imhoff and Van Gollenesse as the Company's principal purchaser and supplier in Cochin^{xxiii}.

These merchants engaged in activities extending beyond pepper procurement. Chetty and Jewish Company merchants received advances to purchase pepper, while Jewish, Chetty and Baniya traders linked the producing hinterland with Dutch coastal warehouses.^{xxiv} Ezechiel Rahabi traded in pepper, cardamom, cloth and Chinese porcelain, owned vessels operating between Malabar, Bengal, Malacca and Mocha, managed capital and once lent the VOC 90,000 rupees. Merchant networks of correspondents, agents and brokers connected Malabar with Gujarat and Bengal^{xxv}. Other Company merchants included Pinna Poy, Naga Prabhu and Upendra Chetty, while Santa Poy competed for the Cochin customs farm in 1745^{xxvi}. In 1770, Callaga Prabhu, Ganesha Chetty, Anta Chetty and Daniel Cohen agreed to purchase the VOC's complete annual Indonesian cargo and were described by the Malabar Council as "our merchants"^{xxvii}.

Together, these communities supplied the VOC with commodities, credit, shipping, brokerage and access to wider Indian Ocean networks.

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