
Book Reviews

Markus Vink. *Encounters on the Opposite Coast: The Dutch East India Company and the Nayaka State of Madurai in the Seventeenth Century*. Leiden: Brill, 2015. 752 pp. ISBN: 9789004272620. \$298.00.

Markus Vink's voluminous study is an academic response to a "black hole" (6) in South Indian history: the neglected history of the Nayaka state of Madurai (one of the successor-states of the Vijayanagara Empire in South India) and its relationship with the influential Dutch East India Company. Although *Encounters* span 752 pages, the book covers only the first—and according to the author, the most interesting—half of the period of Dutch-Madurai relations (1645–1690). The book has seven chapters preceded by a selection of maps and followed by Personalia (a list of names of the Indian and Dutch rulers), currency, weights, measures conversions, and an index.

Chapter 1, "Images and Ideologies" (which Vink confusingly refers to as "Images and Imaginations" in his Introduction [14]) lays the foundations for the rest of the study by describing the ethnographies of the actors in these historical encounters: the "Dutch" and the "Indians", and their mutual perceptions and preconceptions. Chapters 2 and 3 ("Treasure for Textiles: The Import Trade" and "Treasure for Textiles: The Export Trade") detail import and export trade of the coarse cotton textiles, but also of pearls, chaya or dye roots, rockfish skins, livestock, and slaves, the character of which exchanges, according to Vink, was a considerable drain on Europe's precious metals reserves. The commodity trade gets presented against the backdrop of the natural and human geography of the Madurai region. Chapters 4 to 7 provide accounts of fluctuating bilateral contacts, in roughly 10-year spans, per chapter (1645–1657; 1658–1669; 1670–1679; 1680–1690). Vink interweaves his large-scale descriptions of politico-economic trends and often dramatic historical episodes with detailed and intimate biographical facts of individual VOC officials, employees, as well as Indian personalities, offering an unprecedented insight into the Company's daily life and the specifics of its commercial activities carried out on the Madurai coast.

Throughout the whole book, the reader is dazzled by the staggering amount of detail—a witness to the author's punctilious attitude towards his sources, reflected in the extensive 55-page bibliography, and lengthy footnotes regularly taking half a page or more. Vink, probably correctly, presumes that most readers will never get access to the full range of sources he consulted, ranging from original Dutch archival documents to major academic works on the topic, both Indian and Western, to unpublished Ph.D. theses, extracting usable pieces of information from every one of them. Geographical names are in both original and historical forms, administrative terms are in English, Dutch and often Portuguese; and all Indian words and phrases are presented in the Romanised form and assembled in 17 pages of a glossary (which is itself a fascinating introduction to the topic if read before the actual book). The 31 tables in the text meticulously note and organize all the trade data extracted from the VOC archival documents. They indicate the quantity and value of Dutch exports and imports in a year, the amount of grain purchase, revenue from pearl fisheries,

but also further specification like the religious background of men and boat used in pearl fisheries, expressed in exotic units of measurement called diving stones. Vink has provided statistics given with meticulous precision to the second decimal place, and down to the exact number of scarves and handkerchiefs produced (2,598 pieces in 1677–1678, and 3,095 pieces in 1677–1678, respectively). This aspect makes it much more useful as a reference book than a readable historical narrative.

The author seems to be terrified by the prospect that he may neglect and lose even the tiniest piece of hard-gotten information, resigning it back to the dark abysses of history. When he relates one of the so-called “punitive expeditions”, he mentions “a fleet of ten vessels” but immediately specifies that it comprised “3 flutes, 1 yacht, 1 galiot, 3 longboats or sloops, and 2 Sinhalese vessels” (336)—by which time, not giving any illustrations of the abovementioned watercrafts seems almost like an omission. But this level of detail goes well beyond the historical facts. When talking about the rockfish skins trade (which, by the way, is presented as a fascinating political barometer of the time), Vink breaks into an Attenborough-esque description: “Living in coastal tropical waters of the Indo-Pacific with sandy bottoms among rocks, ray- or rockfish (Lat., *Trygon Seption*; *Trygon Sephen*; *Pastinchus Sephen*) are closely related to sharks, belonging to the various marine fishes of the order *Rajiformes* or *Batoidei*, having cartilaginous [cartilaginous] skeletons, horizontally flattened bodies, and narrow tails” (268). Similarly, on the topic of cotton cultivation, two varieties of the plant are distinguished and discussed in detail: one perennial and one herbaceous, with their respective botanical characteristics, agricultural seasons, steps of industrial processing, and commercial value (213–216). As befits the multidisciplinary historical study, the maps represent everything related to the area under survey, from early cartographic representations to political systems, to distribution of soil types and the mean annual rainfall. The map of trade routes of South India in 1699 is so detailed that it requires a separate page listing 147 toponyms, many of which are, unsurprisingly, not identifiable in Google maps. Although rarely extraneous, these details may be perceived by some readers as too exhaustive and distracting from the main storyline.

Encounters must be one of the most comprehensive and authoritative overviews of the Dutch-Madurai relations of that period. Vink’s erudition is intimidating. His familiarity with the personnel and activities of the VOC in South India betrays a deep personal connection, which, for that matter, is explicitly expressed in the acknowledgements, attributing the book to “the spark provided by two energetic and reform-minded leading Dutch East India Company officials, Jacob Mossel (1704–1761) and Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff (1705–1750)” (xvi). All original quotations are presented in the English version only. Eighteen plates depicting VOC officials, contemporaneous images of locations mentioned in the text, and modern Indian depictions of the “punitive expedition” of 1694 from Sri Ganesan Kalaikkoodam (which Vink seems to believe to be the painter rather than a location) all add a bit of colour to the very dense story.

For a reader not used to parsing Indian names and toponyms, or to constant footnote references (in the seven chapters of 600 pages only ten pages have no footnotes!) and sentences regularly stretching to over twelve lines of text, *Encounters* does not make for easy reading. However, for a reader interested in specific aspects of Dutch-Indian economic and social history, this book is a gold mine of hard data, curious facts, unknown events, as well as broader historical analysis and reflections.