

Work and Society in the East India Company Settlements in Bengal, 1650-1757

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This dissertation examines the history of work in the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the English East India Company (EIC) settlements in Bengal between 1650 and 1757. By 1650, both companies had firmly established trading networks in Bengal, and by the early years of the eighteenth century, the profitability of trade in Bengal had become very clear to both companies. The volume and value of trade grew steadily until 1757, when the EIC defeated the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daulah, at the Battle of Plassey, thereby inaugurating direct colonial conquest of the region. During this period of trade, when neither company had political sway over the region and very little intrusion into the producing hinterland, they employed hundreds, sometimes thousands, of workers each year. How did these corporate entities manage labor in time and place, where their political control over workers was severely challenged? To answer this question, this dissertation specifically looks at workers who were directly employed by the companies. In doing so, it brings to light the lives and work of laboring people—boatmen, cartmen, coolies, silk reelers, slaves, sailors and soldiers—thus far ignored by social and economic historians of South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Most importantly, it reveals a world of work marked by the workers’ assertion of their right to mobility and “customary” payments. By emphasizing workers’ agency, I argue that the European companies’ control over the workers was far from total. Building on the rich body of work on the economic, social and labor histories of Mughal India and the Indian Ocean, this work proposes to shift the focus of eighteenth-

century South Asian history from economic histories of trade and the history of both European and Asian mercantile and political elites to the social history of working people. It also brings labor history into the pre-colonial history of South Asia.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the history of work in the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the English East India Company (EIC) settlements in Bengal between 1650 and 1757. By 1650, both companies had firmly established trading networks in Bengal, and by the early years of the eighteenth century, the profitability of trade in Bengal had become very clear to both companies. The volume and value of trade grew steadily until 1757, when the EIC defeated the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daulah, at the Battle of Plassey, thereby inaugurating direct colonial conquest of the region. During this period of trade, when neither company had political sway over the region and very little intrusion into the producing hinterland, they employed hundreds, sometimes thousands, of workers each year. How did these corporate entities manage labor in time and place, where their political control over workers was severely challenged? To answer this question, this dissertation specifically looks at workers who were directly employed by the companies. In doing so, it brings to light the lives and work of laboring people—boatmen, cartmen, coolies, silk reelers, slaves, sailors and soldiers—thus far ignored by social and economic historians of South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Most importantly, it reveals a world of work marked by the workers’ assertion of their right to mobility and “customary” payments. By emphasizing workers’ agency, I argue that the European companies’ control over the workers was far from total. Building on the rich body of work on the economic, social and labor histories of Mughal India and the Indian Ocean, this work proposes to shift the focus of eighteenth-

century South Asian history from economic histories of trade and the history of both European and Asian mercantile and political elites to the social history of working people. It also brings labor history into the pre-colonial history of South Asia.

1.1 FINDING THE “SOCIAL” IN THE PRE-COLONIAL INDIAN MARKET

Despite the unending debate on the nature of change and continuity in eighteenth century India,¹ this work has benefitted and built upon historical works on both contending sides—in particular, the works of Irfan Habib and Christopher Bayly. Irfan Habib’s path breaking work, *Agrarian System of Mughal India*, provides a detailed overview of the economic and social structures of Mughal India, primarily focusing on the various ways in which wealth was created within the Mughal state. Habib analyzes the intricate system of revenue extraction—from the village level to the seat of imperial power—and how the logic of revenue extraction was complemented by a highly monetized economy supported by extensive internal, overseas and overland markets.² In contrast, commercialization of the Mughal economy, especially in the eighteenth century, formed the central story of Christopher Bayly’s account of Mughal North India’s transition to the territorial conquest of EIC state.³ He has recast the decline of the Mughal

¹ For more on this debate, see, Seema Alavi, ed., *The Eighteenth Century in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002); Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, *Peasant History of Late Pre-Colonial and Colonial India* in D.P. Chattopadhyaya, ed., *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization, Volume VIII, Part 2* (New Delhi: Pearson, Longman, 2008), 49-108

² Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707* (3rd edition, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013.)

³ Christopher Bayly, *Ruler, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988)

Empire as the “slow commercialization of India under loose but dynamic Mughal hegemony.”⁴ By focusing on commercialization, he has woven a complex story of the many lives of the Mughal nobility, especially in the provinces, as well as the revenue farmers and *zamindars*. This focus on the “culture of entrepreneurship”⁵ is also found in the works of Ashin Das Gupta, who describes the milieu of deep sea merchants in Surat and their connections with the Mughal court in the eighteenth century.⁶ Such works shifted the focus from imperial and provincial court politics to what has become a vast literature on the social and cultural histories of merchants.⁷

Economics and the politics of trade long remained the mainstay of the histories of the Indian Ocean world. However, this body of work, which started off documenting the volume, value and components of European trade in Asia, finally came to redefine the world systems’ analysis of the evolution of the global economy. For example, in 1989, Janet Abu Lughod showed how the trading links of greater Asia, spanning China, South Asia and Near East, sustained the European economy from antiquity to the Middle Ages through its trading connections with the Mediterranean.⁸ Soon after, K.N. Chaudhuri inaugurated the “Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean” as a separate field of research and analysis.⁹ Scholarship in this field has since then documented the primacy of the Asian economy in the global arena until

⁴ Christopher Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 11

⁵ Bayly, *Indian Society*, 38

⁶ Ashin Das Gupta, *India and the Indian Ocean World: Trade and Politics* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004)

⁷ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ed., *Merchants Markets and the State in Early Modern India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ed., *Money and the Market in India, 1100-1700* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ed., *Merchant Networks in the Early modern World* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire, 1556-1707* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999)

⁸ Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)

⁹ K.N. Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)

1800.¹⁰ It has demonstrated how merchant capitalism and proto-industrialism flourished in Asia independently of Europe and how European commercial expansion in Asia then thwarted that process.¹¹

Such scholarship on overseas commerce has been matched by increasing studies on how overland trade created a connected Eurasian world. Scholars of South Asia thus not only look at the merchant networks within the subcontinent but also throughout Central Asia, delineating how mercantile relations developed across imperial borders of the Safavid, Ottoman, Russian and Mughal empires.¹² This has uncovered the intertwining worlds of Sufism and mercantile practices¹³, for example, and the fact that by the seventeenth century, travel literature was already a well-known writing genre in the Indo-Persian world. Markets have not only been studied extensively but intensively as well, revealing for example, the various layers of market transactions in Bihar and its evolving relationship with the global economy.¹⁴

Similar efforts have been made to situate Bengal history within the dynamic economic world of global commerce, especially in the maritime context. Economic historians have meticulously studied the structure and value of trade conducted by the Dutch, French and

¹⁰ Andre Gunder Frank, *Re-Orient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1998)

¹¹ Frank Perlin, "Proto-Industrialization and Pre-colonial South Asia," *Past and Present* 98, 1 (1983): 30-95.

¹² Surendra Gopal, *Indians in Russia in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1988); Stephen F. Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade, 1600-1750* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Scott C. Levi, *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and its Trade, 1550-1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Amita Satyal, "The Mughal Empire, Overland Trade, and Merchants of Northern India, 1526 – 1707" (Phd. diss, University of California at Berkeley, 2008).

¹³ Satyal, "The Mughal Empire"; Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Kumkum Chatterjee, *Merchants, Politics and Society in Early Modern India, Bihar 1733-1820* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Anand Yang, *Bazaar India: Markets, Society, and the Colonial State in Gangetic Bihar* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1998)

English East India Companies, as well as by private European traders in this era.¹⁵ They have concentrated on the politics of trade based on the interaction of the Company merchants with the officials of the Mughal state. Some have strongly emphasized Bengal's general prosperity by focusing on its favorable balance of trade.¹⁶ These scholars have also illuminated the histories of Hugli and Calcutta as principal centers of commerce in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁷

Despite the richness of these studies in identifying the structures and networks of commerce, trade in these studies has been conceptualized narrowly as means of exchange of goods and services. Yet, as Georg Simmel has argued, exchange is a social process; it is "a condition or a change within the related subjects." Every object in circulation is marked by "subjective significance" in its valuation, making it part of a social reality even when the economy is a real abstraction from the comprehensive reality of valuation. So profound is this mutually conditioning process of value creation and exchange that according to Simmel, it forms "the basis of practical life."¹⁸ Historian and anthropologist Sidney Mintz, comes to a similar conclusion: Markets according to Mintz are "mechanisms of social articulation." This

¹⁵ I. Ray, "Dupleix's private trade in Chandernagore," *The Indian Historical Review* 1, 2 (1974): 279-294; Sushil Chaudhury, *Trade and Commercial Organization in Bengal 1650-1720* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1975); Peter J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes: The British in Bengal in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1630-1720* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985); Holden Furber, "Glimpses of Life and Trade on the Hughli 1720-1770" in Rosane Rocher, ed., *Private Fortunes and Company Profits in the Indian Trade in the eighteenth century* (Hampshire: Varorium, 1997); Aniruddha Ray, *The Merchant and the State: The French in India, 1666-1739, 2 vols.* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2004); Rila Mukherjee, *Merchants and Companies in Bengal: Kasimbazar and Jugdia in the Eighteenth century* (New Delhi: Pragati, 2006)

¹⁶ Chaudhury, *Trade and Commercial Organization*; Sushil Chaudhury, *From Prosperity to Decline: Eighteenth Century Bengal* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995); Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*

¹⁷ Sushil Chaudhury, "The Rise and Decline of Hugli: A Port in Medieval Bengal" in *Bengal Past and Present: A Journal of Modern India* (January- June, 1967): 33-67; Furber, "Glimpses of Life and Trade"; Aniruddha Ray, *Maddhyayuger Bharatiya Shahar* (Kolkata: Ananda, 1999)

¹⁸ David Frisby, ed., *The Philosophy of Money by Georg Simmel*, trans. Tom Bottommore and David Frisby (London and New York: Routledge, 1978), 80-83

dissertation seeks to reveal the social articulation of company trade in pre-colonial Bengal through the lens of labor relations and practices.

Sudipta Sen and Amita Satyal have studied the social and cultural content of market places and mercantile relations in pre-colonial India. Going beyond Bayly's formulation of commercialization in eighteenth century North India, Sudipta Sen has revealed the disjuncture between the pre-colonial and colonial market place—how the EIC state's expectations of the market, which involved an “expanding and regulated market economy,” broke with the commercial culture of pre-modern India, which was an extension of patrimonial relationships between landed elites and their subjects in Mughal India. Satyal, on the other hand, has emphasized the ethical foundations of mercantile relations in seventeenth and eighteenth century, thereby merging the world of the sacred and the secular, a division brought about by modern political economy. Both Sen's work and Satyal's dissertation examine the moral economy of trade, merchants and marketplaces in pre-colonial India.¹⁹ Significantly however, working people themselves do not figure in these works.

Work in fact rarely figures in the social history of pre-modern Bengal. Dwelling on agrarian life, social historians have studied Bengal as a frontier zone, focusing especially on the extension of Mughal rule and the social processes of Islamization since the period of the Bengal sultanate.²⁰ The frontier has also been studied as a setting for political dissent, as rebels in the northern hilly terrains of Koch Behar and Kamrup and in the deltaic region of Bengal challenged

¹⁹ Sudipta Sen, *Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and the Making of the Colonial Marketplace*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); Satyal, “The Mughal Empire”

²⁰ Niharranjan Ray, “Medieval Bengali Culture” in *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (August-October, 1945): 87-95; Asim Ray, *Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983); Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam in the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997)

the Mughal conquest of Bengal throughout the seventeenth century.²¹ Bengal's socio-cultural milieu has been examined in the context of an interface between the Mughal imperial court and the regional courts of powerful chieftains. Pika Ghosh and Kumkum Chatterjee, for example, both examine the regional courts of the Mallas in Bishnupur in South Western Bengal and have come to radically different conclusions about the nature of the relationship between the Mughal court and the Mallas.²² While Ghosh, in emphasizing their regional identity, is of the opinion that the Mallas ended up having an antagonistic relationship with the Mughal imperial court, Chatterjee argues that the Mallas articulated their ideological power in the idioms of both the regional Bengal Vaishnavism and the imperial courtly culture of the Persian language. Though both Ghosh and Chatterjee mention that the forest-dwelling tribes of south-western Bengal formed the principal power base of the Mallas, they are completely silent about their relations with either the regional Malla court or the Mughal Empire. However, as this dissertation will show, forest-dwellers formed a very mobile work-force in pre-colonial Bengal. They too were embedded within the complex mesh of patron-client relationships which defined the regional and imperial court culture of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries.

Social and cultural histories of European contact in Bengal have emphasized the imperial ambitions of European merchants and their limits. Historians of the early Portuguese presence in Bengal have emphasized the limits of the imperial project centered in Goa²³ and how unofficial

²¹ Gautam Bhadra, "Two Frontier Uprisings in Mughal India" in *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History*, ed., Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983) 43-59; Aniruddha Ray, *Adventurer, Landowners and Rebels, Bengal 1575-1715* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1998)

²² Kumkum Chatterjee, "The Persianization of Itihasa: Performance narratives and Mughal political culture in eighteenth-century Bengal" in *Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no.2 (2008): 513-543; Kumkum Chatterjee, "Cultural flows and cosmopolitanism in Mughal India: the Bishnupur Kingdom" in *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 46, no. 2 (2009): 147-182; Pika Ghosh, *Temple to Love: Architecture and Devotion in Seventeenth Century Bengal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005)

²³ George Winus, "The Shadow-Empire of Goa in the Bay of Bengal," *Itinerario* 7, no.2 (1983): 83-101

networks formed by the merchants and renegades of the *Estado da Índia* both extended trade and created an interface with Asian rulers.²⁴ Important research has also explored the economic and imperial ambitions of the later Portuguese merchants in Bengal.²⁵ Other studies on European personnel in the first half of the eighteenth century tend to disregard the earlier period of trade and focus almost exclusively on the top European Company officials and merchants.²⁶

Academic discussions on imperial and regional structures of power involving bureaucrats, landed elites and merchants have come to an impasse on the decline or prosperity of the South Asian economy in the eighteenth century. Bernard Cohn makes a plea to go beyond the debate on the collapse of the Mughal state and to examine:

how parts of the social systems involved were connected, and what principles guided not just personal endeavours but the organization and utilization of power and authority in the society of the time.²⁷

However, in the absence of any information about the working people of the time, any notion of the “social systems” or “power and authority in the society” of eighteenth-century Mughal India remains incomplete.

²⁴ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empire: Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1700* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990)

²⁵ Jorge Manuel Flores, “Relic or Springboard A note on the Rebirth of Portuguese Hughli, c.a.1632-1820” in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 39 no. 4 (2002): 381-395

²⁶ P. J. Marshall, *East India Fortunes: The British in Bengal in the eighteenth century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); Frank Lequin, “Het Personeel van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie in Azie de Achttiende Eeuw, meer in het bijzonder in de vestiging Bengalen,” 2 vols. (Phd. Diss. Leiden University, 1982).

²⁷ Bernard Cohn, “Political Systems in Eighteenth-century India: Benares Region” in *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and other Essays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 10

1.2 IN SEARCH OF THE “WORKER” IN PRE-COLONIAL INDIAN HISTORY

It would be presumptuous to say that there exist no studies at all on the working people of pre-colonial India. The vast literature on peasant studies on pre-colonial South Asia has acknowledged the worker. In the global debate on who constitutes a peasant, the literature on the South Asian peasant has made a unique contribution. South Asian historians have posited, perhaps, the broadest definition of a peasant: not just owner-cultivators, peasants were also sharecroppers, various types of tenants and agricultural laborers. Moreover:

The primacy of agriculture as a source of income and employment implied that non-peasant grOxford University Presss in the village basically lived off peasant surplus.

Hence, “non-peasant grOxford University Presss” were subsumed under the category of peasant. Moreover, refuting Eric Wolf’s distinction between the “farmer” and the “peasant,” people producing for the “profit oriented market” B. B. Chaudhuri has considered peasants.²⁸ The flip side of such an all inclusive definition of the Indian peasant is that there is no room left for imagining an Indian worker.

Research on pre-colonial peasant economy has conclusively proven that the Indian village community was a highly stratified one.²⁹ The peasantry was divided according to landholding and agrarian wealth. The most basic divisions were between the *khudkasht* (independent peasantry with land) and *pahikasht* (migrant peasants with inadequate lands to

²⁸For a comprehensive discussion on the figure of peasant in Indian history, please see B.B. Chaudhuri, *Peasant History*, 35-48

²⁹ This argument was pioneered by Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*; K.P. Mishra, *Banaras in Transition 1738- 1795* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1975); Dilbagh Singh, “Caste and Structure of Village Society in Eastern Rajasthan During the Eighteenth century”, *Indian Historical Review*, 2 no.2 (1976): 299-311; Hiroshi Fukazawa, *The Medieval Deccan: Peasants, Social Systems and States: Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991)

support themselves and their families). Migration for work was thus ingrained in the pre-colonial peasant economy.

Such migration was most common amongst landless agricultural laborers. There was a large number of “dependents” of the well-off independent peasantry, including considerable numbers of waged laborers, variously known as *krishans*, *majurs* and *jans*.³⁰ These landless agricultural laborers were bound to the rich peasantry through various levels of coercion and customary rights.³¹ Wage relations were so well developed that in certain instances, wage dues were paid to the agricultural laborers by the rich peasants on an individual basis – wage transactions required that neither the rich peasants nor the hired laborers acted on any communal basis.³² Certainly, a migratory, destitute agricultural worker must have occasionally been forced to leave the peasant economy? To answer this question, it is necessary to explore the sectors of non- agrarian production.

Peasant villages always included other than cultivators whose primary work was to cater to the needs of the village. Though the services needed in pre-colonial villages were limited in number, they gave rise to various kinds of “village servants.” In fact, research on Western India shows that by the pre-colonial period, specialized “clusters” of villages had emerged which replaced the single village as the unit of economic organization.³³ Within these clusters were purely artisanal

³⁰ B. B. Chaudhuri, *Peasant History*, 125-126

³¹ Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Ravinder Kumar, *Western India in the Nineteenth century: A Study in the Social History of Maharashtra* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968); Jan Breman, *Patronage and Exploitation: Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1979); K. Saradamani, *Emergence of a Slave Caste: Pulayas of Kerala* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1980)

³² Sumit Guha, *The Agrarian Economy of Bombay Deccan, 1818 – 1941* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 10-11

³³ Ravinder Kumar, *Western India in the Nineteenth century*, 33- 34

villages which had no links to cultivation. Since artisans catered to the needs of a primarily peasant economy, their subject position has been academically relegated to that of peasant. However, this designation totally ignores any acknowledgement of the artisan as worker.

Studying the artisan under the umbrella category of peasant studies has created more unresolved dilemmas. Despite the growing literature on commercialization, markets and mercantile practices, the social interface between the peasant village and the market economy remains hidden. How did village societies marked by very high levels of movement, including sizeable mobile destitute populations, interact with market forces? From the vast literature on trade carried out by the European East India companies in South Asia, we know that village artisans – especially weavers — were producing for a global market. In certain places, such as in South India, entire villages had been producing textiles for overseas trade.³⁴ Moreover, rising levels of urbanization drew heavily from the impoverished artisans or laborers of the villages.³⁵

The inability to study the worker in the pre-colonial setting is both a problem of Indian peasant studies as well as of Indian labor history. Following the dominant trend of classical labor history, the literature on Indian labor history focuses most especially on the industrial worker. Industrialization from the second half of the nineteenth century marks the chronological starting point for the majority of works on Indian labor, and only recently is this paradigm being challenged. With the increasing attention given to workers in the “informal sector,” labor historians have started looking for workers and experiences of work outside the factory space

³⁴ Prasannan Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy: Weavers, Merchants and Kings in South India, 1720-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

³⁵ Shireen Moosvi, “The World of Labour in Mughal India (c1500-1750)” in *International Review of Social History*, V 56, no. 19 (2011): 245-261; Eugenia Vanina, *Urban Crafts and Craftsmen in Medieval India: thirteenth- eighteenth centuries* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2004), 61-64

and before the advent of industrial workplaces funded by colonial capital. The topic of Asian sailors in particular throughout the eighteenth century has received considerable attention.³⁶

The magnitude of Asian economies before European colonialism is of central interest in the literature on the Great Divergence. One example of the dynamism and competency of Asian economies, especially in comparison with North and North Western Europe before 1800, were the living standards among Chinese and South Asian working people. Prasannan Parthasarathi persuasively argues that wages and living standards of South Indian weavers, for example, were far better than among artisans in England until the late eighteenth century.³⁷ Interestingly, even when the Asian labor market was comparatively large relative to that of the nineteenth century, throughout the eighteenth century, workers' wages remained high, and the European powers operating in Asia found it impossible to drive down wages. Studies such as this have begun to reveal the little known world of the Asian labor market.

These important works have made it possible for Indian labor historians to make new inroads into the pre-colonial experience. However, focusing on the pre-colonial labor market brings its own problems. Observing Manhattan in 1988 from the summit of the former World Trade Center, Michel de Certeau metaphorically noted:

The 1370 foot high tower that serves as a prow for Manhattan continues to construct the fiction that creates readers, makes the

³⁶ Michael Fisher, "Working across the Seas: Indian Maritime Labourers in India, Britain, and in Between, 1600-1857," *International Review of Social History*, 51, special issue (2006): 21-45; Michael Fisher, "Indian Ghat Sarangs as Maritime Labour Recruiting Intermediaries during the Age of Sail," in *Journal for Maritime Research*, 16, no. 22 (2014): 153-166; Matthias van Rossum, *Werkers van de Wereld: Globalisering, arbeid en interculturele ontmoetingen tussen Aziatische en Europese zeelieden in dienst van de VOC, 1600-1800* (Verloren: Hilversum, 2014); Aaron Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780-1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2015)

³⁷ Prasannan Parthasarathi, "Rethinking Wages and Competitiveness in the Eighteenth century: Britain and India," *Past and Present* 158, no. 1 (1998): 79-109; Robert Allen, Tony Bengtsson and Martin Dribe, *Living Standards in the Past: New Perspectives on Well Being in Asia and Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Pim de Zwart, "Population, Labour and Living Standards in early Modern Ceylon" in *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 49, no. 3 (2012): 365- 398;

complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text.³⁸

The all-encompassing image of a labor market creates a similar problem: Several recent works show that South Asia had a dynamic wage-labor market, but none explains the meaning of wages or wage work in the pre-colonial context. This “bird’s eye view” of the labor market, as evidenced by these primarily economic histories of work, run the risk of becoming “imaginary totalizations” without explaining the complex social relations that produce wage relations, thereby shaping workers’ understandings of work and wages.

Formulated at the interstices of the peasant economy and overseas commerce, this work provides a profile of the late pre-colonial worker. My study on eighteenth-century Bengal views workers directly employed by the EIC and VOC in their various, completely non-agrarian, settlements in Bengal to show how the work force for overseas commerce sprang from the peasant economy. By examining their daily interactions with company officials as well as European and other Asian workers, however, this study further, seeks to unravel the subject position of these workers within the peasant/worker continuum. In sum, this dissertation unpacks the social articulation of company trade in the context of late pre-colonial seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Bengal.

Worker’s consciousness remains the thorniest subject in Indian labor history. Dismissing the long history of the Indian trade union movement as hierarchical and dominated by the Indian bourgeoisie, Dipesh Chakrabarty has emphasized the “primordial consciousness” of the workers as it is steeped in pre-capitalist hierarchies.³⁹ This seeming impossibility of Indian workers to

³⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988), 92

³⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History, Bengal 1890-1940* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989)

achieve a class consciousness has dominated the historiography on the Indian workers' movement for quite some time. In recent years, however, labor historians have challenged this paradigm. Scholars working on late nineteenth- and twentieth-century history have shown how the Indian countryside contributed to the systemic exploitation of the workers: by making workers dependent on their extended families in low-producing agrarian hinterlands, companies operating in the British Indian territories managed to keep the costs of social reproduction of labor at the cheapest possible levels. Since, the peasant economy was structurally important for colonial capital, the agrarian hinterland was ingrained into the consciousness of the worker as a part and parcel of his/her working class consciousness. Most importantly, attachment with the agrarian hinterland did not harken back to any "primordial" past.⁴⁰ In examining the cultural world of the workers, scholars have shown that community consciousness was contingent upon the everyday practices of the workers and that religious consciousness (as opposed to class consciousness) was only one form of community consciousness amongst workers and it was historically specific, corresponding to the nature of conflict between capital and labor.⁴¹

While the concept of the "primordial consciousness" of work has been challenged in the terrain of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century labor politics, the pre-colonial experience of work remains altogether outside the pale of these discussions. The sole exception is Nandita Sahai's work on eighteenth-century artisan protests in Eastern Marwar. Sahai argues that artisans' notions of rights as expressed in the concept of *wajabi* was the source of protests – both

⁴⁰ Subho Basu, *Does Class Matter?: Colonial Capital and Workers' Resistance in Bengal, 1890-1937* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004); Gopal Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, 1870-1945* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012)

⁴¹ Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and its Forgotten Histories*, (London: Anthem, 2005)

in their legal and extra-legal dimensions.⁴² Despite inhabiting a hierarchical world, artisans were pro-active in asserting their agency in determining their rights to subsistence. Significantly, such sensibility was rooted in a pre-colonial world of rights and duties. In discussing the pre-colonial North Indian land holder's conception of maintaining a market place, Sudipta Sen has argued that markets belonged to "a larger moral economy of prestation" whereby land holders and economic actors of the market place were related in webs of customary rights and obligations.⁴³ Similarly, this study posits that not only did workers employ preemptive moves in determining their wages, but they constantly reminded their employers of their rights to "customary payments" – payments over and above the contracted wage, which practically and symbolically cemented the ties between the employer as patron and the worker as servant and beneficiary.

In documenting the global working class, historians and sociologists/anthropologists are increasingly coming to the consensus that the supposedly free wage worker who depends on a job on a factory shop floor with no ties to the agrarian economy is a myth, or at best a miniscule minority of the global work force.⁴⁴ For example, Giovanni Arrighi in his discussion on the Rhodesian economy demonstrates how capitalist agriculture not only put the African peasantry in a precarious position, but ultimately pushed them into wage labor in the mining reserves. However, low wages and lack of security in the industrial sector ensured that those African workers maintained ties with their rural kinsfolk for social and economic support.⁴⁵ Such "partial proletarianization" was not just an African phenomenon, but existed as well in South Asia and

⁴² Nandita Prasad Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest: The State, Society and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006)

⁴³ Sen, *Empire of Free Trade*, 12

⁴⁴ Marcel van der Linden, "Conceptualizing the World Working Class," in *Workers in the Informal Sector: Studies in Labour History, 1800-2000*, eds., Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Jan Lucassen (New Delhi: Macmillan, 2005), 21-44

⁴⁵ Giovanni Arrighi, "Labor Supplies in Historical Perspective: A Study of the Proletarianization of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia" in Giovanni Arrighi and John S. Saul, *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1973)

Latin America, and even to a certain extent in Europe.⁴⁶ The indigenous workers in this study fall into the same category, despite differences in the eighteenth-century social forces that gave rise to such a proletariat. Shaped by the dispossessions of the Mughal economy and market forces of global commerce, these actors were predecessors of the “casual workers” much discussed in the context of colonial and postcolonial economies.

1.3 MOBILITY AND THE PRE-COLONIAL WORKER

Spatial mobility amongst all grOxford University Presss of workers forms a very important theme of this study. Workers, whether indigenous/Asian/European, waged or unfree, remained extremely mobile throughout this period. Their mobility oftentimes was not condoned by either the EIC or the VOC. Even though the legality of such mobility was hardly well-defined, the companies employed various means to control the movements of their workers. Their failure to ordain the movements of these workers and the workers’ assertion of their rights to mobility reveal the nature of the social formation of late pre-colonial Bengal. Pre-colonial Bengal was marked by various overlapping and sometimes contesting jurisdictions of *zamindars*, *fauzdars*, *nawabs*, and Mughal emperor, followed by the various European companies. Each of these players for their own interests wanted the workers to settle down in designated areas. Sometimes they worked in concert, and at other times they competed with each other to restrict the mobility of the workers. However, all of these disparate players who made up the mosaic of ruling class power in early eighteenth century Bengal faced the same ubiquitous “problem”: the

⁴⁶ Shahid Amin and Marcel van der Linden, eds., *“Peripheral” Labour? Studies in the History of Partial Proletarianization* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

workers' practice of uncontrolled mobility. These diverse Oxford University Presses of workers' mobility exposed the caveats of both indigenous and European political and mercantile elites' jurisdictions in Bengal, which were contiguous, sometimes complementary, but most often, conflicting.

Chapters two and three of this study introduce the social vectors necessary to understand pre-colonial Bengali labor history. The first chapter provides the political, economic and social background of overseas company trade and of Bengal in the late Mughal period. In this chapter, I emphasize how trade and urbanization were inflected with social factors such as settlement patterns and policies. Discussing urban development in the twentieth century, Michel de Certeau has argued that from the vantage point of developers, a "concept city" is created. The aim of this "concept city" is to "repress all the physical, mental and political pollutions that would compromise it."⁴⁷ In the context of late pre-colonial Bengal, the neat details of company-planned urban development of primary settlements, the transport routes between them, and finally, the value and volume of trade are an orderly abstraction of what were in actuality much more haphazard social and spatial practices. The second chapter discusses this unruly practice, i.e., worker mobility. Seventeenth-century Bengali society was able to mobilize huge numbers of itinerant workers precisely because of its internal contradictions. This chapter discusses the causes of this mobility and also the limits thereof. Finally, it shows how and when these mobile workers became wage workers. In tracing the figure of the mobile wage worker, I explain the meaning of wages in the broader context of the patron-client relationship in pre-colonial Bengal.

Chapters four to seven focus on the structure of the regional labor market, specifically on wages, periods of employment, and methods of recruitment, thus revealing that worker mobility

⁴⁷ de Certeau, "The Practice of Everyday Life", 94-95

was the single most important factor in determining the structure of the labor market. In certain cases, given the nature of work, mobility became a major factor in determining the recruitment process or wage rates. Boatmen and cartmen, for example, illustrate that mobility was intrinsic to their work process. Somewhat similar was the case of European sailors and soldiers, who were employed in the armies of the VOC and the EIC in Bengal. Since the primary task of the army was to escort the fleets carrying commodities up and down the river Ganga, mobility also underscored the army's work. Moreover, as European contract workers, these workers already had the experience of long distance, intercontinental movement. The other two groups of workers – household workers and silk reelers— did not seek mobility, yet movement was inherent to the very creation of this labor force. While household workers came to Bengal as enslaved people caught and put into bondage in various places around the rim of the Indian Ocean, the silk reelers were impoverished peasant-artisans looking for any means to supplement their meager incomes. Voluntary or forced mobility thus lay at the root of the social reproduction of all these workers.

Despite its haphazard nature, workers' mobility was imbued with meaning. This meaning was not autonomous of the structures and functions of the Mughal state or the corporate entities such as the European companies. After all, mobility was a necessary practice known to these workers as a means to their livelihood – their movements were bound up with the demands of the ruling or mercantile elites. Dirk Kolff's ethnohistorical study of the peasant soldier between 1450 and 1850 discusses the existence of a vast military labor market in South Asia.⁴⁸ This dynamic

⁴⁸ Dirk Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The ethnohistory of the military labour market in Hindustan, 1450- 1850* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990)

view of labor in South Asia has subsequently been elaborated upon in studies on South Asia.⁴⁹ In fact, some studies show how this dynamic lifestyle of the laboring poor was criminalized in the first hundred years of colonial rule.⁵⁰ However, none of these studies addresses what this mobility meant to workers vis-à-vis mercantile capital, pre-colonial or colonial states.

Everyday practices of people have signifying potency: through their actions, people create new symbolic meanings in a given time and place. In chapters two through five, I trace the labor process in each of the sectors – transport, military, silk reeling and household. In doing so, I trace the rhythms of work, workers’ demands, and mobility choices. In certain instances, as in the case of boatmen and European sailors and soldiers, I show the social and cultural world over and above the realm of work. Seen through the lens of workers’ everyday practices, especially mobility, a different picture of late medieval Bengal emerges, not only of the workers’ aspirations, but also of the limits of commodification and the difficulties of mercantile capital to control labor.

Workers running away from the work place was one of the most common problems that both EIC and the VOC faced in this period. Discussions on the labor practice of desertion inevitably leads to the fundamental question: to what extent was desertion from work a form of resistance? Historiography on peasant revolts in medieval India has addressed the practice of desertion in some detail. Based on evidence from Eastern Rajasthan, Gujarat, Mathura, and Agra, historians have shown that not only individual peasants but also entire villages deserted to avoid

⁴⁹ Claude Markovits, Jaques Poucheпадass and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750-1950* (London: Anthem, 2006)

⁵⁰ Radhika Singha, “Settle, mobilise and verify: identification practices in colonial India,” in *Studies in History*, 16, no. 2 (2000):151-198

payment of land taxes.⁵¹ However, the consensus remains that the overwhelming majority of peasant revolts were headed by wealthy peasants since articulation of class interests was often overshadowed by caste or clan affiliations. More importantly, flight or desertion – a practice common amongst both small peasants and artisans – has been characterized as a “passive weapon.”⁵² Yet this “passive weapon,” as Habib reports, contributed to the crisis of the Mughal state.⁵³ The model of the “passive poor” has been used by several scholars to describe fatalism and inaction as the hallmark of the culture of poverty –workers’ passivity and not the exploitation of their oppressors are blamed in this framework as the root cause of poverty.⁵⁴ In the South Asian context, examples conflict with this narrative. Prasannan Parthasarathi’s study of weavers’ protests, especially the Cuddalore weavers’ protest of 1778, has shown that flight was an important component of organized protests by artisans.⁵⁵

In his study on Southeast Asia, Michael Adas has argued that desertion was the most important form of conscious resistance by peasants in a large swath of territory from Burma to Indonesia under the control of various pre-colonial political entities. As in South Asia, there is scant mention of large-scale rebellions in Southeast Asia prior to European colonization. “Protests of avoidance” is the term that Adas uses to characterize such pre-colonial peasant protests, of which desertion formed an integral part.⁵⁶ In contrast, certain scholars while

⁵¹ Irfan Habib, “Forms of Class Struggle in Mughal India,” in *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception*, (New Delhi: Anthem Press, 2002), 233-258, Dilbagh Singh, “Contesting Hegemony: State and Peasant in Late Medieval Rajasthan,” in *Rethinking A Millennium: Perspectives on Indian History from the Eight to the Eighteenth century*, ed., Rajat Datta, (New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2008), 300-315.

⁵² Irfan Habib, “Forms of Class Struggle in Mughal India,” 255

⁵³ Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 371-374

⁵⁴ Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of poverty- San Juan and New York*, New York: Random House, 1966; Orlando Patterson, “A Poverty of the Mind,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2006

⁵⁵ Prasannan Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a colonial Economy: Weavers, Merchants and Kings in South India, 1720-1800*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 103-109

⁵⁶ Michael Adas, “From Avoidance to Confrontation: Peasant Protest in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia,” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23, no.2, (1981): 217-247.

accepting the premise that desertion was a primal response of the poor to their dire situations, have valorized such actions as an important form of resistance against the state. James Scott, the foremost proponent of this view, has argued that everyday “resistance” such as desertion is a more effective weapon of challenging authority than large-scale rebellions or revolution.⁵⁷ However, such an understanding of “resistance” is as problematic as the paradigm of “passive resistance” because it obscures the structure of social power relations and fails to decode the intent and meanings of working class actions.

Indeed, the practice of desertion, as this dissertation shows, offers a repertoire of working class understanding(s) of both mercantile capital and the state. It could be both an individual and collective action. The motives of running away were diverse: unsatisfactory working conditions, violence in the work place, expectations of new opportunities for employment or escape from penal transportation. Sometimes, however, the motives remain inscrutable. In some cases, the companies overcame their initial bewilderment at sudden acts of desertion by diagnosing and then reporting their causes to higher authorities in Asia and Europe. In other cases, the causes were made known beforehand by “quarrelsome” workers. This was extremely common amongst the transport workers. There were also instances, as in the case of the silk reelers during the Anglo-Dutch conflict of 1759-60, when running away from work was an expression of the acute helplessness of the workers, who were caught in an inter-imperialist rivalry between two of the most powerful corporations in the world. Running away in this case was another instance of forced mobility from above.

⁵⁷ James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 30-33,; About desertion Scott writes, “Desertion may, as we have noted, achieve something where mutiny may fail...the massive withdrawal of compliance is in a sense more radical in its implications for the army as an institution than the replacement of officers.” 32

In light of this wide array of motives, one wonders how successful these acts were in eroding company authority? Even leaving aside instances where workers did not consciously choose to run away, effects of desertion on company-worker relations were multiple. The varied responses of the companies to workers' running away can be considered an index of the effects of desertion to the interests of the companies. The companies' responses were of course contingent upon the extent of power they wielded on any specific group of workers. Amelioration of working conditions was almost always chosen over punitive measures while dealing with desertion amongst boatmen, over whom the companies wielded the least power. In contrast, for escaping silk reeler, a group of workers far more dependent on company work despite its indigenous origins, flogging was used liberally to get desertion out of their minds. Then again, workers such as European sailors and soldiers and household slaves and servants, over whom companies had *de jure* complete control and who were often punished with death for running away, were sometimes shown amnesty and taken back to work.

Companies' responses to desertion as a form of disobedience thus fall on a continuum. Understanding of disobedience in (western) political thought as Raffaele Laudani has argued, emerged as a "second-level obedience": it was a mode of legitimate dissent against instituted law. Even when disobedience had the potency of coalescing into outright rebellion, it was not necessarily anti-institutional.⁵⁸ In a similar way, acts of desertion discussed in this dissertation did not lead to complete sabotage of company trade. Amnesty shown to deserters from time to time and higher wages paid to workers to quell desertion indicate that dictated by circumstances, companies at times tried to accommodate this working class activity, and even though from time

⁵⁸ Raffaele Laudani, *Disobedience in Western Political Thought : A genealogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 45

to time running away from work was treated as a seditious activity punishable by death, generally, companies grudgingly accepted the legitimacy of such a widespread practice.

The reluctant acceptance of desertion as a widespread practice by company officials signaled that desertion had left its mark on the institutions of late pre-colonial Bengal. Asef Bayat in his study on street politics in Egypt has argued that the individual or collective action of survival by the poor inevitably creates a frictional interface with the state. Such actions thus create what he calls “quiet encroachment” on the power of the state:

The notion of “quiet encroachment” describes the silent, protracted but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied, powerful or the public in order to survive and improve their lives.⁵⁹

Even when desertion was not anti-institutional, running away signified a “quiet encroachment” on the nature of institutions in pre-colonial Bengal – especially, the labor market and sovereignty of companies and the Mughal state. Workers’ strategy of constantly running away kept their wages high, frequently forcing companies to pay their “customary wages.” Bayat has argued that “quiet encroachment” often translated into poor people’s efforts to increase their share of public goods. Similarly, running away or the threat thereof increased the workers’ share of the profits of trade through better wages. Since the seventeenth century, East India Companies in Asian lands conceived of themselves as sovereign states.⁶⁰ In Bengal, a political landscape marked by multiple and fragmented sovereignties,⁶¹ the East India companies struggled to establish their respective exclusive sovereignties. Hardt and Negri have attributed desertion to

⁵⁹Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2010), 43-65, Bayat’s position differs from Scott’s considerably. He refuses to use Scott’s concept of “resistance” in understanding the everyday practices of Egypt’s urban poor. According to Bayat, the sole motive of urban poor is to improve their living conditions. In so doing they are in constant “vacillation between autonomy and integration” vis-à-vis the state. Bayat, *Life as Politics*, 60

⁶⁰ Philip Stern, *The Company State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

⁶¹ Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Introduction” in Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Mughal State 1526-1750* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998),

the dialectic of colonial sovereignty. Indeed, desertion of certain grOxford University Presss of workers, such as European sailors and soldiers and household slaves– over whom the companies *de jure* had complete legal control – was perceived by the companies as an act of transgression against their sovereignty.

From the vantage point of the workers, however, desertion was an act of autonomous mobility – independent of company control. Desertion inherently meant “evacuation of the places of power.”⁶² Such evacuations often meant assertion of working class autonomy, an important factor in shaping the early modern Atlantic.⁶³ Similarly, desertion was an assertion of autonomy by the workers in Bengal which led to larger structural consequences. By conceptualizing desertion as autonomous mobility, this dissertation is argues for the primacy of workers’ mobility in shaping various aspects of early eighteenth-century Bengal social life, such as the labor market, liminality of European-ness, class relations and sovereignty.⁶⁴

Finally, this study’s discussion of desertion and the autonomous mobility of workers challenges the notion of one essential “Indian” working class consciousness. This assertion of autonomous mobility defying the injunctions of both the VOC and the EIC was prevalent amongst all grOxford University Presss of workers. Not only did indigenous workers use this strategy effectively, but also enslaved people with origins all over the Indian Ocean littoral as well as European workers recruited in various labor markets in Europe and also in Asia. Hence, desertion was not symptomatic of a “passive” Indian peasantry, but a universal practice amongst a very heterogeneous grOxford University Press of working people. This dissertation argues that

⁶² Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 212

⁶³ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves and Commoners and the History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000)

⁶⁴ Martina, Martignoni and Dimitri Papadopoulos, “Genealogies of Autonomous Mobility” in *Routledge Handbook of Global Citizenship Studies*, eds., Engin F. Isin, Peter Nyers (New York: Routledge, 2014),38-48

running away was a rational choice made by these workers, contingent upon the social exigencies of control and exploitation in Bengal, to encroach upon the powers of the companies and the Mughal state to improve their working conditions.

2.0 THE SETTING

For the East India Companies, the commercial geography of Bengal covered the political, social and economic terrain of the Bengal and Bihar *subahs* (provinces) of the Mughal state. The last independent Afghan ruler of Bengal and Bihar was defeated by Emperor Akbar in 1576, inaugurating the Mughal conquest of the region, which would extend well into the seventeenth century. In 1733, the two provinces were merged into one, Bengal, when the Mughal emperor granted the governorship of Bihar to Nawab Shujauddin Mohammed Khan of Bengal. Power relations in this political space were created through a complex bureaucracy sustaining a system of revenue collection. Provincial rule was managed by the *nazim* (keeper of law and order), with the help of the *diwan* (revenue collector) and *faujdars* (military chiefs, posted at various cities), who were also the heads of *sarkars* (sub-divisions of the subah). From 1717 onwards, under Murshid Quli Khan, the seat of the *nazim* and *diwan* were merged, which marked the waning of Mughal imperial power in the region, or the rise of the Bengal Nawabi.

Bengal in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had a thriving economy and great wealth. Between 1595 and 1647, the *jama* (estimated revenue collection) of the Mughal Empire increased by 50 percent. During the same time, the *jama* of Bengal doubled.⁶⁵ Revenue increased by a further 20% in the early eighteenth century with the introduction of new revenue

⁶⁵ Aniruddha Ray, *Adventurers, landowners and Rebels: Bengal c. 1575-c.1715*, 20-21

assessment.⁶⁶ Agrarian expansion⁶⁷ was matched by growing urbanization. Cities of varying sizes developed through the fifteenth century, such as walled cities like Gaur, medium-sized market towns like Bakla, port cities like Saptagram, and European-dominated Hugli. Ain-i-Akbari, the sixteenth-century chronicle of Akbar's India by Abul Fazl, mentions that the assessed annual revenue of the Bakla *sarkar*,⁶⁸ wherein the market town of Bakla developed in the last half of the sixteenth century, was fixed at Rs. 3 lakh 77 thousand. That amount was able to sustain an infantry of a staggering 65,000 soldiers.⁶⁹

Wealth in the region was created throughout town and country through the toils of the small and landless peasants, share croppers, and especially artisans and menial laborers who worked for wages. In towns, the artisans and menial laborers faced a complex set of authorities. Often they were employed in the *karkhanas* (manufactories) of the members of the imperial family or Mughal bureaucracy. Artisans also independently sold their wares at marketplaces in the cities, where they paid duties on their products to the superintendents of markets. In cities, certain neighborhoods were designated for artisans. Other artisans and menial workers also lived in the rural hinterlands surrounding cities. In the countryside, *zamindars* were the face of direct authority for the producers. The *zamindar* was an important intermediary of the Mughal state and was responsible for revenue collection. These men, often having rights to land that predated Mughal conquest, exercised patriarchal control over the peasants. Apart from the imperial

⁶⁶ Appendix no.6 to John Shore's 'Minute on the Rights of Zamindars', West Bengal Government Archives (Calcutta), Board of Revenue, *Proceedings*, April 2, 1788, vol. 127, 539-540. Quoted in Philip B. Calkins, 'The Formation of a Regionally Oriented Ruling GrOxford University Press in Bengal, 1700-1740' in *Journal of Asian Studies*, 29, no.4 (1970): 799-806.

⁶⁷ See Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, chapter 8

⁶⁸ each province was subdivided into sarkars

⁶⁹ Aniruddha Ray, *Adventurers, Landowners and Rebels*, 28

revenue demands, the workers and peasants had to meet the taxes and duties imposed by the *zamindars*.

Revenue was paid in cash, sometimes in kind. The revenue demands in cash led to a high level of economic commercialization. Merchants of various means dotted the social geography. On one end of the spectrum were merchants of importance: in addition to lending out money to high-ranking officials or traders (such as the companies), residing in cities, making money from revenue farming and having access to the mints, they also created a system of bills of exchange which enabled transfer of revenue from the provinces to the center. Furthermore, from the beginning of the eighteenth century, a few merchants even acquired positions of political power. At the other end of the spectrum were the producers-turned-merchants (often wealthy peasants or artisans providing specialized services) selling their products in the village market. Thus, the revenue collection system as introduced by the Mughal state, and later modified under the semi-autonomous nawabs, cemented all of these social players into a web of relationships of obligation. The companies had to navigate this complex social structure in order to pursue their profits.

This chapter will focus on the socio-economic conditions of Bengal in the seventeenth to early eighteenth century along three axes: trade, urbanization, and systems of transport. The chapter specifically emphasizes the place of the EIC and the VOC within the world of trade and urbanization in late-seventeenth-century and early-eighteenth-century Bengal. The coherent geography of company trade can only be understood by exploring the transportation network that connected their settlements. Though the companies borrowed heavily from regional customary practices in establishing their system of transport, they constituted a unique group of traders in late pre-colonial Bengal who commanded heavily militarized trading fleets.

2.1 TRADE AND TRADERS IN BENGAL

Jacquens Vincens was a former councilor at Pondicherry and the supercargo of the superintendent of French affairs in Chandernagore, Francois Dupleix's private trade in Bengal. In 1733, Vincens noted that Bengal was the "the center and source of trade" of the Mughal empire. He noted that every year up to 100 ships ranging between 100 and 500 tons left the Ganges for Europe or other parts of Asia.⁷⁰ For the Europeans, the French were never a prominent group of traders in Bengal. Apart from Dupleix's private trade, the French presence in Bengal's trading world was negligible. That was certainly not the case for the VOC and the EIC, however. The total value of VOC's trade from Bengal rose from 150,534 florins in 1648-49 to 4,615,986 florins in 1720-1721. EIC trade in Bengal also grew considerably from the last decade of the seventeenth century. From the early eighteenth century, the EIC's total trade value from Bengal to Europe was marginally higher than VOC's. In 1684, it was valued at 157,093 pounds, and constituted 19.6 percent of the EIC's trade in Asia. In 1750 this rose to 511, 177 pounds, representing more than half (50.4 percent) of the EIC's total trade from Asia.⁷¹

Unlike the EIC and French East India Company, the VOC as a corporation adopted the unique practice of extensive participation in the intra-Asian trade. In the seventeenth century, Bengal played a major role in VOC's trade with Japan. In 1647, the VOC exported 30,165 Dutch *ponds* or 32,880 pounds of raw silk to Japan, which subsequently increased to 161,595 Dutch *ponds* or 176,138 pounds in 1656. By 1662, the amount rose to 255,858 Dutch *ponds* or 278,885

⁷⁰ Indrani Ray, "India in the Asian Trade in the 1730s: A discussion by a French Trader" *The French East India Company and the Trade of the Indian Ocean: A collection of Essays by Indrani Ray*, ed., in Lakshmi Subramanian (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1999), 188

⁷¹ Chaudhuri, *The Trading World Of Asia*, 508-510

pounds, leading the Japanese government to adopt a 'limited trade' policy in 1685, thus leading to decline in the Japanese trade.⁷² While in Japan the VOC was harassed as a foreigner, in the Indonesian Archipelago, the situation was quite the opposite. Through their political authority in the region, not only had the VOC managed to secure monopsonistic rights over spices, but also over non-precious metals. They managed to oust almost all other competitors –European or Asian --from the Indonesian market. By the early eighteenth century, the exports from Bengal to the Indonesian archipelago grew by 10,557 florins each year. Though Bengal textiles could not make a dent in the Indonesian market, Bengal opium could. According to an estimate from the year 1688, the annual output of opium was 4,350 chests of two maunds⁷³ each. Of this, 10-13 percent was consumed locally, 34.6 to 46 percent was exported to Agra and Allahabad, and the rest (47 to 53.4 percent) of the opium was meant for overseas trade by the European companies.⁷⁴ In 1678, 70,000 *ponds* of opium was consumed in Java and Madura alone. By 1707, the amount had gone up to 108,266 *ponds*. Almost the entire amount came from Bengal. The VOC also made huge profits on the spices that they procured in the Indonesian archipelago and sold in the Bengal market. For example, the profit made on cloves sold in Bengal soared to 1,306 percent of their cost price.

The contribution made by Bengal to the VOC's trade with Europe consisted of three commodities: textiles, raw silk, and saltpeter. During the late seventeenth century, these commodities from Bengal came to dominate VOC's European trade in terms of bulk and value. By 1720, more than half of the textiles imported into Holland originated in Bengal, and Bengal raw silk accounted for 83 percent of the total raw silk sold in Amsterdam. Traditional woolen

⁷² Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, p58-59

⁷³ 1 maund = 82.3 pounds

⁷⁴ Om Prakash, "Opium monopoly in India and Indonesia in the eighteenth century," in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 24, no. 1 (1987): 63-80

clothes and Flemish and German linen was replaced by the silk and cheap cotton fabric procured in India. At the turn of the century, the VOC imported 240,000-260,000 *ponds* of raw silk. However, by 1739, the figure was reduced to 88,000 *ponnds*, or one third of the amount exported in the early years of eighteenth century because by this time, the EIC had, through its re-export trade, taken over much of the European market for Eastern textiles. By 1739, the EIC was exporting 1.2 million pounds of raw silk from Bengal. Despite these numbers, raw silk never formed an important commodity for the EIC's trade from Bengal. Only in one year, 1707, did raw silk account for almost twenty percent of the total value of EIC's exports from Bengal, but between 1721 and 1759, it never rose over 0.74 percent, despite rising slightly to 1.18 percent in 1760.⁷⁵ The EIC was also larger exporter than the VOC of Bengal textiles overall to Europe. Textile exports from Bengal by the EIC rose steadily from 1700 to 1750. In 1709, they exported 116,005 units of textiles valued at 76,784 pounds, rising to 403,195 units of textiles valued at 348,035 pounds by 1752.⁷⁶

Both the VOC and the EIC also exported huge amounts of saltpeter from Bengal. However, the VOC's trade in saltpeter dominated that of the EIC until the 1750s. Since saltpeter was needed for gunpowder manufacturing, it was a very important commodity for the European market. Saltpeter was also used as ballast for most East India Company ships. Export of saltpeter by the VOC increased from 166,000 pounds in 1653-1654 to over 3.8 million pounds by 1718. The EIC on the other hand, exported around 2 million pounds of saltpeter in 1707, which formed 12 percent of its total exports from Bengal. However, in 1760, saltpeter formed only 2.2 percent of the total value of EIC's trade from Bengal, even though they were exporting the same amount

⁷⁵ Chaudhuri, *The Trading World*, 533-534.

⁷⁶ Chaudhuri, *The Trading World*, 543-545.

as in 1707. By then, other commodities such as textiles had become far more important in the EIC's volume and value of trade.⁷⁷

Europeans were not the only long-distance traders in the region. The overland trade in cotton piece goods and silk was significant, although no European companies participated in overland trade. It appears that Indian textiles were the most important commodities in the markets of Turan well into the nineteenth century, even though information on the volume and value of trade is extremely sketchy. K.N. Chaudhuri has argued that most of the textiles for the Iranian and Turanian market came from Gujarat,⁷⁸ but there is evidence of trade between Bengal and Turan. When Arthur Jenkinson, a factor of the Muscovy Company, visited Bukhara in 1558-59, he mentioned that from as far away as the Ganges River and Bengal, the annual trade fair there attracted Indians who came and stayed for two or three years to conduct their trade.⁷⁹ One can also assume that of the cotton piece goods, at least the muslins came from Bengal. The EIC officials reported in 1620 that Armenian and Central Asian merchants invested 100,000 rupees in the finest and the most expensive variety of calico from Patna called *Qaim Khanis*, which they sent to Iran via Lahore.⁸⁰ From the seventeenth century, Turan saw a rise in trade of Marwari merchants. The VOC also noted that raw silk was a very important commodity from Bengal to Agra, from which part of the consignment eventually found its way to Persia and Ottoman lands via Qandahar.⁸¹ This period was also when the trade of the Marwari merchants in Bengal and Bihar flourished. Since the Marwari merchants for trade purposes formed a tight-knit community

⁷⁷ Chaudhuri, *The Trading World*, 531-532

⁷⁸ Chaudhuri, *The Trading World*, 247

⁷⁹ "The Bukharan Merchant Fair" in Lance Jennot, ed., *Anthony Jenkinson's Explorations on the Land Route to China 1558- 1560* (2001) Online at: <http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/jenkinson/bukhara.html>. Quoted in Scott Levi, *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and its Trade, 1550-1900* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 94

⁸⁰ Chatterjee, *Merchants, Politics and Society*, 27

⁸¹ Prakash, *Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 26

throughout the subcontinent, it is quite possible that Marwari merchants drew Bengal into the trade networks of Turan.⁸²

There is much dispute surrounding the changing nature of involvement of Indian/Asian merchants in overseas/overland trade in the early eighteenth century. Peter Marshall⁸³ and Kumkum Chatterjee⁸⁴ have argued that there was a marked decline in the participation of indigenous or Asian merchants in long distance trade; however, Sushil Chaudhury, using as evidence the burgeoning trade of Khwaja Wajeed, the Armenian merchant, with Surat and the Persian Gulf in the 1730s and 1740s, has argued that the participation of Asian merchants in overseas trade was very significant until the middle of the eighteenth century.⁸⁵ However, Om Prakash, and to a certain extent Kumkum Chatterjee as well, has argued that the structure of Asian trade underwent a transformation in the first decades of the eighteenth century. Both Chatterjee and Prakash suggest that the involvement of Mughal officials in overseas trade declined in the early eighteenth century.⁸⁶ At the same time, Europeans in Bengal faced a diminishing challenge from indigenous traders in their overseas trade. Even though trade links with Surat, Malabar and the Coromandel Coast were maintained by non-Europeans, few of these merchant networks were based in Bengal. Instead, they were all based in Surat, Malabar or the Coromandel. Until the late seventeenth century, the presence of merchants from Bengal was mostly felt in the region's trade with the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, Ceylon and the Maldives. As Om Prakash has shown, trade with the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago by the

⁸² Levi, *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and its Trade*, 94-109

⁸³ Marshall has argued that Hugli, the port of call for all Asian and Indian deep sea vessels, was completely overshadowed by Calcutta by the 1720s. Peter Marshall, *East India Fortunes*, 54-58, 65

⁸⁴ Chatterjee, *Merchants, Politics and Society*, 67-68.

⁸⁵ Sushil Chaudhury, "Trading Networks in a Traditional Diaspora – Armenians in India, 1600 -1800," Paper submitted for presentation at the Session 10, "Diaspora Entrepreneurial Networks, C. 1000 – 2000" of the XIII th International Economic Congress, Buenos Aires, 22-26 July 2002

⁸⁶ Chatterjee, *Merchants, Politics and Society*, 97

beginning of the eighteenth century was completely replaced by the VOC. Even the trade between Ceylon and Bengal suffered. The only important commodity that Asian traders exported from Bengal to Ceylon was rice, which was necessary for the maintenance of the VOC settlement at Ceylon. The elephants that the Bengal merchants bought in Ceylon more than compensated for the VOC's expenses for the rice, but trade with the Maldives remained completely under the control of traders from Bengal, in fact expanding in the early eighteenth century.⁸⁷ As Vincens noted, the unhealthy climate of the Maldives, which led to a very high death rate of Europeans, stopped them from participating in this trade, though Maldives was the chief supplier of cowrie shells, an important component of monetary usage in the region.⁸⁸

From the eighteenth century, more and more Europeans were involved in the carrying trade. Both the VOC and the EIC carried goods of Asian traders from Bengal on their ships going to Persia and the Coromandel Coast. As the VOC's intra-Asian trade burgeoned after the 1660s, and the VOC in Bengal had more and more ships at their disposal, they could easily accommodate the cargo of the Bengal traders, which was an additional steady source for income for them. The EIC too started participating in the carrying trade from the late seventeenth century. The EIC not only carried the goods of Bengal traders but sometimes let these traders charter an entire ship for a voyage. The EIC and VOC competed with each other in offering optimal freight prices to the Bengal traders. It must be mentioned here that the companies made use of the Bengal merchants' ships as well. The VOC, for instance, chartered ships of Indian merchants in Bengal before the 1660s, but by 1660, they no longer needed to do so.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Om Prakash, "The European Trading Companies and the Merchants of Bengal, 1650-1725," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1, No.2, (1964): 37-63

⁸⁸ Indrani Ray, "India in the Asian Trade," 192

⁸⁹ Prakash, *Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 57-59.

Overland trade to Central Asia suffered in the 1720s and 1730s. The share of Patna opium and Bengal calicoes dropped as a proportion of Iranian and Turanian trade. This period also followed the political turmoil in North India, leading a great many merchants to emigrate to Bihar and Bengal,⁹⁰ many of whom often dealt with the EIC or the VOC. The best known is Khwaja Wajeed, the Armenian merchant, who had several connections to both the Murshidabad court and the EIC in Calcutta. This man led a princely lifestyle, owning 2,000 boats. Also well-known were the Sikh brothers, Deepchand and Amirchand, who dealt with both the EIC and the VOC. Deepchand and Amirchand were not involved in the deep-sea or overland trade. Their main business was supplying the European companies with saltpeter and opium. In fact, Khwaja Wajeed also made a large fortune supplying saltpeter to the EIC.

Lesser merchants offered varying capacities. Kumkum Chatterjee has shown argues that affluent peasant-cum-merchants (*grihasta beparis*), manufacturers-cum-traders, itinerant traders of various means, and pure long-distance traders belonged to a continuum of actors within the market economies of Asia. The European companies dealt with a range of such traders as the volume and value of their trade increased. Apart from large merchants such as Jagat Seth, Khwaja Wajeed, Deepchand and Amirchand, the companies dealt with a number of small traders in Hugli, Calcutta, Patna and Dacca. Often the credit-worthiness of these merchants was questionable, causing the perennial problem of “bad debts.” In times of uncertainty, such bad debts became irreversible. Five years after the Bihar famine in 1676, the small saltpeter merchants had still not recovered from their indebtedness. The VOC officials arrested and imprisoned a few of these merchants to force them to make good on their arrears in saltpeter, but

⁹⁰ Chatterjee, , *Merchants, Politics and Society in Early Modern India*, 67

they simply had no means of getting out of debt.⁹¹ Since the European companies were the sole purchasers of saltpeter in the region, all Indian merchants in the region were anxious to contract with the Europeans. In 1675, a handful of leading saltpeter merchants in Patna proposed to the VOC that if the company bought saltpeter exclusively from them, they would take responsibility for recovering all bad debts. The VOC, however, decided against creating an oligospony; thus, the small merchants were not wiped out. Acrimonious relationships nevertheless continued into the 1740s. Amirchand, for example, was embroiled in bitter fights with smaller merchants as he emerged as the chief supplier of the EIC. On the other hand, the brothers Amirchand and Deepchand became embroiled in a bitter fight with the EIC over disputed accounts in 1744.

Even when they were not directly dealing with the EIC or VOC, small merchants caused trouble for the companies. In 1736, the *zamindar* or chief land revenue collector of Calcutta, George Mandeville, complained to the Council of Fort William that most small brokers (“*dellols*”) in the city were men of “no substance or character.” They caused the EIC a great deal of trouble by evading the payment of custom duties while carrying out trade in the EIC’s *zamindari*. Moreover, they caused a pandemic of bad debts in the settlement as they were running away with the goods of English private traders on the pretext of selling them. Mandeville suggested an elaborate system of registration to prevent such “inconvenience to the fair trader.”⁹²

The Patna *darbar* (court of the Nawab) or the Murshidabad *darbar* played a very important role in settling disputes. From time to time, Indian merchants, large or small, appealed to the local government not just for settlement of disputes but also protection. Especially as Europeans started using force against the merchants in the 1730s and 1740s, intervention of local

⁹¹ VOC 1307, 499v.

⁹² P/1/11, 302v-303v.

political authorities was an effective measure against intimidation.⁹³ However, Indian merchants also played key roles in the local *durbars*. Khwaja Wajeed, for instance, was Nawab Sirajuddaula's emissary to Fort William in 1757. Most notable was the appointment of Deepchand as the *Faujdar* or the army chief of *sarkar* (district) Saran.⁹⁴

By the early eighteenth century, the structure of long distance trade as carried out by Indian merchants had been significantly altered. Large merchants were increasingly concerned with supplying the European companies with their commodities of trade, especially saltpeter and opium. The political importance of the Indian merchants increased in the early eighteenth century but the military power of the European companies also increased. While military strength enabled the East India companies to flex their muscles, the political clout of the indigenous merchants helped to counteract this power.

2.2 URBANIZATION

Bengal witnessed a rising pace of urbanization from the fifteenth century onward, which led to the creation of diverse cities of varying sizes. The European companies operated within certain indigenous cities just as any other group of merchants did. These cities were Patna, Maksudabad-Kassimbazar-Murshidabad complex and Dhaka. Patna was an old city. Under the rule of the Guptas (CE 2nd to CE 5th) and the Palas (CE 8th to CE 12th), Patna was the

⁹³ Chatterjee, *Merchants, Politics and Society*, 92. It should be mentioned that there are evidences of Europeans using physical abuse against merchants even from the seventeenth century. When the salt peter merchants got into bad debts after the Bihar famine of 1671, the VOC officials in Patna imprisoned some of them in their factory grounds and flogged them to set an example for rest of the defaulting merchants. Prakash, *Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 109.

⁹⁴ Chatterjee, *Merchants, Politics and Society*, 91.

capital city. It remained an important urban center under the Turkish and Afghan rulers of the East, and remained so in the seventeenth century. When Augustinian friar Padre Manrique visited Patna in 1630s, he noted that there were 200,000 people in the city. Though that number is hard to believe,⁹⁵ it makes it clear that Patna was a prominent urban center. As it became the seat of the Mughal governor of the Bihar *subah*, several officials settled in the city. The officials arrived with an entourage of artisans and poets, significantly expanding the city's population. Mughal officials built several ornate public buildings, including mosques, mausoleums and madrasas (schools). Patna emerged as a prominent center of learning, which encouraged a number of scholars from around the world to come and settle in the city. Thus, the city had a mixed population with varying socio-economic backgrounds. The consumption pattern of this population varied greatly, creating a complex network of manufactures and markets. Patna also emerged as an important center of trade. Intra-regional, inter-provincial and long distance trade passed through the city. Apart from the Europeans, merchants from Central Asia, South East Asia, and various parts of South Asia gathered there. People of similar professions and ethnic backgrounds lived in the same neighborhoods. There were also clusterings of poets, government officials, manufacturers of bows and arrows, and glassmakers.⁹⁶ Foreign merchants resided in taverns where rooms could be rented out monthly.⁹⁷ Large merchants rented houses or bought them. Both the VOC and EIC rented big houses by the banks of the Ganga for easy embarkation and disembarkation of goods during and after the 1650s.⁹⁸ Meanwhile, alongside these

⁹⁵ Manrique does not explain how he arrived at this number. Also, there are no other corroborating sources. C.E. Luard assisted by H. Hosten, trans., *Fray Sebastien Manrique, Travels, 1629-1643, Vol. I* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1927), 44-45

⁹⁶ Chatterjee, *Merchants, Politics and Society*, 19-22

⁹⁷ R.R. Diwakar, *Bihar Through the Ages* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1958), 567-568

⁹⁸ Prakash, *Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 39

impressive brick buildings were the huts of the menial workers and artisans who served the various needs of the city.⁹⁹

Dhaka became an important city from the beginning of the seventeenth century as the first Mughal governor of Bengal, Islam Khan, declared the place as his capital. Mughal emperor Jahangir noted in the first decade of the seventeenth century that fifty thousand Mughal officials resided in Dhaka. Friar Manrique, who also visited Dhaka in the 1630s, estimated the population of Dhaka to be around 200,000 people.¹⁰⁰ Though the numbers may have been exaggerated, it strongly indicates the importance of the city. Manrique noted that the city extended along the banks of the Ganges for 1.5 leagues, or around 5 miles. According to English traveler Thomas Bowrey in the 1670s, the city had expanded up to 12 miles along the banks of the river.¹⁰¹ Servicing the needs and demands of the imperial and provincial officials was the root cause of Dhaka's urban expansion. The huts were mainly filled with skilled workers servicing the boat-building and textiles industries. There were also exclusive neighborhoods of weavers servicing the families of the officials. Textiles of the finest quality drew several grOxford University Presss of merchants to the city. The EIC had been present in Dhaka since 1666, saw its trade in Dhaka flourish in the 1670s, but suffer from the 1680s onward until the company regained its stable position after 1723. The VOC, meanwhile, had settled in Dhaka since 1663, and in 1666, they built a house by the river.¹⁰² Apart from these companies, there were several other grOxford University Presss of Asian merchants who bought the finest quality cotton and embroidered

⁹⁹ Diwakar, *Bihar Through the Ages*, 529

¹⁰⁰ C.E. Luard assisted by H. Hosten, trans., *Fray Sebastien Manrique, Travels, 1629-1643, Vol. II*, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1927), 140

¹⁰¹ Aniruddha Ray, *Maddhyayuger Bharatiya Shahar*, 336 - 349

¹⁰² Basil Coppleton Allen, *Dacca: Eastern Bengal District Gazetteer*, (New Delhi: Logos Press, 2009), 44

textiles from the region. Though Dhaka's growth as a city stagnated from the eighteenth century when the capital of Bengal shifted to Murshidabad, it remained a very important center of trade.

The complex consisting of Maksudabad-Kassimbazar-Murshidabad grew into an urban center as a result of the intertwining factors of trade and politics. Maksudabad, named after a legendary merchant, Maksus Khan, developed as an important merchant town by the middle of the seventeenth century. Six miles away from Maksudabad, the European companies set up their factories, centering near a market called Kassimbazar in the 1650s and 1660s. The region had long been known as the center of production of high quality silk yarns which attracted European and other merchant communities. Both companies built impressive silk reeling units and also employed a large number of artisans within the factory compounds to do the finishing work on silk yarns and textiles. They lived in the numerous straw huts surrounding the impressive buildings of the merchants. From 1704, the Karimabad mint, close to Kassimbazar, became the most important mint in Bengal. Along with other indigenous bankers (*sarrafs*), the VOC regularly took their bullion to the mint. The artisans and unskilled workers at the mint mostly came from the nearby villages. In 1716, the capital of Bengal was moved a few miles from Kassimbazar to Murshidabad, named after the Mughal governor, Murshid Quli Khan, who chose the place as his capital and was responsible for its urbanization. By the middle of the eighteenth century, situated along the river Hooghly, the city was five miles long and three miles wide.¹⁰³

Port Hugli formed the nucleus of European settlements in Bengal. In 1579, Akbar granted formal permission to the Portuguese to build a settlement in Hugli. However, signs of actual settlement could not be seen until 1583. Apart from a cOxford University Pressle of churches, the early Portuguese quarter did not boast any impressive buildings, its inhabitants living mostly

¹⁰³ Ray, *Madhyayuger Bharatiya Sahar*, 350-358

in thatched huts.¹⁰⁴ Hugli turned into a Mughal port following the war between the Portuguese and the Mughals in 1632. The next year, Emperor Shah Jahan issued an order allowing all Europeans, including the Portuguese, to come and settle in Hugli. In 1633, The VOC gained permission to set up a factory, but it took them a long time to settle. For quite some time, Pipili remained the headquarters of the VOC. In 1656, the Dutch finally made Hugli their headquarters, where it remained for the next century and a half. The Dutch leased a village, Chinsura, along with an adjacent market, Bazar Mirzapur, in Hugli, where their settlements developed.¹⁰⁵ While traveling up the river from the deltas, one would first come by the grounds of the French East India Company. Next to the French grounds were those of the VOC, and finally, almost a mile away, stood the EIC factory, very close to the Portuguese quarter of Bandel.

Gautier Schouten, who visited Hugli in 1660, described it as a prominent town with a vibrant cosmopolitan population. Muslim and Hindu merchants of various means were to be seen in large numbers. There were large bazaars, sites of busy mercantile activities, as well as several mosques and temples. According to the EIC official, Streynsham Master, and the English merchant-traveler, Thomas Bowrey, the Dutch residence was the most impressive building in the region, comparable to a fort. Cannons were perched on the high walls encircling the residence, which was built with wood brought from Batavia and stones from Madras and had several rooms housing various officials with a large string of attached warehouses. The Dutch also managed to maintain a beautiful vegetable garden adjacent to their residence.¹⁰⁶

The residence, however, represents only a fraction of the extremely vibrant and cosmopolitan life of the Dutch settlement in Hugli. As the rent collector of Chinsura and Bazar

¹⁰⁴ Ray, *Madhyayuger Bharatiya Sahar*, 326-328

¹⁰⁵ Prakash, *Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 37-40

¹⁰⁶ Ray, *Madhyayuger Bharatiya Sahar*, 330-332

Mirzapur, the Dutch directorate retained rights to lease out lands or oversee the buying and selling of houses in these places. Sale documents have survived from the early eighteenth century which convey a sense of the diverse neighborhoods of the settlements. The defining characteristic of Bazar Mirzapur was the market and its surrounding population. Dutch employees of the VOC and Dutch free burghers lived right next door to native Christians, as well as Muslim, Hindu and Armenian merchants, and even other European merchants such as Greeks.¹⁰⁷ Apart from the market, one distinct neighborhood of Bazar Mirzapur was the “Muslim” ground called Portapur. Even though it was called “Muslim,” Dutch men lived alongside Muslim and Armenian merchants.¹⁰⁸ The important landmarks of Chinsura were the Company garden, the church and the square facing it, the Armenian quarter and the Straw bazaar. While only Christians lived around the church square, in all other neighborhoods, the population was extremely diverse. Even in the Armenian quarter, Dutch employees of the VOC had Armenian and Greek neighbors.¹⁰⁹ The most ubiquitous structures in Chinsura, Bazar Mirzapur, and in larger Hugli were the small thatched huts in which poor working people resided.

Calcutta became an important urban center in the eighteenth century as the trade headquarters of the EIC. The EIC’s settlement in Hugli was confined to their residence built in the middle of the seventeenth century. A number of EIC employees lived outside the bounds of

¹⁰⁷ Pieter Souman, the muster roll keeper of the VOC buying the house of a dead mardijker, Jan Dirksz. He had as his neighbor a *firingi*, Nicolas Alve, and a free burger, Jan Brengman. TNSA 1.11.06.11/1677A, 157. Simonia, widow of the pilot Leendert Dirksz: Staalman selling her house to the pilot, Jan de Bruijn, on 18 May 1743. She had as her neighbors a Muslim man, Piroe, a Hindu man, Souram, and a free burgher Alexander. 1.11.06.11/ 1693, 229. See bibliography for description of these and other archival citations.

¹⁰⁸ Property sold by Jan Drabbe to the Armenian, Khwaja Keeuwen on 27th July 1734, TNSA 1.11.06.11/ 1677B, 285; sale of house by Harmanus Blom, junior merchant to the head cooper, Jan Reijkewaart on June 10, 1741, 1.11.06.11/ 1677B, 708

¹⁰⁹ House sold by Christian Edel to Jacobus Brakel on October 6, 1741. TNSA 1.11.06.11/1694, 775

the company residence in the town.¹¹⁰ The EIC in 1693 acquired the revenue collecting (*talugdari*) rights over the three villages – Sutanuti, Kalikata and Govindapore – from the *zamindar* of the region, Sabarna Ray Chaudhuri. The three villages marked the physical extent of the city as it developed throughout the eighteenth century. Here it is important to mention that by the 1690s, when the EIC chose Calcutta as their new headquarters in Bengal, the place had already developed as a market town. A number of wealthy weaver families (Bysacks) and merchant families (Seths) had relocated from Saptagram, the port town close to Hugli, as it declined in the early 1600s, and settled in Govindapore.¹¹¹ In addition to the Seths and the Bysacks, the Armenians and Portuguese were present in the area throughout the seventeenth century. In fact, from the sixteenth century, the Portuguese used Bettore, on the other side of the river from Govindapore, as a satellite market for Saptagram. The oldest grave in the Armenian cemetery dates back to 1630.¹¹² Even after Calcutta became the headquarters of the EIC in Bengal, wealthy native settlers managed the urban development of the city independent of the EIC establishment. The Seths of Calcutta – Jonardan, Gopal, Jadu, Banarasi and Jaykrishna– took it upon themselves to develop the long road connecting the Old Fort with the northern parts of Sutanuti. The Seths owned their gardens north of the old fort long before the EIC gained the *talugdari* rights of the region. In return for their service, the EIC gave them a discount of 8 annas per bigha for the assessed ground rent.¹¹³

Despite the settlement's growth in the seventeenth century, its flourishing in the early eighteenth century was unprecedented. In the Bengal council's meeting of October 14 1690, permission was given for the construction of four "victualling houses." These houses were

¹¹⁰ Aniruddha Ray, *Madhyayuger Bharatiya Sahar*, 331-332

¹¹¹ Nisith Ranjan Ray, *Calcutta: The Profile of a City* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1986), 36.

¹¹² Harisadhan Mukhopadhyay, *Kalikata: Sekaler o Ekaler* (Kalikata: P.M. Bagchi and Co., 1985), 191-209

¹¹³ P/1/1, 398v

expected to not only serve food and drinks to the EIC servants but also to provide them with much needed accommodation.¹¹⁴ By 1703, the inhabitants of the EIC grounds, who were already paying rent, demanded leases for these grounds. These people, whether they were native settlers or Europeans, thus showed their desire for long-term habitation. That same year, several English inhabitants, who had already built “handsome buildings,” were given leases valid for thirty-one years.¹¹⁵ Two years later, in 1705, the Fort William council complained that inhabitants of the three towns were cheating the company of rent for half the land they possessed. The council devised an elaborate lease system, requiring ground rent to be renewed every year.¹¹⁶ The total number of dwellings in 1706 were 8 brick houses, and 8,000 thatched huts. By 1756, the number of brick houses rose to 498 and that of thatched huts to 14,450.¹¹⁷

Thatched huts defined the urban landscape of Calcutta. According to Pradip Sinha, even in 1837, Calcutta was essentially a city of huts.¹¹⁸ From the very early days, these huts encroached upon the EIC’s vision of a perfect city. In 1710, the Court of Directors wrote the Fort William Council that they should not allow any huts within the boundaries of the fort.¹¹⁹ With permission from London, the Fort William council ordered small huts around the fort to be cleared to free up drains and improve the sanitary conditions for the inhabitants of the fort.¹²⁰ In 1728, a complaint to the Mayor’s court noted that “little matt huts to sell fruits etc.” encroached

¹¹⁴ G/7/4 (unfoliated), Consultation of Monday 13 July 1691.

¹¹⁵ G/7/4 (unfoliated), Consultation of September 6 1703.

¹¹⁶ P/1/1, 379v-380r.

¹¹⁷ Mukhopadhyay, *Kalikata*, 293.

¹¹⁸ Pradip Sinha, *Calcutta in Urban History* (Kolkata: Firma KLM, 1978), 28

¹¹⁹ Pradip Sinha, *Calcutta in Urban History*, 1.

¹²⁰ Mukhopadhyay, *Kalikata*, 305-306.

upon the highways.¹²¹ The court prohibited encroachment within the width of thirty-six feet of any road. Whoever violated the ruling had to pay a fine of ten rupees.¹²²

Municipal sanitation became a major concern of the EIC officials as a result of the dense growth of such hovels. The EIC's town planning was also responsible for the unwholesome living conditions of the city. Earlier, water bodies had been dug within the premises of the houses in Calcutta, replicating a well-known feature of house planning in the Bengal countryside. But the Fort William Council prohibited such construction.¹²³ In fact, filling in water bodies of the cities was one of the most important municipal undertakings of the EIC.¹²⁴ Reclaiming lands by sealing off bodies of water was a continuous process, and often such land reclamation was done with the aim of settling "black people" or indigenous people— an important work force – at the cheapest possible cost.¹²⁵ Dense living quarters often went against the dreams of the Court of Directors of making the city "fflourishing[sic], sweet and wholesome."¹²⁶ The complaint brought to the Mayor's Court noted the unsanitary conditions of the drains of the city. Several were "very offensive and dangerous to the publick and very pernicious to the good health of the inhabitants."¹²⁷ One very "offensive" sight was "the black people easing themselves under the wharfs, along the riverside."¹²⁸

The dwellers of the thatched huts were the same people who maintained the settlement. Apart from the small shopkeepers, almost all were working people. The emerging city demanded

¹²¹ P/155/72, 4.

¹²² P/155/72, 8.

¹²³ Mukhopadhyay, *Kalikata*, 300

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 291

¹²⁵ See the consultation of March 1721. The Bakshi was advised to reclaim grounds close to Govindapore at the cheapest possible cost so that it may be available to the native population at low cost. P/1/5, 22r.

¹²⁶ Pradip Sinha, *Calcutta in Urban History*, 1

¹²⁷ P/155/72, 4.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*.

a variety of jobs. First and foremost, construction of buildings required huge numbers of laborers. Masonry work included not just the construction of brick houses, in which the wealthier inhabitants of the city resided, but also civic and communal constructions. Apart from the old fort, the first church of Calcutta, St. Anne's church, was built in 1704.¹²⁹ The first hospital of Calcutta was built in 1709.¹³⁰ Wealthier sections of the indigenous population also needed the labor of such workers. Wealthy native families in Calcutta often claimed to be "jungle clearing inhabitants" of the city or settlers who cleared forest lands. The actual back-breaking work of land clearing, however, was carried out by migrant construction workers. In an urban setting, such claims often translated into rent income of the urban landlord. Opulent houses of such wealthy families were surrounded by the thatched huts of people who not only paid rent but also worked in varying capacities for these families.¹³¹ Construction work also included reclaiming land by draining water, de-silting the largest water body in the city, Laal Dighi, and building numerous roads and bridges. Workers from nearby villages were also employed in construction sites in Calcutta and other settlements in Bengal. Finally, it was not only through their labor that the working poor of Calcutta contributed to the urban development of the city. Evidence suggests that poor people also made cash contributions towards the city's civic structures. In June 1704, Fort William Council mentioned that "petty fines from the black inhabitants" would be used in repairing the highways and filling up the holes in the city.¹³² Because "petty fines" were predominantly paid by small-time criminals drawn from the lower rungs of Calcutta society, these people too funded the growth of early Calcutta.

¹²⁹ P/1/1, 77r-78v, 173r-v, Mukhopadhyay, *Kalikata*, 304

¹³⁰ Mukhopadhyay, *Kalikata*, 302

¹³¹ Pradip Sinha, *Calcutta in Urban History*, 18

¹³² P/1/1, Part II, 50v.

A large number of inhabitants of the huts were personal servants of the European servicemen of the EIC and the wealthy native families. Many low-income indigenous people worked as guards of the city. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the settlement around the fort had taken the form of a commercial, administrative and military center. Residential complexes with sprawling gardens belonging to Europeans had also grown within this area. A map of Calcutta from 1742 shows that this area around the fort was fenced in. Native guards or “peons” were employed to safeguard these boundaries. In 1706, for example, thirty “paiks or black peons” were employed by the EIC following several incidents of robberies committed by “country robbers.”¹³³ In 1726, an additional eighty men were employed as security guards following other incidents of robbery.¹³⁴

Finally, Calcutta became home for weavers and quilters who supplied the EIC with textiles for trade. Between 1706 and 1723, Calcutta weavers were periodically advanced a small but significant amount of money, ranging from between Rs. 2000 and Rs. 3000.¹³⁵ As early as 1706, the company had appointed a merchant, Nityananda Datta, who acted as liaison between the company and the Calcutta weavers.¹³⁶ Most of these weavers were early settlers of Calcutta, having arrived there long before the advent of the EIC. However, in 1731-32, the EIC arranged to settle new weavers in the city.¹³⁷ As quilting often involved elaborate stitch work and appliques ¹³⁸ quilters were also given advances of between Rs. 2000 and Rs. 5000.¹³⁹ In 1716, they did quilting work on as many as 4,000 pieces of hummums (cotton textile).

¹³³ P/1/1, 352r

¹³⁴ P/1/6, 260v

¹³⁵ P/1/1, 482v, 515r; P/1/2, 71v; P/1/5, 242r

¹³⁶ P/1/1, 301r-v

¹³⁷ P/1/9, 5v-6r; P/1/3, 195r;

¹³⁸ P/1/3, 195r

¹³⁹ P/1/1, 502v; P/1/5, 448r-v

2.3 SETTLEMENT TRANSPORTATION NETWORKS

Throughout the seventeenth century, the companies used the Bhagirathi River as the prime waterway to any outpost north of Hugli. Hence, boats coming from Patna first made a stop at Kassimbazar and then sailed forth for Hugli.¹⁴⁰ For smaller consignments the route was suitable; however, from the eighteenth century onward, this practice changed. The companies had organized their transportation work into “fleets.” Central to these fleets were the companies’ standing army. The ability to militarize internal shipping in the region meant major restructuring of the transport sector. Since ferrying a large number of soldiers along with commodities involved larger numbers of boats, the companies’ transport sector underwent a major expansion. Larger convoys, in turn, brought about a change in the route for inland shipping. Given that the companies had to ensure the smooth movement of a large number of medium-weight vessels, they chose a new riverine route whose water level allowed for year-round navigation. Thus, the river Jalangi was preferred to the Bhagirathi. James Rennell, the first EIC geographer to survey Bengal, noted that neither the Kasimbazar stream of the Ganga nor the Bhagirathi was fit for navigation between October and May as a result of alluvial deposit. The Jalangi, which suffered only two to three months of low water, was thus the preferred route.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ This is the route followed by VOC vessels from Patna for both salt peter and opium in 1660, 1662 and 1674, VOC 1304, fol. 187v, VOC 1239, fol. 1233r, VOC 1236, fol 101. Similar pattern can be discerned from the movement of EIC boats from Patna for the years 1679, 1680 and 1681, G/23/1 (unfoliated) December 17, 1679, G/20/5, part II, 124-125, G/20/3, fol. 51.

¹⁴¹James Rennell, *An Account of Ganges and Burrampooter river* (London,1781), 110; quoted in Jean Deloche, *Transport and Communications in India Prior to Steam Locomotion: Water Transport*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 25.

companies also bought saltpeter at Balasore,¹⁴² situated on the Orissa coast. It was an important port for fitting out overseas vessels for the companies in the seventeenth century. Buying saltpeter at Balasore thus meant that the companies did not have to pay or arrange for transportation. The importance of Balasore was noted by VOC officials in 1674:

Balasore is at present the principal port in Bengal, from where navigation of big vessels was being expanded and there the English and now also the Danish have their headquarters as well as the Portuguese and other merchants first bring their goods to the market. Fairly good business is done there with the merchants coming from Orissa and from other inland places around Patna, who come there yearly to trade.¹⁴³

The EIC resolved in 1679 to enter into a contract with the “saltmen who came with great droves of oxen yearly through the woods from Pattana ward to Orixa.”¹⁴⁴ The EIC expected to get around 67 tons of saltpeter that year from this source. The EIC thus tapped into an already existing overland trade network in saltpeter. They decided to “agree with them (the saltmen) to take off yearly what they bring at a certain rate and weight at which they should be obliged to weigh at or near Ballasore.”¹⁴⁵

The cumbersome practice of negotiating with unreliable intermediary inland merchants came to an end in the eighteenth century as the redoubtable armies of the company fleets guaranteed safe access to Patna. There was no particular time of the year for the movement of the fleets. Given the yearlong navigability of the Jalangi, fleets were often sequestered to various needs of the companies (the schedule for overseas voyage, procurement of commodities in the upper quarters, etc). The VOC sent out their vessels anytime between July and September from

¹⁴² Although a report in 1650 showed that saltpeter sold at Hugli and Balasore was far more expensive than that was available in Patna, the EIC continued to buy peter at Balasore mart at least until late 1670s. Chatterjee, *Merchants, Politics and Society*, 28.

¹⁴³ VOC 1304, 166v.

¹⁴⁴ G/20/5, ff31-32

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

Chinsura, and the vessels arrived from Patna anytime between December and April of the next year. The EIC departure or arrival time of the fleet showed even less of a pattern. Vessels from Calcutta were sent as early as June or as late as September. Departure of laden boats from Patna followed a similar time frame.

The companies' fleet seldom moved in one single large train of vessels. The fleet was composed of different segments/grOxford University Presss called "companies" headed by officers. These officers were all answerable to the Captain of the fleet. Such "companies" were also dispatched from Kassimbazar. Though not travelling together, the "companies" always coordinated amongst themselves by constantly corresponding with one another through the letter bearers (*qasids*). At some point in the journey, all the "companies" came together.¹⁴⁶ The segmented nature of the fleet ensured ubiquitous vigilant presence of company boats on the riverine highways of trade. The armed fleet, in connecting the headquarters with the inland settlements, created the contours of an exclusive geography of company trade in eighteenth-century Bengal.

The size of the convoys in the seventeenth century– especially of the VOC – was generally small.¹⁴⁷ The EIC recorded much larger numbers of boats being sent down from Patna. As many as one hundred and seven light-weight vessels and forty heavy-bottomed vessels

¹⁴⁶The EIC by late 1730s also came up with a new plan of escort. A company of soldiers escorted the boats from Calcutta to Mircha or Jalangi, where the river Jalangi met the Ganga where they would meet another company of soldiers coming from Patna. From Mircha/ Jalangi onwards the boats would be escorted by the company sent out from Patna. Thus, in October 1737, two batches of salt peter boats arrived from Patna, under the care of Ensign John Sorbutts and Captain Alliot. Captain Smith sent From the Kassimbazar factory received them and took the entire consignment of the saltpeter under his care and led them to Calcutta, while Captain Alliot and Ensign Sorbutts returned to Patna. P/1/13, fol. 115r, 152r-v.

¹⁴⁷ In 1674 seven salt peter boats were sent from Patna, Voc 1299, 616r-v. The maximum amount of salt peter sent by one consignment was 5000 maunds, Voc 1236, fol 101. Considering that one patella had a capacity of 35 tons or one polwar had a capacity of 15 tons (Hobson-Jobson, 737, 688) the number of boats were limited to fifteen.

carrying saltpeter sacks were sent from Patna to Hugli in 1684.¹⁴⁸ Though large cavalcades of boats plied company goods between Patna and Hugli, there was a marked absence of European military presence. Both the VOC and the EIC contracted indigenous guards or peons to attend their vessels.¹⁴⁹ A peon of the company, a handyman, who performed a wide variety of services, provided the much-needed military labor. Peons working as guards for the boats were usually hired for a short period of time, often the length of the journey.

The use of indigenous guards drew on the trading customs in the region, evident from the waterborne descriptions of trading fleet in various *mangalkabyas* (poems written in praise of a deity) from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The trading expedition of a merchant-*zamindar* with his multiple vessels formed an important episode in different *mangalkabyas*. Mercenary soldiers in the merchant fleet were noted in only two texts – seventeenth-century poet Dwija Bansidas' *Padmapuran* and eighteenth-century poet Krishnaram Das' *Raimangal*.¹⁵⁰ In both cases, soldiers (*paik*) were recruited along with the boatmen on the eve of the merchant's journey, but in neither case did workers have any prior relationship with their employer

In Mughal India, merchants always moved in caravans or kafilas. These caravans comprised of ox-carts or camels. Organizing these caravans was a specialized occupation. Cambridge University Press. These caravan men maintained the animals and carts and they were paid by the merchants whose commodities the caravan carried. Multiple merchants rented out freight space in one caravan. Security for caravans were organized by the merchants individually or caravan men arranged guards who were directly paid by merchants partaking in the caravan. In

¹⁴⁸ G/28/1, fol.41

¹⁴⁹ Military escort for inland shipping was not recorded by the VOC until 1705. But one can get an idea from the practices of the EIC.

¹⁵⁰ Purnachandra Chakraborty, ed, *Sri Sri Padmapuran ba Bishaharir Pnachali: Dwija Bansidas kartrik payaradichhandey birachita*, (Battala: kalikata), 131; Satyanarayan Bhattacharya, ed., *Kabi Krishnaram Daser Granthabali* (Calcutta University Press: Kolkata, 1958), 178

the seventeenth century travel accounts of French traveler and gem merchant, Jean Baptiste Tavernier, VOC official at Agra, Joshua Ketelaar and the autobiography of Jain merchant from Agra, Banarasidas we find a similar picture.¹⁵¹ It was also, tacitly accepted that protection to traders was to be provided by the Mughal state and hence, the elaborate toll point system criss-crossed the empire. The first mention of a soldier on an EIC boat came in 1683 when six peons and a single soldier accompanied a boat from Hugli to Rajamahar carrying 26000 sicca rupees.¹⁵² But the presence of this lone soldier was an exception to the practice of the companies in the seventeenth century. Even the large shipment of 1684 was accompanied by only eighteen peons.¹⁵³

European practice changed with *zamindar* Sobha Singh's rebellion in 1695, which led the companies to fortify their settlements and keep their own militaries. Unsure of his own military strength, the Bengal Nawab allowed the companies to keep their own military forces.¹⁵⁴ Jadunath Sarkar mentions that after the death of Sobha Singh, the mantle of rebellion fell onto his uncle Maha Singh and the Afghan chieftain/*zamindar* Rahim Khan. Prince Azim, the new subahdar (governor) of Bengal, defeated the rebel forces in 1698.¹⁵⁵ However, until 1701, the muster rolls of the VOC in Bengal recorded the military personnel under a special category – “military sent out by the headquarters at Batavia because of the ongoing rebellion of the Raja, kept here

¹⁵¹ Rohini Chowdhury, trans., *Banarasidas' Ardhakathanak: A Half Story* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2009), 121; V. Ball, trans., *Travels in India by Jean Baptiste Tavernier, Vol.1* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889), 42-43; Irfan Habib accepts Tavernier's account mentioning that guards for caravans was arranged by the caravan men. But from various the VOC and EIC accounts from Bengal and Ketelaar's diary it is evident that guards could be hired independently by the merchants in the seventeenth century. Ashin Das Gupta, *Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat, c. 1700 – 1750*, (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1979), 51-52

¹⁵² G/20/9, fol.119

¹⁵³ G/28/1, fol.41

¹⁵⁴ VOC 11539, fol. 439

¹⁵⁵ Jadunath Sarkar, ed., *History of Bengal, Vol II: Muslim Period 1200-1757* (Dacca: University of Dacca, 1943); Aniruddha Ray is skeptical of this conclusion. He suspects the rebellion was not fully crushed as Murshid Quli Khan reported disturbances in Chandrakona as late as in 1704. Aniruddha Ray, *Adventurers, Landowners and Rebels*, 153-157

extraordinarily.”¹⁵⁶ After 1701, the category of “military” crept into the muster rolls of the VOC in Bengal and continued for the rest of the period under study.¹⁵⁷

The use of a standing army for purposes of trade was an innovation of the European companies. Unlike indigenous or Asian traders, the EIC and the VOC arranged their own fleet, did not allow any other merchant to participate in it and finally, used their standing armies, which predominantly comprised of European soldiers, to escort their fleets. In discussing the market reforms brought about by the company state in the latter half of the eighteenth century, Sudipta Sen has argued that use of control, surveillance and violence played a central role.¹⁵⁸ The use of the military in wresting control over market places from the native rulers had a precedent in the use of a military in inland shipping. Noting the effectiveness of the militarization of inland transport, the first EIC geographer of Bengal, James Rennell stated:

In a military view, it (the Ganga) opens a communication between the different posts, and serves in the capacity of a *military way* (author’s emphasis) through the country; renders unnecessary the forming of magazines; and infinitely surpasses the celebrated inland navigation of North America, where the *carrying places* (author’s emphasis) not only obstruct the progress of an army, but enable the adversary to determine his place and mode of attack with certainty.¹⁵⁹

The company hardly dominated the traffic on the Ganga, the highway of inland trade of the subcontinent; however, expeditions with more than 300 European soldiers and one hundred and fifty-six boats stand out.¹⁶⁰ Of the one hundred and fifty-six boats travelling to Patna in 1724,

¹⁵⁶ VOC 11542, fol 449 – 11547, fol.406.

¹⁵⁷ Four soldiers and ten peons accompanied a boat with 445 bales and chests from Kassimbazar to Calcutta in October 1701, G/23/4, (unfoliated), 15 October 1701. Hereafter regular reference to soldiers on boats can be found from 1702/3, P/1 series.

¹⁵⁸ Sudipta Sen, *Empire of Free Trade*, chap. 3

¹⁵⁹ James Rennell, *An account of the Ganges and Burrampooter Rivers* (London, 1781), 107

¹⁶⁰ VOC 8752, II, fol198.

only ten carried goods; seventy-five vessels carried common soldiers, and the rest carried officials and their belongings.¹⁶¹

It is true that the company armies were no match for the huge imperial army, who escorted the revenue collected in cash from Bengal subah to the imperial headquarters.¹⁶² But as Kumkum Chatterjee has argued, the companies gained armed power in the region even while two of Bengal's most able Nawabs possessed political power.¹⁶³ Amongst merchants, the companies were the only heavily militarized forces to be found. Large merchants in the region such as Deepchand maintained their armed retainers, but they were no match for the EIC or VOC's standing armies.¹⁶⁴ The companies maintained standing armies in their headquarters and in important settlements such as Kassimbazar and Patna. Their primary task was to protect the movement of their commodities. After 1695, they refrained from employing peons or indigenous itinerant peasant soldiers for military purposes of the transport sector. The arrival of large contingents of European and Eurasian soldiers, who solely served the companies, signaled a major shift in trade practices. The formidable armies of hundreds of soldiers provided a stark contrast to the twenty hired soldiers on the merchant's fleet in Bansibadan's account.¹⁶⁵

As the fleet proceeded through the heart of a largely unknown and volatile political landscape, questions of security always loomed large in the minds of company officers, who always carefully weighed the potential impact of internal political disputes. The struggles within

¹⁶¹ VOC 8752, II, fol 198.

¹⁶² VOC 8762 II; The imperial army might have used the same waterway. The Chapai mosque, a fifteenth century structure, built on the banks of Mahananda – a stream connecting the Malda to Ganges and used by the Patna fleet- was conjectured to have been a resting place for the imperial naval fleet. Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, *Historical and Cultural aspects of Islamic Inscriptions of Bengal: A Reflective Study of Some New Epigraphic Discoveries* (Dhaka: ICSBA, 2009), 170.

¹⁶³ Chatterjee, *Merchants, Politics and Society in Early Modern India*, 69

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 92

¹⁶⁵ Purnachandra Chakraborty, ed, *Sri Sri Padmapuran ba Bishaharir Pnachali*, 178

the Mughal Empire, which reverberated across the country, especially to the trading outposts, were always meticulously noted. When Commander van der Helling learnt from his spies that a *zamindar*, engaged in a brawl with a Fausdar, was crossing Sitakund with an army of two thousand mounted men, he immediately gave orders to set up an impromptu army camp located in the shadow of a mountain which provided a “good chest shield.”¹⁶⁶ The cannon was put in place, the sentinels circled the camp – the company was ready for a fight.

The armed fleet enabled the companies to transform themselves from purely trading entities to a political force in the region. Their political power was articulated in the new-found ability to resist the armed depredations carried out by local and imperial officials. The instructions for the captains of the VOC fleet, though issued from Chinsura, provided accumulated knowledge about the region. One such instruction given out to Captain Pielat in 1723 specifically mentioned every *jagirdar* (imperial Mughal officials who were given revenue assignments in lieu of payment) and *zamindar* along the way. As resident authorities on the ground, *zamindars* were much feared as men “who ruled the place.” Such *zamindars* were often rebel elements within the Mughal polity. The *zamindar* of Chanda, for example, had declared rebellion against Mughal authorities. The imperial forces crushed the rebellion and threw the *zamindar* and his son out of their patrimony. However, they took shelter in nearby woods and sporadically “roved” on merchants passing through the river.¹⁶⁷

Company boats had to stop at various toll points (*thana*) lining the banks of the river. Under the control of various authorities ranging from small *zamindars* to imperial officers such as *Fausdars*, the size of the toll points varied widely. Some toll points had only one *thanadar* (toll point master) and seven or eight peons; other toll points had two *thanadars* and forty

¹⁶⁶ VOC 8762, fol

¹⁶⁷ VOC *ibid*,

guards; a few had gunmen in addition to guards.¹⁶⁸ The companies also kept a keen eye on the military strength of the imperial or provincial official posted in the region. They were cautious not to start a fight with the likes of the *Fausdar* of Bhagalpur, who commanded an army of one hundred cavalymen, one hundred and fifty gunners, and sixty peons.¹⁶⁹

A trader in Asia was interchangeably a sufi saint, a monk, an ascetic or a diplomat. The reciprocal behavior of gift giving – an ethical behavior going beyond the domain of economic activities – was the most commonly known customary practice of pan-Asiatic trade.¹⁷⁰ The Commander of the fleet paid visits to the courts of local officials with gifts tailored to the demands of recipients,¹⁷¹ yet such ties of “friendship” often unraveled. To the companies, the gift-giving process was inseparable from mafia-like practices of extortion.¹⁷² In the absence of

¹⁶⁸The thana of Pinti, very close to Rajmahal had forty gunmen in addition to a thanadar and twenty guards, VOC 8782, fol 511-

¹⁶⁹ VOC 8782, fol 511-

¹⁷⁰ See Satyal, , “The Mughal Empire, overland Trade, and merchants of Northern India, 1526 – 1707” ; Stewart Gordon, *When Asia was the World: Traveling Merchants, Scholars, Warriors, and Monks who Created the “Riches of the East”*, (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2008)

¹⁷¹In 1731, the commander of the Patna fleet, Captain van der Burg on had to bring to the Fauzdar of the place, a list of gifts that he had demanded the previous year. In the same journey, Captain van der Brug gave out gifts comprising of expensive textiles, gold and silver bullions, nutmeg and pepper for the Fauzdar of Bhagalpur, his associate and his brother. VOC 8762, fol 339; Often, the commander of the fleet was given a muster of the gifts for numerous people on their way. The gift giving was always a two way process. In 1736, when Lieutenant Commander Jan Geldzaak led the fleet through the toll point of Pinti he met the zamindar of Teliagarhi, under whose sway fell Pinti. The zamindar gifted Lt. Commander Geldzaak with milk, vegetables, roosters and goats “as a mark of friendship.” Geldzaak reciprocated with his list of gifts.VOC 8782, fol 511; Gifts were also offered to the shrines of saints or fakirs. In 1731 on his way to Patna, Nicolaas de Munt, the head of the Patna factory, had to donate Rs. 5 and 8 annas to the poor. The amount was put on VOC accounts. VOC 8770, 456. In 1725, the return fleet of Captain Pielat paid Rs. 1.8 at the shrine of a fakir at Dariyapur, not far from Patna. VOC 8754 (2), 33

¹⁷²As Sudipta Sen has argued, European companies’ perception of principles of market economy differed largely from the indigenous perception of the market. In late medieval Bengal the market was the extension of “patrimonies” of the figures of authority ranging from zamindars to members of imperial household. These were physical spaces to which traders had access under the protection of the local rulers, for which the traders not only paid the toll tax but also had to constantly provide the political authorities with gifts. Writing about the trade in the northwest frontier of the province Amita Satyal argues that pillage of merchant caravans was seen as a “right conferred by the proximity of the caravan route” by the Afghan and Baloch pastoralists. Satyal, 117.

accompanying troops, company boats were subjected to outrageous extortions.¹⁷³ In the instructions given to Captain Pielat in 1724, he was informed of extortion by the Fausdar of Purnia the previous year. Pielat was asked to keep his calm and “refuse their beggarliness,” but if the “passage of boats is hindered,” he should strike back with force.¹⁷⁴ The EIC, on the other hand, launched military offensives against demanding *zamindars* without mincing words. In July 1719, the Chakwars, a rebellious *zamindari* clan around Patna, raided EIC possessions. The Fort William Council sent a squadron under Captain Richard Hunt and two ensigns who gathered saltpeter and textiles from “distant places where during these times the country merchants are often insulted and sometimes plundered by the jemindar [sic] for want of protection.”¹⁷⁵ Two years later, not far from Chakwar land, at Beerpur, Richard Hunt led another such retribution in which they again took prisoners of war and “were oblig’d to burn part of the town.”¹⁷⁶

2.4 CONCLUSION

Both the VOC and the EIC saw a tide in the volume and value of trade from the mid-seventeenth century into the mid-eighteenth century. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the

¹⁷³In 1710, salt peter was sent out from Patna under the care of a daroga, Ram Singh. On the way down the fleet was attacked by an army of two to three hundred musketeers and archers of zamindar Dhiresh Narayan. The daroga could muster a force of only two cavalry men, twenty musketeers and four men armed with clubs (chobdar). Hence, the daroga was forced to pay up Rs. 117 to strike peace with Dhiresh Narayan. A little down the way the zamindars of Kandha, Kanak Singh and Gurpit Singh attacked the fleet with 300 hundred mounted archers and musketeers. They demanded Rs. 4000 as ransom money. After much entreaties the daroga got away with paying Rs. 1600. However, the real damage was in the loss of a boat laden with 2250 sacks of salt peter and 45 bags of borax, which rammed into a sandbank and sunk amidst the confusion of the attack. VOC 8742, ff 93-98

¹⁷⁴ VOC 8757, II, 192

¹⁷⁵The conflict lasted until end August 1719, when the Fort William Council received news that “the engagement” between Hunt’s army and the Chakwars was very hott for sometime.” The casualties on the side of the Chakwar army were much greater than the company’s. A sergeant, a soldier and a drummer of the EIC were killed, whereas the Chakwars had their boats burnt and several men were taken as prisoners of war. P/1/4, fol 105r, 124v

¹⁷⁶ P/1/4, fol. 473v.

EIC had a slight edge over the VOC. Burgeoning trade meant the increasing presence of the companies in the region, which led to the development of European settlements in Bengal. While in Patna and Dhaka – two extremely densely-populated pre-colonial urban centers— the companies rented houses and found their niche in the urban fabric of pre-colonial India, in Chinsurah and Calcutta, they were critical to the urban development of these places. While Chinsurah was extremely cosmopolitan, the EIC in Calcutta had plans for a segregated settlement. Irrespective of the nature of urbanization, a host of working people labored to construct VOC and EIC settlements in Bengal. Connecting these settlements was another important infrastructural endeavor that both companies managed efficiently through the introduction of their armed fleet. With their standing armies, they were the first armed mercantile forces operating on a regular basis in the region.

3.0 MOBILE LABOR AND WAGED WORK

According to legend, Bir Hambir (1565-1620), the greatest of the Malla kings, *zamindar* of western Bengal and an ardent patron of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, raised the deity Madan Mohan of poverty. Madan Mohan had visited Bir Hambir in his dreams and recounted the misery of his situation in the house of an impoverished Brahmin who could not provide for him. The next day, Bir Hambir searched for Madan Mohan high and low and found him in a house of a destitute Brahmin in the arid lands of Birbhum, draped him in his shawl, and brought him to Bishnupur.¹⁷⁷ The ambulatory practices of the indigent migrant life of Madan Mohan can be seen in the spatial and ritual practices of the Vaishnava temples of Bishnupur, built primarily in the seventeenth century. There is no fixed sanctum for the deities in these temples. Consequently, temple priests carry the resident idol from the sanctum in the lower level of the temples to the upper level or to the edge of a plinth in the temple courtyard so that it can actively participate in the festivities of the devotees. Immobility of the image – the prevailing characteristic of temple architecture of South Asia – is antithetical to the devotional practices of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Only mobility of the idol can enable the god to conjure his divine sports (*lila*).

The ritual symbolism of physical movement is central to Bengal Vaishnavism, a popular religious movement which defines much of the popular socio-cultural life of medieval Bengal, and is evident from the biographies of Chaitanya, the central icon of the movement. Chaitanya's

¹⁷⁷ The story has been collected by Pika Ghosh. Pika Ghosh, *Temple to Love*, 44

journey from Nadia, an urban settlement on the banks of Bhagirathi to Nilachal, on the Orissa coastline, forms the central narrative of his biography. On this journey, Chaitanya and his devotees broke caste taboos, ridiculed the intellectual rigors of Brahmins and yogis and the procession continued even when the *Qazi*¹⁷⁸ ruled that the marchers should stay away from the streets of Nadia. In one description:

After the King of the people (Chaitanya) punished the *Qazi*
Everyone followed him dancing to the lyrics in praise of Krishna¹⁷⁹

It was in their very mobility—defying the state—that devotees experienced divine love for Krishna. Mobility, here expressed as a constitutive part of a devotional (*bhakti*) form of worship, was also a defining aspect of social life in medieval Bengal.

In this section, I examine the extent of labor mobility and the social origins of wage work in medieval Bengal. As this dissertation shows, almost all of the indigenous workers laboring in and between the company settlements were always on the move and that they worked for wages. By identifying the distinct relations of exploitation in pre-colonial Bengali society, I show the various forms of servitude, how and to what extent such forms of servitude entailed mobility, and finally, to what extent these mobile workers were wage workers.

3.1 HISTORIOGRAPHY

In Bengali, *mangal* means “auspicious” or “beneficent” and *kabya* means “poetry.” *Mangalkabya* is one of the most important forms of pre-colonial Bengali literature. The genre is

¹⁷⁸ Judicial official under Sultanate and Mughal rule.

¹⁷⁹ Sukumar Sen, ed., *Brindaban Das birachita Chaitanyabhagabat* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982), 193

one of narrative poetry and is especially auspicious in its recitation since it brings the blessings of the deity it eulogizes onto the listener as well as the reciter. The most common deities evoked in this genre are Chandi, Manasa, Shib, and Dharma, but there are many others. The *mangalkabyas* are simultaneously part of oral and written traditions. Apart from being recited as a part of worship, these *mangalkabyas* exist in several manuscripts which date back to the fifteenth century. The bulk of the manuscripts, however, come from the eighteenth century. The authorship of these manuscripts is ambiguous, however. Multiple manuscripts, penned by different scribes, attribute authorship to one particular person. The dates the manuscripts were penned are determined by the dates mentioned by the scribes in their self-introductions, in the absence of which, dates are determined by the quality of the paper and the handwriting of the scribes. Based on field-work and close examination of the legends used in the texts, linguists, have arrived at dates for the manuscripts. All agree that the existence of *mangalkabyas* predates their manuscript forms. While some parts of the legends date back to the early first millennium CE, the poets of the *mangalkabyas* lived between the late fifteenth and late eighteenth centuries.¹⁸⁰ For my purposes, I have used various critical editions of each *mangalkabya*. In almost all cases, editors not only mention the various manuscripts they have consulted for each author, but also chart the different variations in a variety of related manuscripts. In my references, I have tried to make clear the exact variation that I have used.

To a certain extent, the *mangalkabyas* borrow from Sanskrit poetry in terms of poetic imagery and legend. With many attributes of folk literature, the *mangalkabyas* used blunt, vivid images based on ordinary items and happenings, a trait which is absent from Sanskrit poetic

¹⁸⁰ For a detailed discussion on the antiquity of mangalkabyas see, Sukumar Sen, *Bangala Sahityer Itihas* (Calcutta: Modern Book Agency, 1948); Asutosh Bhattacharya, *Bangla Mangal Kabyer itihas* (Kolkata: A. Mukherjee & co., 2009, 12th edition); T.W. Clark, "Evolution of Hinduism in Medieval Bengali Literature: Siva, Candi, Manasa," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 17, no. 15 (1955): 14

traditions. Except for Bharatchandra's Annadamangal, which was highly stylized court poetry, almost all *mangalkabyas* glorified the gods in the language of the people.¹⁸¹ The gods of the *mangalkabyas* are far more human than gods of the Sanskrit tradition. Thus, Shiva (Shib) of the *mangalkabyas* is an impoverished farmer. Krishnaram Das' Raimangal, an eighteenth century poet's *mangalkabya*, gives a glimpse of the audience of the *mangal* poems of the period. In the introduction to the text, Krishnaram claims that he was exhorted by the deity Dakshin Rai to write a *mangal* poem:

Write a *mangal* poem in my name
My name will thus spread in the deltas
....
Not knowing my song the minstrels sing
Other songs all night long
Honey collectors and salt makers watch with pleasure
Their manifold histrionics.¹⁸²

Krishnaram's introduction not only tries to resolve the dichotomy between oral and literary cultural forms, but also makes clear who the target audience was. The poets came from a wide variety of backgrounds from indigent migrants to court poets, though they almost all belonged either to Brahmin or Kayastha caste groups. Oxford University Press.

These poems have been used by several historians in exploring the social and political milieu of medieval Bengal.¹⁸³ The descriptive precision of the texts has been contested, however.

¹⁸¹ Bharatchandra is seen as an exception working in the *mangalkabya* genre. Even though his poem was ostensibly meant to praise Annada, his main purpose was to eulogize his patron. See France Bhattacharya, "The Poet and his Patron: Bharat Chandra Ray (1712-1760) and Raja Krishna Chandra Ray of Nadia (1728-82)," in *The Varied Facets of History: Essays in Honor of Aniruddha Ray*, eds., Ishrat Alam and Syed Ejaz Hussain (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2011), 215-228

¹⁸² Satyanarayan Bhattacharya, ed., *Kabi Krishnaram Daser Granthabali* (Kolkata: Calcutta University Press, 1958), 167

¹⁸³ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal Under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study in Social History*, (Kolkata: A. Mukherjee & Co., 1953); Aniruddha Ray, "Urbanization in Medieval Bengal (AD 1200-1600)," Address of the President, Medieval Indian Section, *Indian History Congress*, 1992-93; Gautam Bhadra, *Mughal Jugal Krishi Orthonoti O Krishak Bidraha* (Kolkata: Subarnarekha, 1991)

David Curley has emphasized the didactic nature of the genre of *mangalkabyas* in his analysis of sixteenth-century-poet Mukundaram Chakraborty's *Chandimangal*. According to Curley, the *mangal* poems offer a paradigm of medieval Bengali moral dilemmas and their resolutions; representation of reality is secondary in these texts and hence, should not be used to understand actual events.¹⁸⁴ In contrast, Tapan Raychaudhuri and Aniruddha Ray have used these poems to corroborate specific events and historical developments in medieval Bengal.¹⁸⁵ My use of the texts is more in line with Inden and Dimock's reading, according to whom the mangal poems offer a "realistic ideal" of Bengali society for when the poets constructed the vision of an ideal society or societal order, they borrowed heavily from the quotidian. The poems, as Dimock and Inden have rightly pointed out, were "both physical and metaphysical, and sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference between the two."¹⁸⁶ Especially when the target audience was illiterate working class people like honey collectors and salt makers, the transcendent had to emerge from the immanent, or material world. Hence, vivid descriptions of both ideal and mundane social relations of pre-colonial Bengali society impinged on the divine exploits of the deities.

In my analysis, I also use a different kind of poetry than the *mangalkabyas*: the Eastern Bengal ballads (collected as *Purbabanga Gitika*) despite the fact that it is very difficult if not impossible to date these ballads. Since they were at the time of their collection part of living folk traditions, many scholars argue that some parts of the ballads are much older than other later additions by the performing artists. Zbavitel has argued that the ballads have much in common

¹⁸⁴ David Curley, *Poetry and History: Bengali Mangalkabya and Social Change in Precolonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2008), 1-70

¹⁸⁵ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal Under Akbar and Jahangir*; Aniruddha Ray, *Adventurers, Landowners and Rebels*

¹⁸⁶ "The City in Pre-British Bengal" in Edward Dimock, *The Sound of Silent Guns*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 118

with Muslim Bengali literature of the pre-colonial times given the secular themes of the ballads.¹⁸⁷ Since one can gather a sense of pre-colonial society from these ballads, I use parts of the ballads which corroborate information gathered from other historical sources. One can easily see the historical accretion of people's experiences in the ballads over a long period of time. Some experiences depicted in the ballads clearly depict late-eighteenth century or nineteenth-century development. For example, indebtedness in several ballads has been associated with eviction from land, which was a novelty brought about by colonial landlordism introduced by the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793.¹⁸⁸ However, certain ballads relate indebtedness to debt bondage, which has much older roots. Also, spinning and pounding rice as women's work speak of practices that go back to the early first millennium BCE.¹⁸⁹ Careful reading of the representations in the ballads provide another important layer of meaning to the picture of daily life as culled from various historical sources.

3.2 AGRARIAN AND NON-AGRARIAN FORMS OF SERVITUDE

As Irfan Habib has shown, individual peasant farming in Mughal, India was not egalitarian.¹⁹⁰ Though land was not individually-owned (as under capitalism), possession of cattle, seeds, ploughs, or wells were indices of wealth and distinguished the prosperous peasants from indigent small peasants (*reza riaya*). Seventeenth-century-poet Dwija Bansidas' *mangalkabya*,

¹⁸⁷ Dusan Zbavitel, *Bengali Folk-Ballads from Mymensingh and the problem of their Authenticity* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1963)

¹⁸⁸ For a discussion on the transformative nature of Permanent Settlement of 1793 see Ranajit Guha, *A rule of Property: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1963)

¹⁸⁹ .D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline* (Vikas: New Delhi, 1965)

¹⁹⁰ Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 123-135

Padmapuran, gives a detailed description of a flourishing peasant, Bachhai Adhikari, who is known to all as Haalua Bachhai; “haalua” is derived from the Bengali word for plough, “haal.” An owner of five hundred ploughs and a “wealth” of cows, Bachhai resided in his pleasure house in the middle of his corn-fields. His agrarian wealth gave him power: no one could walk the streets against his orders.¹⁹¹ Similar descriptions of wealth, expressed not in terms of land but in other property, can be found in ballads as well. In the Eastern Bengali ballad Dewana Bhabna, a village headman’s wealth included twenty-eight *bighas*¹⁹² of land, ten milch cows, oxen for ploughs and a store full of rice.¹⁹³ In fact, the employment of servants itself became an index of wealth. Fifteenth-century-poet Bipradas Pipilai’s *Manasamangal*, a short description of two wealthy peasants (*pradhan kisan*), Gora and Mina, included a reference to their slave/servant (*golam*).¹⁹⁴ In the ballad *Kamala*, thousands of healthy, hardworking servants worked for Manik Chakladar, a man in possession of *khamari* lands, a *zamindari* land worked by hired labor.¹⁹⁵

Rural peasantry was basically divided between the class of comfortable peasants with land, the *khudkasthas*, and the class of migrant peasants, the *pahikasthas*. *Pahikasthas* were either small holders who supplemented their income as migrant labor, or landless peasants working in the fields of the other peasants. Most often *khudkastha* peasantry employed hired labor. The *mangalkabyas* eulogizing the goddess Manasa (*Manasamangal*) repeatedly feature the image of a migrant agricultural laborer hiring himself out to landed peasantry. In all versions of the *Manasamangalkabyas*, Manasa, enraged by the influential merchant and *zamindar*, Chand, compels him to go through one tribulation after another. Chand goes on an overseas trading

¹⁹¹Purnachandra Chakraborty, ed, *Sri Sri Padmapuran ba Bishaharir Pnachali*, 59-60.

¹⁹² Land measurement. In colonial period, 1 bigha = 1/3rd acre

¹⁹³ Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Purbabanga Gitika, 2 vols (henceforth PG)* (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 2009), 179-180

¹⁹⁴ Achintya Biswas, ed., *Bipradas Pipilaier Manasamangal* (Kolkata: Ratnabali, 2002), 62

¹⁹⁵ PG,122-123

voyage with fourteen ships to an imaginary land called Dakhin Patan. On his way back, Chand loses his entire merchant fleet. In a state of complete destitution, Chand goes from door to door to eke out a living. In the version of the same story preserved by fifteenth-century-poet Bipradas Pipilai, Manasa comes to Chand's rescue disguised as a Brahmin. She offers Chand the chance to live as a cultivator (*krishan*) on her land.¹⁹⁶ A similar motif of Chand being employed by a Brahmin is also described in the seventeenth-century poet, Ketakadas Kshemananda's *Manasamangal*,¹⁹⁷ rural destitutes who wander around the Bengal countryside often find work as hired agricultural labor in the plots of landholders.

Landholding by Brahmins harks back to a much older source for history in the region, starting in the sixth century CE. Copper plate inscriptions on land transfers between the sixth and thirteenth centuries record that Brahmins were major beneficiaries of land donation by the state. Sometimes they purchased land rights from the state, but most often they received lands as gifts from the state. In certain areas, such as along the Bhagirathi River and in Dhaka-Faridpur region, almost all land grants that were recorded by the state on these copper plates were made to individual Brahmins. While in the sixth and seventh centuries the grants were given as a compensation for the rites they performed in houses of nobility, by the thirteenth century, grants were made in recognition of the service of the Brahmins in the royal courts. The gradual rise in the status of the Brahmins as political players in the region made them major landholders. The donees never to historians' knowledge took up agriculture themselves; rather, they employed

¹⁹⁶ Achintya Biswas, ed., *Bipradas Pipilaier Manasamangal*, 152

¹⁹⁷ Bijanbihari Bhattacharya, *Ketakadas Kshemananda Manasamangal*, (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi), 14

cultivators or new peasant settlers.¹⁹⁸ Hindu law digests sanctioned such practices. Manu's injunction prevented Brahmins from touching the plough.

In early sixteenth-century-poet Vijay Gupta's *mangalkabya*, Padmapuran, Chand went to a village headman, or *mandal*, named Jagai and was hired to weed the rice fields.¹⁹⁹ *Mandals* were village headmen who, on behalf of the collective village, collected revenue and surrendered it to the Mughal imperial revenue officials. Mandals constituted the wealthiest section of *khudkastha* peasantry. They were received with gifts by *zamindars* in their courts as an acknowledgement of their service of revenue collection.²⁰⁰ The wealth difference between the *mandals* and the small peasantry (*reza riaya*) only increased throughout the seventeenth century.

The figure of a far more humble peasant cultivator, engaging servants on land, appears in a literary sub-plot of Shib's rice cultivation in eighteenth-century-poet Rameshwar Bhattacharya's *mangalkabya*, Shibayan.²⁰¹ Shib received a lease document (*patta*) for land from the god Indra. In a domestic argument between Shib and his wife Gouri regarding what was to be done with his land, the latter suggested that cultivation should be left to servants.²⁰²

Servitude within the village was not always agricultural in nature. In eighteenth-century-poet Jagajjiban Ghosal's *Manasamangal*, shipwrecked Chand hired himself out to a potter as a porter.²⁰³ One comes across several terms for servitude with non-agrarian connotations in the middle Bengali texts and ballads. Chand in all *Manasamangalkabyas* appears as a merchant-*zamindar* who, before he too had to do manual labor to survive, originally had command over the

¹⁹⁸ Barrie Morrison, *Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1970), chap 4, 84-125.

¹⁹⁹ Vijay Gupta, *Padmapuran*, 294

²⁰⁰ John R McLane, *Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth century Bengal*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 52-53.

²⁰¹ In all probability Shib is the depiction of a muzari.

²⁰² Rameshwar Bhattacharya, *Shibayan*, 453

²⁰³ Achintya Biswas, ed, *Jagajjiban Ghosal er Manasamangal* (Ratnabali: Kolkata), 78-79

services of many different types of working people. For instance, with fearful hearts, Jalu and Malu, poor fishermen brothers, obeyed Chand's command to bring him fish. In Bipradas' text, their work for Chand is described as "*krittya*", a Bengali term with the dual meaning of work and duty.²⁰⁴ In Ketakadas' text, Jalu and Malu are interchangeably referred to as "*chakor*," meaning servant and "*dasa*," a term used for a servile dependent. Ketakadas further illuminates the relationship of Chand with the Dhibar, or fishermen's community, as one cemented through the payment of a water tax (*jalkar*) to Chand the *zamindar*. Since he had not been collecting the tax for a long time, the fishermen lived at his mercy and were obliged to offer him their service instead.²⁰⁵ Even artisans were bound by relations of servitude. In eighteenth-century-poet Jiban Maitra's *Manasamangal*, Chand commanded seven carpenter brothers to build him a ship with special timber. Though these artisans were working for wages, they were employed on condition that they forfeit their lives if they missed Chand's eight-day deadline.²⁰⁶

Specialized terms for unskilled, hired labor appear in the fifteenth century. "Gabar," a Bengali term used most often for common oarsmen in the mangal poems, is also present in fifteenth-century-poet Vijaygupta's *Padmapuran* for porters who assisted smiths by carrying their sacks of coal.²⁰⁷ In the well-known *mangalkabya*, *Annadamangal*, by eighteenth-century poet Bharatchandra, one comes across the Bengali term "*khetel*." This unusual word is the personified form of the infinitive verb "to labor" in Bengali, "*khata*." A person who uses his labor to earn a living is thus "*khetel*." While it is not specified what kind of work they did, based on other evidence, it appears that the presence of such workers was universal, whether in the agrarian

Achintya Biswas, ed., *Bipradas Pipilaier Manasamangal*, 83

²⁰⁵ Akshaykumar Kayal and Chitra Deb, eds., *Ketakadas Kshemananda's rachita Manasamangal* [(Kolkata: Lekhapara, Bengali year 1384 (1985)], 137

²⁰⁶ Asutosh Bhattacharyya, ed, *Bais kabir manasamangal* (Kolkata: Calcutta University, 1962), 128-129.

²⁰⁷ Vijaygupta, *Padmapuran*, manuscript kha, 349

sector or elsewhere.²⁰⁸ The richness of vocabulary for hired labor is illustrated by the use of the modern Bengali word for waged work, *chakri*; in Annadamangal, Dasu and Basu, the attendants Majumdar, referred to their own work as *chakri*.²⁰⁹

3.3 WORKERS' MOBILITY

Almost all forms of village servitude entailed the mobility of the workers. The presence of the *pahikastha* peasantry in agriculture was substantial. In fact, as Irfan Habib has shown, a *khudkastha* peasant in one village could become a seasonally or even permanently *pahikastha* peasant in another village, where they migrated as agricultural workers.²¹⁰ That mobility of peasants was well known among the Mughal administration is clear from the circular issued by the Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb, in his eighth regnal year (1665). He made reforms in revenue administration for a number of his finance and revenue officials (*diwan*) in different provinces. According to the second clause of the circular:

If anyone amongst the cultivators (*karindas*) has fled, they [amils or revenue collectors] should find out the reason thereof and try hard in the matter of his return to his native place. Similarly, they should use praiseworthy endeavor and much effort at soothing and conciliation, to gather cultivators from all sides and directions.²¹¹

The mobility of the workers was known to the state. Due to excess land in proportion to human beings and more importantly, the frequent clashes with the state over ambiguous jurisdictions of

²⁰⁸ Annadamangal, 275

²⁰⁹ Annadamangal, 384.

²¹⁰ Habib gives the example of some *khudkasht* peasants from the pargana Khambayat in Gujarat migrated to pargana Patlad to work as *paikasth* Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707*, 132

²¹¹ Shireen Moosvi, "Reforming Revenue administration: Aurangzeb's Farman to Rasikdas, 1665," in *People, Taxation and Trade in Mughal India*, (Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2008), 180.

local *zamindars* or village heads,²¹² such mobility could not be regulated and was thus feared. A copy of the same circular was sent by Aurangzeb to Mir Muhammad Mu'izz, revenue administrator of imperial lands (*diwan-i khalisa*) of Bihar province, an important hub of the companies' activities in Bengal.

The extension of settlements—both urban and rural—especially in Eastern Bengal, marked the entire medieval period. Richard Eaton has shown that agriculture expanded in Eastern Bengal in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the Mughal state gave revenue-free (*madad-i-mash*) grants to influential religious figures, both Hindus and Muslims.²¹³ These land grants created a number of *zamindars* called *bankati zamindars*, or *zamindars* who settled villages by cutting down forests. Many of these lands were previously uncultivated and were brought under the plough by workers for the grantees. Such settlement patterns started long before the coming of the Mughals. Khilafatabad, a fifteenth-century town, is a good example. Khilafatabad's settlement centered around a charismatic figure, Khan Jahan Ali, popularly known as Pir Khanjali. Due to his patronage and that of his followers, the area was gradually settled.²¹⁴

A sense of how lands were settled can be gathered from an early eighteenth-century chronicle of the history of the neighboring province of Bihar, which mentions that from the time of Emperor Shah Jahan (1628-1658), it was customary for wood cutters and ploughmen to accompany his troops so that the forest and its hostile inhabitants could be cleared and land

²¹² See clauses 6 and 9 of the same circular, *ibid.*; clash between the zamindars and the Mughal state stemmed from share in the revenue. While the Mughal state wanted to increase their share of the revenue they wanted to abolish the zamindari demands on the peasants to relieve them of the burden. The zamindars on the other hand from time to time cheated on their payment of revenue to the Mughal state. Dilbagh Singh, "Contesting Hegemony: State and Peasant in Late Medieval Rajasthan"

²¹³ Richard Eaton, *Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, 260-262

²¹⁴ Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, *Historical and Cultural aspects of Islamic Inscriptions of Bengal*, 146-147.

cultivated by newly-settled farmers.²¹⁵ A similar picture emerges of the deployment of large numbers of mobile workers for land clearance from pre-Mughal times in sixteenth-century-poet Mukundaram's description of Kalketu's foundation of the imaginary city of Gujarat. Huge numbers of migrant workers, organized by their leaders into gangs and working under their respective leaders, were employed:

Hearing the news of forest clearance organized by Mahabir (Kalketu), day laborers (*berunia jan*) poured in from different directions. *Bir* (Kalketu) bought axes and drills for distributing them amongst the laborers. From the north came a hundred wild people. Bir welcomed the day laborers with paan leaves and areca nuts. From the south came under their leader five hundred workers. Dafar Miyan, a day laborer from the west came with two thousand men.²¹⁶

These workers did not settle in the cleared lands. The settlers were people from the village of Kalinga, who immigrated to Gujarat after a devastating flood.²¹⁷ The word used for such workers, *beruniajan*, is significant. It is derived from the Persian word *berun*, meaning "the outsider." A specialized term for migrant worker thus emerged by the late sixteenth century. The significance of the outsider as wage worker is further attested to by the meaning of *berun* in Bengali. In Bengali, unlike in Persian, *berun* means wages. Here it is important to mention that there were other words used for wage work in the *mangalkabyas*. In late-eighteenth-century-poet Vishnupala's *Mansamangal*, the term "*kaman*" was used to describe the work of a hired laborer.²¹⁸ "*Kaman*," a noun, literally means money earned from selling labor. While human labor underpins the etymology of "*kaman*," migration lies at the root of "*berunia*." Migration thus left its indelible mark on the world of wage work in pre-colonial Bengal.

²¹⁵ Muzaffar Alam, "Eastern India in the Early Eighteenth century "Crisis": Some evidence from Bihar," in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 28, no.1 (1991): 66

²¹⁶ Sukumar Sen, ed., *Kabikankan Mukunda birachita Chandimangal* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2007), 68

²¹⁷ *Ibid*, 76-77

²¹⁸ Sukumar Ray, ed., *Visnu pala's Manasamangala* (Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, 2002), 75.

The numbers of *beruniajan* mentioned by Mukundaram— two thousand six hundred men—makes one wonder if he wrote in a fit of fantasy. However, he was not the only one providing such numbers. The EIC or VOC accounts of the construction sites from the early eighteenth century specify hundreds and sometimes tens of thousands of workers. As many as 28,432 coolies worked in the period between November 1738 and July 1739 on the construction of a makeshift dock for the VOC at Falta.²¹⁹ The various depictions of forest clearance and construction work in the ballads attest to the fact that a huge number of workers were assembled to perform such tasks. In an undated ballad from Eastern Bengal, Dewana Madina, Alal built his house in the midst of a forest close to his patrimony, Banyachang. He was assigned five hundred men for the task by his former employer and patron, Dewan Secunder.²²⁰ In another ballad from Eastern Bengal, Kamalranir Gaan, the king employed 6,400 laborers to empty a lake because his beloved queen had drowned in that lake.²²¹ The migrant workers as depicted in these poems were necessary at every step of the creation of the city or village, from forest clearance to the creation of a cityscape with impressive buildings.

People belonging to the untouchable castes were most disposed to mobility since they had no rights over agricultural land. The untouchables, according to Habib, provided the largest source of hired labor.²²² The continuous process of expansion of the Mughal imperial agricultural frontier through forest clearance entailed destruction or absorption of hunter-gatherers, who remained on the fringes of the rural community. Hunter-gatherer tribes such as the Shabar, Byadh or Akhoti find repeated mention in almost all *mangalkabyas*. The sixteenth-century poet Mukundaram Chakraborty described the family of Kalketu Byadh and his wife

²¹⁹ VOC 8787, 570

²²⁰ PG, 346

²²¹ PG, 590

²²² Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 143

Fullara. Kalketu hunted animals, and Fullara peddled the meat in the village. They had little access to the essential village commodities, especially clothes. The family endured constant deprivation, with meals of nothing but rice starch for several days at a stretch.²²³ In the various Dharmamangals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the story of Kalu Dom and his family reveals a similar picture of untouchables precariously subsisting within the village community. The indigence of Dom's family is vividly described in Rupram's Dharmamangal, a seventeenth-century text. Kalu's wife Lakhia had only a few tattered pieces of clothing with which to cover herself. In the evenings, Lakhia would go from house to house begging for the leftover starch from rice.²²⁴

In all Dharmamangals, the Dom families migrate from their ancestral village, Ramati, accompanying the hero Lausen to Lausen's *zamindari* in Maina. They were able to move precisely because they had no ties to agrarian land. Their means of livelihood, which included rearing pigs, remained outside the pale of the village community. Pigs were considered to be unclean by both upper caste Hindus and Muslims. To join the emigrant community, they had to leave their supposedly polluting lifestyle. In eighteenth-century-poet Manikram Ganguli's Dharmamangal, Lausen forbids Kalu from taking his herd to Maina. He explains, "Maina is a place of dharma, acts of defilement are not permitted there."²²⁵ The VOC employed *doms* for bamboo works on their construction sites in the early eighteenth century. *Doms'* association with bamboo carving and basket-making is mentioned in the seventeenth-century poet Ghanaram

²²³ Sukumar Sen, ed., *Kabikankan Mukunda birachita Chandimangal*, 46-63

²²⁴ Akshaykumar Kayal, ed., *Rupram Chakraborty birachita Dharmamangal* [Kolkata: Bharabi, Bengali Year 1399 (1992)], 203-204

²²⁵ Bijitkumar Datta & Sunanda Datta, ed., *Manikram Gangulir Dharmamangal* (Kolkata: Kolkata Viswavidyalaya, 2009), 313.

Chakraborty's *Dharmamangal* and *Manasamangal* by Ketakadas Kshemananda.²²⁶ The forest also provided them with palm leaves, which the women of the family stitched to make plates, sold in the village market.

3.4 WOMEN'S WORK AND MOBILITY

The mobility of destitute and working women in pre-colonial Bengal is particularly significant. As wives of male mobile workers, some women experienced an itinerant life as well. A famous example is Bharatchandra's description of a grass-cutters' wife. As was the practice, Mughal imperial armies included grass-cutters who would gather the fodder for horses. The grass-cutter's wife, or, as Bharatchandra ironically calls her, "the grass-cutter queen," went along with her husband in the army of the Rajput Hindu general who served the Mughal empire, Man Singh. In Bharatchandra's portrayal, the grass cutter's wife was far from an ideal loyal devoted wife. While a flash flood wreaked havoc on the army, the grass-cutter's wife mourned:

The queen of the grass-cutter floated on a heap of grass
Meanwhile the grass-cutter was drowned
The queen wept, o lord
I have never been in such trouble
I am now fifteen or sixteen years of age
And have already changed eleven husbands.²²⁷

This burlesque on the grass cutter's wife shows how the sexuality of the lower orders of society was ridiculed by the likes of Bharatchandra, court poet of the *zamindar* of Nadia, Raja

²²⁶ Pijushkanti Mahapatra, ed., *Ghanaram Chakraborty birachita*, (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1961), 346-348; Behula disguised as a Doma woman describes various forms of mat and basket works as her caste profession. Ketakadas Kshemananda, 104-105.

²²⁷ Madanmohan Goswami, ed., *Bharatchandra* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2011), 89

Krishnachandra. The uncontrollable mobility of these women contributed to the male perception of them as sexually deviant women.

The milkmaid is a very common trope in *mangalkabyas* and Vaishnava literature. In Chandidas' Srikrishnakirtan, Radha is a woman of the cowherds who carries all the prepared milk products to the market. In the Manasamangalkabyas, goddess Manasa disguises herself as a milkmaid while visiting the village doctor, who has knowledge of antidotes against snake bites. In eighteenth-century-poet Vishnupala's Manasamangal, Manasa, when asked by the village doctor why she moves around alone disguised as a milkmaid, answers: "We are women of the cowherds, we peddle our goods, and there is no shame in this work."²²⁸ An itinerant woman plays an important role in Bharatchandra's eighteenth-century love tale of Vidya and Sundar. On reaching Bardhaman, Sundar takes refuge in the house of Hira Malini, the flower woman. Hira sells flowers from door to door, so Sundar uses her to gain access to his beloved Vidya's quarters. The coquettish Hira Malini, who moves freely in the market, haggling with sundry and all, gives a very distinctive picture of the woman in the market.

Destitution often led to women's mobility. In the story of Jalu and Malu in the Manasamangal poems, Manasa, disguised as an old man, begs Jalu and Malu to ferry her across the river. A Brahmin widow, she moves from village to village, begging for a living.²²⁹ The figure of an ambulatory old beggar woman also appears in fifteenth-century-poet Vijaygupta's *mangalkabya* Padmapuran. Here Manasa, disguised as an old beggar, starving for over three days, asks for some milk from the cowherd.²³⁰

²²⁸ Sukumar Sen, ed., *Visnu pala's Manasamangal*, 46

²²⁹ See Ketakadas, 138-143; Sukumar Sen, *Visnupala's Manasamangal*, 51.

²³⁰ Vijaygupta, 117

It was not just their destitution but also work that connected widows and women at large to the market. In Kshemananda's *Mansamangal*, Jalu, Malu's mother, a Dhibar or fisherman by caste, is seen as chaffing and pounding rice in merchant houses in exchange for broken bits of rice, while Jalu and Malu maintain their caste profession. The widow also spins yarn and then sells it in the village market. Jalu and Malu's catch brings the family rice, but the widow's earnings add salt and oil to their diet.²³¹

Spinning yarn was women's work, and it too connected them to the village market. Even women from upper castes spun yarn for the market. The eighteenth-century poet Bharatchandra describes how a *kulin* (Brahmin of the highest order) woman earned money by spinning yarn to satiate her husband's constant demand for money. The spinning of yarn was elevated to a symbol of feminine virtue when Isami rebuked Razia Sultan, saying that she should not meddle in affairs of the state, but stay home and spin yarn.²³² A similar notion is found in a ballad from Eastern Bengal, *Kamalranir Gaan*, where a queen is seen spinning. Removed from the realm of production, spinning here is transformed into a purely feminine attribute.²³³ In such idealized visions, women's access to the market is often removed. A good example of this is how spinning yarn features in the divine relationship between Gorakshanath and Parvati as depicted in *Gorakshavijaya*, an eighteenth-century Bengali text, considered the most important text for the Natha cult. In her idealized vision of domesticity, Parvati suggests that apart from taking care of Gorakshanath, she would spin yarn with which Gorakshanath would weave *dhotis* (a sarong-like piece of men's clothing) and sell them in the village market for a living.²³⁴ Though women's

²³¹ Ketakadas Kshemanandar *Mansamangal*, 145

²³² Irfan Habib, "Non Agricultural Production and Urban Economy" in *Cambridge Economic History of India, Volume I: c.1200-c.1750*, eds., Irfan Habib and Tapan Ray Chaudhuri (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 78

²³³ PG, 583

²³⁴ Panchanan Mandal, ed., *Gorakshavijay* (Kolkata: Viswabharati, BS, 1365), 38-40

work spinning yarn was critical to the textile industry, as the example of Jalu and Malu's mother illustrates, such work was not confined to women in weaver families.

Working women who spun yarn often appear in the middle Bengali text as sexually deviant figures.²³⁵ The depiction of a widow in Ghanaram Chakraborty's *Dharmamangal*, a late-seventeenth-century text is a good example. On the one hand, a very real picture can be found in the depiction of an old woman who had been widowed for twenty years. A cotton-ginning machine, a spinning wheel and a few earthen vessels are her only possessions (*pnuji*), demonstrating not only her landlessness but also her lack of family support for sustenance. On the other hand, she is seen selling all her belongings, blinded by her lust for a much younger Lausen and thus subjected to brutal condescension by the male poet.²³⁶ Similarly, in several descriptions of Godha's colony, made up of diseased outcasts and therefore a fountainhead of immorality and vice according to Bipradas, in *Manasamangalkabyas*, Godha's wives are shown spinning yarn. In eighteenth-century- poet Vishnupala's *Manasamangal*, the poet issues a caveat in the general canonical description of Godha and his ilk as sub-humans. One of Godha's wives mentions that she sold her yarns to the village weaver. In Visnupala's rendition, even though she was as ugly as any other portrayal of Godha's wife, she took enormous pride in her craft, for a single string of yarn could tie a cow worth twelve rupees, and three strings could tie a royal elephant.²³⁷

The diversification of income among the landless poor provided another impetus for mobility. In his period of tribulation after the previously-mentioned shipwreck, the formerly rich merchant Chand in Bipradas' *Manasamangal* first took up the job of woodcutter, then that of

²³⁵ For an idea of feminine virtue in Brahmanical texts, see Preeta Bhattacharya and Ratnabali Chatterjee, *Prachin Bharate Nari* (Kolkata: Ababhash, 2003)

²³⁶ Pijushkanti Mahapatra, ed., *Ghanaram Chakraborty birachita Dharmamangal*, 283

²³⁷ Sukumar Sen, *Visnupala's Manasamangal*, 106

hunter, then worked as an agricultural labor and finally as a cowherd.²³⁸ Moving from one job to another was quite plausible for the destitute, cutting across gender and caste. This was certainly the fate of Jalu and Malu's mother and Kalketu Byadh. Such examples can be seen in the ballads as well. In the Eastern Bengali ballad, Manik Tara, a young widow of a barber, goes to live with the fishermen with her only surviving son. Though beneath her caste status, she weaves fishing nets, pounds paddy, and spins yarn for sustenance.²³⁹

3.5 ARTISANS AND MOBILITY

As the portrayal of the spinning women indicates, mobile life was not necessarily incompatible with skilled work. The massive influx of artisans in the thirteenth century from Central Asia in North India, which brought in its wake massive urbanization, is well documented.²⁴⁰ Artisans from Central Asia started coming to Bengal in the same period, continuing a migration that endured into the sixteenth century. An interesting religious inscription from the Sylhet district made in the year 1588 mentions the name of the artist, Abdallah Khan Bukhari, who was a new immigrant. Like any recent immigrant, he retained his place of origin in his name. More importantly, that he was a recent initiate in his trade is clear from the crude style of his inscription. Not only was he not aware of the well-developed *tughra* style of inscriptions from the period of Bengal Sultanate, but he was also evidently very ill-versed in the *nastaliq* style of the Mughal period. His unsure hand tells us that the engravers' profession remained porous even

²³⁸ Acintya Biswas, ed., *Vipradas Pipilai er Manasamangal*, 149-152

²³⁹ Barbers are higher in caste status than the fishermen. Brahmins can accept water from barbers' hands but not from the hands of fisherfolk PG, 604

²⁴⁰ Irfan Habib, *Essays in Indian History*, 375-377

in the sixteenth century, absorbing newcomers from distant lands.²⁴¹ The migration of the oldest residents of Calcutta, the Bysacks or weavers from Saptagram, demonstrated artisan mobility. As the port of Saptagram declined, these weavers relocated to Calcutta in the early seventeenth century in order to have easy access to Portuguese merchants loading their ships at Bettore.

Artisans in the mangalkabyas were always on the move. A detailed literary profile of blacksmiths is found in fifteenth-century-poet Vijay Gupta's mangalkabya, Padmapuran. In order to manufacture a foolproof iron room, Chand called in fourteen hundred blacksmiths. After getting the specifications for the desired iron room from Chand, they set up their workshops in a field adjacent to Chand's residence. Work had taken a toll on their bodies – they looked “terrible” (*bikat*) with “crooked backs” (*bhengur kakali*) and “ash-covered faces” (*nake mukhe pariyachhey aguner chhali*), and their “attitude was like hammerblows” (*kamarer bol chal haturer bari*).²⁴² Max Weber called this type of labor “demiurgic” labor, where the labor of the artisan who is paid in monetary wages is controlled by the demand of the corporate body of village community. Thus, village artisan labor was subsumed within the village community.²⁴³ However, from early eighteenth-century company sources, it is that clear artisan mobility often involved moving beyond the village. The 90 caulkers and 100 carpenters working for 160 days at Falta, the anchoring place of EIC and VOC ships, in 1739 could only be explained by migration from neighboring villages.²⁴⁴ Even in 1756, when the EIC officials took refuge Falta, running away from the Nawab's attack on Calcutta, the place had a smaller population. Thus, artisans served the demands of a market that exceeded the limits of the village community.

²⁴¹ Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, *Historical and Cultural aspects of Islamic Inscriptions of Bengal*, 193-194

²⁴² Vijaygupta, in *punthi, kha and ga*.

²⁴³ Max Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Free Press), 1947, 230

²⁴⁴ VOC 8787, 569-573. There were several other carpenters and sawers who worked for a smaller span of time, between 8 and 20 days.

Though artisans' portrayal in Vijaygupta's Padmapuran is very similar to that of recently-destitute Chand, especially because of their mobility, there were important differences.²⁴⁵ Unlike Chand, they owned their own tools. They all came with a hammer in one hand and weighing scales in the other. After setting up their workshops, they themselves gathered other material like coal.

There were several parallels between such arrangements described in Vijaygupta's text and the company construction sites of the early eighteenth century. Carpenters and masons poured into work sites and set up their shops. Carpenters' and masons' shop units had at most three divisions which, since they reflected differential wage rates, were presumably hierarchical. The highest paid were the master masons/carpenters, below them were the general masons/sawyers, and at the bottom were coolies.²⁴⁶ This three-tiered division on the artisan shop floor is also seen in Vijaygupta's Padmapuran. There, fourteen hundred blacksmiths had one master smith, Tarapati, whose good judgment they praised:

Tarapati was the clever one
He hand picked one hundred smiths for the work.²⁴⁷

The master-smith in this depiction was assisted by smiths who worked under him. Then there were porters who helped carry the coal.²⁴⁸ In fact, coolies who worked as assistants were generally better paid than coolies hired by the companies.²⁴⁹ Since their wages were higher than the regular coolies', these carpenters' or smiths' assistants must have performed some skilled work in addition to carrying coal. Tarapati is further praised because:

²⁴⁵ Vijaygupta, Padmapuran, 348

²⁴⁶ For example, in 1730 657 carpenters were assisted by 74 sawers, VOC 8870, 280.

²⁴⁷ Vijaygupta, manuscript kha, 351

²⁴⁸ Vijaygupta, manuscript kha, 349

²⁴⁹ Coolies who worked as carpenters' assistants got a wage of 1.5 annas while the normal wage for any other coolie was 1 anna, VOC 8758, 69-76

Tarapati is most talented of them all.
He made the measurements and laid the foundations.²⁵⁰

From this fictional description, it seems that Tarapati was also an architect. This is very similar to the role played by master mason in making recommendations for repair of the VOC-owned houses in Chinsura in 1739. The unnamed master mason, along with the Dutch master carpenter, Jan Janszen van der Huis, drew up a report based on their inspection detailing the specific renovations that were to be done for VOC houses and warehouses.²⁵¹

3.6 CONSTRAINTS ON MOBILITY

Some members of the untouchable castes were tied to the village community through exploitative relations of debt bondage. For example, the relationship between the village and Kalketu Byadh's family is personified by Murari Seal, the merchant moneylender. As a creditor, Kalketu was bound by debt to bring to Seal's house the meat of animals that he hunted from time to time. He was also obligated to perform certain chores for the Seal household, such as the wood that Seal's wife ordered him to bring from the forest.²⁵² Debt thus tied Kalketu and Fullara to the village community as its servants.

Poor small peasants were also often neck-deep in debt. In the episode of Shib's agricultural venture in eighteenth-century-poet Rameshwar's Shibayan, Shib, as a first-time small peasant, goes to Kuber, the same man who awarded him the lease document for his land, to

²⁵⁰ Vijaygupta, Padmapuran, manuscript, kha, 348

²⁵¹ VOC 8787, 191.

²⁵² Sukumar Sen, ed., *Kabikankan Mukunda birachita Chandimangal*, 66

borrow seeds.²⁵³ Credit networks were a major external force affecting village life. A mid-eighteenth century account of Mughal India states that moneylenders in villages were mostly grain dealers moving between villages. Big merchants called *sahukars*, who were involved in long-distance trade and who also at times bought revenue farming rights (*ijara*) from the state, collectively lent money to the villages. Resourceful and prosperous peasants and village headmen also took over the role of moneylenders.²⁵⁴

Indebtedness was thus an important source of servitude. Persian source Risala mentions that most peasants contracted debt to pay land revenue and other taxes at extremely high rates – as high as 12.5% per month – which were then compounded after short periods.²⁵⁵ In addition to the merchant-moneylenders, the rich peasants/*zamindars* took over the role of moneylenders. Ghulam Hussain Salim, author of *Riyas-u-Salatin*, characterized all people of Bengal in the following terms:

No race in all four quarters of the globe is equal to the Bengalis in wickedness, duplicity, knavery and villainy. They do not consider loans repayable and promises which they pledge to perform in one day they do not fulfill in one year.²⁵⁶

The prevalence of rural usury is evident from Mukundaram's description in *Chandimangal* of the usurer-cum-merchant, Murari Seal, an experienced usurer who gave out loans to individuals in the village against labor bonds or mortgages of the debtors' possessions. The "crooked" Murari Seal then went door-to-door collecting interest. Debts were often passed on through the generations.²⁵⁷ Dingadhar, the protagonist of *Mahisal bandhu*, though born into a small holder

²⁵³ Rameshwar Bhattacharya, *Shibayan*, 452 -453

²⁵⁴ Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 138-138; Gautam Bhadra, *Mughal yuger Krishi arthaniti*, 43.

²⁵⁵ Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 138

²⁵⁶ Maulavi Abdus Salam, trans. & ed., *Riyazu-s-Salatin* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1902), 21

²⁵⁷ Sukumar Sen, ed., *Kabikankan Mukunda birachita Chandimangal*, 66

family, was reduced to being a servant of Balaram, the village moneylender, as he was unable to repay the hundred rupees that his father had borrowed. Dingadhar was bound to Balaram as his cowherd for six years. No wonder he lamented, “The sin of debt is never to be pardoned in this birth or the next.”²⁵⁸

3.7 RURAL STRATIFICATION AND CONFLICT

The rural stratification which gave rise to the itinerant worker often manifested itself in various contradictions. According to a nineteenth-century survey of agrarian conditions in the lower Doab region called Diwan Pasand, the most comfortable substratum of peasants were *hal-e mir* (rich plough owners), a minority compared to the large section of peasantry with small holdings (*reza riaya*).²⁵⁹ The small peasantry who either cultivated their own lands or even worked as tenant farmers (*muzarian*) on rich peasants’ lands were also neck deep in debt. Their precarious relation to agriculture is poignantly expressed in the words of eighteenth-century poet Rameshwar Bhattacharya: “the crop tells the peasant, I will eat you first.”²⁶⁰ The distrust between the small and rich peasants is seen through the poet’s emphasis on the role of *patta* (lease) in formalizing the legal status of the peasant. *Zamindars*, *taluqdars*, *ijaradars* and even the village headmen retained the right to award *pattas* to peasants. Formalization of such status was evidently necessary:

Never have faith in the words of a man of wealth
With a lease consequences are for the better.²⁶¹

²⁵⁸ PG, 458

²⁵⁹ Gautam Bhadra, *Mughal yuger krishi Arthaniti*, 57-58

²⁶⁰ Rameshwar Bhattacharya, Shibayan, 447

²⁶¹ Ibid, 449

Shib's cautiousness puts agreements over land rights as the site of contention between the peasants and revenue officials distributing land rights. The absence of any reference to caste is significant here. The same peasant retained a similar disgust for hired agricultural labor hands. While Shib was of the opinion that the presence of the householder/peasant in the fields was essential for good profits, he hired his nephew Bhim rather than hiring labor hands. His reason was thus:

Family members together do good agriculture --they remain a kin in times of scarcity, whereas greedy agricultural labor hands (habhatya halya) would sell out fast.²⁶²

Hired agricultural laborers always had tenuous links with land as they would move to different peasant holdings if their wages or share of produce diminished. Thus, for small peasants it was risky to employ hired labor. In fact, distrust for hired agrarian workers can be found in the much earlier work of sixteenth-century poet Mukundaram Chakraborty, here elaborating his distress:

In times of scarcity, my agricultural labor hand (halya) sold out.²⁶³

His aversion to agricultural wage workers led him to employ his family members. A very detailed picture of the peasant family at work and especially the gendered division of labor in rice cultivation can be found in the story of Dulal and his wife Madina in the ballad *Dewana Madina*.²⁶⁴ A different picture of familial division of labor emerges from Shib and Bhim's rice cultivation. The relationship between Shib and Bhim at work was one of subordination, even though they were related by blood. Not only did Bhim help out Shib with cultivation, but he also did the lion's share of the work. In exchange for carrying out this Herculean task, Bhim received

²⁶² Ibid, 453

²⁶³ Panchanan Mandal, ed., *Mukundaram Chakraborty's Chandimangal*, (Kolkata: Bharabi, 1991), 8

²⁶⁴ PG,

one square meal for the day, nevertheless irking Shib for consuming copious amounts of rice. Hired labor or not, agricultural work entailed a division of labor which was clearly exploitative.

Some small peasants identified with the wealthier section of the peasantry in their disgust for agricultural laborers. For example, Chand, finding himself a perambulatory destitute, found employment as an agricultural worker with the task of weeding. Under the spell of Manasa, who misled him, Chand snipped the rice plants instead of weeding. In sixteenth-century-poet Vijay Gupta's Padmapuran, his employer, the village headman Jagai, retaliated by beating him up. The headman also gathered other small peasants who assisted him in attacking the destitute laborer.²⁶⁵ Chand's misfortunes demonstrated that settled peasants retained the right to physically abuse their migrant workers.

Class consciousness is clearly articulated whenever the dispossessed cultivator threatened to usurp power. The literature on peasant resistance has emphasized that the articulation of class interests was often overshadowed by clan or caste interests. It is true that caste consciousness was an important component in the thought processes of the *mangalkabyas*. At times it is impossible to extricate caste from class, presumably because menial castes formed the largest group of destitute workers. Yet class conflicts arose in which the language of caste was not used to express antagonism. In sixteenth-century-poet Mukundaram's Chandimangal, with the blessings of Chandi, Kalketu settles an entire village and town, Gujarat, and then appoints a man named Bulan as the village headman. However, Bharu Datta, a *kayastha* and the headman in his previous dwelling place, Kalinga, which he had left following a devastating flood, resented this decision, particularly since Bulan had been his old servant. Thus, Bharu Datta warned Kalketu:

²⁶⁵ Vijay Gupta, Padmapuran, 294

Think well before you act lest you are later ashamed of your own deeds. Bulan wore old clothes, pounded my paddy. The cultivator will now become headman (*deshmukh*). The staff in the hands of servants and wealth in the hands of young women is the source of great sorrow.²⁶⁶

Although Bharu borrowed from the established misogyny of the day in expressing his defense of his class interests, he did not resort to any caste-ist aspersions. In fact, the word he uses for “servant” is “*nafar*” – an Arabic word which makes no reference to Indic caste distinctions.

3.8 MEANING OF WAGES

The starkness of class contradiction, however, had its limits, for the Mughal state could not control the mobility of all of its subjects. In order to address this failure, Aurangzeb, in his circular of revenue reforms, asked his revenue officials to “use praiseworthy endeavor and much effort at soothing and conciliation, to gather cultivators from all sides and directions.” The “praiseworthy endeavors” involved reduced revenue rates for bringing new land under cultivation, relief during natural calamities, agricultural loans, and relief from unjust proportion of revenue burden and the extra levies, imposed by village headmen.²⁶⁷ Such beneficence continued into the early eighteenth century. From Bihar, we have evidence of ploughs being donated to the cultivators by the Mughal state. In addition, for the first year, cultivators were expected to pay a very low revenue of one anna per bigha of land.²⁶⁸ Since there was more land in proportion to people, the central concern of the Mughal state was extending cultivable land by settling peasants. Even the menial castes, who rarely had rights over agricultural lands,

²⁶⁶ Sukumar Sen, ed., *Kabikankan Mukunda birachita Chandimangal*, 77-78

²⁶⁷ Moosvi, *People, Taxation and Trade in Mughal India*, 177-185

²⁶⁸ Muzaffar Alam, “Eastern India in the Early Eighteenth century “Crisis”: Some evidence from Bihar,” 66.

sometimes got a small plot of land where they lived. In Rupram's Dharmamangal, Kalu had a hovel by a pond in the outskirts of the village, which was his hereditary allotment (*miras*).²⁶⁹ Though thoroughly destitute, Kalu was thus embedded in the village community with no threat of eviction. This illustrates Habib's claim that eviction as a threat to rural poor was only introduced by the colonial land settlement of 1793, where absolute property in land gave the new rentier class the opportunity and the incentive to evict peasants.²⁷⁰

The centralized Mughal state settled land in seventeenth-century Bengal through revenue-free grants (*madad-i-mash*) made to the religious gentry, who in turn extended the agrarian frontier. The grantees organized forest clearance and settlement of people from far and near. Due to the scarcity of labor, most of these grant documents allowed the grantee the right to use forced labor, i.e, *begar*, for all kinds of work.

Forced labor was also used in urban construction. In eighteenth-century-poet Rupram's Dharmamangal, the chief minister of the King of Gaur orders his *kotwal* to levy forced labor from the city dwellers in order to build a temple for Dharmathakur.²⁷¹ Each house has to send two people and a shovel to work at the construction site. People start deserting, so every evening after work, the laborers are kept tethered. Despite the use of force, these workers were given five *ganda*²⁷² cowries and a half *seer*²⁷³ rice a day for nourishment. Force was counterbalanced with reward as the captive labor pool could be maintained only temporarily.

²⁶⁹ Akshaykumar Kayal, ed., *Rupram Chakraborty birachita Dharmamangal*, 205

²⁷⁰ Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 134

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 294

²⁷² Monetary measurement. 1 anna = 4 gandas.

²⁷³ Unit measurement for weight. 1 seer approximately equals to 1 kilogram.

The impoverishment of the landless poor was somewhat mitigated through their access to forested lands. Eighteenth-century historian Ghulam Hussain Salim described the human landscape of Bengal:

And the wilderness and habitation of this country are similar [to other parts of Mughal India] in that the people erect huts of thatch made up of bamboos and straw...Whenever quitting one place they migrate to another straightaway. They erect a thatched hut similar to their former one...Most of their habitations are in jungles and forests. So their huts are surrounded with trees.²⁷⁴

Indeed, the hunter-gather family Fullara and Kalketu's hut amidst the forest embodied Salim's historical description.²⁷⁵ Even when forest clearance and bringing land under cultivation formed the topmost priority of the revenue-extracting Mughal state, there was an abundance of forested land. Forests were occasionally taxed under the Mughal state – only that part of the forest cover which was used as pasture land in a densely populated village. In thinly populated villages pasture lands were not assessed for revenue. Most importantly forests posed the heart of darkness for the Mughal state where rebels took shelter. Forests thus had military importance over and above economic significance – forest clearance was undertaken as a military strategy of safeguarding the borders of the empire.²⁷⁶ In eastern India, large parts of forested lands came under the control of autonomous chiefs or *peshkashi zamindars* (*zamindars* who paid a fixed tribute to the Mughal state). Since, these chiefs came from folds of tribal societies of the forests,

²⁷⁴ Maulavi Abdus Salam, trans. & ed., *Riyazu-s-Salatin*, 21

²⁷⁵ Commoning rights over forest lands in colonial India has been discussed by Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993)

²⁷⁶ Chetan Singh, "Forest, Pastoralists and Agrarian Society in Mughal India," in *Nature Culture Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*, eds., David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 21-48

they maintained the communal rights over forests even while extending agrarian land.²⁷⁷ The destitute could thus live off the forest evading the control of the state. The image of forest as autonomous territory is recurrent in texts from the fifteenth through the eighteenth century. In fifteenth-century poet, Bipradas Pipilai's *Manasamangal*, the once-rich Chand after his shipwreck found refuge in one such forest. There he collected a load of branches and sold it to a village potter for four pons or five annas.²⁷⁸ Two centuries later, the depiction of destitute Chand in Ketakadas Kshemananda's text painted a similar picture. Here it needs to be mentioned, forests economically did not maintain complete autonomy. Members of settled communities were constantly in contact with forest dwellers for essential commodities of everyday life.²⁷⁹ Chand's perambulation led him to meet a group of woodcutters. A day's work of chopping woods in the forest and selling it in the city would fetch them ten annas. Woodcutting, they declared, was the "practice of their *jati*."²⁸⁰ It is unlikely that "*jati*" here means caste, precisely because woodcutting historically was never a caste occupation – every member of the village society had access to the wood.²⁸¹ Rather *jati* here refers to a collective existence dependent on cutting, collecting and selling wood. The porosity of this collectivity is evident from the fact that the woodcutters readily accepted Chand in their group. Since the forest belonged to no one there was no anxiety about sharing resources.

²⁷⁷ Binay Bhushan Chaudhury, "Tribal Society in Transition: Eastern India 1757-1920" in *India's Colonial Encounter: Essays in Memory of Eric Stokes*, eds., Mushirul Hasan and Narayani Gupta (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993), 65-120

²⁷⁸ Achintya Biswas, ed., *Bipradas Pipilaier Manasamangal*, 149-150

²⁷⁹ Chetan Singh, "Forest, Pastoralists and Agrarian Society in Mughal India"

²⁸⁰ Bijanhari Bhattacharya, ed., *Ketakadas kshemananda, Manasamangal*, 11-12.

²⁸¹ In a folk tale from Bengal, the great Sanskrit scholar Kalidasa is seen cutting wood. For English translation see, Edward Dimock, ed. and trans., *The Thief of Love: Bengali Tales from Court and Village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 179-183.

For example, the Dom families of Dharmamangals, and Kalketu and Fullara utilize the forest as a resource for sustenance. The wood, foliage and meat provide them with marketable commodities as well as essential material for everyday use, such as food and clothing. Even though the forest provides them with resources which connect them to the moneyed economy of the village –Kalketu and Fullara through bringing meat and food to their creditor’s family and the village market, and the Dom families through bamboo and mat works which they sell in the village market—it provides them with a shelter independent of all authority.

Mobility and the collective rights over the forest ensured that the Bengal proletariat²⁸² was not wholly transformed into a large pool of readily available unskilled labor. By the early eighteenth century, a steady source of unskilled workers or “coolies” had been created around urban settlements – especially company settlements. However, this was by no means a pan-Bengal phenomenon. In fact, the VOC officials found it difficult to recruit coolies once they moved out of their regular territory of work. In 1719, Pieter Hoofmeester was sent to Kanthi to oversee the salvage work surrounding a ship ‘t Casteel Batavia, which had sunk near Kanthi. Hoofmeester was a fish out of water in an unknown place amid hostile *zamindars*, leading him to write a letter to the Director of the Hugli Council requesting a long list of necessities. The list included “200 coolies from Hugli,” as “a coolie from Hugli can do more work than 10-12 coolies here who are merely salt makers.” In fact, Hoofmeester complained that he could “get not even 10 men together” as it was already salt-making season. Dispossession in this part of Bengal did not automatically lead to a supply of coolies, as could be easily found around Hugli.²⁸³ When the company had to hire four coolies with saltpeter boats at Bakerganj on the journey through the

²⁸² I borrow the term from Irfan Habib. Habib uses the term for destitute peasants in Mughal India who sells his labor for a wage. According to Habib the colonial rule expanded the pool of such workers but such workers or proletariats were already created under Mughal rule. Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 143

²⁸³ VOC 8748, Part II, 145 -148

delta, they had to pay 1.6 anna/day to the coolies, when the usual rate of coolie hire around Kassimbazar was 1 anna/ day.²⁸⁴

Finally, limits to commodification can be noticed through a close examination of wages. Of the various representations of servitude, some were explicit examples of wage work. In Pipilai's text, in exchange for his work, the destitute Chand demanded a meal a day, four pieces of clothing, and one rupee per month. Chand was given the task of weeding, and his tools – a pair of scissors, a basket and a straw hat- were provided for.²⁸⁵ In Jagajjiban Ghosal's story, Chand as a porter was offered a wage of five annas.²⁸⁶ Wages could be paid in kind as well: Jagai, the headman in Vijay Gupta's text, commanded over Chand's labor in return for a square meal of rice.

However, some poems revealed a liminal zone between wage work and bondage. The arrangement between Chand and the Brahmin in seventeenth-century-poet Ketakadas Kshemananda's *Manasamangal* provides a good example. Chand offers to the Brahmin:

I will stay at your place; Give me enough food and water to fill my belly; And I will do any work that you will ask me to do.²⁸⁷

The Brahmin then asks Chand to weed the rice fields. As a dispossessed destitute, Chand “freely” offers his labor to the Brahmin in exchange for which he is assured food and shelter, thus binding Chand to the Brahmin. However, the arrangement soon comes to an end with the Brahmin kicking Chand out of his household for being an inefficient worker. No formal signs of bondage are evident in this relationship.

²⁸⁴ VOC 8777,291-293

²⁸⁵ Achintya Biswas, ed., *Bipradas Pipilaier Manasamangal*, 152

²⁸⁶ Achintya Biswas, ed., *Jagajjiban Ghosaler Manasamangal*, (Kolkata: Ratnabali, 2002), 79

²⁸⁷ Bijanhari Bhattacharya, ed., *Ketakadas Kshemananda, Manasamangal*, 13-14.

In a setting where labor is fully commodified, wages sealed a relationship between the employer and the employed. In the *mangalkabyas*, wages alone – paid in cash or kind—do not fully convey such relations. Kalketu welcomes the day laborers with paan leaves and areca nuts. Even though the wage is inscribed in the very Bengali name of their profession – *beruniajan* – Mukundaram does not mention any wage payment as a reward for their work. Instead, bestowal of paan leaves and areca nuts mediate the relationship between Kalketu and the workers. Paan leaves and areca nuts had a symbolic meaning in pre-modern Bengal and South Asia. Like the gifting of ceremonial robes in the Mughal imperial circle (*khil'at*), people in positions of political power gifted paans to their subordinates, thereby sealing a bond in an asymmetrical relationship.²⁸⁸

Mukundaram's text is unique in that the ruler is here seen giving paan to all of his subjects. In other *mangal* poems, several instances appear of paan being offered to artisans. In seventeenth-century-poet Mukunda Kabichandra's Bishallochanir Geet, Chand gifts paan to the two artisan brothers when commanding them to manufacture the seven ships needed for his overseas trading voyage.²⁸⁹ A similar ceremony can be noted in another seventeenth-century text when Chand employs Kesai the ironsmith to make the sealed iron room.²⁹⁰ Even a ship captain

²⁸⁸The robe giving ceremony (*khil'at*) was a well known custom in entire Eurasia and North Africa by 8th century A.D. However, the custom became an integral part of courtly culture in South Asia with the coming of Ghanznavid (10th century) and Ghurid (12th century) invaders. Gavin Hambly, "The Emperor's Clothes: Robing and 'Robes of Honour' in Mughal India," in *Robes of Honour: Khil'at in Pre-colonial and Colonial India*, ed., Stewart Gordon (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 31-35.

²⁸⁹ Sri Shubhendu Singha Ray and Sri Subalchandra Bandopadhyay, eds, "Mukunda Kabichandra krita Bishallochanir Geet," in *Sahitya Parishat Patrika*, 6, No. 3, [1964 (Bengali year 1361)]: 161-190. In another seventeenth century text, Jagajjiban Ghosal's *Manasamangal*, the artisan who is commissioned for making the ships received paan from Chand, Achintya Biswas, ed., *Jagajjiban Ghosaler Manasamangal*, 63.

²⁹⁰ Sri Tamonash Chandra Dasgupta, ed., *Narayan Deber Padmapuran*, (Kolkata: Calcutta University, 1947), 257

in a seventeenth-century text initiates this relationship of employer with his two ship-wrights by gifting them paans.²⁹¹

David Curley has argued that throughout the seventeenth century, the gifting of paan gradually gave way in Mughal court etiquette to the presenting of the robe.²⁹² From the *mangal* poems, he traces a different trajectory of regional gift-giving custom – paan-gifting and robe-gifting came to be associated with the status of both the gift-giver and receiver. While anyone with the status of a king would offer a robe to people of high importance (ministers or vassals), paan came to be associated with people of lower orders. Nawab Asaf-ud-daulah of Awadh was called “raffish” in a local Urdu newsletter for breaking all rules and offering his prized jeweler a robe of honor in his late eighteenth-century court.²⁹³ In Bengal, however, similar examples can be found in much earlier works. In Bipradas Pipilai’s seventeenth-century text, the still-rich Chand, pleased with his work, rewards the ironsmith with silk garments.²⁹⁴ That the practice continued into the seventeenth century is attested to by the text *Bishallochanir geet*. Chand “honors” the artisan brothers with “gift clothes” (*prasad basan*) and paan.²⁹⁵ Though artisans in other *mangal* poems, often portrayed as impecunious, powerless subjects, are never given the robes of honor, there are several instances where they are offered gold jewelry, a practice associated with the robe-gifting ceremony (*khil’at*).²⁹⁶ In Jagajjiban Ghosal’s text, Biswakarma, who is commissioned to build the iron room, is sent away with jewelry after the completion of

²⁹¹ David Curley, “‘Voluntary’ Relationships and Royal Gifts of Pan in Mughal Bengal” in *Robes of Honor*, ed., Stewart Gordon, 65

²⁹² David Curley, *ibid.*, 61-63

²⁹³ Hambly, “The Emperor’s Clothes: Robing and ‘Robes of Honour’ in Mughal India,” 44-45

²⁹⁴ Achintya Biswas, ed., *Bipradas Pipilaier Manasamangal*, 165

²⁹⁵ Sri Shubhendu Singha Ray and Sri Subalchandra Bandopadhyay, “Mukunda Kabichandra krita Bishallochanir Geet,” 185

²⁹⁶ Hambly, “The Emperor’s Clothes: Robing and ‘Robes of Honour’ in Mughal India,” 42-43.

his task.²⁹⁷ Similar examples can be found in Narayan Deb's text.²⁹⁸ Alongside representations of paan-gifting, elements of the Mughal culture of *khil'at* were also chosen by poets of *mangalkabyas* to portray the customary bond of reciprocity between the employer and the employed.

From Ain-i-Akbari, we know that artisans received piece wages for their manufactured items in the Mughal workshops.²⁹⁹ The *mangal* poems also hint at distribution of wages paid by patron to the artisan after receiving the finished product.³⁰⁰ In certain texts, the artisan's remuneration in cash is explicitly mentioned.³⁰¹ The voluntary nature of this waged relationship was subtly qualified. In Narayan Deb's text, the ironsmiths declare that they have "eaten the salt" from Chand. The eating of salt was a symbolic act of fealty, a practice common in the military culture of South Asia. Indeed, salt constituted a part of the wages of the rank-and-file soldiers. Once salt was voluntarily accepted, unquestioned loyalty was expected from the soldier to his military superior.³⁰² Thus, the aforementioned text positioned the ironsmith explicitly as the loyal subject of Chand, even though it was common knowledge that smiths also worked for wages.

²⁹⁷ Achintya Kumar Biswas, *Jagajjiban Ghosaler Manasamangal*, 98. The same was done with artisans who manufactured the seven ships. 63.

²⁹⁸ Tamonash Dasgupta, ed., *Narayan Deb er Padmapuran*, 261

²⁹⁹ Shireen Moosvi, "The world of Labour in Mughal India, (1500-1750)," *International Review of Social History*, 56 (2011), 245-261

³⁰⁰ Achintya Kumar Biswas, *Jagajjiban Ghosaler Manasamangal*, 63; Sri Shubhendu Singha Ray and Sri Subalchandra Bandopadhyay, "Mukunda Kabichandra krita Bishallochanir Geet," 185.

³⁰¹ Akshaykumar Kayal, ed., *Rupram Chakraborty birachita Dharmamangal*, 103

³⁰² Kolkff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy*, 19-20; Stewart Gordon, "Robes, Kings and Semiotic Ambiguity", in *Robes and Honor*, ed., Stewart Gordon, 380-383.; Eaton, *Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, 162-165.

Despite their wages, artisans shared a patron-client relationship with their employers as the above examples show.³⁰³ In such relationships, the fulfillment of customary bonds was important. The notion of customary relationships is evident from the wage workers on company grounds. The workers' insistence on custom was often a source of discomfort for the companies, and the companies' notion of a "free wage worker" was alien to the indigenous wage worker in the early eighteenth century. How such mistranslations of waged work led to conflicts is discussed in the following chapters.

3.9 CONCLUSION

This section provides an overview of the various forms of labor relations in pre-colonial Bengal. These literary sources provide a rare window into the morphology of pre-colonial labor relations, which, if examining only EIC or VOC archives, would remain a mystery. However, when juxtaposed with the reports of the VOC or EIC, a much more nuanced picture emerges of the origins of the indigenous workforce that the European companies engaged. In the highly monetized economy of late medieval Bengal, the services of these workers were often compensated with wages. However, wage work was marked by the mobility of the workers. With the exception of workers bound by debt, all other workers were extremely mobile, a fact which became a source of concern for the state. Finally, wages alone did not cement the reciprocal relationship between workers and employers. The customary practices of

³⁰³ Patron-Client relationship of Murshidabad has been dealt in details by Ratnabali Chatterjee. Ratnabali Chatterjee, *From Karkhana to the Studio: A Study of the Changing Social Roles of Patron and Artist in Bengal*, (New Delhi: Books and Books, 1990) Chap 1.

acknowledgement and reward that marked the political culture of the region also left their mark on the relationship between the waged worker and his patron.

4.0 TRANSPORT WORK

In the year 1770, Gokulchandra Ghosal, the Diwan (treasurer) of the English East India Company (EIC) Governor of Bengal, sponsored a grand pilgrimage to the holy land of Kashi, a place of singular mythical and religious importance situated on the banks of the river Ganga in the province of Awadh. Organized by Gokulchandra's brother Maharaja Krishnachandra Ghosal and joined by several upper caste Hindu men and a few pious elderly widows, the pilgrims started their journey from the Kidderporeghat, an embankment (ghat) named after an EIC official. The flotilla of one hundred and twenty boats meandered through the several ghats of Calcutta, then into Hugli, having crossed the French settlement of Chandernagore. Movement was sluggish because they stopped to pay obeisance to numerous deities enshrined in the towns and villages dotting the banks of the river Bhagirathi and because more and more people joined the fleet. Soon the fleet reached Nabadweep, the birthplace of the medieval saint Chaitanya and the seat of the most learned Brahmins in Bengal. From Nabadweep the fleet left the course of the Bhagirathi and advanced on the river Jalangi. After three full days of sailing, the fleet reached the Ganga. One by one the pilgrims passed Codalmarry, Bhagwangola, Golahat, and Kaliganj, the market towns of Murshidabad. However, the biggest market town of them all, Kassimbazar, was a few miles away from the river. Leaving behind the urbanized lands of Bengal, the fleet entered the sparsely-populated, forested borderlands between the erstwhile provinces of Bengal and Bihar. As robbers in these parts were common, the fleet picked up pace and soon reached

Rajmahal, the early-seventeenth-century capital of Bengal under the Mughals. Following an old custom, Krishnachandra visited the court of the Fausdar³⁰⁴ of Rajmahal to offer him a gift. Beyond Rajmahal, the Ganga flowed through a densely-forested, mountainous region. The head boatmen carefully fathomed the water so that the boats did not crash into the numerous stones on the river bottom. Apart from the rugged terrain, the sight of the mountain people, the Chuars, armed with clubs and flaunting ear hoops, armlets and anklets, inspired fear, but the pilgrims' fears turned out to be unfounded, as the Chuar chief greeted them with bananas. Cautious navigation through the shallows of Jahangira brought the fleet to the walled city of Monghyr. After a day of admiring the fabled riches of the city, the starry-eyed pilgrims continued their journey through Singhanullah. Contrary winds caused much trouble, and the boatmen spent a sleepless night trying to keep the boats from crashing onto the riverbanks. Two days later, they reached the vicinity of Patna, where they saw textile markets and heaps of saltpeter waiting to be bought or sold. Thirty-four days after embarking from the Kidderporeghat, on reaching Patna, the pilgrims chanted, "Hail to Ganga," thanking the river goddess for their safe passage thus far.³⁰⁵

Regardless of the beneficence of the river goddess, the assiduous work of the boatmen over the thirty-four days of their voyage got the pilgrims to Patna. Bijayram Sen, a doctor by profession, was the chronicler of the grand pilgrimage to Kashi that was organized by his patron, Krishnaram Ghosal. Bijayram's vivid description of the journey is the earliest native account of river transport from Calcutta to North India. Though a valuable window into the indigenous experience of travel, Bijayram's route to Kashi navigated through a well-beaten path known for long to the East India Companies. For purposes of trade, from 1701, both the Dutch and English

³⁰⁴ The army chief appointed for any district (sarkar) by the Mughal emperor, who resided in cities.

³⁰⁵ Nagendranath Basu, ed., *Bijayram Sener Tirthamangal* (Kolkata: Parashpathar, 2009), 31-60

East India Companies had organized their “Patna Fleet,” which moved between Patna and their respective headquarters in Bengal. The records of their fleets are the earliest detailed accounts of river transport in Northern India, yet very little has been written on the history of transport in the region.³⁰⁶ Jean Deloche’s magnum opus on transport in India, drawing primarily on nineteenth century sources, pays only limited attention to the region.³⁰⁷ Until recently, economic histories of the region have paid very little attention to the transport sector.³⁰⁸ Apart from an article-length study of boatmen in the early colonial period, the history of transport work is largely unknown.³⁰⁹ This chapter provides the first comprehensive history of transport work in late medieval Bengal.

Based on the archival sources of the VOC and EIC, this chapter narrates the social history of the transport sector of company trade in the period before colonization. As noted in the previous chapter, the growth of the companies’ military power led to the expansion of the transport sector, which naturally demanded a great deal of work. For example, James Rennell, the first geographer of the EIC to map Bengal, estimated in 1781 that the livelihood of 30,000 boatmen depended on the Ganga’s river traffic.³¹⁰ Another estimate from 1815 reveals that the number rose to 50,000 boatmen annually plying some 5,000 boats of various capacities.³¹¹ This chapter next delineates the various labor processes that constituted transport work. Boatmen were just one of many diverse groups of workers within the transport sector.

³⁰⁶ Baring Mahmud wali Balkhi’s accounts, though he takes a different route. Alam and Subrahmanyam, *Indo Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400-1800*, 130-174.

³⁰⁷ Jean Deloche, *Transport and Communications in India Prior to Steam Locomotion: Water Transport*

³⁰⁸ Tilottama Mukherjee has addressed this gap in her work on growth of the transport sector in early colonial Bengal, Tilottama Mukherjee, “Of Rivers and Roads: Transport Networks and Economy in Eighteenth- Century Bengal”, in *Coastal Histories: Society and Ecology in Pre-modern India*, ed., Yogesh Sharma (New Delhi: Primus, 2010), 15-42

³⁰⁹ Nitin Sinha, “Contract , Work and Resistance: Boatmen in Early Colonial Eastern India, 1760s-1850s”, *International Review of Social History*, 39, Special Issue, (2014): 11 -43.

³¹⁰ James Rennell, *An account of the Ganges and Burrampooter Rivers*, 105-106.

³¹¹ Mukherjee, “Of Rivers and Roads,” 22

The rowing, fathoming, fording, heaving, towpath making, spying, letter sending, lading and unlading required for the movement of the fleet involved a variety of skills and hence a diverse group of workers. Deep sea vessels in the Age of Sail have been compared to factory-like work-spaces. Inland shipping in Bengal was no exception. With the synchronized work of diverse specialized workers, the fleet resembled one large complex machine.

Though employed by the companies, these workers belonged to the larger complex world of late medieval Bengal. For most boatmen, inland sailing was not their prescribed caste profession. Their sacred community was often defined by very localized saints, or pir, who protected them from the vagaries of their profession. Finally, as the boatmen's songs reveal, they were members of or heavily influenced by the various mystic cults of the region. The work songs of these mobile workers were a valuable contribution to the heterodox religious movements in the region. Thus, their heterogeneous caste status and deep embeddedness in the world of Bengal mysticism reveal a very dynamic aspect of late medieval Bengali society.

The mobility of these workers could scarcely be controlled. If the militarization of trade reveals the social articulation of company trade in early eighteenth-century Bengal, the incomplete control over the transport workers exposes the limits to this articulation. An analysis of recruitment shows that the various middlemen/labor contractors of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century were virtually absent in this period. The direct negotiations carried out by the companies with the steersmen, cartmen, and oarsmen offer a fresh perspective on the history of contractual work in India. In his influential essay "Indian Status to British Contract," Bernard Cohn argues that all social and political relationships in eighteenth century India, even relationships between buyers and sellers, displayed "non-economic and non-contractual

qualities.”³¹² Studying the legal reforms instituted by the British in early nineteenth-century Banaras, Cohn argues that India witnessed the transition from a status- or hierarchy-based society to that of a society based on contract. Likewise, labor and social historians of early colonial India have shown that extension of control over a mobile labor force was made possible through contracts. It has been argued that contractual relationships or “consensual” agreements between employer and workers, sanctified by the new rule of law in British India, introduced and reproduced labor systems of unfreedom.³¹³ In fact, however, scholars have pointed out that contracts were “anodyne fictions of consent” generated by nineteenth-century liberal legalism to hide the “incoherence of the concept of free labor under capitalism.”³¹⁴ Although several scholars participating in this debate have speculated about the pre-colonial experience of work, no one has yet studied the subject in depth.

In examining worker-company relations in the early eighteenth century, I first argue that “status” is an insufficient category to explain the transport workers/company relationship, especially because almost all workers were hired or worked for wages. Secondly, I argue that workers entered into voluntary agreements with companies, but in the absence of the colonial law/state, money was the only means by which the companies could negotiate with workers. Pre-colonial social relations presented radical possibilities for workers to leverage their position while formulating such agreements. What emerges is an inverted picture of the precariousness of the worker vis-a-vis the employer as shown by Mahapatra or Singha. The contractual ideology

³¹² Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist amongst Historians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 477.

³¹³ Prabhu Mohapatra, “From Contract to Status: Or How Law shaped India’s Labour Relations in Colonial India, 178-1880,” in *India’s Unfree Workforce: of Bondage Old and New*, eds., Jan Breman, Isabelle Guerin and Aseem Prakash (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009); Radhika Singha, “Settle, Mobilize and Verify: Identification Practices in colonial India,”; Nitin Sinha, “Contract, Work and Resistance: Boatmen in Early Colonial Eastern India, 1760s-1850s”

³¹⁴ Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 132-134.

that reproduced “Indian” status/hierarchical relations was a colonial invention. In reality, the contract between transport workers and the companies in the early eighteenth century distinctly echoed the voice of the workers. Unmediated by middleman recruiting agents and in the context of the limited political power of the companies, regulation of this voice was impossible. The chapter closes with a discussion on the bargaining power of workers in determining their contract.

4.1 MOVEMENT AND THE LABOR PROCESS

According to Bijayram, as soon as Krishnaram’s brother agreed to sponsor his pilgrimage:

Everyone got busy fitting the boats
 As the news of the pilgrimage spread like wildfire
Bajra, Mayurpankhi, toshakhan, polwar and more
 One hundred and twenty boats decked up for hire.³¹⁵

Boats, needless to say, were the mainstays of the Patna fleet. With few exceptions, the boats named by Bijayram were regularly hired by the companies,³¹⁶ which had to rely primarily

³¹⁵ Basu, ed., *Bijayram Sener Tirthamangal*, 34

³¹⁶ I will limit my discussion to boats hired for the Patna fleet. Several other boats were used by the companies in and around the settlements are mentioned by the English traveler, Thomas Bowrey and the EIC official, Streynsham Master who visited Bengal in the seventeenth century. Bowrey mentions a list of other vessels used for the purposes of company trade. He mentioned the *purgoo*, which is derived from the Portuguese *barca*, which signifies a barge. According to Bowrey these were mainly used for the carrying goods between the ports of Hugli, Balasore and Pipli. From Streynsham Master we learn that these were used mainly to unload goods from large ships once they had reached Balasore. *Purgoos* as Bowrey stated could stay at sea for long period of time and brought to anchor only by the stern. Another kind of vessel that is often mentioned by both Bowrey and master is the *boora* or *bhar*, lighter oared vessels for carrying saltpeter and other goods from Hugli and salt to Dacca. They were also used as tow boats to smaller vessels bound up or down Richard Carnac Temple, ed., the river Hugli. *Booras* were usually very light vessels using as many as 20 to 30 rowers. As noted by Master, these boats were used for lading and unlading of goods at Balasore. Although these vessels find no mention in the Patna fleet of the companies

on hired boats whose ownership varied widely.³¹⁷ The *majhi*, or head boatman/steersman of the boat, was usually the owner. Medium to large boats could cost around 300 arcot rupees, or 450 florins. Some *majhis* had in their possession more than one boat. A *majhi* named Draub, for example, sailed his own boat in the EIC fleet in 1741. The following year, Draub employed Balaram as the head boatman of the same boat while Draub himself headed a new boat that he had bought.³¹⁸ In certain instances, boats were hired out by local merchants. Salt merchants, for example, were approached by the companies for this purpose.³¹⁹ These merchants sometimes had longstanding relationships with the head boatmen.³²⁰

Boats in Bengal, like most vessels in the Indian Ocean region, were rowing boats which came in several different varieties.³²¹ Of the larger boats, the *bajra*, or “pleasure boat,” was used for the passage of covenanted servants of the companies.³²² *Bajras* of varying sizes were reserved for the top army officials of the fleet. The largest *bajras*, which were reserved for the Commander of the Patna fleet, needed three *majhis* and twenty other rowers. The smallest *bajra*, reserved for the ensign, needed one *majhi* and eight rowers. Boat hire for *bajras* varied according to size. A *bajra* with twenty oars and three *majhis* could be hired for Rs. 54 and 8 annas, and a

from the beginning of the eighteenth century, it is most probable that these were still hired by the companies for their day to day affairs at their principal port areas. Richard Carnac Temple, ed., *The Diaries of Streynsham Master, 1675-1680, Volume I*, (London: John Murray, 1911), 317, *The Diaries of Streynsham Master, 1675-1680 Volume II*, (London: John Murray, 1911), 44; Sir Richard Carnac Temple, ed., *Thomas Bowrey's A Geographical Account of Countries Round the Bay of Bengal, 1669 to 1679* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1905), 228-229

³¹⁷ VOC 8762, 267 & VOC 8777, 830 The VOC had 2 yachts and 2 *bajras* and one sloop which they used for inland transport in 1729 and 1734. The sloop carrying goods often made its way from Patna to Chinsura through the long winded route through the Sunderban deltas.

³¹⁸ P/1/15, 329r, 377v.

³¹⁹ In 1739, the company procure 70 vessels from the salt merchants at Badderpourgola. VOC 8785, 518-519.

³²⁰ Sadaram majhi declared that he had worked for Lakhhan Das a merchant located in Calcutta for over twenty years, P/154/46 (unfoliated), the case between Choppa and Sattee plaintiff and Santose defendant, hearing of July 7 1747 at Mayor's Court, Calcutta.

³²¹ Identifying vessels in South Asia is always a difficult task. As both anthropologists and historians agree nomenclature of boats is a purely local phenomenon. The same boat traveling down from Patna to the deltas could be called by different names at various stages of its journey. Having said that, a more or less standard array of vessels emerge from the company records. Boats of South Asia

³²² Temple, ed. *Thomas Bowrey's A Geographical Account*, 228

bajra with eight rowers and one *majhi* could be hired for Rs. 24/ 25.³²³ The most common boats were the *ulak/woolock/oolock*. The *ulak* was a medium-sized vessel, usually weighing around 60 tons. These mainly carried soldiers and their baggage. A surgeon attended to the sick soldiers or “impotents” of the VOC army in special *ulaks* earmarked as “dispensary” boats. Most *ulaks* had either eight or twelve oars. *Ulaks* with eight rowers were hired for Rs. 25/month, and *ulaks* with ten rowers for Rs. 29.³²⁴ Some boats were hired according to cargo weight. Cargo boats like *patellas*³²⁵ and *bangela/bangelaars*³²⁶ were often hired on such terms. These flat and deep-bottomed vessels were extremely unwieldy and could not pass the shallower passages in the downward journey from Patna. Boat hire was also determined by the distance travelled. The EIC in particular practiced hiring boats by distance.³²⁷ Boatmen operating lightweight vessels at the transshipment point at Mircha-Badderpourgola and Jalangi usually followed this practice. In 1734, *matkas* were hired at Ratanganj near Mircha to tow the sloops from Mircha to Bakarganj.³²⁸ Similar arrangements were made with *polwars*.³²⁹ Boats could also be hired on a daily basis. At transshipment points, *majhis* of *polwars* -light-weight pilot vessels of 15-20 tons

³²³ VOC 8752 (4), 33; VOC 8786,

³²⁴VOC 8752 (4), 33 for 1725; Majority of boats hired by the VOC were employed on a monthly basis. We have information of different hiring practices of *ulaks* at Patna. They were hired for Rs. 14/ 15 in the years 1729 and 1730. It is not clear whether the boats were hired on a monthly basis. It is highly unlikely as in 1730 boats were hired for a journey to Fettua, which was at worst a two days’ sail away from Patna. VOC 8661, 42; VOC 8764, 49-54.

³²⁵Native to Bihar, *patellas* were used for ferrying bulk goods such as grains, salt and beeswax, and sometimes luggage of soldiers and officials. Thomas Bowrey, the English traveler to Bengal in the late seventeenth century mentions that the Subahdar of Bengal, Shaista Khan employed sixty such boats for his journey to Agra. The companies used them for bringing saltpeter from Bihar. Some of them were of 350 tons. Bowrey, Geographical Account of the countries around the Bay of Bengal, 225

³²⁶Though exact description of these boats are hard to come by, according to Hobson Jobson, the dictionary of Anglo-Indian word compiled in the late nineteenth century, these boats were the same as *patellas*. But VOC sources indicate they were two separate vessels. VOC 8752(2), 54.

³²⁷ P/1/6, 702r; P/1/10, 9v-10r;P/1/11, 50r-v; P/1/13, 265v; P/1/16, 35r. For the year 1735 there is an instance of payment on a monthly basis. 61 *ulaks* were hired by the EIC at a slightly lower rate (Rs. 23/month) than the VOC. P/1/11, 50r. Also in 1737 *ulaks* were paid according to weight – Ts. 27 per hundred bags. P/1/13, 165v

³²⁸Though the size of *matkas* is unknown, one can safely conclude that these boats were small and used for towing purposes.VOC 8776, 653-656.

³²⁹ VOC 8777, 291-293.

- often demanded their pay in a similar fashion.³³⁰ Small dugout canoes called dinghy, or *dingelaar*, manned by a lone boatman, were constantly hired throughout the journey for regular exchange of information amongst the authorities at headquarters in Patna/Calcutta, Kassimbazar and Patna and the fleet. These boats too fixed their hire on a daily basis.³³¹

In most instances, boat hire included the remuneration of the *majhi* and the *dandies*, or oarsmen. However, for vessels owned by the companies, *majhis* and *dandies* were directly employed by the companies. Even for hired vessels, the companies often had to recruit the boatmen. Little is known about the wages of *majhis* or rowers since in the company account books, their wages were often included within boat hire. Yet from available information, we do see a system of wage payment. In 1734, twenty-three *majhis* were hired at the exceedingly high rate of Rs. 6, and over two hundred rowers were hired for Rs. 4 for the journey from Mircha to Chinsura via the Sunderbans, which took approximately one and a half months.³³² In 1743, over two hundred and fifty rowers were hired for a daily wage of 0.5 anna.³³³ At the other end of the spectrum, in 1744, twelve *majhis* were employed for the surprisingly low monthly wage of Rs. 2.8, and rowers were employed for 18 annas a month.³³⁴ Displacement caused by Maratha invasions likely brought down wages. However, wage payment of the *majhi* and rowers were usually recorded together. In 1725, the VOC paid one *majhi* and eight rowers a wage of Rs. 24 per month.³³⁵ For the EIC, a similar pattern can be noticed from 1744.³³⁶

³³⁰ VOC 8770, 122, 20 polwars hired for 6 anna/ day.

³³¹ Also, in construction sites of boats or bridges, canoes were hired for moving back and forth the artisans and the coolies between the banks and the vessels anchored in the river.

³³² VOC 8776, 653-656

³³³ VOC 8794, 269

³³⁴ VOC 8796, 551

³³⁵ VOC 8752(4), 32

³³⁶ P/1/17, 40r.

This wide variety of hiring practices highlights the lack of a streamlined labor market for boatmen.³³⁷ The articulation of companies' military power in the region found its expression in the Patna fleet. To man the fleet, the companies had to enter into contracts with indigenous workers, wherein they were forced to accommodate several local practices. The very nature of work, which demanded recruitment of migrant workers over a large geographical space, made a composite labor market impossible.³³⁸ That the fleet was not built on a steady, smoothly-functioning labor market, is most evident from the various company recruitment practices. Labor historians of South Asia often make the mistake of projecting back the recruitment practices in the colonial period onto the pre-colonial period of trade. Thus, scholars have wrongly believed *sardar-coolie*, *serang-lascar* and *ghatmajhi-majhi* relationships of recruitment to be timeless.³³⁹ New scholarship focusing on non-EIC sources challenges such assumptions.³⁴⁰

Though the *ghatmajhi*, or labor contractors, became the lynchpin of the companies' access to the local labor market in the late eighteenth century, the *early* eighteenth century provides examples of varying methods of labor recruitment, one in which the native guards of the companies played an important role.³⁴¹ One comes across the *ghatmajhi* as a recruiter only in the EIC sources. As early as September 1679, the EIC in Kassimbazar had two *majhis*, Harish

³³⁷ None of the rates that I have found corresponds with the rates given by Nitin Sinha according to a Home Public report of 21 June 1773, Sinha, "Contract, Work and Resistance: Boatmen in Early Colonial Eastern India, 1760s-1850s" 13

³³⁸ This fluctuation continued into the nineteenth century. Sinha, "Contract, Work and Resistance: Boatmen in Early Colonial Eastern India, 1760s-1850s", 21-24.

³³⁹ For *lascar-serang* relationship Gopal Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour?*; For *ghatmajhi-majhi* relationship Mukherjee, "Of Rivers and Roads"; Sen, *Empire of Free Trade*, 41

³⁴⁰ Matthias van Rossum, "Lost in Translation? Maritime Identity and Identification in Asia under the VOC" in *Journal of Maritime Research*, 16, no. 2 (2014): 139-152

³⁴¹ Nitin Sinha's study on late eighteenth century recruitment practices show that even in the 1770s, it was not the *ghatmajhi* but a Mr. J. Fraser who was chief contractor for boatmen for the EIC. By nineteenth century, government officials attached to the district collectorate or magistrate's office was assigned the task for recruitment purposes for the government. Private agencies involved in the business of travel for officials and non-officials sprung up in Calcutta entered the labor markets as recruiters, Sinha, "Contract, Work and Resistance: Boatmen in Early Colonial Eastern India, 1760s-1850s", 14,21

and Gopal, who acted as their “press masters.”³⁴² In 1684, in Patna, a *majhi* named Khidu recruited fifteen *patellas*. The next year, the same person was solicited for recruitment of saltpeter boats, including several *patellas* and *muteas*. In both of these years, company records do not refer to Kiddo as *ghatmajhi*. The figure of *ghatmajhi* appears only in August 1732, as someone responsible for recruitment of *polwars* at Hugli.³⁴³ The *ghatmajhi* as recruiting agent then becomes a common figure from the 1740s onward. In November 1730, when Sergeant De Loffernun, heading a delayed fleet from Patna, reported that he needed lightweight vessels to proceed any further, the EIC council at Kassimbazar sent out a *ghatmajhi* and a peon with two hundred sicca rupees to Mircha to recruit light boats.³⁴⁴ A similar pattern of recruitment was again repeated in December 1744.³⁴⁵ Although in 1745 Fort William Council mentioned a *ghatmajhi* “who provides boats for the company on all occasions”, in the midst of Maratha attacks, he was accompanied by the company *banian* (native accounts keeper of the EIC).³⁴⁶

There were instances when the company officials had to directly negotiate with the owners of the boats. From the late 1720s to the 1730s, the VOC employed their cashier or Equipage master at Kassimbazar to deal with the recruitment process at the transshipment point of Mircha-Baddepourgola-Jalangi. All these officials – Abraham Ormea, Equipage Officer Christoffel de Wind, Cashier Christiaan van Bevenage and Cashier Ewout de Leeuw – had some form of direct dealings with the boatmen.³⁴⁷ A letter from Kassimbazar dated May 22, 1738 reported that the EIC cashier, Mr. Kemp, was sent to the toll point at Jalangi to recruit boats with

³⁴² G/23/2, (unfoliated), September 1679.

³⁴³ P/1/9, 384v.

³⁴⁴ P/1/16, 321r

³⁴⁵ P/1/15, 416r

³⁴⁶ Ibid, 630v, 715r-v, 761v.

³⁴⁷ VOC 8760, 9-10; VOC 8776, 212 & 751, 8782, 469, VOC 8786, 523.

the help of the superintendent of the toll point for the fleet coming from Patna.³⁴⁸ In October 1735, the Patna chief of the EIC had to directly persuade the boat owners to sail as far down as Calcutta.³⁴⁹ The same year, boatmen at Dhaka signed bonds (*muchlekhas*) with the factory chief to reach Calcutta within six days.³⁵⁰

Though there are numerous references to *majhis*, the VOC officials never mentioned a *ghatmajhi*. Recruitment procedure at the point of transshipment, Mircha, are the most well documented. In 1732, the task of recruitment of light vessels was delegated to a “Company Majhi” named Binod and a peon who worked for forty-four days gathering around eighty vessels to travel down to Hugli.³⁵¹ In the next two years, Binod, the same *majhi*, along with two peons were employed for the recruitment of polwars and pilots. They sailed as far as Ratanganj, a cOxford University Pressle of miles away from Mircha, on two dinghies to hire ten *polwars*.³⁵² The figure of the “Company Majhi” is quite analogous to the *ghatmajhi*. But there were occasions when the peons were left with the task of recruitment. In 1734, the rowers of all vessels going down to Chinsura from Mircha were recruited by the peons. For five days the peons “hailed” these rowers “from different places.”³⁵³ In addition to the rowers, peons were entrusted with the duty of hiring vessels, even without the help of the *majhis*. As late as 1743, eighteen peons at Mircha were assigned the task of not just recruiting coolies but also vessels. The peons also supervised the work of the coolies and the boatmen, and most importantly, they had to be vigilant “to make sure that they (the vessels and the coolies) were not impressed by

³⁴⁸ P/1/13, 233v

³⁴⁹ P/1/11, 111r-112v.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 191v

³⁵¹ VOC 8770, 122-123.

³⁵² VOC 8776, fol.654, 751

³⁵³ VOC 8776, 654

others.”³⁵⁴ In the midst of the Maratha attacks in the 1740s, there was a shortage in the labor force as people were fleeing their villages in hundreds. In such a situation, all the companies were impressing workers, and one important aspect of the recruitment process was to keep the other competing companies, merchants or local potentates at bay. However, even though the peons played a critical role in recruiting workers and securing them against the competitors of the VOC, they were paid a meager wage of 1 anna/day.³⁵⁵ In 1753, the peons continued to perform the same job for the slightly better wage of 3 annas a day.³⁵⁶

From sun up to sun down marked the usual workday for the boatmen. With canon shot or bugle call at daybreak, the entire fleet set sail, and half an hour before sunset, the fleet camped at an empty site by the riverbanks as chosen by the *daroga*, or principal native supervisor of the fleet.³⁵⁷ However, in times of emergency, boatmen were put to work for the entire day, with two-to-four hour breaks. Such workdays could last a week or a little over at a stretch.³⁵⁸ Be that as it may, the strenuous – not to mention tedious – work of rowing was tempered with work songs called *saari*. Rhythm—either fast-paced or slow, depending on the nature of work at hand – was central to these songs. Boatmen at work singing *saari* are mentioned in Bijaygupta’s fifteenth-century text, *Padmapuran*:

Boatmen in all vessels sing *saari*
As they come down the stream.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁴³⁵⁴VOC 8793, 466.

³⁵⁵ VOC 8793, 290

³⁵⁶ VOC 8805, 65.

³⁵⁷ VOC 8762, 195-231

³⁵⁸In September 1733, on his journey back from Patna, Jan Geldzaak was ordered to go back to Patna to escort another fleet. While his ensign returned to Hugli, Captain Gelzaak returned to Patna. His crew worked very long hours to cover the up river journey to Patna in just two weeks instead of a month, which was the usual time taken by the fleets. VOC 8776

³⁵⁹ In chapter on Chand’s journey to Dakkhin Patan, Jayantakumar Sen Gupta, ed., *Bijaygupta birachita Padmapuran*(Kalikata, 1963), 244

These songs were sung in unison, as in this description, where the song helps the rowers unify and ultimately increase their pace:

Row, row say the rowers singing saari
.....
Their song made a huge noise
As the boats moved
Muddying the water of the river. ³⁶⁰

The thrashing oars turned the color of the river water brown as the boats moved forward. These songs, which will be discussed in detail in the following section, were set in the social and cultural world of late medieval Bengal.

It was the custom of the boatmen of Bengal not to make any stops in the course of their journey throughout the day. Even though the boats passed through densely-populated villages lining the banks of the river, they never took a meal break at any of these places. Each evening, boats halted at uninhabited places. Except for the army officers, everyone got together to set up enormous make-shift camps. After dusk, the campsite was dotted with several burning ovens carved out of the ground by the pick axes and trowels carried in every boat, with each crew creating its own oven. Huddled together in distinct groups, the boatmen cooked and ate their communal meal of boiled rice.

Although the boatmen were forced to withstand the physical exertion of rowing for over twelve hours on one meager meal a day, company officials and their soldiers could not be expected to stave off hunger for that long. Hence, the companies always included in their fleets special medium-sized vessels called “oven boats.” These boats were company creations with brick ovens built into them. What a departure for indigenous travelers, for whom eating a hot meal during a journey was unthinkable. Even in the 1770s, as evidenced by Bijayram’s narrative,

³⁶⁰ Ibid. (Bastu badal pala), 277

native travelers were accustomed to eating their daily meal only after the boats had anchored in the evening. In contrast, every top army official had an oven boat assigned to his service, but there were also oven boats preparing food for the rank and file of the army. These boats were constructed by the companies in their respective headquarters³⁶¹ and obviated the need to stock up on provisions prior to the journey, despite the fact that for most of the journey, the fleet would move through densely-populated regions. While it is unknown whether the companies paid the boatmen food money, soldiers were given their ration money every month. Similarly, Krishnachandra Ghosal paid the food costs of the pilgrims and his crew.³⁶²

Since all vessels of inland transport were rowboats, the *dandies*, or rowers, were integral to inland shipping. The rowers performed several tasks apart from just rowing. Often, where the river was too shallow or the countercurrents were too strong, they had to abandon their oars, get out of their boats and drag them with ropes while wading knee-deep through the water. The upriver journey against the current was especially back-breaking. Hauling would last for several days. When Captain Pielat's fleet reached the reefs of Oeriab on September 29, 1727, he had to patiently wait for three days as the boatmen of the English fleet dragged the vessels one-by-one through a narrow pass amidst the reefs. Pielat was preparing his own men to do the same.³⁶³ And the oarsmen of Captain Gelzak's fleet in 1736 performed the miraculous task of pulling all of the vessels past the city of Bhagalpur against a strong current while both banks of the river were

³⁶¹ De Gennes de la Chanceliere's accounts in Indrani Ray, "Journey to Casimbazar and Murshidabad: Observations of a French Visitor to Bengal in 1743" in *The French East India Company and the Trade of the Indian Ocean: A collection of essays by Indrani Ray*, ed., Lakshmi Subramanian (New delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1999), 153. Entire segment on boats – Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of the Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive* (London: John Murray, 1903); VOC 8752 (4), 8739, 8740, 8742, 8769, 8770, 8776, 8777, 8785, 8792, 8796

³⁶² Basu, ed., *Bijayram Sener Tirthamangal*, 42

³⁶³ VOC 8757, 209

caving in.³⁶⁴ If they were lucky, the water by the banks of the river would be deep enough for them to drag the boats while walking on the banks. But walking on land meant that they had to make their own tow-paths by leveling out thick bushes of reed. The oarsmen of Captain Geldzak's fleet in 1736 made such a tow-path spanning several kilometers between Sitakund and the fort of Mungeer. A French traveler in 1735 marveled at the hard labor of the *dandies*:

Isn't it surprising, I say, that these men can withstand such hard work and that for earning the equivalent of three sols per day? Hence, these are in my opinion the most miserable of all the people of the world.³⁶⁵

Majhis were usually masters of boats or chief steersmen.³⁶⁶ All forms of river-craft employed a *majhi* as the head boatman for his superior experience in navigation and his intimate knowledge of the terrain and contours of the river bed. Certain *majhis* were solely employed for pilotage work. Sailing on light-weight vessels (*polwars*) accompanied by a few peons or a soldier, these *majhis* sailed ahead of the fleet on their light-weight vessels, signaling to the commander of the fleet whether the path ahead was free of dangerous shallows or contrary currents.³⁶⁷ Sometimes, the pilotage work was convened by a head *majhi*. The fate of the entire fleet depended on his decision. After passing the dangerous reefs at Jahangira during his upriver journey to Patna in 1736, Captain Geldzak was informed by his pilots that a swath of shallows in the river above Sitakund made it impossible for the fleet to pass. Grasping at straws, Captain Geldzak sent out his best *polwars* under the head pilot for a last reconnaissance. After inspection, the head pilot came up with a difficult yet ingenious solution. The head pilot reported that a narrow riverbed sandwiched between the left river bank and shallows was still navigable for

³⁶⁴ VOC 8782, 511

³⁶⁵ Indrani Ray, "Journey to Casimbazar and Murshidabad, 154

³⁶⁶ Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, 558

³⁶⁷ They sailed much ahead of the fleet. E.g. when Captain Geldzak's fleet reached Nadia, In late September 1736 he sent out pilot vessels to inspect which stream of Jalangi joining the Ganges was most navigable VOC. VOC 8782, 511

light-weight vessels. Peons were soon dispatched to Kondecatta, a mile below Sitakund, to muster as many light-weight vessels as possible. All the goods from the *ulaks* were loaded onto the light-weight vessels. The oarsmen then performed the Herculean task of pulling both the light-weight vessels and the empty *ulaks* up to Fort Mungeer. This entire process was designed by the head pilot.

Pilotage was clearly dangerous work. While measuring the shallows of Ruwenella, a pilot vessel belonging to the *majhi* Laalkori ran aground, and the boat shattered to pieces, beyond repair. Captain Geldzaak immediately wrote to Chinsura:

Pilots always sail blindly so as to find the least dangerous passage for the company's fleet whereby they run into accidents many times from which it is impossible to save themselves. Therefore, I request your Honor to give Rs. 25 as a custom followed by other nations to this man to somewhat compensate for his loss and also to encourage others to take up such a dangerous calling.³⁶⁸

The “dangerous calling” did not secure good money. The fleet officials testified to the poverty of the *majhis*. On his way to Patna in 1734, Captain Holcombe reported that one of the vessels had run into a sandbank. Though it had caused no significant harm to the company, Holcombe acknowledged that it was a major blow to the *majhi* as the boat was “most of what the poor man had in the world.”³⁶⁹ Though the companies' hearts bled when the *majhis* ran into accidents, there were limits to their empathy. The EIC, with their revenue-farming rights in Calcutta, like *zamindars*, enforced several duties on the people. *Majhis* in Calcutta thus had to pay a *dustoree*, or duty, on their income which was collected annually. Each boat had to pay a sum of Rs. 2. In certain years, when the demand was as high as Rs. 5, the *majhis* complained *en masse* to the company authorities.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁸ VOC 8782, ff

³⁶⁹ P/1/10, 135v-136r

³⁷⁰ P/1/14, 126r, 166v-167r

The ordeals of river movement implied frequent accidents. Maintenance of the boats was a major concern of the Commander of the fleet. Carpenters, caulkers and smiths were the maintenance crew on the move. They performed tasks such as mending damaged boats. In 1728, during Captain Hogerwerf's fleet's journey to Patna, a soldiers' vessel crashed against the shore near Mircha, where a carpenter was immediately put to work. By noon, the vessel was able to rejoin the fleet.³⁷¹ Two such incidents happened the next year with the fleet of Commander van der Helling. Not far from Krishnanagar, a plank in the garrison writer's boat had come loose. A carpenter was dispatched, and by 6:30 the next morning, the vessel again joined the fleet.³⁷² Later in the journey, a little above Bhagalpur, an oar of a soldiers' vessel broke. Within six hours, the carpenter of the fleet had repaired the oar.³⁷³ Furthermore, both carpenters and smiths were essential for making the anchors for Ensign Scheurs' journey through the Sunderbans in 1736.

All construction and repair work related to the Patna fleet was carried out at Kassimbazar and Chinsura.³⁷⁴ Though local knowledge of boat-building was indispensable for making and mending the crafts, company work brought new knowledge of ship-building into the region. Scholarship on pre-modern and early-modern ship-building in South Asia and the Indian Ocean reveals that the use of iron was absent in the making of ships in the region. Archaeological evidence leads to similar conclusions. However, anthropological studies on boats in Bengal show the ubiquitous use of reverse clinker planking.³⁷⁵ The earliest mention of the use of reverse

³⁷¹ VOC 8760

³⁷² VOC 8762 (II), 25

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ VOC 8776, 698-708; VOC 8770, 138-149; 8777, 291-293

³⁷⁵ Sean Mcgrail and Lucy Blue, ed., "The Reverse-Clinker boats of Bangladesh" and Sean McGrail, Lucy Bluse and Erric Kentley, "The Reverse-Clinker Boats of Orissa and West Bengal" in *Boats of South Asia*, eds, Sean McGrail, Lucy Blues, Eric Kentley and Colin Palmer (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 25-97

clinker planking in boat-making in Bengal has long been attributed to pictorial depictions of life in late-eighteenth-century Calcutta by the Flemish artist Frans Balthazar Solvyns. However, Dwija Bansidas' *Manasamangal*, a seventeenth-century text, sheds new light on the subject. It describes how sixteen-hundred carpenters, the "human incarnates of Biswakarma (the artisan god)," made the dingas or vessels for the merchant Chand:

The chink between two planks was bridged by an iron nail
Once soldered, the oceans could do no harm to the vessel.³⁷⁶

It is evident that knowledge of reverse clinker planking had reached Bengal by the seventeenth century. The influx of European vessels throughout the seventeenth century can in fact be attributed to this new development in South Asian ship-building. No wonder so many native smiths were employed for boat-making as well as repair work. Local artisans - smiths, carpenters, cutters, turners, caulkers, and bamboo workers - were employed for making and repairing these vessels. Also, military fences were built in the camping sites to demarcate the territory of Cambridge University Press used by the crew of the Patna fleet.³⁷⁷ Coolies – the lowest-paid workers, performing tasks ranging from assisting artisans to portage work - toiled in large numbers at the various shipbuilding and construction sites related to the Patna fleet.

After reaching Patna, the fleet was dispersed and the soldiers rested for a month or two at the barracks in Patna, Raily and Fettua. Once the Head of the Patna factory handed over the completed memorandum of goods on merchant vessels to the Commander of the fleet, they embarked on the return journey. Bijayram and the pilgrims followed the seventeenth-century route for their return journey. From Suti, they sailed down the Bhagirathi to Calcutta. Unlike the smooth return voyage of the pilgrims, however, the down-river journey of the companies had

³⁷⁶Chakraborty, ed, *Sri Sri Padmapuran ba Bishaharir Pnachali*, 129-130

³⁷⁷ VOC 8754 (II), 32, 35

challenges. The heavy-bottomed *patellas* contracted at Patna could travel down neither the Bhagirathi nor the Jalangi as the water-level of these tributaries of the Ganga was exceedingly shallow. The companies thus had to arrange for an elaborate transshipment.

In the seventeenth century, Mirdadpur in Malda was the transfer point of goods from large vessels to smaller vessels. A special official from the EIC Kassimbazar factory was sent out to Mirdadpur to oversee this work.³⁷⁸ In the eighteenth century, near the confluence of the Ganga and Jalangi, at any of the three villages, Mircha, Badderpourgola or Jalangi, low-bulk commodities such as opium and textiles were placed on light-weight *polwars*, which then made their way to Chinsura or Calcutta.³⁷⁹ Ox carts were hired to carry soaps to Kassimbazar. In years when vessels were hard to come by, ox carts were also used to carry opium and textiles to Kassimbazar, from where they were shipped to Chinsura/Calcutta via the Bhagirathi. Part of the saltpeter consignment was sent via the Jalangi, but the bulk of it made a long haul on hired *ulaks* and the company sloop through the Sunderbans to Calcutta/Chinsura. Even though the lower course of the Ganga through the Sunderbans was deep enough for the *patellas*, the up-country *majhis* refused to sail through the unknown forested deltaic lands, known for the roving bands of infamous Arakanese pirates who would round up whoever they could find and enslave them, so *ulaks* had to be hired and the saltpeter transferred onto them.³⁸⁰

The transshipment zone of Mircha, Badderpourgola and Jalangi was an area of intense activity. Work included the unloading of vessels coming from Patna, storage in the makeshift

³⁷⁸G/20/5 Part II, fol. 8, G/23/1, (unfoliated) December 11-17, 1679.

³⁷⁹Polwars here were also hired for piloting purposes. Attached to the bowsprits of larger vessels, polwars led larger vessels through the streams of the deltas.

³⁸⁰VOC 8751(2), 54, in 1723 at Patna bagelas were hired for saltpeter at the rate of Rs. 3 and 8 anna for 100 maunds. VOC 8770, 122, In 1732 60 vessels were hired for carrying 7200 maunds of saltpeter at the rate of Rs. 8 per 100 maund. VOC 8876, 653, in 1734 5 vessels were hired for carrying 1350 maunds of salt peter at the rate of Rs. 16 per 100 maund; VOC 8877, 818, The same year vessels hired for Rs. 15 and 8 annas per 100 maunds of salt peter.

sheds and finally, portage of goods and luggage from the unloading point to the loading point on the river. The Kassimbazar factory of the VOC sent out a cashier who was responsible for all arrangements. A house not far from Mircha was rented along with servants for the lodging of the cashier for a few months as he made all arrangements for the fleet coming from Hugli and Patna.³⁸¹ Every day, the cashier was ferried from his residence to Mircha on a palanquin (sedan chair), where throughout the day he oversaw all transport activities.

As the seventeenth-century traveler Tavernier noted, ox carts were the primary mode of transportation in the region. By his description, cartmen were nomads. They carried their families wherever they went, spending short periods in the tents that they carried along.³⁸² However, mention of the cartmen's families is absent from company sources. Moreover, the numerous cartmen's songs collected from present-day Rangpur district in Bangladesh and Dinajpur districts in both West Bengal and Bangladesh—broadly the region from where the companies recruited their cartmen—talk of the journey of lone cart men. Separation from family and especially their female partners form the dominant motif of these songs. For example:

O oxcart driver, my friend
 How long must I go on
 Watching the road for you?
 The day the oxcart driver left town
 This woman's heart was crushed.
 You drive your cart
 All the way to Chilmari port.³⁸³

³⁸¹ VOC 8770, 122

³⁸² Tavernier mentions that these cartmen were called Manaris and that they were divided into four tribes. Each of these tribes had monopoly over carting one kind of cargo. From the appearance of the leaders of these tribe it was possible to say what tribe they belonged to. The veracity of such information is questionable. The VOC and EIC remain silent over the tribes of the cartmen. Also, the cartmen appear to have carried salt peter, chests of opium, and luggage of native nobles and the soldiers of the company armies. Michael Fisher, ed., *Beyond the Three Seas: Travellers' Tales of Mughal India* (New delhi: Random House, 2007), 164-167

³⁸³ Chilmari is a port on Brahmaputra river in Rangpur district, Bangladesh. Margaret Mills, Peter Claus, Sarah Drummond eds, *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); For the full song and more examples see Wakil Ahmad, *Bamla Lokasangit: Bhaoyaiya*, (Dhaka: Bangladesh Silpakala Akademi, 1995), 56-59

Since Tavernier contracted his cartmen in Agra, it is quite likely that they were different from the cartmen contracted regularly by the companies' Patna fleet. Wage data on the cartmen is scarce. For the years 1732, 1733, 1734, 1753, the rate for the ox carts was Rs. 2/chest of opium; however, in 1726, 1732 and 1733 and for 1753, it declined to Re. 1/chest of opium.³⁸⁴ Such a system of charging according to the weight of cargo was also prevalent amongst the camel owners of the *cafilas* in North India and Central Asia. Apart from the cartmen, human portage was commonly used. "Coolies" were readily available in this zone and also charged according to the weight of the cargo. In 1737, the coolies were paid 9anna/chest of opium. In 1742, this was reduced to 8 anna/chest of opium. However, there are several instances where the coolies were paid a daily wage rate of 1 anna/day.

At Mircha, temporary storage places or sheds were built to keep the saltpeter while waiting for boats to be recruited. Parts of the shed, such as the mat covering, were constructed in a nearby village, and the complete shed was put together within hours in Mircha.³⁸⁵ Workers on these sheds were employed on a daily wage basis. Carpenters managed to earn between 1.5 and 8 annas while turners, cutters and caulkers got 3.5 anna/day. Smiths charged around 1.8 annas/day. Master masons' wage was 3 annas/day, and general masons earned 1.5 anna/day.³⁸⁶ *Doms*, or bamboo workers', wage was between 1 and 2 annas/day. Bamboo work was especially needed for making mat coverings as well as for fences. Coolies performed a wide range of work from portage to scrubbing and painting of the vessels. They also assisted the carpenters and masons. They could expect a wage anywhere between 0.5 anna and 2 annas. The worst paid were the children, who worked as helpers to the masons and received a wage of 0.75 anna.

³⁸⁴ VOC 8769, 68; VOC 8776, 751; VOC 8754 (II), 34, VOC 8805, 65.

³⁸⁵ VOC 8770, 122-125

³⁸⁶ 8776, 698-708

Eight to ten palanquin bearers or *kahars* were often included in the VOC fleet for the traveling comfort of higher officials. Moving from the *patellas* to the newly hired *polwars* or *ulaks* involved a few miles of walking. While most men took to their feet, officials moved in *palanquins*. Both the VOC and the EIC hired several *palanquins* in the stretch between Badderpourgola and Jalangi or Mircha and Jalangi. Abul Fazl, court historian to Emperor Akbar, noted that the *kahars* of Bengal and Dakhin (Deccan) were the most skilled. They could move so smoothly that “the man inside is not inconvenienced by any jolting.”³⁸⁷ As noted by Abul Fazl, the *kahars* had for long been waged workers. Seldom were the *kahars* owners of *palanquins*, even though the practice of hiring out of *palanquins* was known.³⁸⁸ While the *kahars* of the fleet were hired on a monthly basis for a wage between 2 rupees and 6 annas, the *palanquins* hired at the transshipment point were hired at a daily wage rate of 2 anna/day. Jean Baptiste Tavernier, travelling in Bengal in 1665-66, noted a far greater wage of Rs. 4 per month.³⁸⁹

Several other native workers – performing white-collar services – were hired for the entire length of the journey and were paid on a monthly basis. Each fleet of the VOC included a Persian writer, a head peon, ten to twenty common peons, two to four *qasids* or couriers, one or two rounders, two carpenters, two caulkers, two smiths and a *daroga*. These servants were engaged on a monthly wage payment basis. Amongst the note-worthy pilgrims in Krishnaram Ghosal’s fleet was Munshi Dwija Biswanath. A scholar of Persian and Bengali, he dealt with communication on behalf of the pilgrims with the upcountry men of importance who were not

³⁸⁷H.H. Blochmann, trans, *Abul Fazl, Ain –i- Akbari, Vol 1, Book II* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1873), 254

³⁸⁸Moni Bibi, a resident of Calcutta hired Sitaram’s palanquin for three months in 1728. The kahars, Bisnuram and Balaram worked for the entire period. Dispute between Sitaram and Moni Bibi heard at Mayor’s Court in Calcutta, June 22 1728 P/155/10 (unfoliated)

³⁸⁹ Fisher, ed., *Beyond the Three Seas*, 168

conversed in Bengali.³⁹⁰ A similar task was performed by the Persian writer of the VOC fleet. Since the companies had to frequently send letters to the local zamindari courts or received letters from them, the Company had to maintain a Persian writer who could perform both the tasks of translator and letter writer. On certain voyages, they even employed a separate translator.³⁹¹ Their wages could vary between Rs. 12 and Rs. 16.

Exchange of letters/information meant an intricate network of courier service. The couriers moved back and forth between different segments of the fleet, conveying news from the Captain to officials at different settlements and vice versa. A few of the couriers were paid a monthly wage of Rs. 4, but along the way, the fleet captain hired several such couriers, who were paid according to the distance that they travelled. They were often sent out with hired dinghies. All the couriers, irrespective of the nature of the wage contract, were also paid food money for the way.

A fleet of over one hundred-fifty boats needed its own communication service – a person(s) who could connect the commander's boat at the helm with the soldiers' boat at the end of the fleet. Rounders performed the task of carrying out orders of the captain of the fleet to the head boatmen of all the vessels of the fleet. Each company had its own rounder; hence, multiple rounders were employed in a fleet. The rounder was assigned a small boat for this task.

The fleet would be dysfunctional without the *daroga*, a man of many talents and the supreme coordinator of indigenous labor. As the supervisor of all the indigenous workers in the fleet, he had knowledge of navigation. Along with the *majhis*, he advised the Captain when the winds and currents were favorable and looked after the overall safety of the fleet.³⁹² In certain

³⁹⁰ Basu, ed., *Bijayram Sener Tirthamangal*, 34-35

³⁹¹ VOC 8752 (4), 32-33

³⁹² VOC 8757

instances the *daroga* was given charge of a consignment of boats. In 1709 amidst the ongoing war in the region, the VOC *daroga* Ram Singh was given the very difficult task of escorting saltpeter boats from Patna.³⁹³ Finally, the *daroga* acted as a mediator between the companies and belligerent *zamindars*. It was left to *daroga* Ram Singh in 1710 to deal with confrontational *zamindars* Dhiresh Narayan of Jahangira and the Raja of Kandha.³⁹⁴ However, the peons were truly the jacks of all trades. They worked as guards, recruitment agents and even spies. Captain Hogerwerf, on reaching Malda during the fleet's Patna towards journey, sent out two peons as far as Mongeer to reconnoiter the political situation. When the peons reported that none of the potentates along the way was ill-disposed to the Dutch, Captain Hogerwerf led the fleet north of Shahbad.³⁹⁵ Sometimes special informers other than the peons were employed.³⁹⁶ Some peons earned a monthly wage of Rs. 2 and 12 annas, but many peons were employed on a daily wage basis which could be as low as 2 annas.

4.2 BOATMEN IN THE SOCIAL WORLD OF EIGHTEENTH CENTURY BENGAL

When grOxford University Presss of workers are referred to by their caste names, e.g., kahars or doms, their place in indigenous society, links with land, etc. are readily explained. The social place of transport workers in indigenous society, however, is often elided in company accounts. Nevertheless, this omission is not necessarily a handicap in revealing workers' social position; it only underscores what was a far more complex reality. Silence on caste affiliations

³⁹³ VOC 8739, 231-233, 265-266.

³⁹⁴ VOC 8742, 93-98

³⁹⁵ VOC 8760, 33. Also, e.g. from 1734, VOC 8776, fol. 680, VOC 8796, 545

³⁹⁶ VOC 8752 (4), 35

can only be explained by the fact that professions like rowing or pilotage were not monopolized by any one particular caste. Not only did the boatmen – the most important group of transport workers – belong to different castes, in performing this work, they often transgressed the norms of prescribed caste occupations. Such a phenomenon was not new in late pre-colonial Bengal. As Gautam Bhadra has shown, there are ample examples of such horizontal caste mobility in middle Bengali texts. In light of our introductory discussion, the low status of all these castes vis-à-vis the so-called clean castes, however, implies the propensity for mobility of such men and also their tenuous links with the land.

All information on caste affiliations of boatmen comes from various demographic surveys made in the nineteenth century. Two different surveys at the provincial level show that boatmen of Bengal came from the castes of Chandala, Patuni, Jaliya Kaivarta, Malo, Turaha and Tiyyar.³⁹⁷ In Bihar, the boatmen generally belonged to the Mallah caste, even though there were at least seven sub-castes under the Mallahs.³⁹⁸ Surveys made at the district level make the list even longer. In Bhagalpur, the majority of boatmen came from the Kewat caste in addition to Dhunar, Kalawat and Sarhiya castes.³⁹⁹ According to an account on Patna written in 1838, boatmen came from Chaing and Bindu castes. The Chaings were mostly to be found by the banks of Padma in the Natore region.⁴⁰⁰ Given the mobile nature of their profession, it is not surprising that intra-regional migration was common. In Hugli, an important hub for company activities in Bengal,

³⁹⁷ "Bengal: Its Castes and Curses," Independent Section, *The Calcutta Review*, Vol 101, (1895); Jogendranath Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1896)

³⁹⁸ Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects* 316.

³⁹⁹ William Wilson Hunter. Herman Michael Kisch, Andrew Wallace Mackie, Charles James O'Donnell, Herbert Hope Risley, *A Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol. 14, Bhagalpur and Santhal Parganas*, (London: Trubner and Co., 1877)

⁴⁰⁰ Robert Montgomery Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography, and Statistics of Eastern India; comprising the districts of Behar, Shahabad, Bhagulpore, Goruckpore, Dinajepore, Puraniya, Rungpor, and Assam. Vol.1, Behar (Patna city) and Shahabad*, (London: William H. Allen and Co. Leadenhall Street, 1838).

boatmen were predominantly Bagdis. Tentulias, Majhis and Dandamajhis - amongst the Bagdis of Hugli – were all boatmen.⁴⁰¹ Since the Bagdis of Bengal were considered to be “criminal tribes” living as navvies and wood cutters, the Bagdi boatmen of Hugli disrupt the stereotypical picture.⁴⁰² Similarly, the Chandala boatmen transgressed their caste ocCambridge University Pressation as they were generally associated with living off of cremation grounds. For most boatman caste grOxford University Presss, rowing boats was one of the many means eking out a living. Thus, their caste status was not indicative of any one ocCambridge University Pressational grOxford University Press they belonged to.

Large sections of the so-called Muslim population in Bengal worked as boatmen. Caste divisions were always prominent within Bengal Islam.⁴⁰³ By the end of the nineteenth century, colonial surveys noted that Muslim boatmen belonged to certain caste grOxford University Presss. Large sections of Nikaris, a Muslim Bengali caste grOxford University Press, and Majhis, another Muslim caste grOxford University Press in Bogra, were boatmen.⁴⁰⁴ In Bogra, the Baramasias, a Muslim caste, were all boatmen. Their caste name was directly related to their profession: twelve (*bara*) months (*masa*) referred to their year-round stay on boats.⁴⁰⁵

The ritual purity of the castes is difficult to determine. By the end of nineteenth century, most of them were considered unclean, meaning that Brahmins would not accept water from their hands. Chandalas and Bagdis were traditionally considered untouchables. However, in Hugli, the untouchability of Bagdi boatmen was qualified by the early twentieth century. Though

⁴⁰¹ L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Hooghly* (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1912), 101-102

⁴⁰² Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, 316, L.S.S. O'Malley, *Indian Caste and Customs*, London: Curzon Press, 1932

⁴⁰³ Asim Roy, *Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 37-38.

⁴⁰⁴ Bhattacharya, *3 Hindu Castes and Sects* 16, *Census of India*, 1931, vol. V, Part 1, 423

⁴⁰⁵ L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Sikkim* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917), 212

Brahmins could not drink water touched by them, their touch could not defile the water of the Ganga or dry foods and oil.⁴⁰⁶ Kaivartas were a large caste group Oxford University Press with several internal divisions. One large section, the Haliya Kaivartas, had taken to agriculture by the late nineteenth century.⁴⁰⁷ While certain sections of Haliya Kaivartas were considered clean, most of the boatmen who belonged to the Jaliya Kaivarta sub-caste were considered unclean. In an interesting twist, however, all boatmen in the company fleets considered food touched by their European employers or European co-travelers as defiled.

Boatmen's identity could not be explained by any one caste or even a small cluster of castes. Similarly, their religious affiliations hint at a very eclectic mix of various kinds of spiritual practices. As mobile workers, involved in a dangerous profession, the boatmen's spiritual beliefs often transgressed scriptural norms of Islam or Brahminical orders. In discussing the boatmen, the VOC referred to their internal social differentiation only when it interfered with the movement of the Patna fleet. Both companies noted that one of the many reasons of transshipment at the Ganga and the Jalangi was the stubbornness of the *majhis*. The VOC mentioned that "Hindu" *majhies* were most reluctant to move any further south of the village Jalangi. The VOC preferred recruiting especially "Muslim" rowers at Jalangi who, according to the company, had no trouble traveling through the deltas. Though much of this observation is shrouded in European misunderstanding of indigenous society, there is a kernel of truth in the statement. In a way, the companies were pointing at two different sets of boatmen conditioned by different geographical, and hence, spiritual settings.

⁴⁰⁶ O'Malley, *Hooghly*, 102.

⁴⁰⁷ Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, 279; O'Malley, *Hooghly*, 102-103

Islamization as a popular practice in the Bengal deltas took the form of *pir* worship.⁴⁰⁸ This was an extremely heterodox practice. The Islamic content of such worship was often questionable not only because *pir* worship and the ballads surrounding them exhorted the participation of both the Islamized and non-Islamized rural crowd⁴⁰⁹, but also because the *pirs* were often identified with Allah – according to the sharia laws no human being could be placed on the same pedestal as that of God. One of the most popular *pir* of the Eastern Bengal deltas was Pir Badar. Pir Badar was the guardian spirit of waters. His origins are shrouded in mystery, but according to various legends, Pir Badar was a Portuguese sailor. In Jayaraddi's account of Manik Pir, Pir Badar wielded power over the river goddess Ganga by forcing her to acknowledge Badar as "her elder brother." Shrines of Badar (badarmokam) dotted the entire eastern Bengal delta lands. Worship of Panch Pir (Five saints) also assured safe passage for the boatmen, but the origin of this *pir* is unknown. The shrines, which were often a small tomb with five bumps or a mound at the foot of a banyan tree, are scattered all across the deltas. Rivaling the popularity of Pir Badar and Panch Pir was Ghazi Saheb, who guarded his followers from the tigers of the Sunderbans. Unique to Bakharganj, where the company fleets always made a stop and recruited boatmen, was the shrine of Bara Auliya (twelve saints) whose origins were similarly inscrutable. Khwaja Khizr, well-known in the larger Muslim world as a patron of the seas and waters, was worshipped all along the rivers. Finally, in the western deltas was the abode (*makam*) of Shah

⁴⁰⁸ Roy, *Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, 207-249

⁴⁰⁹ I chose not to use the terms "Hindu" and "Muslim." Recent literature shows that such dual community divide was not existent in India until late 1800s. Shantanu Phukan, "'None Mad as a Hindu Woman': Contesting Communal Readings of Padmavat," in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 16, no. 1, (1996): 41-54; Ramya Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Past in Indian History c. 1500-1900* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007)

Machhandali, a very popular *pir* amongst sailors. Machhandali's legend boasts of his heroic acts rescuing many capsizing boats.⁴¹⁰

In all probability, followers of these cults of *pirs* were recognized by company officials as Muslims. However, just as caste was widespread irrespective of religion, so was the worship of *Pir*. It is no surprise that even today, songs about *pirs* include cOxford University Presslets such as this:

The shirni (food offering) of Ghazi is over:
Let the Muslims invoke Allah
And the Hindus Hari.⁴¹¹

Lower-caste men and women in the deltas were especially attracted to such practices. As worshippers of deltaic *pirs*, boatmen contracted at Mircha/Jalangi/Badderpourgola belonged to a composite cultural/spiritual world of the lower reaches of the Ganga. Boatmen from Patna or the upper reaches of the Ganga were strangers to both the geographical as well as the spiritual maze of the deltas.

The lower reaches of Ganga resounded with the songs, ballads, and rituals composed by the boatmen assuaging their *pirs* so that the *pirs* could attend to the boatmen's everyday trials and tribulations. On January 21, 1734, one rower in Captain Gelzaak's return fleet met his end in the Sunderbans in the clutches of a tiger.⁴¹² The knowledge of such dreadful consequences was creatively dealt with by the rowers of the delta through their prayers to Ghazi saheb. Similarly, before starting their journeys, boatmen would invoke the name of Badar in a chorus:

In the name of Allah, the prophet, Panch Pir , Badar, we do⁴¹³

⁴¹⁰ Roy, *Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, 207-249

⁴¹¹ Ascribed to Zainuddin's Rasul Vijay, quoted in Roy, *Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, 35

⁴¹² VOC 8776, 786

⁴¹³ James Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*, (London: Her Majesty's printer Harrison and Sons, 1883), 17

Or sometimes:

My good men
Ghazi keeps his eyes on us
Cross the Ganga! Panch Pir! Badar! Badar! Badar!⁴¹⁴

Or:

Lift the anchor, sail the boat
Chanting the name of Badar
Sail the boat.⁴¹⁵

There are saari (rowing) songs composed in the name of Badar:

Here goes the boat, hei ho
Fly the boat, row row
In the name of Badar, row
Hei ho, row, row, row
Ho ho, see who's before us
In the name of Badar
Beat them fast
Row, row, row some more
In the name of Badar.⁴¹⁶

Such invocations merged the world of work and the spiritual/cultural world. The boatmen's knowledge and experience of his work refracted through the deification of the *pirs* was also a source of cultural production in the region.

Finally, the boatmen belonged to the heterogeneous world of Bengal mysticism. The corpus of the literary and spiritual practices of Bengal mysticism. One of the one hand, we have the theologies of orthodox Gaudiya Vaishnavism written in Sanskrit, and on the other, the songs of extremely heterodox sects composed in the everyday language of people. Boatmen contributed to this world positively through their work songs called, *saari*. The icons, motifs and even language of these songs were rooted in the multi-dimensional world of Bengal mysticism,

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Wakil Ahmad, *Bamla Lokasangit: Saarigaan*, (Dhaka: Bamla Akademi, 1998), 74

⁴¹⁶ Ibid, 95

but the form of these songs was the innovation of boatmen. As composers and performers of saari, boatmen were also agents in the making of the heterodox devotional movement in Bengal.

The Bhakti (devotional) movement in Bengal is on the one hand associated with popularization of Vaishnavism, centering around the late fifteenth-, early sixteenth-century figure Chaitanya and on the other, with the spread of Sufism. After Chaitanya's death, the theologians of orthodox Vaishnavism (Gaudiya Vaishnavism) established the divinity of Chaitanya and stated that he was the dual incarnation (avatar) of Radha and Krishna in one body. This icon of dual incarnation (Chaitanya) and the icons of Radha and Krishna were appropriated by several syncretistic esoteric cults, which emerged in early eighteenth century.⁴¹⁷ These cults, though borrowing from Vaishnavism, also followed sexo-yogic methods of worship reminiscent of Tantric Buddhist practices in the region called *sahajiya*.⁴¹⁸ They also borrowed heavily from sufic ideals of love, unity of beings (*wahdat-i-wujud*), rejection of ritualism, centrality of the leader (*murshid*) mediating between God and the disciple (*murid*), etc. Though esoteric practice was not to everyone's liking, the ideas of the cults had a wider cultural coinage. Boatmen's songs were steeped in the imagery and principles of these orders.

⁴¹⁷ There are ample evidences of the iconography of Radha-Krishna's divine love in the region's folklore before it was theologized in the late sixteenth century. But, the icon definitely gained wide usage after the Chaitanya movement. See Sumanta Banerjee, *Appropriation of a folk-heroine: Radha in medieval Bengali Vaishnavite culture*, (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1993)

⁴¹⁸ For the theology of Vaishnavas and Sahajiya forms of worship, please see, Sashibhushan Das Gupta, *Sriradhar Kramabikash: Darshane O Sahitye* (Kolkata: A. Mukherjee & Pvt. Ltd., 1964); Shashibhushan Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults as Background to Bengali Literature*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1946; Edward C. Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). For an introductory idea for Vaishnava theology and literature, Edward C. Dimock and Denise Levertov, trans, *In Praise of Krishna* (New York City: Anchor Books, 1967); For Sufi ideas, Asim Roy, *Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, Enamul Haque, "Sufi Movement in Bengal," *Indo-Iranica*, III, no. 1, (1948): 9-32

In order to understand the boatmen's popular eclectic world of esoterism, it is necessary to depend on undated songs.⁴¹⁹ Most of these songs were collected in the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth centuries. However, using them as historical evidence is extremely problematic even when their locale and the nature of the performing art remain virtually the same as it was in the fifteenth century. Space, after all, is not natural; by the twentieth century, these lands have been tremendously altered by advances in technology and the political and social consequences of colonialism and post-colonialism. Moreover, any genre of performing art should be studied in the larger constellation of performing art forms, which evolved greatly in nineteenth-century Bengal.⁴²⁰ Notwithstanding these caveats, in this purely historical work, I use the songs primarily to compare their oft-used literary tropes and cosmological content with the history of religious/cultural thought and language of pre-colonial Bengal.

There is consensus amongst various collectors of *saari* songs that the predominant theme of these songs is the various exploits of Krishna (*lila*).⁴²¹ Timothy Rice has argued, "Phenomenologically, musical experience in the present is partly conditioned by inveterate previous experience."⁴²² The Radha-Krishna icons in *saari* songs can be seen as a temporal device, alluding to a historical past. Awareness of a past (and a present) is absolutely clear, when the boatmen sing:

One good example of love is the love of Radha and Krishna
They fell in love eons back, and still today they are crushed.⁴²³

⁴¹⁹ This method has been adopted by Sumantra Banerjee in his study on the folk origins of the iconography of Radha. Sumantra Banerjee, *Appropriation of a Folk Heroine: Radha in Medieval Bengali Vaishnavite Culture*

⁴²⁰ Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Street: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth century Calcutta*, (Kolkata: Seagull, 1998); Ratnabali Chatterjee, "Gender in Folk Paintings in Bengal," in *Social Scientist*, v. 28, no. 3: 322-323

⁴²¹ Wakil Ahmad, *Bamla Lokasangit: Saarigaan*, (Dhaka: Bamla Akademi, 1998); Asutosh Bhattacharya, *Bamlar Lokasahitya, Vol 3*, (Kolkata: Calcutta Book House, 1965), 585-634

⁴²² Timothy Rice, "Time, Place and Metaphor in Musical Experience and Ethnography", *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 47, no. 2 (spring-summer 2003): 151-179, 163

⁴²³ Wakil Ahmad, *Bamla Lokasangit: Saarigaan*, 54

Here the boatmen create a bridge with the past, signified by Radha and Krishna's love. How transformative the experience may be of singing of love while rowing hard can only be explained by ethno-musicologists, but the use of Radha-Krishna is rooted in a sensibility which dates back at least to the eighth/ninth century C.E. when the Bhagavat Purana was written. The Bhagavat Purana provides the earliest account of the love sports (*lila*) of Krishna with the milkmaids (*gopis*). Some scholars speculated that such iconography of Krishna was rooted in the orgiastic festivals of the Abhiras, a pastoral cowherd community, who were spread all over North India since the early Christian era.⁴²⁴ Though we find the image of Krishna frolicking with milkmaids in Bhagavat Purana, the image of Radha appears in the twelfth century text, Jaydev's Gitagovindam. Jaydev, a Sanskrit poet from Bengal, remained a massive influence for the Vaishnava poets in the region for centuries to come.

Krishna's dalliances with the milkmaids (*gopis*) and the divine love of Radha and Krishna (*rasalila*) come up repeatedly in the *saari* songs. One of the earliest extant *saari*, collected in 1813-14, describes the scene of Krishna's love sports (*lila*) with the milkmaids on a boat:

The young Krishna is the head pilot
The whole world is at play in the waters
His magic turns water creatures into boats
Krishna is the *majhi* and the milkmaids the rowers
As they row, their bangles and anklets rattle to the rhythm
On the highest note, the women of pleasure sing.⁴²⁵

The following song, collected in early twentieth century, dwells on the same theme of Krishna's love sports with Radha, the chief playmate of Krishna amongst the milkmaids:

⁴²⁴ Sashibhushan Das Gupta, *Sriradhar Kramabikash* 249; Sumanta Banerjee, *Appropriation of a Folk Heroine*, 7-8.

⁴²⁵ This song has been mentioned in Jaynarayan Ghosal's *Karunanidhan Bilash* (1813-1814). Based on the refined language of the verse Wakil Ahmad is skeptical if the song was composed by any folk artist. Wakil Ahmad, *Bamla Lokasangit: Saarigaan*, 6-9

O Kanai (Krishna), ferry me across the river
I will pay you the money I make in the bazaars of Mathura.
You beautiful Kanai, and your broken boat.
Where shall I keep the pots of curd, and where shall I put my feet
Kanai replied, listen O, embodiment of *rasa*(savoring/pleasure)
Why did you come to the brimming river in full monsoon
First, put your pots of curd in the boat and then sit in the middle.
Why do you drift in shame in the rain drops
I will ferry all sakhis (Radha's friends/*gopis*) for an anna each.
But for Radhika I will charge her gold earrings.⁴²⁶

Both songs borrow heavily from a Vaishnava *pada* (lyric) on the episode of Krishna's love-making with Radha on a boat (*nauka vilas*). Radha, a milkmaid on her way to the village market, met a boatman, Krishna. Radha repeatedly begs Krishna to tell her the price of the ferry ride. Krishna playfully avoids answering until they reach mid-river, where they engage in divine union (*rasalila*). *Padas* (lyrics) on this theme were first composed in Bengali by Bodu Chandidasa in his Sri Krishna Kirtan, a text which dates back to the fifteenth century,⁴²⁷ but the heyday of the Vaishnava lyrics was the seventeenth and early eighteenth century.⁴²⁸ By repeatedly invoking these lyrics in their own words, the boatmen placed themselves in the world of Bengal Vaishnavism. However, it was the rhythm of the beat (*taal*) that the boatmen rowed by that was the *saaris'* original contribution to the heterodox Vaishnava literary world.⁴²⁹

Even the love songs involving a village damsel, which some collectors have categorized as "folk love,"⁴³⁰ borrowed heavily from the religio-literary treasure trove of Vaishnava lyrics. The word for love in these songs is often *piriti* – the same word used so often in love songs by

⁴²⁶ Wakil Ahmad, *Bamla Lokasangit: Saarigaan*, 39-40. There are several other songs on the boat theme. See, Ahmad, 39-42.

⁴²⁷ Ramakanta Chakravarti, *Vaisnavism in Bengal, 1486-1900*, (Kolkata: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1985), 25; Sumantra Banerjee, *Appropriation of a Folk Heroine*, 17-18

⁴²⁸ Sati Ghosh, *Bamla sahitye Vaishnav Padabalir Kramabikash*, (Kalikata: Saraswat Library, bamla san, 1376), 88-89

⁴²⁹ For a detailed discussion on the rhythm and tune of saari songs, Wakil Ahmad, 25-29

⁴³⁰ Wakil Ahmad, *Bamla Lokasangit: Saarigaan*, 78-86

the Vaishnava poet Deena Chandidasa.⁴³¹ The object of love/desire in these songs is often called *bandhu*, most evident in the Vaishnava lyrics, where the highest state of devotion, expressed as the love between man and woman (*madhuryabhava*)— Krishna, referred to as *bandhua* by Radha, the lover. The male lover, who often is a boatman, is interchangeably called the *rasik* (connoisseur), a term used in the lyrics to identify Krishna, or he who can enjoy the pleasures bestowed by Radha.

These work songs allow us to investigate the eclectic cultural world that these workers inhabited. Though the divine love of Radha and Krishna forms a popular theme, Ashutosh Bhattacharya, linguist and historian of Bengali language and literature and collector of Bengali performing arts, notes:

One must remember that in Eastern Bengal the singers (of saari songs) are all Muslims. Very rarely are a few singers of lower caste Hindu origin. Hence, the songs have been composed and performed by Muslims. But, the themes in all instances are that of Radha-Krishna and Nimai (Chaitanya).⁴³²

And this is not a unique occurrence; various sufi poets who composed verses in Bengali drew heavily from the Vaishnava iconography of Radha and Krishna.⁴³³

This active borrowing of icons going beyond scriptural or caste norms/boundaries hints at the extreme heterodox traditions within Bengal mysticism. A hundred years after the death of Chaitanya, various antinomian esoteric Vaishnava sects emerged. Ramakanta Chakravarti mentions that fifty-six such sects had emerged by the middle of the eighteenth century.⁴³⁴ For these sects, Chaitanya and the icons of Radha and Krishna remained central. These sects were

⁴³¹ Sumantra Banerjee, *Appropriation of a Folk Heroine*, 26

⁴³² Bhattacharya, *Bamla Lokasahitya*, Vol. 3, 627.

⁴³³ Several Vaishnava padavalis (lyrics) were written by Muslim poets. E.g. – some lyrics on the boat theme (nauka vilas) have been ascribed to Masan Ali. Roy, *Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, 206

⁴³⁴ Chakravarti, *Vaisnavism in Bengal, 1486-1900*, 349.

truly eclectic and syncretic in nature. Fakir Aulchand, founder of Kartabhaja sect, was himself a Sufi. One legend surrounding Aulchand mentions that he was Chaitanya in disguise. Disgusted with orthodox Vaishnavism (Gaudiya Vaishnavism), Chaitanya took up the garb of a fakir.⁴³⁵ The heterodoxy of these cults was further accentuated by their sexo-yogic practices of disciplining the body on the lines of sahajiya beliefs. Influence of Sufi thought is evident from the fact that all these sects emphasized the centrality of the guru or the teacher in their orders and rejected ritualism of any kind. However, it is impossible to categorize these cults not only under any one overarching religion, but any single branch of mysticism as well. For instance, influenced by the Sufis, Bauls vehemently opposed any form of ritualism, but borrowing from the *sahajiyas*, they believed that the human body was a microcosm of the universe. But, then they go as far as to reject the *shariat* that no Sufi will agree with or that human body is the abode of god that will make even the *sahajiyas* uncomfortable. The extreme heterodox nature of these cults ruffled scriptural, caste, and patriarchal norms.⁴³⁶

All of these sects rejected caste, hence attracting a massive following amongst the lower orders of society. Instead of the using temples/mosques/*dargah*, leaders of these sects had far more intimate contact with the peasantry. For instance, the elders of the Kartabhaja(Followers of Karta) sect organized all-night congregations or *baithaks* in the house of a follower on any chosen evening. Different grades of disciples ensured wide participation.⁴³⁷ Bauls (Cult of

⁴³⁵ Chakravarti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal, 1486-1900*, 354

⁴³⁶ Patriarchy and Vaishnava movement has been discussed by Sumanta Banerjee. Banerjee, *Appropriation of a Folk Heroine*

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 346-384

Madmen) on the other hand, were roaming troubadours who reached out to a wide audience, even though entry into their orders was difficult.⁴³⁸

Some of the *saari* songs are extremely similar to the songs of these sects. For example, we find the use of allegory both in the songs of the Bauls as well as in the *saaris*. The songs of the heterodox sects are all allegorical – the imagery’s hidden meaning hints at the methods of worship. The allegorical device had powerful popular appeal since even when the meanings were not clear, depicting the plight of mundane life in the everyday language of the people struck a chord with many. For example, in the songs of several sects, the figure of a boat’s helmsman was an important allegory for the importance of the teacher or the guru in their songs: The human body was a frail craft in which the traveler set forth in the stormy river of life, and the senses are drunken ferrymen who would invariably crash the boat on the rocky riverbed of life. One’s only hope was the helmsman or guru who, with a steady hand, could lead the boat to its final destination.⁴³⁹ Similar imagery, which seems to have hidden meaning, is present in several *saari* songs. For example:

I fear going alone
Come guru, let us cross the river together.
.....
First discard the habits of the body
Find a balance between the outside and the inside
Follow the lead of Sujan, the pilot
He will take you on the boat.⁴⁴⁰

The guru in the song is interchangeable with Sujan, the pilot. Disciplining the body brings to mind the *sahajiya* practice of controlling the body and the senses central to all mystic cults of the region. Finally, reconciling the outside with the inside harks back to the Sufi doctrine

⁴³⁸ Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, 249-270; Deben Bhattacharya, *The Mirror of the Sky*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969), 23-38

⁴³⁹ Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, 260

⁴⁴⁰ Ahmad, *Bamla Lokasangit: Saarigaan*, 73

of balance between the apparent and the hidden truth (*zahir* and *batin*). The esoteric sub-text is hidden in the garb of the experience of a seasoned pilot maneuvering a boat.

Despite the similarities in the allegories, it is difficult to conclude definitively that the boatmen belonged to any of these cults. They might have belonged to none or all, but similarity in the idioms of expression puts the boatmen squarely in the cultural/spiritual world of mysticism that emerged in late medieval Bengal. The rustic language adopted by the antinomian sects was also the language of the boatmen. Composed in very localized dialects, these songs were devoid of the embellishments found in the great Vaishnava poet-theologian Krishnadas Kaviraj or the greatest poet of eighteenth-century Bengal, Bharatchandra. The notoriety of saari songs is expressed in the popular saying: “Any amount of praise will not make the corrupt honest, just as any amount of saari will not pollute the waters of Ganga.”⁴⁴¹ In this sense, the boatmen’s songs aesthetically shared much with the songs of the antinomian sects, as in this excerpt from a Baul song:

As the storm rampages
In your crumbling hut,
The water rises to your bed.
Your tattered quilt
Is floating on the flood,
Leaving your shelter.⁴⁴²

In order to explain the futility of attachment, the metaphor of a crumbling hut in the monsoons – a lived experience of millions in the Bengal countryside – is used. Given the fact that boatmen’s songs were (and still are) created while at work, the language is a conscious

⁴⁴¹ Quoted in Bhattacharya, *Bamla Lokasahitya*, Vol. 3, 590

⁴⁴² Bhattacharya, *The Mirror of the Sky*, 8

aesthetic choice: it must be as quotidian as work itself.⁴⁴³ In order to explain how love causes pain, one *saari* laments:

Love is a jewel, love is care
Love is a big headache
No matter how hard you try
You can't get rid of it
Just as the bones of tyangra fish
Cleave unto human flesh.⁴⁴⁴

The earthy sensuality of this song contrasts sharply with the poetic style found in orthodox Vaishnavism, whose followers were strict vegetarians who would cringe at the use of the metaphor of fish bones in a panegyric for the divine love of Radha and Krishna.

Mobility was imperative to the creation of the subject position of the boatmen in the social and cultural world of late pre-colonial Bengal. Movements over fairly long distances, which was part and parcel of boatmen's work, enabled horizontal mobility which cut across barriers of caste rules regarding occupations since the profession was open to members of diverse castes. The spiritual, literary and cultural world the boatmen inhabited was shaped by their everyday concerns as reflected in the eclecticism of the deification of the pirs. This eclecticism, which was a product of their spatial practice of mobility, was also the key factor shaping the boatmen's participation in the socio-cultural world of heterodox Bengal mysticism. In making their work songs, they borrowed heavily from the forms and imagery created by the various sects of Bengal mysticism. The work songs in turn made them cultural agents within this world. *Saari* or rowing songs were composed in such a way that they synchronized with the rhythms of rowing. This music composed in the rustic language of the

⁴⁴³ On conscious aesthetic choice in music, see Steven Feld, "Aesthetics as Iconicity of Style, or 'Lift-up-over-sounding': Getting into the Kaluli Groove," *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, Vol.20 (1988), 74-113

⁴⁴⁴ Wakil Ahmad, *Bamla Lokasangit: Saarigaan*, 53

people, while they plied the Ganga, was the boatmen's original contribution to the composite culture of late pre-colonial Bengal.

4.3 INCOMPLETE ARTICULATION

The boatmen and cart-men negotiated directly with European personnel. Evidence from Patna and Mircha show that from the 1720s on, they bargained directly and astutely with the European company officials, refusing to passively accept their worker "status."⁴⁴⁵ There are several problems in explaining pre-colonial Indian social relations in terms of "status." In discussing how Murshidabad court artists received patronage, Ratnabali Chatterjee argues that exchange relations were built into the system of patronage. The ability of artists to move from one noble household to another indicated the existence of "social relations of conscious exchange,"⁴⁴⁶ which were manifested in their mobility and availability for hire. While relations between employer and employee cannot be explained by some abstract laws of market relations, nor can the practice of conscious exchange be explained away by "status" or instituted relationships within a complex web of rights and duties. Irfan Habib has warned against equating Mughal India with feudal Europe by emphasizing the prevalence of wage labor and the widespread mobility of workers.⁴⁴⁷ Even more so than the Murshidabad artists, the transport workers, who were a disparate group of peripatetic wage earners or

⁴⁴⁵ VOC 8751 (3), 21; VOC 8769, 68-69; for Patna, VOC 8764, 49-54; VOC 8776, 209-212; VOC 8777, 817-819; VOC 8786, 333-334, 516-517.

⁴⁴⁶ The term is taken from Raymond Williams, *Culture* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1981), 39. Ratnabali Chatterjee uses Williams' formulation in understanding the patronage of Murshidabad artists, Ratnabali Chatterjee, *From Karkhana to the Studio* (New Delhi: Book & Books, 1990), 17.

⁴⁴⁷ Irfan Habib, "Marx's Perception of India" in *Essays in Indian History*, 14-58

hirelings, consciously entered into exchange relations with the companies, in which they worked hard to safeguard their own interests. These agreements, which encapsulated the will of the workers, mirrored a company-worker relationship that differed greatly from the contractual relationships of worker-employer in colonial India.

The advantage that the workers had over the companies in deciding on their wages is evident from “quarrelsome” settlements. The very competitive labor market, which the companies could not regulate, continued to rankle them in the first few decades of the eighteenth century. On August 1723, the Hugli council triumphantly announced that the Patna officials had managed to recruit seven *patellas* and two *bangelas* for “very civil prices” of Rs. 4 and Rs. 3.5 per hundred maunds,⁴⁴⁸ respectively. However, incidents in September left a dent in the confidence of the VOC officers at Patna. Rumors about the imminent arrival of Mughal imperial soldiers in Patna and their need to hire boats spread like wildfire. Given the “extraordinary wavering nature” of the owners of the boats, the VOC consequently feared a delay in departure and that the owners would “try to break their contract under one veil or the other.” The Patna officials were ordered “as a precaution” that if that occasion arose, “they should not make the least changes to their (the boat owners’) advantage.”⁴⁴⁹ Available documents do not show whether the Patna officials stood their ground, but it seemed unlikely from the events of 1734, when Patna officials were able to hire boats at a very expensive rate of Rs. 15.5 per hundred maunds. The English, whose fleet left earlier in the season, could manage a relatively better deal of Rs. 14.5 per hundred maunds. Only by agreeing to hire boats at such a high price could the company official feel they could stall “the greedy intentions of the boatmen.” Even such a deal, however, could not rule out the possibility of the “exactions of the Moorish government” while

⁴⁴⁸ 100 maunds = 4.5 tons roughly.

⁴⁴⁹ VOC 8751(2), 54

passing through the saltpeter quarters.⁴⁵⁰ In 1739, the company was again fishing in muddy waters as the Nawab Aliwardi Khan's son-in-law's journey to Murshidabad from Patna coincided with the Patna fleet's journey. Apart from being pressed for the Nawab's son-in-law's entourage, the boatmen were complaining about the coming monsoons, which would coincide with their return journey. Given all these circumstances, boats could only be hired at a very high rate of Rs. 22 per hundred maunds. The company was compelled to "give in to the desires of the (boat)men" by contracting them at the rate of Rs. 18 per hundred maunds. They were thus forced to pay almost twenty five percent higher than the previous year's freight charges.⁴⁵¹ In 1745 a *ghatmajhi* and a *banian*, employed as recruitment agents of the EIC in Calcutta, could not come to an agreement with the boatmen. The EIC cashier, Mr. Kemp intervened to resolve the matter. Unable to bring down the asking price of the boatmen, he took the critical decision of hiring fewer vessels.⁴⁵²

The boatmen everywhere asserted their will in deciding their wages. Recruitment of boats at transshipment points was always uncertain. In some years, the companies made contracts with the *gomasthas* (intermediaries) of the salt merchants to come to a solution,⁴⁵³ but they typically negotiated directly with the boatmen. Such negotiations reveal the remarkable role of the workers in deciding their own terms of employment. In April 1709, when the *daroga* Ram Singh was in charge of the return fleet, he had to arrange the difficult task of transshipment of boats at Kherimarie. The boatmen from Patna refused to go beyond Kherimarie, so he had to recruit new boats. As was the custom, he communicated with Kassimbazar officials regarding his movements. However, the Kassimbazar officials did not approve of the boat hire rates and

⁴⁵⁰ VOC 8777, 818-819.

⁴⁵¹ VOC 8787, 445-449.

⁴⁵² P/1/15, 630v, 715r-v, 761v.

⁴⁵³ VOC 8770, 296

pressed him to bring down the rate, but “the boatmen could not be reconciled to the rate [as recommended by Kassimbazar].” Ram Singh thus wrote to the Hugli council for their permission as he found it increasingly impossible to restrain the up-country boatmen.⁴⁵⁴

It was not just the hire/wage but every aspect of the contract that was debated and challenged by workers. In December 1733, the steersmen and pilots recruited at Mircha refused to sign contracts with the company before they knew the actual size of the fleet that was coming from Patna. Before risking the dangerous passage through the Sunderbans, they wanted to make sure that they would have sufficient military presence. When the fleet arrived, they refused to move without their full pay. When the cashier van Bevenage obliged the boatmen, the fleet finally made a start on December 29.⁴⁵⁵ In 1734, the Equipage Officer, Christoffel de Wind, was sent to negotiate with boatmen at Jalangi. De Wind was in a most uncomfortable situation as the boatmen “did not dare to hazard the dangerous journey through the wilderness of the Sunderbans.” The boatmen made it clear to de Wind that from the following year, they would not rent out their boats for the Patna fleet. Their threat proved successful, as a resolution was unanimously taken in Kassimbazar council to contract twenty-nine boats at the asking price of the boatmen, explaining: “thus far as one can find the boatmen making a reasonable demand, a small cost can be paid for one’s great comfort.”⁴⁵⁶

Demand for food money was another common bone of contention. In 1737, the Kassimbazar cashier, Christiaan van Bevenage, was posted at Jalangi to supervise the transshipment of vessels coming from Patna. Not knowing the amount of opium coming, he hired one hundred boats, guessing that they would be enough for the fleet to move forward.

⁴⁵⁴ VOC 8739, 265-266.

⁴⁵⁵ VOC 8776, 751

⁴⁵⁶ VOC 8776, fol. 212

Boats were fast disappearing that year as a lot of them were being taken up by salt merchants. Van Bevenage thought it prudent to hire vessels when they were available, lest they were all gone by the time the fleet appeared. “But this could happen not without much bickering with the boatmen,” van Bevenage reported. The boatmen demanded Rs. 18 for each vessel and food money of 10 annas per day. After much haggling, van Bevenage managed to strike a deal with the boatmen at the previous year’s rate of Rs. 16 per boat and 6annas for food money for the days they had to wait for the arrival of the fleet.⁴⁵⁷ The money for the “empty days” was absolutely essential for retaining the recruited boatmen. The VOC always looked for ways of cutting what they thought was an “extra” cost, but boatmen were always insistent on keeping it, as is evident from the negotiations in 1739. Like Christiaan van Bevenage, Cashier Ewout de Leeuw was sent from Kassimbazar to Jalangi to recruit boatmen, cartmen and coolies in advance for the loading and unloading work of the Patna fleet. As in 1737, the boatmen again demanded Rs. 18 for each vessel. De Leeuw was successful in striking a good bargain at the previous year’s rate of Rs.16 and managed to hire twenty-two boats at that rate. But soon he lamented, “since I had not paid the food money (for the days they waited for the arrival of the fleet), eleven of them have left to be hired out by merchants who are daily competing here.” De Leeuw decided to give the food money out “sparsely” to the rest of the boatmen from the next day.⁴⁵⁸

A sense of entitlement to wages, which were often comprised of non-monetary privileges, was extremely strong amongst the boatmen. Their constant insistence on carrying salt on board to sell it on their journey upriver to supplement their wages, could not be stopped by the companies. The Mughal state conferred monopoly trading rights in salt to certain traders of their choice, and it was of the utmost importance to the companies to respect such monopoly rights.

⁴⁵⁷ VOC 8782, 469-471

⁴⁵⁸ VOC 8786, 523-524

However, from higher-level European company servants to their native rowers, employees of all stripes were involved in the illegal salt trade. In early 1732, the Nawab of Bengal, Shuja Khan, issued an official order (parwana) to the Fausdar of Hugli, Pir Khan, forbidding “the hat wearers” from the salt trade.⁴⁵⁹ The VOC authorities blamed the Armenian merchant, Khwaja Mohammed Fazee – who carried the privilege of trading in salt – for such an “instigation.” The next year, Captain Geldzak’s fleet during the up-river journey was held up for nearly a month near Hugli by the Fausdar Pir Khan. Salt was found in the holds of the vessels in the fleet, which the Fausdar staunchly forbade. The VOC had a dilemma as the rowers were unwilling to part with their “old privilege,” which allowed them to carry in the holds of the boats two bags of salt for every maund of cargo that they carried. Clearly, this “privilege” was very important to them. The VOC reported: “...without the enjoyment of which right our rowers were unwilling to touch the oars.” After twenty-two days of negotiations, two senior VOC merchants succeeded in persuading the Fausdar to loosen his hold. Between the Fausdar and the oarsmen, the Fausdar had to relent.⁴⁶⁰

For its part, the Nawab’s office asked the EIC to sign a bond in 1727 stating that the vessels of their Patna fleet would not carry salt.⁴⁶¹ However along with the soldiers of the fleet, *majhis* and oarsmen carried salt on the vessels as special “allowances” made to the boatmen by the EIC above their usual wage.⁴⁶² In 1732, however, the EIC discovered that several oarsmen had managed to carry salt exceeding their usual allowance and that it had become standard practice.⁴⁶³ The same year, as the EIC was finding it impossible to stop the salt trade of their

⁴⁵⁹ VOC 8770, 306

⁴⁶⁰ VOC 8774, 152-153

⁴⁶¹ P/1/6, 510v-511r

⁴⁶² P/1/9, 129v.

⁴⁶³ P/1/9, 124r.

soldiers, Captain William Holcombe, somewhere near Mircha, tried his best to convince the boatmen of the polwars of the fleet to reduce their cargo of salt. He was predictably unsuccessful as the *ghatmajhi* of Calcutta reported that it was futile to ask the boatmen to reduce their freight of salt on board the Patna fleet as “they insist on carrying salt as usual with the same pay.”⁴⁶⁴ Two years later, the problem escalated. In August 1734, Captain Holcombe had to call off his expedition when the fleet reached Nadia, not too far from Hugli. The oarsmen were running away “hourly,” and he had to stop continuously to recruit replacements. The steersmen of the boats blamed the company’s decision to not permit the oarsmen to carry salt as the reason behind such an unusual rate of desertion, explaining:

when they were allowed salt it was a security as being on the boat, but now the money they receive they tie in a bag and march away with it.⁴⁶⁵

Salt thus served not just as “security” for the oarsmen but also for the company. Without providing them with freight space, the company could not count on their cooperation. It is not surprising then that this practice of carrying salt on board continued into the late eighteenth century.

Boatmen’s sense of entitlement to such trading privileges can be traced back to the sixteenth-century text, Achyutananda Das’*Kaibartagita*. Achyutananda was an important figure of a popular Vaishnavite movement in Orissa. Though Achyutananda’s real background is shrouded in mystery, he always styled himself as the patron saint of the laboring or menial castes. Thus, in *Gopalanka Ogala*, he claimed to be the saint of Goala (cowherds) and Kamara, (blacksmiths), and in *Kaibartagita*, he was patron saint of the Kaibarta (fisherman/boatmen).

⁴⁶⁴ P/1/9, 384v.

⁴⁶⁵ P/1/10, 108r

⁴⁶⁶In the Kaibartagita, Achyutananda narrated the life of the mythical king of the Kaibartas, Dasaraja, through a conversation between Krishna and Arjuna. Dasaraja was born through the ear of Krishna. He was then crowned the king of the Kaivartagita. By declaring Dasaraja belonging to the same body as Krishna, Achyutananda bestowed the untouchable caste with a dignity that was denied by the Brahminical order. Krishna then gifted Dasaraja a boat and horse to make a livelihood through trade. Trade was thus the birthright of the boatmen, and any violation of that right was violation of their moral economy.

The political landscape was known to the boatmen. When dissatisfied with their wages, they appealed to Nawab's court. In December, 1741, EIC officials at Kassimbazar stopped one hundred and fifty-six *majhis* and dandies (oarsmen) at Rajmahal. They were on their way to the Nawab's court in Murshidabad to "complain for want of wages and subsistence." To calm them down, they were given Rs. 50. That same year, all boatmen recruited at Jalangi were given an advance of Rs. 260.⁴⁶⁷

As mentioned earlier, the boatmen were very territorial. Boatmen coming from Patna would not go any further down than the confluence of the Ganga and the Jalangi.⁴⁶⁸ Their stubbornness was one of the factors deciding the movement of the Patna fleet. Companies found it very difficult to find a way around this inflexibility. The Hindu *majhis* in particular would not move any further south than Jalangi. The VOC thus preferred recruiting especially Muslim rowers at Jalangi who, according to the company, had no trouble traveling. The task was a bit expensive as there were years when they had to be paid a daily allowance of 0.5 anna for the

⁴⁶⁶Since Kaibartagita provides the only indigenous pre-colonial profile of a boatman in Eastern India and since a sizeable section of the boatmen working for the companies came from Kaibarta castes, I will use the text even though it does not precisely come from Bengal. Achyutananda Dasa, *Kaibartagita* (Cuttack: Orissa Government Publications, n.d), 15

⁴⁶⁷ p/1/15, 2r.

⁴⁶⁸ VOC 8739, 265-266

retention period awaiting the fleet from Patna.⁴⁶⁹ In 1735, “with the greatest difficulty,” the EIC officers at Patna persuaded boatmen from Patna to go as far down as Calcutta. They agreed reluctantly and insisted on being released as soon as they reached Calcutta. The Patna council warned that if their needs were not looked after, “they [Patna Council] shall not be able to procure any boats that will go to Calcutta next year.”⁴⁷⁰ Such practices were short-lived at best. Events from 1745 confirm the resilience of the practices of the up-country boatmen. When the boatmen of large saltpeter boats coming from Patna were asked by the EIC to sail through the Sunderbans, they were extremely reluctant as they were contracted at Patna to sail as far down as Badderpourgola. When pressed by the EIC *ghatmajhi* and a native book keeper, they demanded the exorbitant rate of Rs. 24 per hundred maunds. No amount of cajoling could bring them to the usual rate of Rs. 16 per maund. Seven days of coaxing could not change the boatmen from “continuing unreasonable in demands.” The Kassimbazar officials, therefore, had to decide on hiring smaller boats in the region and sending the saltpeter down the Jalangi.⁴⁷¹

Coming to any settlement with the cartmen was equally difficult. In 1732, at Mircha, carts were hired for sending opium and military equipment brought from Patna to Kassimbazar at the rate of Rs. 3 per chest of opium, and Rs. 1 for each soldier’s chest. The artillery and the packaged goods were sent down to Jalangi from where the river was again navigable, at the rate of 8 annas per maund for the former and Rs. 3 per package for the latter. Apart from that, they hired oxen at the rate of 11 annas each to carry the soldiers’ tents, etc. Considering “the trouble in which one finds oneself” at the transshipment point, “whereupon the unreasonable cartmen

⁴⁶⁹ VOC 8776, 654

⁴⁷⁰ P/1/11,111v.

⁴⁷¹ P/1/15, 745r-v, 761v.

are in the habit of making their bills,” the deal was made “on very civil terms.”⁴⁷² However, the next year, the companies were fishing in troubled waters. Though the twenty-four cartmen agreed to work for the previous year’s wages, they demanded 8 annas for each ox while they waited for the fleet to arrive. Kassimbazar council advised Christiaan van Bevenage to “persevere at frustrating” the demands of the cartmen “in the hope that Lt. Geldzak [the commander of the Patna fleet] will soon show up.” Van Bevenage persevered while “with eagle’s eye” he waited for the fleet to arrive. It was no mean task, especially because carts were in heavy demand as a local noble was recruiting them in droves to carry his luggage to Patna. On top of that, many more were being recruited to draw stones at the construction site of the palace of Sarfaraz Khan, son of Shujauddin, Nawab of Bengal. Luckily, Captain Geldzak arrived soon thereafter, and van Bevenage was relieved to dispatch all the opium. Settlements with coolies were fraught with similar “altercations.”⁴⁷³

In May, 1800, the tide changed as oarsmen were put to hard labor on road construction as part of penal punishment for deserting their boats by the acting Collector of Tirhoot.⁴⁷⁴ British governance had finally criminalized a working-class activity the companies had long known and feared. The situation in the previous century, however, was very different indeed. Instructions to the VOC commander, Jacob van der Helling, Lieutenant Francois Mulder and the Ensigns, Jan Geldzak, Lubertus Vermehr, and commandeering Sergeant Jan van Ingen of the Patna fleet in 1729 stated clearly that:

your honor should strongly forbid the Europeans from doing the least harm to the native steersmen and the rowers – from beating them or disturbing them and from touching their cook ware as such an act will

⁴⁷² VOC 8769, 68-69

⁴⁷³ In 1739 coolies could be persuaded to carry opium chests from Badderpourgola to Jalangi at previous years rate of 9 annas/ chest. VOC 8786, 516-517.

⁴⁷⁴ Sinha, 38

compel these people [the native boatmen], to their misfortune and damage, to throw away their food. Apart from that, one has to understand that not only will these people [as they have done with the English] flee from their boats and run away landwards but also that one would not be able to get any more boats in the future.⁴⁷⁵

Such warnings were reiterated in the instructions given to various officers of the Patna fleet in the years 1725, 1732, 1734, 1739, 1743.⁴⁷⁶

In the early eighteenth century, the companies as employers were constantly caught in their wrong foot in preventing the desertion of their workers. Both concern for recruitment and retention of workers were constantly attended to in the manuals given out to the commanders of the fleet or captains heading a company of the fleet. Since the companies were not in a position to draft laws, there was no possibility of criminalizing worker desertion. In fact, the legitimacy of the self activity of the workers was somewhat acknowledged when in 1725, a VOC official remarked that acts of defilement of boatmen's food led to the "great chagrin and no less damage" to the rowers, they being "very poor people."⁴⁷⁷ Such repetitive caution indicated how the company dreaded disquiet amongst the native workforce. From 1729 on, all instructions referred to one incident where the EIC "substantially" experienced the repercussions of the maltreatment of the native workers. Facing "heavy desertion of their rowers," the EIC fleet officials had to make the difficult decision of making the European members of the fleet drag the vessels upriver.⁴⁷⁸ Desertion of boatmen had multiple causes. In 1727, the VOC complained that in case of storm, both the steeringsmen and the rowers "very easily left their vessels." The company detected that the "principal" reason for desertion, however, was that "they have nothing to lose, having got the two months' payment in hand." They recommended a change in

⁴⁷⁵ VOC 8762, fol. 197. VOC, 8752 (2), 197

⁴⁷⁶ VOC 8770, 304-306; VOC 8774, 645-709; VOC 8776, 679-773; VOC 8787, 959-967; VOC 8792, 983-1000.

⁴⁷⁷ VOC 8752 (2), 203

⁴⁷⁸ This incident is first mentioned in 1733 instruction. VOC 8774, 649-650.

the advance payment system then followed in the region.⁴⁷⁹ Though sources are scarce in determining conclusively the changes brought about by the companies, one can see from the spending documents of the companies that the boatmen were paid on a monthly basis with no instances of advances. Even this change, however, did not stop desertion.

Desertion of the rowers was common on the “dangerous” leg of the journey through the Sunderbans. Rattled by desertion, the company had to accept the high wages demanded by replacement workers. In 1734, within the six days between January 6th and January 12th, the Patna fleet of the VOC suffered the desertion of twenty-two rowers. Sergeant Thiers, the commander of the fleet, had to replace the deserters for rowers who charged Rs. 4 each for the two-and-a-half-month journey. Further down the way, on March 1st, three more oarsmen escaped. The VOC was compelled to hire three men for Rs. 3 each for just fifteen days’ of work.⁴⁸⁰ Desertion of oarsmen thus caused enormous discomfiture to the companies, and the only way of getting around it was to accede to the demands for a higher wage for the replacements. Lack of regulating power led the companies to resort to preventive measures as hinted at in the instruction manuals, but not to any punitive measures.

How the EIC and VOC held the numerous transport workers accountable is not very clear as evidence on the nature of labor discipline under the companies is limited. The companies’ limited jurisdiction over the worker and his labor power might explain the lack of such information, as underscored by a cOxford University Pressle of incidents in particular. In 1719, on the arrival of the Patna fleet to Chinsura, the VOC officials discovered that sixty-eight bags of saltpeter were missing. Narottam, the *majhi* of the boat from which the saltpeter bags went missing, was made to sign a bond stating that if he was found guilty, he would pay with his boat

⁴⁷⁹ VOC 8758, 25

⁴⁸⁰ VOC 8776, 656; VOC 8777, 291

to replace the missing saltpeter bags. What the outcome of the investigation was is not known. However, the company had to allow him to sail to Patna, where the officials were informed of the bond.⁴⁸¹ Their mobility could not be circumscribed. In 1745 furthermore, the EIC experienced an incident of theft. Of the boxes of bullion sent to Kassimbazar, one box had a hole in it, and silver worth Rs. 620 was missing. The *majhi* of the boat along with four oarsmen fled the scene. The company guards and soldiers then apprehended the other people on the boat – a sergeant, an Armenian passenger and three other oarsmen – and sent them to Calcutta. Since there was no proof that those prisoners had anything to do with the robbery and since the chief-accused were still at large, it was decided that “the *nya* [owner] of the boat, the person who was security for the *manjee* together with the *Gaut Manjee* (*Ghatmajhi*) must make good the deficiency to the Hon’ble Company.” The EIC it seems, had devised a system of security in ensuring some form of control over the worker: several employees of the EIC were woven together into one nexus of responsibility for not violating the EIC’s property. When the owner of the boat from which the *majhis* and *dandies* had stolen the silver was interrogated, the EIC learned that “she is so poor as to have nothing but her boats for her livelihood and one of them broke and the other not above twenty rupees.” Thus, it was resolved that the *ghatmajhi*, a recruitment agent for boats, regularly employed by the EIC, was to “make good the loss to the Hon’ble Company” as he “ought to have taken better security” for the boat and boatmen he had recruited.⁴⁸² This incident is striking as it shows that the *ghatmajhi*, a worker closely related to the EIC, was most vulnerable to company’s labor discipline.

⁴⁸¹ VOC 8748, 162.

⁴⁸² P/1/15, 630v.

4.4 CONCLUSION

A series of Regulations in the early nineteenth century completed the process of surveillance of these mobile workers and also enforced contracts which were without exception heavily advantageous to the employers. *Majhis* were required to deliver a list of names and places of their oarsmen and also sign an agreement which stated: “I will not permit or induce any of the dandies of my boat to abscond during the voyage under the penalty of forfeiting the sum [...] payable to me.” The EIC also retained the right to confiscate from the *majhi* any expenses made in the recruitment process. Breach of contract was made a criminal offence whereby the workers faced one to three month’s imprisonment while the employers, if guilty, could get away by payment of wages and arrears.⁴⁸³ The unequivocal power of the EIC and private employers of the early 1800s stood in opposition to their power in the early eighteenth century. By then, the power of the transport workers in deciding the terms of the contract and their ability to break such contracts with impunity were over. New strategies of the workers to circumvent these new regulations, however, remain to be examined.

⁴⁸³ Sinha, “Contract , Work and Resistance: Boatmen in Early Colonial Eastern India, 1760s-1850s”, 38

5.0 EUROPEAN SAILORS AND SOLDIERS IN BENGAL: NEGOTIATING WORK IN A REGIONAL LABOR MARKET IN ASIA

In November 1734, eight Dutch sailors of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) ship *Wendela* on reaching Falta, the anchoring place for deep sea vessels of the VOC in Bengal, hatched a “conspiracy” plan to escape from VOC service. Leendert van den Burg, who, according to VOC officials, was nothing better than “an ageing sluggard,” was the leader of the gang. He had “discussed” with the rest of the seven “young careless whelps” going with him to Calcutta, the headquarters of the English East India Company (EIC), located very close to Falta. The sailors unanimously blamed the brutality of the ship officials, especially that of the first mate, as instigating their desertion. The leader, Leendert van den Burg, claimed that the crew was treated “not as company servants but as slaves.”⁴⁸⁴ In the middle of the night, when they silently made their way towards Calcutta on a ship boat, they were unfortunately intercepted by the VOC guards some distance above Falta. Without a fight, they surrendered. Soon one of the arrested sailors died a natural death in chains and thus “escaped the hands of justice.” The VOC fiscaal or judge in Bengal found Leendert van den Burg guilty of “seduction of the young ones” without paying heed to the “tenor of the statutes” against desertion, as read out to the crew of the *Wendela* on their arrival to Falta. Pieter Janzen and Christiaan Houvle were found guilty of assisting Leendert van den Burg. All three were condemned to death and executed on the VOC

⁴⁸⁴ TNSA 1.11.06.11, 1677B, 332-333

grounds of Chinsurah. The remaining two sailors were “again employed and distributed on ships.” Reflecting on the severity of the punishment, the VOC in Bengal concluded that “compassion has been given place” in this judgment.⁴⁸⁵

Holden Furber, the distinguished historian of European trade in India, in his study on Hugli in the early decades of the eighteenth century, remarked on the nature of the lower-level European servants, including the “Ostenders,” from Flanders:

In the 1720's and the early 1730's on the Hugli, the European's own affairs were more settled than those of the country.... Apart from those engendered by the “Ostenders” and other interlopers their quarrels were of their own making and were usually confined to those of petty disputes which were so common among grOxford University Presss of men cooped up in tiny disease-ridden trading posts. On the whole, company servants, free merchants, and sea-captains had easy relations with each other, and the Europeans of the 'lower orders' served English, Dutch, French, Danes or "Ostenders" with a catholicity which is astonishing.⁴⁸⁶

Indeed, low ranking European workers of the companies were a multi-ethnic workforce. As pan-European workers they served all companies. Such work experience, or “catholicity” often meant no allegiance to companies. The incident on the *Wendela* is a good example of the danger such “catholicity” to the internal cohesion of European settlements in India, mitigating class contradictions. Historians of early modern maritime Asia have noted the recalcitrance of European workers engaged in various European overseas enterprises in the East. Footloose soldiers or the exiles of the Portuguese *Estado da India* served as mercenaries in the armies of Indian chiefs or blended completely into the Indian peasantry, thus forming “a shadow empire”

⁴⁸⁵ VOC 8777, ff268-269

⁴⁸⁶ Holden Furber, "Glimpses of Life and Trade on the Hughli 1720-1770" in *Private Fortunes and Company Profits in the India Trade in the 18th Century* (Hampshire:Varorium, 1997), 13-23

of Goa in the Bay of Bengal.⁴⁸⁷ Scammell provides a two-and-a-half century overview of these troublemakers looking for various opportunities in Asia, revealing to some extent the fissures within the English East India Company (EIC).⁴⁸⁸ More recently, Elizabeth Kolsky has called the Europeans of lower order the “third face of colonialism.”⁴⁸⁹ In the early stage of colonialism, this “third face” disturbed imperial stability and the exclusive nature of colonial authority through their acts of violence. They exposed the dark side of the British character to the natives and also usurped the colonial state’s claim to “legitimate” violence. The “renegades,” “outlaws” or “third face” in these studies are seen as hot-headed law breakers or, most often, as seekers-of-fortune in the East. Though these studies are silent on the structural or systemic nature of these instances of defiance, such acts indeed help reconstruct, first, class relations within early modern overseas company settlements in Asia, and second, the place of European sailors and soldiers in the labor market in pre-colonial Asia.

In a study on labor relations in EIC and VOC settlements in pre-colonial Bengal, work performed by European sailors and soldiers figures prominently. European workers were not only present on the waterfront as crew members of overseas vessels coming from Europe or other parts of Asia, but also formed part of the military stationed at various outposts and the fleets that escorted inland shipping. Particularly in the early eighteenth century when the company outposts in Bengal witnessed a significant rise in military presence, European workers constituted an important segment of the work force in Bengal. However, European workers have been assumed as part of a separate labor market, one that was located in Europe, where their

⁴⁸⁷ Maria Augusta Lima Cruz, “Exile and renegades in early sixteenth century Portuguese India” in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 23, no.3 (1986): 249-262; Winius, “The “Shadow Empire” of Goa in the Bay of Bengal”

⁴⁸⁸ G.V.Scammell, “European exiles, Renegades and Outlaws and the Maritime Economy of Asia, c1500-1700”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 26, No. 4 (1992): 641-661.

⁴⁸⁹ Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India*, (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8-9, 37-38.

service contracts with various overseas enterprises were sealed. Though violations of these contracts in Asia are known, very few historians have studied these workers as part of the maritime labor market in Asia,⁴⁹⁰ but a systematic study of the social phenomenon of desertion helps us understand the nature of this labor market.

This chapter unravels the labor market for European sailors and soldiers in Bengal. As Dirk Kolff has shown, a mobile work force for military labor existed in Mughal, South Asia.⁴⁹¹ In many ways, it resembled the mobile military labor market of Central Europe in the late middle ages, especially in the various German states.⁴⁹² However, military labor in Europe experienced a transition from the mid-seventeenth century, a change which was evidently absent in the military labor market in South Asia. As early modern European states enlarged their armies, one striking trend was the use of force, which resulted in deepening intrusion into village life both in England and in Central Europe. Massive numbers of soldiers came from artisanal backgrounds, which indicates that army ranks were filled with people who had lost their means of livelihood and hence, experienced a process of de-skilling.⁴⁹³ This chapter shows that this trend was the direct opposite of what occurred for Europeans in the indigenous military labor market in Bengal. In Bengal, European sailors and soldiers were seen by the indigenous military as skilled workers with specialized knowledge of artillery, especially in handling the cannon. They could

⁴⁹⁰ There has been effort to study Asian workers of the VOC as part of the Dutch maritime labor market, but Europeans as part of the Asian labor market. But the Jelle van Lottum and Jan Lucassen, "Six Cross-sections of the Dutch maritime Labour market: A preliminary reconstruction and its implications (1610-1850)" in *Maritime Labour: Contributions of work at sea, 1500-2000*, ed., Richard Gorski (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2007)

⁴⁹¹ Dirk Kolff, *Naukar, Rajputs and Sepoys*

⁴⁹² Frank Tallet, "Soldiers in Western Europe, c. 1500-1790" & Michael Sikora, "Change and Continuity in mercenary armies: Central Europe, 1650-1750" in *Fighting for a Living: A Comparative History of Military Labour 1500-2000*, ed., Erik-Jan Zürcher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013)

⁴⁹³ Peter Way, "The scum of every county, the refuse of mankind" Recruiting the British Army in the eighteenth century", in *Fighting for a Living*, ed., Erik-Jan Zürcher.

expect a wage five times the amount promised by the VOC or the EIC. Hence, European sailors and soldiers fled in large numbers to the various indigenous armies.

Apart from running away to the armies of indigenous potentates, in Bengal, workers often deserted to rival companies for better wages. Pre-colonial Bengal provided a unique setting where the companies' lack of political authority and increasing inter-company rivalry enabled the European workers to re-evaluate their worth as productive forces of international trade. A close reading of reports and interrogations on cases of desertion also shows that different companies adopted different strategies to circumvent the "problem" of desertion. While the VOC continued to contract workers from the Batavian Republic and hoped to stall the leakage of the workforce to rival companies, the EIC and Ostend Company were setting up mechanisms of recruitment for European workers in Bengal. In fact, the EIC and Ostend Company depended on desertion for their supply of European sailors and soldiers. However, such a strategy could only be sustained through higher wages.

This chapter studies how the market for European military labor evolved in Bengal over a period of a hundred years and argues that desertion, or autonomous mobility and a form of working-class self-activity, played the central role in shaping this market. The workers' strategy of running away repeatedly characterized the labor market and prevented their wages from falling. Unlike covenanted servants of the East India Companies, those shared by these workers with the corporate entities were very thin. The logic of survival of the wage workers often clashed with the companies' logic of capital accumulation. In discussing the Anglo-American sailors in the eighteenth century, Marcus Rediker has argued that desertion affirmed the "free" in

free wage labor, contradicting the merchant capitalist's understanding of the term.⁴⁹⁴ The uncontrolled mobility of the European workers not only depleted the workforce, but also disrupted the methods of labor control. Often the companies had to either concede certain benefits to these workers to stall desertion or to re-admit deserters within the folds of the company, thus showing amnesty to law breakers. This, however, did not mean that companies were silent spectators. They left no stone unturned to curb these acts of malfeasance. Irrespective of the fact that more often than not, companies were unsuccessful at curbing desertion, the severe punitive measures adopted against the accused reflected class conflict at its worst within the company settlements.

The following discussion on desertion of European workers is based on VOC and EIC archives. The VOC archive provides better and denser information for the period, although important information from the EIC archive has also been used. The Bengal directorate of the VOC maintained "desertion lists," from which numbers and debts of deserters can be reconstructed. One reason for why the EIC archive provides less information on desertion is perhaps because the EIC came to depend on the Bengal labor market for European sailors and soldiers. The casual nature of this employment was disrupted, however, when the Ostend Company appeared on the scene, at which point even the EIC felt the brunt of desertion.

⁴⁹⁴ Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 105.

5.1 TO WORK

Most often these European sailors were crew members of deep sea vessels, coming to Bengal for the purposes of intra-Asiatic or inter-Asiatic trade. When in Bengal, the European rank and file of deep sea vessels were supposed to be bound to their respective ships. However, the Bengal directorate employed the European sailors and soldiers of the ships as military personnel within the directorate whenever there was a manpower shortage as a result of sickness, death and desertion.

As shown in chapter two, the military strength of the company developed from the last years of the seventeenth century. In 1697, the VOC had over two hundred armed men in Hugli.⁴⁹⁵ That number shrank to below fifty in the next few years. The VOC army fluctuated from fifty to over three hundred soldiers,⁴⁹⁶ reaching its zenith in 1725-6, when it had three hundred and twenty one soldiers. The muster rolls of the EIC army on the other hand, are available only from 1714, when it had two hundred and fifty-eight men, which then steadily grew throughout the first half of the eighteenth century.⁴⁹⁷ At the peak of the Anglo-Dutch war of 1759 in Bengal, the VOC was able to muster an army of only one thousand men, whereas the EIC was heading an army of two thousand one hundred men.⁴⁹⁸

European soldiers formed the majority of the army in this period. Of the two hundred and fifty nine soldiers of the VOC army stationed in Bengal in 1751, one hundred and forty-four soldiers were categorized as “Europeans,” fifty-three were categorized as “mestizoes” and sixty-

⁴⁹⁵ VOC 11542, fol 449

⁴⁹⁶ VOC 11627, 117, VOC 11636, 97-104.

⁴⁹⁷ P/1/16;

⁴⁹⁸ Collectie Rademacher (CR) 486, (unfoliated), Extract from the report of the commandeering Colonel Roussel on the expedition in Bengal sent to the High Government (at Batavia) and also parts of a letter sent by the same person.

five were categorized as “Eastern Soldiers.”⁴⁹⁹ These eastern soldiers came from various South East Asian islands and were recruited at Batavia, the VOC headquarters. Sometimes they were referred to as Macassarrese and Buginese soldiers and at other times just “Native Soldiers.”⁵⁰⁰ Finally, there were “Mestizo” soldiers, who were born in Batavia of Eurasian origin. These soldiers were able to rise to the ranks of ensign, sergeant or corporal. Since the wages of the Macassarrese/Buginese soldiers were the same as those of the Mestizo soldiers, one might assume that such racial categories had not yet fully coalesced into the structure of social hierarchy. However, although the Dutch recruited indigenous soldiers from time to time, they never made it into the muster rolls as they were hired only temporarily. In times of internal turmoil, recruitment of indigenous soldiers was best avoided since their loyalty to the companies was always under question. In 1743, when Bengal was awaiting a second Maratha attack, the VOC officials at Chinsura contemplated ways of increasing military manpower, but the option for recruiting armed indigenous soldiers at Kassimbazar was ruled out due to “the worry that if one recruits them, they are going to rob us first.”⁵⁰¹

The EIC could not rely on a similar solution, chiefly because it had no colonies in Asia yet from which they could source non-European soldiers if the need arose. The EIC therefore responded to the situation by creating a separate category of soldiers: the “Portuguese.” In 1695, following a French expedition in the Bay of Bengal, the Court of Directors, concerned about the strength of the army in the region, ordered the enlistment of Armenians and “Caffres & Black” with the justification that every recruit sent from England cost around £30.⁵⁰² Thus, the “Portuguese” soldiers were introduced as a cheap source of armed labor. From the 1740s on, the

⁴⁹⁹ VOC 11636, 103-104.

⁵⁰⁰ VOC 11542, ff. 455-459.

⁵⁰¹ VOC 8792, fol.106.

⁵⁰² Captain A. Broome, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Bengal Army* (Calcutta, 1851), 27-28.

VOC also employed Portuguese soldiers in their fleet.⁵⁰³ The origins and identity of the “Portuguese” in service of the companies is a long-debated subject.⁵⁰⁴ Though an underlying Christian unity was invoked by the company during the Battle of Plassey to ensure unfailing loyalty from these soldiers, one can conclude from their very low wages and occasional references to them as “Black Portuguese” that these workers recruited in the Company settlements in Bengal were by no means seen as equals to the Europeans.⁵⁰⁵ Overall, despite significant numbers of non-Europeans in the company armies, European soldiers formed the backbone of the armies in this period. It was only after 1757 that the number of Indian soldiers or *sipahis* rose in the EIC’s Bengal Army.⁵⁰⁶

Payment of the EIC army took place in Bengal. The Captain or Lieutenant was at the apex of the hierarchical order of the army, enjoying a wage of Rs. 35. Below him was the ensign, with a wage of Rs. 25. At Rs. 20, the sergeant came next, and the corporal and drummer shared an equal wage of Rs. 13. Common European soldiers who filled the ranks of the army most prominently received a monthly wage of Rs. 10. Rounding out the wage structure was Rs. 6 for the common soldiers and Rs. 5 for the Portuguese/Black soldier on the bottom-most rung. While the wages of the European common soldiers and the Portuguese soldiers remained the same throughout the period, the wages of the higher officials rose significantly. By 1747, the Captain was earning a wage of Rs. 45.⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰³ VOC 8796, 545

⁵⁰⁴ The “Portuguese” worker will be discussed fully in Chapter 6.

⁵⁰⁵ G/37/20/1, 1r-v

⁵⁰⁶ In January 1757 the Bengal Native regiment of 300-400 carefully chosen sipahis was created by Robert Clive. Seema Alavi, *The Sepoys and the Company: Tradition and Transition in Northern India 1770-1830* (New Delhi. Oxford, 1998), 35

⁵⁰⁷ P/1/3, 11; P/1/19, 188

Distribution of wages for the VOC was far more complex. The VOC muster rolls were maintained using the Dutch currency, florins. The highest military official was the Captain Lieutenant with a wage of *f*60. Below him in descending order came the lieutenant, the ensign, the sergeant and the corporal. The wages of these officials varied over the entire first half of the century. While the wages of the mestizo and indigenous soldiers from East Asia remained fixed at *f*9, common soldiers' wages varied between *f*9 and *f*14. Reasons for this variation could be multiple. The experience and bargaining power of the soldier, especially those recruited in Asia (enhanced through the practice of desertion) must have contributed to this wide range of wages.

Typically, the European soldiers of the VOC were paid at the end of their contract, either in Batavia or in the Republic. A large number of European soldiers were recruited in Asia, for whom payment took place in the various Asian quarters where they were recruited.⁵⁰⁸ Most of these people were recruited in Batavia, but some were also recruited at Chinsura.⁵⁰⁹ These soldiers must have received their wages at the end of their contract in Chinsura. The VOC also maintained a large number of sailors on land. A sizeable number of these sailors were put into military service whenever the need arose for extra men. Finally, from time to time, the VOC gave deserters a reprieve and admitted them into service at the lowest end of the payscale. Very little is known about the recruitment practices of the EIC for its European soldiers. However, a flat rate of Rs. 10 was paid to the EIC soldiers each month throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, and given the fact that the soldiers were paid in rupees and that the VOC always complained of chronic desertion of their men to the English side, it can be safely concluded that the EIC recruited a substantial number of their soldiers locally.

⁵⁰⁸ In the column for name of the ship by which the European soldiers came to Asia, "in dienst" or "in service" or "in India aengenomen" or "taken in (to service) in India" is entered for the European recruits from Asia.

⁵⁰⁹ VOC 11621, ff. 161, 166.

The hardships of shipboard life in the Age of Sail is a much discussed topic.⁵¹⁰ Ship commanders regularly complained to company authorities regarding mass desertions and requested recruitment of European or indigenous sailors to replace the absconding sailors and soldiers. When Isaac Sunderman returned to Enkhuizen after his first successful voyage to and from the Indies as a soldier, he declared that the idea of making a huge fortune in the East was a myth.⁵¹¹ On the contrary, he emphasized that the experience of sailors and soldiers was one of intense poverty. Moreover, the legend of the carefree sailor was far from reality: “but sadly a sailor for one third of his life could not come to land.”⁵¹² For the most part, the shores of the East remained off limits to the lower ranks of the crew. Life at sea was made even more unbearable by the work itself: “[the] very nature of the work corrupted the crew on voyages.”⁵¹³ The ghoulish nature of work on board was underscored by the pitch and tar and the “clamour and bullies of the crew”.⁵¹⁴ Even the best ship was “a prison for the poor sailor,”⁵¹⁵ with the ship’s captain or commander taking the role of jailer. As the despot of the sea, he could “earn the poor sailors both heaven and hell on earth.”⁵¹⁶ From most accounts, it is clear which extreme the sailors experienced. Often times, it was not just the ship captains but also other higher-ranking officials on board – as evidenced by the Wendela incident – who meted out punishment to the sailors. Thus, one VOC report on desertion from 1711, a year of unprecedented numbers of

⁵¹⁰ Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 77-115, 205-253

⁵¹¹ Isaac Sunderman, *Isaac Sundermans: Zyn Geschriften* (Gedruktvoor den authieur: Den Haag, 1712), 40

⁵¹² Sunderman, *Isaac Sundermans: Zyn Geschriften*, 40

⁵¹³ J.D. Hullu, *Op de Schepen der Oost-Indische Compagnie*, ed., J.R. Bruijn and J. Lucassen (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1980), 57

⁵¹⁴ Sunderman, *Isaac Sundermans: Zyn Geschriften*, 66.

⁵¹⁵ Sunderman *Isaac Sundermans: Zyn Geschriften*, 66.

⁵¹⁶ Sunderman, *Isaac Sundermans: Zyn Geschriften*, 68

desertions, identified “the fear of discipline for the misdeeds committed on board” as a cause of the very desertions they were meant to prevent.⁵¹⁷

Working conditions were no better on English ships. Seafaring was perpetual work. As 17th-century sailor Edward Barlow noted in his journal, the seamen “were not to lie still above four hours,”⁵¹⁸ and as Barlow lamented, his occupation was “one of the hardest and dangerousest callings I could have entered upon.”⁵¹⁹ Prolonged work in unhygienic conditions resulted in illnesses of all sorts. Tropical diseases were also quick to claim the lives of the crew. “Death and desertion” was almost always uttered in the same breath by ship captains in complaining of the need for fresh recruits.⁵²⁰ However, hazards were considerably exacerbated by the concentrated authority in the hands of the captain. The constant struggle of a seaman with the commander of the ship forms the most compelling thread in Barlow’s journal: “[A]ll the men in the ship except the master being little more than slaves.”⁵²¹ Even in his last voyage in 1703, Barlow was battling the insufferable “proud, imperious and malicious temper” of the ship’s Captain.⁵²² Fall-outs with the captains and mates on ship were apparently one of the major causes of desertion amongst the sailors.⁵²³ The perils of life at sea might thus explain the mass desertions that occurred immediately after the ships’ arrival at Bengal.

Though the working conditions of the soldiers laboring within the Bengal directorate were much better than those of the sailors of deep sea vessels, death was a constant occurrence

⁵¹⁷ VOC 8744, partII, fol 15.

⁵¹⁸ Edward Barlow, *Barlow’s Journal of His Life at Sea in King’s Ships, East & West Indiamen, & Other Merchant Men from 1659 to 1703, Volumes I & II*, ed. Basil Lubbock (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1934) (hereafter cited as BJ)

⁵¹⁹ BJ, 339.

⁵²⁰ “There being severall dead and deserted” P/1/1, p407r; “Mortality and deserters having lessened my ships company seventeen men” P/1/11, 177v; “Having had the misfortune since I came from England of burying seven of my men ...have had seven more runaway”, P/1/11, 338r.

⁵²¹ BJ 339

⁵²² BJ 544

⁵²³ In June 1737 the Fort William Council received several complaints of misbehavior against a ship captain from his officers. Members of his crew designed a plan for desertion which finally did not take place., P/1/13, fol 68v.

amongst the soldiers working on inland shipping as well. European soldiers were quick to succumb to the diseases of the tropics. In 1728, out of the 333 soldiers of the Patna fleet of the VOC, seven died within a space of only three months.⁵²⁴ The next year, the fleet was manned by 307 soldiers. Of these, thirteen soldiers were so sick that they were unable to work, and out of the rest, eleven died.⁵²⁵ Moreover, combat situations were always life-threatening. Three EIC soldiers were killed in an armed conflict with the Chakwars in 1719.⁵²⁶

Quotidian hardships were often inscribed on the flesh. Otherwise unremarkable sailors and soldiers were often identified by scars running “from above his left until under his right breast” or “signs of injury on the left side of his head and one under his calf,” and life at sea could leave men with “crooked posture” or “severely stammering.” Experience of collective misery in turn gave rise to collective sociability. Thus, sailors’ and soldiers’ Christian names often gave way to endearing monikers: Piet Janszoon Stael was known to his mates as Piet the Pendulum, Dirck Reijers was nicknamed, the Castle Durendael, the shy Guijljam van Beveren was the Housekeeper, Arent Arentzoon was the Baptist, Elias Corneliszoon was Man Elephant, and Johannes Abrahamzoon was known as Jan Ding Ding. This alternative sociability created through workers’ interactions independent of their superiors or workers arising out of the zones of co-operation during the work day was critical to the acts of desertion.⁵²⁷

⁵²⁴ VOC 8760, 33 -

⁵²⁵ VOC 8762, Part II, 25

⁵²⁶ P/1/4. Fol.124v.

⁵²⁷ VOC 1422, ff1510-1515

5.2 TO ESCAPE

As the Wendela incident demonstrates, such cooperation was central to the act of desertion, which was often a collective act. GrOxford University Presss of twelve, thirteen, thirty-three or even fifty-three workers escaped from company grounds. Though shipboard life created bonds of camaraderie, waterfront areas were also sites of working class socialization. The taverns in European settlements were a particularly important part of sailors' and soldiers' lives in Bengal. Known for their drunken brawls and other forms of debauchery, taverns, or punch houses, were breeding grounds for desertion. These resting places, most likely to be found in Hugli and Calcutta, were (most) often run by women of Portuguese origin. Transiting sailors, soldiers and even low-ranking company officials lodged in these establishments. People missing from the daily attendance call could often be found in the taverns. In 1686, in the midst of the Anglo-Mughal war, Pieter Abrahamzoon, a VOC gunner, was sent by a ship captain to bring back a few runaways employed in the EIC service. On his way to the English factory, Abrahamzoon tarried and settled for a drink with his mate at a nearby tavern, where he ironically met twenty VOC deserters. Meanwhile, Abrahamzoon's mate was working for the EIC, baiting men from the Dutch side.⁵²⁸ In 1733, in their desperate efforts to stop desertion from inter-continental ships, the EIC felt it necessary to involve punch-house owners, who were strictly ordered to report to the officer of the guard if they "entertain in their house any stranger." If the punch-house owners failed to notify the EIC, and if the guards apprehended deserters from these establishments, especially those belonging to the company's shipping, the owner of the house

⁵²⁸ VOC 1422,ff1450r-1451v

“[would] not be suffered to remain here but will be sent directly to Europe.”⁵²⁹ Such orders thus marked punch-houses as a critical socialization space for potential deserters.

The sailors of *Wendela* did not put up a fight against the VOC forces, but most successful cases of desertion did involve arms. Taking enemy arms was of strategic importance before running away. The eleven soldiers and two boatswains of the VOC panchallang ‘t Weroname, stationed at Falta in close proximity to Calcutta, thus planned their escape. In the early hours of April 10, 1733, when the quartermaster, two sergeants and two of the four corporals were keeping watch in the deckhouse, they were encircled by renegades “with knives and bayonets in their hands.” When the quartermaster tried to fight them, he was “given two stabs with a knife on his breast.”⁵³⁰ The mutineers lowered the ship boat, and at the crack of dawn, the empty boat was seen lying on the shore in Calcutta. A similar strategy was employed in the desertion of twelve soldiers from a VOC village on the night of April 3, 1727. The company guards and five indigenous residents of VOC grounds tried to stop twelve soldiers from scaling the fence of the Dutch village at night. After a short argument, one of the soldiers took out a pistol and opened fire on the guards, who then chased the runaways beyond the company boundaries. The soldiers first tried to seek asylum in the French grounds. When they were refused, they went over to the Ostend side. Later, it was found that “one of them had stolen a few pistols and taken those with them.”⁵³¹ Likewise, on May 3rd, 1730, a group of six VOC soldiers “weaponed with firearms” crossed the company fences and took shelter in the French headquarters at Chandernagore.⁵³²

⁵²⁹ P/1/10, fol.126r

⁵³⁰ VOC 8774, ff752-763

⁵³¹ VOC 8757, fol 396.

⁵³² VOC 8763, fol 312

Communication with “partners” (*mackers*) was also essential to the designs of the eight sailors of Wendela. As a seasoned sailor, Leendert van den Burg convinced the eight sailors of his designs and took the lead. Passing on information or roping in co-workers was central to the collective act of desertion. On August 13, 1724, while waiting on an *ulak* very close to Calcutta, a VOC soldier went ashore and made his way to Surman’s garden. Two hours later, he returned to get his chest of belongings with an army of black soldiers headed by a European who could speak Dutch. The soldier then asked his “companion,” a fellow soldier, lying sick in the boat, “Will you join me? I have already been hired.” The other soldier immediately joined in. He then asked the two other sick sailors on board, “What will you do lying there, brother?” The fever probably got the better of them, for the sailors did not join the deserting soldiers. Nevertheless, inducing fellow workers to desert was as important as planning an armed intervention. Returning deserters were always a menace. These “faithless vagabonds” never remained in service for long. They would “pinch not only the weapons but also money” from their “lawful masters,” but more importantly, they “seduced others” and induced them to “runaway with them.”⁵³³ Free communication amongst workers was essential to the act of running away, which the companies desperately tried to limit.

Needless to say, the autonomous mobility of the workers triggered a severe reaction from members of authority. The first measure was to severely restrict the mobility of the workers. As early as 1676, VOC authorities issued strong orders “to confine people on board ships.”⁵³⁴ The common sailors of deep sea vessels were not allowed to go ashore during the long layovers, and if they were allowed to disembark, such perambulation was restricted to a very circumscribed area around the ships and only for very few hours. In the instructions of March 3, 1677 given to

⁵³³ VOC 8774, fol 765.

⁵³⁴ VOC 1320, fol 612v

the uppersteerman Cornelis de Soute and lower steerman Adriaan van Ambacht, who were leading a crew of twenty sailors on a sloop and a boat which were being sent to Nawab Shaista Khan in his war against a rebellious zamindar in Orissa, the company strictly warned the steermen that “no one shall at any time tread on land” and to keep good watch against any such movement at all hours.⁵³⁵ A VOC statute of 1685 prevented movement during the night beyond the boundaries of the Chinsura settlement, marked by the VOC bazaar in the north and the VOC warehouse in the south. On violating this rule for the first time, the offender would be fined Rs. 6. On repeated violation, court proceedings would be initiated against the offender. Only officers such as the steerman could move outside the boundaries if the need arose and then only with a permission letter from the Fiscaal.⁵³⁶ From the early eighteenth century, it became routine to read out a statute on all incoming ships which declared that movement outside a half-mile from Falta was a punishable offence.⁵³⁷ However, the sailors did move, in defiance of such orders. The company lamented that given the close proximity to land while the ships were anchored in the river, the movement of the sailors could not be restricted. They swam to the shores, used local vessels in the night to move to and from the ships, and some “got drunk and got pulled into the service of the English.”⁵³⁸

The rising number of desertions makes it evident that preventive measures were not working. Companies thus tried in various ways to get the deserters into service. The lists of the returnees (“wedergekeerdes”) give the names of people who wandered back to their service. (Table 1).

⁵³⁵ VOC 1328, f0l506v

⁵³⁶ VOC1378, ff1281v-1282r.

⁵³⁷ VOC 8743, part II, ff 105-106

⁵³⁸ VOC 1320, 612v

Table 1: Deserters listed as returning to the VOC, 1703-1733. Source: VOC archives

YEAR	NUMBER
14 August 1706	2
1707	10
March 1708	8
16 March 1708-5 April 1709	15
5 April - 1 Oct. 1709	11
1 Oct. 1709- 15 March 1710	13
10 March 1713	6
Feb 1733	24
TOTAL	100

The VOC tried in different ways to get deserters back. In the years 1711/12, when the VOC was facing massive desertions, the Bengal council first tried to organize bounty-hunting of deserting personnel. The company appointed native guards to patrol the banks of the river and “to prevent desertion at their level best.” As a reward, they were promised five rupees for each deserter they could bring back. When such arrangements did not work, they instructed the military patrolling the boundaries of Chinsura factory that “on meeting some of the vagabonds, assure them, if they well-meaningly surrendered they [would] be pardoned.” Such a conciliatory measure did work to some extent, and the company recovered six men. In fact, there were times when, as the VOC declared, they had no choice but to “treat the rabble with a soft hand,” especially when deserters to indigenous armies organized raids on company merchants or property with the help of their new colleagues.⁵³⁹ In 1732, Batavia issued an unprecedented statute that granted blanket clemency to all returning deserters, immunity from deportation to Batavia and also promised their restitution to the same posts that the deserters held when they left the company,⁵⁴⁰ perhaps explaining the relative rise in the number of returnees in 1733.

When preventive measures failed, however, the VOC resorted to punitive measures. Deportation was the most common form of punishment for apprehended deserters, although it was often accompanied with flogging and three to twenty-five years of hard labor in chains in any of the penal colonies of the VOC Empire. Needless to say, apprehended deserters fought back, with jail-breaking common amongst captive deserters. In 1677, three out of six VOC sailors who had deserted near Sadraspatam with a sloop were caught in Bellasore and then sent to Hugli. Their legs were chained to a wooden block, which, as a VOC official confirmed, was common practice with any criminal. Five native soldiers were assigned the task of guarding these

⁵³⁹ VOC 8743, part II, fol 40

⁵⁴⁰ VOC 8774, fol 764

prisoners. However, the prisoners managed “to corrupt the peons,” got the keys from them and at day-break, they escaped. One was immediately caught, and the company hopelessly tried their best to capture the other two.⁵⁴¹ In 1705, six deserters were kept in custody on the ship *Dieren*, anchored near Calcutta, to be sent to Batavia. In the dead of night, they bolted, “breaking chains and manacles.”⁵⁴² In 1712, the VOC arrested two deserting sailors, who awaited deportation to Batavia. One of them managed to flee from prison “in a subtle way.”⁵⁴³ Two apprehended deserters, expecting deportation, escaped in a similar manner in the early hours of December 24, 1725.⁵⁴⁴

The companies had complete legal power over their European workers; hence, they could confer capital punishment on European offenders and carry out their executions in foreign lands. According to my calculation, twenty-one death penalties were given for desertion by *fiscaal* in the Bengal directorate, of which seventeen were carried out in Chinsura.⁵⁴⁵ Certain deserters were given the unique punishment of walking the gauntlet, which entailed walking through two parallel rows of soldiers, while the soldiers lacerated the back of the convict. Two soldiers who had been tried for attempted desertion were given a sentence of walking the gauntlet—through a battalion of two hundred soldiers.⁵⁴⁶ Such punishments made even the death penalty look benign. The hanging of two sailors from *Wendela*, along with two other were carried out in the year 1734. Death row victims of 1734 were particularly unlucky. The death penalties were a result of

⁵⁴¹VOC1328, ff484r&v.

⁵⁴²VOC 8737 fol. 121.

⁵⁴³VOC 8744, ff 73-74.

⁵⁴⁴ VOC 8752, Part 4, 18-19.

⁵⁴⁵Coolhaas, W.P., *Generale Missiven der V.O.C. van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan Heren XVII (deel 7 (1713-1725))*, 's Gravenhage, Martinus Nijhoff, 1968-76, 146; Frank Lequin, *Het Personeel van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie in de Achttiende Eeuw, Meer in Het Bijzonder in de Vestiging Bengalen*, Deel I, Phd. Thesis, Leiden University, 1982,136;VOC 8745, Part I, 32-33, VOC 8745, Part II, 74-75,VOC 8752, Part II, 276-277,VOC 8754, 273-274, VOC 8756, 107-108, VOC 8769,312.

⁵⁴⁶ VOC 8757,140-143.

VOC council at Chinsurah's recent disagreements with Batavia over their ideas of treating returning deserters. On 19 May 1733, the Hugli council reversed the 1732 statute of indiscriminate pardon for all returning deserters as it was "not of any consequence" and reinstated the power of Hugli council's discretion in granting pardon to returning desertions.⁵⁴⁷ Re-exertion of punitive measures was manifested in the four death penalties in one year. However, the death penalties were only partially effective in stopping desertion. . For example, Michiel Gerrit de Groot, who was captured on May 23, 1714, was condemned to death. He was hanged to death on board the ship Wateringen "as an example for the others." His execution "created such terror amongst common sailors" that there was no desertion for quite some time.⁵⁴⁸ However, as the company reported in late 1714 a few days after the execution of Michiel de Groot, the sailors "resumed their old practice." A considerable number of sailors of Wateringen deserted near Calcutta shortly after the arrival of the ship in Bengal.

More often than not, desertion entailed harsh punishment. Even if the Company took back "repenting" deserters, those deserters could only expect to start from the lowest salary level. Knowledge about such penalties for desertion was present amongst the common sailors and soldiers. Beyond that, even if the company forces could be successfully dodged, the "strong currents and crocodiles" presented the sailors and soldiers with "many dangers of losing their lives" in the river and the deltaic lands around Falta when in the dead of night, they surreptitiously swam towards the shores.⁵⁴⁹ Despite such dangers, the European sailors and soldiers still deserted. In certain years, desertion rose to a staggering one third to one half of the

⁵⁴⁷ VOC 8774, fol 764

⁵⁴⁸ VOC 8745, part II, 74-75

⁵⁴⁹ VOC 8744, part II, fol 15-17

total number of European servants of the VOC in the Bengal directorate.⁵⁵⁰ What then were the reasons behind such desperate and widespread acts of transgression?

As discussed earlier, the hardships of shipborne life provided a major impetus to desertion. Fear of legal persecution was another. Amongst the deserters, there were in fact convicts. A carpenter, Jacob Vreem, from Utrecht had been accused of murdering line turner Gerrit Jootsen van Kampen in 1677.⁵⁵¹ When two witnesses confirmed his crime, Vreem managed to escape from the prison in Chinsura. In the same year, another head carpenter murdered a baanmeester and escaped from the Company prison.⁵⁵² Such instances of desertion continued intermittently. Two prisoners similarly escaped from the Chinsura prison in 1714. There were also instances of convicts attempting multiple times to escape VOC law and order. Some of these convicts were death-row prisoners. Jacob Jacobz, for example, after an unsuccessful attempt to escape the fiscaal's men, was hanged on the Sleewijk on April 27 1726, as soon as he was captured.⁵⁵³ Though it is impossible to determine the percentage of deserters who were convicts, one can safely conclude that they formed at best a significant minority.

Indebtedness was endemic to lower-level company servants, especially amongst sailors and soldiers. Some had debts of over 100 Dutch guilders, and with a wage of just 9 guilders these workers were condemned to endless wage slavery for the company or to suffer without pity in one of the early modern debtors' prisons in Europe. One possible way out of this quandary was desertion. The indebted workers deserted to start afresh their balance sheet as wage workers or in some cases to reject the world of wage work altogether. Though indebtedness was a strong

⁵⁵⁰W.P. Coolhaas, *Generale Missiven der V.O.C. van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan Here XVII deel 6, 1698-1713* ('s Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968-76), 773.

⁵⁵¹VOC 1320, 615r-v.

⁵⁵²VOC 1328, 523r.

⁵⁵³VOC 8754, 273-274.

impulse for desertion, indebted workers were still a minority of the recorded number of deserters (Graph 2). In fact, quite a few deserters were even owed more than 50 Dutch guilders by the Company. What then spurred the workers who were not in any financial bondage with the Company to escape? The answer must be sought in the unique employment opportunities that Bengal presented to European workers, indebted or otherwise.

5.3 AND RATHER WOULD I BE THE FOREMOST KING IN ANY LOWER COURT

The VOC in Bengal suffered the highest rate of desertion between 1711 and 1713 – the years marking intense political turmoil in the region (see Graph 1). These years mark the meteoric rise of Murshid Quli Khan in the annals of Bengal Nawabi. Murshid Quli, as the *diwan* (provincial head of revenue collection) of Bengal, Orissa and Bihar, was oft-praised by Emperor Aurangzeb for his ability to increase the crown's share of revenue. After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, waves of political strife engulfed the province of Bengal with Murshid Quli at its center. Though Murshid Quli became the governor of Bengal in 1717, he had long been a major threat to the very powerful Prince Azim (also called Azim-us-shan), Aurungzeb's grandson, son of new Emperor Bahadur Shah I, and governor of Bengal until 1712. In 1710, when Murshid Quli was appointed the *diwan* of Bengal, Azim-us-shan instigated a rebellion of naqdi soldiers (mercenaries) against him. The strife reached its peak in 1711, when Murshid Quli gained the collectorship of customs at Hugli port and the *faujdari* of Midnapur district, then held by Zia-ud-din Khan. Zia-ud-din refused to let go of his post, spurring conflict between Zia-ud-din and

Murshid Quli's agent, Wali Beg, which would last until 1713. In the meantime, the Mughal throne passed from Bahadur Shah to Jahandar Shah in 1712. However, the ensuing conflict over succession was not yet over; Farukh Siyar, the deputy governor of Bengal, had designs for the throne. For his campaign, he had to depend on resources from Bengal; however, Diwan Murshid Quli refused to help him, prompting Farukh Siyar to send troops against Murshid Quli. The political deadlock finally ended when Farukh Siyar finally ascended the throne in 1713.⁵⁵⁴

In the thick of these political upheavals, the common seamen of the VOC with “desertion in their head” were jumping overboard, sailing to the shores in small boats in the dead of night, and joining the armies of the “Moors.”⁵⁵⁵ The political climate had “brought them [the deserters] the audacity” to attack the company village and also the factory in grOxford University Presss of ten or twelve or more armed people “to commit various insolences.”⁵⁵⁶ Since 1711, the Dutch authorities were at wit's end trying to halt the exodus of sailors and soldiers to the armies of Zia-ud-din Khan, Wali Beg or Farukh Siyar. Statutes against desertion were being read out on the decks of the incoming ships and it was also made known in the Dutch village accompanied by drum roll. The situation was similar for other companies, including the EIC. Though “loitering” of common seamen was severely checked, no amount of extra military patrol succeeded in staunching the leakage. In fact, within less than a year, the VOC dismissed the twelve extra indigenous soldiers they had hired in July 1711 to guard the boundaries of the Dutch settlement, as “in Bengal they can always get away,” despite “all serious means” of keeping them there.⁵⁵⁷

What riches did the competing indigenous—“Moorish”—armies have to offer? The European sailors and soldiers were prized as superior handlers of canons, whom, during military

⁵⁵⁴Jadunath Sarkar, “Bengal under Murshid Quli Khan”, in Jadunath Sarkar, ed., *History of Bengal*, 397-421.

⁵⁵⁵ VOC 8743, part I, ff512-513.

⁵⁵⁶ VOC 8743, part II, fol 40.

⁵⁵⁷ VOC 8743, part I, fol. 513

battles, all sides were aggressively recruiting from amongst the soldiers and sailors in the East India company settlements. Better wages was the biggest incentive for this mass desertion. The indigenous armies offered the deserters an extremely lucrative wage of 40 rupees, or 36 guilders, per month.⁵⁵⁸ This was an astronomical sum for the common seaman with many years of hard work at sea. Though better pay was probably the most important factor inducing desertion, it certainly was not the only motivation for the workers. “A short pleasurable life amongst the Moors” also had great appeal for the lower orders of the company.⁵⁵⁹ Reckless living with no concern for the future appeared to be the sailors’ motto. Faced with a severe storm at the sand banks of the Bengal delta, for example, the steeringsmen of the sinking ship the *Ter Schelling* “knew no calm,” and with glasses of arak in their hands, they made sure that the rising waters could not touch their buoyant spirits. Faced with the prospect of death, “their last escape being their drink,” these sailors seemingly could not care less for their lives.⁵⁶⁰ Thus, in 1711-12, the VOC resented the indigenous armies’ promise of the “lazy and unconstrained life” that had ensnared the deserters, notwithstanding the very dangerous nature of the work, for while quite a few of them did succumb to war or disease, there were many more who died of their “drunkenness and foolhardiness,” as their excesses “knew no measure.”⁵⁶¹

Europeans running away to local courts in large numbers is a phenomenon the Portuguese Empire had already witnessed in the sixteenth century. In fact, such desertions gave

⁵⁵⁸ VOC 8743, part II, fol.40

⁵⁵⁹ VOC 8743, part I, fol. 513

⁵⁶⁰ Frans Janszoon van der Heiden en Willem Kunst, *Vervarelycke Schip-breuk van 't Oost-Indisch Jacht ter Schelling onder het landt van Bengale* (Amsterdam: Jacob Meus en Johannes van Someren, 1675),30

⁵⁶¹ VOC 8743, part I, ff512-513., VOC 8743, Part II, ff39-40.

rise to various Indo-Portuguese communities throughout South Asia.⁵⁶² Scammell has shown that employment with the local rulers was also alluring for the “renegades.”⁵⁶³ As early as 1506, Varthema observed that Portuguese deserters at Calicut were employed at manufacturing canons.⁵⁶⁴ The Jesuit priest Padre Godinho, while traveling in the Mughal Empire in 1663, observed that most of the gunners in the Mughal army were Portuguese and Dutch. In subahdar of Bengal, Nawab Mir Jumla’s Assam expedition in 1661-1662, not only Dutch and English sailors and soldiers but also a VOC surgeon and VOC carpenters were recruited from Bengal. Amongst the recruits were fifteen survivors of the Ter Schelling wreckage. They observed that ships laden with canons moving against the current on the Ganga were singularly being operated by English, Dutch and Portuguese (both black and white) sailors and soldiers. The VOC carpenters were “acknowledged as bosses” of an army of artisans engaged in making a ship “that corresponded with the Nawab’s wishes and design.” The wages, though varying widely, were far better than what they could have earned in the service of the VOC or EIC: at the end of twenty eight days, each member of the Ter Schelling got a wage of twenty rupees, or eighteen guilders. The Ter Schelling sailors observed that Portuguese and English “volunteers” were paid even better wages.⁵⁶⁵ “Volunteering” fetched the English fifty rupees, or forty-five guilders per month, while the white Portuguese earned around forty or fifty. There were also other ways for European sailors and soldiers to make money. Two Dutch deserters along with three English deserters in the same expedition managed to make five hundred and seventy-five rupees – a

⁵⁶² Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500-1700: A Political and Economic History* (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 261-283; Tapan Ray Chaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study in Social History* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1969), 235-253

⁵⁶³ Scammell, “European exiles, Renegades and Outlaws and the Maritime Economy of Asia, c1500-1700”, 642-646.

⁵⁶⁴ Iqtidar Alam Khan, “Nature of Gunpowder Artillery in India during the sixteenth century: A reappraisal of the Impact of European Gunnery” in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, 9, No.1, (1999): 27-34, 31

⁵⁶⁵ Van der Heiden and Kunst, *Vervarelycke Schip-breuk van 't Oost-Indisch Jacht ter Schelling*, 111

handsome fortune they stumbled upon among the belongings of an English captain who had died in the Nawab's service.⁵⁶⁶

Various regional potentates, Mughal or otherwise, saw the company grounds as a steady source for their gunners. In times of crisis, the companies were regularly solicited for manpower. In 1677, the VOC had to send a boat and a sloop with twenty sailors to assist Shaista Khan's campaign against a rebellious chief in Orissa. In 1711, Zia-ud-din Khan constantly pressed the VOC for manpower until they were forced to lend out a hundred men. On the event of the second Maratha attack in 1743, the Nawab Ali Vardi Khan called in the company wakils, or mediators, of the Dutch, English and French companies' local court authorities and requested that each of the companies lend out two hundred men who would be put on the payroll of the army of the Nawab.⁵⁶⁷ There were also European soldiers in the Maratha army.⁵⁶⁸ European soldiers can even be found in native descriptions of indigenous polities. Bharatchandra Ray, the court poet of the *zamindar* of Nadia, Raja Krishnachandra Ray, in his description of the unnamed fort in Annadamangal, mentions that English, Dutch, Portuguese, French, Danish and Germans filled the ranks of gunners.⁵⁶⁹ And when recruitment failed to take the usual course of mutual agreement among the indigenous armies and the European sailors and soldiers, indigenous armies depended on desertion. Scottish ship captain Alexander Hamilton met two such Dutch deserters whom he called "renagadoes" (renegades) while he was near Bengal in Cattack, the capital city of Orissa. Although Hamilton stated very clearly that the place "is not frequented by Europeans," these two deserters had made their way into the army of the Nawab of Orissa as

⁵⁶⁶ VOC 1240, fol 1405v

⁵⁶⁷ P/1/15, fol212r

⁵⁶⁸ P/1/15, fol317r-v.

⁵⁶⁹ Bharatchandra Raygunakar, "Annadamangal", in *Bharatchandra Granthabali Vol.2*, ed, Brajendranath Bandopadhyay & Sajanikanta Das (Kolkata: Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, 1944), 9

gunners.⁵⁷⁰ Thus, the EIC at Kassimbazaar, “cautious to prevent desertion,” sent to Calcutta all extra European sailors and soldiers when, during the first Maratha invasion in 1740, the Nawab had asked for a hundred men.⁵⁷¹ Both the VOC and EIC denied any knowledge of or responsibility for the seventeen European prisoners of war that the Nawab Alivardi Khan had captured from the retreating Maratha army in 1743. In the battle of Plassey of 1757, as many as fifty-six Dutch soldiers defected to Siraj-ud-daulah’s army.⁵⁷² Even in 1766, two soldiers of the EIC were lured by a “black man in the bazaar, who offered him fifty rupees a month for his service.”⁵⁷³

At Decca, when the shipwrecked sailors of the *Ter Schelling* met a Dutch man “from head to foot clad in Moorish (clothes),” they “thought inevitably that he was circumcised.”⁵⁷⁴ In fact, conversion to Islam was not unknown. In fact, it was quite common amongst the English.⁵⁷⁵ In certain cases, conversion was used as a strategy by the deserters to garner protection of indigenous authorities against the companies. For example, the fauzdar of Hugli, Malik Barkhordar, shielded a deserting VOC sailor who had converted to Islam in 1685. The company failed to cajole him into handing over the deserter; Malik Barkhoddar insisted that handing over a Muslim “[would] cost his head” if the Mughal Emperor came to know about it, “or at least his service and well being.”⁵⁷⁶ The Company then appealed to Nawab Shaista Khan for his intervention, but to no avail. The next year VOC officials captured the deserter in Balasore and

⁵⁷⁰ Alexander Hamilton, *A new account of the East Indies, being the observations and remarks of Capt. Alexander Hamilton, who spent his time there from the year 1688, to 1723. trading and travelling, by sea and land, to most of the countries and islands of commerce and navigation, between the Cape of Good-hope, and the Island of Japon* (Edinburgh, printed by J. Mosman, 1727), 389-391.

⁵⁷¹ P/1/14, fol 129r

⁵⁷² Lequin, *Het Personeel van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie in de Achttiende Eeuw*, 135

⁵⁷³ G/37/1/2, fol13-15.

⁵⁷⁴ Van der Heiden and Kunst, *Vervarelycke Schip-breuk van 't Oost-Indisch Jacht ter Schelling*, 102

⁵⁷⁵ Van der Heiden and Kunst, *Vervarelycke Schip-breuk van 't Oost-Indisch Jacht ter Schelling*, 102, Scammell, “European exiles, Renegades and Outlaws and the Maritime Economy of Asia, c1500-1700”, 658.

⁵⁷⁶ VOC 7530, fol799

hauled him back, only to lose him again, this time to the forces of Malik Barkhordar, who had been sent specifically to apprehend the converted deserter. A French soldier in the service of the EIC at Patna deserted to the “Moors and complained that [despite] being a Musselman, they (EIC) had obliged him to eat their victuals.”⁵⁷⁷ The attempt by a mardijker, Tambi van Makassar, to desert with two other slaves was aborted, and all three faced severe whipping, branding and twenty years of hard labor in chains. When Tambi managed to escape from his confinement the second time, all efforts to convince the “villains of the Moorish government” to hand over the deserter was fruitless as he had “taken the avowal of Mahomeddan faith.”⁵⁷⁸ Though there were instances when the local rulers did hand over deserters to the companies, it was rare and could be achieved only by paying a handsome bribe.⁵⁷⁹ It was only in 1775 that the EIC was able to strike a deal with the Nawab of Awadh, Asaf-ud-daulah, for returning deserters.⁵⁸⁰

The importance of Europeans in the indigenous armies resulted in various settlements of Europeans in Bengal outside the bounds of the East India company settlements. Europeans were known in the entire Mughal world as “firingi.” This term, which was initially used for the Portuguese or Lusophone elements in the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century, was extended to all Europeans or European descendants residing in the realm. As Aniruddha Ray has shown, the development of zamindaris in Eastern deltaic lands involved the use of European military labor as well as Christian missionary activities.⁵⁸¹ Augustinian and Jesuit churches cemented together the communities of the rowdy grOxford University Presss of “firingis” who were mercenaries in the armies of various zamindars. Such settlements became part of the social

⁵⁷⁷ P/1/15, fol332r

⁵⁷⁸ VOC 8762, fol 97

⁵⁷⁹ Five soldiers were returned by the “moors” to the VOC after paying an expensive present to them. VOC 8756, fol. 107

⁵⁸⁰ Mentioned in Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India*, 38

⁵⁸¹ Ray, *Adventurers, Landowners and Rebels, c. 1575-c.1715*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1998, 3-23

geography of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Bengal. In seventeenth-century-poet Rupram Chakraborty's *Dharmamangal*, a "firingipara," or "firingi," colony is mentioned alongside various place names and settlement types during Ranjhabati's journey from the city of Maina to the abode of Dharma, Champa.⁵⁸² Many of these colonies were colonies of gunners, and it is quite likely that the deserters flocked to these settlements.

Even if they had not settled in these colonies, the European deserters certainly joined the inner circle of military indigenous armies and courts as "firingis." These European descendants had a wide variety of origins, including indigenous roots. But as Sanjay Subrahmanyam has argued, "firingis" were never fully accepted as natives as they were never fully Europeans, either.⁵⁸³ Gunner colonies of "firingis" in Eastern Bengal also had Portuguese-speaking Africans, for example. Thus, runaway European sailors and soldiers were absorbed into indigenous society as "firingis." The unique social space that Europeans occupied in Mughal Bengal, enabled them to make an easier transition from being "European" workers to workers in Bengal, somewhat suspending their European-ness without completely "turning native."

Thus, the socio-economic hinterland of Bengal was not alien to the common seamen and soldiers of the East India companies; it did not take long for newcomers to find their niche in indigenous society, a function that was always prejudicial to the interests of the companies. Not only were the interests of the indigenous state and those of the companies diametrically opposed to each other, their appreciation of the wage work of European sailors and soldiers was completely different as well. The indigenous state in its capacity as employer defied the historic law of wage work under rule of capital, where burgeoning profits saw a sharp decline in

⁵⁸² Kayal, ed., *Rupram Chakraborty birachita Dharmamangal*, 54-55.

⁵⁸³ Sanjay Subrahmanyam *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500-1700: A Political and Economic History*, 261-283

workers' wages.⁵⁸⁴ The social degradation that the rank-and-file of the Dutch and English armies experienced in Europe could be reversed in the indigenous armies. "Who merely carries a Christian name is here acknowledged as a full-fledged soldier," the sailors of the Ter Schelling observed. In certain places, as in the *zamindari* of Bhulua, they were "honored as lords and counts."⁵⁸⁵ Disgorged by enclosures of land, wars and religious strife in Europe, sailors and soldiers were part of that large pool of mobile casual workers. In fact, this trend only intensified in the second half of the seventeenth century in Europe.⁵⁸⁶ As much-coveted gunners and cannoneers in the Mughal or other local armies, the European proletariat experienced an inversion of their social position, in fact experiencing a "re-skilling" of their work. Despite Father Godinho's complaints that the Mughal army was infested with inexperienced gunners of European origins, their demand in indigenous armies indicate that they were seen as skilled workers, right into the middle of the eighteenth century.

5.4 IF THE DAY-WORKER IS MISERABLE, THE NATION IS MISERABLE

Unlike in the days of Portuguese historian Diogo do Couto, when European adventurer-deserters ran away to the courts of local authorities and assimilated into indigenous society, the meaning of desertion in Bengal underwent a change in the late seventeenth century. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the two largest trading corporations, the VOC and EIC, had

⁵⁸⁴ Karl Marx, *Wage labor and capital*, Marx/Engels Internet Archive (marxists.org) 1993, 1999, chapters 7, 8.

⁵⁸⁵ Van der Heiden and Kunst, *Vervarelycke Schip-breuk van 't Oost-Indisch Jacht ter Schelling*, 101

⁵⁸⁶ Lucassen and van Lottum, "Six Cross-sections of the Dutch maritime Labour market: A preliminary reconstruction and its implications (1610-1850)"; Jelle van Lottum, "Labour Migration and Economic Performance: London and the Randstad, c 1600-1800," in *Economic History Review*, 64, no. 2 (2011): 531-570; Page Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe since 1650*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 31-60

established their trade on a more-or-less firm footing, but inter-company rivalry, especially between these two giants, underscored worker desertions. In the early eighteenth century, inter-company rivalry in Bengal reached new heights when the French East India Company and the Ostend Company established their own trading posts there. Whatever aspirations they may have had of creating a stable labor market, which would keep workers' wages down, were dashed by the steady stream of deserters. This section discusses how, in defiance of the company "flags," the desertion of European sailors provides a lens for understanding inter-company rivalry in Bengal.

The Ostend Company, based in Flanders and trading under the Habsburg flag, made its presence felt in Bengal from 1722 on. While the French East India Company was lukewarm in their reception of this new company, the VOC and EIC actually joined hands in an effort to drive out the new competitor from Bengal. Nevertheless, the Ostenders managed to survive, albeit for a very short period of time. They were housed in the forsaken grounds of the erstwhile Danish factory until 1727, after which Alexander Hume, the governor and commander of the Ostend Company, obtained Nawab Murshid Quli Khan's permission to set up a factory at Banquibazaar. Even though the Ostend Company was abolished in 1730, former officials of the Ostend Company along with runaway merchants from the English and Dutch companies used the Banquibazaar factory for their intra-Asiatic trade until 1745. Since desertion of company personnel was a plague in Bengal, Alexander Hume openly announced that it was prudent to replenish the shortages in personnel of the Ostend Company by engaging deserters, thus laying the "foundation for wanton desertion" of workers from VOC and EIC grounds.⁵⁸⁷ This policy of recruitment in Bengal was in tune with the same practice in Europe. Calais, Nieuwpoort and then

⁵⁸⁷ VOC 8753, fol222

Dunkirk became the primary recruitment grounds for the Ostend Company, principally taking English deserters into their service.⁵⁸⁸ Bengal emerged as a second recruitment ground for the Ostend Company outside of Europe.

On June 1724, the VOC reported that the abandoned Danish factory, which was then occupied by the Ostend Company, sheltered a hundred deserters and a good number of *toepassen* (soldiers of mixed origins coming from Batavia) and indigenous sailors.⁵⁸⁹ They had all joined Lieutenant General Cobbe's army in his war against the Nawab. Desertion to the Ostend Company remained a constant concern for the VOC and EIC until 1727, again shooting up in 1744, when, fifteen years after the Ostend Company was formally abolished in 1730, with the attack by Alivardi Khan and under the commandship of Francois Schonamille, the activities of that motley group of renegade merchants finally came to an end. Alivardi Khan routed the Bankibazar settlement in 1745 on the pretext that the Ostenders were abetting the Marathas. Thus, despite the EIC's strict prohibitions on any "intercourse with the Ostenders or to furnish them with powder or any sort of ammunition," around three hundred sailors of the EIC deserted to Bankibazaar during this period.⁵⁹⁰ Military guards had been posted at Perrius Garden in Calcutta and along the banks of the river in several boats, and notices in several languages prohibiting desertion were "affixed at the factory gates and other publick places about town,"⁵⁹¹ but none of the measures could staunch the flow of deserters. Both the EIC and the VOC directly appealed to the governor of the Ostend Company to return their deserters, but to no avail. The EIC even tried to personally plead with seamen to

⁵⁸⁸ Jan Parmentier, "The Private East India ventures from the Ostend: the Maritime and Commercial Aspects, 1715-22", *International Journal of Maritime History*, 5, No. 2 (1993): 80-82.

⁵⁸⁹ VOC 8753, fol224.

⁵⁹⁰ Jan Parmentier, "*De Holle Compagnie*": *Smokkel en Legale Handel onder Zuidnederlandse Vlag in Bengalen, ca 1720-1744*, (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 1992), 86.

⁵⁹¹ P/1/17,239v.

not run away to the Ostend grounds.⁵⁹² It was only when Schonamille escaped to Pegu in 1745 that desertion of EIC workers in such epidemic proportions came to a stall. Schonamille had once left Bengal with a hundred European sailors and soldiers, but in his last flight from Pegu, he was accompanied by only three French deserters and eight EIC runaways.⁵⁹³

Since the Ostend Company's relationship with the other companies and indigenous court remained frictional anyway, they always encouraged deserters to run away with ammunitions from the EIC and VOC grounds, so, for example, twelve soldiers once ran away to Ostend grounds with a number of guns and an ample amount of gunpowder.⁵⁹⁴

Deserters not only came from amongst the rank-and-file, however; there was also a drainage of higher-ranking officers and skilled workers. In 1726, for example, two young men from amongst a group of six runaways to the Danish factory were trained pilots. A Dutch quartermaster testified that they were experienced enough to bring any vessel up the river. Thus, the VOC also suffered the loss of experts. In fact, it was reported that the Ostend Company had invested in a new French sloop as a result of getting this prized deserter.⁵⁹⁵ On December 30th of the same year, a constable of the ship the *Wijnendael* also deserted to the Ostend grounds.⁵⁹⁶ Prospects for social mobility may have provided a strong impetus in these cases; one English mid-shipman who had run away to the Ostend side in 1743 was promoted to the post of Lieutenant within less than a year and thereafter became the commander of a ship, finally being chosen as master of the sloop with which Schonamille escaped to Pegu.

⁵⁹²P/1/17, 340v.

⁵⁹³P/1/17, 588r-589v.

⁵⁹⁴VOC 8757, ff394-407.

⁵⁹⁵ VOC 8753, fol 219-223.

⁵⁹⁶ VOC 8751, part III, 36

This large-scale desertion cutting across social strata was sustained by good wages. For example, in 1726, the Ostend Company was offering common sailors and soldiers a wage of 14 guildens.⁵⁹⁷ Compared to the 9 guildens in VOC service, this was definitely a much better deal. The EIC was forced to admit that “extraordinary pay” was leading to desertion.⁵⁹⁸ Wages in the eighteenth century also meant much more than money alone. The worker, who was not yet weaned from the patronage system of the pre-capitalist period, saw in wages an assurance of keeping his body and mind together. Wages included customary privileges often not translatable into simple financial gain.⁵⁹⁹ Thus, a bottle of arak and extra food were very real earnings. When an agent of the Ostend Company informed the sick sailors on a boat that he would “look after the costs and sleeping place” for them, for example, it was indeed a major incentive to defect, given that in times of sickness, common soldiers and sailors of the EIC and VOC were neither paid nor given leeway for illness.⁶⁰⁰

However, it would be misleading to think that desertion in this period was a one-way movement. Though the Ostend Company absorbed the bulk of deserters from already-established East India Companies, it also experienced desertion from amongst its own workforce. In 1726, for example, three runaways from the Ostend grounds were employed as sailors on the VOC ship *Strikebolle* for 9 guildens and sent off to Batavia. Sheltering such deserters was a decision made by the VOC at a “conference held with the English,” where both parties came to the agreement of trying their level best to “weaken the manpower of the Ostenders.”⁶⁰¹ In the same year, Fort William was also sheltering runaway sailors from the Ostend Company. Like the EIC and the

⁵⁹⁷VOC 8755, ff343-344.

⁵⁹⁸P/1/17, fol 239v.

⁵⁹⁹ Michael Sonenscher, “Work and wages in Paris in the eighteenth century” in *Manufacture in Town and Country before the Factory*, ed. Maxine Berg et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 147-72.

⁶⁰⁰ VOC 8755, fol 344

⁶⁰¹ VOC 8755, fol 459.

VOC, the Ostend Company also sent senior officials to demand the return of their deserting men. When such soliciting failed, the Ostend Company warned that such actions would have “pernicious consequences” and that it would “give encouragement to sailors or soldiers belonging to the English to commit the same notorious offence.”⁶⁰² Though there is no information on the exact wages offered, it is quite likely that the EIC offered better wages in this period in response to such fierce competition by the Ostend Company.⁶⁰³

The French East India Company had the least predatory disposition by far towards desertion. There are very few instances of the VOC and the EIC’s complaining about the French pursuing aggressive policies of recruitment of deserters. However, there were still occasions when the French tried to actively recruit sailors or soldiers from the grounds of other companies. In February 1726, the VOC director wrote to French headquarters in Chandernagore informing them of the recent arrests of two French soldiers who were sent from Chandernagore to clandestinely recruit men from the Dutch village. A few days before the incident, a VOC drummer had deserted to the French. The VOC used the captive soldiers to get back the deserter, but to no avail.⁶⁰⁴ In 1743, a soldier from the EIC service deserted to the French, where he was assigned the post of pilot. The deserter later returned to his service with the EIC.⁶⁰⁵

The French were particularly cooperative in extraditing deserters who had taken shelter on their grounds. On two different occasions, the French helped the VOC in hunting down armed fugitives/convicts from within the precincts of Chandernagore. The French offered no living space to the runaways, and they even set up commandoes to hunt down deserters from other companies hiding in or around the French factory. In fact, one French corporal of such a

⁶⁰² P/1/6, 29v

⁶⁰³ Parmentier, *“De Holle Compagnie,”* 86.

⁶⁰⁴ VOC 8754, fol73-75

⁶⁰⁵ P/1/16, 239v.

commando was severely injured during an operation against six deserting VOC sailors.⁶⁰⁶ The French East India Company was most willing to enter into negotiations with the VOC and the EIC to return deserters from each side. In 1732, the VOC sealed a contract with the French for returning sailors, soldiers, sergeants, corporals, quartermasters and young apprentices. According to the deal, the French could keep the deserter only if the nationality of the deserter was French, and the same applied for the Dutch. Furthermore, neither side could condemn the returnees to capital punishment. This contract was made effective in Chandernagore, Chinsura and Kassimbazaar. In 1734, the same contract was extended to Patna.⁶⁰⁷ The EIC had already entered into a similar contract with the French in 1728. In 1733, when the French revived their factory in Kassimbazaar, Dupleix and the council at Chandernagore expressed their desire to extend this contract to the new place.⁶⁰⁸ Despite such civil agreements, the fear of desertion to the French side always lurked. In 1744, when soldiers and sailors posted at Cassimbazar expressed their discontent over wages, the EIC decided to increase their diet money and advance them half a month's wages rather than risk losing them to desertion.⁶⁰⁹

The French wanted the bipartite treaty of 1732 with the VOC regarding returning of deserters to be a tripartite one by pulling in the EIC. However, the VOC scoffed at the idea as they knew the EIC, who were “getting no or very few soldiers from Europe or Madras” had to build their military with the runaways of the VOC. Thus, they “[would] not be disposed to such conditions.”⁶¹⁰ Indeed, the EIC did depend on the desertion of European personnel of the VOC and the French East India companies to fill their own military ranks. In the midst of the Anglo-

⁶⁰⁶ VOC 8761, 108-109.; VOC 8763, 312-313.

⁶⁰⁷ VOC 8771, ff 1610-1615, VOC 1877, ff 274-275.

⁶⁰⁸ P/1/6, 617v-618r, P/1/10, 7r.

⁶⁰⁹ P/1/16, 101r.

⁶¹⁰ VOC 8770, 255.

Mughal war of 1686-89, the VOC council at Chinsura was chosen as mediator by both warring parties. Though a neutral party, the VOC had a different predicament to combat: unbridled desertion and forced impressments of European sailors. Wartime meant lucrative wages from the EIC. Dutch sailmaker Marten Martenzoon, for example, was offered a wage of 20 rupees or eighteen guilders, diet money of five rupees and also a young boy as his helper. He was expected to mend the sails of two confiscated Mughal vessels. Similar enticements were also presented to a Dutch gunner, Abraham. When such allurements did not do their work, force and terror was used by the EIC to press men and boys into service. Marten and Abraham's accounts are known to us as they were the rare workers who had turned down the EIC's offers; it is evident that there were many more who did not.⁶¹¹

Starting in the late seventeenth century, losing men to the EIC was a constant source of concern for the VOC. In 1675, the VOC complained that men were steadily deserting to the English side. In the years between 1706 and 1713, when the VOC was experiencing massive desertion of men to different indigenous armies, the EIC was also actively recruiting men from VOC grounds. Though it is not possible to reconstruct the exact number of sailors and soldiers defecting to EIC, certain incidents reveal that huge groups of workers ran away to Calcutta. In 1706, a group of thirty-three sailors ran away to the English.⁶¹² In 1711, to the utter perplexity of the VOC, fifty-three sailors "to whom the company owes a good deal of money" ran away to the EIC.⁶¹³ By 1760, following the Anglo-Dutch war in Bengal, the VOC experienced massive leakages to the EIC, rendering them incapable of retrieving any of the deserters. Calcutta became the destination of many deserters of the VOC.

⁶¹¹ VOC 1422,1442v-1443v, 1450r-1451r

⁶¹² VOC 8737

⁶¹³ VOC 8742, Part I, ff65-66

The members of council at Fort William reported that they “ha[d] no command over” English captains directly recruiting men from amongst VOC sailors.⁶¹⁴ Sailors and soldiers were recruited for other settlements of the EIC in India as well. Thus in 1732, the council at Bombay requested “any Dutch soldiers or sailors we [the EIC in Bengal can pick up.”⁶¹⁵ Since the harboring place for all VOC ships was very close to Calcutta in Falta, the VOC was compelled to engage military patrol in the region so that the EIC officers could not recruit from amongst the crew of the ships. Workers were prohibited from leaving the half-mile radius around the anchoring place. Sailors in particular were kept confined to the ships at night.⁶¹⁶ Unlike in the VOC, where wages for sailors remained stable for the entire eighteenth century, wages in the EIC fluctuated heavily.⁶¹⁷

Access to ready money was a significant cause of desertion. The standard VOC wage for a common soldier was 9 florins. The EIC offered the same amount. However, unlike the VOC, which paid the wages of the sailors and soldiers at the end of their contracts of three to five years, the EIC paid the wages of their soldiers at the end of each month. The EIC thus depended on casual labor for their army, turning Bengal into their recruitment grounds for soldiers. Such an arrangement was preferred by the European personnel as they had immediate access to their wages. In certain years, there were several added incentives. In 1711, for example, the EIC induced large-scale desertion by paying ten rupees cash to each deserter as a reward for deserting to Fort William.⁶¹⁸ The EIC knew well how to tap into the seamen and soldier’s quest for “ready

⁶¹⁴VOC 1320, fol548r.

⁶¹⁵P/1/9, 415v.

⁶¹⁶ VOC 8742, part II, 106, VOC 8744, part II, fol 15-17

⁶¹⁷ Paul C. van Royen, “The national Maritime Labour Market: Looking for common characteristics” in *European sailors and the maritime labour market, 1570-1870*, ed, Paul van Royen et al (Amsterdam: International Maritime Economic Association, 1997).

⁶¹⁸ VOC 8742, Part II, 106

money.”⁶¹⁹ The VOC, on the other hand, made no changes in the wages. It is quite probable that the VOC could not pay a higher wage.

Desertion it seems had turned Bengal into a second recruitment ground for European soldiers for all of the competing East India Companies. What were the mechanisms of this labor market? The structure and institutions of the maritime labor market in Europe have been studied in considerable detail. Thus, the figure of a “crimp” or “spirit” in the case of English and “soul purchaser” (zielverkoper) in the case of Dutch are very well known in the history of the maritime labor market. Embodying an extremely exploitative institution of recruitment, the “crimp”/“spirit”/“soul purchaser” often resorted to extreme violence to recruit sailors. The Companies never shied away from using force in Bengal. In 1675, for example, an English sailor in VOC service was kidnapped and held hostage by an Englishman in EIC service on the grounds that being English, he should serve the EIC.⁶²⁰

However, as Marcus Rediker has observed: “Most of the contracting of maritime labor was probably handled in less formal and exploitative ways, especially in the New World, where labor was scarce and wages higher.”⁶²¹ A similar trend of more benign methods of recruitment could also be seen in Bengal. The figure of a “debaucher” (débouchant) appears to be *the key* factor in facilitating desertion and subsequent recruitment by rival companies. “Debauching” sailors and soldiers with trinkets and most often with alcohol seemed to be standard practice by each and every company. The EIC took the most pro-active role in this regard. As early as 1675, the VOC had to recruit eight black sailors for the ship the *Schelvisch* as quite a few of the European crew of the ship went “missing.” They had apparently been “debauched by the English

⁶¹⁹ Barnaby Slush, *The Navy Royal: Or a Sea-Cook Turn’d Projector* (London, 1709), 92, quoted in Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 116.

⁶²⁰ VOC 1320,549r

⁶²¹ Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 82

and taken into their service,” as reported to Batavia by the VOC officials. The cause appears to have been that the EIC had suffered many deaths among their own men that year.⁶²² The next year, the VOC remarked that “yearly our sailors are debauched” to “strengthen” the manpower of EIC ships weakened by deaths.⁶²³ In 1711, when the VOC lost one-third of their European workforce to desertion, they lamented in resignation that it was “an almost impossible task” to stop the “debauching of our men by the English and other nations.” As a solution, they planned to adopt their adversaries’ strategies to “dispose their men to desertion” to the VOC grounds “in a similar way.”⁶²⁴ In 1726, when a few Ostend sailors came merrily drinking to the shores of Falta, they inevitably made the guards suspicious. When the sailors offered the guards half a rupee as a bribe to allow them to sit there, the guards took them for “recruiters from their (Ostend) community” and were thus ready to avert such “seducers.”⁶²⁵ Indeed, two years earlier, in 1724, six VOC sailors were taken away to the Danish factory “by way of debauching” by the Ostenders.⁶²⁶ In the same year, two French soldiers, Thomas Chaelium and Philip Dubois, “debauched” a VOC soldier Louis Le Claire, but while escaping the Dutch village, all three were caught red-handed.⁶²⁷ In 1727, the VOC decided to imprison “all foreign debauchers of our soldiers.”⁶²⁸

Assertion of sovereignty in its capacity to formulate law and to dispense justice in Asian lands was an important component in the constitution of the Company State.⁶²⁹ Losing workers

⁶²²VOC 1307, 631v.

⁶²³VOC 1320, 548r-v.

⁶²⁴ VOC 8742, Part I, 157.

⁶²⁵VOC 8755, 343.

⁶²⁶ VOC 8753, fol 221

⁶²⁷VOC 8754, 74.

⁶²⁸ VOC 8757, fol 141

⁶²⁹ Philip Stern, *The Company State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3-18

to any other state was a violation of this sacrosanct sovereignty. Control over deserters, like the war against interlopers, denoted articulation of state power.⁶³⁰ Letter wars centering on retrieving/retaining deserters thus were an important element of inter-company diplomatic relations in Bengal. “Colours” and “flags” and the violation thereof were central to correspondence regarding desertion. In 1724, for example, when a few sailors and soldiers were impressed from the boats of the VOC on the river near Calcutta, the VOC complained of “public violence done to our colours.” They further warned the EIC that such violence “would certainly open the door to a great many larger misdemeanors, which may be a ground of misunderstanding between the two Nations.”⁶³¹ In a letter to the EIC in May 1706 asking for the return of deserters in Calcutta, the VOC reminded the former of the “good harmony and concord” that existed between the Republic and the English crown.⁶³² Deserters could not be returned by the Ostend Company to the Dutch, however, as every single worker in the Ostend factory is “bound with oath in the service of the Kaiser.”⁶³³ Although the Companies acted in the capacity of state, such state authority was undermined by the vexing deserters. However, the Companies were not just a mere extension of the nation-states in Europe; they asserted their corporate statehood by an autonomous set of rules for their worker-subjects.

While demanding the return of deserting second-mate Lubbert Lubbertzoon in August 1724, the VOC reminded the EIC of “the articles of union peace and allies between the crown of England and the Republiek” reiterated through the years 1654, 1667, 1674, 1685, 1689, and 1699, which stated that deserters should be delivered whenever the notice of desertion was given by the aggrieved party. The EIC replied to this language of state and diplomacy with a legal

⁶³⁰ Stern, *The Company State*, 61-82

⁶³¹ P/1/5, fol 516v

⁶³² VOC 8737, fol 351

⁶³³ VOC 875 3, fol 221.

scrutiny of the term “deserter.” According to the EIC, “deserter” was a “military term” that applied to “the officers and soldiers of each nation deserting their colours and not to the indifferent subjects who are refugees of either nation or the servants of either of the East India companies.”⁶³⁴ Indeed, one company’s “deserter” was another’s “refugee.” But what stands out is the assertion that the treaties sealed by warring nations in Europe would not be binding on the affairs of the company in Asia; the company servants were governed by a different set of rules abroad. The plethora of statutes regarding desertion issued from Batavia bear testimony to this assertion. Regulation of desertion and recruitment of workers – a problem specific to the Asian waters – thus became a central medium for assertion of statehood by the corporate entities.

The mobility of seamen and soldiers turned inter-company rivalry and the sovereignty of the “colours” on their head; these men constantly trespassed the boundaries created in the corporate interest of the companies, sometimes quite literally, as in the tragic case of Jan Striker, a VOC soldier who had escaped to the EIC army stationed at the Kassimbazar factory in 1734. On hearing that his old friend Harmanus van Tomputten had come to Bengal as a soldier of the VOC, he visited him in the Dutch village in Chinsura. Another soldier, Hendrik Tuske, joined them with alcohol. Soon Striker and Tomputten got drunk, “lost their senses” and then “got into a fight with the natives.” In a bid to save himself from the brawl, Striker started running, too drunk to realize that he was running onto VOC grounds. Striker was arrested and given the death penalty. On May 6, 1734, he was hanged to death on a sail ship anchored close to the VOC headquarters at Chinsura, after which his corpse was “cut into pieces and fed to the fish.” Meanwhile, his friend Tomputten had to walk the gauntlet.⁶³⁵ Simple comradely conviviality had

⁶³⁴ P/1/5, fol 512r- 513v

⁶³⁵ VOC 8777, ff266-267

led Striker and Tomputten to fatally trespass the very complex sovereign borders of the East India companies.

Intercompany rivalry is only a partial explanation for desertion, however. After all, sometimes companies did work in union to plug the exodus of workers. However, there were also many amongst the deserters who completely rejected the world of wage work. When Captain James Montgomery was desperately looking for men for a voyage to Malabar, he urged the Calcutta council to recruit from amongst the “great many stragling seamen both of Dutch and English which belongs to no shipping lye sculking in the back parts of the town.”⁶³⁶ These vagabonds were a source of problems for the VOC as well as the EIC. In June 1699, following the shipwreck of the EIC ship *Gracedieu*, Capt. James Murvell dismissed all of the men. The EIC in turn offered to pay them three rupees per month unless they were recruited by any other ship in order “to prevent their starving and any other inconveniences that may happen their wandering idly about.”⁶³⁷ However, when these men were offered employment by Capt. Strutton, they refused to work unless they were given two months’ wages which was not the custom. The Company then shipped them “two or three at a time” to Balasore to put them on a ship stationed there; there was apparently no better way of dealing with such men who were “idleing about ready to starve and [would] not of their own accord accept of service.” Some of the “stragling men” had travelled huge distances. In 1677, for example, two runaways were caught at Bellasore who were seriously ill, and the surgeon doubted “they could outlive their treatment.” One of them was Jacob Hendrikzoon from Harlinge, who had run away from the service of the company four years back with ten other mates in a sloop *De Roos*. They first arrived at Queda, where they converted to Islam. After “stragling” the seas for so long, to his

⁶³⁶ P/1/11, 338r

⁶³⁷ G/7/3, 171-172

misfortune, he was hunted down in Ballasore. The other deserter, Cornelis Claeszoon, from Nieuwehoop, had escaped from the fluyt *De Stadt Grave* in 1676 and ever since had “vagabonded.”⁶³⁸ The VOC often dealt with the offense of vagabondage by deporting the offenders to Batavia. The EIC also deported their vagabonds as they often created trouble with the natives.

At times, the runaways completely rejected the world of work. Resistance to wage work was best manifested in the piratical activities carried out by fugitives. The EIC in 1715 noted the troubles experienced by boats passing through the forested deltaic lands off the coast of Chittagong which were constantly being attacked by armed Europeans. They were especially concerned about the luxury textile items coming out from Dacca. The robbers, they reported, were “deserters from us because they have red coats.” The EIC officials also identified some as “the Dutch soldiers discharged from our service.”⁶³⁹ The trajectory of the Dutch deserters thus finally took them to the limits of wage work in Bengal: having served the EIC, they ultimately left it for high sea robbery. The spectacle of English soldiers committing piratical acts on EIC ships in red coats epitomizes the transgression of authority. Displaying the insignia of their erstwhile world of work, these soldiers defiantly mocked their contracts with the EIC while engaged in the act of stealing their (the employer’s) property.

These masterless men were resented by all forms of authority, including the indigenous rulers of the region. The companies often feared that the European renegades would harm the company vis-à-vis the local authorities. Thus, the EIC feared that if the renegades “should plunder any boats belonging to the Mogull subjects,” the Nawab’s people will “take all opportunity of doing us ill offices.” And in fact, such robberies were common. Complaints of

⁶³⁸ VOC 1330, 838r

⁶³⁹ P/1/3, 53v-54r.

similar activities in Chittagong prompted the EIC to send an ensign to the region. The band of robbers comprised of ten or twelve Europeans headed by two sergeants were all deserters from company service, some of whom were hauled back by the ensign. Furthermore, the council of Chandernagore, headquarters of the French East India Company, complained about two deserters from the EIC at Patna, James Shaw and Abraham Blomer, who had taken protection in the French headquarters, “from thence having got together twenty five Europeans in a small vessel and were gone down the river.” The deserters, the French feared, would “turn pirates.” The EIC thus sent an army of three sergeants, four corporals, two drummers and thirty private soldiers under the command of two ensigns to abort this act of recalcitrance.⁶⁴⁰ Whether the EIC succeeded is not known. However, such rebels exemplify the many dimensions of the act of desertion. As we have seen, these acts were not always informed by the need to negotiate for a better bargain in the wage labor market.

5.5 CONCLUSION

In the aftermath of the Anglo- Dutch war of 1759-60, the Chinsura factory was ravaged by desertion; one hundred and thirty-nine European sailors and soldiers had fled. Almost all were housed in Calcutta. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the wages of the European sailors in the EIC far surpassed those in the VOC. Better wages, which the VOC by 1760 was unable to pay, was probably the prime factor behind the mass desertion. Defeat at the hands of the EIC also led to the forcible detention of many people, which could have spiked the number of

⁶⁴⁰ P/1/6, 4v, 18r,170v.

deserters. Fresh waves of desertion in the early 1750s compelled Batavia to issue new orders in 1753. Court summons for deserters were issued according to which the deserter would be publicly summoned four times altogether. If the deserter failed to appear before the Company after the fourth summons, the company court would pronounce judgment against them. In 1760, repeated summons for deserters failed. The Chinsura council came up with a list of the names of the deserters to be summoned and nailed them on the main gate of Fort Gustavus. When they failed to reCambridge University Pressrate the deserters, the company court passed rulings against them and made these sentences public. The sentences were harsh, but even this did not affect the deserters as they were still at large, and the VOC was rendered helpless in recovering them. They could only seize half of the salary of the absentee deserters to whom the VOC owed money and half the belongings if in fact they had left anything behind.⁶⁴¹ For the remainder of their presence in Bengal, the Dutch continued to suffer desertion of European workers to the EIC in massive numbers.

After 1760, the imbalance of power regarding control over deserters became conspicuous. The EIC, with successive military victories over different powers emerged as the most important political force in the region. With the victory at Plassey, they managed to undermine the indigenous state and crush the French presence in the region. By defeating their prime competitor, the VOC, in the battlefield of Bedara in 1759-60, they emerged as the supreme political force in the region. The Dutch promised their “deep solemn submission” to the English in the Treaty of December 5, 1760, which they signed after their defeat. The treaty stipulated that the VOC could not maintain more than one hundred and twenty-five European soldiers in their

⁶⁴¹ VOC 3006, ff1862-1909

factories in Bengal, Patna and Ballasore. However, sure of their dominance, the EIC refused to even return their prisoners of war.⁶⁴²

Starting in the 1760s, the EIC introduced various military reforms which seemed to have altered the position of the European sailors and soldiers in Bengal. The EIC was aware that “the security and preservation of their acquisitions requires numerous military forces.” To secure the desired number of soldiers, the EIC did not depend on soldiers from Europe. Instead, they decided to “depend greatly on such troops as are raised in the country called the seapoys [i.e., Indian soldiers serving under EIC state command].”⁶⁴³ However, as low-paid non-commissioned officers and privates, a number of European soldiers continued to serve in the EIC army. The sepoys on the other hand, although poorly paid, became the backbone of the EIC army in Bengal.⁶⁴⁴ Such reforms reversed the important position that the European workers held to maintain the company settlements in the pre-colonial period. Thus, desertion of European sailors and soldiers, which had led to the appreciation of their labor value, was rendered irrelevant as a result of the absence of contenders against the EIC and the decreasing importance of European labor.

Despite the ascent of the EIC, desertion of European sailors and soldiers of the EIC continued in the latter half of the eighteenth century. In fact, special military courts were set up to try deserters⁶⁴⁵ as desertion to native kings and princes continued throughout the eighteenth century. However, desertion by this point mostly took the form of vagabondage. Inebriated sailors and soldiers often wandered off who were then brought back by a native army of *sipahis*,

⁶⁴² G/37/8, fol. 32

⁶⁴³ G/37/10, 37

⁶⁴⁴ Dirk Kolff, Naukar, *Rajputs and Sepoys*, 177-179

⁶⁴⁵ In 1759 Lt. Colonel Robert Clive was commissioned to set up Courts Martial with judges and advocates to punish mutiny and desertion of officers and soldiers. G/37/7/10, 11-12

Native soldiers bringing back deserters was a practice which, as we have seen starting from the beginning of the eighteenth century, was made much more efficient after 1760. Moreover, the native police system, which the EIC could use for their own purposes, also helped in the process of apprehending deserters. Thus, a number of deserters were caught within hours of their absence from military roll call. Furthermore, punishments were extremely severe. For charges of vagabondage or absenteeism of soldiers for periods ranging between a few hours and a month, soldiers were subjected to between one thousand and two thousand lashes.⁶⁴⁶

European workers' desertions as a proletarian self-activity thus continued to expose the class contradictions within the company settlements outside Europe. However, by the late eighteenth century, it had lost much of its effectiveness in disaggregating the labor market, thereby limiting corporate company control over the maritime labor market. The runaways could not stop the rising trend of an orderly colonial military labor market, where the availability of a cheap, racialized work force rendered their position in pre-colonial companies' armies obsolete.

⁶⁴⁶G/37/1/2, 14-45.

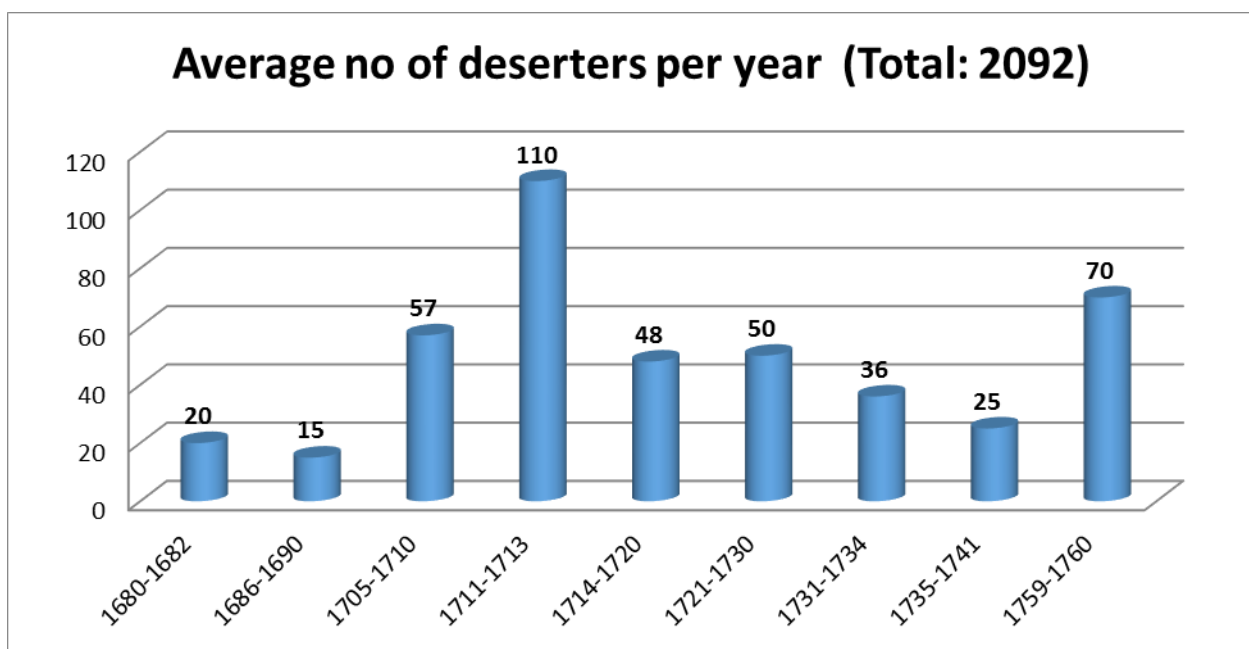


Figure 2: Average numbers of VOC deserters per year in Bengal. Source: VOC archives⁶⁴⁷

⁶⁴⁷ VOC 1361, 1378, 1422, 1470, 8737-8800 (all files)

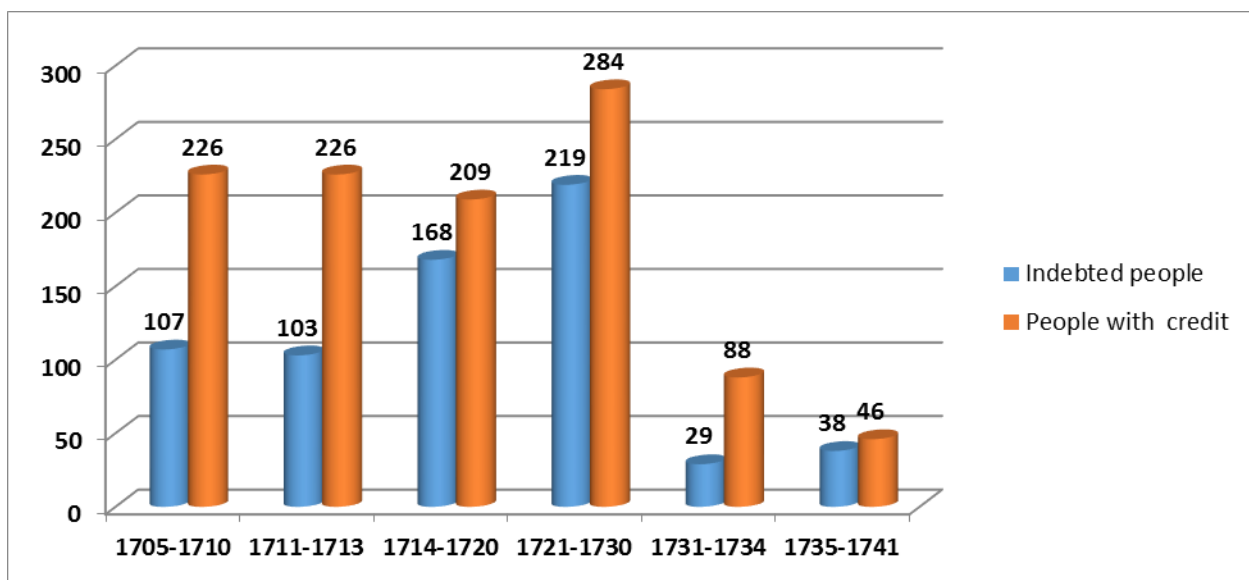


Figure 3: VOC deserters with debts and VOC deserters with credit. Source: VOC archives⁶⁴⁸

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid.

6.0 SILK REELERS

“Manufactories,” or factory-like work places, have been a lively and important topic for historians of early modern Europe. The transition from artisanal production to industrial production in Europe has been studied both extensively and intensively.⁶⁴⁹ Such work, however, has inadvertently given rise to the ahistorical ideas that manufactories or proto-industrial work places were unique to Western Europe. Writing on the Ichapur gunpowder factory of 1790s, which employed around 2000 workers in its busiest years, Jan Lucassen wondered, “After all, this is hardly a ‘Tutankhamen’ case where spectacular hidden treasures are suddenly revealed for the first time.”⁶⁵⁰ Why has historians paid no attention to this eighteenth century manufactory with such rich archival records? The answer gets to the heart of conceptual problems in mainstream labor history— because the Industrial Revolution remains the origin of labor history, Indian historians have looked for the beginnings of industrialization under colonialism as the beginning of Indian labor history. A few historians are now challenging this limited view,⁶⁵¹ but

⁶⁴⁹ Robert Duplessis, *Transitions to Capitalism in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 88-140, 259-303; Edward Burton, “The World of English Artisans and Traders: 1600-1750” (Phd. dissertation, Purdue University, 2007); Thomas Munck, *Seventeenth Century Europe: State, Conflict and Social Order in Europe, 1598-1700* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 118-146; Frederick Nussbaum, *An Early History of the Economic Institutions of Europe* (Washington, DC: Beard Books, 2002).

⁶⁵⁰ Jan Lucassen, “Working at the Ichapur Gunpowder Factory in the 1790s (part I),” *Indian Historical Review*, 39, no.1, (2011): 19-56

⁶⁵¹ Prabhu Mohapatra, ‘Regulated Informality: Legal Construction of Labour Relations in Colonial India, 1814-1926,’ in *Workers in Informal Sector: Studies in Labour History, 1800-2000*, ed., Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Jan Lucassen (Macmillan: Kolkata, 2005); Ravi Ahuja, “Labour Unsettled: Mobility and Protest in the Madras Region, 1750-1800” in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 35, no. 4 (1998) : 381-404; Ravi Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire:*

pre-colonial work experience continues to lie outside the purview of Indian labor history; in fact, it has been completely relegated to the realm of peasant studies.

The silk reeling units of the VOC and the EIC in Bengal are unique settings for manufacture in pre-colonial India and the larger world. In its peak years of operation between 1653 and 1760, the VOC silk manufactory employed around 1,500 men. This places the VOC silk reeling unit in league with the two largest workshops of the early modern world --the Venetian Arsenal, which employed on an average 2,500 men between 1536 and 1641, and the Atlantic dockyards of Portsmouth and Portland, which employed 2,000 men in the mid-eighteenth century. In the context of pre-colonial India, the silk reeling unit as a form of manufactory was unique. The best-known manufactories in Mughal, India, the *karkhanas*, mainly produced goods for elite consumption.⁶⁵² Smaller-scale artisanal production for the market, mostly in urban settings, was mainly organized in individualized shops that combined the workshop with the home of the artisan. Itinerant merchants who “put out” materials to artisans were the most common form of organization for artisanal production in the pre-colonial period. VOC/EIC textile production was organized in similar ways. In fact, the seventeenth-century poet Ketakadas Kshemananda portrays such a merchant-artisan relationship in his depiction of a weaver: An irate merchant fights with a weaver about the delay in the supply of

Circulation, 'Public Works' and Social Space in Colonial Orissa 178—1914 (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2009); Willem van Schendel, “Green Plants into Blue Cakes: Working for Wages in Colonial Bengal’s Indigo Industry” in *Working on Labor: Essays in Honor of Jan Lucassen*, ed., Marcel van der Linden and Leo Lucassen (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 47-73

⁶⁵² Urban artisanal production was not always geared towards elite consumption as Stephen Blake argues. As Eugenia Vanina and Nandita Sahai have argued, artisans alongside working in the *karkhanas* also produced directly or through middlemen merchants for the market. Stephen Blake, *Shahjahanabad: The Sovereign City in Mughal India, 1639-1739* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Eugenia Vanina, *Urban Craftsmen in Medieval India (thirteenth – eighteenth centuries)* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2004), 87-121; Nandita Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protests: The State Society and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan*, 178-211

cloth for which the merchant had supplied the weaver with yarns and advance money.⁶⁵³ On the other hand, the *mangalkabyas* from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are completely silent on factory-like organization for artisanal production by merchants. In the absence of any reference to such organization of labor in the indigenous context, it is evident that the Companies' silk reeling units was an innovation in labor relations in the region.⁶⁵⁴

6.1 THE CENTURY OF THE SILK REELING UNIT

The silk reeling unit of the VOC in Kassimbazar was, as Om Prakash noted, “the most ambitious of the Company’s manufacturing projects.” Between 1653 and 1760, the silk reeling unit of the VOC was anything but stable—at times it produced all of the silk exported from Bengal, and at other times its operation came to complete standstill. At full capacity, its 3,000 men could reel 1,500 bales or 227,625 ponds. In slack times, it employed around sixty reelers, when almost all the silk procured from the suppliers was reeled by reelers living in the countryside. The VOC experimented with the management of the unit, each time acknowledging a different degree of importance of the unit to VOC trade.

Initially, the VOC contracted with a native “master reeler” who was given the necessary equipment, the raw material, and a work place where the recruited reelers would gather to reel the silk. The “master reeler” was paid according to the weight of the silk provided to him. In the

⁶⁵³ Kayal and Deb, eds., *Ketakadas Kshemananda's rachita Manasamangal*, 123

⁶⁵⁴ There were some signs of textile workshops in Western and Southern India which involved multiple looms employed in one place and also different works involving textile production – e.g. spinners, weavers of different textiles— organized in one place. But almost nothing is known about such places, the owner and the geographic location of artisans. Vanina, *Urban Crafts*, 104-105.; Irfan Habib argues that there were no manufactories organized by merchant capital in pre-colonial India. Irfan Habib, “Potentialities of Capitalistic Development in the Economy of Mughal India,” in *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception*, 183-232

1650s, the rate was Rs. 5 per maund of silk. In the first decade of its operation under this system, the production at the silk reeling unit was impressive. In 1655, the unit produced 800 bales or 121,400 ponds of raw silk in only one year. In 1661, it produced 1,457 bales, which comprised 98 per cent of the total exported silk. In 1662, the wage rate was raised to Rs. 5.5 per maund. However, this system of payment had the attendant problem of silk reelers going into debt because the reelers took the advance and yet often could not deliver finished products on time.

In the 1660s, just as the VOC was successfully exporting its silk, they had to face the thorny problem of reducing costs for silk production. The local merchants who supplied the silk worms raised the price of silk as it had become a very important commodity for the VOC, which at this point thought it would be cost-effective to buy reeled silk from middlemen merchants rather than just buying silk worms and getting the silk reeled in the unit. A small quantity of the silk was reeled in the reeling unit of the VOC which was then sent out as a sample to the merchants, who distributed it amongst rural reelers from whom they procured the reeled silk for the VOC. Procuring reeled silk turned out to be a lengthy, time-consuming process—putting extra financial pressure on the company.

Moreover, the maintenance of the silk reeling unit was becoming an increasingly large burden. With a surge in silk-reeling activity, the VOC faced the pressure of accommodating the burgeoning number of artisan-reelers. In 1662, around 1,500 men were employed in the silk reeling unit. The same year, to their great chagrin, the VOC in Bengal discovered that the medium variety (*barriga*) of outside reeled silk procured through merchants was much preferred in the markets of both Japan and Europe to that reeled in the reeling unit. They therefore decided to cut the size of the silk reeling unit to half of its previous output.⁶⁵⁵ The actual reduction of the

⁶⁵⁵ VOC 1240, 1391v.

size of the workforce seems to have been more than half, as we find that of the 1,388 bales supplied in 1664-1665, only 158 or 11 percent had been reeled in the unit. The figure went down to 7 percent of the total supplied silk in 1668-1669.

The downsizing of the silk reeling unit was part of the VOC's overall plan of spendings reductions on silk-making from the late 1660s. In 1670, the VOC introduced a new contract for the master reeler to ensure efficient service and supervision. But this new contract did not reduce costs, either. The silk reelers continued to get into debt, failing to deliver reeled silk on time. Highly-skilled workers, on whom the VOC relied, also complained about decreasing salaries. In April 1674, the expert silk tester of the VOC, Chand Biswas, petitioned the company for a raise. Biswas claimed that he had served the VOC for forty-two years, and in the days of the first VOC director of Bengal, he enjoyed a salary of Rs. 400 per year with a *dasturi* or customary wage of Rs. 300, but after the second director of the VOC in Bengal, Mattheus van den Broucke, had left in 1663, his salary was brought down to only Rs. 300 per annum.

In 1674, the VOC overhauled the structure of the reeling unit, redefining especially the role of the master reeler, who was demoted from contractor to a manager with a salary of Rs. 200 per annum. The common reelers became employees of the company, as the VOC would give them a regular wage. Earlier, they were paid by the master reeler from the contracted amount. Though the master reeler was paid a fixed annual wage, it seems that judging from information available for 1759, the common reelers were paid according to the weight of the silk reeled (per *ceer*).⁶⁵⁶ The VOC officials felt that a regular wage would provide a guarantee against bad debts and that the arrears in supply could be adjusted against their wage.⁶⁵⁷ The unit was thus transformed into a full-fledged factory-like work place. However, this transformation

⁶⁵⁶ Vernet, 62

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

corresponded with the lowest point in the unit's output as the number of reelers was reduced to one hundred, a drastic reduction since five hundred reelers were at work even in 1673.⁶⁵⁸

In 1676, the VOC in Batavia complained that almost all the silk sent from Bengal was of poor quality, specifically mentioning the poor quality of the reeling. Moreover, since the VOC in Bengal at the time depended almost completely on reeled silk bought from the Bengal hinterland, they could not prepare the consignments for Batavia on time.⁶⁵⁹ For a fleeting moment in 1676, officials of the Bengal directorate considered the idea of doubling the size of the workforce employed in the unit, but the idea was quickly abandoned, and it was decided that reliance on the silk reeling unit should be kept at a minimum. The unit would put reelers to work only when the silk procured from outside fell short of demand. Hendrik Adriaan van Rhee, who was sent by the Gentlemen XVII at Amsterdam to Bengal as an inspecting commissioner recommended to the Bengal directorate various measures for improvement. However, thanks to internal squabbling between the Director of Bengal and the commissioner, none of his suggestions was put into effect. For the rest of the seventeenth century, the VOC thus practically procured the entire amount of exported reeled raw silk from intermediary merchants.

The VOC resumed interest in silk reeling in 1700, when merchants raised the price of silk from Rs. 5 per ceer to Rs. 6 per ceer. The VOC threatened that if the price was not lowered, they would reel their entire supply of silk in the unit. The threat worked, the price came down, and the unit kept producing only samples. When the price of reeled silk rose again in 1714, the VOC finally re-activated their reeling unit. Over the next four years, 83 percent of the silk exported by the VOC was reeled in its own unit. The interest in the reeling unit was such that in 1714, the Bengal directorate drew up plans for major restructuring. The VOC in Bengal planned to

⁶⁵⁸ VOC 1291, 449r.

⁶⁵⁹ VOC 1307, 502r-v

transform the silk reeling unit from a mud-and-straw structure into a stone house to avoid the risk of fire in the dry months from March to May.⁶⁶⁰ The plan seems to have been carried out previous to 1722, when an all-engulfing fire destroyed the English silk reeling unit, but the VOC unit was spared damage.⁶⁶¹ This is also evident from renovation reports from 1756: the silk reeling unit was still a stone and wooden structure, although in dilapidated condition.⁶⁶² The VOC in Bengal also planned to expand the silk reeling unit to accommodate 4,000 workers in 1714.⁶⁶³ It is not clear whether the expansion was carried out, but it is clear that the unit remained an important production center for VOC trade until 1760. In 1759, fifteen hundred reelers were employed who lived in straw huts around the VOC's residence in Kalikapur.⁶⁶⁴ Control over these workers became an important site of conflict during the Anglo-Dutch War of 1759, as will be discussed later.

Table 2: Production in the VOC silk reeling unit at Kassimbazar

Production in the VOC silk reeling unit at Kassimbazar		
Year	Number of reelers	VOC reeler production as % of total raw silk exported from Bengal
1661	1500	98
1669	-	7

⁶⁶⁰ VOC 8745, part II, 46-47.

⁶⁶¹ VOC 8750, 24.

⁶⁶² Vernet, 1, (unfoliated) letter of 28th July 1756

⁶⁶³ Prakash,

⁶⁶⁴ Vernet, 2, 10

1674	100	-
1718	-	83
1759	1500	-

6.2 THE WORK

Silk yarn production in Bengal consisted of three important stages: first, the production of the worm; second, reeling or unwinding silk threads from worms; and finally, the spinning of yarns with the silk wastes from the reeling process.⁶⁶⁵ Silk rearing was an agrarian process, whereby peasants living in different parts of Bengal bred silk worms on their plots of land. Silk worms feed on mulberry leaves; hence, growing the right variety of mulberry tree was part and parcel of rearing worms. All cocoon-rearers grew their own mulberry trees, and when their own supply of leaves fell short, they depended on the mulberry leaves of non-cocoon-growing fellow peasants. The best variety of cocoons, producing the softest quality silk, were harvested in the cold (and dry) season; thus, cocoon harvests from November and March were most prized. The November or March cocoons were dried in the sun for five or six days before they were sold. Another harvest of cocoons came from the rainy season, in July. The harvest from the rainy season

⁶⁶⁵For reconstructing the labor process, I have used VOC sources and Sukumar Bhattacharya, *East India Company and Economy of Bengal, 1704-1740* (Luzac: London, 1954), 174-178; Abhay Kumar Singh, *Modern World System and Indian Proto-Industrialization: Bengal 1650-1800, Volume I* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 2006), 133-219; Indrajit Ray, "The Silk Industry in Bengal during colonial rule: The 'de-industrialisation' thesis revisited," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 42, no. 3, (2005): 339-375

produced coarser, inferior silk and had to be reeled immediately. Silk was harvested all over Bengal, but traditionally, Kassimbazar was the hub for silk production as the finest silk weavers resided in that area.

Though Kassimbazar was the main center of silk reeling and overall silk procurement for the companies, it should be noted that silk production was not just confined to this area. Good quality silk was also produced in Rajmahal. The EIC noted in 1676 that Rajmahal also produced raw silk alongside silk piece goods. In 1712, when the VOC officials faced trouble in recruiting silk reelers in Kassimbazar and Hugli to reel the best quality silk, *pattani* and *adhapanji*, they looked towards Rajmahal. The director, Anthonij Huisman, requested the VOC *wakil*, or company intermediary for the Nawab's court, to recruit one hundred reelers from Rajmahol and send them to Chinsura.⁶⁶⁶ It is impossible to know whether the *wakil* succeeded in his task, but that Rajmahal housed hundreds of expert reelers was a known fact to the VOC officials. There were also reelers in Khanakul, a rural area located within the textile production belt of Hugli, who reeled silk exported by the companies from time to time.

Knowledge of reeling was widespread in the Bengal countryside. Impoverished peasants, with little income from land, diversified their earnings from reeling silk. Reelers at Khanakul, a place close to the VOC headquarters at Chinsurah, are a good example of such reelers. At harvest time, it was hard to find these reelers, as they found that working in fields as hired laborers generated better incomes than reeling silk. During the rest of the year, however, when field work needed fewer workers, these same agrarian laborers took up reeling.⁶⁶⁷ The work rhythm was very similar to what Jalu and Malu's mother experienced, as discussed in chapter two. This was not the case with the reelers of the Kassimbazar silk reeling unit of the VOC, however. Work

⁶⁶⁶ VOC 8744, 105, 121-122

⁶⁶⁷ VOC 1278, 2172-2173

there required a steadier labor force. The contract between the VOC and the master reeler from 1670 included a provision stating that the VOC would provide adequate silk to the master reeler so as to guarantee year-long employment to the artisans/reelers engaged by him.⁶⁶⁸ Even though they ran away from time to time, the fact that they lived in close proximity of the Companies ensured that silk reeling was their only occupation. In 1759, they were reeling silk not just for the VOC, but also the EIC and other inland merchants.⁶⁶⁹ Serving so many buyers would have required them to concentrate only on silk reeling.

Silk reeling involves soaking cocoons in very hot (but not boiling) water in medium-sized vats, which loosens the silk fibre from the cocoons. The reelers used their nimble fingers to unwind the silk fibres from the cocoons and fasten them on a reel. The best reeler could fasten fibres on to reels with minimal breakage. This is an important process and decides the quality of the finished silk yarns: yarns with minimal knots fetched the highest prices. Since hot water was needed at all times during reeling, the reeling unit always needed a steady supply of wood. According to one estimate, 150 maunds⁶⁷⁰ of wood was needed to reel a maund of silk. Reels used by peasant households were very rudimentary in nature, often just a piece of bamboo onto which reelers fastened their unwound silk. In the silk reeling unit at Kassimbazar, however, reels were standardized. The unit possessed 1,900 of these cylindrical apparatuses: 400 three-foot-long, two-foot-wide reels and another 1,200 to 1,500 smaller reels.

After the reeling was over, the broken bits of fibre were spun into yarn. Spun yarns were less valuable than reeled yarns, as is the case even today. It is not clear whether spinning of silk yarns was carried out in the reeling unit. From the information available on the mechanized silk

⁶⁶⁸ Om Prakash, 115

⁶⁶⁹ Vernet 2, 62

⁶⁷⁰ 1 maund = 82.3 pounds

filature units set up since the 1780s, we know that labor was divided between reelers and spinners, but there is no reference to spinners in any reports on the silk reeling unit of the VOC. It is highly likely that spinning work in the VOC reeling unit was done by the same reelers, as there is no mention of re-distribution of silk waste to spinners in the vicinity of the factory or beyond. Since only half of the silk fibre could be reeled into yarn, it would have been unviable for the VOC to not utilize such large quantities of silk waste.

The workday at the unit started early in the morning and went until sundown. Common reelers worked under the strict supervision of the master reelers. Every day after work, the reelers carried the reels to the warehouse inside the unit or in the VOC residence along with the reeled and unreeled silk. The equipment and the silk were kept under lock and key until the next working day. This factory-like work discipline was not present amongst the reelers in Khanakul, however. They were handed out the silk to be reeled through contractors and carried out the work in their individual homes.

From time to time, the VOC endeavored to introduce technological or artisanal changes to silk making in the region, centering on their silk reeling unit. Though the company relied completely on indigenous techniques, instruments and labor for reeling, they introduced the entire technical set-up for twining of the silk yarns. In 1662, they set up small twining mills with fifty spindles in the reeling unit. A few months previous, two bobbins, sent from Batavia, had also been introduced in the mills. Though it was reported that the use of bobbins yielded bad yarns, the twining mills were put into use later in the year at the cost of Rs. 6 and 12 annas per pond. The mills were operated completely by indigenous workers, who presumably learnt the technique of using the mills.⁶⁷¹ It has been argued that new technology for silk yarn manufacture

⁶⁷¹ VOC 1240, 1391v, 1484v-1485r

was first introduced by the EIC in the 1770s. It is true that the twining technique of silk yarns as introduced by the VOC was a small change in the silk production process, as compared to the highly mechanized filature system introduced under the EIC. However, such an undertaking by the VOC is important evidence to show that the EIC was not the pioneer of the process of organizing silk production in the region according to the demands of overseas markets.

Techniques for dyeing yarns were also brought from Europe. Dyeing of silk yarns was a primary concern of both the VOC and the EIC as silk threads would not sell if not colored according to the taste of the European buyers. The VOC employed a master dyer, or “fabriceur,” who perfected the color of the threads as desired in the European market.⁶⁷² Roger Fowler, Richard Mosley, John Nayler, and Anthony Smith were the master dyers of the EIC, employed between 1668 and 1772. These dyers were the only European artisans employed in the silk production process in the region. The dyers set up an apprentice system in Bengal, where they trained little boys in their trade. These children were often orphans sent from Europe. In 1678, the EIC dyer, Richard Smith, took under his care an orphan boy, Samuel Pine, sent from England. He promised “to instruct him fully in his art and mystery of dying.”⁶⁷³ The dyers also trained local silk weavers in perfecting the color of the yarn used in preparing the company piece goods.

The skeins of twined silk yarns were then graded. Skeins of similar quality were put into the same bundle and sealed in cloth bags. The best quality silk got an “A” rating and alphabetic order was followed for various grades of silk. Before the final packing, silk reeled in the unit as well as reeled silk procured through intermediary merchants was washed within the premises of the Kassimbazar factory.

⁶⁷² For e.g. - Fabriceur van der Mijl looked after the coloring of the silk yarns in 1711, VOC 8742, part 2, 33

⁶⁷³ G/28/1, (unfoliated), Cassimbazar Diary and Consultations, February 1678/1679

Work related to grading of the silk was carried out in the factories in Kassimbazar. The VOC employed an indigenous expert and a European sorter, who graded both the silk prepared in the unit and procured from outside and determined the price to be paid to the intermediary merchants. The expert was especially useful for testing the quality of outside-bought silk. The expert, earning anywhere between three-hundred and seven-hundred rupees per month, was by far the highest paid silk worker.⁶⁷⁴ The sorter primarily graded the silk prepared in the silk reeling unit. The EIC, which also maintained its own silk reeling unit, had a slightly different system. They did not employ any expert for the job. Silk was tested by three people: the chief, the second and third officer, or the warehouse keeper of the Kassimbazar factory. First, they all made their individual judgments silently on a piece of paper based on a skein of each variety of silk and then compared notes to finally decide the price of each sort.⁶⁷⁵

6.3 CONTROL OVER WORKERS

The VOC failed to monopolize the labor of the silk reelers. It faced manifold problems in controlling the activities of the silk reelers outside of the reeling unit. From its very inception, the hierarchical structure of work within the unit, with the master reeler responsible for monitoring the work of the other reelers, was created for effective functioning. The master reeler was essentially a contractor who used advances to recruit workers, organized and disciplined the workers, and finally was answerable to the company for the entire labor process. However, a perennial problem of this system was that the workers constantly got into debt with the company;

⁶⁷⁴ VOC 1302, 351r.

⁶⁷⁵ Home Miscellaneous, 125-127

they simply could not deliver the desired amount of silk after taking advances. The reelers incurred such debts not only from taking advances from the VOC but also from other merchants in the region. Most reelers were trying to work for multiple employers at the same time and failed to meet the demands of each of them. In 1670, the VOC introduced a new contract with their master reeler which required that the reelers work exclusively for the VOC; this was deemed an important step towards preventing the reelers from getting into debt. The contract was signed by the master reeler, Abhay Ram, in the presence of two local merchants, Deep Chand Shah and Jai Chand Shah. Nevertheless, three years later, the company discovered to their great displeasure that Abhay Ram along with 350 common reelers had been working for Deep Chand Shah and they had collectively accumulated a debt of Rs. 1,000 on account of unfinished work. Abhay Ram –a master reeler and a trusted witness – had broken the contract. The incident revealed just how pernicious the problem of “moonlighting” was in the silk reeling business. The master reeler was dismissed, but that did not solve the problem; the reelers throughout this period continued to work for other employers from time to time.⁶⁷⁶

As discussed in the first chapter, the artisan in pre-colonial Bengal was a highly mobile subject. Moving long distances within and beyond the village to find employers and also to gather material for production was a pragmatic solution to subsistence for an impoverished peasantry. As Jan Jan Lucassen has shown, such patterns of movement were also evident amongst workers of the Ichapur gunpowder factory in late eighteenth-century Bengal.⁶⁷⁷ Similar patterns of mobility amongst artisans have been noted by Nandita Sahai in a completely different geo-political and economic setting, in Eastern Marwar in the eighteenth century. These artisans moved freely without constraint by moneylending merchants. The only form of restraint put on

⁶⁷⁶ VOC 1291, 444r.

⁶⁷⁷ Lucassen, “Working at the Ichapur Gunpowder Factory”

the artisans was practiced by the state. For example, the Rathors of Marwar regularly ordained artisans to work exclusively for the court and also from time to time prohibited artisans from diversifying their occupations. However, mercantile control over the artisans in Marwar was absent. Though the effect of mercantile capital on artisanal production is still a disputed topic, it is clear from existing evidence that it did not dictate the mobility of the artisans in this period.⁶⁷⁸ The VOC in Bengal in a similar vein could not control the mobility of the silk reeler, even though they constituted one of the most destitute groups of artisans in pre-colonial India.

The silk reelers of the VOC were the closest counterpart of the modern factory workers: they worked for a wage, they did not own or control the equipment or their workplace, and they had relocated to the site of their workplace, i.e., the silk reeling unit. Yet such working conditions still could not guarantee the power of the VOC to dictate the movements of the reelers. As early as 1653, the VOC tried to create multiple silk reeling units in Bengal away from Kassimbazar, the center of silk production in Bengal. Since the VOC in Kassimbazar constantly faced competition from other European companies as well as indigenous merchants in terms of recruiting reelers, they had a major incentive to develop silk reeling units elsewhere. The first initiative was to set up a silk reeling unit in Udaiganj, under the *zamindari* of Burdwan, which was located close to Chinsura. The initiative failed as the reelers from around Kassimbazar were reluctant to move to Burdwan on the VOC's terms. The VOC's plan was to relocate reelers from

⁶⁷⁸ Nandita Sahai, *Politics of Patronage*, 189-190; This has been the argument put forward by Joseph Brenning and Sinnapah Arasaratnam. Joseph J. Brenning, 'Textile Products and Production in Late Seventeenth century Coromandel, " in *Merchants, Markets and the State in Early Modern India*, ed, Sanjay Subrahmanyam (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 86 Sinnapah Arasaratnam, *Maritime India in the Seventeenth century* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 191-192. However Eugenia Vanina disagrees with this position. According to Vanina mercantile capital had long term effect on individual commodity production leading to deepening of social division of labor and increasing dependence of weavers on demands of overseas market. Vanina, *Urban Crafts*, 92-93

Kassimbazar to Udaiganj as single, able-bodied men, but the reelers were “not disposed towards living without their wives and children.” Thus, not paying heed to the VOC orders, they moved with their families to Udaiganj. Their income, meant for single males, was inadequate to support their dependents. They quickly fell into debt, which in turn created trouble for the company.⁶⁷⁹ The VOC had to close their Udaiganj unit as reelers’ debts became unmanageable.

If reluctance to relocate was the reason behind the failed plan to set up a silk reeling unit at Udaiganj, the seasonal movement of the reelers in Khanakul was to blame for the failure of the silk enterprise in Khanakul. In 1670, the VOC also planned to open two silk reeling units in Khanakul, very close to their headquarters in Chinsura. They contracted workers to reel silk procured through middlemen merchants. The VOC estimated some four hundred seasonal silk reelers at work at Khanakul. The work force disappeared during the harvest season, but 1670 was an exceptional year: a drought had crippled Bengal, and the reelers therefore found no work in the agrarian sector. To retain their workers, the VOC had to adopt a new wage policy. They had to pay the reelers in rice instead of cash to “avoid disturbances by the [reelers].” By “disturbances” the VOC meant that the reelers would leave Khanakul for some other place; even the drought did not guarantee that the reelers would stay. The VOC had to buy rice at a very expensive rate from a neighboring district and transport it to Khanakul to distribute it amongst the reelers. They complained that the four hundred reelers in Khanakul could only reel half a maund of silk daily or fifteen maunds a month, which fell considerably short of the VOC’s expectations, especially when compared to the production at the silk reeling unit in Kassimbazar. This uncontrolled mobility cOxford University Pressled with the inability to impose factory-like

⁶⁷⁹ VOC 1212, *Memorie van Overgave*, 218

work discipline meant that the production capacity of the Khanakul fell short of the VOC's expectations. Ultimately, no silk reeling unit was built in Khanakul.

Similar trouble was faced by the VOC in 1712, when they planned to send a group of reelers to their small settlement in Costij in western coastal Bengal, away from the primary centers of economic activities of the European companies. The head reeler, Kalia, reported that although many of the good workers were ready to move, a large number of common reelers were opposed to the idea. The Bengal directorate was ready to move them "by hook or by crook," but ultimately the plan failed.⁶⁸⁰

The reluctance of the silk workers to move prevented the VOC from realizing their grand plan of producing silk in their primary centers of power, Ceylon and Batavia. From 1660 onwards, the VOC experimented with setting up silk production units in Jafnapatam in Ceylon. In 1660, under the care of three silk rearers, the first set of mulberry plants and silk worms were sent from Bengal, where the highest quality silk in Asia was produced. These rearers were sent back two years later as both the plants and worms had died on reaching Jafnapatam. Despite the disappointment, the enthusiasm of the VOC in Bengal, Batavia and Ceylon was not to be dampened. In 1665, they sent an entire ship with mulberry plants and silk worms with five caretakers. The dream of producing silk under their own tight control did not die.⁶⁸¹ In 1734, seventy-four odd years after their first attempt to grow silk worms in Ceylon, a report from Jafnapatam confirmed that silk worms had finally grown in numbers large enough to prepare the first batch of reeled silk. The supervision of five European workers and an unspecified number of "native" workers made possible this first crop of silk worms. VOC officials in Ceylon requested that the Bengal directorate "export men and necessary instruments" to set up a silk reeling unit in

⁶⁸⁰ VOC 8743, 635

⁶⁸¹ VOC 1239, 1238v, 1629r-v.

Jafnapatam. Though the Bengal directorate promised help initially in 1734, two years down the line, they were forced to reconsider. The silk reelers had a very different temperament from the silk rearers. In these two years, they tirelessly tried to recruit a dozen silk workers who would move to Batavia or Ceylon, but in vain. Even when they doubled the wages of the reelers, the efforts proved futile.⁶⁸² The VOC officials blamed the workers' reluctance to move on the "Bengali" mentality⁶⁸³ and also the religion of the workers, Hinduism.

There is no evidence to suggest that the silk reelers were all Hindus. Though all the head reelers of the VOC had Hindu-sounding names, there is no way of knowing the names or backgrounds of the common reelers who formed the majority. Moreover, in the absence of caste information, it is impossible to ascertain the socio-religious disposition of these workers towards overseas travel. Information on the religious/caste backgrounds of silk reelers comes from responses to late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century surveys, in which silk reelers of Bengal were a heterogeneous group, hailing from "clean" castes such as Sadgopes and Gandhabanias and also from untouchable castes such as Chandala, as well as a good number of Muslims.⁶⁸⁴ Silk reeling was a skill acquired by a destitute agrarian population to broaden access to income, a fact made clear in Khanakul. Just as spinning yarn was destitute women's work, cutting across caste barriers, presumably silk reeling was artisanal work practiced by an impoverished peasantry of various caste affiliations. Whether it was the Hindu fear of crossing salt water or not, the VOC officials failed to persuade the workers to migrate. These were workers who moved frequently; their decision not to relocate overseas was their own decision. The VOC was thwarted – and their entire silk reeling enterprise in Jafnapatam failed.

⁶⁸² VOC 8785, 72-74

⁶⁸³ They made an exception for Bengali sailors, who according to the VOC forms "a different caste", *ibid*.

⁶⁸⁴ Nitya Gopal Mukerji, *A Monograph on the Silk Fabrics of Bengal* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1903), 3

Another important part of the uncontrolled mobility of the workers was their frequent flight or “desertion” in the words of the VOC, a problem that both the EIC and the VOC faced with all grOxford University Presss of workers discussed in this dissertation. Desertion in this case was often a response to the companies’ efforts to impose labor discipline. In 1662, when the VOC entered its first phase of decline, the master silk reeler protested in a letter to the chiefs of the Kassimbazar that “the flog has been used too much.” The master reeler, under strict orders from the VOC officials, had to flog the reeler “without excuse” if it was detected that the silk was spun roughly. According to the master reeler, the use of the flog for such “small faults” was a “misuse” precisely because the reelers had been running away in great numbers and the master reeler could not recruit replacements.⁶⁸⁵ That no solution was found to the problem is evident from the fresh contracts that the VOC prepared for their master reelers. One provision stated that the company would provide exclusive foot soldiers to hunt down deserting reelers and bring them back to work.⁶⁸⁶ The VOC always feared that the reelers would run away on the smallest pretext. In 1714, when the VOC proposed to the Governor General and his council at Batavia to provide funds for building a stone house for the silk reeling unit, they cited retention of the reelers as one of the main reasons for such renovations. If the older straw-roofed unit caught fire, the reelers would run away, and the VOC would lose its precious silk production.⁶⁸⁷ In 1737, one such situation arose when the VOC found it impossible to recruit reelers for “sober day wages” as they migrated en masse in search of better opportunity and more money.⁶⁸⁸ Migration of the workers also depended on internal political conditions. In 1756, the “wantonness” of the soldiers of Siraj-ud-Daulah’s army resulted in the flight of several silk-rearing peasants and reelers

⁶⁸⁵ VOC 1240, 1387r-1391v.

⁶⁸⁶ Om Prakash, 115

⁶⁸⁷ VOC 8745, Part II, 46-47

⁶⁸⁸ VOC 8782, 82.

residing in and around Kassimbazar.⁶⁸⁹ This problem continued into the turbulent years of 1759, when the Dutch were embroiled in a struggle with the EIC, whose political power in the region was on the rise.

6.4 THE VOC SILK REELERS AND THE ANGLO- DUTCH WAR OF 1759

The Battle of Bedara in 1759 was a significant event in the history of the EIC's political ascent in Bengal, which had already advanced with Clive's victory at the Battle of Plassey in 1757. With the defeat of the VOC, Dutch dominance in Bengal was irretrievably lost. Scholars have discussed various aspects of that war, starting with the nineteenth-century accounts of Captain Arthur Broome and Klerk de Reus.⁶⁹⁰ However, while the military strategies, geopolitical implications, and conflicting personalities among the English, Dutch and Nawab of Bengal have been discussed in minute detail, there has been no discussion on the impact of the war on the VOC's workers themselves. The silk reeling unit played an important role in the in the turbulent years of 1759-1762.

Roberto Davini has attributed the EIC's growing control over the silk reelers of Bengal to the financial reforms undertaken by the company after 1770, including the EIC's effort to buy up

⁶⁸⁹ Vernet, 1 (unfoliated), letter of March 9 1956

⁶⁹⁰ Captain Arthur Broome, *History of Rise and Progress of the Bengal Army*, (calcutta, 1850); G.C. Klerk de Reus, "De Expeditie naar Bengale in 1759," *Indische Gids*, 11, no. 2 (1889): 2093-118; (1890), 27-90, 247-78. Other accounts of the Battle of Bedara includes Kalikinkar Datta, *The Dutch in Bengal and Bihar, 1740-1825*, (New Delhi: Motilal Banarassidas, 1968); C.R. Boxer, *Jan Compagnie in oolog en vrede. Beknopte geschiedenis van de VOC* (Bussum, 1977); Holden Furber, *Rival empires of trade in the Orient 1600-1800* (Minneapolis, 1976), F.S. Gaastra, *De Geschiedenis van de VOC* (Zutphen, 2002), G.D. Winus and M.P.M. Wink, *The Merchant-Warrior Pacified: The VOC and its Changing Political Economy in India* (Delhi, 1994), Om Prakash, *European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Hugo s' Jacob, "Bedara Revisited: A Reappraisal of the Dutch Expedition of 1759 to Bengal" in *Circumambulations in South Asian History: Essays in Honour of Dirk H.A. Kolff*, ed., Jos Gommans and Om Prakash (Leiden: Brill, 2003, 117-132.

silk at higher prices, rather than to any monopolistic control over production. He explicitly states that in 1772, the EIC decided not to use coercion to control silk production in the region.⁶⁹¹ However, the fate of the VOC silk reeling unit in 1759/1760 in the hands of EIC forces shows a different picture. Breaking the backbone of Dutch power in Bengal meant not only defeating the VOC military on the fields of Bedara, but limiting their access to intermediary merchants, creating monopsonistic control over *aurungs*, or centers of textile production,⁶⁹² and finally, financially ruining the VOC silk reeling unit at Kassimbazar. Coercion was central to the EIC's strategy of breaking the VOC's purchasing power and gaining control over silk production in Bengal.

Correspondence between Adriaan Bisdorn, the VOC director at Chinsura, and George Lodewijk Vernet, the VOC chief at Kassimbazar, is an important source for understanding the conflict in the months leading up to the Battle of Bedara. Their letters have been crucial to revealing the plans of the Dutch within Bengal and their various strategic blunders in Bengal and Batavia, leading to their defeat on the battlefields of Bedara. The silk reeling unit featured prominently in these letters. However, , historians have said little about the fate of the unit after 1715.

The silk reeling unit remained an important manufactory in the 1750s, when 1,500 reelers lived nearby and worked at the unit at Kalikapur in Kassimbazar. As early as in January 1758, Vernet wrote Bisdorn and the Council at Hugli that silk reeling work was not going well. He reported that Kassimbazar could supply less *pattani* (the highest quality silk) compared to the

⁶⁹¹ Roberto Davini, "Bengal raw silk, the East India Company and the European global market, 1770-1833," *Journal of Global History*, 4, no. 1, (2009): 57-79

⁶⁹² Om Prakash, "From Market-determined to Coercion-based: Textile Manufacturing in Eighteenth century Bengal," in *How India Clothed the World*, eds., Giorgio Riello and Tirthankar Roy (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 217-50

consignment from the previous year and that the quality was so bad that a portion of the silk had to be re-spun. Vernet blamed the slow work and the bad silk on the “troublesome conditions” in the region. He referred to the raids by the English to “impress” their reelers. By “impressment,” Vernet meant that the EIC servants were visiting the houses of the reelers every night, supplying them with *pattani*, the highest quality silk, which they were then required to reel on top of doing the work for the VOC.⁶⁹³ It is significant that Vernet used the term “impressment” to describe the EIC tactic of “poaching” their workers. Impressment was commonly used to describe the forceful recruitment of sailors, especially for naval ships at various ports in Europe.⁶⁹⁴ The Dutch and English states and the merchant companies had evidently adopted such means of “recruitment” for silk reeling as well. The British Navy employed doubtful legal sanctions to carry out this practice during wartime, but the practice continued not just within the Navy but also among private British merchants, especially colonial British officials in the Anglo-American world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁶⁹⁵ Vernet’s use of the term in 1758 signaled the important place of the Kassimbazar silk reelers in the Anglo-Dutch relations in Bengal. Like the seamen in the Anglo-American world in wartime, reelers too played a critical role in the conflicts which arose from the political ambitions of the two largest European companies fighting it out in Asian lands.

While impressment of sailors meant seizing men by force, the process of “impressing” reelers was far more complicated. In the middle of the night, EIC men surreptitiously went to the houses of the head reelers and supplied them with the worms for *pattani*, which the head reelers

⁶⁹³ Vernet 2, 4, 10

⁶⁹⁴ Denver Brunsman, *Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth century Atlantic World*, (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2013)

⁶⁹⁵ Niklas Frykman, “Impressment, Kidnapping and Panyarring” in *The Princeton Companion to Atlantic History*, ed, Joseph C. Miller (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), 240-242

then distributed amongst the other reelers. Moreover, the EIC's ruse opened the floodgates for other merchants in the region to bring their silk by stealth to the VOC reelers. With so many employment opportunities for the reelers, it became impossible for the VOC officials to control their workforce. Vernet complained in January 1758 that there were only six hundred reelers available in the vicinity of the VOC factory, nine hundred less than the usual number of men employed. Moreover, only three hundred of these men could be put to work, given their engagement with other sources of work and income.

When the reelers started working on the EIC and other merchants' silk, the quality of their work for the VOC suffered. During the day, the reelers worked in the VOC silk reeling unit and at night on the EIC silk. Their workday now literally never ceased. Vernet complained:

Our reelers are now working in the night on their silk and so they come to our unit very late and then they work in such an unenthusiastic and roguish way that they break most of the finest threads into pieces and then hide them in the ground and also reel the rest so unequally that many threads which should get the stamp of first letters are getting a stamp of lower letters.⁶⁹⁶

The reelers were obviously exhausted. Exhausted reelers could not reel silk without frequent breakages, thus increasing silk waste. The EIC side did not complain about the quality of their work, which could mean two things: either they received good quality silk or they did not care about the quality, the real motive being to damage the VOC's silk production. The latter seems more probable in light of developments in the silk reeling industry in the region in the late eighteenth century.

From 1770s onwards, Bengal no longer produced high quality silk for the European market. This decline of the silk reeling industry in the region has been attributed to technological and financial causes. The EIC drastically transformed traditional Bengali reeling technology by

⁶⁹⁶ Vernet, 2, 10

introducing the Piedmontese silk reeling machine in 1780s. In a report prepared in 1836, the EIC stated that Bengali reelers had previously used very rudimentary tools which included an earthen pot of hot water and bamboo reels. However, we know that in the VOC reeling unit, tools were far more sophisticated. The report then went on to say that crude methods of work led to threads with different degrees of fineness in the same skein of *pattani*.⁶⁹⁷ From the different discussions on silk production between 1670 and 1759 in the VOC silk reeling unit, however, it is evident that this problem became persistent only in the wake of the Anglo-Dutch conflict. The stress created through the EIC's aggressive policy of siphoning off VOC's work force evidently led to the decline in the quality of the silk reelers' work.

The VOC responded by taking several measures to preserve their workforce. By the end of January 1758, they took several surveillance measures such as regular inspection of the reelers' houses and clearing out any silk kept there, which they might have received from other employers. The VOC also started officially registering the silk traffic that passed through Kalikapur and made every transient silk merchant sign a bond stating that they would not give the reelers residing in Kalikapur any silk.⁶⁹⁸ The VOC then took the initiative of concluding a contract with the English and the other inland merchants in the region. These contracts stated that the EIC and other merchants would not employ the VOC silk reelers. Recall that previously, the VOC had signed contracts with the French East India Company and EIC to return their deserting European servants and also for an equitable share of saltpeter procured in the region.⁶⁹⁹ Even though the VOC managed to get the EIC and the other merchants to sign a contract which prohibited them from distributing *pattani* to the houses of the head reelers, the circumstances in

⁶⁹⁷ Davini, "Bengal raw silk", 60

⁶⁹⁸ Vernet, 2, 54

⁶⁹⁹ Kalikinkar Datta, *The Dutch in Bengal and Bihar*, 6

which it was signed qualified the effectiveness of the document. No copies were made of the contract for exchange among the signing parties, and inland merchants “had no desire to do it.” As for the EIC, they were adamant about putting their name above the VOC on the contract, which was a mark of status. The VOC ceded the position in hopes of stalling the loss of their reelers to the EIC. The effort, however, proved futile.

The EIC was determined to capture the workers of the VOC in Kassimbazar by hook or by crook. The EIC’s higher wages lured away VOC reelers and coolies.⁷⁰⁰ The EIC was offering 3 anna/ ceer more than what the reelers were earning at the VOC reeling unit. By the summer of 1758, after signing the contract with the EIC and other inland merchants, the VOC had raised the wages of the worker by 3 anna/ceer generally and two percent extra pay for *adhapanji* (half *pongee*) silk and two percent extra for *tanni* silk. After this step was taken, the EIC wage no longer proved sufficient to attract the reelers. Moreover, since reeling for the English meant work over and above that at the silk reeling unit, the work-load became impossible to manage. Some reelers refused to work for the EIC, especially after VOC officials started making inspection visits to the houses of the head reelers. The EIC was unfazed, however, so they sent in the army to kidnap head reelers and common reelers and kept them under arrest in their own residence in Kassimbazar. The EIC first solicited the reelers for their best quality silk. When positive incentive failed, they resorted to the age-old violent practice of impressment. This kind of impressment was, in the end, no different from the impressment of the sailors in wartime.

The impressment of the reelers presaged armed conflict between the VOC and the EIC. The VOC found that just putting indigenous guards or peons around the houses of the reelers was not enough to thwart the mighty armed force sent in by the EIC. They then decided to shelter the

⁷⁰⁰ Vernet, 2, 2

reelers who were still willing to work for the VOC in their residence at Kalikapur. Production nevertheless suffered significantly. By the summer of 1758, the VOC could not get more than a hundred pieces of yarn prepared. Given this situation, Vernet reported to Hugli:

We are asking the English with politeness, but it is fruitless, and so at last we are going to meet violence with violence.⁷⁰¹

Contracts and acts of self-defense ultimately gave way to the language of violence. It is significant that Vernet made such a comment in November 1758, a year before the war at Bedara. He put the war in a broader perspective. The two companies collided violently, not only on the battlefield of Bedara, but in their cut-throat competition to control the bodies of their workers.

Vernet's report from December 1758 signaled an unchanging situation: the VOC could not create favorable conditions for silk production. He reported that the rise in prices of silk thread could not be controlled. It is significant that he attributed the rise in the price of silk not to increased wages, but the bad work of the reelers. In other words, the EIC's strategy of disrupting the work of the VOC silk reeling unit continued to be effective. The exhausted reelers, caught up in the rivalry between the EIC and the VOC continued to break threads and throw them away or bury them in the ground in fear of retribution by VOC officials. Vernet was peeved at "the devilish behavior" of the reeler, but could not find any stable solution to the problem.⁷⁰²

In February 1759, seven months before the Battle of Bedara, Vernet reported that the tide was turning for the VOC. The quality of silk being reeled was steadily improving, yet their prime concern was still a chronic shortage of reelers. That was the last mention of the silk reeling unit in Vernet's letters to Hugli until the war was over, only mentioning them again in June 1760. In

⁷⁰¹ Vernet, 2, 73

⁷⁰² Vernet, 2, 142-143

the months of June and July 1760, the VOC faced an acute scarcity of reelers. While they were able to gather enough reelers to prepare the full order of the *mochta* variety of silk, for reeling *adapangia* silk, they could get only fifty reelers, enough to supply only a very small fraction of the order, and to prepare the best quality silk, *pattani*, they found no reelers at all. Meanwhile, the EIC had put a notice on the front door of their residence in Kassimbazar and had made their *goldaars* (announcers with kettle drums) announce throughout the area that whoever would reel *pattani* silk for the EIC would get a special “acknowledgement fee.”⁷⁰³

By the summer of 1760, the reelers were leaving the Dutch grounds in Kassimbazar of their own volition. The slow attrition caused by the EIC notwithstanding, the changing settlement pattern of the reelers once again underlines the mobility of these workers. The straw huts of Kalikapur were deserted by the reelers as they crossed to the other side of the Ganga in large numbers. They migrated in order to work for the EIC as well as for various indigenous local and imperial elites residing in and around Kassimbazar.⁷⁰⁴ Throughout 1758, a large number of reelers secretly worked for the English, precariously serving both companies, but by 1760, they had decided to migrate away from Kalikapur, abandoning the VOC altogether.

Desertion irreversibly ruined the VOC’s Kassimbazar silk reeling unit. Vernet’s letter from June 1762 revealed that the entire silk industry around Kassimbazar was collapsing. While there were many factors that contributed to desertions within the VOC silk industry, famine had a significant impact as well. In September, October and November 1762, many peasants, including silk reelers and rearers, died of starvation, and many others, faced with rising food prices, chose for their own survival to run away, which incidentally caused the death of most of the silk worms, thus ensuring the continued downfall of the VOC silk industry. Thus, in 1762,

⁷⁰³ Vernet, 2, Part III, 29-30, 34

⁷⁰⁴ Vernet 2, 34

Vernet was forced to cancel the entire order of silk sent from Amsterdam via Batavia and Hugli.⁷⁰⁵

6.5 CONCLUSION

The silk reeling unit of the VOC was one of the major manufactories of the early modern world. In the indigenous context, it was the first factory-like workspace organized by merchant capital, contributing to both the technology and labor management of silk production in the region. Despite its uniqueness and importance in the global history of early modern labor relations, it was, ultimately, a failure. One significant reason for its failure was the VOC's ever-shifting view of the most cost-effective method of preparing and procuring reeled silk. The uncontrolled mobility of the reelers and their resistance, as this chapter argues, was another reason for the fluctuating fate of the silk reeling unit.

Throughout the hundred years under discussion in this chapter, the VOC tried to mobilize silk reelers across the region to realize the company's ambition of producing the best silk in Asia. However, their ambitions were frustrated because they could not control the movement of the reelers. The mobility of the Bengal silk reelers, one of the most destitute grOxford University Presss of workers, was ordained by their logic of subsistence. The reelers' choice of mobility clashed with the VOC's plans of controlling them, exposing them to adverse working conditions with little social security inside and outside Bengal.

⁷⁰⁵ Vernet, 2, 20-21, 64, 94

The silk reelers' autonomy of mobility was highly circumscribed during the Anglo-Dutch war of 1759, however. During that time, they did not choose to leave VOC grounds of their own volition but were forced to leave under violent circumstances created by the armed intervention of the EIC forces. The attempt to poach reelers from VOC grounds was part of a larger strategy of damaging the mercantile power of the VOC, the EIC's biggest rival in Bengal. While the movement of the reelers between 1759 and 1760 was not autonomous, their mobility in this period nevertheless led to the ruin of the VOC-owned silk reeling unit and ultimately set the stage for the decline of the silk industry in the region.

7.0 THE HOUSEHOLD WORKERS OF THE SETTLEMENTS

Leonara van Mandhar came to Bengal as a slave. As her name suggests, she was a native of Mandhaar in Western Sulawesi, before being sold into slavery. However, she was emancipated by the time she nursed the ailing VOC director of Bengal, Roger Beerenert. Pleased with her service, Beerenert made a handsome provision of Rs. 10,000 for her in his will. He also added a clause that Leonara, his “free Christian girl,” could gain access to her money only if she was married, thus limiting her chances of enjoying her new-found wealth. However, her prospects for marriage were not difficult as with her inheritance, Leonara was presumably a sought-after maiden in Chinsura. Soon after Beerenert’s death, Leonara married the Dutch sailmaker, Jan van Boekholt, in 1734. Leonara and Jan emancipated seven of their slaves within months of their marriage. Even after the manumissions however, their household possessed several other slaves. As joint owners of their property, Leonara and Jan made a will in late 1734 which stipulated that of the two of them, “the one that would live the longest” would be the sole heir.⁷⁰⁶

Leonara’s story encapsulates the origins, work, subjection and aspirations of household workers in the company settlements. Though native workers were employed in the settlement households, domestic labor was performed by enslaved, “free Christian” and “Portuguese” workers. Living in very close proximity to their employers, officials of all ranks of the East India

⁷⁰⁶ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1677A & 1677B

companies, they formed a defining element of the social composition of the early company settlements. At the crossroads of European trade and pre-colonial Mughal Bengal, the experiences of these workers, like the runaway sailors and soldiers, provide deep insights into the identity of European settlements in early eighteenth-century South Asia.

As the chapter on European sailors and soldiers demonstrates, runaways exposed the uncertainty of European-ness in pre-colonial Bengal. This ambiguous nature of the company settlements was further heightened by the presence of the household workers. Historian Ira Berlin explains the emergence of the figure of the Atlantic Creole thus:

Along the periphery of the Atlantic –first in Africa, then Europe and finally in the Americas - it was a product of the momentous meeting of Africans and Europeans and then their equally fateful rendezvous with the peoples of the New World.⁷⁰⁷

Since the origins of these household workers lay in the networks of Pan Asian slavery as structured by the VOC and the EIC, their induction in company settlements in Bengal was part of a larger process of Indian Ocean creolization. The slave trade in the Indian Ocean region underpinned the reproduction of its work force. The forced migration of men and women from different parts of the Western and Eastern Indian Ocean regions led to the convergence of a multiethnic workforce in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Bengal. However, what has been overlooked in the existing historiography on domestic work in eighteenth-century India is precisely the multiethnic nature of the work force. Though a minority in comparison to other grOxford University Presss of workers discussed in this dissertation, the contribution of this work force to the demographic composition of pre-colonial Bengal cannot be overemphasized.

⁷⁰⁷ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The first Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 17

Their presence brings out the most cosmopolitan elements of life in maritime settlements in early modern Asia.

The position of these workers – both their subjection and aspirations – can be understood as the intersection of class and gender relations in the company settlements. Household work or reproductive labor entailed intimate relationships between employer and worker, which often meant that the household worker provided sexual services to their masters. It is thus not surprising that this workforce was predominantly female. Dependence on household workers reveals very clearly that labor relations helped to structure family life in the early company settlements. Even the subject position of male domestic workers as care-givers, subjected to the patriarchal authority of the head of the household, could be understood in terms of gender and class.

Finally, the self-activity of household workers paved their manifold trajectories within and outside the bounds of company settlements in Bengal– from slavery to freedom, from foreigner to native, from worker to employer. Like other workers discussed in this dissertation, enslaved people often deserted in defiance of their masters. Plans to poison their masters or to steal from them were often informed by their desire for freedom. Their ability to form friendships or alliances with freed men or native workers proved not just their resilience but also the creative drive to move out from under their burdens of coercion and form new communities in Bengal. Enslaved people and freed men and women alike formed familial structures, separate from the households they served, which were based not just on labor, but creative kin relations.

7.1 THE SLAVE TRADE

The Indian Ocean slave trade under the Europeans is still an understudied subject. Ever since Markus Vink's attempt to "unsilence" the Indian Ocean networks of slavery, there have been attempts, albeit insufficient, to address the dynamics of the slave trade in the Indian Ocean region in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁷⁰⁸ Kerry Ward has shown that slavery/forced migration was central to the imperial formation of the VOC in Asia.⁷⁰⁹ A recent survey has shown that in the early eighteenth century, the slave holdings of the VOC empire in Asia were much larger than Dutch imperial slave holdings in the Atlantic.⁷¹⁰ The emphasis on the nineteenth-century slave trade/forced migration still continues.⁷¹¹ Richard Allen's survey does much to shift from the Afrocentric focus to the Indian Ocean slave trade and tries to bring South-East Asia into the history of the European-controlled slave trade in the region between 1500 and 1800. However, South Asia remains a blank spot.⁷¹² Matthias van Rossum and Linda Mbeki's

⁷⁰⁸ Markus Vink, "'The World's Oldest Trade': Dutch Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century," *Journal of World History* 24, no.2 (2003), 131-177.

⁷⁰⁹ Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)

⁷¹⁰ Matthias Van Rossum, *Kleurrijke Tragiek: De geschiedenis van slavernij in Azie onder de VOC* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2015)

⁷¹¹ Alessandro Stanziani, *Sailors, Slaves, and Immigrants: Bondage in the Indian, 1750-1914* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2014)

⁷¹² Richard Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2014). It should be pointed out that great works on forced migration and slave trade in the nineteenth century Indian Ocean has been done, especially centering Mascarenes, Reunion Islands and Mauritius. Gwyn Campbell, *An Economic History of Imperial Madagasscar, 1750-1895: The Rise and Fall of an Island Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Marina Carter, "The Transition from Slave to Indentured Labour in Mauritius" in *Slavery and Abolition*, 14, no. 1, 1993: 114-130; Richard Allen, *Slaves, Freedman, and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

recent article on the dynamics of the slave trade between Cape Town and Cochin is a step towards filling that gap.⁷¹³

The duties collected on the “sale of slaves” recorded in the proceedings of Fort William and the omnipresent slaves in all European households in Calcutta have led historians to come to the consensus that slaves were bought and sold in Bengal.⁷¹⁴ Though the nature of slavery and bondage in South Asia has been much discussed, surprisingly, there has been no systematic study of the slave trade in the eighteenth century, specifically on that carried out by the Europeans. Apart from the British regulations of the slave trade/slavery in Bengal from the 1770s on, there has been almost no interest in the dynamics of the slave trade in the region.⁷¹⁵ Indrani Chatterjee remains the sole exception, even though the evidence she presents is muddled by words such as “transfer,” “gift,” “security bonds,” etc. However, anecdotal references to the Arakanese pirates aided by Portuguese adventurers conducting slave raids in the deltaic region abounds although Arakanese slave marts were not the only slave marts in the region.⁷¹⁶

The slave trade, as practiced by the companies in Bengal, dates back to the seventeenth century. The first major slave traders in the region were the Portuguese. One of the reasons for

⁷¹³ Linda Mbeki and Matthias van Rossum, “The 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” in *Slavery and Abolition*, April 2016.

⁷¹⁴ Kalikinkar Datta, *Alivardi and His Times* (Calcutta: World Press, 1963); Amal Chattopadhyay, *Slavery in Bengal Presidency 1772-1843* (London: Golden Eagle Publishing House, 1977)

⁷¹⁵ Indrani Chatterjee, “Legal Complicities”, *Gender Slavery and Law in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 176-224, Nancy Gardner Cassels, “Social Legislation under the Company Raj: the Abolition of Slavery Act V 1843,” *South Asia Research*, 11, no. 1, (1988) 59-88, Gyan Prakash, “Colonialism, Capitalism and the Discourse of Freedom” In *Peripheral Labour*, eds., Shahid Amin and Marcel van der Linden (Amsterdam: International Review of Social History, Supplement 4, 1996), 9-25, Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772-1843* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012),

⁷¹⁶ For slave trade through Arakan see 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. dissertation, Leiden University, 2013). Wil o’Dijk, “The Dutch Trade in Asian Slaves: Arakan and the Bay of Bengal, 1621-1665: An end of History?” *Newsletter of The International Institute for Asian Studies, Den Haag*, No. 46, Winter, 2008; Michael Charney, “Slaves and Tyrants: Dutch Tribulations in Seventeenth-Century Mrauk-U,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 1, no. 3 (August 1997): 201-253

their expulsion from Hugli and the transformation of Hugli into a Mughal port town was the unchecked slave-raiding conducted by the Portuguese in the region.⁷¹⁷ Not even the Portuguese-Mughal war in 1632 put an end to the slave trade either in Hugli or in Bengal. That the slave trade continued throughout the seventeenth century and that both the VOC and EIC were involved in the trade is evidenced by the repeated orders to the EIC and VOC from the Provincial governor (Nawab) to stop their trade in Muslim subjects.⁷¹⁸ It was known to all company officials that transaction in human flesh, especially Muslims, was a grievous offense in the eyes of the imperial authorities. In 1670, Thomas Stiles, an EIC merchant conniving against Matthew Mainwaring, the chief factor of Hugli, complained to the Fausdar regarding “the extent of the Company’s privileges [sic] to imprison musselmen.” Before going to the Fauzdar, Stiles conveniently freed his own Muslim slave. Ironically, the EIC officials always feared “to have our slaves forced from us, under pretence that they either are or would be moores.”⁷¹⁹

Though the VOC denounced the “abominable trade,”⁷²⁰ or the “vile practice of buying up poor people,”⁷²¹ it is clear that many of their employees participated in it. After 1732, the VOC issued statutes prohibited the members of their Patna fleets, especially the European members, from capturing the inhabitants of Bengal to sell them into the overseas slave market. However, the notarial documents from Chinsura confirms that although the VOC as a corporate entity did not participate in the slave trade, many of their employees, including the directors, did. It is even questionable whether the trade was clandestine as there is evidence of “public auctions” for

⁷¹⁷ Titas Chakraborty, “Hugli: Trade and Labor in a Seventeenth Port City in Bengal” (M.A. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2009).

⁷¹⁸ In 1678/79, G/20/2, 7 & G/20/5, 15-16, in 1682, G/20/8, 33.

⁷¹⁹ G/20/1, Consultation of May 28, 1670, 9-10

⁷²⁰ VOC 8777, 681 – instructions given for the Patna Fleet. Such statutes were read out during the up-river journey. VOC 8776, 776 Geldzak’s Diary, entry, 9th August 1733.

⁷²¹ P/1/15, 383v

slaves in prominent settlements of the VOC.⁷²² The only evidence of the VOC's cracking down on the slave trade comes from 1719. Gerrit Vlamming, a VOC surgeon, Rosa da Silva, Vlamming's cook, Michiel van de Rijp, the ship's bookkeeper, Dendam, and Julius Jeronimus, a mardijker working for a merchant, were all condemned for their involvement in the "unbecoming trade." However, the reason for the condemnation might stem not from the trade itself but rather that they had embezzled company funds for the Rs. 760 they used to buy a young Muslim boy. The exorbitant amount included not only the price paid to the blood relations of the boy, but also the bribes paid to the Fauzdar of Hugli and his army to prevent him from reporting the transaction to the Nawab. In any case, only the cook and the mardijker were punished.⁷²³ The seventy-eight slave transactions that I have reconstructed from the notarial documents not only confirm existing hypotheses, but also provide fresh insights into the nature of the slave trade. [Refer to the Transactions in Slaves in Appendix A]

The slaves thus came from Malabar and Coromandel coasts of peninsular India, from Sulawesi, Makassar, Padang east of the Malacca straits, and finally, from the VOC strongholds of Colombo and Batavia. Such varied origins of the slaves make it clear that Bengal was a node in the pan-Indian Ocean slaving network. However, one cannot definitively say that the VOC structured these slave-trade networks. After all, the Portuguese traders in Bengal participated in the slave trade and owned domestic slaves before the arrival of the VOC or EIC in the region. Not much is known about the structure of this slave trade. What is quite clear, however, is that the VOC was the only corporate trading entity in the Indian Ocean which could integrate so many places into one complex slave trade network.

⁷²²Harmanus Blom while selling his slaves before his departure for Europe, mentioned that he procured one of them at a public auction in Cassimbazar. 1.11.06.11/1715, 85

⁷²³ VOC 8748, 80-81.

The names of the slaves are very similar to what can be seen in other parts of the VOC empire. Names include the given name by the slave owner and the place of origin of the slave. While some names are Christian and Portuguese-sounding, the majority of names were not derived from the Judeo-Christian traditions. This might be partially explained by the fact that there were many slave owners who were reluctant to baptize their slaves. Also, the brutality and dehumanization inherent to slavery—in particular, the slavery practiced by Europeans—can help explain the naming process. Thus, there were many slaves named after the months of the year (e.g., January, October), and some were given outright cruel names such as “Misfortune” (ongeluk).

Middle- to high-ranking officers of the intra-Asiatic vessels of the VOC formed the majority of the buyers and sellers for this period. Evidently, the slaves were supplementing the wages of these officers.⁷²⁴ These slaves, carried on board in long intra-Asiatic voyages, usually did no work on the ship. This further demonstrates the primary importance of the slaves as commodities adding value to money wages. In certain years, ship officials desisted from selling their slave-commodities in Bengal, hoping “for the most profit” in other ports in Asia.⁷²⁵ In some instances, the merchants in Batavia were directly involved. In 1740, Nicolaas Monniks, a merchant in Batavia, entrusted the book-keeper of the ship, Schuijtwijk, for the sale of a slave, Ijsak van Colombo.⁷²⁶ In 1743 Louis Taillefert, a secretary and junior merchant, sold a male slave named Augustus van Boegie to senior merchant and ware house master Jan Kerseboom, on

⁷²⁴ This has also been pointed out in Mbeki and van Rossum, “The 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”

⁷²⁵ In 1743, A book keeper of a ship wanted to sell his two slaves, Adonis van Batavia and September van Balier at Cape where he expected to get the best price, 1.11.06.11/1694, 923. 997.

⁷²⁶ TNSA 1.11.06.11/ 1694,247

behalf of a woman in Batavia.⁷²⁷ In the following decade, both Kerseboom and Taillefert went on to become Directors of the VOC in Bengal. In addition to middle- to higher-level company officials in the Bengal directorate, free residents of the Chinsura also participated. The prices of slaves brought from Batavia and/or adjacent lands and sold by Company personnel on VOC ships were significantly higher than those of slaves sourced from Bengal or traded amongst people living in various settlements in Bengal. Even in the later years, when slave prices generally fell, slaves from Batavia were quite expensive. It might be the case that Batavian slaves were considered a luxury commodity in Bengal.

For reasons that are not clear, the sale of slaves from Bengal rose significantly in the 1750s, possibly due to depredations brought about by the Marathas in the previous decade. Presumably, one does not come across large-scale sale of humans in the first half of the eighteenth century as there was no recurrence of famine until 1770. The hinterland for slaves in Bengal was vast. Slaves could be sourced anywhere between Falta, the principal harbor for the EIC and VOC in Bengal, and as far inland as Rampur, close to Varanasi. How they were sourced is difficult to ascertain, however. John Marshall observed that during the Bihar famine of 1670, destitute parents sold their children into slavery for a few annas.⁷²⁸ Sellers of slaves ranged from natives such as “Boudie” to any and every company employee.⁷²⁹ Evidence for direct involvement of native people in the slave trade with the Europeans is thin, however. In 1679, the Fausdar of Hugli alleged that an old woman sold a young Rajput boy to a “house caterer” in the EIC quarters who then sold the boy to a company servant.⁷³⁰ Two men were brought to the

⁷²⁷ TNSA 1.11.06.11/ 1694, 793

⁷²⁸ Shafaat Ahmad Khan, ed., *John Marshall in India: Notes and Observations in Bengal, 1668-1672* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 150

⁷²⁹ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1715, 7, 18

⁷³⁰ G/20/2, June 13, 1679, 38.

criminal court in Calcutta in 1728/29 on charges of abducting and selling children into slavery.⁷³¹ One was convicted, and the other was acquitted. A native man, “Boudie,” was involved in selling two slaves at Chinsura in 1755, and given the prevalence of the slave trade in the previous centuries, it is most probable that companies had connections with local slave dealers. The Portuguese and free Christians were deeply implicated in the slave trade on company grounds. Eleven of the seventy-four slave transactions involved the “Portuguese,” and six others involved “free Christian” men and women.

Slaves from Bengal formed the majority of the transactions of the 1740s and 1750s. A distinct trend is noticeable with regards to the pricing of slaves. Whenever the seller was of “Portuguese,” “free Christian” or native origins as opposed to European employees of the company the price of the slaves was significantly low. Presumably, these were the contacts of the VOC officials for the slave-trading hinterland. However, in one instance, a common soldier was involved in selling a five-year-old boy child into slavery. The price that he got in exchange was exceedingly low. Keeping in mind the statute issued in 1732 against slave-raiding by soldiers of the Patna fleet, it can be assumed that VOC soldiers were suppliers of slaves in the markets of Chinsura. The same holds true for EIC soldiers. In November 1742, Manuel Joseph, an EIC soldier, was apprehended in Decca with twelve slaves.⁷³²

Very little is known about the slave-trading networks of the EIC. However, the existence of a slave trade is attested to by the importance of slave ownership in the wills of inhabitants of Calcutta and the regular collection of duties on the sale of slaves in Calcutta markets. There are also strong indications that the EIC, and not simply its officials in private capacities, was involved in the overseas slave trade. From February 1706 to February 1707, the Fort William

⁷³¹ P/155/72, 11-12.

⁷³² P/1/15, 383v.

Council passed an order to buy up as many slaves as they could get in order to send a consignment of slaves to York Fort at the West Coast of the Indonesian Archipelago.⁷³³ The availability of human cargo is indicated by the council's remark that, "here [Bengal] being slaves often offer'd to sale." The order went on to state:

Keep them in a compound with a guard for that purpose giving them victuals from the company and make them work at the house or otherwise as there may be occasion so as to keep them in health. He [the Company Bakshi or the Military Paymaster] must take care yt[sic] that they are most men and boys and few women and girls, and see they are sound, wholesome and well shaped when bought.⁷³⁴

These instructions clearly situate Calcutta within the global nexus of the European slave trade as initiated in the sixteenth century, yet how often such consignments of male, able-bodied workers were sent overseas is unknown. At best, we can ascertain that such overseas transactions were sporadic. Less than ten years before the launch of the ostensible process of abolition in 1774, the Fort William Council passed the bills to the owners of the ship *Solebay* for victualing forty-four slaves—men, women and two boys—at fifteen shilling per diem.⁷³⁵

Direct transactions in slaves provide only a very small window into the pervasiveness of slavery in the European settlements. Non-market transactions as found in wills, inventories and "gift" giving show that almost all European employees were owners of slaves. Mention of slaves is rampant in most wills of VOC and EIC officials as well as other merchants and "free" inhabitants of Chinsura and Calcutta.⁷³⁶ A junior merchant in 1733 had as many as eleven

⁷³³ P/1/1, 364v.

⁷³⁴ *ibid*

⁷³⁵ Quoted in Indrani Chatterjee, "Colouring Subalternity: Slaves, Concubines and Social Orphans in Early Colonial India", in *Subaltern Studies X: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, eds., Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash and Susie Tharu (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 54

⁷³⁶ This trend has been noted in the wills of various EIC officials as well as other inhabitants of Calcutta in the late eighteenth century. Indrani Chatterjee, "Colouring Subalternity: Slaves, Concubines and Social Orphans in Early Colonial India"; Durba Ghosh, *Sex and Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge

slaves—six males and five females—as his inventory indicates.⁷³⁷ Certain wills warranted the sale of slaves after the death of the masters.⁷³⁸ Slaves were often left as an inheritance by dying masters to their friends and family.⁷³⁹ Officials leaving Chinsura left their slaves as gifts. Harmanus Blom, a junior merchant, before leaving for Europe in October 1740, “gifted” one female slave, Rosetta van Bengale, to Louis Taillefert.⁷⁴⁰ The manumission documents are another source of the number of slaves. The departing director Kerseboom in 1755, for instance, manumitted a total of forty-five slaves.⁷⁴¹

University Press, 2006). It holds true also for this period. The various wills from the notarial collections of Chinsura exhibit a similar trend.

⁷³⁷ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1677A, 245. Another example is the inventory of a bookkeeper, Helling from 1741. He had six female slaves and one male slave, along with his entire family of a wife and four children. The entire family was legally his slaves. 1.11.06.11/1694, 154.

⁷³⁸ Will of Mary Legall, 1728, P/154/ 40, 2-3; Will of Augusto Guilhermo, 1733: P/154/40, 12-13; will of William Millakin, 1743, P/154/50, 5.

⁷³⁹ E.g.: will of Johanna Dirksz., widow of Meurier. Johanna left her elder daughter her male slave Enassie and his wife Cicilia. She also let a female slave, Prostina to the executors of her will, Mr. Drabbe and Mr. Powell. TNSA 1.11.06.11/1677B, 234. Will of Catherina Disius, 1740, 1.11.06.11/1694, 222; A sailor gifting a free Christian woman, Rosa de Costa a slave woman, Mano van Baranagore, 1741, 1.11.06.11/1694, 524; A geweldiger presenting an assistant a female slave Maria van Decca, 1.11.06.11/793; The examples from Calcutta include: Will of Charles Strong, will of John Plank, will of James Sutton, 1729, P/154/40, II, 2-11; will of John Sainsbury Lloyd, 1733, P/154/40, II, 15-17; will of Joshua Hepworth and Adam Dawson, 1733; P/154/40, II, 1r-2r; Danel Willeboorts and will of Rouland van Beem, 1736, P/154/40, II, 2-4; will of John Cudmore, 1739, P/154/40, II, 2-3; will of George Keadie, 1752, P/154/50, 5; will of Nicolo Urno, 1751, will of Jane Douglas, 1752, will of Sarah Shadow, 1755 P/154/50, 4, 36-38, 40-42; will of John Knox, 1758, will of Maria Elizabeth Starks, 1758, P/154/50, II, 1-2, 12-13; will of Elizabeth Searle, 1758, will of an Armenian merchant, 1759, will of David Wilson, 1759, P/154/50, III, 1, 19-22, 26-28; will of Edward Ridge, 1759, will of Francis Wilmsley, 1760, P/154/50, IV, 8-9, 15; will of Andrew Glenn, 1745, P/154/44, 2-3; will of Christian Brunn, 1741, will of Sarah Guion, 1742, P/154/42, 2, 6-7; Will of Roger Kinsey, undated, P/154/45, 6; Will of William Chapman, 1748, will of James Altham, 1748, P/154/47, 11-12, 14; will of George Goring, 1748, P/154/49, 7; Will of Henry Dallibar, 1722, will of William Gill, 1722, will of Theophilus Gamen, 1724, P/1//5, 255r, 340r, 481v-482r; will of sarah Sinclair, 1710, will of Joachim Addis, 1712, will of Dorothy king, 1711, will of Henry (?), 1714P/1/2, 44r, 209r-v, 286v, 471v-472r.

⁷⁴⁰ Blom gave away another female slave, Clara van Bengale, as a “gift” to his niece. TNSA 1.11.06.11/ 1694, 569, 605

⁷⁴¹ TNSA 1.11.06.11/ 1715, 221-263

7.2 SLAVERY AND THE HOUSEHOLD

The enslaved population in the settlements primarily performed reproductive labor. In August 1678, an ailing Padre Manuel Gonsalves sought passage on an EIC ship. Since he was to be nursed by two of his slaves, knowing that the crew would not be responsible for his care, Captain Stafford allowed the padre passage.⁷⁴² Anthony, the slave of Josiah Bedloe, an English resident of Calcutta, attended his master at the dinner table amongst other jobs.⁷⁴³ Simon van Orixas's primary work was in the kitchen of his master, the VOC merchant Adriaan Bisdor.⁷⁴⁴ When Febrauraj van Bengale and Valentijn van Bengale were sold by the junior merchant Harmanus Blom to the VOC director Jan Sichterman in November 1740, it was mentioned in the sale document that they were both "good cooks."⁷⁴⁵

Enslaved women and men were critical to child-care. Elizabeth Harding left her slave girl Jenny to "to wait upon and attend my child Martha."⁷⁴⁶ Daniel Willeboorts left his two Bengal slaves, Manoel and Janico, to look after his infant sons, Daniel and Mattheus. A number of female slaves attended to his daughter, Maria.⁷⁴⁷ Enslaved women worked particularly as wet nurses, or ayahs. It was a common practice amongst company servants in Calcutta to send their children to Europe under the care of enslaved women. In her will made in October 1724, Mary Hopkins, bequeathed her slave girl Fariana her freedom and twenty rupees, but only after accompanying her infant daughter to England. Similar provisions were made in the will of Sara Guion in 1741, in which she wished her slave Mirtilla to accompany her son Joseph Guion to

⁷⁴² G/20/5, 6.

⁷⁴³ P/155/72, 31-35, 1.11.06.11/1694, 1028-1030.

⁷⁴⁴ P/155/72, 31-35, 1.11.06.11/1694, 1028-1030.

⁷⁴⁵ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1715, 85

⁷⁴⁶ P/155/9 (1736 bundle), 1-2

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid., 2-4.

England “as his servant” and only after performing this duty would she receive her freedom. As Rozina Visram and Michael Fisher have pointed out, this was a very common practice amongst Europeans moving between India and England. The “freedom” promised on reaching the shores of England, however, was nothing more than a euphemism for relinquishing all responsibility of supporting their servants.⁷⁴⁸ Since such servants, after having performed their tasks dutifully, did not have enough money for passage back to India, they joined the destitute population of London in droves, begging on the streets for a living.

From the vantage point of enslaved labor, families in early company settlements in Bengal were work units. Male slaves worked alongside female slaves in this unit, thus ensuring a steady reproduction of household workers. . However, a small number of freed men and even men from the local population supplemented labor in this unit. In nine wills, for example, free male servants are acknowledged: Stephen Cooper left 100 madras rupees for his servant Fakir Mohammad;⁷⁴⁹ John Bonkett cancelled the debts of his servant Pedro and left him 50 madras rupees;⁷⁵⁰ Basil Hamilton left his “servant” Francisco Deerasto 100 rupees;⁷⁵¹ Thomas Coates left 100 madras rupees to his servants, Abraham, Pedro, Domingo, and Juna;⁷⁵² Jeremiah Kendall, a second mate, left 10 madras rupees for his black servant, Russoolee;⁷⁵³ Holland Goddard, a senior Alderman, left an extra two months’ wages for his khidmatgars, steward, butler, peons, palanquin boys, water-woman, gardeners and housekeepers;⁷⁵⁴ Elizabeth Rasmus,

⁷⁴⁸Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: The Story of Indians in Britain, 1700-1947* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 11- 34; Michael Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 53-65

⁷⁴⁹ P/154/40 (1731 bundle), 1-3

⁷⁵⁰ P/154/50 (1733 bundle), 5-6

⁷⁵¹ P/154/40 (1736 bundle), 5-7.

⁷⁵²P/154/40 (1736 bundle), 8-9

⁷⁵³P/154/40 (1737 bundle), 5-6

⁷⁵⁴ P/154/50 (4th bundle), 19-24

a widow, left for her gardener 50 arcot rupees;⁷⁵⁵ Thomas Sampson left for his servant from Malabar, Rammar 70 madras rupees;⁷⁵⁶ William Bucknall, a merchant in Calcutta, left for his servant Raju 100 Madras rupees.⁷⁵⁷ Since they were left with only money, it is highly likely that the amount in the will signified wage arrears. After all, wage arrears for domestic servants were not unknown. On June 1, 1739, Sheikh Adab, a house servant of Daniel Willeboorts, complained to the Mayors' Court against his employer stating that he had not paid his wages for the previous 30 months. The court took cognizance of Sheikh Adab's petition and ordered Willeboorts to pay him 30 months' wages at the rate of 17 rupees per month, amounting to 510 rupees.⁷⁵⁸

Female slaves in the settlements often performed sexual services. Housework in nineteenth-century European households became a mark of feminine virtue and was thereby never treated as work but rather as an expression of love. This contrasted entirely with housework in the company settlements in Bengal in the early eighteenth century. Since slavery undergirded affective pleasures for men in the settlement, any semblance of a reciprocal relationship within these households was subordinated to the juridical relationship between master and slave. Child-bearing, in addition to sexual services, could result in material improvements in the lives of enslaved women. To begin with, it could earn them emancipation. Additionally, they could expect monetary gains. Marcella, a slave woman who bore the child of her master, George Petty, was emancipated and given 50 pagodas.⁷⁵⁹ Maria, a female slave of John Rennald, was promised her freedom in his will and a sum of 300 rupees. She was the

⁷⁵⁵ P/154/50 (5th bundle),17

⁷⁵⁶ Will of Thomas Sampson, 1747,P/154/46, 11

⁷⁵⁷ Will of William Bucknall, 1741, P/154/42, 2

⁷⁵⁸ P/254/40, proceedings of 1 June 1739

⁷⁵⁹ Will of George Petty, P/154/40 (1728 bundle), 14-15.

mother of Rennald's only son, to whom he left 2,000 rupees.⁷⁶⁰ Thomas Hawkes freed his slave-girl Sophia, the mother of his two children, and left her 200 Madras rupees and a slave.⁷⁶¹ Magdalena, the slave of EIC ensign John Gulielmus, was freed when she became pregnant with his child and was later left with 200 rupees.⁷⁶² Some enslaved women could expect to inherit the houses of their masters. Nathalia Peres, a slave girl of a steeringman?, was emancipated in 1737 and given a house by her master in the Stroobazar near Chinsura. After her death, the house went to her and the pilot's son, Dirk.⁷⁶³ That same year, a house with a garden just outside the company bazaar was gifted to an emancipated slave family by its master, a secretary of the VOC in Bengal.⁷⁶⁴ In 1715, Robert Fox gave freedom to his slave Romana, appointed her the sole executor of his will and then left her all of his possessions, including his house.⁷⁶⁵ In 1722, William Barry freed his slave Dorinda and left her his house and compound.⁷⁶⁶ Lucretia, a slave of John Ross, was freed by her master and given 10 madras rupees per month for her maintenance for the rest of her life as well as the house and garden of her master.⁷⁶⁷ In 1755, Sarah Shadow freed her slave Nattu and gave her half of a house which she was to share with Shadow's gardener.⁷⁶⁸

Despite the seeming generosity of the above-mentioned "gifts," emancipation in the company settlements in Bengal hardly allowed former slaves to move beyond the realm of household work. Taking into consideration the similar work performed by the enslaved and the

⁷⁶⁰ Will of John Rennald, 1741, P/154/55, 7

⁷⁶¹ Will of Thomas Hawkes, P/154/50, 19-20

⁷⁶² P/1/4, 414v- 415r.

⁷⁶³ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1694, 124.

⁷⁶⁴ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1694, 70

⁷⁶⁵ P/1/3, 598v-599r

⁷⁶⁶ P/1/5, 80r

⁷⁶⁷ Will of John Ross, 1736, P/154/40 (1736 bundle), 9-10.

⁷⁶⁸ P/154/46 (4th bundle), 40-42

free, it is hard to say how much of a social improvement emancipation actually brought. The passage from slavery to freedom was often punctuated with conditions as well, which chained the slaves for prolonged periods to the sector of household work. Henry Dallibar's slave Bastian was handed over to his friend, Capt. Marmaduke, on the stipulation that Bastian was to serve his new master for five years before gaining his freedom.⁷⁶⁹ In 1720, Thomas Greaves, a Calcutta merchant, while initially deciding to free his slave, Kutte Kelly, having asked his executor to ensure Kutte's education at the Madras Charity School, ultimately changed that clause and made Kutte Kelly's freedom and a sum of one hundred and thirty pagodas conditional on an extra ten years' of service for a friend after Greaves' death.⁷⁷⁰ Similarly, Luzia, one-time slave of Sarah Shadow, was bequeathed to Sarah Peris, whom she was required to serve for seven years before gaining her freedom.⁷⁷¹ As these examples show, freedom, though promised, can be deferred in various ways. Christian Bruun delegated the decision of freeing his slave boy Anthony to Mr. Margas. Anthony was to serve Mr. Margas until the time Mr. Margas "thinks him capable of getting his bread in a honest way." Anthony's hour of liberty was left to the vagaries of Mr. Margas' desire, though Bruun had left him his freedom money of 50 rupees.⁷⁷² George Downing made an even more confusing provision in his will. His slave, an eight year old boy named Nicholas, was to serve his friend Richard Dean "not as a slave but as a servant" for five years, after which time he was "to be set entirely at liberty."⁷⁷³ Though juridically no longer a slave, Nicholas was to continue to function as one until he gained complete freedom. Sometimes the conditions of emancipation were so extreme that they blurred all difference between slaves and

⁷⁶⁹ P/1/5, 255r.

⁷⁷⁰ P/1/4, 241v- 242v.

⁷⁷¹ Will of Sarah shadow, 1755, P/154/46 (4th bundle), 40-42

⁷⁷² Will of Christian Brown, 1741/42, P/154/42, 1

⁷⁷³ Will of George Downing, P/154/46 (6th bundle), 40-42

servants. George Penuse, a ship captain in 1736, freed all of his slaves—Giddah, Flora, Bavenah, and Pauncheecok—but added that they were to “serve as before.”⁷⁷⁴ William Coverly gave his slave boy Caesar his freedom, but “he is to serve my well beloved wife Maria Coverly as long as it shall require him to do so.”⁷⁷⁵ It was thus not a mere slip of the tongue when the terms “servant” and “slaves” were used interchangeably.⁷⁷⁶

7.3 “FREE CHRISTIAN” MEN AND WOMEN AND THE MAKING OF THE “PORTUGUESE” COMMUNITY

For slaves, the social trajectory from slavery to freedom often meant entrance into the “free Christian” and Portuguese community. Masters such as Roger Kinsey wished that his slaves, Scipio and Pompey, be christened in the Roman Catholic Church as a condition for their emancipation. A similar trend is noticeable in Chinsura. Several emancipated slaves had Lusophone names. When Nathalia Peres, Christina Rozario, Eleanora de Rosario or Rosa de Rosario gained their freedom, absorption into the Portuguese community presumably was a small step.⁷⁷⁷ Portuguese women often were referred to as “free” Portuguese women, signifying their passage from slavery to freedom in a society marked by household slavery. When Anna Cordosa appeared in the Mayors court as a witness, she was specifically asked “to whom she

⁷⁷⁴ Will of George Penuse, 1736, P/154/40 (1736 bundle), 4-5.

⁷⁷⁵ Will of William Coverly, 1751, P/154/46 (3rd bundle), 36-37.

⁷⁷⁶ Will of George Petty, 1728. Petty mentions his “servants” Marcella and Maria, to who he promised freedom and 50 pagoda and 20 pagoda respectively, P/154/40 (1728 bundle), 14-15.

⁷⁷⁷ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1694, 124; P/154/40, 10; P/154/50, will of John Knox, 1758; Rosa de Rosario emancipated by the Fiscaal CloannesThielen in 1732, 1.11.06.11/1696, 255

belonged,” to which she answered “she was her own mistress.”⁷⁷⁸ As is noted in various manumission documents, wills and inventories, slaves in the European households were able to create and maintain their own families. Such families included not only man, woman and children, but also multigenerational members, such as grandparents and grandchildren. [refer to the Emancipation table] In several instances, they were both listed and manumitted as families. Cornelis de Jonge, the director of VOC in Bengal, on the eve of his departure in 1743, manumitted five such families.⁷⁷⁹ Since kinlessness is possibly the greatest bane that separated a slave from a free person, the presence of family at the moment of emancipation no doubt made the task of blending into free society far easier. Whether or not they became part of the Portuguese community is hard to tell, however, but as free Christians with families and Portuguese names, it is very likely that they were absorbed into the community, especially at a time when natal ties to patria and extra-local nexus of Christian power over the Portuguese community in Bengal were declining.

[Refer to the Manumission List in Appendix B]

Proselytizing activities by the various ecclesiastical missions contributed towards the expansion of the Christian population in the region. As has already been noted, such activities had started in the sixteenth century, primarily in the Eastern delta region. From the early eighteenth century, the “brown” Portuguese in Hugli emerged as a numerically strong group over whom the Augustinian mission tried in vain to have any form of moral control.⁷⁸⁰ The baptismal records of the Church of Our Lady de Rozario (Igreja da Nossa Senhora de Rozario) in Calcutta in 1698 reveal that out of the 487 people baptized, none were of

⁷⁷⁸P/154/46, Proceedings of 27 Feb, 1746/47.

⁷⁷⁹ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1693, 376.

⁷⁸⁰ Flores, “Relic or Springboard? A note on the ‘rebirth’ of Portuguese Hughli, ca 1632-1820,” 389

Portuguese origins. Yet all took up Portuguese-sounding names. The native origins of these people were listed as “Gentio/a,” “Mogo,” “Mouros” and “Telenga.” The paternity of certain converts remained unknown (*pais incognito*). The age of the baptized varied between a few months and twenty-five years. From the records of 1769, one can also note the practice of baptism of slaves. The baptism took place in the house of the slave owner. The name of the master was mentioned, though the friar consciously ignored the name of the slave.⁷⁸¹ Conversion of slaves was a thorny issue in the late eighteenth century, as Indrani Chatterjee has noted. Presumably, the friar obliged the slave owner but avoided publicity of a still questionable practice.⁷⁸²

The Portuguese were the first European settlers in the region just as in the rest of Asia. The Portuguese presence in Asia was defined by both the “formal” Portuguese empire and the extra-imperial, “informal” or “shadow” empire.⁷⁸³ The formal presence consisted of the *casado* settlers and the people of the church who maintained their links with Goa, and the informal empire was marked by the so-called “renegades,” “rebels” and “footloose merchants or soldiers.”⁷⁸⁴ Right from the moment of imperial expansion in 1511, Afonso de Albuquerque decreed that Portuguese settlers in Asia could marry locally.⁷⁸⁵ Local marriages inevitably made the definition of the *casado* community a fluid one. Within a generation, the *casado* community was divided into the *mesticoes* (of mixed blood), *casticoes* and *Indiaticos* (born in Asia with one

⁷⁸¹ Mentioned “*cujo nome ignoro*” (whose name I ignore), HAG, Book no. 2760, 43

⁷⁸² HAG, Book. No. 2760

⁷⁸³ Winius, “The “Shadow Empire” of Goa in the Bay of Bengal”, *Itinerario*, Volume 7, Issue 2, July 1983, 83-101; Malyn Newitt, “Formal and Informal Empire in the History of Portuguese expansion”, *Portuguese Studies*, Vol. 17, Homage to Charles Boxer, (2001): 1-21; Leonard Andaya, “The “informal Portuguese Empire” and the Topasses in the Solor archipelago and Timor in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,” *Journal of South East Asian Studies*, 41, no. 3, (2010): 391-420.

⁷⁸⁴ Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia*, 261-283

⁷⁸⁵ J. J. A Campos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal* (Calcutta: Butterworth, 1919), 170-171

European parent) and the reinois (of pure European blood). From the mid-seventeenth century, certain Portuguese chroniclers also used the categories of black casado and the white casado, the black casado being described as the “native of the land.”

Creolization was thus inherent in creating even the official Portuguese communities. Furthermore, in the Bay of Bengal region, the boundaries between official and unofficial communities were often blurred. This region, infamous for the activities of military adventurers, pirates and renegades, often saw the casados sliding into the ranks of the footloose merchants or mercenaries.⁷⁸⁶ It was not only in Hugli that the Portuguese were concentrated; the eastward settlement of Bengal delta and subsequent urbanization under the local chieftains or zamindars from the late sixteenth century included a large number of Portuguese. Valued as military advisors, they were given extensive land grants in the Eastern deltas by these zamindars. Finally, the zamindars also encouraged missionary activities—performed by the Augustinians in Bengal—as they felt the word of God would have a moral influence on these rowdy bands of adventurers.⁷⁸⁷ Proselytizing activities cOxford University Pressled with mixed marriages further diluted the European element of the Portuguese settlements.

The Portuguese, expelled from Bengal by the Mughals in 1632, were again allowed to return the next year. Individual dreams/designs of reestablishing Portuguese imperial authority surfaced periodically, but the sense of any composite Portuguese community declined steadily from the end of the seventeenth century.⁷⁸⁸ The Portuguese in Asia thus did not quite become native. Even when they became important in the Mughal court, they remained a unique category of firangis. Similarly, the Asian Portuguese could not quite cross the gulf to becoming European

⁷⁸⁶ Winius, “The Shadow-Empire of Goa in the Bay of Bengal,” Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia*, 254

⁷⁸⁷ Ray, *Adventurers, Landowners and Rebels, c. 1575-c.1715*, (New Delhi: Manohar), 1998, 3-23

⁷⁸⁸ Flores, “Relic or Springboard? A note on the ‘rebirth’ of Portuguese Hughli, ca 1632-1820,” 381-395

Portuguese. This inability to cross boundaries to become European was felt all the more by self-conscious Asian Portuguese men as the colonial power of the EIC sunk its teeth deeper in the region. In a memorandum written in 1784 by George Germain, a Portuguese (or Portuguese descendant) residing in Calcutta, suggesting a resurrection of a Portuguese colony in Hugli with the help of the Portuguese crown, resented the racism he and his self-identified community faced at EIC head quarters, where the English at every opportunity “treat the Portuguese with indifference (...) as they always distinguish them according to colour and only love the money they have.”⁷⁸⁹

Germain was evidently a man of means. His sense of community at best included the mestizos who worked in Calcutta as interpreters and agents, but people living in extreme poverty in Bandel, as mentioned by an Augustinian superior in a letter to the Viceroy in Goa a year later, fell outside the pale of Germain’s community consciousness. In the early eighteenth century, an Augustinian friar noted that there were 25,000 Christian Portuguese in Bengal, most of them being “brown” Portuguese.⁷⁹⁰ It is no wonder then that in 1825, a friar observed, “Most of them [Christians called Portuguese] have no more relation by birth, or otherwise, to the Portuguese or to any other European nation than to the Tartar Calmucks. They are partly composed of half-castes, the illegitimate offspring of Europeans and a few descendants of the Portuguese; whilst the majority of them are the offspring of Hindoos of the lowest rank, who after learning some one of the European dialects put on a hat, boots and the European dress and endeavour to copy the European manners.”⁷⁹¹ This process of becoming “Portuguese” has also

⁷⁸⁹ Flores, “Relic or Springboard? A note on the ‘rebirth’ of Portuguese Hughli, ca 1632-1820,” 392

⁷⁹⁰ Stefan Halikowski-Smith, *Creolization and Diaspora in the Portuguese Indies: The Social World of Ayutthaya, 1640-1720* (Leiden: Brill, 2011) 8

⁷⁹¹ J.A. Dubois, *State of Christianity in India*, (London, 1823), 75-76; Quoted in Campos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal*, 184

been noted by Remco Raben in his study on Ceylon.⁷⁹² This multitude of men and, especially, women in the provisioning trades—tavern keepers, housekeepers, concubines and foot soldiers—who in all probability were not pure-bred Portuguese and in most cases, people of limited means, formed the multitude of so-called “Portuguese” community, which I will discuss here.

The Portuguese community was integrated in the social milieu of the company settlements through their work. For Portuguese males, a steady source of employment was the armies of the VOC and EIC. Though the VOC recruited them intermittently, the Portuguese soldiers formed an integral part of the EIC standing army in Calcutta. These soldiers were paid Rs. 5, or half the wages of the European soldiers. Although they were most often listed as “Portuguese,” sometimes the term “black Portuguese” was used. Since the wages remained the same for both the “Portuguese” and the “black Portuguese,” one can conclude that such categorization was at best casual. There are stray instances of the Portuguese men employed in other maritime trade-related work as well. As early as in 1677, a “poore Portuguese [sic] sexton” was employed in Hugli to provision for the prisoners of the EIC.⁷⁹³ They also worked as pilots. In 1663, the EIC employed a Portuguese pilot, Pedro de Lauro, in Hugli.⁷⁹⁴ In 1746, Francisco Carneiro was working as a pilot in Calcutta for both the EIC and the native merchants.⁷⁹⁵ In 1728, Francisco Piraro, also called Francisco lascar, petitioned the Mayors’ Court along with two other lascars to complain against Capt. Forbes for not having paid their wages for four months.⁷⁹⁶ A few years later in 1737, there is mention of a “Portuguese sarang” living in the

⁷⁹²Remco Raben, *Batavia and Colombo: The Ethnic and Spatial Order of Two Colonial Cities, 1600 -1800* (Phd. dissertation, University of Leiden, 1996), 131, 282

⁷⁹³ G/20/1. May 18, 1677

⁷⁹⁴ G/20/1, October 13, 1663

⁷⁹⁵ P/154/47, proceedings of March 18, 1746/47.

⁷⁹⁶ P/155/10, proceedings of 29 June and July 6, 1728.

VOC settlement around Bazar Mirzapur, not far from Chinsura.⁷⁹⁷ As lascars, or Indian seamen, and sarangs, or the recruitment agent or head of the lascars, these Portuguese men blurred the boundaries between native and non-native.

Women of the Portuguese community were extremely visible in the company settlements through their service as care-givers in various capacities. Bowrey in the 1670s noticed in Hugli that provisioning trades were run by the Portuguese, a significant number of whom were women. In the early eighteenth century, the Portuguese women continued to be important in provisioning and care-giving trade at both Chinsura and Hugli. In Calcutta, Domingo Ash is a unique example of an enterprising Portuguese woman. Domingo Ash was the most important supplier of arak to the EIC ships for at least forty years.⁷⁹⁸ An arak distiller herself, Domingo Ash also maintained her own punch-house. To add to her profits, she was a money-lender and a landlady on the side.⁷⁹⁹ In Chinsura too, Portuguese landladies were not rare.⁸⁰⁰ Beginning in the late 1680s, Portuguese women were prominent as tavern keepers.⁸⁰¹

As a traveler in 1727 observed, the punch-houses doubled as lodgings in the early settlements⁸⁰² as tavern keepers let out rooms to lodgers. Often poor European soldiers and sailors were the lodgers, and they shared rooms, each occupying one

⁷⁹⁷ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1679B, 761.

⁷⁹⁸ Starting from 1704, Domingo Ash's license for distilling arrack was renewed until 1743/4, P/1/5-P/1/16.

⁷⁹⁹ In 1727/28 she lent out a considerable sum of Rs. 200 to a ship merchant, Sheikh Benaik, P/155/10, (unfoliated), proceedings of Feb 1, 1727/28; In the same year she was renting out a house for Rs. 10/month. P/155/10, proceedings of March 16, 1727/28. Another example of Portuguese woman in the moneylending business is Dominga Araujo who listed her creditors in her will, 1760, P/154/50 (unfoliated).

⁸⁰⁰ On 18 June 1734, a bookkeeper, Nicolaas Wendel as a tenant and Nathalia Raposa, a free Portuguese woman as the landlady, signed a lease for a whole year, renewable on the willingness of both parties involved. TNSA 1.11.06.11/1677B, 278.

⁸⁰¹ In 1686 in Chinsura, VOC 1422, ff1450r-1451v; in 1733 in Chinsura, TNSA 1.11.06.11/1677A, 255-282; in 1743 in Chinsura, TNSA 1.11.06.11/1693, 347

⁸⁰² MssEur B 162, Account by Judith Weston of a voyage to Madras in East Indiamen, 6r.

bed.⁸⁰³ Room-sharing was an old practice amongst European soldiers in Bengal. Linschoten in his travels to Bengal in the early seventeenth century noted that ten to twelve Portuguese soldiers together rented a house and lived together. Each of these houses had a cOxford University Pressle of slaves or Indian servants who would prepare the food and wash the clothes.⁸⁰⁴

Barring a few, such as Dominga Ash, servicing the European men was the primary source of income for these women. Even for women who accumulated wealth, reproductive labor remained the primary or foundational source of income. Several of these women worked as housekeepers. Durba Ghosh has argued that “housekeeper” was a term signifying conjugal domestic arrangements of the European men.⁸⁰⁵ As always, “conjuality” mystifies the many dimensions of domestic labor. Looking after men in sickness and health was the task of these housekeepers. For example, Leonara van Mandhar took care of Roger Berenaart, the Director of the VOC in Bengal, in his illness.⁸⁰⁶ Captain Herbert, before his death in 1715, left “nurse money” for a woman.⁸⁰⁷ As Lodewick Demurry’s housekeeper, Rosa de Rosario, who was also his sexual partner, “made the punch and dressed the victuals” for him. When he fell sick at Culpy, Rosa de Rosario went from Calcutta to look after him.⁸⁰⁸ Phillipa Gomes was thanked by Richard Williams for the “cares she took of my daughter Sarah and self in my illness.”⁸⁰⁹ Child-rearing in addition to nursing sick men was thus Phillipa’s work. Jan Christoffel Wijnman, a sergeant in Chinsura, was looked after in his illness by another Rosa de Rosario in 1733.⁸¹⁰ Rosa

⁸⁰³Examples of tavern keepers from Chinsura include Anthonica da Silva (1733) TNSA 1.11.06.11/ 1677A, 255-282; a woman named Lucia (1743) 1.11.06.11/1693, 347; in Calcutta, Alsida de Rosario, P/155/73, 58.

⁸⁰⁴ Tapan Ray Chaudhuri, *Bengal Under Akbar and Jahangir*, 241-242

⁸⁰⁵Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India*, 110.

⁸⁰⁶ TNSA 1.11.06.11/ 1677A, 456

⁸⁰⁷ P/1/3, 112v.

⁸⁰⁸ P/154/46 (unfoliated), Proceedings of 17 February 1746/7

⁸⁰⁹ Will of Richard Williams, 1724, P/1/6, 43r-v.

⁸¹⁰ TNSA 1.11.06.11/ 1677A, 392

de Rosario was also his sexual partner with whom he had a child, Joanna.⁸¹¹ Cornelis van Schie, a thirty-three-year-old man, expressed his gratitude to Sicca de Esperance Rosairo for her “help and service...during his stay, made contingent by his sickness and otherwise.”⁸¹² Augusto Guilherme, a Portuguese resident of Calcutta, acknowledged Francisca de Rozario’s “diligent care for [his] infirmity.” (*diligente attenciao dentro minhas infirmadades*).⁸¹³ Some of these housekeepers were paid monthly wages, as in the case of Francisca de Rozario.⁸¹⁴ A lucky few, such as Leonara van Mandhar, inherited Rs. 10,000 from their masters, but the majority of these women, such as Rosa de Rosario and Sicca de Esperance de Rosairo of Chinsura, were rewarded parsimoniously with the clothes, furniture or “other leftover goods” of the masters after their death or departure for Europe as an “acknowledgement of her service”.

Alexander Hamilton, during his travels in Bengal in the early eighteenth century, summed up his impression of the oldest Portuguese quarters, Bandel, in Hugli:

The Bandel, at present, deals in no sort of commodities, but what are in request at the Court of Venus.⁸¹⁵

Providing sexual services formed the foremost work of the Portuguese or free Christian women of the settlements. The practice of taking native women as concubines by European men was rare in this period, in contrast to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Since deep intrusion into the Indian heartland was not possible in this period, which would later enable Europeans to purchase female consorts, the Europeans had to rely on the women originating

⁸¹¹ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1677B, 241.

⁸¹² TNSA 1.11.06.11/1677A, 179

⁸¹³ P/154/40, 1736 bundle. A Mrs. Isaac, a woman not identified as Portuguese was employed by a tailor, Robert Bennell in Calcutta in 1746, P/154/45, 6-7

⁸¹⁴ Also evident from the will of a senior alderman, Holland Goddard, in 1753. He left two months wages for a list of servants including his housekeeper in his will. P/154/50, bundle for 1753.

⁸¹⁵ Alexander Hamilton, *A new account of the East Indies*, 21

from their Indian Ocean outposts for such services.⁸¹⁶ Native women were thus present in the European settlements as construction workers and domestic servants. Except for three instances, they never figured as domestic partners of the Europeans.⁸¹⁷ Not only financial support for the duration of co-habitation but often future remuneration could be expected in exchange for such services. Harty Hart, a mariner (presumably, a ship captain) assigned in his will 500 arcot rupees to Domingo Almedo as a token “for her good services.” That her service was sexual in nature is confirmed by Hart’s acknowledgement of paternity of a child “begotten on the body of Domingo Almedo.”⁸¹⁸ Similarly, Catharina de Rosario inherited 300 madras rupees from Gerritz, a pilot in Chinsura, for her companionship.⁸¹⁹ Mary de Rosario, though referred to as a “servant” and a “spinster,” was bestowed with clothes by her master, a senior Alderman at Calcutta. It is very likely that he maintained a sexual relationship with her.⁸²⁰ Since the settlement between these women and European men was that of provisional concubinage, they were referred to as “my woman in house,”⁸²¹ “woman with whom I have long cohabited,”⁸²² “woman who now lives with me and serves me,”⁸²³ and “my servant now living with me.”⁸²⁴

⁸¹⁶ For hinterland of women slaves purchased in late eighteenth century, Indrani Chatterjee, , “Colouring Subalternity”

⁸¹⁷ Nicholas Rowe in his will, 1731, left for the maintenance for “a Moor woman” Meddo and her son an allowance of 5 Madras rupees, P/154/40 (1731 bundle), 9-11; Will of John Vass, 1752, mentioned a native servant Meapa, who bore him a son. P/154/50 (1752 bundle), 19-20.; Will of Samuel Spencer, Gunner, 1741 mentioned a woman Chicka with whom he had a child, P/154/42, 9-10

⁸¹⁸ P/154/50, 6th bundle, 6-7

⁸¹⁹ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1679A, 101

⁸²⁰ Will of Holland Goddard, 1753, P/154/50 (3rd bundle), 19-24

⁸²¹ Will of Alexander Dagleish, 1728, P/154/40;w751, will of Thomas Stables, 1751, P/154/50 (2nd bundle), 1; will of James Dunkly, 1753, P/154/50 (2nd bundle), 28

⁸²² Will of John Carpenter Marshall, 1733, P/154/40 (1733 bundle), 6v; will of Edward Ridge, 1759, P/154/50 (4th bundle), 8-9.

⁸²³ Will of George Keadie, 1752, P/154/50, 5; will of Frances Brook, 1740, P/154/41, 1

⁸²⁴ Will of Francis Wilmsley, 1760, P/154/50 (4th bundle), 15; in addition, “my girl” is an oft-used term as pointed out by Chatterjee and Ghosh. Indrani Chatterjee, , “Colouring Subalternity”; Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India*

Any information regarding the remuneration of these women comes from the wills of European men. Though the wills of Holland Godard and Augusto Guilhermo indicate an arrangement of monthly wage payment for their housekeepers, it is very difficult to say whether such practice was universal. For sexual partners, one might expect that these women's upkeep for the period of cohabitation was the man's responsibility, and in fact, what they gained from household work, as sex workers and/or domestic servants, can be found in the men's wills. Catherine Christine, the partner of Henry Dallibar, the commander of the Patna fleet, was to inherit his house and compound by the riverbank.⁸²⁵ Susanna de Rosario was left with half a bundle of sail-cloth and 150 arcot rupees by a sergeant Hendrik Jansz in 1737.⁸²⁶ Lodewick Gits left all of his "small furniture" for the free Portuguese woman, Clara de Rosario.⁸²⁷ The quartermaster Gerrit Jeggers in 1740 left a sum of 200 Madras rupees along with two slaves, Flora and Rosetta, and all of his furniture for his housekeeper, a Portuguese woman, Helmont, living in Chinsura.⁸²⁸ Serina, a free Christian woman, born and brought up in Chinsura, received half the legacy of deceased pilot Christiaan Paulus.⁸²⁹ John Guthrie left his house and slaves to Christianade Rozario and a deposit of 600 rupees, the interest of which she was to enjoy during her entire lifetime.⁸³⁰ Hendrik de Coster left with Cecilia de Pereira two slave women and all of his furniture.⁸³¹ Allvina de Rozario, the housekeeper of Joseph Carrom, a sergeant in the EIC army, inherited almost all of his belongings.⁸³² Another housekeeper, Mary Dottison, working for gunner Daniel Pain was promised all of the furniture of her master and an additional 50 arcot

⁸²⁵ P/1/5, 255r

⁸²⁶ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1694, 62

⁸²⁷ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1677A, 45-47

⁸²⁸ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1694, 741

⁸²⁹ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1715, 126

⁸³⁰ Will of John Guthrie, 1728, P/154/40 (part I), 28-29.

⁸³¹ Will of Hendrik Coster, 1739, P/154/40 (1739 bundle), 3-4.

⁸³² Will of Joseph Carrom, 1743, P/154/40 (1743 bundle), 1

rupees. Clarendia Rosario inherited all of the furniture, crockery and a female slave, Poncheca, from her master, with whom she cohabited. For her maintenance, he also left an additional 1000 arcot rupees, the interest of which she was to enjoy every month or once in four months.⁸³³ Pamela, the servant of the Calcutta merchant William Bucknall, inherited 60 Madras rupees⁸³⁴ Louisa Pereira, servant of the English merchant Thomas Feake at Dhaka, received 100 arcot rupees for her services.⁸³⁵

As “free” women, the Portuguese or free Christian women performed the same work as their enslaved sisters did. The free Christian and Portuguese community in this sense must be understood as on the same continuum as slavery: it was an outgrowth of the practices of slavery in early company settlements. However, there were two major differences of being a free Christian or Portuguese female care-giver. First, through the creation and maintenance of taverns, lodging houses and brothels, these women were able to commercialize household labor. By removing the caregiving work from within the patriarchal unit of a family, these women offered such affective services purely as commodities. Secondly, for almost all of these women, reproductive labor was premised on contractual relationships. Contractual relationships, furthermore, reveal that households in the company settlements were cemented through labor over and above any affective ties.

However, the difference between contract and coercion was a very fine one and often blurry. In England, from the middle of the eighteenth century, there was a marked move towards contractual relationships between household employers and their domestic servants. Such contracts, or “poor settlements,” formed as a dual result of Christian charity and the capitalist

⁸³³ Will of Francis Wilmsley, 1760, P/154/50, 6th bundle, 15

⁸³⁴ Will of William Bucknall, 1741, P/154/42, 2

⁸³⁵ Will of Thomas Feake, 1750, P/154/49, 6.

work ethic, was often contested in courts.⁸³⁶ Examples for similar contractual relations between household workers and domestic (especially female) servants are few and far between, however. From the few examples available, it is clear that contracts were verbal arrangements. Ultimately, female servants depended on the munificence of the men and their steadfastness to their promises. Rosa de Rosario's appeal to Mayors' Court demanding her share of inheritance of her client/master, Lodewick Demurry's belongings reveals the contractual nature of such arrangements. Six years before his death, Lodewick Demurry moved in with Rosa de Rosario. Her expenses were borne by him, and he was heard saying multiple times, "If I go to Europe or marry or dye I will provide for my girl." Catherine de Rosario, Anna Cordosa and Maria de Rosario, who were all close to Rosa and who also worked as housekeepers, confirmed the verbal promise made by Lodewick Demurry.⁸³⁷ The contractual nature of Lodewick's relationship with Rosa, however, did not rule out coercion. There is strong evidence that she often times felt pressured to perform her work. Anna Cordosa, Rosa's friend, was asked by the Calcutta Court if Rosa de Rosario ever quarreled. Anna observed that Rosa and Lodewick had differences and that Rosa "came and lived with deponent (Anna Cordosa) for seven or eight days and then she went back and lived with Lodewick Demurry." The difficulties of concubinage as well as Rosa's inability to perform it without complaint contributed to the court's decision to deprive her of any claim to Demurry's property. Finally, even though the arrangement between Lodewick Demurry and Rosa de Rosario seems to have been a contractual one, obviously, nothing was guaranteed.

⁸³⁶ Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 66-86, 131-145.

⁸³⁷P/154/46, Proceedings of 17 February and 27 February 1746/47.

7.4 LIMITS OF PATERNALISM

There were limits to the paternalism of the European masters. Indrani Chatterjee has pointed out that the increasing differences between indigenous and European household slavery were already evident from the late eighteenth century. Whereas slavery in the indigenous noble families was an avenue for kinship formation, the native slave remained an alienated subject within the European family. Slaves were chattel and not kin. Reproductive labor was generally performed outside marital/familial bonds and was fairly transactional in nature. As this chapter shows, the distinction was evident from the earliest days of company settlements in the region. This was not just true for the English settlements; even though the VOC followed an allegedly more inclusive model for family formation in their outposts in Asia, in Bengal, women providing sexual/domestic services were alienated as household workers in Dutch settlements. The most important markers of difference between indigenous and company settlements were the implications of the act of child-bearing. In indigenous households, child-bearing provided the most secure means for women to attain positions of importance within the harem, irrespective of their enslaved status. In line with the conventions of European patriarchy, however, guardianship of the children was almost never left to the mothers. Often, men in the European settlements were appointed as guardians. Even more often, money was left for the children, but not for the mothers. Though the Portuguese woman from Chinsura might have secured some financial security since Jan Cornelisz had left his entire estate to their child who lived with her, she personally did not inherit a single penny.⁸³⁸ Similarly, Rosa de Rosario could claim ownership

⁸³⁸ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1677A, 570.

over Anne Wits' legacy only if all of her children died before her.⁸³⁹ While Thomas Hawke left 200 madras rupees to the mother of his children, his former slave Sophia, he left his house and the rest of his belongings to his children. After the death of the children, the property was to go to his mother or sister, but not to Sophia.⁸⁴⁰ While a provision of 200 pounds was made by Charles English for his "illegitimate" son, John English, no mention was made of the mother of the child,⁸⁴¹ and while Magdalena, the mother of Ensign Gulielmus, was left with 200 rupees, the child inherited one thousand rupees with the further stipulation that if the child died, then the money would go to Gulielmus' sister.⁸⁴²

In certain cases, child-bearing brought no change in the conditions of work. Jan van Latum freed his child Turkenij de Rosario, born to a slave-woman. Though Turkenij got her freedom "by dint of her birth," no provision was made to free the mother or to leave her with any money.⁸⁴³ Indrani Chatterjee has shown that most of these children were taken away from their mothers. Though not the predominant practice yet, snatching children away from mothers was known at this time. For example, George Petty made sure that his unborn child by his slave Marcella should ultimately be taken away from her.⁸⁴⁴ Charles English's son, John English, was taken away from his natural mother and kept in the care of an acquaintance, Thomas Boddam.⁸⁴⁵ Anna Baptista's child, Thomas Cauty, was to be taken away by Thomas' father's brother-in-law when he was six years old to be brought up in Britain away from his mother in

⁸³⁹ TNSA 1.11.06.11/ 1679A, 98

⁸⁴⁰ P/154/40 (1728 bundle), 19-20. Anna Hendrik the mother of John Daniell's children shared a similar fate. P/145/45, 5.

⁸⁴¹ Will of Charles English, 1756, P/154/40 (6th bundle), 7

⁸⁴² P/1/4,414v-415r

⁸⁴³ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1696, 217

⁸⁴⁴ P/154/40, 14-15.

⁸⁴⁵ P/154/40 (6th bundle), 7

Dhaka.⁸⁴⁶ Elizabeth Pain, who had the means to look after her children, had them taken away from her. She made provisions in her will for her three natural children who were taken away from her and sent to England, referring to them as “illegitimate.” Two of them shared the same surname, while the third had a different one, suggesting that the paternity of the children was different. Presumably at the will of the fathers, she had no claim over their guardianship.

While many slave-women remained slaves regardless of their maternity, most enslaved women bearing their masters’ children were promised their freedom after the death of their masters. However, such a waiting period was a major predicament in their path to emancipation as some of them died before their masters. Flora, who bore a child for Adam Dawson, boatswain of the EIC living in Calcutta, never lived to see any gains of her child-bearing.⁸⁴⁷ John Rennald in his will promised his slave Maria 100 rupees and her freedom as she was the natural mother of his son. Later, he made amendments to his will as Maria had passed away. She did not live long enough to see her freedom or her money.⁸⁴⁸

The subject position of freed women living in sexual relationships with company officials differed from that of the wife in monogamous European marriages. Such cohabitation, though extremely common, was deemed “illegitimate” in the eyes of European, Christian customary laws of marriage, thus, these women were not seen as equal individuals in transactional capacity. The affective nature of reproductive work made these women not just workers but also members of the second sex. Thus, like the European women, they too were considered by the company servants as “children,” incapable of taking care of themselves. Even though Roger Bereneert left a generous amount of money to his nurse, Leonara, the Orphanage at Batavia was appointed as

⁸⁴⁶ P/154/47,9-10

⁸⁴⁷ P/154/40 (1733 bundle), 1r-2r.

⁸⁴⁸ P/154/45, 7

the trustee of the money. As a “minor,” Leonara could exercise no discretion in using the money for her maintenance. Leonara, though twenty-six years old, “required supervision,” Bereneert judged, until the time she was married.⁸⁴⁹ And while Holland Goddard, Senior Alderman of the Mayors’ Court, left 5,000 rupees for his own concubine, he added:

The said Mary D’ Rosario is by me deemed and hereby declared a minor and as a minor is to enjoy the benefit of the produce of the said 5,000 rupees at residue of my estate etc. in like manner and no otherwise than as a minor might should or could enjoy the same[,] free of all incumbrances as the law prescribes, supposing the minor to be of 10 years of age incapable of giving awayalienating any part or parcel thereof by the Mortgage, bail or security, contracting, charging, perverting or appropriating the same for any use or purpose otherwise than for her real personal use and service and therefore and henceforth[sic] until the said Mary D’ Rosario shall attain to the age of 99 yrs I will and desire that the said 5,000 rupees on residue of my estate etc. by the said William Nixon, his executors or assigns as soon possible after my decease be put to interest ... and the interest to be paid unto the said Mary D’ Rosario monthly as an allowance and maintainance [sic] during her natural life and after the principal sum to revert unto and be revived and accounted for as part of my estate and by my executor for the time being to be received and disposed of.⁸⁵⁰

A woman of twenty-six or ninety-nine could effortlessly become “minors” to the company establishment in Bengal.

Any hope of gain was made even more fragile by the European man’s potential dissatisfaction. Reasons for dissatisfaction were often arbitrary. Mary Dottison could inherit her part of her master’s property only if “she behaves herself in a proper manner till the time of my decease and not otherwise.” Whether Mary pleased her master we do not know, but from Rosa de Rosario’s case, it is clear that often such hopes were frustrated. Four men, Harman Hendrikson, John van der Hayden, Jan Carl and Samuel Bailey, happened to have heard Lodewick Demurry, Rosa de Rosario’s master, say on his death bed that he would not leave

⁸⁴⁹ TNSA 1.11.06.11/ 1677A, 259

⁸⁵⁰ P/154/50 (4th bundle), 19-24.

anything to his girl “who hath poisoned me.” Based on the evidence of the four men and ignoring the counter evidence provided by Rosa de Rosario and her three housekeeper friends, the Mayor’s Court of Calcutta, with Holland Goddard as one of the Alderman present at the hearing, decided to hand over Lodewick Demurry’s entire property to the aforementioned Harman Hendrikson to be divided amongst himself, Jan Carl and John van der Hayden.⁸⁵¹ Whether cutting Rosa from the inheritance was the death wish of Lodewick Demurry or not, we do not know, but that the will of the men of the settlement triumphed arbitrarily is very clear. No matter what the female household worker expected or how she planned her access to wealth, she would be always at the mercy of the whims of her masters.

Some of the male children of the “free” population of the household workers, after being taken away from their mothers, were sent to England to obtain an education. The possibility of social mobility for the women of the free Christian population of Bengal meant marriage with Europeans. In 1688, the EIC allowed their men in India to marry Roman Catholic women in the settlements. Such marriages were also allowed in the Dutch settlement. In 1734, Leonara van Mandhar thus married a VOC sailmaker from Rijswijk, Jan van Boekholt.⁸⁵² Adriana Mendes’ daughter was married to Christopher de Wind, a cashier of the VOC. Marriages, though allowed, were extremely difficult to come by, such as in Calcutta. The few existing examples show that marriage did not improve the status of the “free” women of the Indian Ocean creole. One James Kennie was married to a Maria Texeira. Abusing her as “a common whore” in his will, Kennie left her 3 arcot rupees.⁸⁵³ Hamilton’s description of the “mustice wife” of a seaman had similar

⁸⁵¹ P/154/46, proceedings of 17 and 27 February 1746

⁸⁵² 1.11.06.11/1677B, 63

⁸⁵³ Will of James Kennie, 1757, P/154/50 (3rd bundle), 3-4

overtones. In the absence of the seaman, she was “a little inclined to lewdness.”⁸⁵⁴ The sexuality of the free Christian and Portuguese women was feared even in marriage

The patriarchy of company settlements in Bengal was not yet racialized. At times, however, patriarchal anxiety could attain racial overtones. In 1746, Robert Bennell, a tailor, decided to leave 1,000 silver rupees for his housekeeper, Mrs. Isaac, and his unborn child, whom he had fathered with an unnamed slave. Bennell specified that his offspring was to receive the money, “provided that the child by its colour appears to be mine, but if black, then the whole interest [is] to go to said Mrs. Isaac.”⁸⁵⁵ Such conditions were also echoed in the will of George Keadie, a ship captain, in 1752. He was ready to assume paternity of his unborn child on the body of his concubine Ann de Rozario on the condition “that the child now in her womb should when born be white,” and if the child “be born black then and in such case I give and bequeath all my estate to my said god son Richard Bowler.”⁸⁵⁶ Anxiety over the unborn child’s whiteness or blackness, it seems, had more to do with anxiety over paternity than on the racial status of the child. Again, patriarchal anxiety about the woman’s sexuality – in this case, that the unmarried woman partner could have sexual relations with other men – resulted in such conditions in the wills.

One should be cautious about overemphasizing the racial divide between the household workers and the Europeans in the settlement. As has already been argued, there was no stable and well-defined European-ness in the company settlements. Cases of assertion of white privilege are few, for example. Moreover, Portuguese inhabitants sometimes pleaded that they were “foreigners” and so were granted a jury, half of which were “foreigners.” Such demands

⁸⁵⁴ Hamilton, 10.

⁸⁵⁵ P/154/45, 6-7.

⁸⁵⁶ P/154/50 (2nd bundle), 5.

indicate that the “Portuguese” could still fashion themselves as “outsiders,” thereby differentiating themselves from the enslaved and free Christians. Moreover, the fact that they were granted such demands indicate that the EIC still held the “Portuguese” in somewhat high esteem. However, such cases were rare. People with Portuguese names often faced a jury chosen by the company officials at their whim. During a drunken brawl in October 1733, an EIC soldier, Thomas Brewer, warned Antonio Vaso, a Portuguese inhabitant of Calcutta, that he “must not lift his hand against a white man.”⁸⁵⁷ At his trial, Antonio Vaso was found guilty of manslaughter but not of willful murder. Thomas Brewer’s assertion of his whiteness was not defended with any privilege in Oyer and Terminer’s Court in Calcutta. In fact, this lack of solidified racial identity vis-à-vis the ruling class of the settlement accentuated the creole nature of the settlement.

As Ira Berlin has warned, the paternalism that existed in a society with slaves should in no way be used to cover the brutality of the practice. The disciplining of household workers was one practice that belies such a temptation as the disciplining of slaves and servants often devolved into physical violence. As early as in 1691, the Sutanuti factory had to deal with a case where, on suspicion of theft, a European master, Mr. Richard Metcalf, had beaten his servant so severely that he died five days later.⁸⁵⁸ Generally, unless the servant died, there was never a reason for reporting domestic violence. However, if a European disciplined a servant, trespassing the authority of the servant’s master, the matter was promptly reported to higher authorities. On May 30 1698, Nathan Halsey complained against Richard Hartopp, who had beaten Halsey’s servant and “spoken unbecoming language” just because the servant happened to cross into

⁸⁵⁷ P/155/73, 51

⁸⁵⁸ G/7/1, Consultation of Saturday 21 November 1791.

Hartopp's compound. Hartopp was fined Rs. 5.⁸⁵⁹ Thus, beating one's own servant was deemed only natural, whereas trespassing the patriarch's jurisdiction was a crime. In 1706, when the Calcutta Council wanted to arrest the servant of a Chaplain, the furious Chaplain locked up his servant, refusing to hand him over to the government.⁸⁶⁰ Even the government's right over a servant was disputed.

The disposition of the patriarchs in the settlements was thus quite similar to both free Christian/ Portuguese women and the enslaved women. Despite the apparent availability of upward mobility to the enslaved women, their fate, as determined by the patriarchy of the European settlement, altered little. Tavern keepers such as Anthonica da Silva were often perceived by their neighbors as "whores," for example.⁸⁶¹ The taverns were also sites of extreme violence. The sailors and soldiers, the customers of these women, were seemingly always embroiled in fights amongst themselves, and the women were often assaulted during such drunken brawls. For example, in 1686, Abraham, a gunner of the VOC, and a mate he had known from his previous ship were enjoying their drinks at a tavern not far from the EIC factory in Hugli. For some unknown reason, in the course of the first drink, Abraham's friend struck the barmaid, a Portuguese woman, in her face.⁸⁶² The ugliest form of assault, however, was obviously rape. On October 10, 1719, Michael Cameron and John Massey, mates of two EIC ships, broke into the house of two Portuguese women, Joanna Averiss and Maria Rodriguez, presumably tavern keepers, and gagged and tied two minor girls and then raped them. The older girl, Sabina, was a nine-year-old slave, and the younger one, Biviana, daughter of Joanna Averiss, was five. Biviana, bleeding profusely, was seriously injured. Cameron and Massey were

⁸⁵⁹ G/7/3, Consultation of Monday May 30, 1798.

⁸⁶⁰ P/1/1, 297r-v

⁸⁶¹ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1677A, 143

⁸⁶² VOC 1422, 1450r-1451v.

punished with thirty-nine lashes by rattan on their bare backs.⁸⁶³ In contrast, when Mundoo, Hashim, Peru and Munshiram were convicted of burglary in the house of William Barwell, for stealing goods worth a little over four hundred and fifty rupees, they were all given death sentences.⁸⁶⁴ Thus, Joanna and Biviana's rapes first of all reveal the perils of being female household workers on company grounds. For no other grOxford University Presss of workers discussed in this dissertation was the personal security in the workplace so adversely compromised.(except that sadly, we are learning more and more about rapes of boys, which is reported even less often than rapes of girls.) Secondly, as victims of the same crime, Joanna and Biviana's fate bridged the social difference between slavery and freedom. The difference between their social status in the settlement was one that of degree and not of kind, as in any society with slaves. Abused female workers catering to the domestic needs of European men were exploited and marginalized in a similar way, thus putting these women in the larger composite grOxford University Press of settlement household workers.

7.5 SELF-MAKING OF THE HOUSEHOLD WORKERS

Slaves resisted in different ways for their own paths to freedom. Freedom was not always bestowed from above through the masters' manumission documents or provisions in the wills. Historiography on the social world of Indian Ocean slavery is yet very underdeveloped. Edward Alpers in his very well-known article on slave resistance in the Indian Ocean world mentions that

⁸⁶³ p/1/4, 140r-v.

⁸⁶⁴ p/155/72, 51

in the South Asian context, there is very little evidence of resistance amongst slaves.⁸⁶⁵ However, the enslaved population in Bengal in the pre-colonial company settlements provide a very different picture. Slaves were no passive sufferers of the household. Poisoning their masters was apparently one kind of response to captivity among female slaves. In 1712, a slave woman of a free burgher of Chinsura, Jacques Leloeu, was caught conspiring to poison her master and his wife. After she confessed, the Hugli council of VOC hanged her to death.⁸⁶⁶ The killing of masters was a strategy adopted by many slaves. Such incidents indicate the contradictions of household work, revealing on the one hand, the displeasure of the slaves with their masters, and on the other, the severity with which authorities crushed such responses. On November 19, 1739, September van Mandhaar, a slave of a junior merchant, killed his master and injured one of his master's palanquin bearers. He was apprehended and sentenced to the rack. Upon his death, his body was to be thrown into the Ganga.⁸⁶⁷

Among the slave population of Bengal, there is no evidence of the practice of “running amok” - a well-known strategy of collective resistance amongst slaves from South East Asia. However, there were signs that ties with practices of their places of origin were not all dead. In December 1755, a few gold daggers and chains and “Malay witch craft papers” were found in a bundle in the quarters of November van Bonne, a former slave of Alexander Jacob Jan, an Armenian merchant in Chinsura. November was presumably suspected of attacking his former master, although he emphasized that he had “no thoughts of harming anyone.” The papers, he claimed, were his amulet for “conservation of his health.” Such talismans, foreign to both the companies and to Bengal, thus made their rounds amongst the slaves of Chinsura. Moreover, a

⁸⁶⁵ Edward Alpers, “Flight to Freedom: Escape from Slavery among Bonded Africans in the Indian Ocean World, c. 1750-1962,” *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol 24, no. 3 (2003): 51-68

⁸⁶⁶ VOC 8742, 527

⁸⁶⁷ VOC 8787, 1132-1133.

combination of such talismans and weapons was potent enough to raise the anxiety of the company establishment in Chinsura.⁸⁶⁸

Stealing from masters was common, even though it involved great risks: if apprehended, the workers often faced capital punishment. It should be mentioned at the outset that masters nearly always viewed their domestics as natural thieves. Lest we affirm the stereotypes of slaveowners, there is evidence to prove that often such fears were simply the result of the masters' paranoia. Though a charge was brought against Haroo and Fakira of having stolen six geese from Captain Strong, not one witness could be found to warrant their crime.⁸⁶⁹ Similarly, charges of theft brought against Mingoo, the husband of Godfrey Tilman's cook, could not be proven. Mingoo, evidently visited the cook frequently, but upon discovering that some of his knickknacks were missing, Tilman forbade Mingoo from coming to his house. After an incident of burglary one night, Tilman set the settlement guards on Mingoo's house. Though the cook lost her job, nothing could be found on Mingoo.⁸⁷⁰

Theft and robbery, however, often created zones of interpersonal relationships between the enslaved workers and other workers of the settlement. Often it was a means of self-creation, a way of breaking ties with their masters. This self-creation often-times manifested a desire on the part of the slave to form affective bonds outside of the restrictions imposed by the slave masters. Take for example, the tragic story of Hannah and Hackema. In May, 1728, a slave woman, Hannah, stole gold and silver ornaments worth Rs. 100 from her master, Khwaja Gregor, an Armenian merchant, and fled with her lover, a freed man, Hackema. For Hannah, theft was a crucial means to her freedom and a life not ordained by her master. Hannah and Hackema had

⁸⁶⁸ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1715, 505-506

⁸⁶⁹ P/155/72, 7, 14, 17

⁸⁷⁰ P/155/72, 37-38.

unsuccessfully tried to steal from Khwaja Gregor six months before. Hannah was pardoned that time on her promise “never to be guilty of such actions again nor any more to keep company with Hackema,” yet she took the risk a second time, with fateful consequences.

As has been discussed above, enslaved people in Bengal often formed and maintained families even under conditions of slavery; enslaved people such as Hannah and Hackema also formed affective ties that defied the master’s authority. Hanna and Hackema’s journey over the next few days displayed their knowledge of the place, as evidenced by their extraordinary maneuvers. They crossed over to the other side of the river Hooghly, where the old Mughal toll point stood, thus moving out of the jurisdiction of the EIC’s zamindari. There they went to a lodging house maintained by two merchants, Bunny khan and Bauden and found food and lodging for a night in exchange for some jewelry. To assuage the merchants’ suspicions, Hanna told them that her master had freed her and gifted her with the jewelry to start anew her life with Hackema, whom she would marry. Unfortunately, before Hanna and Hackema could safely pass into their free life in Bengal, they were caught by her master’s search army the very next day. With the stolen goods on them, they had no safeguards against the brutal justice of the Mayors’ court and were both sentenced to death. Hanna pleaded that she was pregnant. Despite being in the early stages of pregnancy – as attested to by midwives – she was judged unworthy of life.⁸⁷¹

Theft by enslaved people was often a transitional stage towards self-emancipation. This was perhaps the reason why thefts were often punished by death. Fear of such fatal consequences probably egged Ganoe van Balij on to the much graver crime of murder. In June 1736, he was caught red-handed by his master, the junior merchant and cashier at Hugli directory, Jacob Cornelisz: van der Huis. A scuffle followed in which Ganoe murdered his master and severely

⁸⁷¹ P/155/72, 31

injured another slave. The Fiscaal of Bengal directorate found Ganoe guilty of murder and condemned him to death on a breaking wheel, after strips of flesh were cut off of his body with a hot iron. The body was then to be left at the main gate of the settlement in Chinsura as a warning to the slave population. To avoid torture, Ganoe attempted suicide, but the authorities, apprehensive that the convict would die without suffering the punishment, acted promptly to carry out the execution. Ganoe's case in fact brought about judicial reforms in Bengal VOC: A permanent position was created within the judicial council which would make express decisions when the need arose, provided that the official did not go against the tenor of VOC law.⁸⁷²

Desertion was thus a common practice of defiance amongst slaves. We have noted how work and the patriarchy of the settlements created a structure of household work whereby the distinction between slaves and freed men was often blurred. Through the act of burglary and then running away, which demanded interpersonal trust, the household workers autonomously articulated their collective identity. As another example, Antonio de Rosario, the cook of Josiah Bedloe, an EIC servant residing in Calcutta, was good friends with Bedloe's slave, Anthony. Antonio was a freed-man, but he, like Anthony, came as a slave from the Malabar coast. They were often seen together chatting in their own language, presumably Malayali. Antonio and Anthony, on the evening of June 2, 1729, broke their masters' cabinet, took a waistcoat, several gold buttons and a few pieces of silverware and then hurried out towards the river. There, waiting for them was Pascal Peres, known to all as Panchu, an acquaintance of Antonio. Given Antonio's greater mobility, he had befriended Panchu, a resident of the French settlement of Chandernagore, in one of the Calcutta markets. Panchu was critical to their plot as he arranged for the boat in which they escaped. At Chandernagore, they were "entertained" by Panchu's

⁸⁷² VOC 8785, 200-202, 446-447.

family, his mother, wife and child. By the next morning, however, word of their escape had spread. Soon Antonio was recognized by one of Bedloe's servants in a fish market, and he was arrested. Anthony, however, remained at large. At court, Antonio never denied his friendship with Anthony or how they co-plotted the burglary. The adventures of the freed man, Antonio, like those of so many others, came to an end on the gallows of Calcutta.⁸⁷³ Nevertheless, through the act of burglary and then running away, which demanded interpersonal trust, the household workers autonomously articulated their collective identity, thereby breaching the juridical division of the settlement between the enslaved and the freed.

Although running away was a risky affair, like Hannah and Hackema, enslaved people took such risks time and again. In 1729, along with a mardijker, two slaves, Anjou van Mandhar and Jaget van Bali, escaped from Chinsura "with bad intentions of escaping with goods of their master and flight from slavery." They were all caught, whipped mercilessly and sentenced to twenty-five years of hard labor in Batavia. However, on the night of July 2, all three escaped from the company prison and took shelter with the local government. The VOC officials found, much to their displeasure, that they had all converted to Islam, thereby securing a somewhat safe shelter away from company grounds. Sijfax van Macassar, Jan Kerseboom's slave, ran away from his master's house in November, 1739. He was caught and branded and sent to Batavia to serve a term of five years of hard labor in chains.⁸⁷⁴ Meanwhile in 1751, when William Millakin, a ship captain, was writing his will in Calcutta, his slave Tom was absconding. Millakin hoped that he would be caught and sent to Millakin's concubine, Inowys, residing in Pegu, as a slave.⁸⁷⁵

⁸⁷³ P/155/72, 35-38.

⁸⁷⁴ VOC 8787, 1133

⁸⁷⁵ P/154/50, 5

Running away in certain cases was the result of interpersonal interactions between the enslaved people and the indigenous workers in and around the settlements. In addition to household workers, as discussed in the first chapter, indigenous workers such as guards, washermen, weavers, quiltmakers, and boatmen lived in and around the settlements. A massive pool of migrant construction workers – both skilled and unskilled and often numbering in the thousands -- often poured into the settlements for maintenance work. The theft committed by Simon van Orissa shows partnerships with several such workers. Simon was a slave at the house of junior VOC merchant Adriaan Bisdom in Chinsura. During maintenance work in Bisdom's residence, he came in contact with a native mason who constantly asked him, "Why are you still here?" The idea that the condition of slavery was an unnatural one was planted in Simon's mind by the mason. In the words of the VOC fiscaal, the mason "corrupted" Simon, whose answer was that he had no money. The mason suggested that the best way out in that case was robbing his master's cabinet. Thus, Simon's central motive behind the theft was freedom from his juridical as well as economic condition. For a charge of twelve rupees, the mason helped Simon to make a hole in one of the walls of the cabinet. Simon stole some silverware and two silver plates and buried them in a salt vat in the kitchen. Next, he utilized his connections with other freemen to smuggle out the stolen goods. The majority of the stolen goods he sold at a silversmith's workshop, and he gave the two silver plates to Louis van Dhaka, a mardijker and small-time moneylender in the region. He gave Simon thirty rupees for the plates. It is unknown how Simon was caught; perhaps the sudden accumulation of cash gave him away, but from his testimony and also the testimony of Louis van Dhaka, it is clear that Simon was not reported to the authorities either by any other slave or servant of the Bisdom household, or by Louis. In fact, the fiscaal suspected that Simon must have bribed the other slaves to silence them, even though he could

not prove it. The mason and silversmith, Simon's accomplices, thanks to their mobility, were able to dodge the VOC justice system by absconding. Simon's many-pronged relationships with the working class of the settlements, both native and creole (*mardijker*) shows the agency of the household workers in their self-creation. Simon's efforts were of course aborted, but one can safely assume that there were several others who succeeded. The uncertain and fragmented jurisdictions of power make it difficult to ascertain where they ended, whether they blended into the native life of late medieval Bengal or added grist to the mill of household and settlement work in any other European settlement.⁸⁷⁶

Manumission, as we have noted, was not in itself emancipation for the enslaved as freedom from slavery did not mean freedom from reproductive labor. Manumission was very much an external process – a process from above – where the household workers had very little leeway in shaping their lives. The wills of fifteen Portuguese, or free Christian, women provide a rare window into what these women called “family” and how they dealt with the patriarchy of the settlement even when it impinged on their affective ties.⁸⁷⁷ Even while toiling for the upkeep of the company servants, these workers, especially women, innovated different kinds of affective ties, which developed an alternative form of family life, separate from households with company servants at its center. The Anglo-Indian family, especially in North Indian Mughal cities in the early colonial period, has received a fair amount of historians' attention. Studies on Begum Samru and Khair un-Nissa, for example, have emphasized the agency of indigenous women in

⁸⁷⁶ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1694, 1028-1030, 1033-1037

⁸⁷⁷ Wills of Susanna de Rosario, Catharina Disius, Anthonia de Rosario TNSA 1.11.06.11/1694, 112, 222, 1026; will of Lucia de Piedade, Simoa de Mello, Magdalena de Rosario 1.11.06.11/ 1693, 181, 239, 480; will of Roza de Costa, 1.11.06.11/1715, 552; in Calcutta, will of Elizabeth Pain, 1757, will of Dominga Araujo, 1760, P/154/50 (unfoliated); will of Adriana Mendis, Clara van Bengale, TNSA 1.11.06.11/ 1693, 39,84, Roza de Costa, 1.11.06.11/1693, 258; will of Josepha Jesus, 1.11.06.11/1715, 159-160; will of Petronella Henrietta, 1.11.06.11/ 1696, 628-629; will of Nathalia Raposa, 1.11.06.11/1694, 108

creating innovative family ties at the moment of transition from pre-colonial rule to company rule.⁸⁷⁸ As women who came in touch with the European men of the companies, Portuguese/free Christian women in and around Calcutta and Chinsura in many ways pioneered the innovative family ties in the long history of transition to colonialism. At the crossroads of class and gender, these women defined the various possibilities of emotional ties for the household workers.

In analyzing the experience of motherhood amongst racialized minorities in the United States, Patricia Hill Collins has noted that the disjuncture between the public and private sphere, or the domestic sphere and the labor market was blurred for most women of color.⁸⁷⁹ Similarly, unlike the European woman, familial ties experienced by the propertied free Christian or Portuguese women of the settlements went beyond the experience of womanhood confined to the hearth and home. For most female European women who left wills, their widowhood was their primary identity.⁸⁸⁰ There are very few instances of VOC or EIC officials recording Portuguese or free Christian women as dependents. None of the fifteen women in their wills express any inkling of marital ties. The enterprises run by these propertied women were a product of the patriarchy of the settlement. Reproductive work centering on the male company servants was the source of their wealth, yet in the absence of the patriarch in these units, affective ties developed amongst these women, their slaves, and male workers according to a logic that went beyond the singular factor of heteronormative caregiving.

⁸⁷⁸ Michael Fisher, "Becoming and Making "Family" in Hindustan" in *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia*, ed., Indrani Chatterjee (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 95-121; William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-century India* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India*

⁸⁷⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing About Motherhood" in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience and Agency*, eds., Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang and Linda Rennie Forcey (New York: Routledge, 1994), 45-66

⁸⁸⁰ Married women made their wills jointly with their husbands in the Dutch settlement.

The male kin of these women were defined outside the conventional norms of marital or blood relations. Catharina Disius, with her coterie of female slaves, ran a brothel in Baranagore. But the house also involved men, with whom Catharina shared familial ties. The non-Christian names of her brother and nephew suggest that most probably, they were not her blood relations. However, not only were they included within the ambit of her fictive family, but they were generously endowed with her wealth.

The propertied Portuguese women were also the benefactors of European men. Alexander Hamilton described Baranagore, a place known for the brothels run by the Portuguese women, thus:

The town is famously infamous for a seminary of female lewdness, where numbers of girls are trained up for the destruction of unwary youths.⁸⁸¹

However, there is significant evidence to show that “the seminary of female lewdness” contributed towards the making of a fortune of quite a few European men. Magdalena de Rosario from Chinsura left the bulk of her property to Simon George.⁸⁸² Petronella Henrietta also nominated a Dutch man as her universal heir. Nathalia Raposa left Rs. 868, 54 and a half annas to VOC book-keeper Joan Francois van Schie. Simao de Mello chose a VOC sergeant, Lodewijk de Giets, as her universal heir. The wealthiest of all these women, Rosa da Costa, who had multiple acquaintances in Batavia, left a substantial amount of money for each of them. Two sergeants, Grimius and Grabo, were the primary inheritors of Roza de Costa’s wealth.⁸⁸³ It is hard to imagine any social gains made by these women in making such provisions in their wills. As has been discussed earlier, the relationship between these women and European men was normally maintained outside the wedlock. True to this practice, none of the wills define these

⁸⁸¹ Hamilton, 19

⁸⁸² TNSA 1.11.06.11/ 1693, 480

⁸⁸³ This Rosa de Costa wrote her will in 1743 and is different from the Rosa de Costa who wrote a will in 1755.

women's relationship with the men, evading any effort to formally establish bonds centering these men legitimately in the eyes of settlement patriarchy. Moreover, they were not motivated by the need to compensate for caregiving work or paternal guilt for leaving behind illegitimate children. Thus, benefaction was never a one-way channel, with Portuguese/free Christian women at the receiving end. Given the fact that they were socially marginalized in the settlements as women with no agnate kin to claim, such legacies can be elevated to real acts of munificence.

The most important innovation in kinship ties amongst these women lay in their practices of motherhood. Except for Lucia de Piedade, who had a grandson, no other woman had any consanguineous kin. In fact, four of them clearly stated that they had "no blood relations in the world." Yet, as in most wills, the possessions of these women were left for the young. Motherwork,⁸⁸⁴ as can be discerned from these wills, was an expression of a collective survival strategy of these women engaged in the trade of reproductive work. Motherhood was broadly defined; apparently, biological mothers were not the only ones responsible for the upkeep of the children. Filial relationships thus had various names. Most women in the VOC settlement left money for their "wards" (opvoedeling). Sabina de Rosade chose her "ward," Sabina, as her universal heir. Similarly, Anthonia de Rosario chose her "ward", Johanna de Rosario. Lucia de Piedade left her "ward" half of the straw house. Magdalena de Rosario left for her "fosterchild," Margaretha de Rosario, 10 rupees. It is quite possible that these "wards" or "foster children" were the natural children of these women. Lucia de Piedade, however, specified the natural mother of her ward to be a woman named Anna de Piedade. Even when Lucia de Piedade

⁸⁸⁴ "motherwork" is the term used by Patricia Hill Collins to signify racial ethnic women's experience of motherhood. According to Collins, "I use the term "motherwork" to soften the existing dichotomies in feminist theorizing about motherhood that posit rigid distinctions between private and public, family and work, the individual and the collective, identity as individual autonomy and identity growing from the collective self-determination of one's group." Collins, "Shifting the Center", 47-48

nominated her grandson, Nicolaas de Silva, as her universal heir, she mentioned no clear relationship with his natural mother, Roza de Rozario. That all three had different surnames suggest that irrespective of blood relations, a process of fictive kin formation was at play in defining maternal lineage. Motherwork for these women was a process of maintaining children that were wanted irrespective of the fact of who the biological mother was and whether their birth was planned or not.

Such mothering work was in a dialectical relationship with the gender and class order of the early company settlements. While these children were born as a result of women's work for the company men, the patriarchy of the settlements found no incentive to maintain these children. Moreover, as has been discussed earlier, the gendered role of these women was limited to their sexuality, their role as mothers being completely devalued. Though fathers generally acknowledged their paternity and made provisions in their wills for their "illegitimate" children, none lived with their children born to Portuguese/free Christian/enslaved women. Adriana Mendes mentioned her two daughters, Cornelia Halling and Anna van der Stamme, as her universal heirs. Though daughters, none of them shared similar surnames.⁸⁸⁵ It is very likely that the daughters took the surname of their natural fathers, even though they continued to live with their mother.⁸⁸⁶ Despite the acknowledgement of paternity, the "illegitimate" birth prevented them from living with their father. The illegitimacy of a common practice led to creative ways of defining relationships. If the child lived with the mother or any other free Christian women, it they were no longer known as "illegitimate." Domingo Araujo referred to the three children in her house as "housebred child" or "criollo/a." Genealogical alienation signified by "illegitimacy"

⁸⁸⁵ Cornelia Halling and Anna van der Stamme were both married and both their husbands had different surnames.

⁸⁸⁶ John Carpenter Marshall is an exception.

was overcome by Araujo's term, "criollo/a," identifying and emphasizing the mixed genealogy of the children.

Ira Berlin has argued that the Atlantic creole in societies with slaves aspired to be slave-owners like their masters. Indeed, these matri-focal families sustained the institution of slavery: all fifteen of the women were slave owners. As mistresses of taverns, lodging houses and brothels, they had an exploitative relationship with their slaves. Some, like Anna de Rosario, used the language of any other European man or woman while dealing with their slaves – gifting them to relatives, selling them off and guaranteeing emancipation, conditional on “good behavior.” Others like Leonara van Mandhaar – a benevolent slave owner - used 1,550 of her 10,000 rupees' inheritance to emancipate seven of her slaves.⁸⁸⁷ From the tavern keeper Lucia's testimony, it is clear that slaves were working alongside her at her workplace.⁸⁸⁸ Slaves were also capital investments. A Portuguese woman from Calcutta in 1753 sold her slave in Chinsura for 70 arcot rupees, the money “saved her from poverty.”⁸⁸⁹

However, slaves, and especially female slaves, were sometimes very important in the nexus of family ties these women created. The wills present an insight into the interpersonal relationships between the female members of such establishments, and even between the slave-owning mistress and her female slaves. Most of these slaves were the mothers of “house-bred children” of the Portuguese women. Rafael and Domingo, the house-bred children of Roza de Costa, were the children of her slaves, Rosetta van Bengale and Anthonia. Roza left them all three hundred rupees and her house. Mothering work performed by the propertied woman in this case opened up a zone of cooperation between the enslaved women and their mistresses. In the

⁸⁸⁷ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1677A, 545.

⁸⁸⁸ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1693, 347

⁸⁸⁹ TNSA 1.11.06.11/1715,560

absence of “blood relations,” these women often depended upon their slaves to fulfill the filial duties of care-giving. Magdalena Rozario freed her slave Susanna van Calcutta and left her with 1000 rupees. Magdalena depended on Susanna to bury her. Though Rosa de Costa had several acquaintances in Batavia, her closest people in Chinsura were her eight slaves. She promised freedom to all and left them each between 10 and 200 rupees in cash. One slave family of Rafael de Couto, Andre and Sophia Theodora, inherited a huge amount of gold. Sophia Theodora also inherited the house in which her mistress lived, and others were to eventually inherit three other houses that Rosa owned in Chinsura. Similarly, Catherina Disius freed all of her slaves and left them all her furniture and clothes. Josepha Jesus was unique amongst these women. In her will made in 1755, she left her two slaves, Allvina Jesus and Rietha de Chorea, her entire property. Both of these slaves were first entered in her will as “daughters.” The word was later struck off and the word “slaves” was entered. Slaves in some of these households were not quite chattel, but subservient female members of the family. Though these relationships were unequal – the mistress exploiting the labor of the enslaved women to generate profits – such establishments provided spaces where female bonding based on trust and care could develop.

7.6 CONCLUSION

Care-giving work for the upkeep of company servants in the settlements was primarily done by enslaved workers. They cooked and cleaned for their masters, attended their tables and even took care of their needs during long-distance overseas travel. Enslaved women and men were critical to child-care. Enslaved women in particular worked as wet nurses or ayahs. In addition, “housework” for female slaves often included sexual services for the masters. Slavery

in the settlement was sustained by an Indian Ocean network of the slave trade. This trade was critical to the social reproduction of reproductive labor in the early company settlements.

For slaves, the social trajectory from slavery to freedom often meant entrance into the “free Christian” and Portuguese community. The social composition of Portuguese community in early eighteenth-century Bengal was highly heterogeneous in its genealogical roots. This made the induction of formerly enslaved people in this community much easier. Women of the free Christian or Portuguese communities were highly visible in the public life of the settlements. As “free” women, the Portuguese or free Christian women performed the same work that their enslaved sisters did. Free Christian and Portuguese community in this sense has to be understood in continuum with slavery – it was an outgrowth of the practices of slavery in early company settlements. As tavern owners, lodgers and brothel keepers, these women commercialized reproductive labor. Thanks to their initiatives, reproductive labor in the settlements did not have the mystifying veneer of “labor of love.”

Economic and social gains for the enslaved women and the free Christian and Portuguese women depended on the paternalism of the male company servants. Sexual services and the act of child-bearing in many cases led to monetary gains for these women as is evident from many wills of the company servants. However, there are many more examples when these women were completely ignored. Even when the company servants developed affectionate relationships with these women, the women were considered first and foremost as alienated workers with no place as kin in the family of the company servant. Finally, as female workers, they were constantly subjected to different forms of abuse.

By only concentrating on the needs and services of settlement patriarchy, we can only get a partial picture of the subject position of the household workers, but they also shaped their lives

autonomously, resisting the commands of their masters. Slaves resisted in different ways for their own paths to freedom, which was not always bestowed from above through the masters' manumission documents or provisions in the wills. Paths to freedom for enslaved people, independent of the wills of their masters, involved murder, theft, interpersonal relationships with other enslaved and freed people, as well as working people of the local population. Finally, the women working in the taverns, lodging houses and brothels innovated kin relations, bypassing the roles prescribed by the settlement patriarchy. These relations, even when they were subsumed by the logic of reproductive politics of the settlements, developed autonomously. The establishments that these women ran were spaces of transactions in reproductive labor, with the company servants as consumers. However, these were also spaces of mother-child, mother-daughter, brother-sister relationships, going beyond the business rationale of serving the male company servants.

8.0 CONCLUSION

The son of the merchant, Pushpadatta was looking for artisans who could make him seven ships. The Gods in Kailash ordered Viswakarma and Hanuman to go to Pushpadatta in the guise of artisans. The captain of Pushpadatta's fleet received Viswakarma and Hanuman with paan and took them to Pushpadatta. When asked how long would it take them to make the seven ships, Viswakarma and Hanuman cautiously answered that it was difficult to say. With the help of their seven hundred assistants, they should be able to prepare the crafts within three months. They also added that Pushpadatta can pay them their wages and rewards after the completion of the task.⁸⁹⁰

Trade in eighteenth-century poet Krishnaram Das' Raimangal has purely symbolic value. Pushpadatta's perilous trading voyage to the imaginary land of Dakshin Patan becomes the theatre of contention between the gods of the delta, Dakshin Ray and Ghazi Kalu. The motif of the overseas voyage, where the insecurities of life are thrown into sharp relief, augments the didactic tone of the *mangal* poems. But, true to the genre of *mangal* poems, where everyday life of the common man is meticulously depicted in order to convey a transcendental truth, Krishnaram presents a very mundane picture of trade. The realism in trading practice is expressed not in any list of commodities or trading destinations, but in the relationships between the workers and patrons.

Like Krishnaram Das, this dissertation has shown that trade, as a social practice, can be understood through the prism of labor. By focusing on workers directly employed by the VOC or

⁸⁹⁰ Bhattacharya, ed., *Kabi Krishnaram Daser Granthabali*, 172-173

EIC officials, the dissertation presents a new and unusual portrait of labor relations centering company trade. Often any understanding of the labor relations of trade is confined to the primary producers of commodities: trade is narrowly understood as exchange of commodities. The inclusion of transport workers, soldiers, sailors, and household workers significantly broadens our understanding of social relations of trade, which demanded that commodities to be transported under tight security and that company officials to be taken care of.

By discussing the EIC and the VOC as employers, the dissertation has understood them as important social forces in pre-colonial Bengal. Even before the Diwani of Bengal had passed into the hands of EIC in 1765. The EIC and the VOC necessarily faced social issues such as managing labor, mitigating conflicts, and articulating the sovereignty of corporations. By identifying the methods that these companies adopted in recruiting workers and paying both indigenous and European workers, we have seen how the companies navigated the complex social setting of late pre-colonial Bengal to realize their ends. Working as *zamindars* themselves, but within the mercantile logic of increasing the volume and value of trade, the companies constantly negotiated and sometimes fought the powers of other companies and local and imperial ruling elites to retain their control over the workers. Through the many-sided labor disputes that the EIC and the VOC faced, the social articulation of European corporate enterprises with pre-colonial Bengali society is revealed.

While finding their place in the mercantile world of pre-colonial Bengal, the EIC and VOC innovated certain trading practices. The militarization of trade through the use of a standing army was one such new practice. The hiring of armed forces for the protection of commodities travelling in caravans was well known throughout Mughal India. Yet, each *kafila* or caravan carried goods belonging to different merchants and these merchants individually were

responsible for hiring guards who would safeguard their respective share of goods in the caravans. The EIC and the VOC devised a far more efficient system of transport by organizing their own fleets. No vessels carrying the commodities of other merchants were allowed to join the fleet of the VOC or the EIC. Finally, both the EIC and the VOC maintained their standing armies of Europeans, “black Portuguese” and Asian men of mixed origins sent from Batavia. They did not depend on the local military labor market for guarding their fleets.

Company trade also extended the social division of labor in pre-colonial Bengal. It was only because of company trade that European sailors and soldiers and enslaved household workers from all over the Indian Ocean littoral made their way into Bengal. European sailors and soldiers (*firingis*) and enslaved workers (“free Christian” and “Portuguese” people) entered the social milieu of Bengal as special categories of workers who toiled not only for the companies but other merchants and local and imperial political elites. The presence of these workers enhanced the cosmopolitan character of Bengali society of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The labor market of indigenous workers in late pre-colonial Bengal was not the creation of the companies. Internal dispossessions caused by the system of revenue extraction of the Mughal state – which extended both agrarian and urban frontiers of pre-colonial Bengal – had created vast pools of mobile, waged workers. The companies could take advantage of this labor market: they employed large numbers of transport workers and silk were all waged workers, regularly. Recruitment procedures reveal a great variety of employment practices for waged workers in the region. For the silk reelers, the VOC had come up with a standardized recruitment method – a master reeler was appointed to recruit of the rest of the reelers. Even though the EIC or the VOC tried hard to come up with standardized methods of recruitment for boatmen –

through the appointment of a *ghatmajhi*, or a Company *majhi* – they failed. Boatmen continued to be recruited by a whole range of people from the indigenous company guards in different settlements to high officials such as the Equipage officer.

An existing wage labor market also meant there were indigenous understandings of wage relations. Even though the existing labor market made it easier for both the EIC and the VOC to gather their workforces, indigenous understandings of wages often created tensions between the companies and their workers. This was most evident in the workers' insistence on customary wages. Workers, especially skilled workers, demanded non-monetary or monetary benefits over and above their contracted wage. Such benefits or "rewards" included a monetary payment as high as Rs. 5 or food money over a period time or, as in the case of boatmen, cargo space in the vessels so that they could carry salt to sell on their own during their upriver journey. These payments "according to custom" were a source of chronic conflict. But in the absence of adequate political clout on ground, the companies usually had to comply with the demands of the workers. In most cases, complying to the demands of the workers-- not labor discipline -- was the only means of settling disputes.

The extensive mobility of workers, which could not be controlled by the employers, was another hallmark of the waged labor market of pre-colonial Bengal. Silk reelers of the VOC, the most indigent group of workers in pre-colonial Bengal (and the most "modern" industrial waged workers), often made decisions about their mobility independently and often to the detriment their of employer. Similarly, the boatmen and the rowers of the Patna fleet of the VOC and the EIC also asserted their preference of movement – thus, no amount of cajoling could make boatmen from Patna to sail down to Chinsura or Calcutta. Most importantly, workers used their mobility to leverage their position vis-à-vis the companies. Even the lowest

paid worker of the companies applied this strategy. Thus, “desertion” or running away from work place was a chronic problem that the companies faced. Whenever the workers were unhappy with their working conditions, their rejoinder to the companies was running away from work. The reasons varied greatly – poor treatment at work, unsatisfactory pay, or hazardous working conditions. Workers often drove hard bargains not only for their hiring rate, but also food money and customary allowances. The rowers, for example, one of lowest paid workers usually earning a wage of 1 anna per day, defended their right to trade salt, which was deemed illegal by the Mughal state, through a sustained threat of desertion.

“Desertion” of workers also exposed the conflictual understanding of contracts between the companies and the workers. Labor contracts in Europe and later in the colonial South Asia provided a major advantage to employers. Moreover, contracts were safeguarded by punctilious enforcement of law. In the pre-colonial Bengal workers would get into voluntary arrangements with the companies. Such arrangements were extremely reciprocal and did not put the employer at any advantage – a slight dissatisfaction with working conditions would mean workers would walk out of contracts. In the absence of political power, the companies could not seek the help of state in making the workers forcibly bound to contracts.

Autonomous mobility was not just the hallmark of the labor market for indigenous workers. European sailors and soldiers ran away in droves on reaching Bengal. Between the various rival companies, the imperial Mughal state, the Bengal Nawabi and various zamindaris, there existed a broad and often lucrative military labor market for Europeans. In the indigenous armies, European runaways were highly prized as cannoneers, fetching extremely high monthly wages of 36 guilders. Through the labor practice of running away, European sailors and soldiers also managed to keep their wages high, even while working for European companies.

Running away from work was also common amongst the enslaved workers of the companies. Enslaved workers in the company settlements labored in households. Almost all male company servants, from the common soldier to the Director, owned slaves. By deserting their masters the enslaved workers not only gained freedom but also creatively organized their lives. Running away involved intricate planning on several levels. Enslaved men and women built up alliances not only with their fellow enslaved brethren but also freed workers of the settlement and other indigenous workers living in and around the company settlements, in order to plan their flight. Finally, like other workers employed by the companies, they had a keen sense of the limits of the companies' powers, especially the geographical extent of their jurisdictions. To run away successfully slaves often crossed over the boundaries of the companies' *zamindaris* or at times, even converted to Islam to secure the support of Mughal imperial or provincial officials.

Control over the pre-colonial labor practices of mobility became the primary concerns of labor management for the EIC state after 1765. Such concern was already presaged in the events leading up to the Battle of Bedara in 1759. The control over the bodies of the silk reelers became an important factor precipitating the interimperialist armed conflict between the VOC and the EIC. The strategy used by the EIC was to forcibly extract workers from the VOC grounds. In their effort to quell their most formidable competitor in Bengal, the EIC took control over the mobility of the silk reelers – faced with the armed intervention of EIC forces reelers no longer made independent decision of walking out of VOC service. Certain grOxford University Press of workers, such as European soldiers, were completely replaced by a new workforce – the *sipahis*. Common soldiers in the Bengal Army were not drawn from the ranks of European contract workers, but from the indigenous population. Such re-organization of the army was obviously driven by a desire to tame and utilize the indigenous military labor market for the

purposes of the EIC state. Given chronic desertion, the employment of European soldiers in the pre-colonial period might not have seemed like a viable option. The sudden increase in the brutality of punishment meted out to European army deserters or absconders after 1757 also signals the EIC's decision to deal with desertion amongst their lower ranking European servants once and for all. Complete intolerance for European deserters coincided with the making of the Bengal Army under Robert Clive.

The EIC state consolidated power in Bengal by creating a systematic, uniform legal system. This required obliterating the numerous contending jurisdictions of local chiefs as they existed in the pre-colonial period. Consolidation was a centralization of power, which enabled the EIC judicial system the sole right to dispense justice. A series of Regulations were issued from 1770s onwards specifically to manage labor relations. "Desertion" or uncontrolled mobility of the workers was a major concern for these regulations. By making absconding and running away from work a punishable offence vide Regulation XI of 1806, and VII of 1819, the EIC criminalized a labor practice well known in the area for at least a cOxford University Pressle of centuries.⁸⁹¹

Unregulated mobility became a defining feature of grOxford University Presss of indigenous people listed as "criminal tribes" under Criminal Tribes Act, 1871. With the passing of the Act, the colonial state finally criminalized certain collective practices of mobility in British India. Colonial officials complained that the "vagrant lifestyle" of the workers gave rise to their highhandedness – they devised a "blackmail system" to extract benefits from their employers.⁸⁹² As this dissertation shows, these collective practices had pre-colonial roots. The uncontrolled mobility of the worker formed the primary contradiction of the world of work in the

⁸⁹¹ Sinha, "Contract, Work, Resistance," 38

⁸⁹² Singha, "Settle, mobilize, verify," 151-165

pre-capitalist/pre-colonial company settlements. A struggle to control this mobility started in the seventeenth century, as soon as the VOC and the EIC started their transactions in the region. The successful colonization of the region was premised upon controlling this mobility and thus, creating a docile workforce in the region. In the previous pages, we see for the first time, the many dimensions of the vibrant practice of autonomous mobility of the pre-colonial worker.

APPENDIX A

TRANSACTIONS IN SLAVES

For the following table, I have used the archival sources available in the Bengal Directorate at Chinsura and the successors (*Kantoor Bengalen te Chinsura en rechtsopvolgers*) collection at Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai. Boxes consulted are: 1677A, 1677B, 1679A, 1679B, 1694, 1696, and 1715

Table 3: Transactions in Slaves in VOC records

Year of sale	name of slave	gender	place of origin	sold by	sold to	Price	price in stuiver
1721	Rosetta van Boeten	F	Boeten	ship captain, Albert van Petten	Hendrik Bergmuil	70 rx @ 48 stuivers	3360
1732	Alexander van Macassar	M(18yrs)	Macassar	junior merchant	ensign	150 Madras rupee	
1732	Januarij van Patna	M (15yrs)	Patna	the same ensign	junior merchant	50 Madras rupees	
1732	Lijs van Batavia	F	Batavia	junior merchant	Director	150 rx	7200
1732	Damina van Batavia	F	Batavia	ditto	ditto	150rx	7200
1732	Cambridge University Pressido	M (5yrs)	?	a soldier	first clerk of the company	16 madras rupees	
1733	Fortuijn van Bengale	M	Bengal	merchant, Hendrik Amelis de Diue	ship captain of Aldegonda	60 madras rs.	
1734	Mars van Mangeraij	M	Mangeraij	ship captain, Hendrick van Staal	Jacob Brakel	200 madras rs.	
1734	Dominga, renamed	F/ 13 yrs.	Bengal	Pieter Abrahamsz.,	ship captain, Jan van Henkelen	57 madras rs.	

	Clara by the buyer			resident of Chinsura			
1734	Cartouche van Bengale	M	Bengal	Jan Anthonij Meulenbeck, assistant	ship captain, Isaacq Hage	65 madras rs.	
1735	Alexander van Malabar	M	Malabar	cashier Ormea	master sailmaker	125 madras rupees	
1735	Cecilia	F	?	ditto	ditto	125 madras rupees	
1737	Januarij van de Kust	M	Coromandel	?	Constantia Amalia Falk	50 rx @48 stuivers	7200
1740	Pedro van Bengale	M	Bengal	Dirk Kelderman, bookkeeper	Coenraad Meijer, oppermaster	55 madras rs.	
1740	Clara van Bengale	F	Bengal	ditto	ditto	55 madras rs.	
1740	Cartoe van Rampour	M	Rampour	Adriana Prera, free resident of Chinsura	assistant, Jan Hoorn	33 arcot rupees	990
1740	Damon van Macassar	M	Macassar	Albert Burgert de Jonkheere, bookkeeper of a ship	assistant, Cornelis Erkelens	100 arcot rupees	3000
1740	Dominga van Bengale	F	Bengal	Jan Rijkewaard, master cooper	head of Cassimbazar, Bartholomeus Aukema	90 arcot rupees	2700
1740	Ijsak van Colombo	M	Colombo	book keeper of a ship selling , slave sent with him by Nicolaas Monniks in Batavia	a junior merchant and warehouse keeper at Cassimbazar	160 Madras rupees	
1740	Jodoe van Boegies, renamed Moses	M	Boegies	ship captain, Jan Jorz	Nicolaas Harman van Som, acting on behalf of Bartholemus Aukema, the head of cassimbazaar.	95 rx @48 stuivers	4560
1740	Mannies van Padang	F	Padang	ditto	ditto	90 rx@48 stuivers	4320
1740	Lourens van Bengale	M	Bengal/ Batavia (?)	Jan JacobsZ: Gouda, nurse of a returning ship	Henrik, Sneebal, junior steerman of a ship	150 rupees	4200
1740	Joseph van de Kust	M	Coromandel	ditto	Adam Amie, nurse on another ship	60 rx	2280
1740	multiple slaves	N/A	N/A	book keeper of a ship	N/A	N/A	
1740	Lucia van Bengale	F	Bengal	Jan Rijk..(?) aart, Master cooper	Jan FrederickGrabo, bookkeeper, leaving for Bataiva	100 arcot rupees	3000

1740	Mantje Maliers	?	?	Jan Frederick Grabo, Bookkeeper leaving for Batavia	junior merchant	100 rx @48 stuivers	4800
1740	Rubia Maliers	F	?	ditto	ditto	ditto	4800
1741	Clara van Bengale	F	Bengale	Jacob Juriansz: Zuidland	Samuel Crombour	50 arcot rupees	1500
1741	Diana van Bengale	F	Ditto	ditto	ditto	ditto	1500
1741	Diana van Boegies	F	Boegies	Master steerman of a ship	vice commander of the equipage wharf	130rx @48 stuivers	6240
1741	Sisnander van Malabar	M	Malabar	joint owners a surgeon at the company's hospital and an assistant	ship captain of a returning ship	150 arcot rupees	4500
1743	Flora van Decca	F	Decca	upper surgeon	book keeper	100 arcot rupees	3000
1743	Tatiana van Bengale	F	Bengal	ditto	ditto	100 arcot rupees	3000
1743	Leander van Bengale	M	Bengal	a bookkeeper	oppermaster of a ship	100 arcot rupees	3000
1743	Sabina van Voltha	F	Bengal	a free Portuguese woman from Calcutta, Anna de Rosario	assistant, Jan Hoorn	35 arcot rupees	1050
1743	Pombo	M	?	Jan van Hoorn	Adrian Bisdom, junior merchant and Baanmaster	140 arcot rupees	4200
1743	October van Malabar	M	Malabar	junior merchant	junior merchant	250 arcot rupees @30 zware stuivers	7500
1743	Ijurnat van Batavia	M	Batavia	oppermaster of a ship	bookkeeper of a ship	150 arcot rupees	4500
1753	Lacras (slave boy)	M	?	nurse	a junior merchant in Patna	80 arcot rupees	2400
1753	October (jonge)	M	?	Boudie, "inlander" or native	free resident of Chinsura	30 rupees	840
1753	?	F	?	ditto	Dutch resident	30 rupees	840
1753	?	F	?	portuguese woman	?	?	
1755	Cambridge University Pressido	M	?	Hector Macmillan, company servant	Anna Maria Bergh	50 arcot rupees	1500
1755	Solo van Bengale	M	Bengal	junior merchant	surgeon of a ship leaving for Batavia	88 arcot rupee	2640
1755	Sapara van Bengale	F	Bengal	sold by the same surgeon	constable	110 arcot rupees	3300

1755	Januarij van Bengale	M	Bengal	Portuguese Simon de Rovero	constable's mate	15 arcot rupees	450
1755	Briel van Bengale	M	Bengal	a freeman of Chinsura	Lieutenant ter Zee, Peter Ruis	85 rupees	2380
1755	Diana	F	?	a bottelier	Portuguese woman, Monica Dia	60 arcot rupees	1800
1755	Januarij	M	?	Francisco Ricordo, a Portuguese man	junior steersman	50 arcot rupees	1500
1755	Diana	F	?	a substitute fiscaal	ship captain of a returning ship	30 arcot rupees	900
1755	Gabriel	M(boy)	?	a Dutch resident	Junior steersman	70 arcot rupees	2100
1755	Cambridge University Pressido	M (Boy)	?	Hector Macmillan, company servant	a sergeant	40 arcot rupees	1200
1755	Januarij	M (Boy)	?	resident of Calcutta	Lieutenant ter Zee	43 arcot rupees	1290
1755	April	M (Boy)	?	ditto	ditto	38 arcot rupees	1140
1755	November	M (Boy)	?	ditto	ditto	40 arcot rupees	1200
1755	Fortuijn	M (Boy)	?	ditto	ditto	46 arcot rupees	1380
1755	Bottie	F	?	free Portuguese woman	canonner	40 arcot rupees	1200
1755	Catharina	F	?	free portuguese woman	constable	20 arcot rupees	600
1755	Pedro	M(little boy)	?	free Christian woman	upper surgeon of a ship	70 arcot rupees	2100
1755	Ongeluk	M	?	pilot	free burger	50 arcot rupees	1500
1755	Gedult	M	?	same person	same person	50 arcot rupees	1500
1755	Patientie	M	?	same person	same person	50 arcot rupees	1500
1755	Vartwee	F	?	ditto	ditto	80 arcot rupees	2400
1755	Alteijtsoo	F	?	ditto	ditto	60 arcot rupees	1800
1755	Anthonij	M	Bengal	ditto	ship captain	85 arcot rupees	2550
1755	Roza	F	?	a free burger	a respectable perso	70 arcot rupees	2100
1755	Rosetta	F	?	a resident	ship captain of a returning ship	50 arcot rupees	1500
1755	Esteria	F	Bengal	a free Christian woman	secretary of political council	40 arcot rupees	1200
1755	Samson	M	Bengal	a free Christian woman	bookkeeper of the settlement	20 arcot rupees	600
1755	October	M	Bengal	Anthonij from Chandernagore	ditto	40 arcot rupees	1200
1755	Bitona van Bengale	F	Bengal	a sergeant	assistant	110 arcot rupees	3300
1755	Flora	F	?	substitute Fiscaal	?	?	
1755	Dominga	F	?	free Christian woman	junior steersman of a returning ship	55 arcot rupees	1650

1755	Johanna	F	?	ditto	ditto	55 arcot rupees	1650
1755	Cesar, renamed Leonardo	M	?	a book keeper and a former head of comp.'s clothes room	junior merchant	60 arcot rupees	1800
1755	Alexander	M	?	Portuguese man	old ensign	55 arcot rupees	1650
1755	Bettie	F	?	Portuguese woman living in Calcutta(which saved her from poverty	ship captain	70 arcot rupees	2100

APPENDIX B

LIST OF MANUMISSIONS

For the following table, I have used the archival sources available in the Bengal Directorate at Chinsura and the successors (*Kantoor Bengalen te Chinsura en rechtsopvolgers*) collection at Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai. I have gathered information from manumission documents and wills. Boxes consulted are: 1677A, 1677B, 1679A, 1679B, 1694, 1696, and 1715

Table 4: List of Manumissions in VOC records

year	name of slave	Origin	Gender and Age	Master	terms
1721	marquis	?	F	Baanmeester Henricus Hak	so to be released after the master's death
1721	Salamed	?	M	ditto	
1721	Sirpina	?	F	ditto	
1721	Rosetta	?	F	ditto	
1721	Caser	?	F	ditto	
1721	Ciciliac	?	F	ditto	
1732	Emmanuel van Bengale	Bengal		the resident at the mint in Karimabad	
1732	Anthonij	born in Bengal		ditto	
1732	Anna			Johanna dirksz., widow of Mezurier	when the widow dies
1733	Isabella	Bengal	F, 20 yrs	Warehouse manager	
1733	Pansje	Bengal	M	Assistant	
1734	Dina	Bengal	F, baby	Leonara van Mandhaar	

1734	Dalima	Mandhaar	F	Leonara van Mandhaar	
1734	Toemat	Batavia	M	ditto	
1734	Alexander	Diemen	M	ditto	
1734	Dina	Banda	F	ditto	
1734	Sabina	Bengal	F	ditto	
1734	April	Bengal	F	ditto	
1734	Lisje	Batavia	F	ditto	
1734	Joanna van Patna	Patna	F	a soldier from Holstein	
1734	Theodora de Rosario	Bengal	F	Nicolaas Buinincx, sergeant	
1734	Marsella	Bengal	F, 15yrs	corporal	
1740	Castor		F	a secretary	left money and property
1740	Florence		F	ditto	
1740	Rozelijn		F	ditto	
1740	Marcelle		M	ditto	
1740	Aron		M	ditto	
1740	Aurora (Aron's wife)		F	ditto	
1740	Aaron and Aurora's children			ditto	
1740	Domingo		M	ditto	
1740	Sabina		F	ditto	
1740	Nathalia Pieres	?	F	pilot	gave her a house in Stroobazar. She got patta but could not sell the house.
1740	Elizabeth		F	Catharina Disus of Baranagore	left her furniture and clothes
1740	Beatrice		F		
1740	Rebecca		F		
1740	Theodora		F		
1740	Ebba		F		
1740	Flora		F		
1740	Lijs		F		
1741	Sicilia van Mandoe	Mandoe	F	Junior merchant	if the slave misbehaves with him or his wife he retained the right to enslave her again
1741	Anna		F	quartermaster	to be freed immediately after his death

1741	Cata		F		
1741	Doegnie	Bengal	F	Susanna de Rosario, resident of Chinsura	
1741	Colona	Bengal	F	ditto	
1741	Fortuijn	ditto	M	pilot	when he leaves for Netherlands
1741	Louis	ditto	M	pilot	ditto
1743	Anna van Boegies	Boegies	F	Bisdom, junior merchant	if the slave misbehaves with him he retained the right to enslave her again
1743	Nero with wife Esperance			Cornelis de Jonge, director	to be freed immediately after his death -200rupees madras
1743	Adam and his wife Cerie and their children			Cornelis de Jonge, director	Rs. 150 madras
1743	Doringa with her daughter			Cornelis de Jonge, director	Rs. 200 madras
1743	Alexander and Diana with their 2 children			Cornelis de Jonge, director	Rs, 150 madras
1743	Valentijn			Cornelis de Jonge, director	Rs. 200 madras
1744	Thaaltje	Macassar	M	?	
1755	Tjelie and Rebecca			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	October and Dina and their children Sictie and Isabel			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	Kamis with his grandsons Jonas, Adonis and Joseph			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	Elis and Patra and their childreb Domingo and Bouang			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	Kloris and Lijsje with their child Saptoe			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	Julij			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	

	Kato			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	Junij			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	Lucretia			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	September			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	Batjoe			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	Pedro			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	Anthonij and Calista			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	Coridon and Diana			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	November			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	Sultan and Sabina			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	March			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	David and Juliana with their childre Ontong, Dominga, Leander, Lizarda and Lena			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	Damon and Limanada and their children Meij, Manies and Andries			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	Titus and Regina			Kerseboom, director who was leaving	
	Faviana				

	Florentiana with her daughter Floriana				
	Calistra				
	Rebecca with her son, Arees				
	Alexander with his wife Magdalena and son Albert and daughter Fenisa				

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British Library, London

- Bengal Public Proceedings (P/1)
- Factory Records (G)
- Home Miscellaneous (Home Miscellaneous)
- Mayor's Court Records (P/154; P/155)
- Sessions of Oyer and Terminer and Sessions of Gaol Delivery (P/155/72; P/155/73)
- Clive Collection (G/37)

Nationaal Archief, Den Haag

- Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren*
 - Amsterdam Kamer (VOC 1232-1493)
 - Zeeland Kamer (VOC 8730-8807)
- Kopie-generale landmonsterrollen van the VOC-dienaren in de VOC-vestigingen in Indie*
 - VOC 11534 – VOC 11653
- Vernet Collection (Vernet)
- Rademacher Collection (CR)

Historical Archives of Goa

- Baptismal Records of Igreja da Nossa Senhora de Rozario (HAG, Book. No. 2760)

Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai

- Kantoor Bengalen te Chinsura en rechtsopvolgers* (TNSA 1.11.06.11)

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