

The rise and fall of THE DUTCH IN DHAKA

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India has always been considered a haven for various businesses by European traders. For ages it was renowned for its prosperity and was popular for its spices. Since the 15th century, European traders started to appear on the Indian ocean and subcontinent, adding to the traders who came from Arab, Iran or China. First came the Portuguese; afterwards, more than a century later, came the Dutch. We generally call them "Olondas" in Bengali (from the word "Holland"). In 1602 a few Dutch businessmen founded the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, VOC in Dutch or the United East India Company in English) in order to establish trade routes and links with the orient (defunct in 1795).

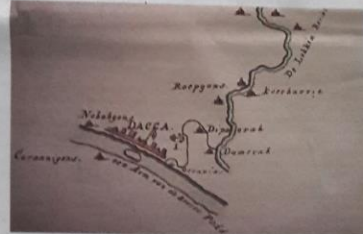
In a short period of time, the Dutch would expand their businesses to

slave trading along the Bengal coastline in the 1620s.

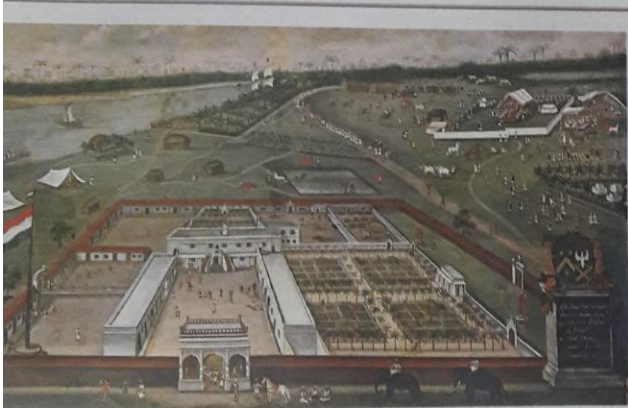
One after another they started setting up trading posts at different locations — one of which was Dhaka — in India. They came to Dhaka for the first time in 1610, but it turned out to be a tragic experience for them. It was supposed to be diplomatic mission consisting six people, but even before starting from Hooghly, they had some form of altercation with the local authorities and were arrested. They reached Dhaka in handcuffs. They did manage to secure their freedom from the Mughal court in Dhaka, but had to pay handsomely to provide gifts for the Nawab. They also had to bear the transportation costs and the payment of the blacksmith for breaking their handcuffs. Moreover, they were beaten up and badly bruised, and as a result had to be treated by doctors. So, they

Dhaka in 1666. This time, they contacted an official of the Nawab's court named *Rasmandal* to create a favourable situation. They also appointed a Bengali-speaking assistant, *Cangarara*, in their trade factory. But by this time they were wary of existing local people because of their past unfortunate and bitter experiences. Gradually the Dutch established their trading house, offices, factory and garden in Dhaka starting from the 1660s and these were in operation till 1785.

The Dutch factory was located by the Bariganga River, at the site of present day Mitford Hospital. This was also their office. They had a garden in the vicinity of Farmgate, probably somewhere between what is now the Ananda Cinema Hall and Tejari Bazar area. These locations can be seen in the map of Major Rennell (1781). The trade post of Dhaka was under direct control



Part of a Dutch map showing Dhaka and environs, including Keraniganj ("Carannigons") and "Damarah" (Demara), c. 16th century



Hooghly (Hugli-Chuchura, Bengal) Painting by Hendrik van Schuylenburgh, 1665

various corners of the world, especially in East Asia and South Africa. They reached Bengal in 1607, but settled and built a trading post in Chinsura, Hooghly a bit later in 1635 after getting a *farman* (official permission to engage in trading) from the Mughal *subadar* (governor). The Dutch governor of Coromandel (present day Karnataka in South India) sent some people to set up a trading centre in Bengal, although like the Portuguese, the Dutch were probably also involved in piracy and

had to pay medical bills as well. The situation was so hostile that they then had to buy a boat and pay the boatmen in order to go back to Hooghly. It cost them more than a thousand taka, a huge sum in those days. The only achievement for them was an agreement with the Nawab regarding business.

But their settlement in Dhaka was neither established, nor did they gain a stronghold following this incident. They again tried to set up a trade centre in

of the trade centre of Chinsura. Hooghly, which itself was operating under supervision of the Dutch trading office of *Coromandel*. The main centre for business and trade office for them in Southeast Asia was situated in Jakarta, *Batavia* (present day Indonesia). So, as its importance grew, the factory in Chinsura, Hooghly of Bengal came under the direct guidance of *Batavia*.

François Bernier, a French traveller who visited Dhaka in 1665–1666,

stated that the Dutch had a monopoly over cloth export from Dhaka. They generally exported to Europe and Japan. Their other main export item was Saltpetre or Nitre (locally known as *swa*), one of the main ingredients for producing gunpowder. They used to collect huge amounts of saltpetre mainly from Bihar for which they had also set up a refinery there. In the same time period, Jean Baptiste Tavernier, a 17th-century French gem merchant and traveller who visited Dhaka in the 1660s, saw a beautiful warehouse of the Dutch in Dhaka.

In many businesses in Bengal the Dutch were pioneers and frontrunners. In 1746, they even got a *farman* for a monopoly over export of opium from Bengal. But in the same decade, the British trading power started to gain grounds and their main competitor was the Dutch. Inevitably, this struggle for superiority and profit led to serious confrontations. In 1759, the battle of Chinsura took place between the Dutch and British, in which the Dutch lost decisively, though their military or naval power was no less mighty. By that time, the British had already covered all the other European powers in Bengal after their important victory in the battle of Plassey (1757). As a result, the Dutch never regained their financial or political power after 1759, despite their continued presence in Dhaka or Bengal.

Eventually, between 1781–83, the British took possession of all Dutch trading centres and posts. The one at Dhaka surrendered in 1781 and the Dutch garden at Farmgate was also handed over. Their businesses in the city virtually ended at that time. The magistrate transferred the house (Dutch Trade office) to the collector of Dhaka in 1801 and the authorities demolished it with help from the police. The rubble was used to repair roads of the city. In 1810, the authorities proposed a hospital at the site (the present Mitford hospital). Finally in 1824, the Dutch

government handed over all their belongings in India to their British counterparts through a treaty between them. With the official transfer in June, 1825, the Dutch left Dhaka, Bengal and India for good.

The British business interested tried to remove all their political and business competitors, and they were very successful in doing so. Mostly as a display of power, they destroyed the beautiful trading house of the Dutch in Dhaka, even then more than a century old, and repaired the roads with the debris. There is no evidence today of the Dutch Garden in present day Farmgate, other than its depiction in the old maps of the city. However, when the chief of the Dutch factory in the city, Mr Langkheet died in 1775, he was buried in the then English cemetery (now at Narinda). This is the only remaining sign of the Dutch in Dhaka today.

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