

The Best of Two Worlds: Interview with Om Prakash

In 1995–1996 Professor Om Prakash spent some time as a senior visiting fellow at the International Institute for Asian Studies at Leiden, where he also gave the annual lecture. The subject of the lecture (which was published by the Institute) was 'Asia and the Premodern World Economy'. When he was interviewed in 1997 at the Center for the History of European Expansion by Jos Gommans, Carl Feddersen and Leonard Blusse, he had just returned from England where he had handed in the proofs of his latest book European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India (Cambridge 1998), a volume which appeared last spring as part II.5 of The New Cambridge History of India series. The tapes of the interview were transcribed and edited by Martha Chaiklin, who did not have to wait long to meet Dr Prakash and update the interview, since he is presently at Leiden University as a visiting scholar before moving to the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS) in January 1999 for three months as a guest of the rector. It would seem that while all other Indians are visiting the hill stations, Professor Prakash has found his own alternative for a breath of fresh air in the Netherlands.

Let us briefly review how you came to the Netherlands to work on the VOC material many years ago.

I had all my education, both school as well as University, in Delhi. I received my MA in Economics from the Delhi School of Economics in 1961, with specialisation in economic history. While I was still doing my MA Tapan Raychaudhuri, who was then in the faculty, told me that if I wanted an academic career in economic history, one of the major repositories of an important body of source material on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Indian economic history was in the Netherlands. That was about the time that some kind of a plan had been put together by the Dutch government to invite young Asian scholars to use those archives. So if I was interested, Raychaudhuri told me, a fellowship to enable me to work at the Algemeen Rijksarchief [General State Archive, The Hague—ARA] could be arranged. Soon after I gave my consent, I received a nice

letter from the first secretary at the Dutch embassy in New Delhi inviting me to spend a year at the Algemeen Rijksarchief.

Was that in the 1960s?

That was in 1961. I arrived in The Hague in September of that year. I had just done my MA and I was 21 years old. Tapan Raychaudhuri was spending that year in the SOAS in London as a Visiting Research Associate. So he came over to The Hague for a week to introduce me to the VOC documentation at the Algemeen Rijksarchief which at that time, as you know, used to be in Bleyenburg in a very different kind of building from the one that now houses the Rijksarchief. I had learnt some Dutch in Delhi from one Mr. Schaap. He was the cultural secretary of the Dutch embassy and was interested in this kind of thing. I used to go to him twice a week in the afternoons and we spent an hour or so together going over the basics of the language. On my arrival in The Hague, Raychaudhuri introduced me to Mrs. Meilink-Roelofs, the keeper of the VOC archives, and Mr. Avelingh, the person in charge of the Reading Room at the Algemeen Rijksarchief. When I first looked at a VOC volume, then carrying K.A. numbers, I said to myself: 'This is not Dutch, this is something else.' I spent about a week or ten days trying to get some sense out of the documents with the help of a dictionary, but to no avail. I persevered for another two weeks or so and then went to see Miss Talsma at the Ministry of Education who was in charge of my fellowship programme. I explained my problem to her and said I was seriously thinking of going back home. She counselled patience and agreed to finance a private tutor for me. That gentleman was a teacher of English in a school. He lived somewhere near Scheveningen. So I would go to him twice a week and we started, at his suggestion, by translating bits from *Het Beste*.

The Best of Reader's Digest?

Yes, *Reader's Digest*. Then he got so interested in the project that once in a while he would come with me to the Rijksarchief, but he confessed that he couldn't read the difficult handwriting either. But by that time, I had begun to get the hang of the documents. From that point on it went quite well. By the time the first three months or so were over, I was quite comfortable with the documents.

Your first connection with Dutch Universities, was that Professor Coolhaas?

The connection with Leiden University at that time was quite marginal, in the sense that there was really nobody here who was particularly interested

in that kind of thing. Professor Heesterman came to Leiden only after I had left the Netherlands. The only person who was really into the field was W.Ph. Coolhaas of Utrecht University, and he was far too big for me to go and bother. That was one of the problems. I really had nobody to turn to for academic guidance.

You were a pioneer at that time. Even in Holland at that time nobody was working on this?

Absolutely. But at the Algemeen Rijksarchief there was an active group of foreign researchers working. Diaku from Ghana, for instance, who later wrote an excellent book on the West India Company. There was also an archivist from Ghana whose name I unfortunately cannot recall. Then there was Jack Wills from the United States, Karl Goonewardena from Sri Lanka and one or two others. All these were ever willing to help each other and also interacted socially. We would once in a while go out for dinner and that kind of thing. But there really was nobody from the Netherlands who was particularly interested in this kind of research. I had initially come for only a year but at the end of the year I was not even halfway through the work. But my fellowship was extended for another year so I stayed here for a total of about two years. In the meantime, I also went to London for three or four months to look at the English East India Company documentation. The bulk of my documentation, however, came from the Rijksarchief.

So was it more or less a coincidence that you started here? Was there no special attraction to the Dutch material?

No, I didn't really know about it. I learnt about it only through a course I was doing with Tapan Raychaudhuri. There were only two students taking this course. The other one was not particularly interested, so in a sense I was the student and Raychaudhuri would once in a while deviate from the regular lecture and talk about a whole lot of things which were not part of the lecture, but which were taken from the material here. There already was a tradition of Indian scholars using the VOC material—Tapan Raychaudhuri himself and Ashin Das Gupta who, as you know, sadly passed away recently. Raychaudhuri would talk about how rich this material was and in one meeting he simply came up saying: 'look we are thinking of this and if you are interested in making an academic career, this would be a good opening.' Frankly speaking, my father, a civil servant himself, wanted me to go into the civil service. But to be fair to him, he said: 'this is what I would want, the family would want, but if you do this

at my asking and if you are not happy with it, it is not worth it.' And he added: 'try this Dutch option, if it doesn't work, you can always come back.' It was in fact in that context that at the end of the first few weeks I had seriously thought of returning to India. In retrospect, of course, I have no regrets whatsoever that I decided to stay on and try and write a Ph.D. thesis.

You were working through the Dutch material, which was slowly becoming something of your own; you were beginning to feel comfortable with that material. But to what extent did you have the feeling that it was about India?

One of the things that Tapan Raychaudhuri had done all along was to emphasise that these documents were really like turnips, in the sense that if you wanted to squeeze material relevant to specific aspects of Indian history out of them, then you really had to squeeze them hard. It was there, but unless you were consciously and deliberately looking for it, you would not get very much. So what I did was to have a large number of subtopics in my notes system. And I had cards for each and every one of them, and even if I got no more than a few sentences on one of those subtopics, I would take them down. So I tried from the very beginning and very consciously to extract all that was possible from the documents. And there were some very interesting things that I have probably not used in my work. Let me give some examples. There was some trouble between the Dutch and the local people somewhere in Orissa about the Muslim Muharram procession. And in the documents there was this very detailed description of what the procession was all about. The Dutch factors there were complaining that this was always a problem area between the Hindus and the Muslims, and this time they had been the unintended victims. The factors who wrote the report were indeed quite knowledgeable and provided fascinating details. So I took all of it down because this kind of detailed description one wouldn't find often. Another example was the minutes of a meeting between the head of the Dutch factory and a senior government official. Serious disagreement arose between the two on some point, making the official angry enough to use swear words in Urdu, which are still the same 300 years later. The transliteration was in Dutch but the words were unmistakably recognisable. I also found a list in the documentation that contained fascinating details of the structure of bureaucratic corruption in Mughal Bengal. Starting with the top, it indicated in great detail how much had to be paid to officials at various levels to get a particular job done. This sounds so familiar in relation to the Indian bureaucracy today, particularly at the lower levels. In fact

I think this entire notion that we, as a people, as a society, were very different 300 years ago is something which needs to be looked at again. Many of the essentials, you see, are very much the same.

But now you haven't told us what your subject was when you started out then. Yes, the subject was also a bit of a problem. We had agreed that I would work on Gujarat. Ashin Das Gupta had worked on Malabar, Raychaudhuri himself had worked on Coromandel, but on this major region, Gujarat, there was no work yet. So I started out on Gujarat and began to look at the Surat documentation. But after about two months or so, I decided to try something else, partly because I had expected a lot more from the documents than I was actually getting. From Glamann's work, which was still a new work at that time, I knew that in terms of the volume and value of trade Bengal was an immensely important area.¹ So I decided to move to the Bengal documentation and somehow, partly because my capacity to get things out of that documentation had in the meantime improved somewhat, I felt more comfortable with the Bengal documentation and I decided to stay with it.

I remember you saying that there is not such a big difference in the early modern age between Asia and Europe if you take a look at the East India Company material.

Yes. Coming back to that, let me put it this way. It was always a struggle to get anything out of this documentation as far as the Indian economy or Indian society was concerned. Once in a while you would get things on religion, on society, on this and that, but that's limited. But, when it got to the real subject of my dissertation, which was the functioning of the VOC, there was so much material that you really had to make a decision early on regarding the kind of information that you would want. And one particular kind that fascinated me was that concerning the relationship between the local ruling authority and the Company, and between the central authorities of the empire and the Company. It was quite clear from the very beginning that both sides were interested in getting things sorted out, rather than in confrontation. And that meant that whenever there was a problem they would talk it over and almost always sort it out eventually. But on actual matters of trade and the kind of problems they were facing in procurement etc., one could immediately see that the factors were often overstating their case. This was done usually for the benefit of the Heeren XVII or Batavia so that they themselves would not be called inefficient or corrupt or whatever. The general picture, however,

that comes through from the documentation loud and clear is that of a very vibrant economy, a very vibrant system, where the VOC was just one of many operators in the market with no qualitative advantage over anybody else. There, however, was a distinct advantage available to it in quantitative terms. This followed from the substantially larger body of resources available to it than to almost any other entity operating in the market. But this was a very different picture from that, say, in Indonesia or Ceylon where the Company enjoyed extraterritorial authority and was in a position to coerce producers and suppliers into submitting to terms considerably below the market.

Is the economist Prakash speaking here? I mean how do you see yourself, as a historian, as an economic historian?

When I started out I really had no formal training as a historian. My degree was in Economics. Economic history was my elective paper. So I was more interested indeed in the economic part of it. But from whatever I had been talking over with Raychaudhuri over a long period of time, I was very keen to get whatever else I could get out of these documents. So while I was looking at this documentation primarily as an economist to begin with, it was quite clear that they were rich in many other respects as well.

So how long did it take you before you finished your thesis?

I arrived here in September of 1961 and left for home in December of 1963. I took a boat for Bombay from Marseilles. It was an extremely enjoyable trip and I spent Christmas and New Year on the boat. On arrival in Delhi, I learnt that since the Department of Economics at the Delhi School of Economics had recently been recognised by the University Grants Commission as an Advanced Centre for research in economic history and economic development, new faculty positions had been sanctioned and that I stood a good chance of getting one of them. But there was some administrative problem whereby the interviews for the positions could not be held for a while. So for that stopgap period I joined St Stephen's College as a lecturer in economics. That is the best college in Delhi University and probably in the country. Initially my idea was that I would stay there for only a few months, but then the Principal persuaded me to stay on for a little over a year. It was only in August 1965 that I joined the Economics Department at the Delhi School of Economics where I have been ever since, now thirty-three years.

So you were at St Stephen's for just one year. But you haven't yet answered the question, when did you finish your thesis?

The one year I spent at the St Stephen's College was a most pleasant experience in many ways. One came into contact with the best undergraduate students in the country. But from the point of view of my research and writing the year was a complete washout. It was only after joining the Delhi School of Economics in August 1965 that I began writing. I submitted the thesis in January or February of 1967. In our system, the thesis has to be referred for approval to three external examiners. My examiners were Arun Das Gupta of Calcutta University, Kristof Glamann of Copenhagen University and Holden Furber of the University of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia. All three were kind enough to recommend the award of the degree.

You were at NIAS as well later on.

My connection with the Netherlands was resumed in 1976. It was around that time that you people were just starting to set up the shop here in the form of the Center for the History of European Expansion and Reactions thereto. The first time I was at NIAS was in 1982–83.

At that time was there still nobody working on this?

Well, some work had started but not very much. In fact in the old Algemeen Rijksarchief building at Bleyenburg there were not yet very many researchers working on the VOC documentation.

Well, the whole VOC project had started then.

It had started yes, but it was still in its initial stages. I shall tell you about an interesting experience I had in 1976–77 in the Rijksarchief building. In the old building at Bleyenburg, the Reading Room had a capacity of only about thirty people and if you did not reach there by about ten past nine in the morning, all the seats would be taken. You would then have no option but to return home. So I would always be there at nine o'clock. Then, of course, you can go out for coffee or whatever but you have reserved your seat. And then since you are among the first, you always get the seat of your choice. And then you get used to a particular seat and go back to it every day as a matter of routine. A kind old gentleman who probably was in his eighties always took the seat opposite me. Every morning we would religiously nod to each other. He stopped coming after about two months or so and it was only about eight or nine months later that he reappeared. I was still there struggling with the fat VOC volumes. And then he comes

up to me one day and says: 'Mijnheer, ik moet met U praten.' [Sir, I need to talk to you.] So we went down for coffee. He said: 'You have been here all these eight months that I have been away and reading these big books?' When I said 'yes,' a look of utter sympathy came on his face and in a low voice he said: 'young man, I admire your tenacity, but tell me, do you really expect to find your name in these books?' I hardly need to add that he was one of the large band of genealogists regularly using the Algemeen Rijksarchief. The researchers using the VOC documentation at that time could perhaps be counted on the fingers of one hand.

But VOC research was starting up again.

Yes, it was just starting. But things were already very different in the 1970s from what they had been in the 1960s. You know the field had opened up at Leiden. And that was very helpful.

And Mrs. Meilink-Roelofz of course had taught as an extraordinary professor from '70 to '75, but that was too short a time for her to produce a school of her own. Still there were new people, I mean Femme Gaastra, Frank Lequin, Els van Eijck and, of course, Jaap Bruijn who were continuing some of her courses. A lot had changed, but India was not yet in the picture.

In fact, Sri Lanka was more in the picture at that time than India was.

Yes, Jur van Goor, who was working with Coolhaas at Utrecht, was doing research on Ceylon.

Yes, Van Goor, Goonewardena, Arasaratnam. And later another Sri Lankan scholar, Kotalevele. But of course it was at that point that I came into contact with people like yourself, Dirk Kolff, Henk Wesseling and others. Since then the contact has been unbroken.

But to what extent did this research on maritime trade also link to what was happening in the economy of mainland India? We have already discussed this distinction between what was happening on the coast and in the mainland during the NIAS meeting of June 1993.

You are absolutely right, and this is a gulf that has persisted. It is only in the last several years, the last few years actually, that conscious attempts have been made in the direction of bridging that gulf. As you said, many of the questions asked are the same, but the approaches have been so very different. And even amongst the little group of those of us who have been using this material I think the approaches have been quite different. Let me talk for a moment about the work of Ashin Das Gupta, for example.

Das Gupta used the VOC material not really to talk about the VOC itself, or about international trade, or the movement of precious metals, or from the point of view of the export of textiles, but almost exclusively from the point of view of what this material could tell you about Indian merchants and their functioning. Of course in a way he was lucky to have worked on Gujarat, because if he had taken that sort of approach in relation to, say, Bengal, the amount of information he would have obtained on that front, even with that very conscious bias, would have been quite small. So as it happened Gujarat was a good choice for Das Gupta, because you have all these major merchants in Surat who are not rivalled anywhere else and you have in fact a great body of material available around them.

Anyhow, the great divide between the coast and the interior needed to be bridged; one of the first people to talk about these things was Jan Heesterman. Increasingly, it was realised that the coast could not exist except on the basis of a strong support structure operating in the interior. And by the same token, the interior could do with support from the coast. But the nature of that relationship, except at this very obvious and in some ways very superficial level, somehow never came through. And unfortunately the research on the interior came to be concentrated more and more on the agrarian sector. That was the other big divide. The agrarian school would not touch anything that was not concerned with the land revenue system, the agrarian structure and whatever.

Are you referring to Irfan Habib's school?

You see Habib himself is a great scholar. That kind of range of mind is not very common. In his own work, Habib does deal a little bit with the monetary system and things of that sort. But this kind of lack of integration between the inland economy and the coastal economy has always existed. An increasing number of scholars are now looking at these things somewhat differently.

But in that sense Pearson's book didn't really help either.² He showed that the Portuguese could develop their operations on the coast because the inland powers were not really interested in what was happening there. He actually emphasised that there was a separation.

I had first met Pearson at a seminar I had given to Holden Furber's group in 1971 at Philadelphia, and we had talked about some of these things. He had either just finished or was finishing his thesis. And the book came out in '76 and as it happened I read it almost immediately. It was a book that for a while made a great impression because it proceeded on the basis of

distinct categories. But I think at one level these categories were stretched by Pearson into such exclusive compartments that they ceased to be very real categories. He said the ruler was the ruler, the Indian merchant the Indian merchant, the foreign merchant the foreign merchant, and there was nothing that brought them together. But you cannot really have these exclusive categories—if you are this, then by definition you are not that. Not only are you by definition not that, but you have nothing to do with that other category and you are either opposed to each other or completely indifferent to each other.

You mean that the people from the coast were not really that different from those from the inland and people from big cities?

I think it would make much more sense to talk of a continuum. A continuum not in any big political sense, but in the sense that where the inland stops and where the coast begins is something which is in a way an artificial distinction. The hinterland sometimes really goes all the way.

That is of course a subject that Braudel has been talking about.

And in this context I must talk with great admiration about the work of Hans van Santen. I strongly feel his dissertation should be translated into English and then published.³ It is one of the best pieces of work on this kind of thing where you are bringing out the relationships between the internal economy and the coast. That thesis again I think shows a great imprint of Heesterman's thinking. You have material available, and that is the kind of material you would need.

I want to go back to a very basic issue. And that is if you look at your career, you have had to battle with certain existing or emerging paradigms, right? You started out with, let's say, the Van Leur paradigm. Then you were confronted with, let's say, the Pearson paradigm that came out of Portuguese India. Then you were facing the Cambridge school, which developed new explanations for what happened in India in the second half of the eighteenth century. Not forgetting Glamann who showed how the Company worked as an intra-Asian entrepreneur, or Niels Steensgaard with his original thesis that has been pestering everybody in the field for twenty years. It seems to me that there is something quite specific to the Indian Ocean studies: you seem to have this succession of big paradigms. A new book comes out, Glamann, Steensgaard, Pearson, and each time everybody says, 'well that's it,' until a new study appears. You must have had this feeling when you were working your way through the VOC archives 'Oh my God, now I also have to deal with this new

paradigm'; or perhaps even 'I have to pierce through these theories because I have so much more material.'

As you say it has been in many ways, for a young scholar at any rate, a very confusing picture.

But exciting.

Exciting but confusing. You see I wrote my thesis in the 1960s and it was a very different kind of work. A publisher in Delhi offered to publish it straight away, but in retrospect I am glad that I didn't do that, because it would certainly not have done much good to my reputation. But when I really sat down and began revising it, it began taking on a very different shape. I was lucky to get the help of many people in doing that. One I distinctly remember was M. M. Postan from Cambridge who spent a few months in 1968 or 1969 at the Delhi School of Economics as a Visiting Professor. His own field of work was very different, but he was kind enough to read my thesis and spend several hours talking about it with me. The gist of what he said was that on the basis of the material I had in the thesis I could write a much more broadly based book. I then decided to go beyond Bengal and situate the book and the VOC in the Indian Ocean–South China Sea trading network. Today if you ask me, I think the only merit of this book, which was eventually published by Princeton University Press in 1985, was placing Bengal in the VOC's Indian Ocean trading framework.⁴ I had realised that without bringing in, in a major way, Japan and the Spice Islands, one could not tell a very meaningful story. So this is not so much a book on Indian economic history alone; it is really on the history of the operations of the VOC in the Indian Ocean–South China Sea trading network. I do not believe that anybody until that point had emphasised strongly enough the critical significance of the spice monopoly and exclusive access to the Japan trade as the principal factors behind the outstanding success of the VOC in intra-Asian trade. Now in this Cambridge book which has just been published, I have covered a good deal of additional ground.⁵

So what is the new Cambridge book about?

As I just said, the canvas has been broadened a great deal. The book deals with the Indian operations of each of the European corporate enterprises as well as those of the private European traders functioning in Asia between 1500 and 1800. As in the earlier book, the quantitative base remains important. I believe that if you are providing a quantitative profile as an important ingredient in the story you are telling, then it is important

to be as precise as you can. You see, there may be situations where you don't have data of the kind that you would need, in which case you must say, yes, this is the limitation of my work. What I am strongly opposed to is a situation where, on the basis of a very small amount of data, you are offering very wide generalisations. That's one kind of problem. The other kind of problem is that in situations where the data do not allow you to be sufficiently precise, you are nevertheless conveying a false sense of precision. Let me give you an example of the second kind of problem. In 1993 there appeared a book called *Portuguese Trade in Asia under the Habsburgs* by James Boyajian.⁶ It is a major book that completely revises the orthodoxy in relation to the Portuguese trade in Asia and the relative role of the official trade on the Malabar Coast in the total Portuguese Euro-Asian trade. But if you look at the statistical basis of Boyajian's revisions of the orthodoxy, there is a very serious problem about the quality of his data. He is completely honest and he has covered himself fully. There is no question about that. But only a specialist will really find out that some of the quantitative data are indeed very shallow and much too fragile to bear the weight of a major reformulation of current orthodoxy. He is, I'm convinced, moving in the right direction, but the extent of the revision is not fully supported by the kind of data that he has.

I think all of us have been over-enthusiastic at some stage when working in the archives and discovering all these shipping figures. You get all enthusiastic and say 'My God, so many ships came on Monday and on Tuesday,' and before you start thinking you are noting all this down and you make this fantastic pie diagram say for two months, and then suddenly you don't have anything for eight months and then you again have a little bit and then you don't have it for two years, and then by the time you have amassed all this you suddenly realise that you cannot do at least what you originally wanted to do. Am I hitting you at a weak spot?

No, quite the contrary. I spent quite a bit of time putting together all the shipping lists relating to Bengal and then processing them. In the course of the processing, I found that a very large part of the statistical material pertaining to the goods carried by the ships would have to be thrown away. This was because of a whole range of problems relating to the manner in which this material was available in its raw form. Even in respect of an analysis of the number of ships on a given route in a given season, a large part of the data was unusable. That is the kind of problem that you just pointed out. The biggest problem was in terms of the coverage of the lists. I soon found out that in a shipping season of, say, six months, if I did not

have information for the whole of the six months, I would have to live with that. Because if I made a rule that I must have information for the whole of the six months, then there would probably not be even one list left. So I laid down the arbitrary rule that I would accept a shipping list if it gave me information for a minimum of, say, five and a half months.

Five and a half months?

Whatever. On the basis of their usability as a credible indicator of shipping movements over the entire season. All those lists that did not fulfil those criteria simply had to be dumped. It was a very hard thing to do. I had spent all that time recording them, but I did exactly that. If you are completely open and completely honest about the quality of your statistical material and you are continuously emphasising its limitations, then it is for the reader to decide how much trust to put in your conclusions. But it is you alone who know the weaknesses of the data, and I believe it is incumbent upon you to come out explicitly with its limitations. I would nevertheless emphasise that in spite of all the problems that exist in relation to the various kinds of quantitative data available in the VOC documentation, it is still probably the richest body available, and if one is deliberately conscious of the methodological problems involved in using this material, one can still get an enormous amount of mileage out of it.

Not only figures, but what used to be seen as a hard fact, has of course been very much questioned recently by the post-modernists or subaltern-studies people. What do you feel about this viewpoint as an economic historian?

I must admit that I am not quite into post-modernism. I'm not terribly comfortable there. In many ways I am a traditional historian where telling a story in an analytical, interesting and meaningful framework constitutes the basic craft. The particular points of departure may vary—everybody has his own view on things—but so long as you are specifying clearly the underlying basis of what you are doing and are putting all your cards on the table as it were, I think that is still the best way of writing history. I don't feel terribly comfortable with post-modernism not because I have any specific problems with their approach, but partly because I have never felt interested in it. In relation to the subaltern and related work, it's a different kind of a problem. I don't think it's my job as a historian to feel obliged to propagate a particular viewpoint. In short, let 100 flowers bloom.

I have a very silly question about the position of being an Indian scholar. Because having witnessed your going and coming over the years, I have this personal distinct mixture of slight jealousy on the one hand and empathy on the other. I know that you spend the horrible summers in Delhi and melt away. I know how you have been building your new house with all kinds of problems. So on the one hand there is this empathy, but when you think of it, there is also 'envy,' in the sense that through all kinds of international agreements or whatever, as a good Indian historian you can go places. I am sure you have spent about five times as much time in the archives here in the Netherlands as I have. When you just think of those years, the time you have been able to travel and there is also this whole network of conferences. Now what does this do to you? Do you find it a silly question?

No, it is not a silly question. Let me put it to you this way. You see living and working in India vis-à-vis living and working in the West is a choice that one has to make. It has not been an easy choice. It was not an easy choice in the sense that when I came here first in the 1960s, I am sure that if I had chosen to stay here that would not have been a problem. But I went back. And when my wife and I were at Harvard for a little over two years in the early 1970s, I was offered a job at another American University. That was in 1971. This was not an Ivy League University, but it was a well-paid job, and I spent many sleepless nights deciding whether to take it and stay in the United States or to go back to my job in Delhi. I must say one of the important factors in this has been my wife, who has consciously maintained that travelling is fine, but that she would not want to live in the West. So I finally said no to the offer and we returned to Delhi in 1972. But this was the period of the great shortages in Delhi and elsewhere in India. You had to stand in a queue for bread and things of that sort, and then sometimes I would wonder if I had made the right choice. But fortunately that phase did not last very long. In retrospect, let me put it to you that if you are a bit envious I can understand that, because in some sense I have had the best of both the worlds. I live in India and by Indian standards Professors are paid reasonably well. If the weather is hot, it is hot for everybody. And in addition, it is a good University Department that I happen to be in. It's an unusually good Department both in terms of its academic stature as well as in terms of inter-personal relations amongst colleagues. So from the point of view of job satisfaction, I am quite happy. And then I have been able to travel a great deal. I spent two years as a research student here, and then came back for a full year each time in '76-'77, '82-'83, and '92-'93. I have been a visiting professor at Virginia University and a visiting scholar at Harvard, Heidelberg and

Paris. I have done my share of travelling and academic work. And, as you said, I have had access to the Algemeen Rijksarchief on a continuous basis so that my research at no point has really suffered because of my dependence on a body of archives which is located several thousand kilometres from my home base. So I think in some sense it has been the best of both the worlds. If I had lived in the West, I don't think I would have been a happier person.

Is that perhaps the reason why only a few Indian scholars are actually interested in Europe, in Western history; they always seem to stick to India?

That is another thing. This reminds me of the Presidential address that Furber gave to the American Association of Asian Studies in 1969. That was the Gandhi centenary year and one of the points Furber made towards the end of the address was that while we have associations of Asian studies in the West, there were no associations of Western European or American studies in the East, which made for an unreal basis for a continuing mutual exchange. So you are absolutely right. If you ask me to name five major Indian historians working on non-Indian history, and it is a very large category, I would find it a very tough job to do that. Of course there are some outstanding exceptions, but they are just that: exceptions.

This is in a sense a shame because when you look at Orientalists like we are, or even Indians teaching in America, they will get a lot of their new ideas, their methodological ideas, in short get a lot of mileage out of what is happening in European history. The first time I read Foucault for instance was at the campus at J.N.U. in Delhi. Because everyone was talking about Foucault and the French coupe and things like that.

But not many of them would perhaps have read Foucault. Some of them would really know about Foucault, but almost nobody would use Foucault in his own work. This is something I frankly have never have thought about. But now that you mention it, yes, it is a problem area.

It is a waste of talent because there is so much talent.

Absolutely. But there is one thing about borrowing models lock, stock and barrel. There can be big problems with that sort of complete borrowing.

But you have to start out somewhere. Wasn't Van Leur really in the same situation when he applied Weber's ideas on Asian trade? He used even less material than most theoreticians nowadays.

Let me put it this way. You see there are different ways of writing history, and each historian chooses the way most suited, not just to his material, and not just to the kind of problem he's addressing. An important ingredient is his temperament and style. A historian is before anything else a person, a living human being. And I think the approach that he takes is a personal decision. After a while, once you have made that kind of decision, it sometimes becomes too late to go back. That, I think, is the way in which some of these things develop.

You have met quite a lot of the great historians. You worked with Holden Furber for instance.

Holden Furber was one of the kindest men I have come across. As I mentioned earlier, he was one of the examiners of my Ph.D. thesis, so he knew my work very well. He taught at the University of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia but he spent his summers at his house in Marblehead, very close to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Since I was at Harvard for over two years, I would often go to his place in the summers and we would talk extensively. I would always cherish whatever I learnt sitting, as it were, at the feet of Holden Furber. The kinds of things that would come out in a very gentle way would make you stop and think, 'why didn't this occur to me' and 'if I looked at it this way it would make more sense.' He was such a humble man. He was writing his *Rival Empires of Trade* at that time and he would say: 'Look, I am looking at your chapters, would you be so kind as to look at mine?'⁷

So those who have been most influential in your work, who would they be?

Starting with Tapan Raychaudhuri who was my teacher/mentor, I would say yes, Holden Furber. Another person, who influenced me a great deal, although he was not in this field, was Henry Rosovsky. He was then a Professor of Economics at Harvard. He had done an enormous amount of work on Japanese economic history, some of it together with a Japanese colleague, Ohkawa. Our fields were quite different but he was kind enough to read my dissertation and comment extensively on it. At the level of pure ideas, I have benefited a great deal from Harvard. Another professor of economic history there, the late Alexander Gerschenkron, used to run a seminar which I attended regularly. And one year when Gerschenkron was on leave, Henry Rosovsky ran that seminar. The presentations I made in these seminars elicited extremely valuable comments and suggestions. David Landes was still in the History Department but he would come to this seminar often. In Delhi, I have benefited extensively from

discussions with Dharma Kumar. Our fields are quite different, so are our temperaments, but I have nevertheless learnt a great deal from her. And here in Leiden, first of all Jan Heesterman. During 1976–77 when I was here for a whole year, I interacted with him a great deal. And of course there are many others. Henk Wesseling, more than anyone else, has helped facilitate my work in a whole lot of ways, providing a support structure that I could always bank upon.

How do you see yourself in relation to a younger emerging generation? Is there such a generation? We have all the time been talking about you assembling materials, thinking about books, uniting books, but what about you as a teacher?

Let me put it this way. I am a teacher in an economics department. And although we have a Centre for Advanced Study in Economic History and Economic Development, the students that we get are of a kind where economic history essentially is at the fringe of things. So I cannot really expect to get the very best students of ours to come to my field. The only exception was Sanjay Subrahmanyam. In a way I am very pleased that I was associated with him. I was his teacher in his MA programme. And then I was his advisor for his Ph.D. programme together with Dharma Kumar. I am very glad that he has reached heights that anybody can be proud of. I have lots of students who are very much interested in the kinds of things I do, but they would not want to do it for a living.

You have been working with all these source materials close to forty years. In Holland we have the Linschoten Vereeniging, the R.G.P.; in Britain the Hakluyt Society; we have published some substantial series ourselves at IGEER; but don't you think European research institutes like for instance HAS should play a much more central role in setting out a policy on how to make Western materials better available to Asian scholars?

I couldn't agree with you more. In my own case, *The Dutch Factories in India* which I published in 1984, contains in English translation and annotation the documents of the VOC relating to India for the early years of the seventeenth century.⁸ That was a modest beginning and Bhaswati Bhattacharya, Dirk Kolff and myself are now planning to continue this series. But the point is that, partly because the kind of organisational framework that you are talking about has not been available, the progress has been rather limited.

Notes

- 1 Kristof Glamann, *Dutch-Asiatic Trade, 1620–1740* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1958).
- 2 M.N. Pearson, *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat: The Response to the Portuguese in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1976).
- 3 Hans Walther van Santen, *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie in Gujarat en Hindustan, 1620–1660* (Ph.D. thesis, Leiden University 1982).
- 4 Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1630–1720* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).
- 5 Om Prakash, *European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), *The New Cambridge History of India Part 2: Indian States and the Transition to Colonialism*, vol. 5.
- 6 James C. Boyajian, *Portuguese Trade in Asia under the Habsburgs, 1580–1640* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
- 7 Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600–1800* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976).
- 8 Om Prakash (ed.), *The Dutch Factories in India, 1617–1623: A Collection of Dutch East India Company Documents Pertaining to India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1984).