

Nearly fifteen years VOC service in Bengal: Jan Albert Sichterman

Dick de Jong
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Not much personal information from Dutch life in Bengal or any other of Dutch settlements in India can be found in the VOC archives in the State Archives. The reason for that is that the VOC correspondence only covered official and business information written by VOC employees and shared with the local head office and the central office in The Netherlands, The VOC also censored all letters.

An exception can be made for Jan Albert Sichterman (1692-1764), who spent nearly 15 years in Bengal. In 1742 he used his own money to build a church tower near the river in Chinsurah. Under his management the VOC post was fortified against the Marathas, native rebels, whose attacks intensified after 1740, and in 1742 it was given the name Fort Gustavus, after Governor-General Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff. Van Imhoff was a cousin of Sichterman's wife. That we know a bit more about his and his family's life is due to a personal history dug up by a descendent in the Sichterman family. Wiet Kühne-van Diggelen grew up in Groningen with in the living room of her parents a portrait of Jan Albert Sichterman left of the fireplace and his wife Sibylla Volkerak Sadelijn's portrait on the right. These were portrait paintings from 1755 by C.K. Haverkamp. [See picture]



Dutch Governor at Chinsurah
Mr. Jan Albert Sichterme

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Wiet's grand-dad had an old VOC shipping chest full of family papers from the early 18th century, marriage contracts, wills,, inventories, doctor diplomas, dissertations in Latin, political pamphlets, student poem at promotion and marriages and so on.

It also carried many letters, including some written by Jan Albert Sichterman from Bengal, from the years around 1740 when he was Director of the VOC settlement there.

Seven generations Sichterman had guarded this old VOC chest for more than 250 years, when a relative made Wiet aware of it. Together they opened the chest and found this treasure. Simultaneously Wiet was appreciated by another branch in the Sichterman's family from where also new information came forward. Years of study on all these personal historical treasures brought her to write a true life history of Jan Albert Sichterman. Some 40 letters of Sichterman have been preserved, mainly about the upbringing of his children. They provide a picture of the Dutch way of life and education in the first half of the 18th century.

The name Sichterman and the palace of a house at the Ossenmarkt in the city centre of Groningen have been there for ages. The family was well-to-do already. Jan Albert added richness mainly from his Bengal years. Much of the exquisite luxury that Sichterman collected or had ordered to be made has been preserved. Not only the house. Two stone Moor statues that supported the balcony on both sides, the balcony and the carved wooden door are since 1913 in the Groninger Museum. The family sold the two portraits to the museum, with other paintings and porcelain. The family archive with vary valuable documents was donated to the State Archives in Groningen.

Jan Albert Sichterman: VOC-dienaar en 'koning' van Groningen, is the title of the book that Wiet Kuhne-van Diggelen published in 1995. From her we can learn about the many personal and business relations of Jan Albert Sichterman. The book also has the pictures of the portraits and of the old VOC shipping chest.

Jan Albert Sichterman in Bengal

In 1715 Jan Albert Sichterman was a lieutenant in the infantry when he killed an opponent in a duel, probably near the city of

Namur. To avoid prosecution, he departed to the Indies in 1716 as an assistant-buyer for the VOC in Batavia (Jakarta), under the protection of the court of the prince-stadtholder in Leeuwarden, where his mother had close connections.

During a year's stay in Batavia he met the former director for the VOC in Bengal, Anthony Huysman, who than was a member of the High Commission. In 1717, Huysman recommended him for the post of assistant buyer of the VOC station at Chinsurah/Hougly in Bengal, under the director Ewout van Dishoeck (1717-1722). In 1719 he became treasurer of the VOC post in Cassimbazar, some 80 miles upriver.

In 1721 Sichterman was married at Hougly to Sibylla Volkera Sadelijn, born in Bengal, the daughter of Jacob Sadelijn, who was later to be the director of Bengal (1717-1731). That same year he returned to Hougly as manager. Here. In 1722, their first son was born, Anthony Ewout, named after Huysman and Van Dishoeck. In the following 16 years seven more children were born. The second son died in Batavia, aged 2 1/2, whereas the remaining seven children were all at an early age sent by VOC ship to relatives in the Netherlands for their education. Correspondence with the family back home was the only way for Sichterman to communicate his wishes for their upbringing.

In 1722 the new director of Bengal was Peter Vuyst, previously fiscal agent of the VOC in Batavia. Relations between him and Sichterman were very poor, and Vuyst had Sichterman recalled to Batavia in 1724, for a 'private disagreement', as Sichterman put it in a private letter to guardian of his children at home. The High Commission in Batavia put Sichterman in the right and in 1725 appointed him as fiscal agent in Hougly. Vuyst had meanwhile been dismissed as director; after a sojourn in Batavia and some years as governor in Ceylon Peter Vuyst was executed for cruelty in 1732.

Sichterman was send back to his favourite Bengal and Chinsurah in July 1725 as merchant and fiscal agent. VOC merchants had a very varied existence, travelling to other VOC settlements in India and accompanying envoys to Japan and China. As fiscal agent he had to act as prosecutor and guard against VOC servants that broke the rules concerning desertion, private trading, misconduct and so on. He was co-responsible for checks on trade records and payment to soldiers records and was expected to be present at the departure of VOC ships to Europe.

Not much can be found in official records how Sichterman behaved in these functions. In the Rijksarchief, the State Archive in the Hague, there is a copy of defence note in the Bengal Factory section by Jan Albert Sichterman, Fiscal in Bengal, to director and councils concerning the behaviour of captain Pieter van Genegten, in 1726.

VOC director in Bengal in 1725 was Abraham Patras. Jan Albert asked him as witness to the birth of his fifth child Johanna Maria, born on 27 August 1726. In the same year Patras returned to Batavia and promoted to Council for India. After his departure probably the council of Bengal wer all promoted: Jacob Sadelijn became director, his late successor Rogier Beerenaart became chief in Cassimbazar and son in law Sichterman was appointed there as secunde (second in command). In July 1731 the same pattern occurred. Sadelijn was appointed as council for India in Batavia, Beerenaart as director of Bengal and Sichterman as chief in Cassimbazar.

VOC Bengal director Rogier Beerenaart passed away unexpectedly in 1733, Jan Albert Sichterman replaced him temporarily and returned with his family to Hougly. On 18 June 1734 the High Council appointed him officially as director in Bengal. He was in this position 10 years and he performed the tasks that go with it:

- permanent supervision of all his VOC servants, in accordance with the regulations of the Heren (Gentlemen) XVII;

- the totally just treatment of civil and criminal court cases; and
- having authority over sorting of the textiles.

Next to that he was also responsible for keeping cordial relations with the Nawab and his local representatives and to negotiate over trade conditions and tariffs.

His salary was 180 Dutch florins per month. On top of that he was allowed to have some commissions, such as acquiring Dutch and native Indian goods against discount, receiving a percentage on textiles and opium delivered by natives. He also received a yearly allowance for representation. The Director alone enjoyed the privilege of being carried in a palanquin, fitting upon an chair. Military honours were shown to him at the gate of the fort and he was always attended in his journey by many *chobdars* (staff bearer), peons and other servant, as K. K. Datta writes on page 4 in his 1968 edition of the Dutch in Bengal and Bihar, 1740-1825. One of the staff bearers ran ahead announcing the arrival of his master and proclaiming aloud his titles.

Nawab's gift rhino Clara toured Europe

Nawab Shuja-uddin Khan was Governor in Bengal for the Great Mogul in Delhi until 1740. During his reign Bengal was quite and prosperous. In negotiating for beneficial trade relations the VOC management and India leaders exchanged presents whenever appropriate.

In 1736 for instance, as reported in the Generale Missiven, receive a dress of honour from the Great Mogol. The costs for receiving it and the counter presents to the Great Mogol amounted to 638 rupees. Sichterman had to pay 80 rupees to the VOC to keep the dress, as was required by the VOC to allow certain personal presents.

These counter presents were usually Japanese lacquered ware, silver or European wine. On this occasion Sichterman requested

permission to send 2,000 ricebirds to the Court of the Mogol in Delhi. Permission was granted.

To the Nawab in Dhaka VOC directors usually donated cash amounts, these were answered with native presents. Berrenaart for example received once one an elephant, “nice and well-tusked”. Sichterman received in 1738 a female baby rhino; one month old that had been captured in Assam. The animal was so charming and tame that she was allowed to walk around the dinner table to great hilarity of the guests. But after two years the rhino became too big and to avoid further damage to his house Sichterman donated the rhino to Douwe Mout van der Meer captain of the ship Knappenhof.

The captain brought the rhino probably illegally to the Netherlands and he started giving public shows with her, first in Leiden and Amsterdam. Later he and the rhino travelled to many big cities in Europe, where even crowned kings came to see it. In Wurzburg (Germany) the rhino got her name: Jungfer Clara. Many drawings, engravings and even medals with her picture have been preserved. Such an animal had never been seen before in Europe. At the age of 20 Clara died in London.

Sichterman's wife

Sichterman's wife Sibylla must have deplored the leaving of the rhino. The animal provided welcome distraction within the walls of the Dutch factory, where there was little pleasure. Sibylla was allowed to walk only in the garden within the factory. Going outside or joining in hunting or official trips was forbidden. Only few visitors from other Dutch settlements arrived, the distance between them was too big.

The upbringing of the children was left to native servants and usually the children of three or four years were sent to family in the Netherlands for further education. For Sibylla this practice must have been hard having to say goodbye to her three last children in

the autumns of 1736, 1738 and 1742. Sichterman never writes about his wife's activities, he occasionally mentions that she is doing well.

Sibylla was born in Bengal from Dutch parents so she must have grown used from her young days to the fatiguing climate, with temperatures regularly reaching 40 degrees. Even in this heat Europeans did not wear light dresses. The ladies wore silk and cotton that was worked in voluminous gowns following the latest fashion from London, and they always wore a hat. The gentlemen also dressed European, with a waistcoat and a heavy velvet jacket, wig and hat. At home they changed in a wide cotton shirt and replaced the wig on their bold hats with a cotton cap for the night.

VOC and own interests

Jan Albert Sichterman was promoted to the post of director in Bengal in 1734. In 1740 he was appointed as Councillor Extraordinary of India, with a small salary increase. VOC trade blossomed in these years. As the market in Bengal was very varied with rapid changes in supply and demand he employed the service of two 'benjans', Bengalee Hindu traders, as brokers and contact persons for buying of the indigenous goods. These persons also functioned as investors and partners for private trading. This made trading for private interest for the director easy; it was inextricably linked to buying and selling of all Eastern goods of the VOC.

Sichterman had several options for private trading and he must have used all of them. He made a lot of money with it as became clear from the evidence unearthed by the Belgian historian Jan Parmentier in his book *De Holle Compagnie*. If Sichterman directly harmed the VOC by demanding percentages on buying and sales, or disapproving supplies and reselling them, or letting the VOC pay for production costs of his silk and cotton mills cannot be substantiated from official records. Sichterman fancied the more

adventurous big business, teaming up with several other European managers.

Sichterman maintained cordial private relations and contacts with Joseph Dupleix, who was governor of the French lodge in Chandranagore since 1730; a remarkable man who hated the English and wanted them out of India. In limited time Dupleix had established an international network of intra-Asian trade. In 1733 he employed already 13 ships sailing in and out of India that were funded by private parties. In different Asian ports goods were sold and new goods loaded and sold in the next harbour. Sichterman invested regularly in the ship movements of Dupleix together with other European managers in Bengal, merchants from Calcutta and Madras, or Armenian or Moorish traders. In 1736 Sichterman invested 87,000 rupees in the sailing of the ship *Francois* to Bassora, as Parmentier found.

Francois de Schonamille was another participant in the intra-Asian trade of Dupleix. He was since 1725 council of the South Netherlands Ostend Company in Denmarknagore, after 1727 settled in Banquibazar. In the Antwerp City archives copies of letter can be found from letters by Sichterman to de Schonamille show the realtions between the two gentlemen. One of those letters is dated 21 December 1733, a few days before the sailing of the Ostend ship *Concordia* that carried some chests with private Sichterman goods. Sichterman manages to get 'a biggish bundle' on board the ship and asks if this can be 'put in a chest of a friend' so that it can be transported 'without any trouble'. And he wants to know the name of that good friend so that he can inform his solicitor in England.

Sichterman made big profits from this inter-Asia trading, but he also suffered losses, as shown by an account of Dupleix from 1739 of a still standing debt of 42,000 rupees of Sichterman. This debt must have been paid on the day in 1741 when Dupleix married the widow of his supercarga (the man responsible for buying and

selling goods on a ship) Jacques Vincens at which Sichterman was a witness.

There is other proof of Sichterman using Swedish Company's ships to transport personal belongings to Europe. Pieces of Chinese porcelain with the family logo he had ordered from Canton were found in the wreckage of the Swedish East-Indian ship "Goteborg" that came from China in 1745 and ran ashore just before reaching Sweden. Another load with goods from Sichterman was on board of the Swedish ship 'Suecia' that in 1740 was wrecked near the Orkney islands north of Scotland. Two letters from Sichterman to Scottish supercargo Charles Irvine shed light on this. The two met already in Bengal I 1732.

In January 1742 sends a few gifts to Irvine with a friendly letter that he hoped to see back some of his possessions he had on the Suecia. He added a copy of a letter to Irvine from 1740 that was carried on board of the Suecia by supercargo Lorient, who died in the shipwreck. With another Swedish ship 'Fredricus Rex Suecia', with Bengal goods underway to Sweden, Sichterman send home letters and presents with the second supercargo Andreas Jacobus Flanderin. Sichterman had done good business with Flanderin before. This time Sichterman sent a writing box and three small chests. Two of these contained medicine and Japanese toilet goods, marked as 'tea' on the cargo list. The last chest contained gold that was registered as 'rosewood'. Flanderin shipped these from Goteborg on the Dutch ship the 'Eendracht' to Sichterman's solicitor Gerard Pauw in Amsterdam.

Gerard Pauw was a partner of great value for Sichterman. He was a grand-son of Reinier Pauw who in 1594 co-founded the 'Company van Verre', the predecessor of the VOC. Both Gerard and his father were wine merchants, living on the Oude Turfmarkt in Amsterdam. He received the goods that Sichterman shipped from the East and took care of storage or transport. He also handled the many financial affairs of Sichterman.

Bad handwriting

In his 28,5 years in the East Sichterman wrote many letters, or better since 1725 he had many letters written by a clerk, because he did not trust that other people could read his own handwriting. It was for him the only way to manage his relations and to do his personal and private business. Apart from official messages he also sent private letters to the High Government in Batavia. He maintained contact with some of the Councils for India, such as his 'nephew' Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff, as Van Imhoff's wife, Catharina Magdalena Huysmans, is a niece of Sichterman's wife. Through these contacts Sichterman was occasionally able to help young VOC staff on request of his relations from the Dutch Republic. Names that appear in these letters include: Jan Jacob Slicher, Auberjonnois, Faucheneau and Louis Vernet. The latter built the Dutch reformed church in 1765 next to the church tower of Sichterman from 1742.

Last difficult years in Chinsurah

In his last four years in Chinsurah Sichterman had a difficult time. The partly releasing by the VOC of the intra-Asia trade to private trading was reached too late for him. The quiet era under Nawab Shauddin Khan changed in 1740 was replaced by a more volatile era under a new nawab: Alivardi Khan. This nawab followed an independent policy of trade rules and regulations to curb the expansion and competition of the English, Dutch and French companies. At the same time everybody suffered from the increasing number of attacks of the Marathas (Hindus from the poor Deccan area). They were after the wealth of the Europeans as well as of the Islamic authorities in Bengal, who were said to have accrued 400 million guilders in their coffers. The Marathas plundered and committed cruelties in many places in Bengal and created chaos that hampered the economy.

Sichterman saw these dangers coming and decided to fortify the Dutch factory to be protected against these attacks. Plans for this

had been there for years, but money was short and earlier directors stayed two or three years, too short to see such drastic changes through. Under Sichterman solid walls replaced the earlier fence around the buildings, the two entrance gates were integrated. Four bastions were added on each corner with Dutch names: Amsterdam, Middelburg, 't Noorderkwartier and De Maas. On the South new gardens were created and around the land area of the fort a canal was dug. A tunnel was dug leading from the fort with two step-terraces leading to the river Hoogly. In his handing over memorandum of 1744 to his successor Sichterman reported that the tunnel had partly caved in because of vermin. Sichterman called the fortification 'Fort Gustavus', after his nephew Gustavus van Imhoff, the governor-general in Batavia at that time. At the bottom of a letter to his nephew Conringh Sichterman writes for the first time: 'In't Fort Gustavus, den 20 jan. 1743.'

In 1744 his director years in Bengal ended on his request and he sailed from Bengal on his home journey through Batavia on 25 March 1744. On arrival there on 13 July the High Government there tells him that has been appointed as Council for India since 30 June.

Before that in December 1743 Sichterman wrote to his nephew Conring that he has his hands full with Company business and his approaching home journey. One of his most important works is to prepare the official handing over memorandum for his successor Jan Huygens, who had been second in command at Chinsurah before. The memorandum is dated 14 March 1744. Sichterman first wrote about the importance of this memorandum, which described the best and safest way of doing business and explained the tasks of the director. Loyalty, diligence and knowledge are needed. The director must go for profitable trading and he must also abide by the rules and regulations, even outside the trade. Also needed are knowledge about the government and habits of the Moors. Sichterman advises to take firm and consistent action against the Moors, but to avoid too strictly applying of the VOC

regulations, 'through which one would make oneself ridiculous in the eyes of the Moors'.

Sichterman writes that he was very satisfied with the benjans, the Bengal Hindu traders that served the VOC. He specifically recommends two of them, 'the cunning Bengali Totaram and the Moor Chan Mameth'. Sichterman devotes a lot of attention in the memorandum to the bad relations with the English Indian Company and the VOC and explains the recent conflicts between them. They are the result of jealousy between the two and both trying to buy the most goods and to get the most profitable deals. Sichterman writes that Bengal still is the most profitable of the Dutch settlements in India, but he notes with regret that in spite of all his efforts during his ten-year management he had not been able to leave behind a flourishing trade and that improvement is not likely.

In his farewell note to the direction of Bengal Jan Albert Sichterman writes: 'I leave to mister Huygens a liquid state of affairs, without any bad debts. After 25 years of service and burdensome direction I wish well for the new director and his staff from the bottom of my heart'.

On 24 October 1744 Sichterman and his wife went on board of the 'Woitkensdorp' with captain Pieter Sluys that was part of a return fleet of 15 ships. On some of these Sichterman was allowed to carry personal goods. Some faithful Bengal servants joined them, they wanted to follow their master in his home country. With stops underway it took ten months until they reached Rammekens in the South of the Republic on 2 September 1745. There VOC officials came on board to inspect the ship and to release the crew from their oath of loyalty to the VOC.

After debriefing with the VOC chamber in Zeeland and with the States General in the Hague Sichterman went to his newly built mansion with some 30 rooms, with a coach house and separate servant quarters on the Ossenmarkt in his birth town Groningen.

His cousin had built this house according to Sichterman's instructions from Bengal. Furnished as a museum with many Asiatic artifacts, natural specimens, paintings, Chinese ceramics and Chine de Commande porcelain, this special curiosity in Groningen attracted many visitors from Holland and abroad. The porcelain from China carried Sichterman's family coat-of-arms, an Indian squirrel in different formats on blue, red and grey porcelain that he had made on order from China.

He also built a country house in Groningen. He lived a rich life for nearly 20 years. For quite a number of years he received income from his textile and windmills he had set up in Bengal, as is confirmed by Johan Beckmann in his Groninger travel report after his visit in 1762. Even in 1777 the VOC is auctioning Sichterman textile.

Sichterman passed away on 15 January 1764. In an added codicil to his will Sichterman provided an allowance for his 'black servants Klaasje, Simon and Laurens'.

Kühne -van Diggelen, Wiet. *Jan Albert Sichterman, VOC-dienaar en 'koning' van Groningen*, 1e dr. Regio-Projekt, Groningen, 1995. 128 pp. ill. naamregister