CHAPTER ONE

GETTING TO KNOW PLACES AND PEOPLES:
COCHIN CIRCA 1750

'It has very strong walls; big, broad and airy unpaved streets, provided with beautiful houses; because of its tall buildings, churches and towers, it resembles a European city.'
François Valentijn

A VOC ship heading from Batavia to the roadstead of Fort Cochin in 1750 would in all probability put in at Galle in Ceylon en route. Approaching Cochin a traveller would have been confronted with a picturesque sight of high stone walls and buildings emerging from a background of palm and coconut greenery. In the year 1750, three Dutch East-Indiamen Knappenhof, Scheijbeek, and Schellag arrived at Cochin from Batavia and one VOC warship, De Gerechtigheid, called twice. Numerous other private ships anchored in the port of Cochin throughout the year. The ships entered port via a tidal inlet which led to an immense system of back-waters. The crew and passengers disembarked in a busy area called Calvetty with two-storied VOC warehouses (Illustration 1). Walking on the quay, new arrivals entered Fort Cochin through the gate at the port. Passing the commander’s house, they looked for inns and other places to stay. Apart from merchandise and men, the ships delivered general and secret letters, letters of appointment, transfer and promotion, and instructions and requests from the High Government in Batavia or the Gentlemen XVII in the Netherlands. The ships also carried private letters for the Company servants from friends and relatives in Europe and other parts of VOC Asia.

In the following pages we shall get to know Fort Cochin, meet its inhabitants and learn about the historical backgrounds of the different places and people connected to it. We shall first acquaint ourselves with the Malabar Coast, then familiarise ourselves with Fort Cochin, and finally meet the people who lived in and around Fort Cochin.

The waters off the coast of Malabar were considered relatively safe. The coast was rich in many small natural harbours frequented by traders from the surrounding areas. Some of the ports were at the mouths of waterways that gave access to the navigable backwaters, or ‘pepper highways’, which connected the ports and the hinterland. It is through these channels that the pepper harvested in the interior reached traders visiting the numerous ports of Malabar.
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Illustration 1: A view of Cochin by James Forbes, 14 Feb. 1772