CHAPTER TWO

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE MALABAR COMMAND
(1750–1784)

‘Income from land is the source from which the state exists.’
Commander Casparus de Jong

How did the Company and the people of Fort Cochin fare during the period between 1750 and 1784? How did the servants of the Company at Cochin and the High Government in Batavia deal with the various competitors on the coast? These are the main questions taken up in this chapter, the aim being to specifically identify and further define the nature of the Dutch presence in Malabar between 1750 and 1784. In the latter year, the Fourth Anglo–Dutch War came to an end bringing about a realignment of power in Europe and consequently among the European powers in India. The Fourth Anglo–Dutch War came to an end bringing about a realignment of power in Europe and consequently among the European powers in India. Present historiography defines the Dutch in South Asia as merchant–warriors, emporialists, entrepreneurs and traders, and it has been said that in the second half of the eighteenth century this merchant–warrior was pacified. Cochin has been adduced as an example of an emporium with European and indigenous trading communities dealing in a variety of goods. More thorough research on the Malabar Command, using new archival data, and focusing on the servants of the Company reveals another picture. Individual servants as well as the Company as an institution were changing their style of functioning in Malabar. The above quotation hints at the changes.

Changing Times: Europe and India

In an attempt to understand the changes in the fortunes of the people living in Fort Cochin, and in the Company itself, let us briefly review some developments in Europe—particularly Britain, France, and the Dutch Republic—and India. Because the English, the French, and the Dutch all had establishments in India and on the Malabar Coast, and relations between them in Europe had ramifications for them on the coast, one has to keep developments in Europe in mind while studying Fort Cochin. This will bring into a comparative perspective certain poli-
cies and reactions of the VOC officials in Fort Cochin and in Batavia. It will help us to better understand the actions of the men on the spot.

During the 1750–84 period, wars and alliances, both in Europe and in India, directly or indirectly affected the people of Fort Cochin. At times they were threatened by other European powers on the coast due to their enmity in Europe, and at other times they were threatened by indigenous powers on the coast that could receive support from rival European powers. That the people in Fort Cochin were informed about these wars and alliances is evident from the many volumes of general and secret letters from and to the Netherlands, Batavia, Malacca, Bengal, Coromandel, Ceylon, Surat, Persia, and other offices in VOC Asia, kept in the Fort’s archives in those days. They were also in correspondence with the Portuguese, the English, and the French. For information on events in Europe, Company officials in Cochin more or less depended on these official letters, usually sent via Batavia, although occasionally they could hope for information from the VOC offices at Ceylon or Bengal, where ships arrived directly from the Netherlands.

Correspondence with the local indigenous rulers in Persian, Arabic, Marathi, the then contemporary southern languages of Kanada, Tamil and Malayalam, kept the Dutch officials in the fort well informed about relations among the sovereigns in India. Through this exchange of letters, they were aware of the court politics in the regions immediately in their vicinity and the different factions that could come to or might lose power, thereby affecting the Company’s relationship with the different factions. These changes—both far from and near Cochin—affected the general security and well-being of the people there.

The inhabitants were thus informed about the developments around them, though sometimes rather late, as in the case of war in Europe when shipping and communication were affected. On the other hand, it was the Malabar Command that informed Batavia about the developments on the coast, on the basis of which the High Government and the Gentlemen XVII prepared their instructions and policies for Malabar, thereby affecting the lives of the people who had to execute the orders.

Power Struggle in Europe

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Britain was emerging as the world’s leading mercantile power, eclipsing the Dutch Republic, which was past its Golden Age, and gradually surpassing the French. The East India Company (EIC) had become a strong competitor and in many parts of Asia directly challenged its Dutch counterpart. When compared to the English company, the VOC’s trade in South-Asia was generally on a path of decline.