CHAPTER THREE

THE SOCIAL WORLD OF FORT COCHIN

‘Whoever who does not want to die, let him register his name here;
In order to remain living even after his death;
If not in the roots, let it be in the trunk,
For it is out of the roots that the tree has got its life.’
Register of Marriages, Fort Cochin

These telling and true to-life lines, taken from the front page of a marriage book maintained in Fort Cochin, acquaint us with a view of the legal and moral foundation of marriage. While family ties often become a system of support, marriage and the birth of offspring lead to extension of family networks as well as the continuation of family names. The institution of marriage and the role it played in the lives of VOC servants will be dealt with in this chapter which also examines the social and economic relationships of Company servants in Fort Cochin.

Fort Cochin and the region around it formed a single geographic and economic entity. Yet the people who inhabited the region were divided into two distinct political domains: the Company servants and their dependents lived within the walls while the indigenous people of Malabar lived outside the fort walls in Mattancheri, on Vaipin Island, on Bolgatty Island, and in other surrounding areas. Politically, the realm of the Raja of Cochin was separated from that of the VOC. In principle, Dutch jurisdiction was limited to Fort Cochin, but traditionally it also extended to the Roman Catholics on the coast.

The politics and economics of the VOC in Malabar were not limited to Fort Cochin. The men on the spot knew how to deal with and adjust to the constantly changing political and economic environment of Malabar. They did so by shifting their focus from earning profit for the Company through commercial activities to harnessing income from land. Let us identify what defined Fort Cochin’s main social and cultural characteristics and examine how far the fort’s influence extended beyond its walls and how the larger Malabar littoral milieu affected its society. In order to understand the VOC as an administrative organisation that governed Fort Cochin and maintained order among its inhabitants, it would be desirable to study the worlds outside Fort Cochin. However, paucity of sources and the larger goal of the research project compel us to focus on Fort Cochin and unearth the outside influences as much as possible by studying what was happening within the walls.
The people living in Fort Cochin and those living outside interacted with each other at many different levels: personal, commercial, and legal. Through incidents in daily lives culled from data gathered from the civil and criminal cases, wills, estate papers, papers created by public institutions like the church, hospital, Orphan Board and so on, one gets a glimpse of episodes in the day-to-day life and work of many people in Fort Cochin. This confirms that, although the people were divided into two distinct physical and legal spaces, with distinct administrative establishments, they were inter-connected and interacted with each other. Differences, interactions and social distances among the various groups of people in and around Fort Cochin, as well as some instances of social and commercial networks and interdependence comprise the thread that will guide us through the 'social world of Fort Cochin'.

To unravel the unique characteristics of this social world, chronology will be temporarily abandoned and replaced by individuals, institutions, and incidents. This enables us to envision Fort Cochin as it was during the decades between the 1750s and the 1790s. The investigation of the VOC’s management of its public institutions will bring forward the administrative practices of the VOC, while an enquiry into the public institutions and the individuals using them will help us draw conclusions about finer aspects of the contemporary social scenario.

Mestizos and Merchants

Owing to the Portuguese presence, and as a consequence of centuries of miscegenation, the Malabar Coast had many people of mixed European and Asiatic parentage (Eurasians) referred to by the Portuguese as Mestiços. In 1580, the Italian Jesuit Father Alexandre Valinano, writing on the population of Portuguese India, distinguished the categories of Reinol (Europe-born Portuguese), Castiços (Portuguese born in India of pure European parentage), Mestiços (born of a European father and a Eurasian mother), and the indigenous pure-bred Indians. In the seventeenth century, the term Castiço came to be applied to Portuguese persons born in India without any infusion of Asian blood, and the term Mestiço to anyone who had a European ancestor, however remote. Thus the classification was based both on place of birth and on ethnic profile.

The Dutch in Fort Cochin used a similar system whereby Mestizen, in Dutch, meant persons of mixed European and non-European (Asian) parentage. Castizo, when prefixed with the word ‘white’, denoted Asia-born persons of pure European parentage. The category of ‘White Castizo’ is a mysterious one and was probably used only in Malabar. When the VOC established its presence on the Malabar Coast, many