



In 1498, when Vasco da Gama set foot in Kerala looking for Christians and spices, he unleashed a wave of political fury that would topple local powers like a house of cards. The cosmopolitan fabric of a vibrant trading society—with its Jewish and Arab merchants, Chinese pirate heroes and masterful Hindu Zamorins—was ripped apart, heralding an age of violence and bloodshed. One prince, however, emerged triumphant from this descent into chaos. Shrewdly marrying Western arms to Eastern strategy, Martanda Varma consecrated the dominion of Travancore, destined to become one of the most dutiful pillars of the British Raj. What followed was two centuries of internecine conflict in one of India's premier princely states, culminating in a dynastic feud between two sisters battling to steer the fortunes of their house on the eve of Independence.

Manu S. Pillai's retelling of this sprawling saga focuses on the remarkable life and work of Sethu Lakshmi Bayi, the last—and forgotten—queen of the House of Travancore. The supporting cast includes the flamboyant painter Raja Ravi Varma and his wrathful wife, scheming matriarchs of 'violent, profligate and sordid' character, wife-swapping court favourites, vigilant English agents, quarrelling consorts and lustful kings. Extensively researched and vividly rendered, *The Ivory Throne* conjures up a dramatic world of political intrigues and factions, black magic and conspiracies, crafty ceremonies and splendourous temple treasures, all harnessed in a tragic contest for power and authority in the age of empire.

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'A magnificent effort' —*Mint*



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THE IVORY THRONE



MANU S. PILLAI

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'A gem of a book' —*The Indian Express*

THE IVORY THRONE

CHRONICLES OF THE HOUSE OF TRAVANCORE

MANU S. PILLAI



COLLEGE OF AVIAN SCIENCES & MANAGEMENT
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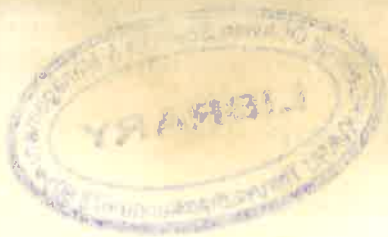
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'A clear-headed history ... Well-researched and well-written, *The Ivory Throne* adds a new point of view to the study of Kerala.'

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Éléphants du Radja de Travancor (Elephants of the Rajah of Travancore) (1848), lithograph by L.H. de Rudder based on a drawing by Prince Aleksandr Mikhailovich Saltuikov.

The Ivory Throne

Chronicles of the House of Travancore

MANU S. PILLAI



HarperCollins Publishers India

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Introduction: The Story of Kerala

In July 1497 when Vasco da Gama set sail for India, King Manuel of Portugal assorted a distinctly expendable crew of convicts and criminals to go with him. After all, the prospects of this voyage succeeding were rather slender considering that no European had ever advanced beyond Africa's Cape of Good Hope before, let alone *reached* the fabled spice gardens of India. Da Gama's mirthless quest was essentially to navigate uncharted, perilous waters, and so it seemed wiser to invest in men whose chances in life were not especially more inspiring than in death. Driven by formidable ambition and undaunted spirit, it took da Gama ten whole months, full of dangerous adventures and gripping episodes, to finally hit India's shores. It was the dawn of a great new epoch in human history and this pioneer knew he was standing at the very brink of greatness. Prudence and experience, however, dictated that in an unknown land it was probably wiser not to enter all at once. So one of his motley crew was selected to swim ashore and sense the mood of the 'natives' there before the captain could make his triumphant, choreographed entrance. And thus, ironically, the first modern European to sail all the way from the West and to set foot on Indian soil was a petty criminal from the gutters of Lisbon.¹

For centuries Europe had been barred direct access to the prosperous East, first politically when international trade fell into Arab hands in the third century after Christ, and then when the emergence of Islam erected a religious obstacle in the seventh. Fruitless wars and bloodshed followed, but not since the heyday of the Greeks and Romans had the West enjoyed steady contact with India. Spices and other oriental produce regularly reached the hungry capitals of Europe, but so much was the distance, cultural and geographic, that Asia became a