

Return of Muziris

PASSING THROUGH Conservation architect Benny Kuriakose charts the restoration efforts of the Muziris Heritage Project, of which he is the chief consultant, as NITA SATHYENDRAN listens

Brick by brick, stone by stone, the ancient port city of Muziris, which was once one of the most important centres of maritime trade in the world, is being restored to its former glory under the Muziris Heritage Project of the Government of Kerala. At the helm of this ambitious project (currently one of the biggest conservation efforts in India), is its chief consultant, conservation architect Benny Kuriakose. The Chennai-based Kuriakose, who grew up in the city, was here recently for a seminar on conservation. He got chatting about the restoration efforts in and around Kodungalloor taluk in Thirissur district and North Paravur taluk in Ernakulam district, the area of the 'Muziris Heritage Site.'

Kerala's history

"The wealth of heritage that is to be found in the bylanes of the area is simply amazing," says Kuriakose. Muziris (discovered to be present day Pattanam, near Kodungalloor) was a key link in the Indo-Roman Empire and Indo-Greek trade route that dealt in spices, gold, precious stones, textiles and so on. Once upon a time it drew legions of Roman, Greek, Dutch, Portuguese, Chinese, Jews and Arab traders from across the sea, whose influences, architectural and cultural, are still to be found in the area.



"The area boasts outstanding examples of built heritage including buildings, markets, footways, bridges, cemeteries and so on, some even as late as the 20th century, besides archaeological sites and even landscapes that represent around 2,000 to 3,000 years of Kerala's history. The area also has a wealth of intangible associations and traditions connected to Kerala religion, society and culture. Nowadays, though the area is a known pil-

grimage centre, tourist inflow is very low," says Kuriakose, who drew up the master plan for the project, at the behest of State Finance Minister, Thomas Issac.

Kuriakose, an alumnus of the College of Engineering (he has a degree in Civil Engineering), the Government Arts College and the Model School in the city, began his career as an apprentice to late architect Laurie Baker. Soon he found his calling in conservation and is today,



KNOW YOUR HERITAGE
Says Benny Kuriakose (left); Remains of the Kottapuram Fort in Kodungalloor (top) and the Jewish Synagogue at Chendamangalam, monuments that are part of the Muziris Heritage Project
PHOTO: V. GANESAN

one of India's leading conservation architects renowned for his tsunami reconstruction projects in Nagapattinam, rehabilitation villages for victims of the Latur and Kutch earthquakes, Dakshinachitra heritage centre, near Chennai, and so on.

Kuriakose drew up the Muziris plan in 2006 and the project was started in September 2008 in collaboration with 19 government departments and agencies, with Central Government

aid of Rs. 41 crore – the biggest allocation for a conservation plan ever. In the initial phase of the project, four of the 27 odd museums, namely the Paliyam Kovilakam, the Paliyam Nalukettu and two synagogues, and two archaeological sites, namely, Pattanam and Kottapuram Fort, will shortly be opened to the public.

"It will not be your usual museum visit. Nor will it solely cater for tourism. All these monuments are connected and

we want to tell a story – the story of Kerala – through them. Wherever there are missing links there will be museums (such as the Chavittunatakam Centre at Gothuru, Syrian Christian History Museum at Kodungalloor, Traditional Lifestyle Museum at Chendamangalam, Armory Museum at Kottapuram fort and so on). The Muziris Heritage Project is primarily intended to be a centre for education rather than tourism, with focus on sustainability and involvement of the local communities," explains Kuriakose, adding that the master plan is a model one for conservation in Kerala because it follows international guidelines such as UNESCO charters on heritage conservation, the Nara Document on Authenticity, ICOMOS (International Council of Monuments and Sites) charters and so on.

In keeping with these guidelines, the project also envisages features such as interactive museums, visitor centres, a virtual reconstruction centre, facilities to travel by boat on the River Periyar to various monuments, cycle tours of the area and circuit tours, to name a few. "To quote a well-wisher, in a few years time the Muziris Heritage Site will become the Taj Mahal of Kerala," asserts Kuriakose.

For more information check out www.keralatourism.org/muziris/