

# An Inventory of Vanished Treasures

The Muziris Heritage Project in Kerala by Vedika Architects understands the need to conserve, enhance and interpret the cultural significance of the ancient landscape of the port-city of Muziris and prepares it to, not only, adapt to a modern setting, but also contribute significantly to the aspirations that accompany it.

*Text: Shalmali Wagle*

*Images & Drawings: courtesy Vedika Architects*

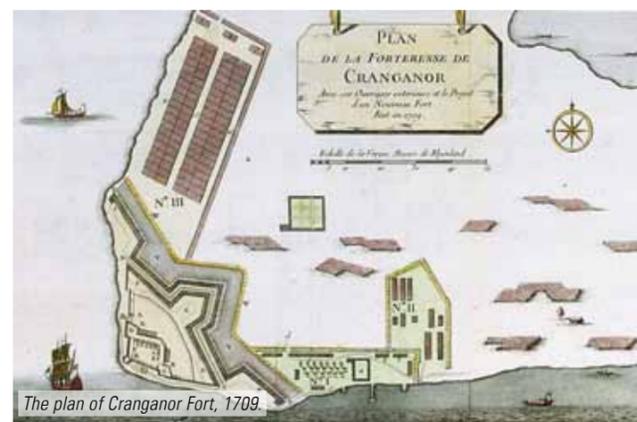
Imagine a time back in the early ages, when mankind was only just beginning to discover what the world and his existence meant. Imagine a sumptuous sliver of land intertwined with water bodies opening into the voluminous spumes of the Arabian Sea. Imagine a dominant port swarming with cargo vessels of the ancient world and unrestricted access to markets in Rome, Greece, China and Persia. Imagine a peaceful nucleus for Judaism, Christianity, Islam and an aromatic amalgamation of such diverse world cultures... and then imagine this and much more, vanishing noiselessly, without a warning, sign or trail, swallowed by the tortuous sands of time!

Kerala has a history that goes back several millennia, tracing its mythical origins to the supreme Hindu Gods. In the Ramayana, Muziris is fondly called Murachipattanam; in his characteristic flight of romance, Kalidasa meditates on Murachi's pepper vine, cardamom and outlandish damsels and in Sangam literature, Muziris becomes Muchiri, and later Muyirikkode. A more tangible perspective sees Muziris as an affluent port-city of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century BC where the ancient mariners anchored. Among the earliest of its kind in the world, it was a place of prosperity, of craft and architecture and of abundant opportunities in trade and commerce.

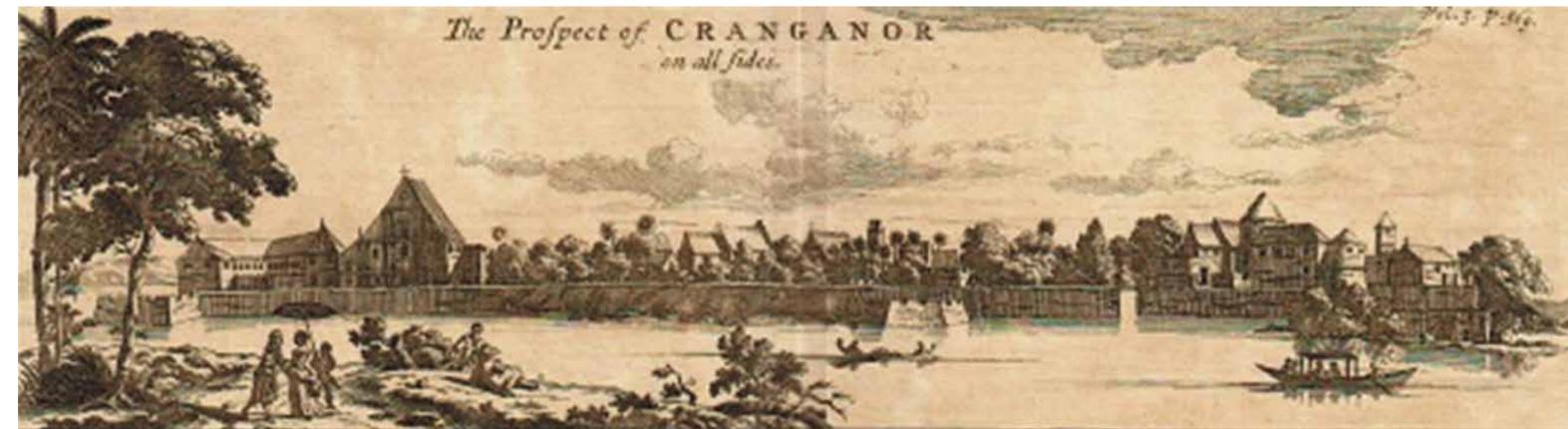
However, disaster struck in 1341, when the profile of the water bodies in the Periyar River basin, on the Malabar Coast in Kerala underwent a major transformation. The prosperous port-city suddenly dropped off the map, due to a flood or an earthquake, or possibly both; it was silted over and its site, left to conjecture. Muziris had disappeared and where once relentless activity bustled, now napped an unassuming humble village, Pattanam, thirty kilometres to the north of Kochi.

Now, imagine the possibilities that lie behind this land of opportunities. Imagine the city and its environs waking up once again to a new world. Imagine a well-conserved heritage site, in

a modern setting with a modern outlook, becoming a vitrine of Kerala's history, architecture, trade, crafts and living traditions... Realizing the potential impact of a legacy and opportunity as valuable as this, Chennai-based Vedika Architects initiate an ambitious 'Muziris Heritage Project' in Pattanam and its surrounding areas to salvage a large number of monuments and propose a development plan for the region. The idea is to create awareness and restore the identity of valuable beginnings, in the form of a living-exhibit of 2000 years of its historic culture, to a still-evolving modern society.



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The overall scheme of the development includes the conservation of the built-heritage in the area, the regeneration of the canals as networks of waterways, water-front development, refurbishment of the public squares and interaction zones and tourism-enhancing facilities like pavilions and boat jetties.



The natural setting.



Vocational traditions.



Customs and culture.



Architectural heritage.



Local practices.



Techniques and skills.

Nestled on the northern shore of a pleasant branch of the Periyar River, the Muziris Heritage Site stretches across the two municipalities of North Paravur in the Ernakulam District and Kodungallur in the Thrissur District. It includes four Panchayats in the Ernakulam District, namely Chendamangalam, Chittatikura, Vadakekkara, Pallippuram, and two in the Thrissur District, namely Azhikode and Methala. The archaeological excavations in these areas have unearthed signs of early trade and commerce that have, in turn, unveiled a wealth of information not only on the port, but also on its hinterland, the entire Periyar Basin, and the historic towns of Kodungallur, Pattanam and Paravur. The Muziris Heritage Project, in its context, establishes an extraordinary example of how historic monuments, archaeological remnants and natural landscape together collaborate to illustrate a significant stage in human history, bearing testimony to its fast-disappearing culture and tradition.

The Project evolves from the inherent natural environment of its context. The architectural inheritance comprises of numerous notable buildings from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries scattered arbitrarily. The surviving elements include not only buildings like temples, forts, houses and palaces, but also the markets, streets and footways, bridges and cemeteries. A network of waterways influence and inspire the growth of the architecture and the built-heritage, with beautifully incorporated panoramic views and a smooth flow of linkages between the elements

of importance. While these physical entities create a unique unparalleled ensemble, intangible associations and traditions form the essence of the Muziris experience. The culture of worship, teaching, fishing and bathing is several thousand years old in the region, its value only increasing with time. The design proposal draws inspiration from these tangible and intangible elements and links them to cater to modern aspirations of tourism and community space, evolving in the process.

Pattanam and its immediate environs are under great pressure of development and changes, the sustainability of the monuments and landscape in the vicinity at a continuous threat. The National Highway 17 cuts across the landscape; it is positioned for widening, placing many old buildings under threat of demolition. The Muziris Heritage Project is envisioned on the basis of the need to conserve, enhance and interpret the cultural significance of the landscape employing universal values of heritage conservation. The proposal aims to foster pride, awareness and understanding of the cultural distinctiveness and diversity of the ancient port-city, conserving its assets, their values and significance for the future. Promoted as a sustainable site, the project engages the residents and their skill to sustain, while making it accessible and pleasurable to all. It celebrates the ancient atmosphere by integrating heritage matters with educational programmes and popular tourism with heritage management.

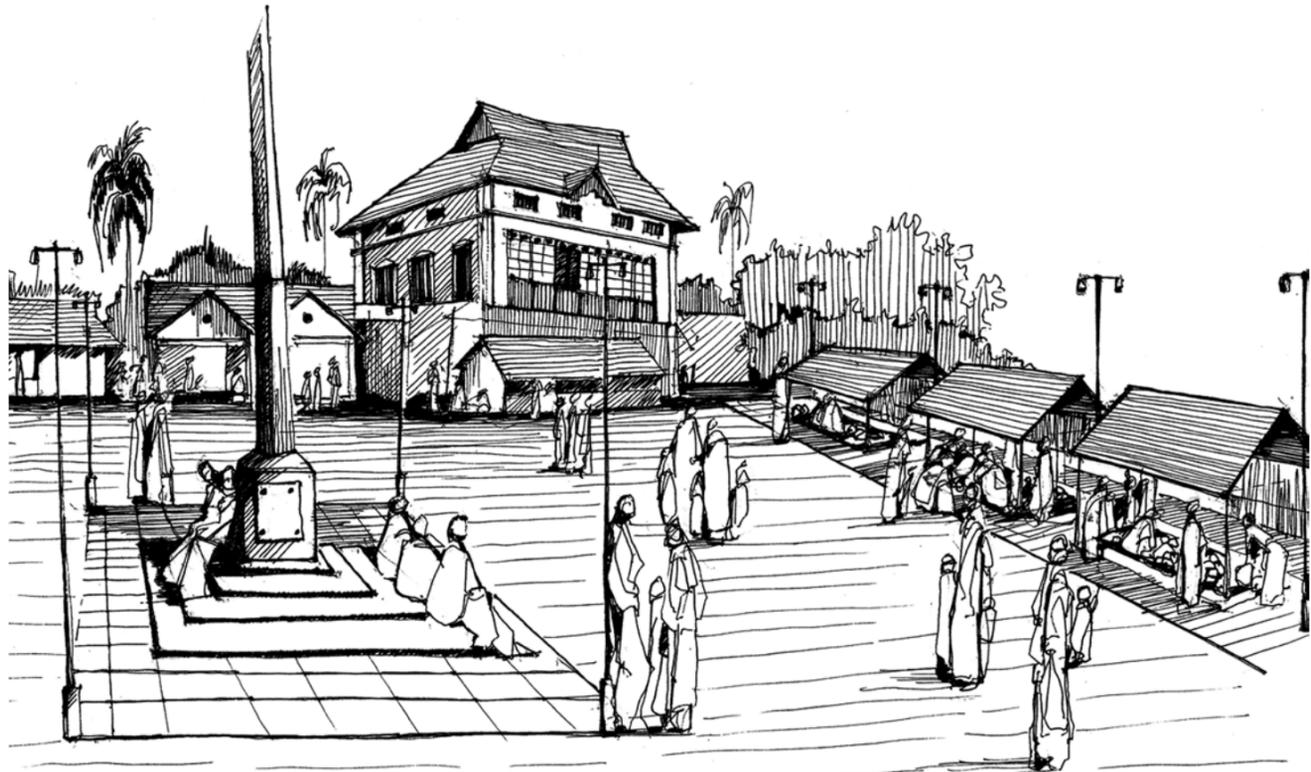


SITE PLAN



The Conservation Development Plan of the project is a 'process-oriented plan' with substantial inputs from multi-disciplinary stake-holders. This includes the involvement of representatives such as architects, planners, historians, social scientists, educationists, 'panchayat' members, trustees, religious authorities as well as the public. The overall scheme of the development includes the conservation of the built-heritage in the area, the regeneration of the canals as networks of waterways, water-front development, refurbishment of the public squares and interaction zones and tourism-enhancing facilities like pavilions and boat jetties. The new development compliments the existing, respects the significance of the site and is appropriate to the historic and the architectural context.

Sustainable transport aids the conservation of the character, employing pedestrian and cycling-routes to reduce the conflict between vehicles and pedestrians. The redundant jetties, foot bridges and other water spaces are managed and re-used in a way that respects their significance and utilises their potential. It is hoped that the proposal will help guide the future of the site, unlocking the potential of its buildings, monuments, public realm and context, through the education and delight of its residents, workers, visitors and tourists, without altering the principal purposes of the involved monuments and buildings. Besides repairing the damaged buildings, finding alternate uses and reviving the original character of the place, the scheme also incorporates basic amenities like public toilets, drinking water, street lighting and storm water drainage and additional facilities like shops, cafes and restaurants, internet kiosks and banks and ATMs.

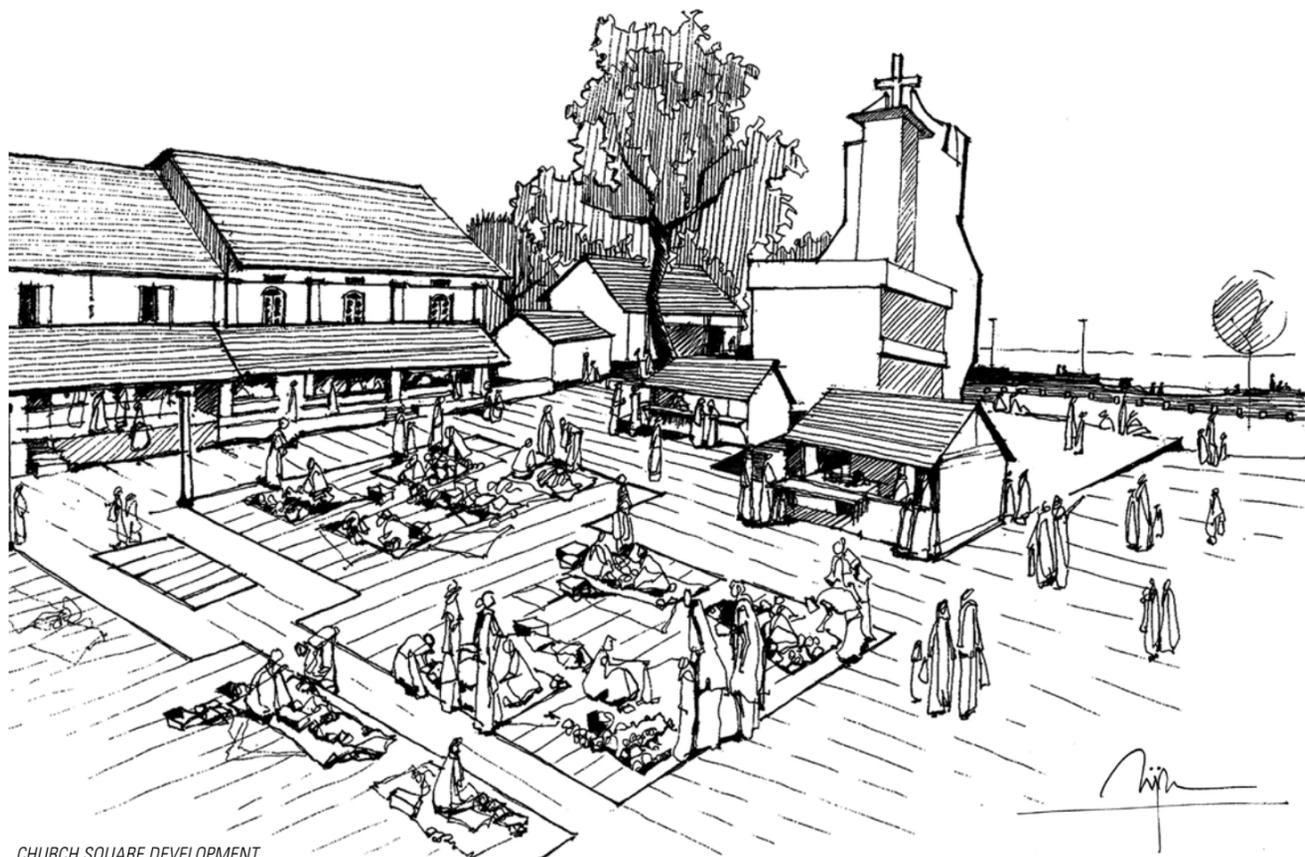


MARKET SQUARE DEVELOPMENT

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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BUILT FORMS AND THE STREETS

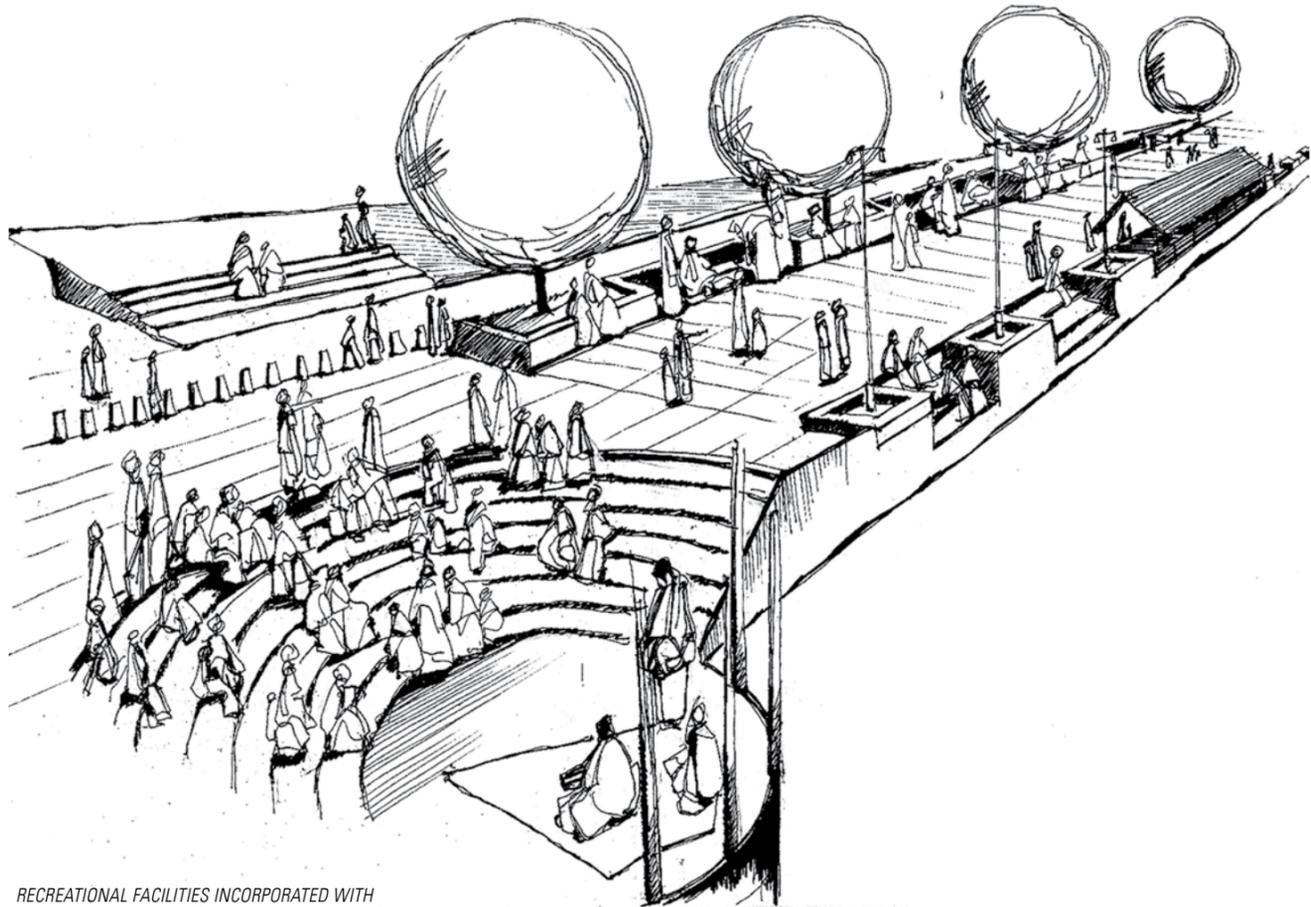


CHURCH SQUARE DEVELOPMENT

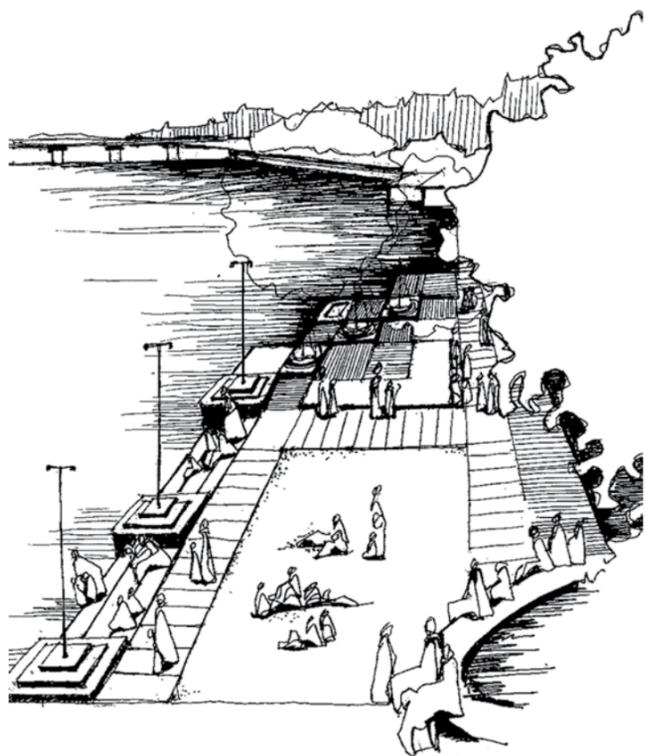
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A SKETCH OF THE MARKET STREETS



RECREATIONAL FACILITIES INCORPORATED WITH THE WATER-FRONT



THE WATER-FRONT PROVIDES AN ECONOMIC VALUE AND A SOCIAL DIMENSION



Development of the water's edge



Green buffers between the public spaces and the circulation.



SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT COMPRISING OF BOAT-TAXIS AND JETTIES



- 1. Pattanam
- 2. Paravur North (Market – Synagogue)
- 3. Kottayil Kovilakom (Chendamangalam)
- 4. Krishna Temple – Paliyam
- 5. Boat Club – Gothuruthu
- 6. Gothuruthu Cheria Palli
- 7. Kottapuram Fort
- 8. Kottapuram Market
- 9. Thiruvenchikulam Temple (Kodungallur)
- 10. Pularchakattu
- 11. VK Rajan Memorial Park (Kodungallur)
- 12. Pallipuram Fort
- 13. Sahodaran Ayyappan
- 14. Cherai Churches
- 15. Kottoi Kovilakom (Kodungallur)
- 16. Reception Site (Kodungallur)

KEY PLAN FOR THE PROPOSED BOAT JETTIES



A network of waterways with panoramic views and linkages between the elements.

Bounded by water, the project attempts to make the best use of land while protecting natural resources from the minor, but potentially detrimental effects of development in the area. The public spaces not only provide an economic value but introduce a social dimension, besides maintaining the natural bio-diversity of the region when combined with the waterfronts.

Water-dependent uses like recreational fishing and boating find ways to balance themselves along the water's edge and channels. The transportation comprises of a combination of an organised network of pedestrian and bicycle tracks and a network of waterways with boat-taxis. The existing old Boat Jetty building on the site is adapted to perform as an information centre and a ticketing counter. The introduced Boat Jetty has shops and interactive waiting-areas treated with natural green to form points of pause.

The once ambiguous field of architectural conservation is now an extremely disputed discipline. The protagonists are no longer merely uninformed professionals fighting over philosophical values, but the 'awakened' masses which now believe that they have a pivotal role in determining the fate of historic monuments. Between them is an array of politicians, bureaucrats and activists, each with freshly discovered opinions and elemental knowledge on the issue. Though the methods adopted vary from mediated design solutions to protests and processions, the issues sought remain the same: what to conserve, or what not to conserve, of the existing architectural heritage and how to go about the restoration process itself. The Muziris Heritage Project does not seek to preserve the past while valourising it or by succumbing to blind revivalism, but instead cautiously resuscitates its inherent value by awakening its memory by embracing contemporary agendas. With this, it strives to mediate the future, one that is born of the past but is not trapped within it. ■

FACT FILE:

Project	:	Muziris Heritage Project
Location	:	Kerala
Architect	:	Vedika Architects
Client	:	The Government of Kerala