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# In Search of Muziris: India's Biggest Archaeological Dig

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An excavation site that is part of the Muziris Heritage Project, also known as the Pattanam Excavations.

**Kochi:** Tucked away in the tiny bylanes of Kerala's Kodungallur town, it's easy to miss one of India's biggest archaeological findings.

The Muziris Heritage Project, also known as the 'Pattanam excavations', that began in 2007 has found conclusive evidence of what was once a flourishing trade port on the spice route.

Before a flood in the Periyar River in the 14th century washed away the entire port, history books talk of ships laden with gold sailing across the seas looking for the one thing their lands didn't yield - spices - that only this part of the world could offer. Muziris is believed to have been that place where the oceanic cross currents brought in a particular kind of syncretism, fuelled by the spice trade to become an important centre of the now famous spice route.

It was the Roman Empire that needed the pepper. Malayalam author Setu Madhavan says they needed pepper to season the meat they had to store for a long harsh winter. Arab merchants sold it to them at high prices, so they set forth themselves. They sent Greek sailors because they were "good navigators and they found that during the pre-monsoon winds - the south western winds - if a ship set sail from the Red Sea, it could reach Muziris in 40 days."

The Archaeological Survey of India licensed the Kerala Council for Historical Research to oversee the dig in 2007. Its director, PJ Cherian, says the Pattanam excavations link the whole Indian Ocean region to the Mediterranean, through the Red Sea - a confluence of cultures and religions that led to a "web of relationships which included human beings, technology, nature and cultural aspects that linked these three continents. This was for the first time in human history that this type of an urban process was spreading across Indian ocean."

For the last eight years, a team of archaeologists have managed to recover everything - from pottery to glass beads, metal objects - from sites scattered across the area, an hour and a half from Kerala's current flourishing port of Cochin. Archaeologist Preetha Nayar, who's leading some of the research, says the evidence from the area points to "very active trade - the material like the potteries, we have recovered 1 lakh 30 thousand glass beads that could perhaps reveal that this was not just a trade port but also possibly a production centre."

The dig has attracted international attention precisely for these links. Historians from the British museum say no other site in India has yielded so much archaeological evidence and that once found, there were bound to be Roman and Middle Eastern artefacts there.

Conservationists say the project - still young for an archaeological dig - is remarkable because it has developed without creating havoc for the local community. AGK Menon, convenor of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), says, "Here the local lives are transforming but in a way that is determining their needs, they need a bus stop they provide a bus stop and the bus stop can also be serving the tourist. They need a ferry point and the ferry point is being built so that tourists can come. But that local people also need it so they're going about in a step-by-step way."

But the significance of the dig runs deeper than just its historical or archaeological value. This part of Kerala is where different cultures and religions mixed with each other to give India its first churches, mosques and synagogues.

In fact, you'd almost miss it if you weren't looking, but the Cheraman Juma Masjid is India's oldest mosque. Established in 629 AD on the remains of a Buddhist vihara, it was set up on the orders of the reigning king of Kerala, Cheraman Perumal, who ruled from his capital of Kodungallur. Legend says he had a dream that the moon was split in half, and without finding a satisfactory explanation about what it meant, he converted to Islam and left for Mecca. He died on his way back, in present day Muscat, but is believed to have instructed his chieftains to establish India's first mosque here so that Arab traders sailing through trading in spice had a place of worship.

The mosque trust's chairman, also a local surgeon, Dr Mohd Sayeed says, "the Archaeological Survey of India did some excavations in 1962 and found that the period could be traced to 10th to 11th century." Unlike the Islam of the north that came in through Moghul conquests, here trade and commerce led to a different kind of practice and faith.

Christianity too entered India through the waters of the Kerala coast. Legend says St Thomas the Apostle travelled from Jerusalem and landed here in 52 AD. The pontifical church at Azhikode nearby is one of the three possible alighting points according to the church's rector, Father Jose. He says the Azhikode church "very gladly cooperated with the excavation of the Muziris Project. Excavations are going on, and we think that after the excavations of Muziris Project, we may have some clarity on the exact location where St Thomas landed, and where he established the first church in India."

At a time when religious divides are sharpening, conversion has become the subject of volatile and belligerent politics, churches have been vandalised, and "love jihad" has entered the vocabulary as an idiom for mixed marriage the confluence of faiths and cultures that the project links together is not lost on anyone, even though the RSS publication, 'Organizer', called it a "left conspiracy, spearheaded by the Kerala Council for Historical Research, to showcase Muziris as a centre of composite culture consisting of Jews, Dutch, Portugese, Muslims and Babylonians. Hindus are only represented by vanvasis."

But author Setu waves away such criticism. He talks of a hillock in his own native village, Chendamangalam. "On the top there is a famous Krishna temple and down below there is a Jewish synagogue, a Christian church and Muslim mosque. It is all in a radius of half a kilometre. It was all built on a land allotted by the then raja. It was unbelievable at that point of time. This was possibly built some 500 or 600 years back. That is a kind of religious harmony happening at that point of time when the Jews were on the run. The second temple was destroyed in Babylon and Muziris, familiar because of trade, and far away from their troubles became a major landing point."

"It has huge potential not only for historical facts but the cultural message, the cultural message is also huge that one can make through that site," says INTACH's Menon.

And its potential to change the local economy via tourism is what has graced the Muziris project with political patronage, irrespective of who's in power. Local Congress MLA, VD Satheesan, says even though it started at the time of the previous Left government, they agreed to leave politics out of it because "this is not a conventional tourism project. We have no such experience for the heritage protection. Mr Thomas Isaac, then the finance minister, was the person behind it. We discussed in detail, then we reached a conclusion that there won't be any political intervention in this project."

The three-phase project is expected to showcase museums, historical and religious sites alike, and the first phase is expected to be inaugurated before the year ends. So whether it brings in travellers following wanderlust and history or whether it draws pilgrims and boosts religious tourism is a matter of fine print. The significance, symbolism and scope of The Muziris heritage project is far greater than simply reviving history because it highlights the very composite culture of tolerance and integration that gives not just Kerala, but all of India its place in the world.