

# Arts & Culture

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**T**hink of Kerala, and it's not just natural beauty that comes to mind, but the way the State has preserved its past. In fact, if one wants to hear lovely old Tamil words such as *thaazhkol* (key) and *uduppu* (clothes), being used in everyday conversation, one has to go to Kerala. But on a visit to Kerala some years ago, this writer noticed the strident march of modernism in quite a few places, with graceful homes being replaced by 'modern' ones in hideous shades of purple and pink. And one couldn't help wondering if Kerala too was losing its grip over tradition. "Not so," says architect Benny Kuriakose. "Although we do keep losing a bit of the past everyday, today there is a lot more awareness about heritage. Why else would

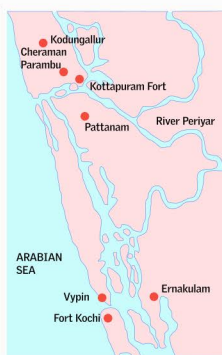
## Past is charming

Architect Benny Kuriakose talks about Muziris, his pet project. *Suganthy Krishnamachari* listens.

people pay more to stay at heritage resorts rather than in five star hotels, where the tariff is less? And why would old brass vessels grace living rooms?"

Talking about how modern buildings soon become irrelevant, he points to how popular malls attract fewer footfalls, when newer ones come up. "So a mall can soon become obsolete. But if it's a heritage building like the old Spencer's building or Moore Market, people will come just for the charm of the old world architecture. Such buildings will never go out of fashion." "People are becoming aware of the inadvisability of using glass in buildings," says Benny. But will not the jettisoning of modern materials push up costs? "Not at all. When Jeevan and I designed the Mayor Ramanathan Centre, we spent Rs. 12 lakhs on elevation, and we didn't use glass. If we had used glass, we would have spent Rs. 2 to 3 crores." Stressing the importance of vernacular architecture, Benny says, "In vernacular architecture, materials and techniques take into consideration the climate and culture."

So how do you get people to use vernacular architecture, when fewer people seem to be into it? "The few who know its value must keep on using it and advocating its use. It's just like any dying art. The fewer the people practising it, the more vigorously those few must continue to practise it." Benny's client Gowtham, who runs a school in a hilly tribal area near Palghat, designed and built an office room, even before he came to Benny. The room built of timber, rests on four concrete stilts, on top of



▲ **Paliyam Naalukettu. (Below) The Paravur synagogue and (left) Benny Kuriakose.** PHOTO: K. PICHUMAIL

which are aluminium pots, coated with cashew kernel oil, to keep termites away. Split bamboos are used for the ceiling. The walls are plastered with mud. Showing me pictures of what Gowtham has built, Benny says, "So here you have something locally designed and executed using locally available materials."

A project that is really close to Benny's heart is the Muziris Heritage Project (MHP) of the Kerala Government, of which he is the Conservation Consultant.

Muziris, which dates back to at least 1 Century BC, was an ancient port of Kerala that finds mention in Sangam literature, Pliny the Elder's work and Periplus's 1<sup>st</sup> Century C.E. travelogue. An important trade centre between Southern India and

the Phoenicians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Roman Empire, and even the British, the exact location of the port is not yet identified.

While Benny doesn't want to get into historical controversies about the location, he waxes eloquent about the MHP itself. The award-winning architect, who has a Masters degree in Conservation from the York University and a PhD from

IIT Madras, talks of how people can be brought round, if you explain the importance of heritage to them.

For example, restoring a 1,400 year old mosque in the Muziris region, meant later additions had to be demolished. But the congregation numbered 2000, and the old structure could accommodate only 300. So Benny suggested a basement to accommodate the congregation, leaving the old structure visible. The committee in charge of the mosque agreed. But a wealthy donor suggested that instead of a basement, a five storey structure be built behind the old mosque.

Benny told the committee, "If you allow modern

### Muziris Heritage Project Site Map

- 1. North Paravur Synagogue Market**
- 2. Pattanam Excavation Site**
- 3. Kottayil Kovilakom Synagogue Vypeekota Seminary Holy Cross Church Krishna Temple Cemetery**
- 4. Chendamangalam Paliyam Dutch Palace Paliyam Nalukettu Market**
- 5. Gotthuruthu Fort Market**
- 6. Kottapuram Market**



- 7. Chermanam Parambu**
  - 8. Kodungallur Bagavathy Temple Kunhikuttan Thampuran's House Chermanam Juma Masjid Thiruvanchikulam Temple**
  - 9. Eriyad Abdul Rahaman Sahib's House**
  - 10. Azhikode Marthoma Church**
  - 11. Pallipuram Fort Sahodran Ayyappan's House**
  - 12. Visitor Centre**
- Boat Jetty

buildings to come up near the old mosque, then you will be making a mistake knowingly. For a historic building, the setting is as important as the building itself. So think of whether your children will thank you if you allow a modern building behind the old mosque." When Benny finished speaking, the president of the committee said: "We must not let donors decide what should be done. We must make the decision ourselves." And they decided to go along with Benny's idea.

The MHP has looked at intangible heritage, and also at traditional occupations of the people in the region such as weaving, for instance. There are 130 looms in the area. Earlier, there used to be 900. The weavers were originally from Andhra and used to weave cloth for the Cochin royal family. Now they make the Kerala thorthu (towel) and Ayyappa dhotis, and make just Rs.125 a day. And that's hardly anything in a State such as Kerala, where labour doesn't come cheap.

Benny says that for heritage conservation to succeed, people must be proud of their heritage. He gives the example of Thambi, a master of Chavittunatakam, a folk art,

### Green drive

Benny Kuriakose recently spoke about the MHP, for the C.P. Ramaswami Iyer Foundation. The project covers an area of 150 sq.km, and encompasses seven panchayats and two municipalities. "Muziris is not just a place. It is a concept," said Benny. It's an attempt to educate future generations about heritage, and to throw light on Kerala's pan Indian and international trade links. The MHP is a green project. Tourists have to travel from one heritage spot to another by country boats. Nineteen government departments are involved in the project. "We have evolved a model for Muziris, which can be replicated elsewhere," said Benny.

where mostly Biblical stories are enacted. Chavittunatakam is popular in Muziris, and Benny is building a performance space for the troupes on land donated by the Church. When Thambi was asked to teach actor Mammooty the art, for the film 'Kutty Srank', he was initially thrilled, but

later walked out of the film, because he did not want to compromise his art.

So, one wonders, what can be done about all shops around temples in Tamil Nadu, which detract from the setting. Benny says, "Obviously, we can't close the shops and deprive people of their livelihood. But we must see how they can be accommodated without marring the beauty of the temples. I am working on this, with respect to temples in Thanjavur, which are under Palace control. As for the temples themselves, I've come up with a list of dos and don'ts -- no marble; no cement."

Benny is emphatic that we mustn't look at heritage from a tourism angle. "No other country pulls out all stops for tourists the way we do. By all means let tourists come. But we shouldn't make compromises." He says conservationists have to take people along with them, and that is why he doesn't talk of a Master Plan for Muziris. He calls it a conservation development plan.

But conservation and development are often seen as strange bedfellows, I point out. "It doesn't have to be so," says Benny. "Conservation can and must have a human component too."

### Monuments in the MHP area

■ Kizhthali Siva temple, said to have existed during the Perumal reign (113 BCE and 343 CE), was destroyed by the Portuguese, Dutch and Tipu Sultan. All that is left is the sanctum sanctorum.

■ Thiruvanchikulam Mahadeva temple

■ Kodungallur Bhagavati temple, where Cheran Chenkuttuvan is believed to have installed the idol of Kannagi 1800 years ago.

■ The Paravur synagogue built in 1615

■ Paliyam Naalukettu, built in 1786, to house the women and children of an ancient Nair family, whose members were Prime Ministers to the Cochin Maharaja.

■ 16th century Church in Cheriapally, with 400-year-old wall paintings depicting Biblical stories.

■ For more information on the Muziris Heritage Project, visit the official website: <https://www.keralatourism.org/muziris/index.php>