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The Kochi-Muziris biennale -How it all began

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On May 30, 2010, M A Baby, the Education and Culture Minister of the then LDF government in Kerala was enjoying a quiet dinner with Bose Krishnamachari, one of India's leading artists, at Bose's home in Mumbai. Artists Riyas Komu and Jyoti Basu were also present.

"We were chatting about what we could do for Kerala," reminisces Bose. Later that day, out of the blue, they came up with the idea of holding a biennale in Kochi.

Baby instantly got hooked on to the plan and suggested that the artists come down to Thiruvananthapuram for a tete-a-tete. The project started gathering steam from the very next day, with Bose and Riyas starting to build contacts with museum directors, curators and artists across the world to brainstorm the idea.

Soon, some sense of the dough required to pull off the event emerged. For example, if the Biennale at Lyon, France, costed \$10 million, the Gwanju Biennale in South Korea rides on a \$29 million fund. A few days later, with the project proposal in hand, they flew down to Thiruvananthapuram. But disappointment lay in store.

The Tourism Secretary, Dr V Venu, informed them that the department did not have the monies to fund a biennale. Undeterred, Bose and Riyas went to Delhi, where the officials at the Prime Minister's Office encouraged them to pursue the project, although the much-needed lucre still eluded them.

But the duo struck gold, when Benny Kuriakose, the chief consultant and conservation architect of the Muziris Heritage Project, funded by the Kerala state government, expressed interest in linking the project to the biennale.

Together, Bose and Benny met the then State Finance Minister Thomas Isaac, who loosened the purse strings to release a sum of `5 crore.

As if on cue, other organisations started chipping in. These include the Australian High Commission; the Biennial Foundation, Netherlands; BMW (Global Cultural Engagement Fund) Germany; the DLF Limited; Gujral Foundation; the Farook Foundation, UAE; Goethe-Institut, Germany; the Cochin Port Trust; Cochin Corporation; and the Greater Cochin Development Authority.

Successful biennales are not usually conducted in capital cities, quips Bose. “Paris or London does not have a biennale. Also, biennales are not commercially oriented. We felt that Kochi would be the best place since it is a city with a great historical legacy.”

Bose is the artistic director, and Riyas, the director of programmes of The Kochi Biennale Foundation, formed to conduct the event. “We got Aspinwall House, and all the other venues for free,” says Bose. “Customs duties have also been waived.”

Many influential people of the art world have promised to grace the event. Chris Dercon, Director of Tate Modern, London; Sheena Wagstaff, Chairman of the Modern and Contemporary Art Department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and Sir Nicholas Serota of the Tate Art Gallery in London could be seen prancing around Kochi soon.

The participating artists are thrilled as well. Atul Dodiya, a name to reckon with in the art world, says, “The sites are amazing and fantastic. When I show my work in Germany, France, Japan or the Moscow biennale, those spaces are ultimately in foreign lands. “But here, I will be showing my work in my own country. The walls, floors, smells, and the lights, they are all so familiar. I am excited that the biennale is being organised in Kochi.”

