

# CHERAMAN JUMA MASJID: RESTORATION OF INDIA'S FIRST MOSQUE (2021)

Dr. Benny Kuriakose



Cheraman Juma Masjid, located in Kodungallur, in Kerala's Thrissur district is the first mosque in India. Although the Masjid is said to have been built in AD 629, historians attribute it to the 11th century. It is known by various other names also such as Cheraman Perumal Masjid, Cheraman Palli and Cheraman Mosque. The Masjid stood as a testament to Kerala's ability to assimilate different cultures, beliefs, and traditions under one roof. The restoration of this historic Juma Masjid is being carried out under the guidance of Dr. Benny Kuriakose as part of the Muziris Heritage Project.

### Cheraman Perumal Nayanar and the Story Behind India's First Mosque

Cheraman Juma Masjid history dates back to 6th century. There are numerous regional and tribal variations of the story of the last Chera king who abdicated his throne, converted to Islam, and his subsequent pilgrimage to Mecca. The gist of this legend known to almost all in the region of Kodungallur is as follows.

Cheraman Perumal, the reigning King of the Chera Empire, with Kodungallur as its capital, had experienced an unusual dream in his sleep. He dreamt of the moon being split into two halves. He consulted astrologers far and wide and none could give him a satisfactory explanation until a group of Arab traders passed by. They explained that the dream was the celebrated miracle of Prophet Mohammed. Because of this explanation, Cheraman Perumal decided to visit Mecca. He divided his Kingdom and handed over the different territories to local chieftains. He then left for Mecca. After meeting the prophet, he embraced Islam. While returning home, after spending a few years there, he fell ill and died in Oman.

Before his death, he wrote letters to the local chieftains. When Malik Bin Dinar and his followers reached Kodungallur, the letters were handed over to the local chieftains. They got permission to construct a mosque in Kodungallur and the first mosque in India built here. The mosque was constructed in Kerala's traditional style. Malik Bin Dinar was the first Ghazi of Cheraman Masjid. After a while, his relative Habib Bin Malik became the Ghazi at Cheraman Masjid. He established mosques in different parts of Kerala. Cheraman Juma Masjid also called as Cherman Perumal Masjid was the first in the series. The old tombs at Cheraman Masjid are believed to be that of Habib Bin Malik and his wife Khumarriah.



An Old Photo of the Cheraman Juma Masjid (Archives)

### The History and Legacy of Cheraman Juma Masjid

The mosque is very historic. E. Ismail, former Head of the Department of History at Sir Syed College, Kannur University, writes that "Kerala can be considered as the earliest Islamic frontier in India."

He explains that the legend about the construction of Cheraman Juma Masjid in 629 C.E. was that it happened during the last years of the life of Prophet Mohammed. He concludes that these mosques built along the coastal areas were originally meant for the Arab merchants who visited the coast often. (Taken From "Bringing back structural past of a religious monument" Article of The Hindu Newspaper)

Now, Cheraman Masjid has grown to be the place of prayer even for hundreds of people who were substantially from non-Muslim communities. The Masjid authorities have encouraged this and the secular credentials of the mosque are dearly preserved. During the month of Ramzan, Iftar offerings are being made by the non-Muslim communities. Many people from other religions are conducting "Vidhyarambham" of their children at the mosque. Another unique feature of this Masjid is an ancient Kerala-style oil lamp that is said to have been kept burning continuously since the inception of the Masjid.



An Old Photo of the Cheraman Juma Masjid (Image credit: Archives)

### Through the Ages of Cheraman Mosque

It is believed that the Masjid was first reconstructed in the 11th CE and since then it has undergone a lot of renovations. During the earlier reconstruction works, the front part of the mosque was demolished to pave for the changes. Due to the social changes, concrete additions, domes, and minarets were added in the 60s. Fortunately, the ancient part, the core of the masjid made up of timber was retained, leaving us with a bit of the original glory.



The retained part of the Masjid over the years. (Image credit: Benny Kuriakose & Associates)



The Cheraman Perumal mosque after the renovation in 1994.  
(Image credit: Benny Kuriakose & Associates)

Over the years, the Masjid underwent a lot of additions that dishonored the historic aspect but were made to expand the space of the mosque. Another renovation was done in 1994 to accommodate the increasing population of devotees but then soon enough, the original structure of the mosque was planned to be revived owing to its history. Luckily, the core part of the old mosque is still intact.

### Significance of Cheraman Masjid in Muziris Heritage project

To regain the historical and cultural glory of Muziris, the present-day Kodungalloor, The Government of Kerala launched the Muziris Heritage Project. Muziris Projects Ltd. is concerned with the restoration of a list of historic buildings that showcase the essence of an important period in the history of Kerala, known for its trade and cultural values, and the Cheraman Masjid restoration is its most hopeful conservation project involved.

Cheraman Juma Masjid, located in the Muziris Heritage Project area is the first Masjid built in India. The Masjid has unimaginable capacity for its expansion as a tourist attraction due to its location and the religious and cultural significance it owns. Due to the continued restoration efforts in a sustainable manner, the Muziris has regained its old glory of the old spice route that explores the multicultural character of the port city and has flourished to become a major tourist destination. The Cheraman Masjid validates this essence of the Muziris Project with its long history and tells an enchanting tale of the multicultural society of Kerala.

### Bringing a Religious Monument Back to Life

As an ode to the legacy of the Masjid, the proposal to do the conservation of the oldest mosque in India as a part of the Muziris Project aimed to recreate its former architectural

character through restoration. Conservation of the Masjid's original structure is vital, as it is a structure of heritage value having a long history associated with it.

The restoration work was inaugurated by Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan on 10th November 2019. The unpleasant additions of Cheraman Masjid, the oldest mosque in India are being removed and restoration of the same is carried out. Although we started working on the project in 2012, the conservation works started in the year 2019 only. The demolition of the unsympathetic additions to the mosque has been completed and renovation works are progressing fast. Please see the images of the demolition of the unpleasant concrete additions.



Demolition of the later additions of the Cheraman Juma Masjid  
(Image credit: Benny Kuriakose & Associates)



Demolition of the later additions of the mosque  
(Image credit: Benny Kuriakose & Associates)



Demolition of the concrete additions of the Cheraman Mosque  
(Image credit: Benny Kuriakose & Associates)

**Challenges Involved in the Conservation Project**

Our office had taken great pains to work out a solution to do this project which was done a few years ago. The main issue in removing the recent additions to the mosque was that the capacity of the people will come down from 2000 to 300. Since the members of the mosque realized that the additions were not suitable for the mosque, they decided to remove all the unpleasant additions. So we suggested having a canopy ie, a high light roof on the top of the historic building or a basement, as the second option. The mosque authorities went with the second option. The masjid members have a great connection to the Mosque, so they didn't prefer any new construction. The present mosque authorities agreed on the decision to restore the mosque on the condition that a newly built basement would provide sufficient space for an increasing number of believers to conduct worship, without

affecting its architectural integrity. The basement can serve as a prayer hall leaving the original structure undisturbed. The main challenge was to convert the basement which might look like a car park into a sacred space.

Since it is a historic building and although several modifications have been made, we have sought the help of historians and archaeologists. Former Director of Archaeology Dr. Hemachandran S has assisted in this regard.

**The Proposed Plan for the Restoration of Cheraman Juma Masjid**

As a part of infrastructure development for the Masjid, the following changes are proposed:

- **Addition of Cheraman Juma Masjid Interpretation Centre**, to educate visitors on the history surrounding the establishment of the Masjid. This would be an informative feature for all those visiting the place of worship. This addition would be made to the ground floor of the existing Islamic Museum already present on the premises.
- **Cleaning and revival of the pond**, to ensure that the serenity of the premises is maintained.
- **Paving the pathway and the front yard with stone**, due to the high footfall the Masjid receives.
- **Provision of a lift**, to make the building universally accessible.

Tourism-related services, such as water supply, waste disposal, communication, and electricity supply are required for the comfort of the tourists visiting the Masjid. Since the proposal aims at increasing the footfall and tourist activity in and around Cheraman Juma Masjid, the following public amenities are proposed for the same:

- **Construction of an Amenities Building:** This building will include toilet facilities and rest areas in addition to other tourism facilitation services like cloakrooms, ATMs/ money exchange, waiting for areas, cafeteria, drinking water outlets, etc.
- **Information Centre:** a service within the Masjid premises to help and inform visitors of timings, events, activities, etc which may also house a souvenir shop.
- **Information Signage** will be provided throughout the Masjid premises to supplement the visitors with useful information.

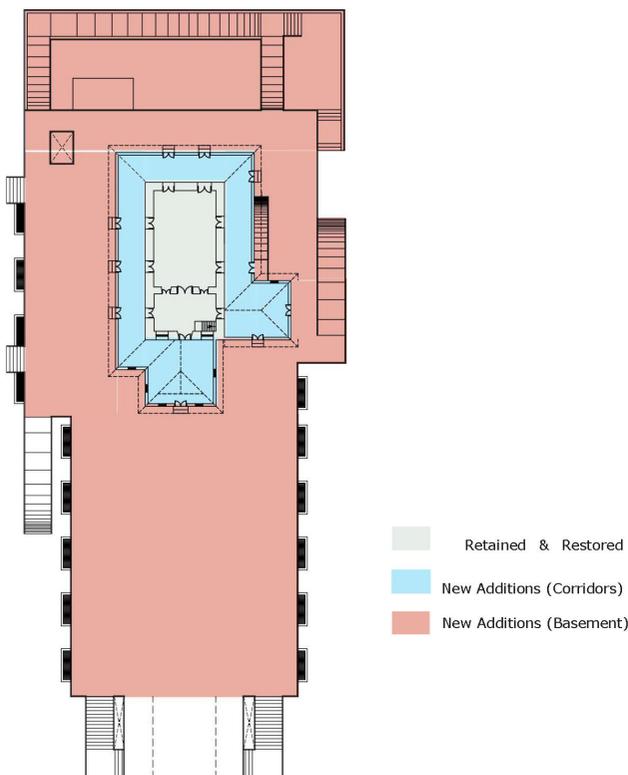


Figure 2: Plan showing the proposed layout of Masjid

Plan showing the proposed layout of Cheraman Juma Masjid  
(Image credit: Benny Kuriakose & Associates)



Proposed Site Layout (Image credit: Benny Kuriakose & Associates)



Proposal to restore the mosque to its original state (Image credit: Benny Kuriakose & Associates)



Addition of a basement to expand the bearing capacity of the Masjid, to be used as a Prayer hall (Image credit: Benny Kuriakose & Associates)



Proposed view of Cheraman Juma Masjid (Image credit: Benny Kuriakose & Associates)



3D View Showing the proposed stone paving on pathways (Image credit: Benny Kuriakose & Associates)

- Additionally, **CCTV cameras** and other security equipment and installations to be provided in all public areas to ensure the security of the premises.
- **Firefighting equipment** such as hydrants and extinguishers are to be provided along with smoke detectors.
- Other necessary services such as water supply, sanitation, electrical conduits and wiring, lightning arrester, etc., would also be provided.

**The Proposed Architecture for the Restoration of Cheraman Juma Masjid**

To convert the basement to a spacious area, the idea is to use tiles of a different character and also to use the lighting in a different way to create the feeling of the mosque inside. Also, we decided to give a different traditional look

to the mosque rather than the normal Persian character possessed by most of the Indian mosques. A new Islamic History Museum depicting the history of the mosque and Islam in Kerala is being set up in one of the buildings in the nearby compound. Following were the key features of the Conservation of Cheraman Masjid:

- Addition of a basement to expand the capacity of the Masjid, to be used as a Prayer hall.
- The sloped roof corridors were provided around the mosque similar to its original design.
- Windows have been introduced to give some natural light to the basement.  
Decorated niches will form the highlight on the wall.
- The interiors will be provided with dramatic lighting.



Different Stages of Cheraman Juma Masjid Restoration (Image credit: Benny Kuriakose & Associates)



Cheraman Juma Masjid Post Restoration (Image credit: Benny Kuriakose & Associates)

**Various Phases of Restoration and the Present Status Of Cheraman Juma Masjid**

The conservation works are going on very fast mode. The following photographs show the various phases of restoration works of Cheraman Masjid progressing on the site.

Restoring the authentic character of the historical Cheraman Juma Masjid that has survived more than a Millenium is not an easy task, especially when several renovations and reconstructions have been done over centuries which has affected its originality. But we hope that the Masjid regains its full glory in the near future. Its conservation and development will cherish the visitors to the Muziris Heritage Project in the area and contribute immensely to the local community by increasing employment opportunities and encouraging social unification and awareness.

Conservation of heritage and historic resources is a green solution, which helps in making economically and environmentally responsible decisions to give rise to sustainable development. Thus the conservation of the oldest mosque in India would ensure that the diverse cultural and architectural heritage associated with it, visible to future generations.



**Dr. Benny Kuriakose** started his career in 1984 and received basic lessons in architecture under the tutelage of Laurie Baker. He received the Charles Wallace India Trust Award for a Master's degree in Conservation Studies from the University of York, UK, and his Ph.D. from the IIT, Madras. Taking its roots in vernacular architecture, he has developed expertise in architectural conservation and design of new buildings and now runs a conservation and architectural design consulting firm in Chennai. [bennykuriakose@gmail.com](mailto:bennykuriakose@gmail.com)