

Bringing the Muziris experience back to life

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KOCHI: Imagine a sliver of land intertwined with water bodies that open into the Arabian Sea and has access to markets in ancient Rome, Greece, China and Persia. This land, called Muziris, was the landing point in Kerala for Judaism, Christianity, Islam and a host of world cultures. Its port was a hub for cargo vessels, and cultures, of West Asia, the Mediterranean and East Africa. St. Thomas and the early Islamic missionaries are believed to have stepped onto the Kerala shore through this port which finds mention in the 'Chilapathikaram' as well as in Roman and Greek historical records. The port went down under in the titanic floods in the Periyar in AD 1341.

Imagine this land and its environs waking up once again in a modern setting and becoming a showcase of central Kerala's history, architecture, trade, crafts and living traditions.

If the architects of the Muziris Heritage Site (MHS) project have their way, the heritage preservation-cum-tourism project will be a reality in a few years.

"The first phase of the project will be ready by late 2010," Finance Minister T.M. Thomas Isaac, whose brainchild the project is, told *The Hindu*. A few components would be open to public by early next year. "It is a first of its kind project in the whole country," Dr. Isaac added.

The project's concept and action plan will be revealed at a two-day workshop at Kodungalloor, to be attended by the top brass of the various departments and agencies involved, on June 27-28. Last

year's State budget had allotted Rs.10 crore for the project and the groundwork has been going on quietly since September at a feverish pitch. "The Muziris project will help the economic rejuvenation of the area; it will be a public-private-participation project in which the local people will have a big say," Dr. Isaac said. "This is a multi-department, multi-agency project with the Tourism Department in the leading role."

The Muziris site covers six panchayats and two municipalities in Ernakulam and Thrissur districts: Chennamangalam, Chittattukara, Vadakkekara and Pallippuram, Azhikode and Methala, North Paravur and Kodungalloor.

Excavations

Benny Kuriakose, chief project consultant, said the project would be a "unique one with international dimensions." Mr. Kuriakose, the Chennai-based architect who was part of the team that visualised the Dakshina Chitra heritage township near Chennai, pointed out that the archaeological excavations at Pattanam, which gave evidence of the area's long history and its links with ancient Europe, West Asia and Africa, would be a key component of the project.

"The archaeological and historical data emerging from the excavations show that the hinterland of the port, the Periyar Basin and the historic towns of Kodungalloor, Pattanam and Paravur were part a geographic entity called Muziris," said P.J. Cherian, director of the Kerala Council of Historical Research which is part of the Muziris Heritage Site project.



FACELIFT SOON: *The Paliyam Nalukettu at Chennamangalam is one of the important sites on the proposed tourist circuit.*

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He noted that a 2500-year-old canoe was discovered during the excavations.

"It was the Pattanam excavations that inspired us to conceive the project," Dr. Isaac recalled.

Muziris was a thriving port in the first century BC with trade links with major ports in Asia, Europe and Africa—though its exact location has not yet been identified. From the 15th century, colonial invasion by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British left lasting marks on the area. The surviving monuments

are in a dilapidated condition and are hardly attractive to tourists.

Among the remains of the monuments to be showcased will be: two European forts, at Pallippuram and Kottapuram; two synagogues; the Vypeekotta seminary, which was the first Christian seminary in Kerala; the Cheraman Juma Masjid, the first mosque ever built in Kerala; the Kottayil Kovilakam which houses a number of historical buildings; the Paliyam Palace and the Paliyam Nalukettu at Chennamanga-

A heritage project aims to showcase the ancient port town and its hinterland

lam; dozens of temples such as the Kodungalloor Bhagavathi temple; hundreds-of-years-old churches; and, homes of writers, politicians and thinkers.

The project involves preservation of these monuments and historical buildings as well as restoration of old bazaars, roads, canals and bridges and linking them into several tourist circuits. "The area is the richest part of Kerala in terms of heritage and history," Mr. Cherian said. "It is a microcosm of Kerala's history."

Mr. Kuriakose claimed that by going on the circuit, a tourist, or scholar, would have a "walkthrough of 2000 years of Kerala's history and traditions." The circuit would be linked by water transport. For this, water taxis and custom-made country boats would be utilised.

Live museums

There will be a series of 'live museums' dotting the circuits: a coir museum, an aquatic museum, a museum of fishing tools and implements, and a museum of spices.

Kodungalloor Kunhikut-tan Thampuran's home will be turned into a museum of Kerala literature and the freedom struggle would be the theme of the museum to be housed at Mohammed Abdurahiman Sahib's home at Kodungalloor.

There will be 'living exhibi-

tions' of artisans and craftsmen; and, workshops by bell metal makers, handloom weavers and wood workers.

The Dutch Palace at Chennamangalam, which was built by the Dutch for the Paliyathachan (prime minister to the Kochi king) for his help in defeating the Portuguese, and the Paliyam Nalukettu, a house for the children and women of the Paliyam household, would be important items on the tourist circuit.

Village markets

One major aspect of the project will be the rejuvenation of the 'Aazhcha chantha' (weekly village market and fair) at the Kottapuram, Paravur and Paliyam markets. The traders will be helped financially to restore their buildings to the old so that the tourists will get a feel of the weekly village fairs in the past.

A lot of public amenities and infrastructure will be created in the six panchayats and two municipalities so that the local people will have a stake in the conservation and development of the tourist circuit.

Dr. Isaac said the project would be executed with the participation of the local people and panchayats. Funds would come from a rush of sources, such as the panchayats' own funds, State government funds and Central assistance.

"When completed, the Muziris site will be a world-class heritage-tourism site with strong economic linkage with the local communities. It is not a tourism project per se and it will be unique in its conception, execution, funding and sustainability," he said.