

Muziris project set to turn over a new leaf

State Tourism Department to fast-track plans with renewed thrust on cultural research and learning

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KOCHI: Officials are back on the Muziris trail, seeking to revive an old dream that lay comatose in the past few years.

The uniquely ambitious Muziris Heritage Project (MHP), which seeks to link up heritage sites, restore monuments and community spaces along the riparian North Paravur, Chendamangalam, Chittattinkara, Vadakkekara, Pallippuram, Kodungalloor, Mathilakam, Eriyad and Methala and live them up with community-based projects and cultural shows from the region, is on the cusp of being revitalised and fast-tracked by the State Tourism Department.

Team's visit

As a first step, a working team of project consultants and officials is visiting the Muziris region, putting to technical scrutiny each site that's up and running for upgrade as originally envisaged, besides surveying new sites for making it a participatory conservation tourism initiative with renewed thrust on cultural research and learning.

Conservation architect Benny Kuriakose, who's the project consultant, is leading a team of architects to prepare detailed sketches and plans while tourism officials led by special officer on the project M.V. Kunhiraman are dwelling on the administrative aspects ahead of the forthcoming meeting of the MHP board of directors at Kodungalloor on February 17. "The immediate goal is to put the project back on an even keel and it will be done in the next six months," says V. Venu, Principal Secretary in the Department of Tourism.

The team scouting around the sites has drawn up a host of alterations and additions to reinstate the original plan.

The Paravur Jewish Synagogue, one of the sites commissioned after restoration, was originally envisaged to have a sensor-activated audio track playing Vyloppilli Sreedhara Menon's poem on the Jews of Kerala when a visitor enters the courtyard through the padippura.

"Next to the tablet with Hebrew inscription on the synagogue should be its interpretation in English," says Mr. Kuriakose.



A library stacking literature on the Jews of Kerala will be readied at the Paravur Jewish synagogue which is a part of the Muziris Heritage Project. — PHOTO: S. ANANDAN

While the area around the main structure was dug up to lay a walkway, a section of the foundation structure of the old synagogue, which was gutted in fire in the 1660s, came into view. The

upgrade plan will ensure that this is protected and showcased with hard-glass cover. A library stacking literature on the Jews of Kerala will be readied on the top floor of the padippura, which had

originally functioned as a Hebrew classroom. The upgrade will also see if a walkway could be made from the back end of the synagogue to the nearby Paravur market – another vital site part of the project which, though conserved, badly needs rectification and upgrade.

Alongside, efforts will be taken to reopen the conservation laboratory, which was set up as part of the project but has remained idle since. "It's a key facility for which equipment worth ₹25 lakh was purchased. The laboratory should be brought back alive for chemical restoration of the Synagogue's ceiling with organic dyes and similar work elsewhere," say the conservationists.

Another immediate priority will be to standardise and install signage, which we call 'way finding' to make the journey hassle-free and pleasant, says Mr. Kuriakose.

While completed sites are set to get a fresh lease of life, with rectification and upgrade, a few new sties are being identified and integrated into the circuit, as it is the ecosystem of conservation that's fostering the project.

The Chendamangalam

Handloom Wavers Yarn Society, an apex cooperative of handloom weavers in the region, has agreed in principle to enter into a memorandum of understanding with the MHP to have a museum in their land on the banks of the Periyar, across the VP Thuruth Island in Chendamangalam.

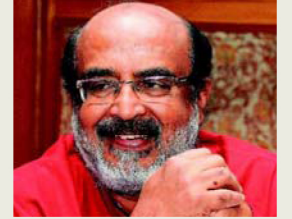
"We just need to have a jetty constructed here for the MHP boat to berth. It's an ideal location since the MHP tour is by water. The existing building of the society could be used for setting up different types of looms and yarns and weavers could actually work, demonstrating their work to the visitors. There could be a sales counter selling handloom products as well," Mr. Kuriakose says, to the agreement of the society secretary Suresh Babu.

Swap market

There could be a similar public project at the Paliyam market – an ancient swap market located at a stone's throw away from the Paliyam Kovilakam and Nalukettu, which are set to undergo upgrade – where traditional artisans from the region could showcase their line of work.

Priority to cultural conservation: Isaac

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT



KOCHI: The purpose of the Muziris Heritage Project (MHP) is to attract students and researchers from all over the world for academic work and tourism is a spin-off, maintains Finance Minister T.M. Thomas Isaac, who had announced the project in his budget speech in 2006 and steered it in its initial years.

While the MHP Company looked after the administrative side of the project, the research institute that would be operational at Kodungalloor as originally planned would function as an autonomous body promoting cultural and heritage research on Kerala. "Our aim is to build it in such a manner that it should be the go-to-place for studying Kerala's history, society, environment and cultural heritage," said Dr. Isaac in an exclusive chat with *The Hindu*.

"Over the years, the project had dragged on and there were deviations from the original plan, with the MHP's positioning as a vital locale in the erstwhile spice route and its connect

Work on all museums along the circuit will be completed at the earliest, says Finance Minister T.M. Thomas Isaac.

with the public falling through. Steps are being taken to re-establish these as also to redo in the right manner work that's gone awry. Work on all museums along the circuit will be completed at the earliest," he said.

He said the green heritage project would take special care not to congest the region with tourists. The waterway would be the prime route with hop-on, hop-off boats operating for visitors' convenience. "Those arriving in private vehicles would have to park either at Paravur or Kodungalloor where an arrangement would be done for them to board the official vehicle for the tour."