

Architect Benny Kuriakose lists the reasons the Muziris Heritage Project has been so successful and what Karnataka can learn from it

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It's hailed as the most remarkable historical reclamation project by *The New York Times*. The Muziris Heritage Project is considered the largest heritage conservation project in India. The Government of Kerala with the support of the Government of India embarked on the project in 2006 along with architect Benny Kuriakose to conserve cultural assets for present and future generations and to promote sustainable development. The MHP set a precedent in India for adopting an integrated approach to heritage conservation and regional development. Kuriakose tells *Bangalore Mirror* what Karnataka can learn from its neighbour's success.

**HOLD THE BUGLE AND THE CAVALRY**

From the outset, the MHP was kept low-key. Instead of getting the Prime Minister or the President of India to launch the project, it was announced in the budget. There was a two-day workshop to which the local panchayat heads and community members were invited. Three ministers participated in the workshop with one minister being present throughout. No fanfare meant no discordant and "vested interests" that would otherwise arise. "Besides, anything and everything in Kerala can lead to controversy," Kuriakose laughs.

**SEPARATE THE WHEAT FROM THE CHAFF**

Give importance to expertise, not titles. When the government invited representatives of 17 countries (including three ministers) for a Joint UNESCO meeting at New Delhi, Kuriakose was asked to do the presentation in spite of the presence of three ministers from the state. "I was told that my perspective would be the best way to present Muziris to the outside world," he says. The prototypes of PVC museum panels were prepared and shown to the then Chief Secretary of Kerala along with a few MLAs, all of whom loved the colourful panels. Kuriakose then told the Chief Secretary, 'World over museum panels are done in black and white format'. Immediately, a decision was taken to have black and white panels. That willingness to listen to expert-speak was instrumental in the MHP staying its intended course without getting diluted.

**SET YOUR PLANS IN STONE**

The government had told Kuriakose right in the beginning that the MHP would be a model for the rest of the country not just for its conceptualisation but implementation too. "And they stuck to their word,"



# Lessons from our neighbour



**When one says heritage is to be conserved, it does not mean that development should be stopped**

BENNY KURIAKOSE

Kuriakose says. First, a committee of ministers called the Coordination Committee was appointed with seven key ministers. The government appointed just one post to coordinate the various department activities. Meetings were conducted once in two months – the decisions taken there were equivalent to cabi-

net decisions. With no other intermediary bodies in the picture, implementation was swift. "It was the second time such a thing had happened in Kerala," Kuriakose points out. The first time was for the Literacy Programme in the state. As we all know, God's own country is 100% literate.

**STATE WHAT YOU THINK, CLEARLY**

Initially, not many from the local community came forward to participate in the conservation project. The plan was for the government to conserve heritage buildings, provided the residents allow at least part of the building to be open for public viewing. "The government kept stressing that the intention was not to take over the building," Kuriakose says. As and when a shop or a house came forward, conservation was carried out. Word-of-mouth ensured that more and more people came forward. Conservation of heritage is being linked with development plans in Muziris. "When one says



**THE MUZIRIS HERITAGE PROJECT**

Muziris is an ancient port town in little Kerala. An ancient port (1st Century BC) that traded spices and silk with Egypt, Greece, Rome two millenia ago, Muziris vanished after the fall of Rome. Later, Portuguese, Dutch, and the British too came to trade, became part of the internal power struggles and then became colonisers. All of them left imprints on the region. Three important religions: Islam, Judaism and Christianity entered the country through this port. The historical monuments and materials available through excavations make this a unique location to tell the story of Kerala for up to 3,000 years.

heritage is to be conserved, it does not mean that development should be stopped." So, the market place – Kottapuram Market – under the MPH, sees local traders sell their wares from 5 am to 11 am. "In Muziris, the government is trying to show that conservation and development can go together."

**CITY EXPERTS SPEAK**



The fundamental learning for our government (from the MHP) is to understand that the identity of the state is tied to its culture. Heritage is an integral part of our

culture. The Kerala government sees immense value in its cultural identity. By developing its tangible and intangible heritage, it is revitalising the local community.

**KRUPA RAJANGAM**  
Conservation Architect  
(Co-founder Saythu Projects)



The willingness of the government to negotiate with the local community and come up with out-of-the-box solutions is worth emulating. If our government can restore heri-

tage buildings without blindly taking over the property, so many heritage homes in Ulsoor and Frazer Town would get a new lease of life. Within the state, Melukote or Halebidu would also benefit if the government look at doing things differently.

**MEERA IYER**  
Co-convenor INTACH  
(Independent Researcher)



The biggest learning will be to appoint a technical or professional consultant to head the team. This is in line with international norms. Despite challenges of un-

trained contractors and tender approaches of the PWD, Kuriakose remained true to the larger vision of the Muziris Project. Our government could look at Hassan District or the Chalukya region (Gadag, North Karnataka) instead of individual monuments.

**PANKAJ MODI**  
Conservation Architect (led heritage conservation projects like the Gangubai Hangal Museum, Dharwad)

**Heritage Buildings secured under the MPH**



**Cheraman Juma Masjid – first mosque in India**

Built in 629 AD, the masjid is believed to have been renovated in the 11th century and also 300 years ago. The front portion was expanded in 1974 and further expanded in 1984. The older part of the mosque including the Sanctum Sanctorum is left untouched and is still preserved.



**Paravur Jewish Synagogue – one of the earliest synagogues**

The building is located in the former Jewish Street of the Paravur region. The complex comprises of two buildings – the double storeyed entrance building and the main synagogue separated by an open space.



**Paliyam Dutch Palace**

The two-storey building is functional with minimum ornamentations, reflecting the Dutch influence. The building features elaborate wooden staircases and balustrades apart from thick walls with splayed openings.