

Into the heart of heritage

Architect Benny Kuriakose is the Conservation Consultant for the Muziris Heritage Project going on in Kerala and has been involved with its Master Plan and implementation. It sets an example for community involvement in government work, he says ahead of his talk for the 'INTACH lecture series' this evening.

By **RANJANI GOVIND**



The remains of the Kottappuram Fort (left) and the Bhagavathy temple, Kodungallur which are part of the Muziris Project

The Muziris Heritage Project, a massive 150 sq. km venture, would never have been possible with the private sector," declares architect Benny Kuriakose who is involved with this nearly Rs. 200 crore Kerala government project that seems to have posed overwhelming challenges. "It's a public project, by the people, for the people. Architects, engineers, historians, archaeologists, bureaucrats and the government are involved for dedicating something for posterity. So, it is highly satisfying," says Mr. Kuriakose.

The Muziris Heritage Project, the largest conservation project being carried out by the Kerala government, is all set to be a major destination for cultural tourism. Muziris is the region passing through Ernakulam and Thrissur districts of Kerala, once an active port in the 1st Century BC, where Chinese, Arabs, Jews, Greeks and Romans came to trade. Even though the Portuguese, Dutch and the British came to trade they did sense the power struggles between Travancore, Kochi, Calicut and the Mysore kingdoms that have their imprints on the region.

In the run-up to his INTACH lecture regarding his association with the project, Benny Kuriakose spoke of the importance of being associated with such a project

with The Hindu-Property Plus.

Excerpts....

We have heard that the Muziris Heritage Project in Kerala is a subtle combo of history, architecture and archaeology coming together?

To sum up the Muziris Heritage Project in one sentence, it is "a cultural pilgrimage through 3,000 years of Kerala's history." It is history, archaeology, heritage and their conservation which is driving this project. The historical monuments and materials made available through recent excavations establish it as a unique location to tell the story of 3,000 years of Kerala, a story of coexistence and sharing.

What is it that prompted the Kerala government to get into this? Is this the largest conservation project of a port city?

This project is the brainchild of Thomas Issac who initiated it in 2006 when he became the Finance Minister. I was appointed as the Conservation Consultant for the project. Conservation of heritage was the major aim. We wanted to establish a link with the local development and introduce a non-formal education with the help of monuments, museums and heritage. This certainly is for posterity.

Various Government departments in Kerala have taken part with the Department of Tourism as the nodal



A courtyard at the renovated Paliam Palace and (right) the Paravur synagogue of the Muziris Project



agency. It has cost the Government of Kerala nearly Rs. 200 crore.

When did you take up the project and how many empires did it have a link with?

Although funds were allocated in 2006 itself, the excavation in Pattanam started in 2007. The preparation of the Master Plan for the Muziris Heritage Project was completed in 2009. Since then the various works connected with the project have started. This is a long-term project, and the first phase is ready for inauguration. The project is linked to the heritage of many other countries, and three religions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — which entered India through this port. The Greeks, Romans, Armenians, Jews, Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch and British arrived here. The research done by historian K.S.

Mathew shows that Kerala had trade relations with more than 30 countries. The Kerala Government thus launched the Spice Route Project in 2011.

If there are tangible structures that bring back intangible historical memories, can you mention some of those relics or structures that are being restored to breathe cultural life?

There are no large-scale monuments in the Muziris area. But everyone who came here left some traces. The oldest mosque in India is here. One of the oldest synagogues is here. The oldest surviving European monument is here. The Paliam Palace, Paravur Synagogue, Nalukettu in Chendamangalam etc., have been conserved and are now being converted into mu-

seums on different aspects of Kerala history. They are now open to the public.

Is that why Muziris is thought of as a region more than a location?

The exact location of the old port of Muziris is not known and may come to light in the years to come. The entire region has many traces of earlier parts of Muziris. The entire Muziris area covers more than 150 sq. km. It is not only the 2000-year-old history which is important, even an incident or location connected with the freedom movement of India makes sense.

What have you handled till now to bring about a change to the area there...?

Many buildings have been conserved as part of this project out of which seven are becoming museums depict-

ing various aspects of Kerala's history. Many buildings in the Kottappuram and Paravur markets were restored to match the historic surroundings. Also drinking water facility, drainage, public toilets, lighting etc. are improved as part of the project. A new market for housing the craftsmen was constructed in a traditional way in Chendamangalam. A lot of people's initiatives are also happening as part of the project.

One of the modern chapels in a historic area was demolished and a replica of the old chapel was constructed to harmonise with the surroundings. Cheraman Masjid, which is the oldest mosque in India, is being restored as a private initiative. Boat jetties which have been built will link the different places using water transport and make the project as sustainable as possible. The first phase of the project is getting completed so that the places can be opened to the visitors.

INTACH lecture

The INTACH lecture series (June 27, 6-30 p.m., Goethe Institut /Max Mueller Bhavan, 716, CMH Road, Indiranagar) will feature a talk by architect Benny Kuriakose about his association with India's largest heritage conservation project, the Muziris, an ancient port in Kerala that had strong links with the Roman Empire.

This heritage project has brought several government departments, the local community and academics to work together.



Benny Kuriakose, who propagates the 'no-waste' culture

'Involve architects'

"Senior architects should be involved in government projects, only then will government buildings be varied and interesting," says Mr. Kuriakose. While it is important to study the route map of our own buildings for analysing the materials and techniques used in local climate, architecture and conservation as taught in schools fall short of being appropriate. "The Muziris Heritage Project will play a role in bringing about this awareness amongst the general public. While the project primarily targets school children, tourists would gain as they would be informed about history and heritage," he says.

I think it will be a massive achievement by the Government of Kerala as conservation and heritage always takes a back seat with all Governments.

You are in the process of rejuvenating, conserving and showcasing heritage. What are the things that would come to light for a commoner?

For a commoner, the roads are being improved, public toilets are being done. The

initiative of "Clean Muziris Green Muziris" has started. It is primarily a conservation project.

It is heritage, conservation and history which is driving this project. But a model of sustainable tourism is also one of the objectives. We are trying our best to avoid having the ill-effects of tourism, as it is important that Kerala looks beyond the beaches, backwaters, forests and ayurveda.

Cost-effectiveness

Architect-designer Benny Kuriakose's proficiency is based on the strong foundation laid by Laurie Baker. Known for his educational lectures at the School of Architecture and Planning in New Delhi, Benny also served as a

member of Kerala's Expert Committee for examining the feasibility of adopting low-cost technology in new buildings.

Benny has a Master's in Conservation Studies which took him to the University of York, U.K. "Where is the

sense in increasing the cost of construction," argues the cost-effective architect who advises young professionals to avoid wastage in construction, which is the underlying factor of sustainable development ideologies in architecture.