

Muziris heritage project

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Muziris, in the Ernakulam and Thrissur districts of Kerala, was an active port in the 1st century BC where Chinese, Arabs, Jews, Greeks and Romans came to trade. Similarly, although the Portuguese, Dutch and the British too initially came to trade, they soon became a part of the internal power struggles between Travancore, Kochi, Calicut and the Mysore kingdoms, and eventually went on to become colonizers. All of them have left their imprints on the region. The historical monuments and materials made available through recent excavations establish it as a unique location to tell the story of 3000 years of Kerala, a story of coexistence and sharing.

In 1341, the profile of the waterbodies in the Periyar River basin on the Malabar Coast in Kerala underwent a major transformation. The prosperous city port of Muziris, at the mouth of the Periyar, overlooking the Arabian Sea, suddenly dropped off the map due to a natural disaster – maybe a flood or an earthquake, or both. The archaeological and historical data gathered on 'Muziris' provides evidence to show that it was a vibrant business and cultural centre, with far reaching international associations.

The Government of Kerala with the support of the Government of India embarked on the Muziris Heritage Project (MHP), which encompasses a vast area around the ancient port of Muziris, including various historically and culturally important monuments like India's first mosque, one of the earliest synagogues and the

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oldest surviving European monument in India. The MHP focuses on retrieving the historical heritage of this cultural region through various initiatives including historical research, archaeological excavations, integrated heritage conservation and tourism development, providing public access to historic buildings and sites within the framework of a public private partnership model. This project has set a precedent in India for adopting an integrated approach to heritage conservation and regional development.

Heritage management and tourism, when integrated, create an outstanding product with mutual benefit. Kerala has so far marketed only its lovely beaches, backwaters and forests and to some extent its monsoon and Ayurveda. This project can help the tourism industry in a way similar to what Angkor Vat has done for Cambodia, and Athens for Greece.

* The entire project is perceived as a heritage conservation exercise, and not merely as one for propagating tourism.

* It is one of the biggest non-formal education projects launched by the Government of Kerala. Layers of history ranging from the Romans, Greeks, Chinese, Jews, Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch and the British have been uncovered in this small area.

* The project has been integrated with the present day development plans. Its focus is on the local economy, attempting to rejuvenate employment, traditional industries and artisan activities, that will provide a boost to local culture and traditions.

* Activities of the various departments, involving 19 government agencies, are being converged into the project.

* A major thrust is being provided for the development of infrastructure in the region. The facilities envisaged as part of the project are focused on the larger community.

* An effort is being made to provide a strong academic and research content input with the setting up of an international research Centre for Muziris Studies that is under construction.

* The entire programme is being executed with the active participation of the community. Around 80 volunteers were recruited as resource persons for the project, acting as the link between the community and the project.

* The Muziris Heritage Project has been declared the first green project endorsed by the Government of Kerala. It has conceived the Muziris Heritage Project as a sustainable model for tourism where the local community benefits. The driving force of this is primarily history and conservation with tourism as a by-product.

The state government initially announced the Muziris Heritage Project in Thomas Issac's first budget speech of 2006. What started as a small project with an initial allotment of Rs 50 lakh has now grown into a large project with a sanctioned amount of Rs 140 crore. It covers an area of about 150 sq km in five panchayats and two municipalities. The project was supported by the present government without dilution in its objectives and vision. An amount exceeding Rs 100 crore has been spent on it by different government agencies with central government assistance.

The excavation in Pattanam under the auspices of the Kerala State Council for Historical Research started during the summer of 2007. The conservation development plan (CDP) for the Muziris site was submitted to the Government of Kerala in February 2009. The concept of the CDP evolved after a series of discus-

sions with different stakeholders. It was decided that the conventional approach to tourism should not be followed because it would be detrimental to the conservation of heritage and the needs of the local participating community. In this context the drawbacks of the existing tourism projects in Kerala were studied. None of the existing models for cultural heritage management were found suitable to local conditions and hence an alternate model was developed. Several monuments and historic buildings were first identified as part of the master plan before starting the different works.

Over time, the project has received tremendous publicity, and is widely known today. *The New York Times* selected it as one of the 45 places to visit in 2012 along with the Kochi Muziris Biennale.¹ To quote from the travel pages of the paper, 'The most remarkable historical reclamation project is happening in the biennale's other Kerala site, Muziris. A fabled ancient port that traded spices and silk with Egypt and Greece two millennia ago, Muziris mysteriously vanished sometime after the fall of Rome. Archaeologists have recently located and started to excavate the vanished settlement, which opened to tourists this year.'

The project's vision is to see it as an integrated approach to conservation and heritage, which has different components with many different government agencies taking part. Some of the major components are (i) Excavations are being done at different place; (ii) Conservation of historic buildings and old markets are being carried out; (iii) Infrastructure is being developed that includes public toilets, roads, and the construction of boat jetties;

1. *The New York Times*, 'The 45 Places to Go in 2012.' <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/08/travel/45-places-to-go-in-2012.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed on 10 April 2014).

(iv) Museums for education and interpretation are being set up as part of the project; (v) Academic research and scholarly exchange is being encouraged.

Three religions, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam, came to India through this ancient port. The researchers working on Muziris found that this port and Kerala had trade relations with more than 30 countries. Muziris is thus not only Kerala's heritage; it is also linked to the shared heritage of all these countries.

The Jews took the highly carved heichal² from the Paravur Synagogue to Israel about three decades ago and it is now part of the exhibits in the Israel museum in Jerusalem. What has been taken away is not only Jewish heritage, but Kerala's as well. Our craftsmen have now reconstructed the heichal, which is 18 feet high and nine and a half feet wide. Although it is not a practice to recreate floral patterns, it was decided to reconstruct it considering the importance of the heichal to the Paravur Synagogue. But it was not easy to draw the heichal by looking at the different photographs from the museum.

Kerala, once renowned as the Spice Coast of India, was a major hub in the 'spice route', even trading with ancient Europe. Historical records speak of Roman Empires that emptied their treasury in lieu of the spices of this land, and of how spices opened doors to Europe and the Americas. At the centre of this spice trade was the ancient port of Muziris that has a history of 3000 years. The present day Kodungallur finds mention in the works of Pliny the Elder and also in the *Periplus* of the Erythraean Sea.

2. Torah, the holy scripture of the Jews is kept inside the heichal, which is also known as the ark. It is usually highly carved in Kerala synagogues.

The Muziris Heritage Project may well be a starting point for a Spice Route, much like the Silk Route Unesco has promoted. By tracing the Spice Route, it has been possible to establish the astonishing amount of cultural exchange that occurred between nations. The extent of this cultural exchange and the consequences it had on world history is astounding, ranging from the cuisine to the spread of religions. Kerala has been a centre for this melting pot of cultures and religions, and living examples of this cultural exchange are evident even today – from the Syrian Christians who trace their origin to St. Thomas the Apostle to the Jews who made Muziris their home as early as the 6th century BC.

The Spice Route Initiative is aimed at mobilizing bilateral and multilateral support from countries, mostly former colonial and trading partners of Kerala due to the historic spice trade in the Muziris region, and of which there are historic traces in the form of tangible and intangible heritage. This project has great potential for bilateral and multilateral cultural cooperation for safeguarding the ‘shared heritage’ in Kerala.

Writing on tourism planning in relation to integrated and sustainable development, Eduard Inskeep states that: ‘Ill-conceived and poorly planned tourism development can erode the very qualities of the natural and human environments that attract visitors in the first place,’³ a general observation supported by studies on how tourism is destroying communities and culture. According to McKercher and Du Cros, some unscrupulous tourism operators exploit local cultures and heritage assets for personal gain, while

3. Eduard Inskeep, *Tourism Planning: An Integrated and Sustainable Development Approach*. Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1991, pp.459-467.

providing little in return for the community or the continuing care of the assets.⁴ This can lead to cultural damage and the degradation of local economies and social structures. If the places and heritage, which attracts tourists are destroyed, then the development that takes place in association with cultural tourism will die a natural death.

‘There is a dichotomy between satisfying the pressure for economic growth through tourism and protecting the cultural heritage sites and monuments that lie at its heart.’⁵ Tourism and heritage management must be integrated to create an outstanding product for mutual benefit. McKercher and du Cros observed that this ‘is complicated by the historic lack of understanding of the role each plays and is reflected in the sentiment that both sectors work toward different and mutually incompatible goals... Tourism industry professionals value cultural assets as raw materials for their products to generate tourism activity and wealth. Cultural heritage management professionals value the same assets for their intrinsic merits.’⁶ Quality standards and authenticity should be maintained to sustain tourism as well as cultural heritage.

A cultural tourism project should not be driven by tourism considerations, but managed by the principles and conventions of international guidelines on cultural heritage management. The success of any project depends on how heritage assets are converted into cultural tourism products.

The number of cultural tourists is growing at a faster rate than any

4. Bob McKercher and Hilary du Cros, *Cultural Tourism: The Partnership Between Tourism and Heritage Management*. Haworth Hospitality Press, 2002.

5. Europa Nostra, 2006.

6. McKercher and de Cros, op cit., fn 4.

other kind of tourism. Beach tourism was a buzzword in the ’80s, ecotourism in the ’90s and now it is cultural tourism that is at the centre of the world tourism scene. Travellers are looking for experiences. As the world gets more high-tech, there is a growing demand for experiences that are ‘high touch’. The tourists want heritage, culture, education and adventure which is authentic. Kerala can no longer survive or be a market leader in the tourism industry by only marketing its beaches, backwaters, forests and Ayurveda.

People will continue to travel, although how they travel may change. They are looking for a more authentic and spiritual experience and travel to lesser known destinations has increased. Rural festivals and events with a good mix of cultural experience are in great demand.

One of the important strategies for the Muziris Heritage Project is the thrust given to the conservation of intangible heritage, which is often overlooked while planning. The intangible heritage is consciously integrated with the overall plan. According to the definition agreed upon in the 2003 Paris Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage,⁷ ‘Intangible heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups

7. Unesco Culture Sector-Intangible Heritage-2003 Convention. Paris, 2003. http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17716&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (last accessed on 10th April 2014)

in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.'

As far as possible, the intangible heritage should not be removed from its context or setting to the extent that the authenticity is affected. The presence of traditional torch bearers is necessary to give life to the heritage. The integrity of the cultural space plays a major role in presenting an authentic experience, although it may not be traditional. Highly commoditized attractions by the tourism sector for easy consumption have a shorter lifecycle.

The intangible heritage helps visitors gain a deeper understanding about the place and its culture. Many questions may be raised about whether the cultural performances organized for the visitors taken from its original context, can be considered as part of the intangible heritage.

The Government of Kerala has sanctioned Rs 140 crore for the Development of Muziris Heritage Project and is involved in carrying out different works. The conservation work at Paliyam Nalukettu and Paliyam Palace has been completed. The palace is being converted into a museum, which will tell the history of the Cochin dynasty and its relationship with other countries. The Nalukettu is being turned into a lifestyle museum. Though both buildings are owned by a private trust, the Government of Kerala came forward to conserve them on the condition that the buildings are open to the public.

Although this policy of public-private partnership was announced in public, many of the owners of historic buildings were reluctant to be associated with the project in the beginning. Subsequently, many religious and non-religious organizations joined the initia-

tive by entering into partnership with the government. No forced land acquisition was considered and the thrust was to encourage participation of the local community. A popular demand from different sections of the people was to include their temple, church or a historic building to be part of the project.

In the case of Cheraman Masjid, the oldest mosque in India, some additions were made to the structure in the 1960s and 1990s to increase its size. The extensions had minarets and domes, never part of the Kerala mosque architecture, and were unsympathetic to the original historic core of the building. Now the mosque authorities have themselves come forward to restore the mosque to its original state by demolishing the ugly extensions, but without any government assistance. In a similar case, the chapel that was built in the 1990s in Kottappuram Market was demolished to build a new one that is a replica of the old chapel in tune with the historic surroundings.

Another project that was taken up was the conservation of the Paravur Synagogue. After conservation, the synagogue has been converted into a museum, which portrays the relationship of the Kerala Jews with the rest of the community. Chendamangalam Synagogue is being converted into a museum which will portray the life cycle of the Jews. The government plans to set up more than 20 museums in the project area and these four museums are part of the first phase.

As part of the Muziris Heritage Project, excavations are being carried out at different sites. The Kerala State Council for Historical Research is carrying out excavations at Pattanam site and it has thrown much light on the early history of Muziris and maritime trade with many countries. Kottappuram Fort is being excavated by the

State Department of Archaeology, which has thrown light on the Dutch and Portuguese period. The government has also sanctioned funds for excavation at different sites other than Pattanam. These include sites such as Cheraman Parambu and Paravur Synagogue.

The Kottappuram and Paravur markets were thriving commercial centres whose fabric had a variety of Portuguese, Dutch and traditional Kerala influences. The market streets portray the pressures and problems that it earlier faced. The development that took place in terms of scale, design and typology was unsympathetic to the original character of the market, affecting the identity of the place. With the construction of new bridges and roads, the importance of the waterways was lost. As part of the revitalization project, toilets, drainage, pathways, street lighting and the improvement of the traditional markets is being carried out.

As part of the Muziris Heritage Project, infrastructure improvements have also been undertaken. The arterial roads in the Muziris Heritage Site have been improved. Public toilets are being built in more than 15 locations with most of them having facilities for physically handicapped people.

A major breakthrough during the planning phase was the decision to transport visitors from one destination to another by boat. The old waterways that were once in use will now be revived as part of the project. The government has sanctioned the construction of 14 jetties for developing boat traffic, which will be the main means of transportation for visitors. Seven boat jetties have already been completed and work on the others will also begin soon.

The visitors coming from the south side will park their vehicles in

North Paravur and those from the north side in Kodungallur. They will get on to the boat jetties which are nearby. A major advantage of the 'park and ride' policy is that the parking requirements at each destination will be minimized. Hopefully, this should ensure minimum disturbance to the peaceful life of local residents caused by the big 'Volvo' tourist buses.

The Kerala State Institute of Children's Literature is publishing different books related to the Muziris Heritage Project. The institute has already published the newsletters in Malayalam and some books related with the project. The Centre for Development of Imaging Technology has undertaken to document the project at different stages. They have also made short films for the different museums.

The Information Kerala Mission of the Government of Kerala has prepared a detailed resource map of the entire area. This will be used for further exploration of the Muziris site. The Centre for Muziris Studies is being set up on the campus of KKTU College. The construction of the 50,000 sq ft building has been completed. The Centre will house a library, lecture rooms, auditorium, computer centre, and different offices for scholars and accommodation facilities for visiting scholars. The centre will provide the academic and research content required for a project of this nature.

The funding by the Government of India to the tune of Rs 40.52 crore has come handy. As part of the central government aided projects, the visitor centres in Paravur and Kodungallur, performance centre at Gothuruthu, tourist interpretation centres at different locations, conservation of different monuments, revitalization of the Paravur Market, the signage, bicycle pathways and toilet blocks etc. are under different stages of construction.

One of the policy decisions for the project was to add only those facilities that are relevant to the local community. The land acquisition route, that was part of many of the earlier tourism projects in Kerala, was avoided. The aim was not to promote five star hotels under the pretext of tourism. Although there was a strong political will for the project, no legislation was introduced unlike in many other conservation projects in India. The reason cited was that the participating community should strongly feel the need for legislation.

The Muziris Heritage Project is relevant for the future of Kerala for the following reasons: (i) History, conservation and heritage can be linked to development and can form potential resources and assets. The economic values of heritage, which is sustainable, is important for a state like Kerala. (ii) Convergence of funds from different departments is important for a developing economy, where bureaucratic and inter-departmental procedures delay the implementation of many projects. The Government of Kerala views the project as a model not only for its concept, but for its implementation as well. There is a coordination committee consisting of ministers, and decisions are being speeded up. (iii) It is an integrated approach to tourism and this model is sustainable for the future of Kerala. Tourism and heritage management are integrated in this approach. A common mistake made in some of the earlier cultural tourism projects was a lack of coordination between tourism administrators and the custodians of our monuments. In the case of Muziris Heritage Project, the different departments of the government are working together based on the broad objectives mentioned in the Conservation Development Plan.

Like most projects in Kerala, the Muziris Heritage Project has also created its share of debate, arguments and controversies. One relates to the hypothesis about whether Pattanam is Muziris. Another one claims that the excavation and conservation work are not as per the standards. It is true that the expertise of handling such activity might not be up to standards available at present. No major excavations had been undertaken in Kerala since the 1970s till Pattanam, which started in 2006. While it is not easy to carry out this work as per the government rules and regulations and maintaining high quality is difficult, attempts to achieve higher standards must continue. However, the project has created lot of knowledge exchange and more awareness regarding Kerala's history, heritage and sustainable tourism.

Muziris is a great symbol of communal harmony and this is the site where the Jews, Christians, Muslims and Hindus have lived peacefully for centuries. The conservation of heritage is the primary objective of the project and it is an experiment to see how heritage can be linked with development which will benefit the local community. The community expects their lives will be impacted in a positive way with the Muziris Project.

The intention is that the monuments should not be seen in isolation, but designed in a manner that involves the local communities and integrates the various proposals with other developmental activity. The Muziris Heritage Project naturally lends itself to bringing back memories of the past; it is not about tourism or recreation alone. It is about making a difference – a big difference to conservation, restoration, the study of history, environment, research, development of craft and art forms, occupations and other community activity.