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Kochi-Muziris Biennale

Unearthing History

The Muziris Heritage Project

Benny *Kuriakose*

Muziris was an active port in the 1st century BC, though it is still not known when the city-port was established. The merchants of Muziris had instituted Indo-Greek and Indo-Roman-Egyptian trade channels, dealing in gold and other metals, pepper and spices, gemstones and textiles. From the 1st century onward, they traded with Jews, Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch, Chinese and British. In 1341, the profile of the water bodies 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 flood or earthquake, or both. The archaeological and historical data gathering on "Muziris" provides evidence to show that it was a veritable 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, the first Christian Church and the oldest surviving European monument in India. The MHP focuses on retrieving the historical heritage of this cultural region through various initiatives including historical research, archeological 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.

Tourism and heritage management are integrated to have an outstanding product having mutual benefits. Kerala has so far marketed only its beaches, backwaters and forests and to some extent its monsoon. This project can help the tourism industry similar to what Angkor Vat has done for Cambodia, Athens has done for Greece.

- The whole project is seen primarily as a heritage conservation project and not a tourism project.

- This is one of the biggest non-formal education project launched by the Government of Kerala. The different layers of history ranging from the Romans, Greeks, Chinese, Jews, Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch and the British can be seen in this small area.

- The project is integrated with the rest of the development plans. The focus of the project will be on local economy rejuvenation including generation of local employment, rejuvenation of traditional industries and artisan activities, providing a boost to local culture and traditions.

- Activities of the various departments are being converged for the project. Nineteen Government agencies are working on the project.

- Great thrust is being given to the development of infrastructure of the region. The facilities that are being planned as part of the project are relevant to the community rather than the tourists.

- This is a project with strong academic and research content. A international research Centre for Muziris Studies is being set up as part of the project and construction work is going on.

- The Government of Kerala is seeing the project as a model not only for its concepts, but for its implementation

also. They have formed a co-ordination committee consisting of seven ministers and the decisions are speeded up rather than moving as files from department to the other.

- The entire program is carried out with the participation of the community in the project. Around 80 volunteers have been recruited as resource persons of the project who act as the link between the community and the project.

- Although the project is driven by certain tourism considerations, they are managed by the principles & conventions of the international guidelines on cultural heritage management.

- The Muziris Heritage Project has been declared as the first green project of the Government of Kerala.

The intangible heritage is consciously integrated with the overall plan. The Government of Kerala is seeing the Muziris Heritage Project as a sustainable model for tourism.

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

1. North paravur
Kottakavu Church
St. Jacobite Church
Synagogue
Kannankulangara Temple
Mookambiga Temple
Mahadeva Temple
Market
Jewish House
2. Pattanam Excavation Site
3. Kottayil Kovilakom
Synagogue
Vypeekota Seminary
Holy Cross Church
Krishna Temple
Jewish House
4. Paliyam
Dutch Palace
Nalukettu
Market
Siva Temple
Devi Temple
Vishnu Temple
5. Gothuruthu
R.C Church
L.P School
Priests's Office
Chavittu Natakam
Fishing Nets
Lime Shells
6. Kottapuram Fort Market
7. Cheraman Parambu
8. Keelthazhi Siva Temple
9. Thiruvanchikulam Temple
10. Cheraman Juma Masjid
11. Kodungaloor Bagavathy Temple
12. Abdul Rahman Sahib's House
13. Azhikode Marthoma Church
14. Pallipuram
Fort
Pallipuram Church
Mosque
St. Rose Church
St. Gorge Church
St. Marys Church
Varaham Temple



The Spice Route Initiative

Ancient Kerala, renowned as the Spice Coast of India, was a major hub in the Spice Route, trading even 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 center of this spice trade was the ancient port of Muziris that has a history of 3000 years. The present day Kodungallur, it finds mention in the works of Pliny the Elder and also in the Periplus of the Eritrean Sea.

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 consequence it had on history of the world is astounding, ranging from the cuisine to the spread of religions. Kerala has been a center for this melting pot of cultures and religion and living examples of this cultural exchange is 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 6th century BC.

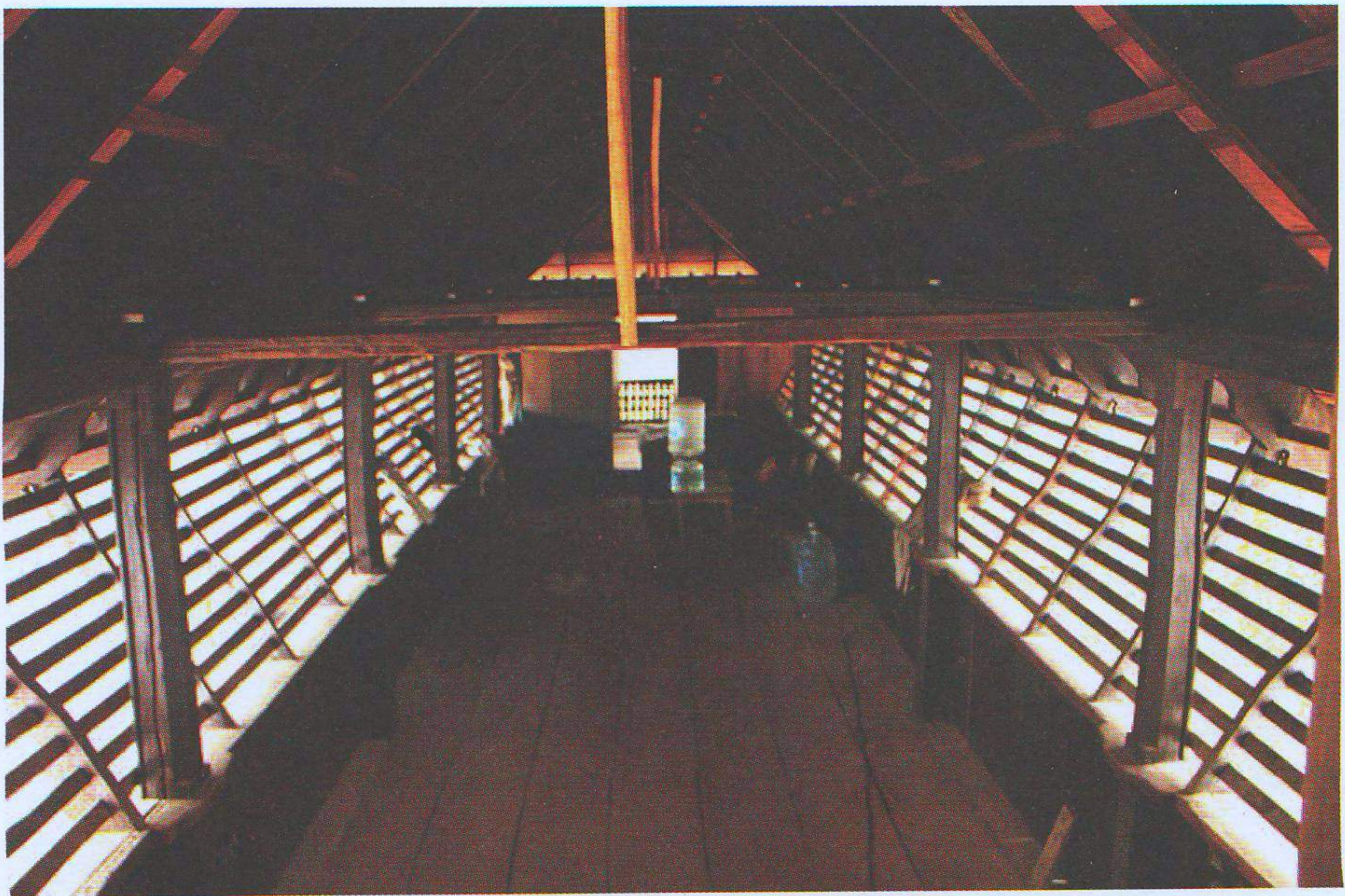
The 'Spice Route Initiative' is aimed at mobilizing bilateral and multilateral support of countries, mostly former colonial and trading partners of Kerala due to the historic spice trade in the Muziris region, and of which there are historic traces in the form of tangible and intangible heritage.

This project has great potential for bilateral and multilateral cultural cooperation for safeguarding the

'shared heritage' in Kerala. Therefore in consultation with UNESCO the 'Spice Route Initiative' was launched to forge international exchange and collaboration. The Government of Kerala requested UNESCO New Delhi to take forward the Spice Route Initiative by facilitating the exchange and foreign collaboration.

The Government of Kerala has accorded sanction an amount of Rs. 140 crores for the Development of Muziris Heritage Tourism Circuit. Different works are being carried out by the Government of Kerala as part of the Project of which some are the following;

- Conservation of Paliyam Nalukettu and Paliyam Dutch Palace are almost over. The palace is being converted into a museum, which will tell the history of the Cochin dynasty and their relationship with the rest of the countries. The Nalukettu will be turned into a lifestyle museum.
- Conservation of the Paravur Synagogue is being carried out. After conservation, the synagogue is being converted into a museum, which portrays the relationship of the Kerala Jews with the rest of the community.
- Conservation of Kottappuram Fort: The State Department of Archaeology has been carrying out excavation at the site, which has thrown light into the Dutch and Portuguese period.
- Excavation at Pattanam Site is being carried out by Kerala State Council for Historical Research and it has thrown much light into the early history of Muziris and maritime trade with many countries.
- Excavation at Other Sites: The Government has sanctioned funds for the excavation at different sites other than Pattanam. These excavations, which are being carried out by the State Department of Archaeology, include



different sites such as Kottappuram Fort, Cheraman Parambu, and Paravur Synagogue etc.

- Revitalization of the Kottappuram Market: As part of the revitalization project, toilets, drainage, pathways, street lighting and the improvement of the traditional markets etc. are being carried out.

- Construction of Boat Jetties: The Government has sanctioned the construction of 14 boat jetties for developing the boat traffic, which will be the main means of transportation. Seven boat jetties are nearing completion being done by KINCO and another three will be constructed by KIDCO.

- Improvement of Arterial Roads: The Government has sanctioned funds for the improvement of the major arterial roads for the project. Works on the different roads have been completed.

- Publication of Newsletters, Books and Brochures: Kerala State Institute of Children's Literature are publishing different books related to the Muziris Heritage Project. The Institute has already published the newsletters in Malayalam and some books.

- Resource Mapping of the Muziris Heritage Site: The Information Kerala Mission of the Government of Kerala is preparing a detailed resource map of the entire area. An amount of Rs. 50 lakhs have been sanctioned to them and the project is nearing completion.

- Capacity Building of the Project: 78 resource persons selected from the different Panchayaths in the project area collected information on local history. The Centre for Heritage Studies, Kerala is doing the capacity building training programs.

- Different Museums: The Government

is planning to set up more than 20 museums in the project area and in the first phase, four museums will be ready by January 2013.

- Centre for Muziris Studies: The Centre is being set up in the campus of KKTMM College. The construction is under way. The Centre when completed will house a library, lecture rooms, auditorium, computer center, and different offices for scholars and accommodation facilities for visiting scholars. The Centre when completed 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 Crores is being used. As part of the Central Government aided projects, the visitor centres in Paravur and Kodungallur, performance center at Gothuruthu, tourist interpretation centres at different locations, conservation of the different monuments, revitalization of the Paravur Market, the signage, bicycle pathways and toilet blocks etc. will be constructed.

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

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