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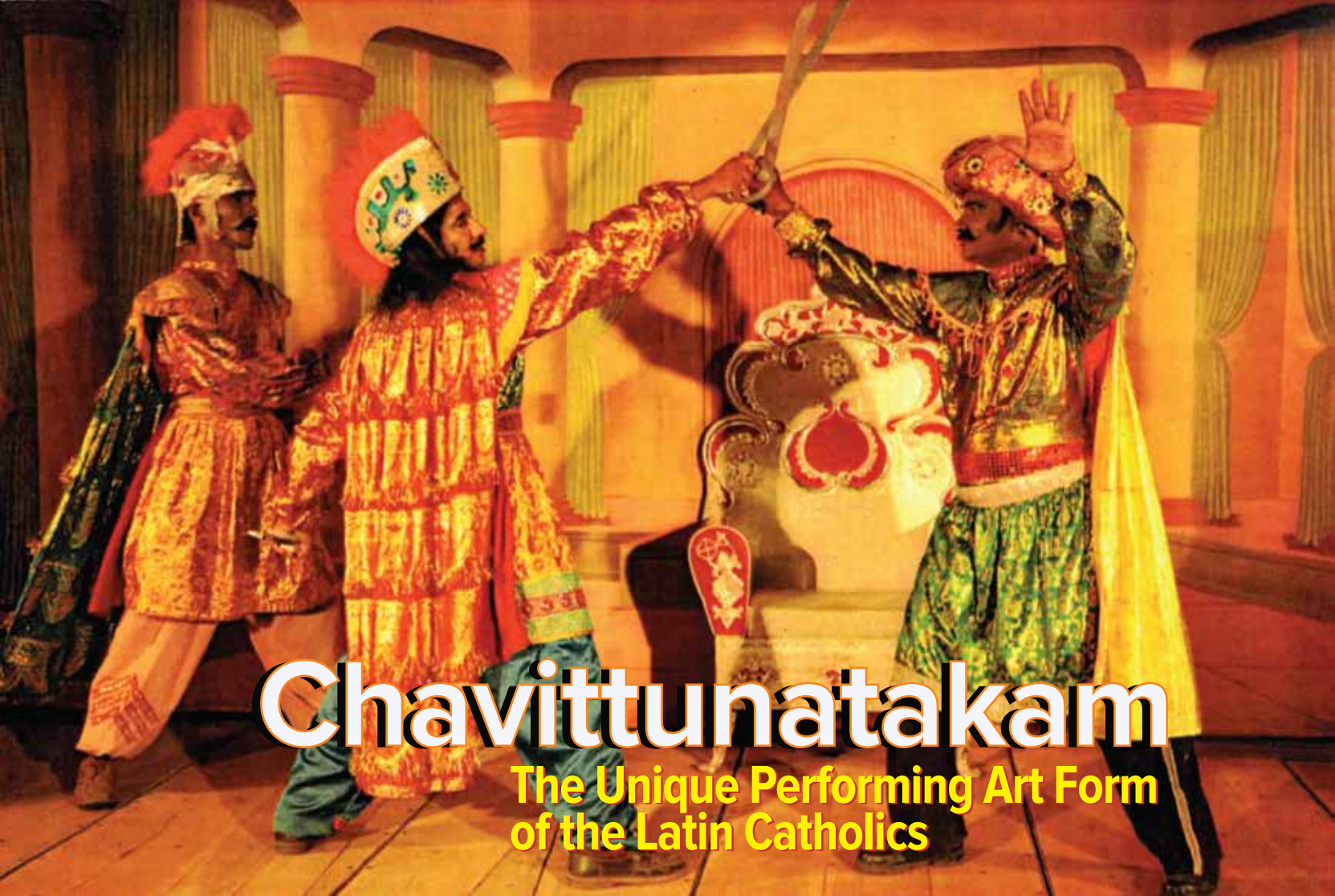
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CHAVITTUNATAKAM

**The Unique Performing Art Form
of the Latin Catholics**



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● Sippy Pallippuram

Chavittunatakam is a unique performing art form that is the contribution of the Christians of Kerala. It is believed that Chavittunatakam existed in Tamilnadu in the form of “Therukkoothu” and in Sri Lanka, as “Naadagama.”

C.J. Thomas, in his study *Uyarunna Yavanika* (Rising Curtain), says: “Chavittunatakam, the first successful indigenous theatre of Kerala, evolved from the progeny of the mixed marriages of the natives and the Portuguese who had come along with Vasco da Gama and settled here.” Renowned historian, A. Sreedhara Menon, in his *Keralacharitam* (A History of Kerala), mentions, that “In Chavittunatakam, Bible stories are adapted for the stage so as to entertain a Christian audience.” Dr. P.K. Gopalakrishnan, in his book *Keralathinte Samskarika Charitram* (The Cultural History of Kerala),

specifically point out: “Chavittunatakam is a blend of some performing art forms of Kerala and the European opera.”

The Characteristics of Chavittunatakam

Chavittunatakam is a traditional performing art form of Kerala that is closely related to classical performing arts like Kathakali and Kootiyaattam and the European opera, as already seen. Elements like song, fights, dance performance and acting are blended beautifully together in this art form.

As mentioned above, Chavittunatakam has close similarities with the “Therukkoothu” of Tamilnadu, the Yakshagana of Karnataka, and the “Naadagama” of Sri Lanka. Chavittunatakam assimilates a semi-classical style containing the essence of Indian classical arts. It gave the common masses who were unable to enjoy the pure classical style of Kathakali and Kootiyaattam, excitement and enjoyment in a large measure.

It was the intense efforts to present Christian morality tales, historical tales, Bible stories and superhuman narratives in a dramatic form to the illiterate rural masses, that prepared the way for the inception of Chavittunatakam.

Chavittunaatakam performance texts are called “Chuvatikal.” The Chuvatikal, in their earliest form, were written on palm-leaves. As prescribed in the Chuvatikal, the different characters that arrive on stage, the Kattiyakkaaran (Sootradharan), the background singers, and the Aashaan(the director) together create the magical effect on the stage.

Chavittunaatakam is not only music-oriented, but dance-oriented too. “Chavittu” (stomping of the feet) implies the rhythmic stamping of the feet of the dancer/actor on the stage during the performance. This rhythmic stamping is the life of the performance. This is precisely why it is called “Chavittunaatakam” (Stomping-feet Drama).

In the earlier times, Chavittunaatakam was performed on a broad stage at least 100 to 120 feet wide at the frontage. Battle scenes in which 50 to 60 actors participated, parade of kings mounted on their stallions, the emperor and kings under his tutelage with their entourage in procession, hunting expeditions of kings along with their companions etc were enacted on stage.

There would be at least a hundred songs with different tunes, in a particular Chavittunaatakam drama. The Kattiyakkarar (Sootradharan) who

coordinates the different elements of Chavittunaatakam is a crucial link holding the performance together. Kattiyakkarar would be a local actor who can employ humour that suits the different contexts of the play, unleash satirical social criticism and witticisms, and completely captivate the audience and plunge it into a frenzy.

The audience will sit through the night till dawn every night consecutively for four of five days—the time it took for a play to finish its performance-- in the maidan, enjoying the playing on the percussion instruments, singing, rhythmic stomping of the feet, sword-play, duels and dancing. The actors would enter the rehearsal stage in the gurukula style, after paying obeisance to the Aashaan and offering him the dakshina.

The Origin and Development of Chavittunaatakam

The origin of Chavittunaatakam in Kerala was in the 16th century, exactly a century before the emergence of the dance-narration form of Kathakali. The Christian missionaries who had arrived from Europe around that time had given shape to this art form. About the same time, the Malayalam translations of Sanskrit plays began to be staged throughout Kerala.

After the Synod of Dyamper (Udayamperur) in 1599, the Church prohibited the performance, within the church premises, of Koothu and Kootiyattam which had been related to the Arya-Brahmana culture. The recital of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata within the courtyard of the church also stood prohibited. In order to bridge this gap, and also to hold the Christian faithful in the sweetness of devotion, some of the missionaries began to compose hymns in the metre and style of Poonthanam’s Njaanappaana. Of these, it was Arnose Pathiri’s Puthenpaana that occupied the pride of place. This work composed based on the life-story of Jesus Christ used to be sung in most of the Christian homes during those times (It is still sung during the lent in traditional homes). This is one of the important elegies that have been composed in the Malayalam language.

It was around this time that the Christian missionaries invented Chavittunaatakam as a means of propagating the tenets of the Christianity. Kochi and Kodungallur, which were within the circle of influence of the Portuguese at that time, were considered the native homes of this performance art form.

Chinna Thampy Annavi and Vedanayakam, Christian scholars from



Tamilnadu who reached Mattanchery, introduced certain programmes to encourage the artists of Kochi. It is believed that Pristina, the Chuvati that Chinna Thampy composed for this purpose, was performed as the first ever Chavittunaatakam. Yet, it is found in the Akhilavijnaana Kosham published by DC Books, that the first Chavittunaatakam was Janova, composed to extol the greatness of a Roman emperor. Sebina Rafi, who has written a research volume, Chavittunaatakam, opines that neither of these two is in fact the first one; instead, it was Karalman Charitram. There are not two opinions about the fact that Karalman Charitram is the easily the greatest of the three, at any rate.

Chavittunaatakam was chiefly staged on the occasion of church fiestas, wedding celebrations, Christmas and Easter. Including the faith and adventure-oriented plays like Alleshu naatakam, Bruseena natakam, Youseppu naatakam, Alphonse naatakam, Napoleon naatakam, Geevarghese naatakam, Daveed Vijayam, Plamena charitam Kathreenanaatkam, Lucina charitam, Yakobu naatakam, Sanniklaus charitam, and morality plays like Jnaanasundari, Komalachandrika, Satyapalan, Dharmishtan, there were about 50 Chuvatis in the beginning.

Chavittunaatakam flourished greatly in the coastal regions stretching from Kannur in the north to Kollam in the south, where Christians, especially the Portuguese and the European missionaries, had great influence.

How did this Dramatic Art Form Decline?

The beginning of the decline can be traced back to the time when the Christian missionaries responsible for the inception of Chavittunaatakam began to leave Kerala by the middle of the 17th Century. The tremendous progress in the development of Kathakali that happened during this time, and the propagation and public acceptance of prose plays in later times, endangered the very existence

of Chavittunaatakam. The touring of Tamil drama troupes throughout Kerala too proved to be detrimental to it.

The alcoholism of the actors, their lack of training, ignorance about the body of the story, lack of discipline and unruliness, the less than dignified and irrational trends like the rich and the powerful in the community grabbing main roles etc. creeping into the production, proved to be grave hindrances in the development of this art form. Also, the lack of talent of the background singers and the scant attention paid by them to the details of the singing, contributed to the decline.



New Chuvatis not being written to suit topical themes and the play extending over several days, caused the audiences to grow tired of Chavittunaatakam. The generations that followed lacked the interest to spend long periods of time in getting trained in the art form. There was a sharp decline in the number of the local artists who prepared the costumes and the other props for the play. The audience of such changing times also grew impatient about the repeated rendering of the old Tamil-mixed songs sung by the background singers. They forsook

Chavittunaatakam and embraced farces and Malayalam musicals.

How to Save this Art Form?

If this art form is to be resurrected from its deathbed, several things must be done. The renowned theatre director and actor Chandradasan opines: "Chavittunaatakam can be given a new lease of life if the undue influence of the Tamil language is reduced, if the overbearing cacophony of the orchestra is reined in, and if the play is brought under the control of good directors who can bring in new and creative stylizations in the stage production."

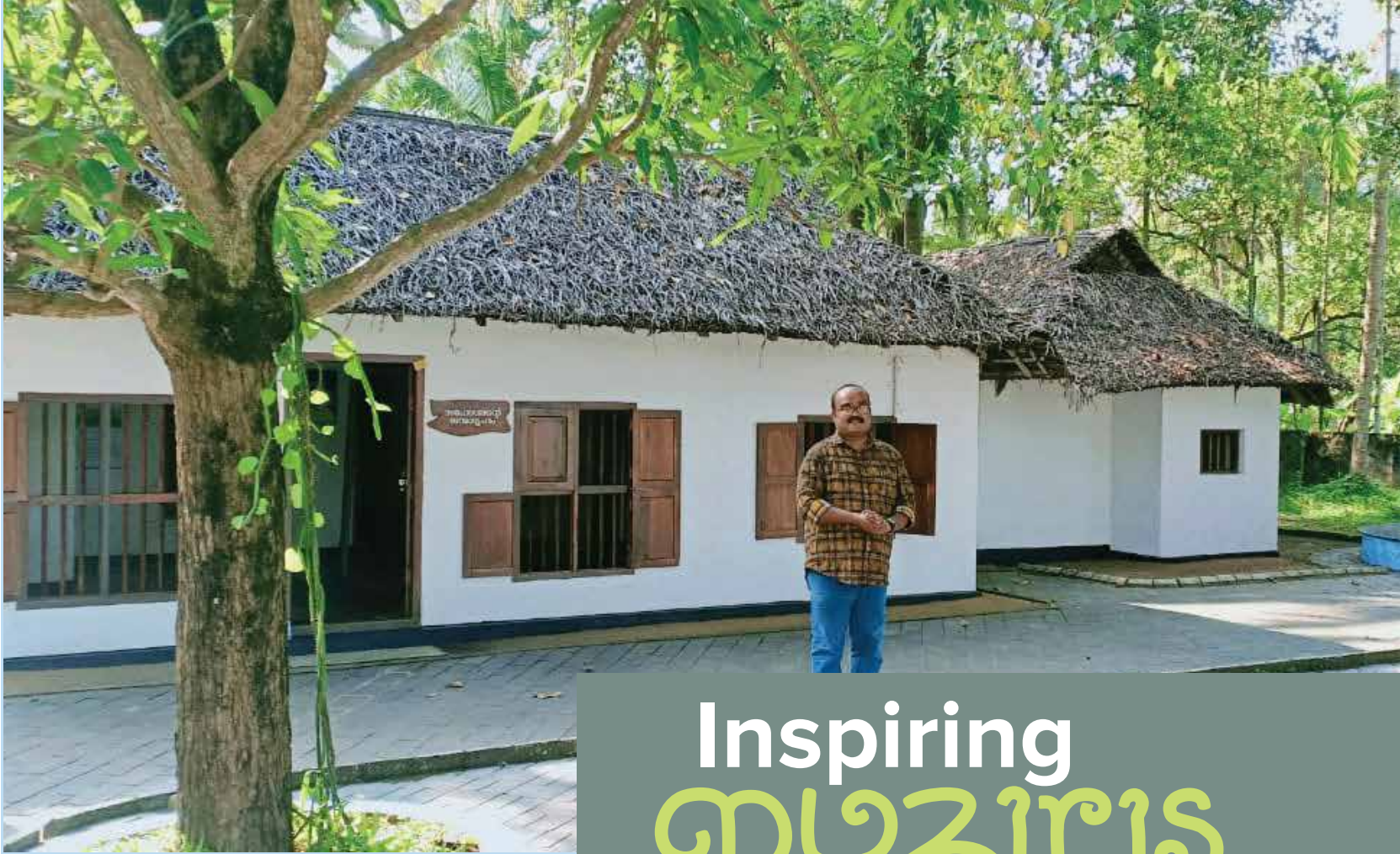
T.M. Abraham, the well-known playwright and former Vice Chairman of Kerala Sangeeta Nataka Academy strongly advocates the creation of a "Centre for Chavittunaatakam" with Kochi as its headquarters. For this, the Kerala Sangeeta Nataka Academy or Kerala Kala Mandalam must take strong interest.

Chavittunaatakam in School Arts Festivals

Years ago, the then Education Minister had announced that Chavittunaatakam would be included as an item in the School Arts Festivals of the state. Sri M.A. Baby had

taken special care to make it an item for competition. However, it was not added as an item in the State Arts Festival Manual.

It was Sri Abdurrah, the new Education Minister then, who passed the order including Chavittunaatakam as an item in the School Arts Festivals from the 2012-2013 academic year. He must be felicitated from the bottom of the heart.



Inspiring മുളിരി

● K A Shaji

K A Shaji is a South India-based journalist who reports regularly on political developments, environmental issues, health, livelihood, dalit issues, tribal affairs, art, culture and developmental disparities.

മുളിരി

It was while assisting the crew of Discovery Channel which produced an hour-long documentary on the devastating Kerala floods of August 2018, that Muziris turned into a fascinating subject for me. Delhi-based journalist Anubha Bhonsle was doing the direction part while veteran camera person Ajmal Javi was recording the post-flood situation. When we moved around in the Kodungallur-Paravur belt, locals with a penchant for history told us the deluge was almost a replay of the catastrophe that washed away the ancient river port of Muziris in 1341.

Periyar, the state's second-largest river that divides Kerala into north and south, was in spate ever since the morning of August 14, 2018, inundating parts of Idukki, Ernakulam, and Thrissur districts. The flood situation continued for three days. People's lives, homes, valuables, and precious spots faced a surging threat from the waters; so did the treasured historical legacy of the ancient port town of Muziris. People told us that several prized archaeological remains of the legendary port town were lost to the flood.

During the conversations with the community, I learned that Muziris was situated at the exact point where the river empties into the Arabian Sea. Subsequent visits convinced me that the shores of Periyar in the belt hold strong archaeological evidence of centuries-old Kerala as a cultural and commercial hub, which networked with ancient cities like Rome.

It was the apocalyptic swell of Periyar waters in 1341 that erased this urban centre. Those massive floods destroyed not just the transcontinental trade ties but also various remnants of the ancient port town, which had brought the Malabar Coast and its spices onto the world map. Fortunately, this time the waters receded by August 16 by the evening without the level of destruction that occurred in 1341.

It was with this background that I visited Muziris again in 2019. I had an additional purpose of writing an article for The Telegraph newspaper of Kolkata on the Cheraman Mosque at Kodungallur, the world's second and India's first mosque. It is now getting renovated as part of the Muziris Heritage Project and it also adds attraction to the harmonious cultural and social situation prevailing in the region.

When I reached the office of Muziris Heritage Project, a boat was waiting for me to visit and see all the major landmarks of the region which are under renovation along with the mosque. Till then, my impression was that backwater tourism would be possible only in the Alappuzha-Kuttanad region in Kerala. Backwaters, rivers, and networking canals had ensured for me a smooth boat journey, which provided panoramic views. The guide who accompanied me told me that the legacy of Muziris starts from around 3000 BC when Babylonians, Assyrians, and Egyptians came to

the Malabar Coast in search of spices. Later they were joined by Arabs and Phoenicians, and the port town gradually entered into the cartography of Old World trade. An integral part of those ancient trade routes, Muziris now holds the key to a rich seam of Kerala's ancient history.

In the stories of Rama's adventures Muziris was Muchiri Pattanam, the forest where the forces of the monkey king Sugriva start their search for the abducted Sita. Tamil Sangam poems from the early centuries of CE describe the numerous Roman ships landing at Muziris laden with gold in exchange for the local pepper.

According to the first-century accounts of Pliny the Elder, and the contemporary Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, Muziris could be reached in a fortnight from the Red Sea ports on the Egyptian coast if you were purely sailing on the monsoon winds.

As someone fond of Buddhism, the region enthralled me when the guide said that Muziris was a major Buddhist centre in the South. The ancient Kurumba Bhagavathy Temple located at the heart of Kodungallur was once a Buddhist centre of worship and it became a Hindu shrine when the locals abandoned Buddhism. The region had a strong Jain presence as well.

During the journey, I found that the region holds a unique distinction as India's gateway to all the





Semitic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. It is also a prominent Hindu pilgrim centre. No other settlement in India can claim such a history, and the region has a long history spanning over 2,000 years of communal harmony and social solidarity.

Muchiri Pattanam evolved into Muziris and Kodungallur over the years. Muchiri in Malayalam means cleft lip and the place name denotes the three branches of the Periyar which empty into the Arabian Sea close to the town. Legends say that Christ's apostle St Thomas landed at Kodungallur in 52 CE. A church commemorating the event stands at Azhikode, where Periyar merges with the sea. The town also had a flourishing Jewish settlement till recent years before most of the residents moved to Israel. The synagogues of the Paravur region are quite fascinating.

The entire Kodungallur-Paravur belt is rich in monuments of Kerala's history: churches, temples, synagogues, and historical places. The happiest thing is that the restoration works are being undertaken in tune with the original character and aesthetics of each historical monument. The Muziris Heritage Conservation Project deserves praise for reviving and restoring these structures to espouse the cause of unity and amity.

The Muziris Heritage Project, which stretches across seven panchayats in Kodungallur and

adjacent Paravur, is an ambitious one and it will have 27 museums and more than 50 sites of interest ranging from a spice museum to an excavation site where shards of Roman amphorae and Italian ceramic ware have been found.

In a commendable effort, the project has recovered more than 95,000 objects, ranging from glass beads to fragments of pottery from Mesopotamia, modern-day Iraq. Visiting Chendamangalam, a weavers' village which lies between Kodungallur and Paravoor, provides a different experience. Earlier it was the seat of the Paliath Achans, prime ministers of the erstwhile princely state of Kochi.

Besides the weavers and their work, which makes the finest handloom textiles and wear, the major attraction here is the Paliyam Palace, built in the Dutch architectural style by the Paliath Achans. A nalukettu or four-winged house used by women and children of the Paliath family in the past is another attraction in the village.

The boat has taken me to fantastic locations like Pallippuram, Kottappuram, and Gothuruth, encircled by the backwaters. It was indeed a great experience and I am looking forward to another visit after the project come into its full shape. I am sure, Kerala Tourism will soon find Muziris as the most sought-after destination in Kerala.



NEW PROJECTS AT ALAPPUZHA

The Hon'ble Chief Minister of Kerala, Shri. Pinarayi Vijayan inaugurated the function and new projects at Alappuzha and dedicated the completed projects to the public. Hon. Minister for Tourism, Co-operation and Devaswom Shri. Kadakampally Surendran presided over the function. Ministers Shri. G Sudhakaran, Dr TM Thomas Isaac, Shri. Ramachandran Kadannapilly, Shri. P. Thilothaman, Shri.K. Krishnan Kutty, Hon. Alappuzha MP AM Arif, Hon. Municipal Chairman Mr. Illikkal Kunjumon, Managing Director P.M. Nowshad were present.

Azhikode Muziris Munakkal Beach which was closed for seven months due to the Covid 19 crisis, has been opened to the public. The beach is being opened as part of the restoration of tourism after the Pandemic . The Chavakkad Cyclists' Club, a group of cyclists from Chavakkad, arrived at the beach as the first tourists as part of a heritage trip organized by 20 cyclists. The Cycle Club team was received in the Muziris Heritage Project following the Covid -19 protocol.

The cyclists reached Munakkal beach after pedalling 60 km from Chavakkad. Visitors are escorted through a special gate where hand sanitizer is provided and body temperature checked. The group took a boat trip from Kottapuram waterfront and returned after visiting the Paliam Museum and Kottapuram Fort. Muziris Museum Managers Sajna Vasantha Raj, Nimmi K and Junior Executive Akhil S. Bhadran and others received them at various museums.

AZHIKODE MUZIRIS MUNAKKAL BEACH OPENED



KOCHI PEDAL FOR CYCLING CLUB CYCLE RIDE THROUGH HISTORY

Kochi Pedal for Cycling Club under the auspices of Muziris Heritage Project cycled through history. The cycle ride to Muziris started from Thrupunithara in collaboration with Kochi Metro Rail Limited. About 15 people travelled about 100 km and reached Paravur synagogue. The group was received by Muziris Heritage Project Marketing Manager Ibrahim Sabin and Museum Manager Nimmi KB.

