

Anniversary issue  
January 2008



# Cochin Chronicle

TRACING 150 YEARS OF THE CITY'S HISTORY

Cochin Chamber of Commerce and Industry newsletter

2 Malayali on the  
Burmese footie  
team? Don't be  
surprised

3 Text of letter  
from Cochin  
congratulating  
Queen Vic

4 Prof. Shankara  
Menon takes a  
nostalgia trip

6 Singing an old  
tune with the  
boatman's songs

7 Catching up:  
Interview with  
American  
architect Patricia  
Tusa Fels

8 A sense of  
Mattancherry in  
the bustling  
trading days

## LEAF OUT OF THE PAST

### With respect, from Cochin

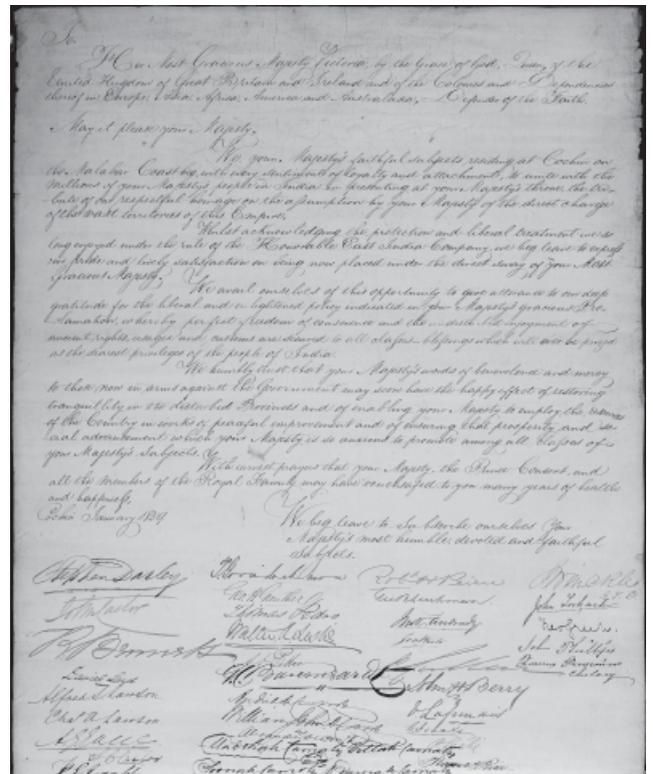
A letter to Queen Victoria from the inhabitants of Cochin forms part of the British Library's royal collection

They might have been in a calmer Cochin, but apparently, no region in India was too remote to remain untouched by the change of guard. Following the sepoy rebellion in 1857, which made the East India Company's presence obsolete in India, legislation was passed to take royal control of the country through a viceroy received Victoria's signature on August 2, 1858. The Queen wrote to Canning, who became viceroy, that direct government responsibility for "that enormous Empire which is so bright a jewel of her Crown" was "a source of great satisfaction and pride." India was now part of the British Raj and residents of Cochin and Malabar joined

hands to sent Queen Victoria a letter congratulating her on the assumption of rule in the country. The 5-ft long, handwritten letter, which consists of a few hundred signatures in English and Malayalam, forms part of the royal collection in London's British Library. The letter includes the signatures of Robert Hodges Peirce and Patrick Leslie, the founders of Peirce Leslie, the firm that exported in tea, cashew, coir and coconut oil from Kerala to Europe.

Dated January 1859, it was sent two years after the Cochin Chamber of Commerce was set up. The queen also received separate congratulatory letters from Raja Ravi Varma of Cochin and the high priest of the Kashi muttom in Benaras.

Continued on page 3



**Note this:** The letter sent from Cochin to Queen Victoria with some of the signatures

## Brochure worth a I,000 words

It is an innocuous looking souvenir, but Kailash Gupta, the former president of the Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, has treasured it for 35 years. The 28-page, black and white brochure, was printed to celebrate the laying of the foundation stone of Cochin Shipyard by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, in 1972. This ceremony followed close on the heels of the stone-laying of the Vishakapatnam Shipyard, also by Mrs Gandhi.

The souvenir contains messages from President V.V. Giri, Vice-President G.S. Pathak and central and state ministers, including Kerala Chief Minister C. Achutha Menon and Home

**In the beginning was the word:** Cover of the Cochin Shipyard souvenir



Continued on page 7

BACK IN TIME

## Footballer from the Collis line

An ace player on the Burma national football team was a nephew of Cochin-based shipping merchant, Fred Collis

Malayalis are a bit like Rajnikanth fans, they can be found in the strangest places. Still, a footballer of Kerala origin on the Burmese national team almost sounds like the apocryphal story of the Malayali whom Neil Armstrong bumped into on the moon. But in fact, Yvon Collis, a nephew of Fred Collis, who operated Ambassador Steam Ship Company, later named Collis Line, a cargo shipping firm in Cochin, was a national football hero in the former British colony.

Antony Lazar Culas, Yvon's grandfather, was a durbar manager in the Travancore court. The family name, Culas, was later anglicised to Collis. Culas's children, the Collis siblings and their families, including Fred and his sisters Flora and Sophie, migrated to Burma for work.

Sophie's husband, Ralph Gomez, was a warden at the Incene Central Jail. During World War II, the families fled the country following Japanese occupation, and Ralph came to Cochin where he was superintendent of the State's Veyoor Central Jail.

Yvon's father, Cyril Collis, was a platform inspector with the Burma Railway. "The families had made a dramatic escape. My parents trekked and rode in bullock carts out of

Burma," says Yvon's brother, Gordon, who is now settled in Australia. "I was three, but my mother used to recount how they saw bodies strewn on the sides of the street during their walk to Chittagong. Sometimes, bullock cart wheels would roll over the bodies." Flora, who made an early exit out of Burma, was able to ship all her family's belongings back to Kerala, but Sophie was not so lucky. Her family had to leave everything behind. Refugees from Burma were sent to camps in Coimbatore.

The Collises finally came to Cochin, where Fred, who was a wireless operator with the navy, eventually started the shipping company in the early 50s. It was a prosperous business and he had about five ships that carried cargo to Africa and the Middle East. "My father worked with uncle Fred in his shipping company for a while, but my mother, who was Anglo-Burmese had a difficult time here, so they returned to Burma," says Gordon.

Burma obtained independent in 1948, when the British handed over power. Cyril's family seemed to have been a cosmopolitan bunch. Though he spoke fluent Malayalam, his family followed an Anglo-Indian lifestyle. His son, Yvon, who showed promise as a football player, changed his name to Maung Maung Tin to fit in. But, of

course, it was his talent that took him far. The team, which toured Iran, Israel, Ceylon, Germany, Russia and England, was top in Asia and won the prestigious Tunku Abdul Rahman Cup in Malaysia three times. Maung Maung, who started playing on the national team in 1969, too, was no lightweight. The footballer, who played various positions during his decade-long career, won the title of All Asia Star.

In fact, the German coach who trained the team for three years was keen to take Yvon back to Germany with him, but the footballer was content in Burma. After he retired at 35, he coached the Burmese Railway team and the youth team, which also toured internationally. Eventually, Yvon migrated to Australia, where his other brothers were settled, with his wife, Susu, and four children in 1993. He worked in a factory assembly line and died of a heart attack in August, 2000. "Though today, the standards have dropped, football used to be a very popular sport in the country," says Gordon, who often visits Burma with his family.

"Just as with cricket in India, you could find boys kicking a ball in any vacant plot. My three brothers and I, too, used to play, but Yvon was the one with true talent."

THEN AND NOW

## Warehouse and spare space



When it was the centre of trade, the roughly 250 warehouses in Mattanchery, must have seemed like too few. It stored rice, pulses, herbs, tea, oil, kerosene, coir and all manner of goods. The two-story buildings along the street, with decorated windows and carved eaves, even today offer a romantic street façade, which is impressive, considering that trade and romance are almost as impossible to mix as oil and water. In fact, Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* is located in 16th century Mattancherry.

The godowns had grand arched gates, called *annavaathil*, that lead from the road to expansive courtyards that extend to the water's edge. These buildings have gable roofs covered with clay roofing tiles, timber rafters with heavy timber ties and thick, brick stuccoed walls.

When trade dwindled, the godowns were left empty and unused. But today, thanks to the tourist traffic, these beautiful spaces have received a new lease, and have been resurrected as restaurants, art galleries (in pic below: Kashi Art Gallery) and creative workshops.

Not a bad new avatar!



**Good sport:** Muang Muang Tin alias Yvon Collis (extreme left) with team members of the Burma football team; Receiving a trophy for best player



Continued from page 1

While the governance of India passed from the East India Company to the throne following the first war of independence, it will only in 1877 that Queen Victoria, who was the longest serving monarch, assumed the title of Empress of India, through a move ratified in the English parliament by Benjamin Disraeli. The subcontinent was an important imperial colony and had political, economic and social significance for the throne. In fact, the Government bought shares in the Suez Canal, owned by the bankrupt Khedive of Egypt, to obtain control in the passage to India, which was opened in 1869.

The queen also received separate congratulatory letters from Raja Ravi Varma of Cochin and the high priest of the Kashi muttom in Benaras, when she received the title of Empress of India in 1877

The Queen-Empress never visited India, but she had Indian servants, and also an Indian secretary teach her sufficient Hindi to enable her to write diary entries in the language. She had



**Man of letters:** Robert Hodges Peirce was one of the signatories of the letter to Queen Victoria

an Indian dish on most of her dinner menus, and wore and displayed jewels from India, such as the famous Kohinoor diamond, which is said to bring misfortune and death to any man who owns or wears it, but good luck to women.

In fact, Victoria personally received Prince Duleep Singh of Lahore, whose family owned the diamond, within weeks of his arrival in London and she and her husband, Prince Albert welcomed him into their family.

The Empress also added a large “Durbar Room” to Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, with art and artifacts from India.

## TEXT OF THE LETTER

*Her Most Gracious Majesty Victoria, by the Grace of God, Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the colonies and dependencies thereof in Europe, Asia, Africa, America and Australasia, Defender of the Faith.*

*May it please your Majesty,*

*We, your Majesty's faithful subjects residing at Cochin on the Malabar Coast beg with every sentiment of loyalty and attachment to unite with the millions of your Majesty's people in India in presenting at your Majesty's throne, the tribute of our respectful homage on the assumption by your Majesty of the direct charge of the vast territories of this Empire.*

*Whilst acknowledging the protection and liberal treatment we so long enjoyed under the rule of the Honourable East India Company, we beg leave to express our pride and lively satisfaction on being now placed under the direct sway of your Most Gracious Majesty.*

*We avail ourselves of this opportunity to give utterance to our deep gratitude for the liberal and enlightened policy indicated in your Majesty's gracious proclamation, whereby perfect freedom on conscience and the undisturbed enjoyment of ancient rights, wages and customs are secured to all classes – blessings which will ever be prized as the dearest privileges of the people of India.*

*We humbly trust that your Majesty's words of benevolence and mercy to those now in arms against the Government may soon have the happy effect of restoring tranquility in the disturbed Provinces and of enabling your Majesty to employ the resources of the Country in works of peaceful improvement and of ensuring that prosperity and social advancement which your Majesty is so anxious to promote among all classes of your Majesty's subjects.*

*With earnest prayers that your Majesty, the Prince Consort and all the members of the Royal Family may have vouchsafed to you many years of health and happiness,*

*Cochin January 1859*

*We beg leave to subscribe ourselves your Majesty's most humble, devoted and faithful servants...*

## A PAGE FROM THE MINUTES BOOK

Emergency meeting held at 11 am on the 11<sup>th</sup> March 1916

Present: Messers E.H. Cooper

A. Bueler

H.E. Day

C.H. Hodgson

D.A. Cuthbert

S. Deane

J. Dell

Received letter from the Collector of Customs, Madras, informing the Chamber that no applications for permission to export copra can be entertained at present.

Resolved that the following telegram be sent to the chief secretary to government with copy to the collector of customs and the Collector of Malabar.

Customs Collector here informs shippers that under instructions from secretary of state no application for permission except Chamber will be entertained at present. The Chamber thinks a mistake must have occurred in translation of this order as it is impossible to conceive reasons for such prohibition seeing that coconut oil which is extracted from copra is urgently

required in large quantities in England and France, not only as a food product but also as a material from which glycerin is extracted. The Chamber would also point out that copra forms the bulk of the export from this coast and the season now being in full swing all shippers have large commitment with buyers in England and France together with large engagements of freight which must be fulfilled. Apart from this the sudden stoppage of business in copra which the order in question entails is likely to be fraught with very serious economic consequences amongst, if not absolute disaster, to the people of Malabar, Calicut and Travancore, as the industry is one that supports the bulk of population from Cannanore to Travancore inclusive and it is important for the industry to consume anything like the quantity of copra available; arrivals in Calicut and Alleppey alone amount daily to roughly 400 tonnes representing a value of about a lac and a half. The Chamber therefore respectfully requests that prompt steps be taken to cancel the order in question so far as exports to the UK and France are concerned. Immediate action is absolutely necessary as the mere knowledge that such an order has been issued is likely to cause a panic throughout the whole of the west coast.

(signed)

Hon. Sec

Walk through time

# The times, they are a-changing

By Shankara Menon



May I invite you to walk back with me and look at Cochin and what else a few hundred years ago. Our eyes are in front, and looking back is only for some profitless emotional satisfaction. Henry Ford, and you know who he is, said history was bunk. He was not wrong, because the most stupid thing you can do is to repeat history. It is not such a good idea to celebrate even birthdays. Dr. Johnson's History of the English Language contained 40,000 words, now it is closer to a million. Bill Clinton did not even use his real father's name. And anyway, dads come out only because mothers point them out.

Let's go back to our granddads. It is a little upsetting to know that there is a spot in Japan called Cochin. The Japanese were too small and too good to learn from India, except some Buddhism, which they overturned to Shintoism. It might interest you to know that our old rikshaw, the name as well as the design and manufacture of this cute and easy half-machine, was entirely Japanese. This might be the place to tell you that our Chinese fishing nets that net so many tourists, is a contribution by China, a certain Chinese was brought to Kerala to teach wire-netting and he was paid a massive salary of Rs.15 a month. Parasuraman lifting up Kerala is a cock and bull story, but we have other information which are historically accurate.

Some of us were born in Ernakulam, and now when we drive through the city at night, we cannot recognize our cute, old little baby. I am going back still further, to a time when greedy

Tippu Sultan came to Kerala to topple the old state and put it in his tote bag, he almost also did it, except that the English caught him from behind and put the lid on his destiny. Tippu Sultan stands out in our history as the first man who made a road in Kerala, not for any convenience to anybody, he only wanted to suit himself, to bring up his canons and take care of the semi-nude people who lived in this area. If you should sit down and look at the documents of old properties, you would not come across any road mentioned, boundaries are often moats and canals. The narrow footwalk-roads between properties were designed to allow headloads to pass through. These were our primitive roads!

A mite long back we had a Cow Economy, cows were second only to Brahmins, and their ordinal number of importance was 2, the king himself came up far behind as Number 8! The whole state was organised to suit just one idle community, and nobody was allowed to move up the caste ladder. So you had to die in your childhood, that is how the state got to remain as it was, and where it was. The King of Travancore paid the British an annual tribute of rupees eight lakhs. Well, if you don't have shops, you cannot have trade, or business, and no trade meant no money. If you gave two cows to India they would have got to be looked after somewhat, then probably worshipped, if you gave two cows to America, they would sell one and buy a bull and soon have good cow business. We say in Kerala, "*karayunna kunjinne pallollu*", this is expressed in American English as : It is the nut that squeaks which gets the grease!

We had so little awareness, and use of money, that anybody could fool us. The Portuguese paid the petty kings of Kerala 42 pounds each per year for pepper, and nobody asked for more, not even 4 pounds a month! There were some smaller kings who got 12, and they too were happy by the windfall! The Portuguese paid their own king, in Lisbon, 45,000 pounds a year; all told,

the king's income from Kerala was 1,54,913 a year! What do you say? We have had 41 rivers in 38,864 kilometers of land, 30 kings, and about 100 landlords. According to the Census of 1891, just a single hundred odd years ago, there were 5,39,898 houses, and of them only 4025 were tiled, all our tiles reached us from Portugal and France! Thus tiled houses were just ONE PERCENT of the total! The state of Cochin, of which the star is our Ernakulam, had 1,17,368 houses, of which only 1521 were tiled! Only extremely important and significant people lived in tiled houses.!

The three things that mostly influence and shape people are clothes, food, and language. Perhaps we were lucky to go under the British in all these things, that is what Ambassador Galbraith thought. The French, Spanish, or Portuguese were different. The Portuguese in Goa

prevented the Konkani Brahmins from cremating their dead, they had to bury them, like Christians did. Any breach of this law was punished without mercy. At night time, more common than not, burning bodies of dead Brahmins, secured to banana plantain stumps, floated down the Mandovi river. The relatives had often to fly away from their homeland, some of them are ancestors to Konkanis now spread here and there, including Kerala. The living, but yet immortal singer, Lata Mangeshkar is one who had to pay for crimes of sorts. The RSS began in Goa, in protest against the Portuguese.

Old Cochin has also been home to many Jews, we still have our old Jews Street. Cochin has also more Anglo-Indians than any other spot in Kerala. Cochin has always been a welcoming city. The so-called Broadway in Ernakulam was once broad and big, now also it is busy and prosperous,

If you should sit down and look at the documents of old properties, you would not come across any road mentioned, boundaries are often moats and canals. The narrow footwalk-roads between properties were designed to allow headloads to pass through. These were our primitive roads!



According to the Census of 1891, just a single hundred odd years ago, there were 5,39,898 houses, and of them only 4025 were tiled, all our tiles reached us from Portugal and France! Thus tiled houses were just one per cent of the total! The state of Cochin, of which the star is our Ernakulam, had 1,17,368 houses, of which only 1521 were tiled!

but nobody will call it "broad". We are not careful or poetic with names, up in Chennai there is a bridge called AMBITTAN PALAM, it was built by Governor Hamilton, and came to be called AMBITTAN BRIDGE. Today it is known as, you will find it hard to accept this, well, this famous bridge is today known as BARBER'S BRIDGE; naturally. The few people who made money in Cochin, like by cornering the wholesale trade of tobacco, invested their money in land, there was nothing else to do.

The old Warriam Road which hosts our Lotus Club runs parallel to another nice and soft road, the Diwan's Road, though no Diwan ever lived there. The house that was built to accommodate him was found by some people to be too grand, everything has to relate to the king who had also a kind of castle nearby. So the Indian Diwan moved to another house which has been recently elevated and modified to a Guest House. Ernakulam was a cradle town, small, though it was of course big enough for Cochin, even the name of the state says it is a KOCHCHU. Old Cochin was nothing much against the pompous décor of Trivandrum, though things are different today.

Up in the fifties and sixties, it was a lot to belong to the Lotus Club, unlike

today, most of its members knew each other. The Lotus was a certain way of life, for friends to meet and forget the tensions of the day. Present Cochin offers a number of places and opportunities, but in the sixties, seventies, and so on, there wasn't much to compete against Lotus. Some time, I don't remember exactly when, I think in the sixties, or early seventies, the Lotus Club made a Jubilee offer to members, anybody could convert his ordinary membership to Life, on a one-payment of rupees one thousand, or five hundred more; as I recall, there were not even ten members to take up the offer! The Kitchen was always a problem, good today and impossible tomorrow.

Activities then were more or less the same as now, and nothing to beat cards. Whether it is a nation, a people, or a club, its final contribution is shaped by its activities. Think of what our state would have been but for the introduction of English, even clerical English, which sounds like well-dressed Malayalam. Even our wonderful club is a tribute to things English. May I pull back with a Royal Salute to Lady Bristo? Thank you.

*The author is the founder of Menon & Krishnan College. He is a renowned columnist in Malayalam and English*

**Fast disappearing spaces:** The author, Shankara Menon's 250-year-old family house in Elamakkara; (below) the women's bathing pool with a shelter adjacent to the house; (top left) an finely carved eave in the old house



## GOING BACK IN TIME

### **There was light and people were pleased**

The Cochin Electric Company was known for the uninterrupted service it provided

Things were very different in the old days, you hear the old-timers say and you roll your eyes up. These stories are staple to the elders and you do not always identify with why they think that the old days were better; except perhaps when they tell you that they did not experience the annoying power failures of today. Was it because the women kept replenishing lamps with oil, you think half-mockingly.

But apparently, when the Cochin Electric Company, of which the Cochin royal family was the major shareholder, was the power suppliers to the Mattancherry and Fort Cochin areas up to Palluruthy, there was no failure in distribution. And if supply to a house or office was disrupted, the consumer would report directly to Samuel Koder, the director of the company, who made sure that power was promptly restored.

The Cochin Electric Company operated from the 1940s till the late 1970s before the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) took over the company. But the story of power probably starts from 1916-17, when the first random references to the working of thermal plants can be found in the administrative reports of Cochin State. These plants supplied electricity to royal residences and government offices for lighting.

The first attempt at generating electricity on a commercial scale was made in 1935-36 when the government of Cochin issued a licence to the Cochin State Power and Light Corporation for the electrification of Ernakulam, Trichur and the suburbs. Subsequently, thermal power stations were installed with diesel engines at Ernakulam, Trichur and Mattancherry. The distribution here was now done by the Cochin Electric Company, located in Thoppumpady, where the KSEB office now stands. The administrative office, where the company's board members met, was in Jew Town. The company's board consisted of Koder, his brother Elias S. Koder, daughter Queenie Koder and Dr S.B. Rao, owner of Navratna Pharmacy. Board meetings were also attended by a palace representative.

Supply from the Pallivasal hydro-electric project in Travancore began in 1942 and by 1945-46, the requirements of Ernakulam and Mattancherry were met from this source. Even though the development of hydro-electric power had attracted the attention of the Cochin government as early as 1929-30, when surveyors were deputed to conduct detailed surveys at Peringalkuthu, the project was launched only in 1946 and completed after considerable delay in 1958 when a 24,000KW plant was commissioned.

The Cochin Electric Company bought power from the board at Pallivasal and funnily enough, sold power back to the board, which supplied electricity to the Edakochi area. This was taken over by the KSEB a few years before the Cochin Electric takeover in 1979. The power provided by Cochin Electric, which had some 130 employees and casual labourers, was received by some scepticism by people in the early days.

Agents used to chase after prospective customers to take a connection, not unlike an insurance agent these days. Customers paid a Rs 5 deposit for a meter. The deposit was deducted from the monthly bill, which in most cases came to Rs 15. The household of Parvana Seth, the owner of Indo Marine Industries, set a record with monthly bills averaging Rs 800. It was quite a feat considering that the per unit price of electricity was 30paise in 1975. And the company was still recording a profit.

The bills were printed by a 'press' manufactured by Bradma, a Chennai-based company. It bore the name of the consumer, and the present and the previous meter reading. Unlike the aluminium wires used today, the wiring in those days was done with copper, which ensured that there were no voltage problems. "Efficiency was key," says P.K. Muraleedharan, who worked in Cochin Electric's accounts department before moving to KSEB after the takeover. "Largely, people would get their connections within 24 hours. Koder's management was very liberal and none of the employees ever wanted for money." Cochin Electric was valued at Rs 5 lakh and taken over at a 12 percent dividend.

കൂട്ടനാടൻ ചുണ്ടുലിപേ കൊച്ചുപാണേ  
കുലിലാട്ടേ  
**Work is pleasure**  
കൂട്ടനാടൻ ചുണ്ടുലിപേ കൊച്ചുപാണേ  
കൂട്ടനാടൻ ചുണ്ടുലിപേ കൊച്ചുപാണേ (2)

Folk songs in Kerala originated not only for pleasure, but was also as a means to provide rhythm to work. So, while there are songs to celebrate Onam or lullabies, there are also songs sung by traditional carpenters and boatmen. But like most things, which do not reach the new generation via TV or the net, the vanchi pattu (boatman's songs) is a little-appreciated, fast fading part of our heritage. The first vanchi pattu, *Kuchela Vritham*, was composed by court poet Ramapurathu Warriar, to demonstrate his skill to his patron, Marthanda Varma. It is believed to be an impromptu number composed on a journey from Vaikkom to Thiruvananthapuram.

Lovely Kuttanadu girl with the voice of a cuckoo, Get the drums beating and the trumpets sounding. Thi thi thara thi thi thei thithai thaka thakathai tho (chorus) Gather musicians to beat the drums and put up the buntings, We are returning victorious. (chorus) We floated over the waters like a black swan, We raced forward like a horse. (chorus) The snake boat from Kavaalam returns, Without bowing to anyone and without tasting defeat. (chorus) The waves of Pampa embraced us, The sunshine was a dot (*bindi*) on our forehead, Golden palm fronds embraced us. (chorus) We dedicate our victory to the Champakulam church, And offer a hanging lamp to Ambalapuzha (temple). (chorus) The boat swayed like characters dancing the *kavadiattom*, While we went to make an offering to the goddess. (chorus) Hold up the finishing line, We are returning victorious. (chorus)

While the *Kuchela Vritham* was devotional, boatman's songs, which have a rustic gusto, may be built around traditional stories or even local gossip and witticisms. Here is the translation one that is a favourite in Kuttanad. It address a local, farm belle.



കൂട്ടനാടൻ ചുണ്ടുലിപേ കൊച്ചുപാണേ  
കൂട്ടനാടൻ ചുണ്ടുലിപേ കൊച്ചുപാണേ (2)

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PO Box No 503, Bristow  
Road, Willingdon Island,  
Cochin- 682 003

Tel: +91 484 2668349,  
2668650  
Fax: +91 484 2668651

Editor  
Anna Mathews

Please route suggestions  
and feedback to  
[cochinchamber@eth.net](mailto:cochinchamber@eth.net)  
or  
[chamber@md2.vsnl.net.in](mailto:chamber@md2.vsnl.net.in)  
Contributions are  
welcome. If you have any  
interesting stories from  
yesteryear Cochin,  
please mail us on the  
above address.

IT'S AN OLD STORY

**The truth about trade**

The emergence of Calicut as an important trading port, apparently, stems from the honesty of the Zamorin. The beginnings is almost like a morality tale from history. Apparently, around the late 9<sup>th</sup> century, an Arab from Muscat, left his homeland to avoid a battle over succession with his brother. He travelled to many lands with his share of wealth: boxes of gold. He docked at several ports and at each place, he met the king and gave them the boxes for safe-keeping, saying they contained pickles. When the kings found out what the contents of the boxes really were, they quietly appropriated the gold. When the Arab reached Calicut and did the same with the Zamorin, the ruler at once pointed out to him that perhaps he was mistaken and that the boxes, in fact, carried gold and not pickles. The Arab, pleased that he had found a trustworthy king, settled down in Calicut and became the *koya* (priest) of the area. Subsequently, not only did trade prosper with the Arabs, but according to the history written in the *Keralolpatti*, it was with the aid of the Muslim settlers in Calicut that the Zamorin chiefs expanded their kingdoms to the neighbouring regions. According to another account, the trader asked for the Zamorin's permission to trade and founded the bazaar at Calicut. The *kovilagom* (king's residence) had a cellar named *Ambaresan kett* after the Arab. Apparently, this is where he had stored the gold that was part of his fortune.

Four questions

## “The old structures look like they belong here”

American architect Patricia Tusa Fels's relationship with Asia goes back 15 years, when she worked for the city of Penang, Malaysia, for two years, on a conservation plan for their old city centre. “The energy of Asia and the vibrancy of the cities were an inspiration,” she says. She first came to India in 2003, accompanying her husband, an artist, who was on a Fulbright Scholar's grant, and spent ten months in Cochin. During this time, she kept in touch with her architecture practice in Seattle over the Internet and researched the history of the built environment for several articles that she wrote.

Now back on a Ford Foundation grant, Patricia is working with c-hed (Centre for Heritage, Environment and Development) to document four to five of the oldest mosques in Mattancherry.

Patricia is a member of an Asian Pacific conservation network and “realises that there are many possibilities for conservation for Cochin”.

In an interview with COCHIN CHRONICLE, Patricia speaks about her impressions of the architecture of Fort Cochin and says that her “hope is to show that building conservation/rehabilitation/reuse can offer an alternative to the glitzy glass boxes of the west”.

**As an architect, what were your impressions when you saw the structures in Fort Cochin?**

Seeing Fort Cochin was a joy. As an architect I always look for structures that respond to the climate and customs of a unique place. The buildings of Cochin displayed connections to trade, a relation to the water and port, and they looked like they belonged in the tropics. The importance of shade and air movement was visible in the design; the native building materials of Kerala were well used.

**As you noted, there are many influences in the Fort Cochin/Mattancherry area. Is there a harmony in the cacophony of influences in architecture?**

Of course there is harmony. The harmony comes from the response to the climate and to trade, to the culture and customs of the people living there. The buildings reflect the place.

Even the Portuguese and English colonial buildings bow to the climate. Only today do we forget where we live.

**This is an ancient quarter of Ernakulam district. In terms of town planning, how proficient does this area look?**

Town planning has not really made many advances in the last hundred years. Despite all the good intentions

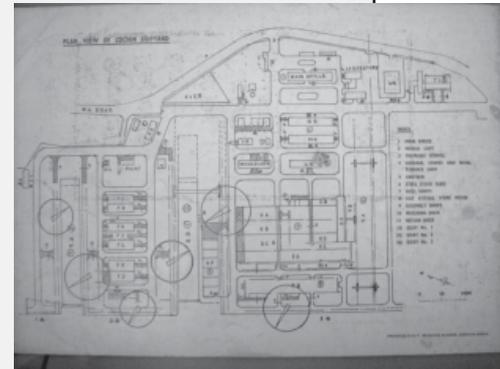
and good plans, many cities of the world are - for the most part - dysfunctional. Cochin works for the pedestrian or bicyclist. It doesn't work for the car. But that doesn't have to be a negative. Amsterdam, Rome, New York City, Tokyo and countless other major cities are not built for the car. They will be models for cities of the future; they function with excellent public transportation systems. Creative solutions to movement of goods keep the cities alive and vibrant. Cochin needs to improve water and sewer availability, and increase modes of public transport. The ‘bones’ or the framework of the city is excellent.

**Many of the warehouses in Mattancherry are being adopted as alternative spaces, such as art galleries or even clubs. Is this a way forward in the move towards conservation?**

Conservation means looking for new uses for old buildings. Since trading businesses are moving elsewhere and since the water connection is losing out to auto transport, new uses need to be found for the old warehouses. Also, employment needs to be available to keep the community vibrant.

By the way, I consider it a big mistake to not take advantage of the Kerala tradition of water transport. Roads will never offer the amenities of water. Even though America has miles and miles of freeway, transport bogs down in traffic. Building roads only brings more traffic. It is a never ending puzzle. Cochin could celebrate water transport and move goods without gridlock. I read several articles about the advantages of water transport in Kerala. The city should not give up the infrastructure of water connections - the canals and access to the sea.

Continued from page 1



Minister K. Karunakaran. The mood in the messages is of pride and optimism. “The occasion is, no doubt, another distinct landmark in the onward march of the country towards progress and prosperity and it is needles for me to state how jubilant our people are on the fulfillment of one of their long-cherished dreams,” writes Karunakaran.

Printed in the city's premier press, S.T. Reddiar and Sons, the well-made souvenir contains pictures of the ground work in the construction of the shipyard. The cover consists of an architect's colour model of the shipyard and the back cover shows a “plan view”. The Cochin Shipyard, constructed at a cost of Rs 45 crore, was built with the assistance of Japanese company, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries. The first ship that came out of the yard was a 61,000 DWT straight bulk carrier.

Gupta's family, who were Agarwals of Rajasthani origin, were traders in Cochin since the 1950s. He came to Cochin in 1969 to manage KVA Bros, the family's prosperous coconut oil and rubber distribution business. His old warehouse and house in Jew town was bought in the early 1960s. Gupta, who was the Indian Chamber president in 1976-77, hopes to present the souvenir, which is in mint condition, to the shipyard chairman.

**Reconstructing history:** American architect Patricia Fels is in Mattancherry to document some of the oldest mosques in the area with the Ernakulam-based Centre for Heritage Studies





THAT WAS THEN

## When trade was not staid

A return back in time to a bustling Mattancherry

A fairly good way to gauge the importance of a place would be to go by real estate prices. That definitely holds true for Mattancherry. In the 1960s, when it was an important trading centre for the district, land was much more expensive here than in Ernakulam, which is now the city centre. “While one cent cost Rs 5,000 in Mattancherry, you could buy land in Ernakulam for Rs 1,500 per cent,” says K. Raghunandan, secretary of the Indian Chamber of Commerce, Cochin.

Mattancherry offered the advantage of the waterways to traders, so the godowns to store spices, food produce, coir, herbs, oil and kerosene were built here and the back end of the of all warehouses had trolley tracks to the waterfront. Rubber, for example, was produced in the hilly areas, but the trading took place in Mattancherry.

“There was constant traffic on the waters,” says K.A. Bahuleyan, 74, of Coastal Trading Company, which has been in the coir business for the last 45 years and has a godown on the waterfront. “In the old days, there used to be

48 coir offices in Jew town. Even then our warehouse was always buzzing with workers who were loading and unloading goods off the *kettuvallam* (boats). Today, there are about four offices and yet, things are quiet.” A *kettuvallam* could carry about six or seven truckloads of goods.

Ironically, in the early days, though much of the activity happened via the waterways, the traders did not have to pay duty, and today, with the coming of the port, though business is dim and the waterways are not used, traders pay Rs 700 as duty.

Prosperity was, as always, accompanied by its dark companion: theft. Police patrolling was sparse; the police had only a couple of boats, and thieves came on boats like pirates and sometimes made away with the pepper and cardamom, which were stored on trading boats or even on ships.

Within Mattancherry, which was brimming with activity, traders and Europeans moved around in hand-pulled rickshaws and bicycles. Buyers and traders came from all over the state and south India. When trucks first started making an appearance, wholesale traders had to buy the whole truckload of goods from the producers. But gradually, when trucks started making inroads into the interiors and brokers came into the picture, trucks would supply to a couple of dealers and the wholesale trade diminished.

Trading negotiations between buyers and traders were done sitting on the floor, which had platforms raised about three feet high. Mattresses were laid on the floor with white sheets, and the buyers and traders relaxed on bolsters, while the rooms were cooled by the traditional cloth punkhas.

Living quarters for the entire staff of a trading company were either provided on

the first floor of warehouses or adjacent to it, largely because work started at about 9 am and carried on till midnight. Apart from their salaries, staff were provided food—a special fare for festivals—and given money for basic necessities like soap and oil. Each day’s book was written before the end of the day, and every expenditure and account had to tally down to the last anna.

Those were the days when work was not encumbered by trade unions. The unions were a result of the flourishing port.

Port workers lived in Mattancherry and their influence began to tell. When they had a strike at work, it had a domino effect on the bazaar workers in Mattancherry. The bazaar saw a curious mix of people. “There were local people and Europeans, of course, but it used to be amusing to see nuns jostling amongs the crowds,” says David T. Mookken, whose grandfather started the reputed Mookken Devassy Ouseph & Co, that traded in food and herbs, and were the first dealers for kerosene. “Medicinal herbs used to do good business in those days, and nuns came here to buy raisins to make wine.” Those sound like heady days

“There was constant traffic on the waters,” says K.A. Bahuleyan of Coastal Trading Company, which has been in the coir business for 45 years now. “In the old days, there used to be 48 coir offices in Jew town. Even then our warehouse was always buzzing with workers who were loading and unloading goods off the *kettuvallam* (boats). Today, there are about four offices and yet, things are quiet.”

