

Sunday Herald ARTICULATIONS

Forged ahead

Back in 1496, Michelangelo copied an ancient Roman sculpture called 'Sleeping Cupid' and passed it off as an original. After completing the reproduction, he buried the statue underground and then dug it up to give it a worn, scratched look.

OUT OF THE ORDINARY

DELIGHTS OF A DETOUR

With its deep historical roots and a heritage of religious harmony, Chendamangalam should be on the must-visit list of everyone who wishes to know about the history of Kerala, writes **Toms Varghese**

Deviating from a plan might not always be a good idea. But sometimes it could lead to delightful results. My friend and I made plans to explore the historic town of Kodungalloor, in Thrissur district. But a chance conversation with another friend on the eve of our trip, led us to a different experience altogether.

Kodungalloor is 30 km from Edappally and 10 km before the historic town lies a quaint little village of Chendamangalam. It is the home of Paliath Achans, the prime ministers of the erstwhile Kochi royal family. We decided to visit the palace of this legendary dynasty before heading to Kodungalloor. En route to Paliath, we spotted a signboard directing us towards Kottayil Kovilakom and a Jewish Synagogue. Ever the explorers, we felt like checking it out and so we took a turn and found ourselves in the presence of a glorious past.

Standing tall
Kottayil Kovilakom, roughly translated as the palace in the fort, was once under the principality of the Villarvattom. A model of religious harmony, this village has withstood the test of centuries as it houses a Sri Krishna Temple (approximately 3,000 years old according to locals), a 17th century Jewish Synagogue and cemetery, a 700-year-old church and a mosque,

all under the radius of 1 km. Though there are no remnants of the palace or the fort as the Villarvattom royal family apparently went extinct in 15th century AD, the hilly area that lies next to the Periyar River still stands tall as a testament to Kerala's proud history of being a cradle for religious harmony, a tradition which continued under the rule of the Paliath Achans.

After garnering this knowledge through a quick Google search, we took a turn in the direction of Kottayil Kovilakom. Approximately 2 km later, we reached a T-junction. While trying to decide whether to go left or right, I just looked to my left and there it was—the synagogue.

The simple monument, with its white outer walls and tiled roofs, was a sight to behold. After a few minutes, an employee of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) came to open the monument. Paying a nominal entry fee of Rs 2 each, we entered the structure (Rs 10 for camera/mobile phones). The synagogue, built in 1614 AD, was the spiritual and cultural centre of the Jewish community. Though they all migrated to Israel by 1960s, members of a few prominent Jewish families visit the shrine annually, said the ASI employee.

Just a 100 mts behind the synagogue lies another historic and culturally significant monument—the Mar Sleeba Church or the Holy



Inner sanctum of Lord Krishna Temple



The Holy Cross Church. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

Cross Church, which was built in the 16th century. The church is a pilgrimage as it has the relics of the cross on which Jesus was crucified, hence the name, as well as those of the 12 Apostles. St Francis Xavier is said to have stayed at the church premises during his visit to Kerala.

We were greeted by the church verger, Jose, who spoke about the history of the place and the monument. He also showed us the tip of two arches below the compound wall of the church.

This was an opening to a secret underground passage. Unfortunately, the doors were sealed by ASI. It is said that the passage was used by the erstwhile rulers to escape from sudden attacks. The church, which was first built as a chapel for the Vypeenkotta Seminary, has undergone several changes over the centuries. The ruins of the seminary, which was built by the Portuguese in the 16th century, can be found behind the cemetery.



Remains of the Vypeenkotta Seminary built by the Portuguese, which lies adjacent to the Holy Cross Church



A mural of Lord Krishna painted on the wall of the Krishna Temple

An experience

From there, we moved towards the Sri Krishna Temple. Though there were no boards, no one can miss the temple with its gateway adorned with saffron hued decorations. For a three millennia old temple, it looked quite new to us. But our doubts were cleared by a priest who told us that the stone-cut step to the temple door and the idol in the sanctum sanctorum dated back to 3,000 years. He said that there is a stone carving in ancient *Vattezhutthu* script that confirms the authenticity of the claim. The *kavu* (sacred space) around the temple is also an abode for rare migratory birds. The next task ahead of us was to find the Jewish cemetery, which lay adjacent to the temple.

Almost 20m down, we saw a structure, which to me, seemed like a water tank. But as we took a few steps ahead, we saw a decrepit headstone among the hedges. And looking back we saw the inscriptions on the bigger structure: It was a family tomb. Since the families had left for Israel, the burial ground had turned into a ruin. It had a certain otherworldly feel to it.

Our next destination was the mosque. Though it was claimed to be centuries old like the other shrines, we were not able to garner more information.

We bid adieu to Kottayil Kovilakom with a feeling that was a mix of enlightenment, humility and pride.

We felt enlightened because we learnt about this historic place, felt humble at the knowledge acquired about the greatness of the erstwhile rulers who gave importance to religious diversity and also proud because Kerala is where the term harmony hasn't lost its meaning entirely.

HUMOUR

Signing up for trouble

Signatures come in fascinating shapes and sizes, some visually appealing and some not. Apart from being one's 'personal stamp' as it were, one's signature is as unique as one's fingerprint. Further, one's signature is often believed to reflect some facet of one's personality. Determination is supposedly perceived in mine, according to a practising signature-analyst.

I've found that a comparison of signatures can be intriguing. Some are ridiculously large or small. A pint-sized colleague had a signature that belied—or rather, made up for—his small stature. It was visibly obtrusive in any letter he signed, spread-eagled across almost the entire signature space.

On the other hand, the signature in my car's insurance policy is so minuscule that once a cop checking it wondered whether it had been signed at all.

A former British boss's signature eerily resembled a suicidal snake, in miniature, that had hopelessly tied itself up in knots while another superior's reminded me of a hibernating earthworm uncoiling itself languorously. Yet another odd signature that caught my eye looked—believe it or not—very much like a raptor swooping down on its prey. By far, the most convoluted signature I've ever come across is a former colleague's—a veritable maze of small circles, loops, whorls and squiggles apparently meant to thwart the potential forger. Pratap certainly did ensure that none could duplicate the oval of 'abstract art' that passed for his signature.

Talking of forgery, as a teenager I found I could produce an exact facsimile of my father's none-too-simple signature (unknown to him, of course) thanks to regular (and stealthy) practice. I still can. However, I never misused this 'skill' except once to bail out a younger sibling in trouble. He had pestered me

to 'sign' his unflattering school mark-list so that dad didn't get to see it—and belabour him. I obliged him, salving my juvenile conscience that it was merely an act of brotherly help and not forgery. The deceit, incidentally, went undetected. A bank once prudently returned one of my cheques because my signature didn't quite match the sample registered with them. I had to go to the bank and personally convince the sharp-eyed clerk of its genuineness before it was honoured. Ironically, a month later the same bank cleared a cheque of mine that I'd absent-mindedly initialled rather than signed.

Like many others, I'd always thought my signature looked impressively professional until an outspoken doctor friend brought me down to earth one day with the caustic comment, "Frankly, to me it looks more like an ECG that's gone berserk." And a colleague who didn't believe in mincing his words once remarked that my signature eerily resembled a shark's fearsome dentition. Viewed dispassionately, I realised both of them did have a 'point' there (sic), considering the needle-sharp serrations in it.

Once stood by as my British boss signed a dismissal order for a habitual absentee. As he did so with a flourish, the nib of his fountain-pen tore right through the paper: "Dammit!" he exclaimed in disgust and, abruptly changing his mind, asked me to get another letter typed giving the employee a final warning instead.

Whether it was superstition or second thoughts that got the employee a reprieve, I couldn't figure out. But, somehow, he was convinced that I'd bailed him out and remained ever grateful to me thereafter—a case of totally undeserved and misdirected appreciation, if ever there was one.

GEORGE NETTO



REFLECTIONS

The answer to my quest for truth

The light drizzle continued as we finished our walk in the nearby park where my significant other and yours truly go every evening. The relatively new and aesthetically landscaped park is one of the popular outdoor retreats for residents of the area.

Walkers, health-watchers, budding models hanging around taking selfies, nature-lovers, parents strolling with their infants on prams, senior citizens catching up for a round table on national politics, carefree youngsters with snazzy phones as well as dating couples struck by the cupid's arrow, all converge for some refreshing time in the brightly lit and aerated park.

Amidst this entire buzz there is one section of the park from where I receive enlightenment and garner some pertinent answers to my quest for truth. It's the children's corner equipped with jungle gyms, slides and a play area for the entertainment of the little ones.

I see scores of children having a merry time every evening. While most kids are accompanied by

their parents there are also a few among them who come by themselves to play. From the looks of their worn out clothes to their unkempt hair, it is easy to decipher the economic status of these kids. Perhaps they are children of some labourers in the neighbourhood; perhaps they belong to the families of the live-in-maids of the swanky bungalows surrounding the park; perhaps their dads work as watchmen in the apartments close by. Whatever be the case, these are surely the children of the



TO BE WITHOUT SOME OF THE THINGS YOU WANT IS AN INDISPENSABLE PART OF HAPPINESS."



lesser Gods. And yet, it is heartening to see the cheer on their faces; it is inspiring to note their upbeat spirit and it is touching to watch them try

to mingle and mix; play and be entertained; to be a part of the happy world.

What also strikes me is that these

kids are never seen to sulk or look forlorn, ever. When I notice the sense of satisfaction and contentment about them, I begin to agree with the philosophy that, "to be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness." It surely seems that these kids, from the economically weaker sections of the society, have an almost sure hunch that in all their growing up years they are bound to be without the things they want; and perhaps this inevitable truth becomes an indispensable part of the happiness they exude.

Again, these children drive home the truth that happiness is by and large a choice and a by-product. It comes to those who choose to be happy, no matter how they feel and despite their current circumstances in life. Contrarily it eludes those who seek and chase after it vehemently as the only goal in life at the cost of compromising on moral and ethical values.

Happy children playing in rags and bare-feet are nothing short of the best image of the truth that

happiness in life does not come from the grand events of life but is made up of innumerable little things that seldom cost much.

As I circle around the jogging track of the park, the moment I hit the western corner which nestles the children's area, I feel a surge to life and am convinced of the eternal values of the universe. In the disposition, attitude and spirit of these innocent kids I know lie the answers to my quest to seek the truth, the good and the right attitude to life. And I continue my walk with the assurance that if these little ones with little hope for a brighter future can be happy and contented, then much of humanity still has hope.

In the light drizzle that continued turning dusk into a dull grey, I could hear the faint cheer of laughing children in the background as I left the park. It carried the message that as long as there are children being added to the universe, we can be rest assured that God has not yet given up on the human race.

DOROTHY VICTOR