

FINANCIAL EXPRESS
Cultural Counterpoint

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FOOTLOOSE



Boats anchored in an estuary against the backdrop of the Ponnani harbour in Malappuram

CULTURAL counterpoint

Besotted by beaches and backwaters, the land of the Mappilas hides a history woven with Kathakali, Kalaripayattu

Faizal Khan

LYING ON the southern periphery of Malabar, Malappuram is a microcosm of God's Own Country, offering a cornucopia of Kerala's varied natural beauty. Arriving from Delhi in the afternoon, I had already seen by the next day an unending beach, backwaters, an estuary, three distinct rivers and a dense forest all within the boundaries of the district that is twice the size of



sometimes even in other states and also in the Gulf for immigrant workers from the state. A recent story of the troupe, based on the travails of Arjuna from the Mahabharata, was written by a mechanical engineer, a son of the soil, who works in Qatar.

Kalari treatment thrives in Malappuram though under the penumbra of Ayurveda. While Kundalayar's Kathakali performers do the massages mostly for Vaidya Sala's senior staff when they need treatment,

yoga to their Ayurveda routine to give a holistic value to their treatment packages.

Even with yoga on the menu, nature retains its due share on the list of ingredients for the elixir everyone is seeking in Malappuram. That was obvious when I sat one early morning in the balcony of the Kadavu Resort, built on a hilltop. As my eyes gazed at the breathtaking Challyar river below, it seemed as though the jackfruit and mango trees flanking the balcony were reaching out to me to share the view. It was the same feeling when I took a calm cruise on a houseboat the next day in Ponnani's Beyyem Lake where lotus flowers cohabited

and Ayurveda

Kottakkal Arya Vaidya Sala Natyasangham's principal Kesavan Kundalayar performing the role of Pushkara in *Nalacharitam*



the national capital. Like the landscape, the place of the Mappilas is also Kerala's cultural potpourri. More than a thousand years ago, Malappuram's Thirunavaya was the venue of a gathering of traders from around the world at its 'Mamankam' festival, no doubt India's first international trade fair. The fair, which was held once in 12 years on the banks of the Bharathapuzha, ended in the 18th century, but while viewing its erstwhile site from a centuries-old watch tower used by the then rulers to witness the ashes of Mahatma Gandhi were immersed and a Hindu ceremony performed for Michael Jackson by his American agent after his death.

Not far from the river, considered Kerala's own Ganges because of its massive size and status as a sacred river, is the place where the Mappilas revolted against the British well before Meerut staged its rebellion. Malappuram may also



(Clockwise from top) Kalaripayattu students during a training session, an Ayurveda patient undergoing a 'shirodhara' head massage and oil for an Ayurveda head massage being poured from a mud pot

be the first place to get more mobile phone connections than fixed phones—as early as in 2001—but it remains tantalisingly traditional.

Arts as science

The best example of Malappuram's tryst with its traditions is provided by Ayurveda that has become as much a brand as the backwaters in Kerala. "It is remarkable that the Hindu tradition of Ayurveda has flourished in the land of the Mappilas," says KS Money, the top official of the legendary Kottakkal Arya Vaidya Sala, about how Malappuram became the Mecca of Ayurveda.

PS Varier, who started the Vaidya Sala 110 years ago in a Malappuram village, did two things fundamentally

different to the practice of Ayurveda until then. "First, he freed the medical system from its academic stranglehold by making it accessible to the common people and secondly, he started mass manufacturing of Ayurvedic medicines for the first time," explains Money.

There is a third thing, too, that is seldom mentioned. Varier also launched a theatre company as part of his hospital in Kottakkal, the village that has spawned a brand name as well as a culture of medical tourism for Kerala. The PSV Natyasangham, formed in 1907, provided entertainment to the hospital's patients initially, but became a part of the healing philosophy of its founder when Kerala's spectacular art form of Kathakali replaced drama as the group's insignia. That is where another of Malabar's dazzling art forms comes in—Kalaripayattu. The martial

arts' strict regimen provided Kathakali performers the flexibility demanded by their art form through tough body exercises.

"When we were not staging Kathakali, we were called upon to perform massages at the Ayurveda hospital," says the Natyasangham's current principal Kesavan Kundalayar. The massages performed by the Kathakali performers, running only their feet over the patient's body, are the ones that they do one another at the Natyasangham's 'Kalar' as part of the daily exercises. The painstaking steps of Kalaripayattu learned and repeated everyday by the Kathakali performers give them the much-needed body language on the stage. In the meantime, the mental healing continues too.

Thanks to Malappuram's fetish for festivals, the Kathakali troupe stages about 100 performances every year,

there are hundreds of 'Kalar' gurus in Malappuram who offer the same for common people. "We run our Kalar schools and also treat patients," says Abdul Razak, a 'Kalar' doctor, sitting in his clinic full of medicine bottles, most of them from the Ayurveda stable.

"Kalar' gurus can fix bone fractures thanks to the decades of experience in body exercises," says Razak, who goes by the name Vaidyan Abdul Razak Gurukkal.

Dock and roll

Malappuram's geography complements its advantages of Mappila and Ayurveda traditions. The Kozhikode International Airport sits in the district, which has the Arabian Sea on its west and Nilgiri Hills on the west. The main town of Malappuram, also called by the same name and which in Malayalam means hilltop, is set uphill and downhill giving a rollercoaster urban experience to visitors. In fact, everything is on a hilltop in Malappuram and where there is no hill, there are beaches, backwaters and rivers.

The wavy hills deftly block the tensions and pressures of modern lifestyle as evident from the number of rich foreigners flocking to the district's luxury resorts to holiday in peace and breath pollution-free air. According to the Central Pollution Control Board figures for 180 Indian urban centres, Malappuram and another Kerala town of Pathanamthitta are the only places with superior air quality coming even nowhere near the pollution standard limit. Smart resorts like the Kadavu Resort and Ayurveda Centre on the banks of the Challyyirriver have added

with water weeds.

It is easy to find a quite beach in Ponnani, a port where foreign traders arrived for the 'Mamankam' festival. From near its harbour, lined by scores of fishing vessels, a ferry takes passengers to the meeting point of the Bharathapuzha and the Tirur river with the Arabian Sea. All that is required is to step across the estuary feeling the flutter of migratory birds overhead and there is the Padinjarekkara beach, which is yet to be discovered by the outside world.

The Nilgiri Hills, part of the Western Ghats, are not far from the beaches and backwaters. The Kozhikode International Airport sits in the district, which has the Arabian Sea on its west and Nilgiri Hills on the west. The main town of Malappuram, also called by the same name and which in Malayalam means hilltop, is set uphill and downhill giving a rollercoaster urban experience to visitors. In fact, everything is on a hilltop in Malappuram and where there is no hill, there are beaches, backwaters and rivers.

The Malabar experience, however, is complete only when the munching begins on Mappila food like the Malabar *biryani* and fried drumstick leaf medallions called *muringayila vada*. My favourite is the starter, *athishaya pathiri*, which, according to its name, is supposed to be a surprise, the main course of *pathiri*, a wafer-thin rice flour bread, and *unnakkaya* or cotton pod, which is steamed and mashed banana with coconut filling for dessert.

If the last meal was two hours earlier, there is, of course, an Ayurveda massage to fall back on, with the masseur's feet for the bravest and hands for the rest.

The writer is a freelancer