

# Newsweek

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## India Debuts Kochi-Muziris Biennale

By Annie Paul | 12/15/12 at 2:30 AM

On 12/12/12, God's own country—as the southern Indian state of Kerala is often described in tourist brochures—became Art's own country. On that numerologically auspicious date India's first Biennale, its “largest contemporary art event,” was launched in Kochi, one of the oldest port towns in the region.

Why would the subcontinent's first Biennale take place in Kochi, so physically and spiritually distant from the metropolitan art centers of Delhi and Mumbai? Mainly because it was the initiative of two Kerala-born artists to mount a full-fledged Indian Biennale: Riyas Komu and Bose Krishnamachari, two Mumbai-based artists, are the curators of this extremely ambitious venture that aims to put Kerala and India on the art map once and for all.

Art biennales are typically gargantuan extravaganzas, requiring vast reserves of cash and physical resources. At their best, as biennale expert Renée DeVoe Mertz says, they are “mechanisms through which countries—particularly politically, culturally, or economically marginalized regions—help shape their relationships with the dominant parts of the world.”

The Kochi-Muziris Biennale has been accused of being a cavernous hole into which vast sums of money have disappeared. Embroiled from the beginning in contention and controversy, the Biennale first ran into opposition from influential members of the local art community who took offense at “outsiders” like Komu and Krishnamachari being given state backing to mount such an event. The former minister of culture, M. A. Baby, had indicated support but after elections, with a new party in power, neither the state nor the central government were willing to invest heavily in what seemed to them like an exorbitant venture with no immediate political benefits.

Then something fortuitous happened. Benny Kuriakose, chief architect of a fully funded state heritage project to excavate the ancient Kerala seaport of Muziris, heard about the Biennale and suggested a marriage between the two ventures. “Before Cochin [Kochi’s former British name] there was Muziris,” says Kuriakose, adding that the project, if properly imagined and managed, could do for Kerala what Athens has done for Greece. As far back as 2,000 years ago, Muziris was a crucial hub in trade between the Arab countries, Greece, India, and China. It was thought that the cultural potential of linking Kerala’s ancient heritage with a contemporary-art megashow such as the Kochi Biennale would lift the state beyond the basic tourist development model it has followed so far.

Biennales typically invite selected artists to create works for specific sites, allowing them the kind of space and scope to realize their visions that art galleries can seldom provide. Eighty artists from 24 countries are participating in this Biennale. The curators of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale restored several disused spice warehouses and godowns in Kochi such as Aspinwall House and the old Durbar Hall, to provide expansive new exhibition space. With Durbar Hall swallowing most of the funds that had been raised and other money that had been promised not coming through in time or at all, the opening of the Biennale on Dec. 12 proved to be a wobbly affair, with many artists’ projects not yet complete or even in situ. A grand reception planned at the magnificently restored Durbar Hall had to be canceled at the last minute along with many other activities. Many artists also had the unnerving experience of having members of the public tramping through their exhibition spaces while they were still trying to get lighting, sound, and other technological equipment in place.

Despite all these challenges, a euphoric feeling surrounds the Biennale. Schools were closed on the day of the opening and locals have been pouring in to view the exhibits. Artists, curators, and critics from all over India have flocked to this tiny coastal town to support what they see as a venture that will benefit them all in the long run. Despite the many hiccups, the wider Indian art community is excited at the possibilities created by the Kochi-Muziris Biennale.

“India doesn’t have a ready-made infrastructure to host something like this ... at least they gave artists a chance to think big,” says Geeta Kapur, India’s most senior art historian and critic. The chaos and confusion should be excused, she thinks, because it’s the first attempt at something so vast and ambitious. “It happens even at major events like the Shanghai Biennale but the spirit is very good,” she added.

For foreign artists such as Hussein Valamanesh, the lack of proper follow-through and planning is less easy to overlook. One of several artists funded by the Australian government, the travails of getting his materials to Kochi have been exhausting and unnecessarily stressful. The last straw was when Kerala customs officials held up his already delayed shipment because he had itemized round lightbulbs needed for his installation as “globes” on the packing slip. Interpreting “globes” to mean geographic ones, they told Hussein they couldn’t release the box until they had made sure that the borders between India and Pakistan on the supposed world globes had been properly represented.

Highlights of the Biennale include a massive installation of excavated pottery shards from the archeological site Pattanam, thought to be where Muziris once was, by veteran artist Vivian Sundaram; a *vallom*, or boat, filled with his trademark household effects and utensils by star artist Subodh Gupta; and a powerful, poetic, multimedia work by artist and activist Amar Kanwar incorporating 266 varieties of indigenous, organic rice seeds along with handmade books and projections of moving and still images about the intersection of crime, politics, human rights, and ecology. Mathangi Maya Arulpragasam, Sri Lankan-born artist and musician, better known as M.I.A., whose track for *Shumdog Millionaire* was nominated for an Oscar, is also a visual artist, has work in the Biennale, and performed a selection of her songs on opening night. Throughout the opening week, visitors have been treated to thrilling performances of Kerala’s vast array of folk arts and music. The Kochi-Muziris Biennale may have gotten off to a shaky start but with the right backing and the lessons learned this time it promises to transform the landscape of art in India. In the meantime, think of it as a work in progress.

### *Community Guidelines*