

Bharat Darshan Report

*Kerala: God's Own
Country*

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Preface

This report documents a seven-day study tour to Kerala, organized by DR MCR HRD Institute of Telangana spanning from April 28th, 2024, to May 4th, 2024. The tour aimed to study the implementation of government policies, acquaint officer trainees with developmental and citizen-centric activities in villages, and foster team spirit and time management skills. Our group comprised 61 students and one faculty member, with five students selected as group leaders to ensure the efficient coordination of the tour.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express our sincere appreciation to the Department of Personnel and Training for granting us the opportunity to participate in the mandatory training program at the MCRHRD Institute of Telangana, Hyderabad. Special thanks are also due to Smt. Usha Rani, Course Director at MCRHRDIT, for her invaluable support.

We are deeply grateful to Mr. Saka Venkateswara Rao, Senior Faculty and Bharat Darshan Coordinator, for his guidance, constant supervision, and provision of necessary project information, which greatly aided in the completion of the project.

Our thanks also extend to the Director General of MCRHRD for providing the essential support for the successful culmination of our study tour.

The experience of working as a group during the visit to Kerala was truly remarkable. I thoroughly enjoyed the study tour and gained invaluable insights.

Day 1

Thiruvananthapuram:



At Trivandrum

At 06:10 on April 28th, a group of 62 individuals from our team embarked on Indigo flight 6E 5278 from Rajiv Gandhi International Airport, Hyderabad, to Thiruvananthapuram. We arrived at Thiruvananthapuram International Airport by 07:45. The weather was characterized by hot and humid conditions, with temperatures hovering around 35°C.

1. Padmanabhaswamy temple:

Our first stop on the itinerary was the Padmanabhaswamy Temple, dedicated to Lord Vishnu, specifically in his Padmanabhaswamy form. The temple is renowned for its architectural beauty, intricate carvings, and historical significance. It's also known for its immense wealth, with underground vaults reportedly containing treasures worth billions of dollars. The temple has strict rules for entry, including a dress code, where women must wear sarees, Mundum Neriyaathum (set-mundu), skirts with blouses, or half-sarees, while



young girls under 12 can wear gowns. Men are required to wear

mundu or dhoti, and they must be bare-chested. Dhotis are available for rent at the entrance. After donning the appropriate attire, we made our way to the temple located in the East Fort of Trivandrum.



- The temple showcases a blend of Kerala and Dravidian architectural styles, boasting high walls and a 16th-century gopuram towering 100 feet (30 meters) high with seven tiers, constructed in the Pandyan style. The temple has four entrances: Kizakke nada (East), Padinjare nada (West), Vadakke nada (North), and Thekke nada (South), with the main entrance being Kizakke nada. Inside, a corridor houses 365 and one-quarter sculptured granite-stone pillars adorned with intricate carvings, extending from the eastern side to the sanctum sanctorum.

- Due to it being a Sunday, the temple was crowded, and the queue stretched long, winding through the corridor and into the sanctum sanctorum. By the time we reached the sanctum sanctorum, it was midday, so we had to wait an additional 45 minutes for darshan due to the ongoing pooja. Inside the Grabhagriha, Padmanabha reclines on the serpent, visible through three doors. The first door reveals the visage of the reclining Padmanabha and a Siva Linga beneath his hand. Through the second door, one can see Sridevi and Bhrigu Muni in Katusarkara, Brahma seated on a lotus emanating from the deity's navel (hence the name “Padmanabha”), gold abhisheka moorthies of Padmanabha, Sridevi, and Bhudevi, and a silver utsava moorthi of Padmanabha. The third door offers a view of the deity's feet, along with Bhudevi and Markandeya Muni in Katusarkara. The Temple also houses two other significant shrines, Thekkedom and Thiruvambadi, dedicated to the Deities Ugra Narasimha and Krishna Swami, respectively.
- In 2016, the temple was incorporated into the spiritual circuit of the Swadesh Darshan Scheme, with a budget allocation of 78 crore for various amenities’ development at the temple premises. This inclusion has spurred the overall development of the temple, providing facilities such as pure drinking water and accommodation for tourists. After completing our darshan, we returned to our buses around 1 pm and proceeded to our hotel.

2.Veli village

- After enjoying a satisfying lunch and taking a brief rest, everyone felt rejuvenated. Later in the evening, we ventured to Veli

Village, situated at the convergence of Veli Lake and the Arabian Sea. This picturesque destination offers distinctive boating and picnic experiences. We wrapped up our visit to Veli Village by approximately 8 pm, and after dinner, we retired for a good night's sleep.



DAY 2

Alleppey: Venice of the East



- Around 9 am, we set off from Trivandrum to reach Alleppey by 2 pm. Renowned for its canals, backwaters, beaches, and lagoons, Alleppey offered us a captivating experience. We had arranged a backwater cruise to explore the scenic man-made islands,

coconut-fringed backwaters, and lush paddy fields. Our local crew on the cruiseboat doubled as guides, navigating us through the backwaters journey, which commenced from the Pamba River and extended to Vembanad Lake, covering a total distance of approximately 15 km round trip along National Waterway 3.

- Given the limited scope for road and railway development in Alleppey, the establishment of waterways has significantly benefited traditional industries like coir, cashew, and fishing. Alleppey boasts being the first national waterway in India to offer 24-hour navigation facilities along its entire stretch.
- The economy of Alleppey thrives on paddy farming, tourism, and the coir industry. As part of the Kuttanad region, which has the lowest altitude in India and supports farming below sea level, it is often referred to as the “rice bowl of Kerala” and is part of India’s second-largest Ramsar site. To combat saltwater intrusion, a 1252-meter-long saltwater barrier called Thanneermukkom has been constructed on Vembanad Lake.
- Aside from its backwaters, Alleppey is renowned for its coir industry, extracting fibers from coconut husks used in various products such as ropes, twine, brooms, brushes, and doormats.
- After disembarking from the boat, we retired to our hotel. Later in the evening, we explored some coir shops to witness the manufacturing process and admire the range of coir products available.

DAY 3

Periyar Tiger Reserve:

- At 8 am, we set off for Thekkady to explore Periyar National Park, renowned for its community-based ecotourism initiatives. These programs, managed by local residents, focus on protecting vulnerable areas of the reserve while ensuring livelihood security and reducing reliance on forests. Our tickets for boating on Periyar Lake were pre-booked, and upon arrival in Thekkady, a national park bus transported us to the entrance. Four double-decker boats awaited us at the lake for a one-hour journey. Along the way, we spotted herds of deer, elephants, wild goats, and buffaloes, though unfortunately, no tigers were sighted. When we inquired with a forest official, he mentioned that tiger sightings are rare due to the park's vast area (925 sq km) being home to only 40 tigers.
- Despite accommodating thousands of tourists annually, the forests of Periyar Tiger Reserve remain pristine and undisturbed, a testament to the reserve's effective management. In fact, it received the first prize in the Management Effectiveness Evaluation (MEE) of tiger reserves in India for 2022, as announced by the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change.



The spice route:

On our way from Thekkady to Munnar we had a stop at “The spice route”. Established in 2014, Spice Route Ayurvedic & Spice Garden Delights has been a pioneer in delivering exquisite spice experiences to culinary enthusiasts worldwide. At spice route we came to know about variety of spices and plants of Ayurvedic and medicinal importance. There was also shop for spices and other ayurvedic medicines and many of us did shopping there.

From Periyar tiger reserve, we proceeded to our next destination Munnar and reached there by 11pm. On the way from Thekkady to Munnar we witnessed many tea, spice and rubber plantations.



DAY 4

Munnar: Kashmir of South India



Munnar stands out in Kerala for its unique climate, thanks to its elevated position in the Western Ghats. Unlike the coastal regions, Munnar enjoys cooler temperatures, providing a welcome escape from the heatwave for everyone.

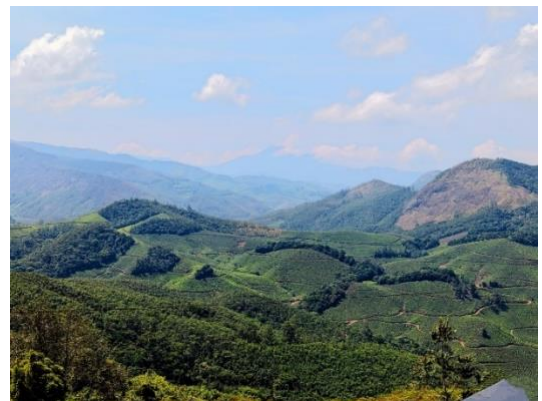
In the morning, we set out for Eravikulam National Park, located 15km away from our hotel. Nestled in the Kannan Devan Hills of the southern Western Ghats, this wildlife sanctuary spans 97 sq. km. and holds the

distinction of being Kerala's inaugural national park. The park is delineated into three sections: the core, buffer, and tourism zones, with visitors permitted access solely to the tourism zone. Upon reaching the main entrance of the tourism area, we paused to take in the sights.



1. The kurinji trail

The trek lasts for an hour, during which we encountered herds of Himalayan Tahr, breathtaking mountain vistas, and stunning tea estates. While journeying along the Kurinji Trail, we were immersed in the tranquil atmosphere of the Western Ghats. The air was fresh and revitalizing, carrying the delightful scent of the Neelakurinji flowers that adorn the landscape in a vibrant burst of color.



2. Montane Shola grassland ecosystem

Sholas, originating from the Tamil term ‘Solai,’ signifying tropical rainforest, represent distinctive tropical montane forests exclusive to the Western Ghats of India. They feature undulating grasslands embellished with diverse grasses, lush evergreen flora, and dwarfed trees. Notably, they possess exceptional water retention capabilities, functioning as vast sponges that slowly release water, serving as a crucial water source for the rivers of South India.

3. Nilgiri Tahr

During the journey, visitors can observe herds of Nilgiri Tahr, an endangered mountain goat native to the natural habitat of Eravikulam.



This national park boasts the highest density and largest population of Nilgiri Tahr, with a total population exceeding 700 individuals.

4. Neelakurinji

Towards the end of the trek lies the revered plant species *Strobilanthes kunthiana*, locally known as Neelakurinji. Neelakurinji is an endemic species of the Western Ghats, facing threats from indiscriminate harvesting by uninformed or reckless individuals in the High Ranges grasslands. It blooms once every 12 years, with its last bloom occurring in 2018, indicating the next bloom in 2030.

After enjoying some time at the summit, we returned to the starting point of the trek and visited the “Story of the Park” exhibit. This exhibit provides a concise history of the park, highlighting the flora and fauna found within, with particular emphasis on the Nilgiri Tahr.



DAY 5

1. Mattupetty dam

In the morning, we toured Mattupetty Dam. Beyond its role as a water storage facility, Mattupetty is renowned for more than just its utility. The reservoir created by this gravity dam is commonly referred to as Mattupetty Lake. This perennial lake remains full even during the dry summer months. Serving as a vital electricity source, the dam also facilitates various water-based recreational activities,



enhancing its appeal to tourists. Additionally, the water from Mattupetty Lake is utilized for irrigation in nearby fields.

2. Tata tea museum

- Tea has played a vital role in shaping the history of Munnar.

The Tata Tea Museum showcases photographs and machinery that document the tea industry's evolution in the region. Located at the Nallathanni Estate of Tata Tea, the museum pays homage to the hardworking individuals who have contributed to the longevity of the tea plantations. Visitors have the opportunity to witness the transformation from



rudimentary tea rollers to modern, fully automated factories. The museum also features various stages of tea processing, including the production of black tea. Among its attractions is a sundial crafted in 1913 by the Art Industrial School in Nazareth, Tamil Nadu, along with historical artifacts like the 'Pelton Wheel' used in a 1920s power generation plant and a rail engine wheel from the Kundale Valley Light Railway.

- Another highlight is the demonstration room for tea tasting, where visitors can sample a diverse range of tea varieties from around the world, including some of the most exotic blends available.

3. Tea estates

The tea museum is located within the Nallathanni Estate, owned by Kanan Devan Hills Plantations Company Private Limited. KDHP opens some of its plantations to the public. During our visit, we explored several tea estates and observed the meticulous process of tea leaf plucking. Harvesters carefully select the first two leaves and a bud



for plucking. This task is labor-intensive, with hand plucking proving to be more cost-effective than machine-based methods.

DAY 6

Kochi: The Queen of Arabian Sea

The port city of Kochi was our final destination in the tour. We reached Kochi on the evening of 2nd May. Kochi is the most developed city of Kerala. The high rise buildings, backwaters and forests kind of blend in here and this gives Kochi a unique identity on its own. The view from our 14 floor high hotel building itself was mesmerizing. On the morning of 3rd of May we went out to explore Kochi.

1. Cherai Beach

Cherai Beach in Kerala presents unspoiled coastlines, gently swaying palm trees, and tranquil backwaters. Immerse yourself in water sports, dolphin sightings, and peaceful sunsets amid its breathtaking natural beauty. The array of adventure activities available, including lounging by the shore, banana rides, and jet skiing, entice numerous tourists to visit Cherai Beach.



2. Fort Kochi



Fort Kochi, a historical treasure in Kerala, showcases colonial-style architecture, vibrant markets, and peaceful backwaters. Key attractions in Fort Kochi include:

- mattancherry palace
- st francis church
- dutch cemetery
- santa cruz basilica
- fort immanuel
- jewish synagogue
- maritime museum
- chinese fishing nets

i. Mattancherry palace

Commonly referred to as the Dutch Palace, this structure is a quadrangular building designed in the Nalukettu style, a traditional form of Kerala architecture, featuring a central courtyard. While predominantly following the Nalukettu style, certain architectural features such as the arches and chamber proportions exhibit European influences. The palace walls are adorned with a plethora of murals executed in the style of Hindu temple art, which are both religiously significant and artistically ornate.



ii. St. Francis Church

located in Kochi, Kerala, St. Francis Church carries profound historical importance as India's oldest European church. Constructed in the early 16th century, it showcases colonial architectural styles and symbolizes the introduction of Christianity to India. Initially, it served as the burial site for Vasco De Gama.

ii.Santa Cruz Basilica

The Santa Cruz Basilica in Fort Kochi, Kerala, stands as a magnificent representation of Indo-European architecture. Adorned



with intricate frescoes and murals within, its towering spires command attention against the backdrop of Fort Kochi's skyline.

iii. Fort Immanuel

Fort Immanuel stands stoically, its aged walls and deteriorating battlements serving as poignant reminders of the turbulent past that has shaped the region. A favored destination among tourists, it provides a window into Kerala's colonial past and the enduring architectural imprint left by its European rulers

iv. Jewish Synagogue

The synagogue's architectural design seamlessly integrates elements of both Jewish and Kerala styles. Inside, visitors can marvel at ancient Torah scrolls, meticulously handwritten on parchment, representing profound religious and historical importance for the Jewish community.

v. Chinese fishing nets



DAY 7

THERUVORAM NGO VISIT

THE BEST WAY TO FIND YOURSELF IS TO LOSE YOURSELF IN THE SERVICE OF OTHERS”

-MAHATMA GANDHI

Our final day was dedicated to a visit to an NGO, aiming to gain insights into the organization’s mission, objectives, activities, the issues they tackle, the communities they support, and the impact of their endeavors.



- Founded by Murugan S in 2007, Theruvoram endeavors to rehabilitate street people in Kochi, operating independently without government funding or public grants, while consistently serving the community. It extends a compassionate hand to those abandoned on the streets and individuals afflicted with diseases such as leprosy, irrespective of age, gender, or background.
- Murugan S, originally from Peerumedu in Idduki district of Kerala, gained his initial experience at Don Bosco Snehabhavan, where he cultivated love and compassion for others amid life's challenges. Later, he embarked on rescuing people independently, financing these efforts through late-night auto-rickshaw shifts. In 2007, he

founded Theruvoram Pravarthaka Association NGO, dedicated to rehabilitating street people with round-the-clock assistance. Murugan S has received national recognition, including the National Award for Child Welfare in 2011 from the President, an award from the Honorable Prime Minister in 2017, and recognition for community development and women's empowerment from the President in 2020.

- The NGO's mission revolves around the empowerment and welfare of street people, especially the elderly, mentally challenged individuals, and migrant labor communities. Additionally, it focuses on empowering rural women to foster equitable relationships between urban and rural areas, utilizing underutilized urban resources to trigger development with dignity across the country. Their vision is to contribute to making the world a better place for the human race.
- In terms of service, the NGO has rescued nearly 30,000 homeless beggars and destitutes. Upon encountering beggars on the streets, the NGO promptly engages with local authorities, obtaining necessary permissions via police letters. It has organized various drives in coordination with the police and local authorities to rehabilitate the homeless and mentally unstable. The NGO primarily focuses on accommodating individuals with psychiatric disabilities, the bedridden, and the elderly. Their facilities include a two-story building spanning 1600 sqft, which includes a small kitchen and can accommodate 30 homeless individuals.

CONCLUSION AND **LEARNINGS**

- The study tour proved to be a remarkable and educational journey for all of us. Throughout our travels, we gained insight into India's diverse landscape, rich history, cultural heritage, and ecological abundance. We deepened our understanding of the nation's development, governance, and societal dynamics, while also honing essential skills such as teamwork, time management, and adaptability. Additionally, we forged lasting friendships and cherished memories.
- Key takeaways from our experiences include recognizing India's juxtaposition of ancient traditions and modern advancements, as well as its vast socio-economic disparities. We marveled at the country's architectural marvels, vibrant festivals, and culinary delights, which vividly showcased its historical and cultural tapestry. Moreover, our exploration of India's varied ecosystems—from lush forests to arid deserts—highlighted its unparalleled biodiversity.
- This study tour was an integral and enjoyable component of our training program. We extend our gratitude to the MCR HRDIT, Course Director, Study Tour Committee, and officials whose efforts made it possible. Special thanks also go to our fellow participants for contributing to the camaraderie of the trip. We are

eager to apply and share the insights gained during our journey in our future endeavors and look forward to revisiting these remarkable destinations to further explore the wonders of our incredible India.

THANK YOU!