

My initiation into Archaeology

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Pattanam, where I arrived as part of the Internship offered by the Kerala Centre for Historical Research, opened for me the big world of Archaeology. As a student who reveres the fragrance of the past and the know-how evolved through centuries, the experiences I had at Pattanam were both educational and enchanting...

It was one of the most exciting and rare opportunities for a yet -to-be BA student in Kerala can dream of- that is, to do a 15 day Internship at the Pattanam excavation site- which is now the centre of attention of archeologists within and outside India. Pattanam, a serene village outside the crowded and buzzing Cochin city, is unlike the stereotypical excavation sites that I had seen in movies where tourists bustled around, and volunteers explained the history of the area and the significance of their findings. At Pattanam, it was quiet, and it didn't seem to me like a place which centuries ago was 'connected the Indian subcontinent with the Indian Ocean, Red Sea and the Mediterranean'. The findings from the excavation have thrown light on how developed Kerala was during a period before the 9th century about which there is limited evidence. It has also highlighted how developed the Kerala trade was during a time when the Western civilizations were still in cradle. However, the Pattanam I saw was humble, tranquil and beautiful with the air resonating with stories from the past.

The PG diploma course offered at Pattanam has more than one dimension to it, being a holistic approach towards education. More than equipping the students with a good knowledge of their study material, it is also ensured that the students get the best teachers, wonderful learning experience, and good exposure. Our days at Pattanam started with a meditation session and reading short passages from the books, *Manimekhalai* and B.R Ambedkar's *Buddha and his Dhamma*. On some days when it was not raining, the meditation was followed by a cycling session. After cycling there will be just enough time to get ready and go for breakfast. Post-breakfast, we either get time to read, or there would be classes. The food for all of us was supplied by the *Kudumbashree* workers, which validates the view that real education is integral and integrated to social awareness. However, although the schedule seemed liberal, it was only after we got into the academic flow that we discovered that our days were packed with something exciting happening every day.

The opportunities offered at Pattanam has undoubtedly enabled me to have a closer acquaintance with History and Archaeology- I got the chance to see an old pot belonging to the early historic period being removed from one of the trenches before filling it back with soil; attend a talk by Dr. Sudarshan Seneviratne, the Sri Lankan High Commissioner in India when he visited us, and participate in an anthropology field work, to find out social memories of the people at Pattanam.

The session with Prof. Sudarshan Seneviratne, the Sri Lankan High Commissioner, in which he spoke about archaeology and how an object loses its glory once it is taken out of its context, was highly inspiring and enlightening. He also stated how history should be read through stratigraphy more than from written documents. Although, historical literature is an important way in which we can have a closer look at our past, in a lot of circumstances it is written by the people at the top of the class hierarchy who wanted the future to understand them in a way that they wanted to be understood by the future. I was particularly fascinated by the model of history education in Sri Lanka, where when excavations happen, interesting aspects of it are publicized in schools, and students are encouraged to visit the excavation sites. As a result, the students get firsthand experience of the process associated with archaeology and that provides them with exposure. If archaeological excavations of small scale are promoted among school students just like the experiments in chemistry and biology, it will change the view our society has about history, as an inference study subject meant for students who cannot study science, and enlighten them about its importance.

Although the classroom and library at Pattanam are simple, and facilities limited, it is guaranteed that the library has the best available books on Archaeology. The book that I enjoyed reading the most at Pattanam was Colin Renfrew's 'Prehistory'. It was a quick paced and tightly written one; each and every sentence contained an interesting fact. It was fascinating to read about how deeply rooted Christian beliefs were at a point of time, and how it made the idea of pre-history difficult. Historical connections were made complex by the beliefs such as the 'Noachian flood of Genesis'. Further, strong believers of Christianity, did not want to believe that there were human beings before Adam. Thanks to James Hutton who stated in 1785 that unnatural events will not be taken under consideration while studying the Earth, or else many exciting discoveries would have left unheard entangled in religion. The book I read other than 'Prehistory' was Philip Barkers' 'Techniques of Archaeological Excavations'. The book was technical, more like a textbooks and dealt with detailed information about the process of carrying out an excavation.

The technical books I read about Archaeology only made sense after attending classes. The course offered at Pattanam completely revolves around using the library and reading up related topics depending on what is taught. It is impossible to teach everything that is in the syllabus at a PG diploma level. Hence the students are expected to read and make notes for themselves, after which the lectures will set a platform for them which will enable them to think and explore the topic. During my first few days at Pattanam, I used to sit through the lectures completely puzzled. It is only after a while that I discovered that I had to read up a bit and understand the basics of archaeology to enjoy the classes to the fullest. Out of the many things that our teacher talked to us about, I was greatly interested by the principles of stratigraphy. It requires imagination to come up with the idea that different layers of soil can be associated with different periods of time. The upper most layer is more recent than the lower most layer that belongs to time immemorial. It is in fact this principle of Stratigraphy that helped the archaeologists working at the Pattanam site to classify the findings denoted by specific time periods.

Learning was not just confined to books at Pattanam despite having a library that contains some of the best books on archaeology, it also involved watching documentaries and videos related to the topic along with doing practical excavations. The documentaries I watched were engaging and thought - provoking. Out of the many documentaries that were shown to the students, the two documentaries that I enjoyed the most were 'How Earth Made Us', and the 'Lost Kingdom of the Mayas'; the first about water and the latter on the ancient and mythical Mayan civilization. Although it shattered the pre conceived notions I had of the Mayas, it was a sensational revelation that made me understand that Mayas were not primitive, and instead was a group of highly advanced people who lived 1000 years before Columbus discovered America. While watching the documentary on water, I was particularly impressed by how BBC despite being British, was honest in admitting that the British rule and their decisions during the colonial period in India were disastrous. The documentary portrayed how the deep rainwater tanks prevalent in India were labeled unhygienic by the British, and to solve the issue how they built tanks which later led to stagnation of water and multiply breeding grounds for mosquitoes that spread malaria.

It was during the last couple of days, that the ethnography field work was organized. The fieldwork gave us a chance to interact with the local people of Pattanam to extract their social memories which is important in the study of History. The one experience that was a part of the memory of most of the people we spoke to was of poverty. The hardships they had undergone decades ago disabled them to admire the beauty of Pattanam as I did, as for them Pattanam at one point

was a barren earth that offered only days of starvation. The fieldwork was followed by a workshop that dealt with consolidating the data collected to give us an idea about what is expected from the Ethnography that will be submitted by the students.

Despite not being able to do any practical excavation at Pattanam as I had wished for, my experience was certainly enriching. Pattanam opened up a new world of knowledge and information for me, and convinced me that it requires a lot of handwork and patience in order to make an exciting archeological discovery. It is not an easy task, and the primary requirements to be a successful archaeologist is dedication, curiosity and a good amount of imagination. Unless an archeologist has the power to imagine and be curious about what the world would have been like a 1000 years ago, he/she can never visualize what to look for and identify what is retrieved and relate it to the present social realities.

Although my days at Pattanam are over, I conserve with me lovely memories from a land scattered with coloured beads, decorated with lined up amphorae and trod by the traders of Muziris.
