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## Through the Everyday of a Heritage Site: Understanding the Making of Chalai

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the making of heritage in Chalai, a historic marketplace in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, by situating it within the evolving conceptual frameworks of heritage studies. The study adopts a working definition of heritage as a “mental construct” that attributes significance to selected places, artifacts, and practices from the past. In this light, Chalai is approached as an “everyday site” where commerce, residence, and memory intersect, and where heritage is embedded within routine urban life rather than preserved as a static exhibit. Drawing on field observations, interviews with residents, historical accounts, and news reports, the paper analyses both the tangible and intangible dimensions of Chalai’s heritagescape. Architecturally dense streets, centuries-old buildings, and the principal bazaar lane form the material substratum of heritage, while archival references, from medieval records to nineteenth-century accounts, constitute its narrative fabric. The study underscores that heritage in Chalai emerges not from a single chronological origin but from multiple historical layers, ranging from the Travancore period to contemporary socio-economic transformations. The paper further explores the evolution of trade practices, intergenerational businesses, and shifting material cultures, highlighting how nostalgia, adaptation, and commercial competition shape heritage-consciousness. Chalai’s plural cultural landscape reveals the coexistence of multiple heritages within a shared spatial frame. Finally, the study engages with state-led heritage redevelopment initiatives and stakeholder concerns, stating how Chalai exemplifies the challenges and possibilities of managing heritage within a continuously inhabited and commercially active urban environment.

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**Keywords:** Chalai, heritage studies, cultural history, urban studies

## The Tangible and Intangible Making of the Heritage of Chalai

A central question in the discipline of heritage studies is: What is heritage? Its definitions and interpretations have continued to evolve without reaching a definitive resolution, and this fluidity expands the scope of the field. Heritage sites are often conceived as static or frozen exhibits, leading to an understanding of heritage primarily in terms of museums, art galleries, and memorials. Although this assumption is not entirely incorrect, it becomes limiting when it obscures the ways in which heritage permeates spaces that do not conform to conventional expectations. A practical working definition describes heritage as “a mental construct that attributes ‘significance’ to certain places, artifacts, and forms of behaviour from the past...” (Logan et al. 1). In this sense, an everyday site used by the public for transportation, livelihood, or commerce may also fall within the ambit of heritage. The lack of definitional fixity, therefore, enables this paper to examine the different ways in which heritage intersects with the ordinary spaces of daily life.

This paper, informed by this understanding of heritage, examines the making of heritage in Chalai, a locality in the Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala, India. Today, Chalai is a major centre of trade in the city, and its antiquity can be traced back to medieval Kerala (“Kerala Archaeology” 00:02:20–00:02:26). Those who walk through the Chalai bazaar today may not consciously register its long history or recognise the enduring material traces of the past that shape the area. The term “everyday site” in the title refers to the fact that Chalai is regularly visited for buying and selling and is also home to a substantial residential population.

With these considerations in view, this study examines the tangible and intangible dimensions of Chalai’s heritage, investigates the ways in which state agencies and various organisations engage with it and the implications of such engagements for residents, and analyses how heritage becomes embedded within an everyday site. The study draws primarily on field observations, interviews with local residents, historical accounts, and relevant news reports.

The incorporation of tangible entities—such as buildings, streets, and material objects—into the domain of heritage is contingent upon the presence of an intangible narrative through which meaning is conferred. In the context of Chalai Bazaar, the architectural structures and the principal thoroughfare are recognised as elements of heritage not merely because they possess age, but because their pasts continue to articulate historically situated meanings. This raises the longstanding and theoretically complex question of whether all entities possessing a past can be classified as heritage. Although every object or site is, in a literal sense, situated within temporality, such ubiquity does not automatically produce heritage value. This distinction may be clarified by extending the working definition introduced earlier, namely that “heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations” (Carman and Sørensen 12). For material remnants of

the past to be understood as heritage, they must actively mediate between temporal registers: they must engage the present and retain the potential to generate significance for future generations. In this sense, the historical strata of Chalai continue to animate its contemporary urban life. It is necessary to emphasize that the term “past” is employed here in a pluralistic sense. The heritage of Chalai cannot be traced to a single chronological origin; rather, it emerges from multiple historical moments ranging from the medieval period to more recent socio-economic developments. Furthermore, the use of the term “Chalai” in this discussion refers not to its expansive geographical extent but to the principal lane and the associated sites conventionally identified as Chalai in contemporary usage.

The main lane of Chalai Bazaar is a straight road with two openings, one at East Fort and the other at Killipalam. Directly opposite the East Fort entrance lies Gandhi Park, beyond which stands the well-known Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple. The lane is comparatively narrow, and the buildings are densely arranged along both sides. Although the road accommodates the movement of goods lorries, the overall congestion makes driving difficult. Many of the structures in Chalai are several centuries old. According to Respondent 1, a resident of Chalai for more than six decades whom I interviewed, there have been no significant changes in the built forms during his lifetime.

A news article in *The Hindu* by Nita Sathyendran outlines the history of Chalai, drawing primarily on the works of historian Malayinkeezhu Gopalakrishnan. Chalai was formally established as a market space in the eighteenth century during the reign of Karthika Thirunal Ramavarma, also known as Dharmaraja, of the Travancore kingdom. The administrative initiatives of Diwan Raja Kesavadas are particularly significant in this development (Sathyendran). The largescale renovation of the Padmanabhaswami Temple and the growing prominence of Thiruvananthapuram as the royal residence led to the relocation of numerous families, trades, and craft guilds to the city (“Kerala Archaeology” 00:00:54–00:01:08). Recognising the need for a market that could support this expanding population, Raja Kesavadas purchased land for the bazaar from Karuvakkulam Potti and invited traders from various regions to settle in the area (Sathyendran).

In addition to these accounts, references to the Chaalai market appear in several other archival sources. Sharat Sunder Rajeev, writing in *The Hindu*, notes that Colin Paterson, physician to Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma, recorded in his *Medical Report of Travancore* (1842) the existence of “Shala Bazar,” described as “an extensive street of Native Shops” located to the east of the Fort (Rajeev). Furthermore, the *Mathilakom Rekhakal*, which document “innumerable incidents of Travancore’s history hidden away in a few palm leaf manuscripts” (A.S.), indicate the presence of an earlier bazar in the vicinity of the temple in the sixteenth century. One entry recounts a theft in 1518 AD, when certain temple vessels went missing and were subsequently recovered from a shop in Chalai (Sathyendran). The thirteenth-century Malayalam composition “Ananthapuravarnanam” describes a vibrant

marketplace that included a fish market, textile market, provision market, and other trading spaces (Sathyendran).

These constitute the principal historical accounts of Chalai that circulate within prominent public and scholarly discourses. Although further archival exploration may reveal additional layers of historical significance, such an undertaking lies beyond the present scope. Collectively, these records, together with the place's historical functions and the narratives embedded in its evolution, form a substantial part of Chalai's intangible cultural fabric. Their material traces continue to persist in various forms within the contemporary urban environment. Taken together, these tangible and intangible elements shape the Chalai "heritagescape" (Garden 270). As Garden observes, "heritage sites are both tangible places, that is, bounded physical space, and cultural constructs..." (270).

### **Commerce and Trades in Chalai Bazar: Past and Present**

In its contemporary form, Chalai Bazaar functions as a dense and highly active commercial hub offering a wide range of goods and services. The area is characterised by significant pedestrian and vehicular congestion, with shops occupying nearly every available frontage along the main and subsidiary streets. Distinct clusters within the bazaar are associated with specialised categories of trade, including vegetables, fruits, flowers, puja materials, metals, electronics, groceries, textiles, jewellery, and several other commodities. Commercial transactions of considerable monetary scale occur daily. Writing in *The News Minute*, Saritha S. Balan describes the bazaar as a comprehensive shopping destination.

Balan further reports the observations of Ramachandran, President of the Vyapari Vyavasayi Ekopana Samithi, Thiruvananthapuram, who notes that the wholesale market constitutes the economic core of Chalai, drawing retailers from across the district (Balan). She also cites Rafeeq, President of the Vyapari Vyavasayi Ekopana Samithi, Chalai Main Market, who states: "There's a saying that people go to Chalai even to buy a paper clip. We purchase vegetables from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. Fruits we import from Punjab and Shimla while furniture is made locally as well as imported from abroad" (Balan). Such patterns illustrate the bazaar's extensive commercial linkages and its embeddedness within wider regional and interregional networks.

The antiquity of the marketplace has been addressed in the preceding section. Interview material with Respondent 1 contributes to an understanding of Chalai's more immediate commercial past. According to him, the trading community in Chalai has historically been diverse, comprising Malayalis as well as Tamil, Gujarati, Marathi, and Rajasthani groups. He notes that many Tamil traders migrated from Kanyakumari during the period of the Travancore kingdom. A more detailed consideration of their cultural practices will be taken up in the subsequent section of this paper.

Respondent 1 recalls that Kothuval Street formerly hosted vendors who sold household items such as thatch (*oola*), mattresses (*oola paaya*), straw rice baskets (*ari vatti*), wooden tawas, coir products, earthen pots, and various containers and carriers (*chatti*, and *kutta*). Many of these objects have since fallen out of common use as domestic life has shifted toward plasticware, metal utensils, and electrically powered appliances. The bazaar has adapted to these changes, reflected in the proliferation of electronic stores and outlets specialising in contemporary kitchen tools. Nevertheless, the older products evoke a sense of nostalgia and contribute to what might be understood as a form of heritage-consciousness. Items associated with Kerala's earlier domestic practices can still be located in Chalai, albeit with increasing rarity.

According to Respondent 1, grocery shops (*palavenjanakadakaal*) were concentrated along Sabhapathikovil Street, located opposite Kothuval Street. These two streets converge at Sannidhimukku, a toponym now largely recognised only by older generations.

The history of the gold trade in Chalai is also notable. Gold merchants, particularly those identified locally as 'Settus,' once played a prominent role in buying, selling, melting, and crafting gold and silver. Many resided with their families in the vicinity of their establishments. The rise of large jewellery houses in the wider city, however, diminished the customer base of these traditional gold traders. Small gold shops continue to operate in Chalai today, although their presence is considerably reduced.

A significant number of businesses in the area remain intergenerational, reinforcing a sense of heritage for both longstanding residents and external observers. As Respondent 2., a resident of Chalai, notes, many shops prominently display framed photographs of fathers or grandfathers, expressing a clear veneration for familial lineage. However, several longstanding establishments have not endured the pressures of contemporary commercial competition. Nita Sathyendran, writing in *The Hindu*, reports the closure of a seventy-five-year-old establishment, "Swami and Brothers," once regarded as a principal destination for threads and embroideries. In the article, V. Narayana Iyer, whose father founded the business, remarks, "...business has been rather dull for the past several years thanks to the garment superstores that have popped up in the East Fort area. We really had no option but to sell up" (Sathyendran). Such instances indicate that while elements of heritage persist, they are also subject to the economic contingencies of the present.

### **Heritage(s) of Chalai**

Chalai is characterised by the coexistence of multiple cultural and heritage formations within a single spatial setting, offering a notable example of plurality. The bazaar hosts long-established communities originating from different linguistic and regional backgrounds across India. A significant proportion of traders have ancestral links to Tamil Nadu, whose patterns of migration have been discussed

previously. In addition, wood traders from Rajasthan and commercial groups from Gujarat and Maharashtra contribute to the diverse economic and cultural landscape of the area.

Interview material with Respondent 1 provides insight into the development of a distinct Tamil cultural sphere associated with a now-demolished establishment in Chalai. The Chithra Theatre, initially functioning as a venue for dramatic performances, hosted prominent Tamil actors such as Shivaji Ganesan, M. G. Ramachandran, and Padmini. The venue was later converted into a cinema screening Tamil films, around which a specific cultural milieu emerged. Respondent 1 characterises this environment as a “Nagarcoil ambiance.” Although the theatre no longer exists, its cultural imprint persists within local memory and spatial nomenclature; several residential buildings that once accommodated Tamil film actors continue to display their photographs, and the area includes a road named “Chithra Theatre Lane.”

Over time, Tamil-speaking residents have become integrated into the broader cultural fabric of Chalai. According to Respondent 1, shifts in naming practices among younger generations—from common Tamil names such as Ramalekshmi, Muthulekshmi, and Vijayalekshmi to those more commonly associated with Malayali traditions—illustrate this process of incorporation. A Tamil-medium government school continues to operate in the locality, and while students receive formal instruction in Tamil and use the language within domestic spaces, they are proficient in Malayalam and employ it for wider social interaction.

Chalai is also defined by its long-standing religious diversity, a feature traceable to the early stages of the bazaar’s formation. As Rajeev notes, “Ancient Muslim families settled in Thengapattanam and Poovar regions as well as some prominent Christian families had shops in Chala.” The contemporary streetscape includes both mosques and temples situated amidst commercial establishments. The Aryasala Temple, one of the oldest in the area, plays a prominent role in Hindu ritual circuits involving the Kundani Nanga, Kumaraswami, and Vellikuthira shrines. The bazaar is also home to one of the region’s oldest Juma Masjids. Architecture students from the Bishop Jerome Institute, Kollam, highlight the distinctive design of the Karuppattikkada Juma Masjid, noting its absence of domes and minarets (Ravi).

Chalai continues to function as a site of sustained coexistence, where diverse cultural heritages intersect and collectively shape the identity of the marketplace. Nora Bible, a visual researcher based in Berlin, in her audiovisual narrative on Chalai notes:

The streets of Chalai vividly inculcate the street vendors, shopkeepers and other hard-working classes, accentuating the versatility of the antique market place. The market is home to different castes, tribes and religions. They co-exist congruously without any discrimination in racial classifications, age, gender, religion and philosophical discrepancies. Each in their struggle to

survive, to look after their families, to fulfill their loved one's dreams, never forgetting to hold their neighbors and friends close to their hearts. Chalai market indoctrinates an overwhelming fable of tolerance, humility and universal love. (Chalai: An Audiovisual)

### **Official Recognition of Heritage Value**

The identification of tangible heritage assets and intangible cultural elements by state bodies and other institutions is a well-established practice, mostly accompanied by legal instruments intended to ensure their protection. The case of Chalai, however, presents particular complexities that distinguish it from other heritage sites in Thiruvananthapuram. The city contains several monumental structures—such as palaces and museums—whose heritage value is widely recognised and whose preservation follows established regulatory frameworks. Sites like Kuthiramalika Palace and the Napier Museum are managed as controlled environments, where visitor movement can be monitored and regulated to minimise potential forms of deterioration.

Chalai, by contrast, functions as an everyday commercial and social space with continuous public access, rendering conventional preservation strategies impracticable. The dynamics of the bazaar do not permit restrictions on movement or activity on the grounds of potential “contamination.” Instead, heritage is embedded within the routines, interactions, and material practices that constitute daily life in the market. Any approach to conservation in this context therefore requires a methodology attentive to lived experience, commercial rhythms, and the coexistence of multiple cultural forms.

In 2018, the Tourism Department of Kerala initiated a project aimed at developing a designated heritage street in Chalai, intended both to benefit local residents and to enhance the area's appeal to visitors. The proposal included a series of wall paintings designed to depict episodes from Chalai's historical past, along with the installation of traditional roofing elements, resting benches, and flowering plants along the streetscape. Among the most prominent components of the plan were two gateway arches positioned at the entrance and exit of the bazaar, as well as a statue of Raja Kesavadas, the Diwan credited with conceptualising the market. The project further outlined measures for the conservation of heritage buildings, improvements to the drainage system, and interventions to address parking challenges in the area (The New Indian Express). Appendix 1 of this paper contains the blueprint of the proposed gateway arch. Since its launch, only the renovation of access roads has been initiated, and the core heritage street elements originally proposed remain unrealised, with the project undergoing revisions and further planning amid funding and administrative delay (“Chalai Project to...”)

One major concern when a place receives official recognition as a heritage site is the question of stakeholders, which makes a stakeholder analysis indispensable. Although the residents of Chalai may not strictly be considered an Indigenous community, the principles outlined by Stefan Disko in her

essay “Indigenous Peoples’ Rights and the World Heritage Convention” remain pertinent to them. Disko emphasizes that any heritage redevelopment or intervention in a lived space must ensure that residents retain “the right to lands, territories and resources; the right to self-determined development; and participatory rights” (Disko 357). Christina Cameron observes in her essay “UNESCO and Cultural Heritage: Unexpected Consequences” that “...the tourism industry has enthusiastically embraced World Heritage as an extraordinary business opportunity” (Cameron 330). While the commercialisation of heritage warrants critical scrutiny, it is also important to recognise the potential of heritage designation to generate economic benefits for local communities. In this context, Respondent 1 notes in an interview, “Everything is available at Chalai Bazaar. There are many small streets that sell all sorts of things. It is like Paris street in Chennai. So, when Chalai is made into a heritage site, these businesses will benefit.”

Other organisations, including the Indian National Trust for Arts and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), have also engaged in efforts to conserve Chalai’s heritage. Shaji Krishnan, co-convenor of INTACH, observes that a significant portion of Chalai’s cultural heritage—particularly within the textile and gold trades—has already been lost. He notes that when INTACH approached local business owners with proposals for heritage conservation, they were often resistant, expressing concern that such initiatives might negatively impact their commercial activities. Krishnan advocates for a coordinated effort among all stakeholders, including employees, head-load workers, residents, government officials, archaeologists, and the wider citizenry (Sathyendran).

## Conclusion

The tangible structures and intangible narratives that constitute Chalai’s heritage reflect layers of historical memory spanning several centuries. Despite the influences of modernity, the bazaar continues to convey its historical identity. Consequently, in discussions concerning the transformation of Thiruvananthapuram into a heritage city, Chalai is likely to play a central role. This paper has examined the processes through which the multiple heritages of Chalai have developed over time, collectively shaping its contemporary character. It has also explored the ways in which heritage is embedded within an everyday urban space, continuously interacting with and being experienced by the local community.

In these lights, heritage can now be understood as a cognitive framework that assigns “significance” (Logan et al. 1) to specific places, artifacts, and patterns of behaviour from the past. Heritage not only communicates with the present but also informs and shapes the future. Chalai’s historical legacy manifests in multiple forms: through its architecture, its embedded narratives, and increasingly through structured interventions such as heritage redevelopment projects. While the preservation and transmission of Chalai’s heritage has historically occurred in largely informal and

non-deliberate ways, contemporary efforts introduce deliberate strategies that also bring new challenges. Chalai therefore serves as a critical case study for understanding how heritage can be maintained and managed within the context of a continuously inhabited and commercially active urban space.

Appendix



Source: *The New Indian Express*

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