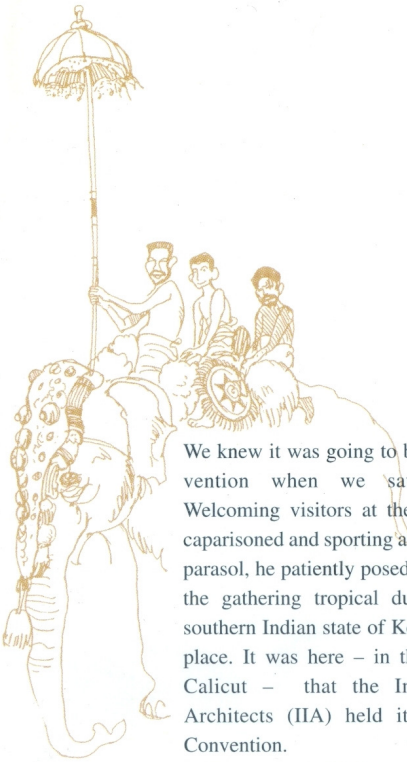


A case of assembled identity

Maria Jones and Ian McDonald reflect on a recent convention on *Globalisation and Regionalism*



Illustrations:
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We knew it was going to be no ordinary convention when we saw the elephant. Welcoming visitors at the entrance, gaudily caparisoned and sporting an elaborate crimson parasol, he patiently posed for photographs in the gathering tropical dusk. But then, the southern Indian state of Kerala is no ordinary place. It was here – in the coastal town of Calicut – that the Indian Institute of Architects (IIA) held its recent National Convention.

The theme of this year's gathering was 'Globalisation and Regionalism'. Although currently celebrating 50 years of independence, India is only now opening up its economy to the international market and it still seems unsure how to harness the forces of globalisation for local benefit. We were anxious to see what Indian architects make of a debate which is already acknowledged in the West, but which could soon acquire new relevance for the fledgling regions of Britain following the devolution votes of last September.

In principle, globalisation is nothing new, and Calicut is certainly an appropriate location to discuss the influx of new ideas into India. Successive waves of foreign traders and invaders have come to Kerala's Malabar Coast in search of spices, sandalwood and ivory. Chinese traders sailed here from the court of Kublai Khan. Calicut itself was famed in medieval times for its powerful Muslim rulers, the Zamorins or 'Lords of the Sea', who attracted Arab, Jewish and Syrian Christian merchants to their tiny city state: a dazzling variety of cultures in overwhelmingly Hindu southern India. In 1498 Vasco da Gama landed at Calicut, heralding five centuries of European influence in India by the Portuguese, Dutch, French and finally the British.

Throughout it all, Kerala assimilated the cultural waves lapping at its shores with a strong local identity which would be the envy of many up-and-coming European regions. The tiny state combines strict Hindu observance with an ancient matriarchal system, modest codes of dress with wild and weird traditional dance costume, farming methods

Medieval muslim mosque at Calicut, shedding the language of domes and minars for climatically appropriate pagoda like forms, with timber grilles for ventilation instead of large windows.



unchanged since the dawn of agriculture with an education system the envy of the sub-continent: a 91% literacy rate being the proudest achievement of the world's first freely elected Marxist local government! If Kerala can balance such contradictions why not Wales, Scotland or the English regions?

The harsh tropical climate puts paid to the modernist 'white box', and most Keralan

building types shelter under steep, pagoda-like roofs of thatch or tile with cooling timber grilles instead of large window openings in the bamboo and mud cement walls. Even the mosques of Calicut's Muslim Lords shed domes and minar in favour of the ubiquitous pagoda, and Laurie Baker long ago reminded the Keralans of the importance of respecting their distinctive regional building tradition.