



“The Aflaj have helped to shape the history and settlement patterns of Oman, and they continue even now to tie together each community that draws upon the falaj's flow

Mahmood Al Azry
Deputy director of Aflaj department,
Ministry of Regional Municipalities
and Water Resources

Focus on heritage of Aflaj network

Since the heritage of water is the theme for the World Heritage Day celebration this year, the workshop's focus was on the Aflaj of Oman and the archaeological sites

AFTAB H. KOLA
aftab@timesofoman.com

MUSCAT: Oman has officially joined the world in observing the World Heritage Day.

At a function held on Sunday at the Culture Club in Qurum, under the auspices of Ministry of Heritage and Culture and Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources, experts called for a holistic approach to conservation of heritage.

Since the heritage of water is the underlying theme for the World Heritage Day celebration this year, two papers were presented, one on Aflaj (singular, falaj) of Oman and the other on the relationship of water resources with archaeological sites.



CREATING AWARENESS: The experts have urged the people to participate in the awareness programmes of Oman's priceless water heritage which has won global accolades. - Jun Estrada/TIMES OF OMAN

The event was graced by Eng. Ali bin Mohammed Al Abri, undersecretary for water resources affairs at the Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources, and Salim bin Mohammed bin Said Al Mahrooqi, undersecretary of heritage and culture, Ministry of Heritage Affairs.

In his opening note, Hasan bin Mohammed bin Ali Al Lawati, director-general of archaeological sites and museums, Ministry of Heritage and Culture, asserted, "Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations".

Hasan's short speech was followed by a short documentary on the Aflaj of Oman.

In his lecture on the Aflaj of Oman,

Mahmood Al Azry, deputy director of Aflaj Department, Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources, said, "Falaj is an ancient engineering marvel that is Oman's lifeline even today. Oman's rugged topography has tested the ingenuity of ancient planners, who produced engineering solutions that are part of Oman's architectural heritage."

Al Azry quoted His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said: "The falaj is a unique and important water source that has made a major contribution to Omani society throughout its history."

"Not only is it regarded as a historical landmark of Oman, but it represents the ability of Omanis to build civilisations in the face of severe challenges and, at the same

time, enrich the world's heritage through their intellectual and creative endeavours".

Azry said that falaj is a sustainable irrigation technology that has withstood the ravages of time. He said, "The Aflaj have helped to shape the history and settlement patterns of Oman, and they continue even now to tie together each community that draws upon the falaj's flow."

Talking about the types of Aflaj, he said, "In Oman, we have three types - Daudi Aflaj, Ghaili Aflaj and Aini Aflaj. The government has taken measures to protect and maintain the Aflaj in terms of construction and conservation of water".

He said it was a proud moment when the Unesco's World Heritage Committee during its 30th meet-

ing held in Lithuania in July 2006, formally took a decision to inscribe Oman's five Aflaj on the World Heritage List. They are: Falaj Al Jeela, Falaj Daris, Falaj Al Muyassar, Falaj Al Khatmeen and Falaj Al Malki.

Talking about the relationship of water resources and archaeological sites, Ali bin Hamoud Mahrouqi, archaeologist at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, said that human settlements were found around water bodies and near the mountains where they found aquifers, etc. He went on to elaborate the usefulness of water resources to those living in the past. Ali called upon archaeologists and conservation architects, government bodies and people to participate in the awareness of Oman's priceless heritage elements.

'PRAVASALOKAM' DRIVE

Rafeeq on crusade to find missing Indians in Gulf

REJIMON K.
reji@timesofoman.com

MUSCAT: His phone never stops ringing. During the past one decade he has handled 1,300 missing person cases and is now much sought after by migrant Indians and their families who are in distress.

Rafeeq Ravuthar, a journalist by profession and activist by choice, with the help of well-wishers of his TV programme *Pravasalokam* (world of the non-residents), locates and unites missing migrant Indians and now has become a blessing for those who are in misery and left stranded on the streets in a foreign land.

The show, which began 11 years ago, has completed its 533rd episode recently. Unlike other TV programmes where viewership rating is a must to decide advertisement volumes, *Pravasalokam* is viewer-driven differently. Here it's the viewers who locate the missing people and inform about their whereabouts to the TV channel and the programme's host.

"When we started, we were lucky that the TV channel management didn't insist on market value of the programme. It was a blessing for us. At that time the other two TV channels at that time also had a few programmes on migrant Indians but they were of 'successful Indians'. As we all know, all the migrants don't have luck to be successful. We planned to throw light on ordinary migrants who really need help," Rafeeq told *Times of Oman*. Rafeeq is currently in Oman as part of his TV programme.

"Some missing cases were easily resolved but others were a little tough. During the last 11 years, we came across several cases like of one Karunan who was missing for 13 years in Saudi Arabia and some cases like Pattalam Mathai's.

"T. C. Mathai aka Pattalam Mathai, had been missing from his home in Thiruvalla in Kerala for 27 years. All that his wife and children knew was that he worked somewhere in



“In many cases we draw up the photos ourselves collecting tips from the relatives. Sometimes the person might have been deported to India in which case he would land in Mumbai, from where it is difficult to trace him

Rafeeq Ravuthar
'Pravasalokam' producer



the Middle East. The children grew up, came to work in the Middle East, but could not locate their father.

"When *Pravasalokam* telecast Pattalam Mathai's story, a Muscat-based social activist P. M. Jabir got calls from *Pravasalokam* fans in Muscat saying that they knew the whereabouts of Mathai. Jabir brought him back to a shelter and made all arrangements to send him back," says Rafeeq.

Thus, what the government, ministers and embassy could not do for a long time was done in a few days, thanks to the big viewership the programme commands wherever and whenever it is telecast.

Rafeeq had a personal reason to begin *Pravasalokam*.

"A cousin of mine, who was an engineer, committed suicide just

four days after joining duty in Muscat. He was betrayed by the agent in India and despite my brother working in Abu Dhabi, we could not do anything. I knew there would be hundred similar cases elsewhere," he said.

Rafeeq turned out to be right.

False impression

People often go to foreign countries, especially Gulf Cooperation Council countries, under the false impression of having secured a lucrative job. "It's only when they reach there that they realise that their work and salary are not what was offered by the agent. Dejected, and often mentally and physically tortured, they get into petty quarrels and leave the sponsor who keeps his visa details. Without a sponsor,

he will have to be in hiding there and fear of humiliation and poverty do not allow him to inform his people back home," he said.

Though the programme was initially aimed at helping missing Keralites, nowadays, it has been successful in rescuing and helping Indians from other states too.

"Recently, we helped a Nepali woman who was betrayed by an Indian. We had to provide shelter for her and take up her problem with the government officials to find a solution. Even though we faced some obstacles in the initial stages, we were able to find that Indian and settle the issue," Rafeeq said.

Missing cases are on an increase and the programme gets more than 10 fresh cases per week.

Rafeeq feels that there are three

main reasons behind people going missing. "One reason could be a natural missing case, the second one may be a deliberate one and the third one usually involves falling into some trap. Natural missing cases are the most difficult ones to locate," Rafeeq added.

The programme is backed by a good network of 12 representatives across the GCC countries who can be contacted for help. Their phone numbers and contact details scroll on the TV screens while the missing cases are reported. These people also help in bringing home the bodies of people who die abroad.

Success in finding one's relative often depends on how much of updated information about the missing person is received from the kinsmen. Most of these people would

be missing for years and the photographs the relatives provide often do not match with the person's present look. Many, in fact, change beyond recognition.

"In many cases we draw up the photos ourselves collecting tips from the relatives. Sometimes the person might have been deported to India in which case he would land in Mumbai, from where it is difficult to trace him," he added.

Earlier, the maximum number of missing cases was reported from Saudi Arabia, including Jeddah, but now cases are being reported from places like Canada and the US also.

Recently, Migrant Forum Asia (MFA), an organisation which believes that migrants' rights are human rights, has roped in Rafeeq's programme as its media arm.