

Chettinad Chic: How the grandiose dwellings of this southern region have carved a distinctive style

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A view of the majestic 100-year-old Lakshmi Vilas.

Drive through Chettinad in the Sivaganga region of Tamil Nadu and you cannot help but exclaim at the magnificence of the architecture of homes here.

It seems like everybody is a royal here, as palatial homes with extravagant facades and opulent interiors abound in the settlements in this area – remarkable for its spatial uniformity and planned streets. The Indo-European styled mansions of the wealthy mercantile Nattukottai Chettiar



The Verandah or Thinnai with stained glass arches, polished granite columns and Burma teak support structure.



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A view of the ceiling with paintings and carvings.

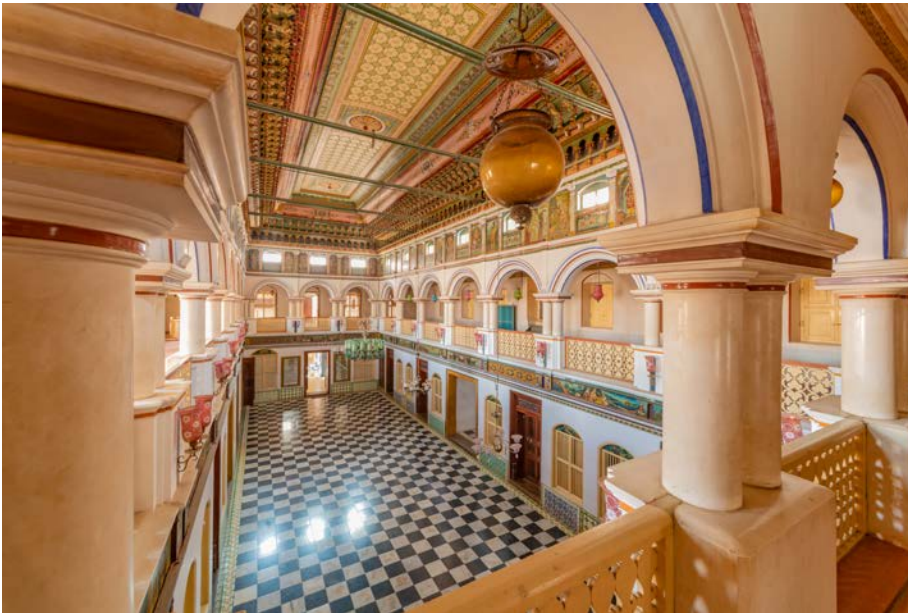
community are so unique that they have become big heritage tourist attractions, with some – like the lavish Kanadukathan

Palace, built by Sir Annamalai Chettiar – also becoming popular filming locations. One of the most memorable movies

shot in this palace was Rajiv Menon's *Kandukondain Kandukondain* starring Aishwarya Rai.



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1200 sq ft Darbar Hall replete with paintings, chandeliers and ornate work.

Even each step of the staircase in this mansion, which has a dining hall that can seat over 250 people and a corridor with stunning stained-glass windows reminiscent of European churches, is painted in colourful hues. However, not all the homes are well maintained – many seem to be in ruins, in deep neglect, though their facades wear signs of a resplendent past, as most inhabitants have moved to cities.

My own ancestral home, the 100-year-old Lakshmi Vilas in Poolankurichi village near Karaikudi, lay untenanted for over 35 years until we decided to restore and refurbish it to its glorious old days. Built in 1922 by M Subramanian, the 50 room mansion is spread over two floors. The struc

turally sound masonry home is made up of eighteen-inch thick walls, with courtyards and verandas supported by granite stone columns. Burma teak is strategically used in cross beams, the roof,

doors, windows, ventilators and intricate carvings. The central hall is truly exquisite and splendid. This was the house where my grandfather, M S Chockalingam, the son-in-law of the renowned textile baron and Gandhian Karumuttu Thiagarajan Chettiar, was born.

Like many of the mansions in the area, our home too had luxurious Belgian chandeliers, exquisite artefacts from all over the world, beautiful vegetable oil paintings on the eggshell plaster walls and roofs, and stunning chequered tiles – locally known as Athan-gudi tiles – on the floors.

It was during the restoration process, painstakingly done by Bengalurubased architect



The inner courtyard, private living quarters for the family, that brings in both light and ventilation.



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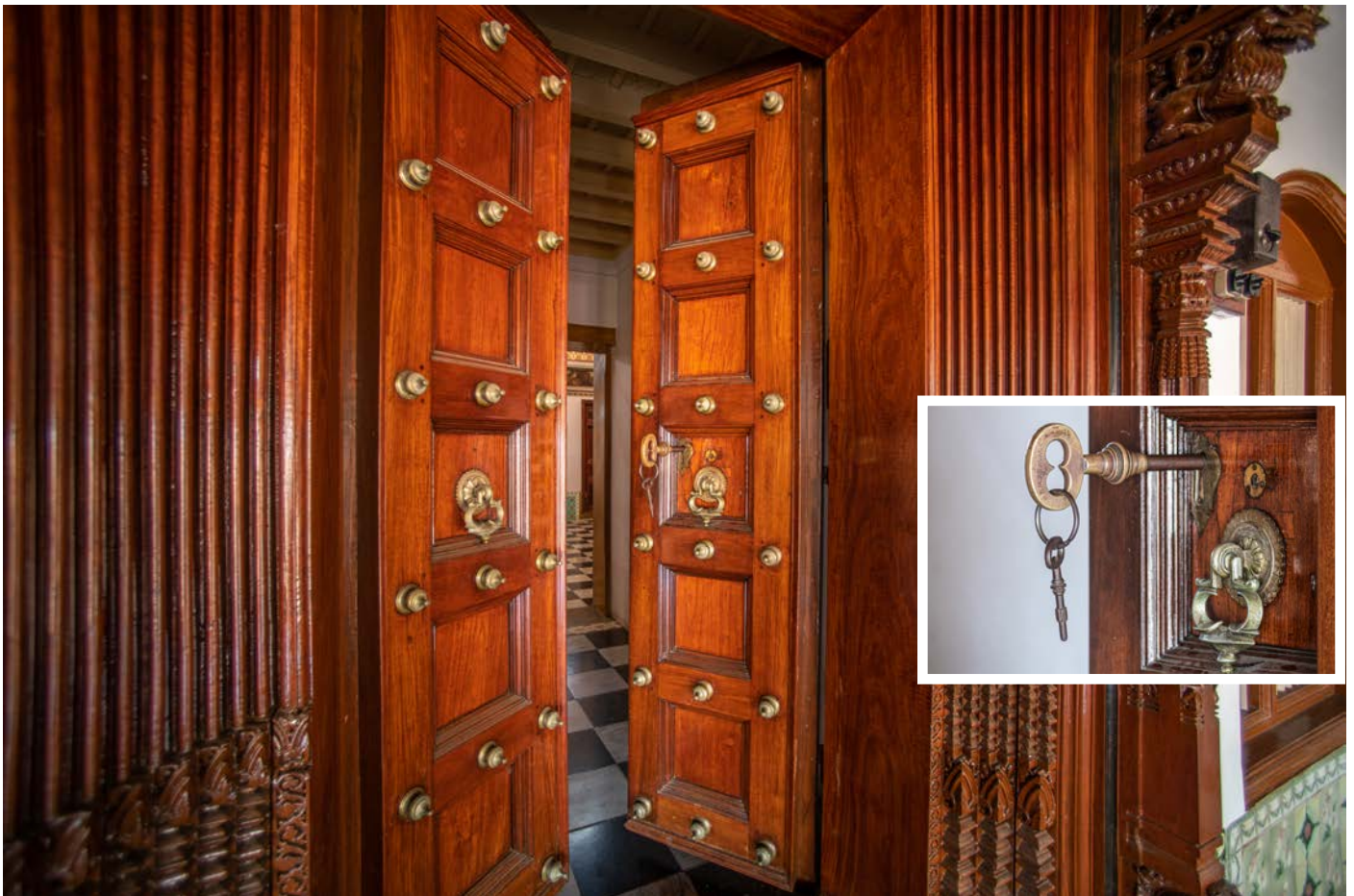
Vikram Ponappa, keeping all the original sensibilities intact, that we began delving into the history of our community and why such ornate mansions were created.

Settling in the region

The Nattukottai Chettiars, who were merchants, miners and traders, originally lived near the sea in a place called Naganadu, somewhere near Kanchipuram but the floods destroyed their land. They

then moved to Kaveripoom-patinam (Poompuhar) around 789 BC where they resided for about 1400 years before moving into the Sivaganga District in 707 AD. The reason why we moved to this district from Kaveripoom Pattinam near the shore was because of constant floods and water flowing into the homes. So, the Chettiars chose a dry place – Sivaganga region is very arid – and not only that, they built their houses on a huge citadel. The Chettinad region, as it

eventually came to be called, is spread over 1550 sq kms and comprises 96 villages. There are nine big temples in the area and every Chettiar family is attached to one of these nine temples. Hardworking, humble, and God-fearing, with traditional values, the clan may be small in number (there are barely 50,000 Chettiar families) but it is big in stature. The first houses that the Nattukottai Chettiars built in this area were fairly simple and shows the community was



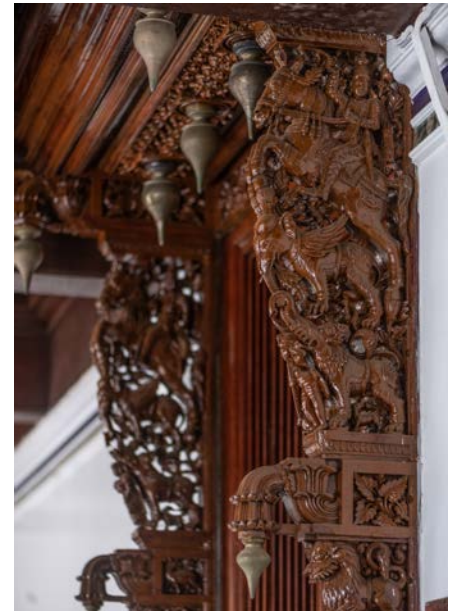
The carved entrance Burma teakwood door, that matches the scale and beauty of the palatial home.



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Detail of the upper courtyard showing the structure and the use of teakwood.



Teakwood Carved brackets on the sides of the entrance door.



The showstopper of the home-the magnificent entrance door.

not that wealthy. They mostly traded rice, salt and pearls. But gradually, the Chettiers became merchant bankers and slowly earned renown as financiers. Around the 1850s, the intrepid community be-

came last mile bankers to the British empire and began making voyages to Burma (now Myanmar), Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and Malaya (now Malaysia), and got into the business of timber, rice, tea,

coconut and rubber plantations, as well as tin factories, making big fortunes. This wealth began to slowly reflect in the Chettiar dwellings back home. Materials imported from various countries – teak from Burma, tiles from Italy, chandeliers from Belgium, artefacts from Vietnam, Cambodia etc., were used in the new opulent homes that came up. However, many of the important architectural features of the original modest homes were preserved – for instance, the east-west orientation, the outer verandah or thinnai supported by columns, a courtyard inside, open to the sky with similar columns, around which are the rooms.

Over time, as the wealth of the community grew, it began



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Frieze depicting a historical visit by Gandhiji who visited Madurai and stayed in Kalaithanthai Karumuttu Thiagarajan Chettiars guest house.

reflecting more and more in the homes, where the walls were now embellished with elaborate paintings, the doors had elaborate carvings, the tapering columns in the thinnai now made of teak set on fluted granite bases and topped by ornate wooden brackets, false ceilings made of wood in criss-crossing patterns and in some of the halls with breathtaking paintings.

In my own home, you enter through the doorway into the thinnai and from there into a central durbar hall that is



The rear elevation, showing the dining hall door and windows for cross ventilation, an open yard, beyond which is the large kitchen.



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The support structure of the roof with brackets.

the majestic centrepiece of the house, whose embossed ceiling extends over two floors high. On both sides of this are courtyards around which are organised rooms, a stairway that leads to the upstairs deck where you can stand on the corridors and gaze down into the hall. Upstairs on the verandahs, leading to the colonnaded balcony, etched on the floors are ancient board games played in the times of the Mahabharata – a form of chess. The roofs clad with traditional tiles slope to the outside as well as to the inner courtyards. These open to sky inner courtyards bring in nature – sunshine and rain, besides constantly ventilating the home, keeping the spaces warm during winter and cool in the summer months. Another notable feature at many

originated. The cuisine of Chettinad is one of the best examples of fusion food – combining local dishes with their own. The use of aromatic spices, sun-dried meats and salted vegetables, and rich gravies reflects the dry climate of the region.

The Chettiars were traditionally vegetarian but their travels all over for trade influenced what they ate, and now the cuisine has earned fame for the complexity of its flavours and the heat of its curries.



Friezes in the Darbar Hall painted with vegetable dyes.

of the Chettiar homes are the huge money chests almost as large as a cot, where the daily collections would be kept. At night, the munim, or the accountant, would sleep on top of the box, thereby ensuring safety. Maybe this is where the term “sleep on the money”

Rice-based dishes are the staple, served up in myriad ways. The icing on the cake is the Japanese black rice pudding. The clothing of the Chettiars is also distinctive with the women wearing silk or cotton sarees with a checkered pattern that is unique to the area



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called Karaikudi Checks. One of the attractions while visiting the area is to see the Chettinad handloom weaves. It was a unique way of life and the beauty is that many of these dwellings are preserved for us to go and marvel and understand how the earlier generation lived. A visitor to Chettinad can spend many days enjoying the splendours

of many of the mansions here – be it the grand scale and woodwork at the VRMV House at Karaikudi, the graceful European style AMM house at Pallathur, the octagonal twin-towered STSS House at Kadiapatti, or the small but richly decorated Periya Chettiar House at Sirukudalpatti with its vivid paintwork and balustraded

balconies. Normally, in India, you have royal palaces that remain with no dwellings of the common man to show. Chettinad in contrast, had no royalty but it is the epitome of people's palaces. ■

*Architectural photographs by
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Corner detail of the exterior.

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Reprinted from The Consular Chronicles, March 2023, Vol 14