

# The Opulent Secrets of the Chettinad Mansions

Magnificent mansions abound in every lane of Kanadukathan in Karaikudi. Peeking through the locked gates, one could only imagine what the rich interiors might be. Would the main door lead you to a carpeted drawing room or would it be the start of an ornate passage? My imagination ran wild as I admired the exteriors of the closed mansions—until I came across an old caretaker willing to reveal the secrets within. Past the rich Burma wood doors, I set foot into one of the many timeless mansions of Karaikudi and discovered the riches within.

By: Ami Bhat

My restless feet walked around in the cluster of opulent buildings. Each one exuded a palatial elegance—one was designed like a castle with gothic turrets and another stood tall with an elegant spire. None were similar and yet they had a few things in common—their gargantuan size, the central idol of *Gajalakshmi*, and massive gates that were locked from the outside. Curiosity filled my eyes as they wondered what lay beyond these enchanting façades. Despair set in as they kept searching for an answer. Finally, they mirrored hope.

It was the only gate in the deserted alley that was not locked. My curious eyes drew close and peered through the gaps of the barrier. My sight soon locked



Most doors are embellished with intricate carvings and made of Burma teak wood.



A colourful intricately carved ceiling with gold inlays in an ancient mansion in the village of Athangudi in Chettinad.

onto a carved extravaganza that stretched from the pillars to its high vaulted ceilings, windows, and regal doors. The majestic view caused an involuntary gasp, attracting the attention of the caretaker inside.

The old man chuckled as he met my inquisitive eyes, “Another one of those thirsty souls”, he thought as he threw open the gates for a star struck visitor. “It is time to quench the thirst.” With that he unlocked the portal into one of the many abandoned mansions of Chettinad.

Chettinad, a region in Tamil Nadu was established by the mercantile community known as Nagarathar Chettiars. Initially settled in Poompuhar, they were forced to move to higher grounds when a tsunami swept their palatial homes. They settled down in 96 villages and re-established themselves as overseas tradesmen. The riches they brought in turned them into bankers and moneylenders for the royal court and the British East India Company.

Symbolic of their status were their aristocratic bungalows called the *Nattukottai* (meaning land fortress). The Chettiars poured a significant part of their wealth into their dwellings. Their regular trading visits abroad allowed them to bring back exotic artefacts and furniture. From crystal chandeliers to Belgian glass, ornate Japanese tiles and Italian marble, their homes were an eclectic amalgamation of Indian, Oriental and European décor.

Eventually, as their businesses expanded, most of them chose to set up bases in other Southeast Asian countries. They slowly locked up their ancestral legacies. Today, most of these are opened only for occasional family reunions and weddings while very few are still occupied.

Like the other Chettinad mansions, this *Nattukotai* was sandwiched between two lanes. With the unlocked front and the back doors, the curious eyes could see the other street—right through the high pillared courtyards.

The interiors of the mansion were embellished with Burma teak wood. Directly sourced from Myanmar, the wood was carved into various themes—from warriors and dancers on pillars to elephants and deities

along the door and window frames. Every inch of the wooden interiors lent to the enchanting grandeur of these dwellings.

Extra care was taken to decorate the front porch or the *thinnai*. This space doubled up as the guest area as well as an office space for traders and accountants. There was a space for casual conversations as well as a corner for a confidential tête-à-tête.

The *thinnai* led to a grand reception hall that was built to impress with its Italian marble flooring and Japanese

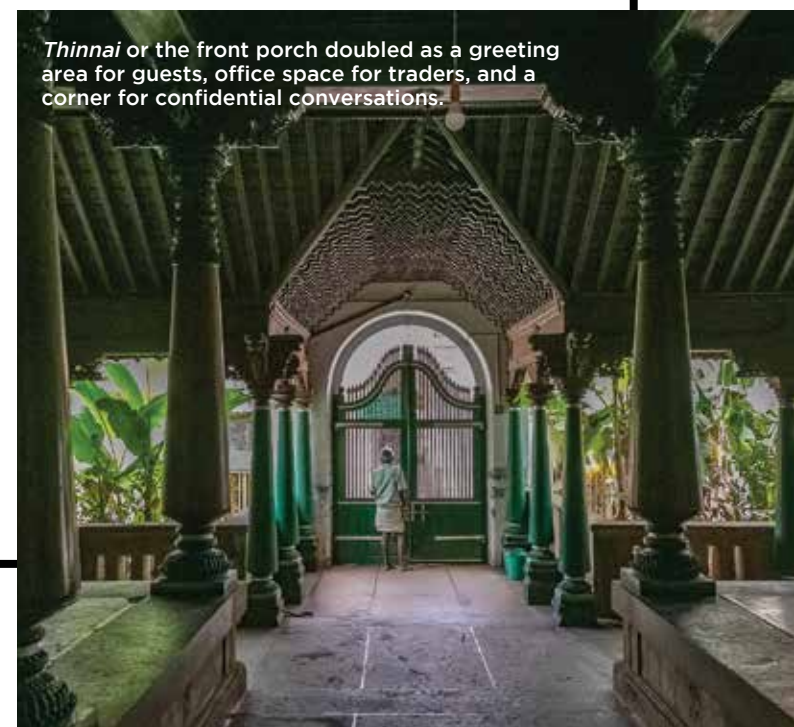
tiles for the ceiling. The colourful lights from the Belgian glass around the hall highlighted its European elements—the cherubs around the arches and the lion heads around the pillars. A large chandelier hung down in the centre adding its magnificence to the already extravagant aura of the hall. It was evident that the space had seen some lavish festivals and parties.

The inner courtyards, termed *valavu* had rooms built along its perimeter with one level. There were at least 60-70 rooms across the various courtyards—more than one literally for each person in the family. The main *valavu* was a common area where weddings, family gatherings, and festival celebrations used to take place. The inner ones attached to the kitchen were used exclusively by the women for their household chores.

Open to the sky, these courtyards were not just naturally lit but also served as a centre for rainwater harvesting. The sloping roof served as a funnel for the collection of water in tanks.

The rainwater harvesting, the natural lighting and aeration are just the visible part of the sustainable architecture in the Chettinad mansion. Made with a local limestone called *karai* and eggshells, the polished walls also contributed to this green architecture. Though over

*Thinnai* or the front porch doubled as a greeting area for guests, office space for traders, and a corner for confidential conversations.







The massive hall of the Athangudi Palace with its beautiful handmade Athangudi tiles.



Pillared courtyards are a common feature in Chettinad architecture and have rooms along its perimeter.



Kanadukathan Palace built by Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar in 1912 is one of the finest examples of Chettinad architecture.



Athangudi tiles are an integral part of these ancient mansions.

## A ringside view

- ♦ The Athangudi Palace or Sri Letchmi Vilas was opened to the public in late 2010s. One can visit it from 9.30 am to 5 pm on most days paying a nominal entry fee.
- ♦ The Kanadukathan Palace (Chettinad Palace) is not open to public generally, however, one can visit it with prior permissions from the family based in Chennai.
- ♦ One could also stay at some of the heritage homes turned resorts for an authentic Chettinad experience.



One of the many decorated wooden capitals on top of the pillars at the Chidambara Palace in Kadiapatti.

1000 years old, the walls looked as if they were white-washed recently. Even the murals over the door frames and windows were created with vegetable dyes—their themes ranging from local folklore to scenes from mythology.

Gracing the floors of the corridors of this *periya veedu* (big home) were the native Athangudi tiles. Still hand-made in this part of the world, these tiles now grace the halls of popular luxury hotels in India and overseas. The classic floral and geometric patterns even enhanced the ceilings of the other rooms in this Chettinad home.

Seeing these secrets tumble out was enough to douse the fire in my eyes. They now turned dreamy as imagination took over. The empty *valavu* appeared filled with women gossiping while squealing kids ran between the pillars playing catch. The *thinnai* looked busy with the men—some sitting along the steps by the carved pillars, others relaxing on a settee against the wall.

My mind snapped out of the trance. With one final look at the treasures within this Chettinad mansion, I looked gratefully at the keeper of secrets. My restless feet took over again—in search of another unlocked door. There were so many more opulent secrets of Chettinad that needed to be uncovered. ♦