



JOEL SUGANTHY/FLOOR

## CULTURE

# Keeping it reel

A peek into one of Chettinad's opulent mansions shows **Charukesi Ramadurai** why the region continues to be a popular draw for Indian filmmakers

**T**he caretaker at Periya Veedu (Big House) at the Chettinad town of Athangudi, rubbed his fingers together as soon as he spotted me exiting the car. It took me a moment to realise that he was making the time-honoured gesture for money, the way he did with all visitors. The magnificent – a word that I would use repeatedly during my time in the region – house remained locked for most of the year, under his watchful beady eyes, to be opened only for curious visitors, such as myself, who found their way there.

In contrast to the dry and dusty landscape of the region, the cool, spacious interiors of Periya Veedu came as a pleasant surprise. As I stepped into the foyer, known as the mugappu, I could see down the long, narrow corridor all the way to the back door. "That opens out onto the parallel street; that is how large houses in Chettinad are," said my guide Venkatesan, with a proud smile.

The mugappu itself was stunning with ornate teak pillars and enamel panelling. A low, wide seat or thinnai

## FYI

### When to go

The region can get unbearably hot in summer. Plan a visit between November and February when it's comparatively cooler.

### Getting there

Take a train or fly to Madurai, the nearest airport and railway station. From here, it's about a two-hour cab ride to your destination.

### Getting around

It's easy to travel between the smaller towns and villages via cycle-rickshaw or on foot. Autorickshaws are available for longer distances, but be prepared to haggle. Bus connectivity is sketchy, so it is best to hire a taxi to explore the region. Cab drivers often double as guides and can help with access into some of the local homes.

### Tourist information

[www.tamilnadutourism.org](http://www.tamilnadutourism.org)

ran along the wall on both sides of the main door. This served as one of the social hubs of the house and was often used to welcome guests, catch quick afternoon naps and hold intensive gossip sessions.

### House proud

Chettiar belong to a trading community, with ties once extending as far as Singapore and Malaysia. Known to the British Raj as bankers and moneylenders, they flourished under their rule. Investing their wealth in their hometowns, they built large

mansions – the larger the abode, the higher its owner's status. The best was brought in from across the globe – glass from Murano, teak from Burma, chandeliers from Belgium and tiles from closer home, namely the town of Athangudi. Throw some Victorian furniture and Art Deco influences into the mix and you have an arresting architectural masterpiece.

Other highlights usually include intricate woodwork on doors, depicting Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth who presides over these homes. The smooth walls gleam with plaster made

of a ground mixture of egg white, lime, powdered shells and a local fruit.

### Director's cut

Like most big Chettinad mansions, Periya Veedu was built in the early 20th century. Over the years, several of these houses across the region fell into disrepair owing to the migration of their owners to larger towns like Chennai and Coimbatore. While some have recently received a fresh lease on life having been converted into luxury heritage hotels, others, like Periya Veedu, have been rented out for film



(Opening page) The Chettinad Palace is a popular setting for film shoots

(Clockwise from right) One of the many Chettiar mansions in Kanadukathan

Though the mansions are usually closed, caretakers sometimes allow curious visitors a glimpse inside

Most roofs in Chettiar mansions are supported by carved teak pillars

In sari weaving units, the threads are untangled by hand

Lunch is served on banana leaves with a plethora of choices

ERIC LAFFORGUE/DINODIA

shootings.

Indeed, Chettinad is a popular location among filmmakers from the Tamil and Telugu industries, and increasingly, Bollywood. The local red soil and lavish mansions lend themselves to stories ostensibly set in Rajasthan or wealthy homes anywhere in the hinterlands (cue the rich Thakurs of Bollywood filmmaker Priyadarshan's movies). The lively streets and colourful markets too play a part. The star attraction here is the opulent Chettinad Palace in Kanadukathan. One look at its

stunning exterior – just as grand as its interior – with brightly painted walls glittering in the sunlight, and it is easy to see why.

The most memorable film set, however, is cinematographer and director Rajiv Menon's *Kandukondain Kandukondain* (2000) with a stellar cast that included Tabu, Aishwarya Rai, Mammooty and Ajith. Then there's the climax (an exciting chase sequence) to the sequel of director Hari's blockbuster *Singam* (2010), that was filmed on the streets of the nearby town of Karaikudi near Pandian Cinema.

Among the filmmakers of Bollywood, Priyadarshan has shown his fondness for Kanadukathan, using Raja's Palace – as Chettinad Palace is known locally – and Chettinad Mansion (now a heritage hotel) as locations for *Virasat* (1997) and *Malamaal Weekly* (2006). He later went on to recreate a slice of Bihar in Karaikudi for *Aakrosh* (2010), a thriller based on honour killings.

### Rising to the occasion

Filmmakers have sometimes chosen Chettinad over conventionally favoured

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CHARIKESI/RAMADURAI



**SHOP AROUND**  
You'll find plenty of kottan baskets woven from palm leaves at the local market, or sandhai, on Mondays and Thursdays



KO SHYKSHY/CREATIVE COMMONS/FLICR



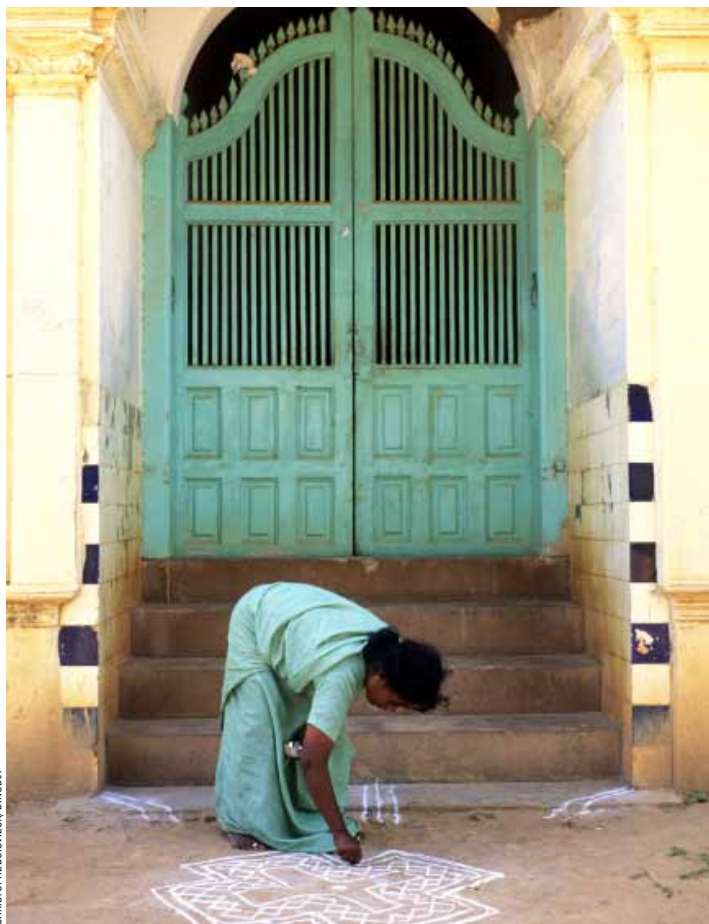
SONIA PIEPER/CREATIVE COMMONS/FLICR



KHATIDODDHA/FLICR



Murals at the Iranikovil temple, one of the nine clan temples of the Nattukottai Chettiar community



CHRISTOPHE BOISVIEUX/DINODIA

A local woman chalks out a rangoli (kolam in Tamil) meant to attract good fortune. The Pillayarpatti temple, part of the nine clan temples, is worth a visit for its carvings



ARVIND SRIDHAR/FLICR

locations like the snowy Alps or the streets of Paris for song sequences. A couple of Tamil hits come to mind – ‘Iruvizhiyo siragadikkum’ from *Pirivom Santhipom* (2008), a story about a joint Chettiar family and ‘Idu daana’ from *Saamy* (2003), a tale of a Deputy Commissioner’s attempt to fight corrupt politicians in Tirunelveli. Interestingly, both feature scenes from a traditional Tamil engagement and wedding. Which seems quite fitting, in a way, since many of these homes remain uninhabited for the most part, with families spread far and wide, returning only for special occasions and major festivals.

These wedding scenes are set in the large courtyard, or valavu (a

typical feature of these mansions), that are open to the skies and used to dry appalam (a kind of papad) and pickles, and occasionally, for cooking. Branching off to a side are vast halls where guests are fed, some of which can hold up to 500 people at a time.

As I stepped out of Periya Veedu, I craned my neck for a final look at the statues atop the main gate. Stucco-work of vibrantly painted gods and goddesses, animals and birds, and British soldiers with horses and guns peered back at me and over the passers-by on the street. Silent witnesses for over a century now, I couldn’t help but wonder about the stories they’d have to tell. ■

## FACT FILE

### AT A GLANCE

About 80km from the temple city of Madurai, Chettinad is the collective name for the 75-odd villages and towns once inhabited by the Chettiar community. The biggest of these towns today is Karaikudi, the commercial hub of the region. The towns of Kanadukathan, Devakottai, Athangudi Kothamangalam and Kottaiyur have some of the most opulent mansions in the region.

### EXPLORE

Hop across towns and take in the splendour of the architecture of the old Chettiar mansions. Although locked, some have caretakers willing to give you a guided tour for a nominal fee of ₹50 or so. There are several factories in Athangudi where one can watch tiles being handmade from local sand. Brightly painted with typical floral and geometric motifs, they remain glossy for decades. Dedicated to Ganesha, the rock-cut

Pillayarpatti temple (part of the nine clan temples of the community) is located 12km from Karaikudi. Believed to be from the 4th century AD, this is one of the most significant of the nine temples dedicated to the Hindu god in this area, with a six-foot tall statue of the main deity in its sanctum.

### SHOP

Buy cotton Sungudi saris straight off the loom at the Mahalakshmi Weaving Centre (KM

Street, Kanadukathan 630103. +91-45652-73286. ₹₹₹). Employing local tie-and-dye techniques, they are available in traditional vibrant patterns. Go antique shopping at the main market on Muneeswaran Koil Street. Shopkeepers are always willing to chat about the rich history of their wares, most of them from local Chettiar homes. Look out for hidden gems at the multi-level Mangalam Arts (49/1, Muneeswaran

Koil Street, Karaikudi 630001. +91-45652-39679. ₹₹₹₹).

### EAT & STAY

The Bangala (*Devakottai Rd, Senjai, Karaikudi* 630001. +91-45652-20221/250221. www.thebangala.com. ₹₹), a former gentleman’s club, offers 25 luxury rooms, a pool and spa. Watch the chef whip up a traditional Chettinad meal complete with local delicacies like milagu kuzhambu (pepper stew) and crab curry. With its typical

architecture, Visalam (7/1, 143 Local Fund Rd, Kanadukathan 630103. +91-45652-73111. www.cghearth.com/visalam. ₹₹₹₹₹) allows visitors to experience local culture. Classic Chettinad snacks such as kuzhi paniyaram (a rice and pulse batter shallow-fried and served with chutney), idiyappam (string hoppers served with coconut milk) and adhirasam (a deep-fried sweet made from rice flour and jaggery) can be sampled at most heritage hotels in the region.