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## PORTALS TO THE PAST: A VISUAL RECORD OF CHETTINAD'S TRANSNATIONAL HERITAGE

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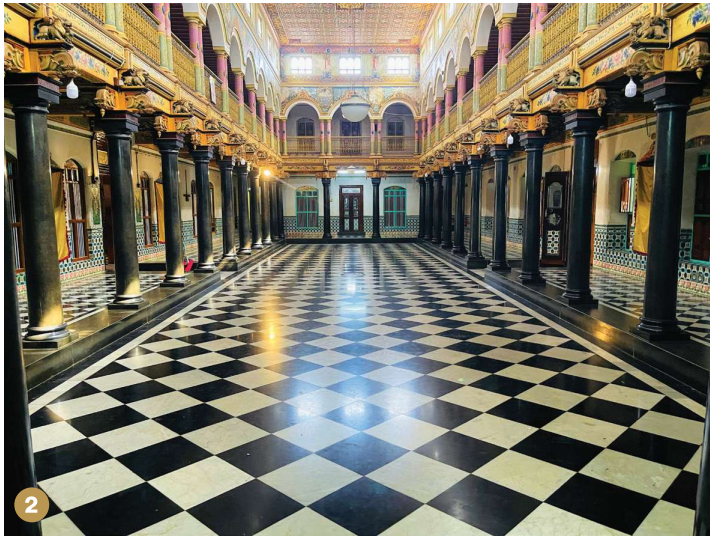
# PORTALS TO THE PAST

## A Visual Record of Chettinad's Transnational Heritage

By **Muhammed Kunhi**

**I**n the semi-arid southeastern hinterlands of Tamil Nadu, where palmyra palms grow in abundance, lies Chettinad, a region spanning nearly 1500 square kilometres across the Sivaganga and Pudukottai districts. Reportedly, the region acquired its name during the Pandya period, when a kind ruler permitted Nattukottai Chettiars to construct 96 villages across this inland landscape. Chettinad is now famous for its thousands of palatial mansions, built between the 1850s and the 1940s. These homes, spread across 73 villages, stand as physical testaments to the wealth and ambition of the Chettiar community during the colonial period.





**1)** According to some estimates, more than 15,000 mansions once stood across the Chettinad region, bearing witness to the immense wealth of the Nattukottai Chettians. Today, reportedly only around 5,000 of them remain..

**2)** The interiors of Chettinad mansions were designed to showcase wealth and impress visitors, with grand halls, Renaissance-inspired paintings, and rare artworks.

**3)** Chettinad villages displayed a striking resemblance to well-planned urban residential areas, with straight roads cutting through the landscape and often intersecting to form large rectangular grids.



**4)** In many of these villages, there were special schools reserved exclusively for children of the Nattukottai Chettiar families.

**5)** Most of the early mansions feature an elaborate entrance gate, often adorned with stucco figurines of family elders, deities or protective symbols, with steps leading to a raised terrace on which the mansions were built.





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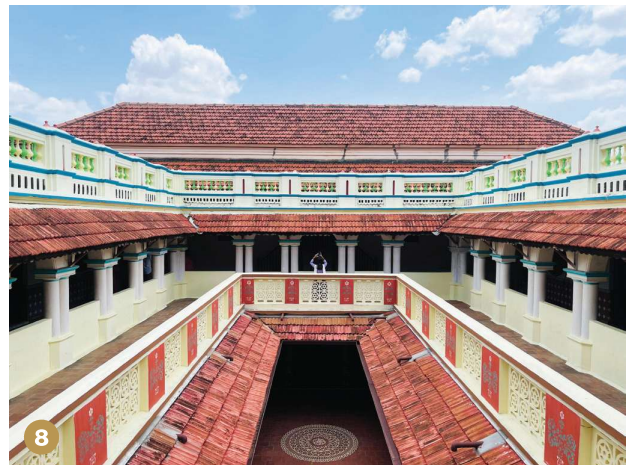
**6)** Most of the Chettinad villages feature several large water tanks, originally excavated to source soil for levelling the raised terraces on which the mansions were built.

**7)** Massive teak pillars, often carved from single logs of imported Burmese timber, form the structural and aesthetic spine of Chettinad mansions.

**8)** Though massive in scale, these mansions, constructed largely according to the principles of Vastu Shastra, ensured a steady flow of natural light and air throughout most parts of the house.



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**9)** Early mansions commonly used large limestone blocks in the construction of the lower sections of compound walls and mansion foundations.

**10)** The construction boom in Chettinad not only benefited many local industries but also led to the emergence of a few successful ones, Athangudi tiles remain the most important among them.



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**11)** Though once they were a statement of wealth, a large number of Chettinad mansions are under the threat of destruction due to neglect by both private owners and the government. If urgent steps are not taken to document, preserve, and restore these architectural treasures, a vital chapter of South India's cultural and transnational history may quietly disappear. **iw**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### MUHAMMED KUNHI

is the Editorial Coordinator at *India's World*. He holds a PhD in International Relations from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and has previously served as a Postdoctoral Researcher at the National University of Singapore. His research interests include the politics and international relations of China, Cold War studies, and the dynamics of public discourse.