



Meenakshi Meyyappan in her hallmark cotton sari

# Retrieving the Lost World of the Chettiars

The Bangala - the Art Deco bungalow - is the pride of Karaikudi village. **Kaveri Ponnappa** talks to its founder, Meenakshi Meyyappan, as she walks through its fabled, ornate walls

Photographs: **Bharath Ramamurtham**



The entrance archway to a mansion in Karaikudi village

Two decades ago, we were four of a total of six guests spending the New Year at Karaikudi's recently opened and only boutique hotel, The Bangala. Part of the waterlogged roof had been replaced, and after decades of neglect, the 1920's Art Deco bungalow, once a Gentleman's Club, had been restored and completely refurbished. There were just four spare, cool, comfortable rooms. The floors were covered with tiles made at nearby Athangudi, fitted out with locally-sourced antique furniture, accented with basket ware and Burmese lacquer, referencing both local skills and the wide-ranging internationalism of Chettiar heritage. Meenakshi Meyyappan, the genius loci of The Bangala, dressed in her hallmark cotton sari, her hair rolled into a bun, a teetotaler, was persuaded to drink a couple



A splendid Karaikudi mansion, in white



The Bangala at dusk

of tiny sips of champagne with us on that evening as we celebrated the story of the family property she had brought to life.

We had driven across miles of silent, empty countryside of scrub and dust dotted with mysterious shrines to village deities lying under a hard, bright light to be confronted, abruptly, with village after village of spectacular mansions. Staggering in scale, grand, decaying, peeling, mesmerising, standing along formal grids, it was a surreal vision that stunned the imagination, hinting at depths that could not be easily plumbed, and appeared at first sight, quite overwhelming. Some of them were so vast, entrances and exits faced separate streets. It was with intense relief we entered the airy interiors of the Bangala to a discreet, warm welcome and the seamless service of the white *lungi*-clad staff, an oasis off the dusty streets of Karaikudi. Over the next few days we would experience a unique kind of hospitality that would take us back time and again.

Meenakshi Meyyappan's tranquil demeanour hides a questing intelligence and a deep sense of commitment to her Chettiar roots. She walks through the interiors of the Bangala serenely, her eye taking in every detail — a table that's missing something; an oil stain on the floor; new arrivals — even



The grand interiors of a mansion



An ornate doorway



Meenakshi Meyyappan at her desk

while she pauses to converse with guests. If the steady rhythm she has established falters, her voice rings across the room, imperious, and staff scatter to set things right. She is called *aachi* by everyone, with great respect and affection.

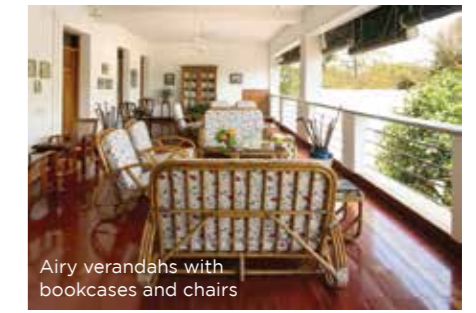
“I was not inspired to do this,” she says. We are seated in the lounge filled with comfortable armchairs and books on the culture and history of the region, koels calling in the background, competing with raucous crows and the occasional roar of a bus on the busy road outside. “My son said that we could not destroy what our ancestors had built, let's try and restore the building. It was not easy, and within two to three years, there was competition.”

At 84, Meenakshi has drawn on her heritage, feared for its continuity and at the same time, been sustained by it. She has managed to put Karaikudi, an unlikely town in interior Tamil Nadu, on the world map as an exclusive travel destination and bring out three highly acclaimed publications: two on Chettiar heritage and its unique architecture and the third, a cookbook of the famous food served at the Bangala. The four rooms are now 25, curtained by cascades of dazzling pink bougainvillea, with a beautiful outdoor pool, perfect to while away evenings when temperatures finally begin to dip — unless you happen to prefer trips to antique shops on drowsy afternoons, or to be captivated by Chettiar history, as I am, and choose to spend your time buried in the many books available.

The Natukottai Chettiars are linked through myth to the ancient port of Kaveripoompattinam. When the formidable Chola warrior kings sailed East in the 10th century, creating a sprawling empire across



Brilliant blue Athangudi tiles



Airy verandahs with bookcases and chairs



Comfortable sofas and antique furniture in the lounge



The inviting poolside



Karrupaiah, the head cook

Breakfast of *panniyarams* and the famous Bangala *chutneys*

The brightly coloured dining room

public and private, male and female carefully segregated. The mansions were constructed mostly through the mid-19th century into the post-independence era by a community of empire builders who made unimaginable fortunes in trading and banking. The landscape changed — and so did the cuisine, as new ingredients filtered in. The inward looking, clan-bound traditions, however, remained. As complex geo-politics played out across Southeast Asia after the Second World War, the prosperous community suddenly found they had to reinvent themselves as colonial trade collapsed, many of them pursuing new professions, relocating across the West. The 77 villages clustered around nine clan temples entered a period of lingering decline, as the families streamed out, leaving their mansions to caretakers, returning only on special occasions for clan gatherings. Meyyappan Jr, who is the next generation face of the Bangala, observes that Chettinad's unique heritage both fascinates and defeats: without the colossal riches of colonial entrepreneurship and the complex inheritance laws, it takes a rare vision and drive like Meenakshi's to bring the place to life. In the process of documenting the culture for the next generation of Chettiar, she has succeeded in drawing the international gaze to this lost part of India.

Meenakshi's own background — she was born in Bangalore, and brought up in Colombo, in the days when Sri Lanka was still Ceylon — is embedded in the spirit of this phase of Chettiar history. Her father, who founded the local chapter of Indian National Congress and became the Mayor of Colombo, entertained lavishly. "The house was always full of people, and although my mother was not highly educated, we mixed with a wide circle of friends," recalls Meenakshi.

"Hospitality in Colombo was very elegant, very warm, and when we returned to Chennai, we entertained in style." Brought up by an Irish governess, there's a vignette of her early life in Colombo she remembers vividly: of invitations to the home of a wealthy Parsi family who had lived in Shanghai, where stylish teas were laid out with the best lace, linen and crockery,

and every gesture was perfect, something which made a great impression on her. This picture of a very young Meenakshi, dazzled by luxurious hospitality, goes a long way in understanding the generosity of spirit that underlies every service offered at The Bangala — you realise that everything here is an extension of her own life, the way she wishes to live it.

Sumeet Nair, a friend and co-author of *The Bangala Table Cookbook*, who has returned every year since 2009 to spend time with Mrs Meyyappan, states quite simply that he is "...in awe of her. She is erudite, incisive and a pleasure to speak with. She has a young, open mind. She's a trailblazer, with an eye for perfection and detail, she spares no expense to get things right." Nair does not exaggerate: the erstwhile Gentleman's Club now has an all-women's front office, and a steady stream of art historians, authors, photographers, filmmakers and journalists who converge regularly to enjoy the environment of intellectual and cultural exchange that she has created.

Nair was also the catalyst for the publication of *The Bangala Table Cookbook*, soon going into a reprint. "Our first meal was a banana leaf lunch. The flavours were so different, the juxtapositions of taste and texture so extraordinary, we were completely overwhelmed. My wife insisted that I had to find a way to document this cuisine." It took six months for Nair to persuade Meenakshi to take up the project, after which he spent long hours in the kitchen, off season, working with the team of cooks. To anyone who has eaten meal after sumptuous meal at the Bangala, it would come as something of a shock to learn that Meenakshi does not cook — at all. But, as Nair, says, she is an epicure, she knows how to refine and perfect a dish. "During the writing of the book, we would take a dish to her to taste, and she would ask us if we had put in a particular spice or ingredient, and we would say no, and take it back, wondering all the while how she had worked it out."

The long, fascinating and sometimes poignant history of the Chettiar people is embedded in all its complexity at every meal that is served here: it reflects



Mrs Meyyappan with a collection of antique vessels in the background



The famous banana leaf lunch at Bangala

Malacca, Sumatra, Java and the Mekong, the Chettiar were there as ship chandlers, outfitting the legendary fleet, showing a rare willingness to cross the oceans. The 17th century saw them trading in rice from the rich Kaveri delta, salt from the flats of the Coromandel coast, pearls from the Gulf of Mannar, and gemstones from Golconda. They transitioned easily into a similar role when the East India Company rose, expanding trade and banking into Burma, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam.

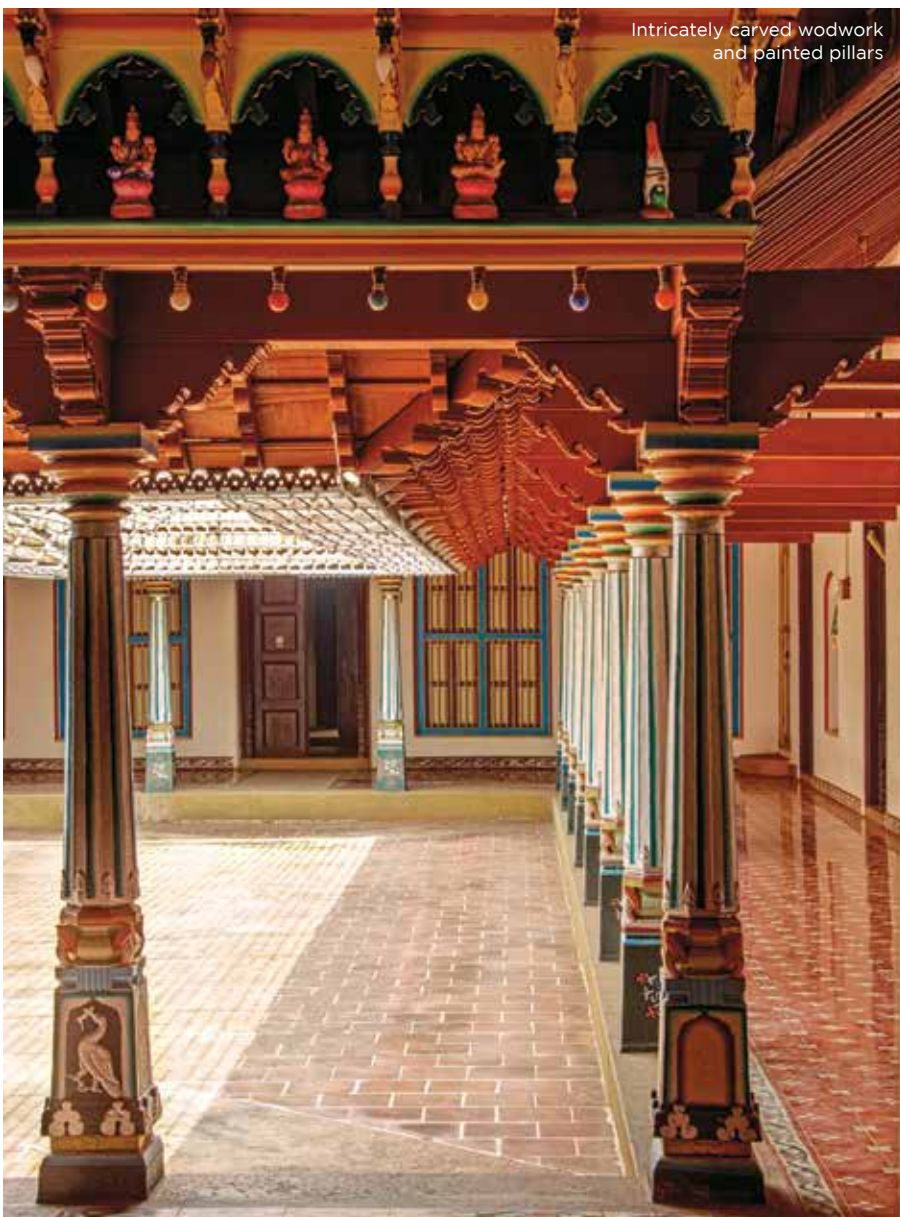
The men left for three-year stints; the women and children remained behind with the clan. When they returned — for a year or two — they brought with them expanded sensibilities: a taste for Belgian mirrors; Murano chandeliers; Italian marble; monumental columns of Burmese teak and new visions, all of which went into a frenzy of construction and decoration, a perplexing blend of cosmopolitanism and tradition. The lavishly and innovatively embellished interiors of the mansions remained strictly traditional in the division of living spaces:

traditional vegetarianism that gave way to the contingencies of overseas travel and trade, embracing seafood, quail, mutton, incorporating spices such as star anise, and black rice from Burma, as well as dishes from the British ruling classes into their everyday fare. On the menu, you might have pepper curry; fish fry; *Crab Rasam*; *Milagu Masala Kozhi*; *Keerai Masiyal*, and finish up with *Tender Coconut Mousse* or *Marmalade-topped Bread Pudding*. Karuppaiah, the head cook, may be in semi-retirement, but he still oversees the kitchen, and his protégé,

Pandiyan, from whom I have had lessons in Chettiar cooking many times, is a very competent successor. The flavours simply flow out of the kitchen, ranging from frugal '*mandis*' — my personal favourite — made with the reserved, starchy water from washed grains of rice to dishes such as *uppu kari*, luxurious in their subtle spicing and flavouring. This exceptional cuisine has not had a more informed and passionate spokesperson than Meenakshi. "I didn't realise when we started that food would be such an important part of it all," she



Italian tiles and marble floors



Intricately carved woodwork and painted pillars

says, watching a busload of visitors stream into the dining room for a banana leaf lunch. “I did the food just as I would have in my own home.” She plans the menus personally, twice a day, and is present at lunch and dinner, speaking with the guests at every table displaying more energy and enthusiasm than many women half her age. The banana leaf meal served here is a regular stop for travellers to the region and the Bangala is rated number 7 among 50 of the best restaurants in the country. The popularity of Chettinad’s cuisine has spawned eateries that serve food that has little or no connection to the real thing. “People sometimes come here and ask, are you sure this is Chettiar cuisine?” says Meenakshi, her eyebrows arching steeply for a moment, her expression quizzical. “This is how we eat at home. When I eat by myself at home I would have a ridge gourd *kootu*; bitter gourd *masala*; *sambar*; always a *rasam* and perhaps *uppu kari*. It’s a lot of coriander seeds over chillies, and we use the relatively mild Ramanad chillies in our cooking. The spicing is layered, never really fiery.”

Home is MSMM House, a magnificent mansion with chequered marble flooring, hung with splendid chandeliers and Venetian mirrors, many locked rooms filled with dowries and portraits of ancestors looking down from the walls. Here she reads for an hour every night, until 11pm — politics, art, literature business and book reviews. In the morning she meets the next batch of guests, people, she says, “...like me, concerned about what to do to make the world a better place for the next generation.” Extremely modern in her outlook, she seems to cross an invisible portal when she retreats to her home, returning to the foundations of her heritage. In a way, she is doing what her ancestors did for generations — she’s bringing the world home without quite leaving.

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