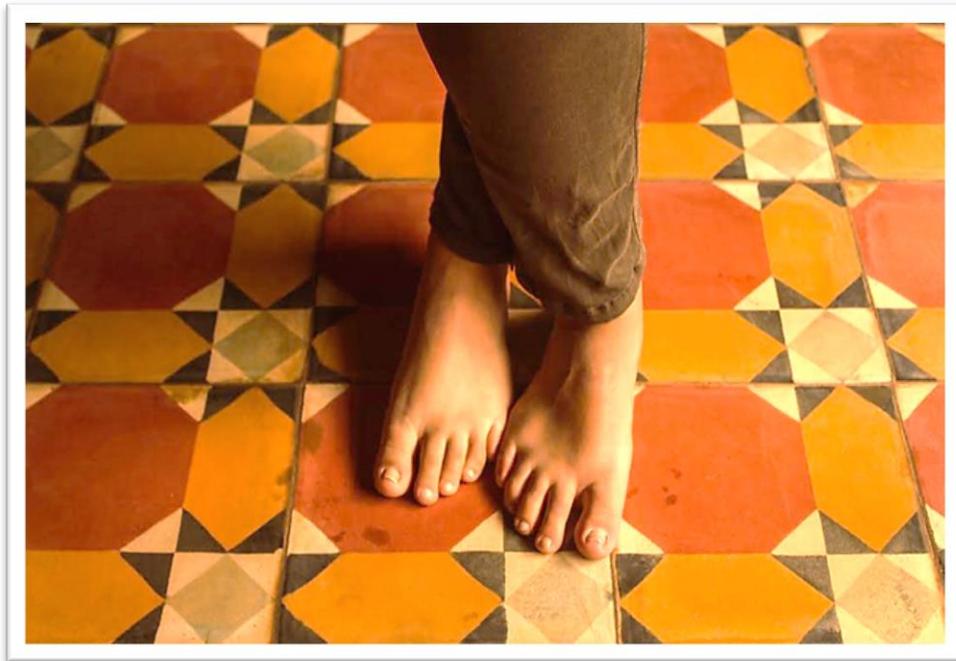


Discover India Program

2016-17



**FLOORED BY LEGACY:  
ATHANGUDI TILES**

MARCH 2017

# **FLOORED BY LEGACY: ATHANGUDI TILES**

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**DISCOVER INDIA PROGRAM  
2016-2017**

**March, 2017**

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## Certificate

This is to certify that the work incorporated in the report titled “Floored by Legacy: Athangudi Tiles” submitted by the undersigned research team was carried out under my mentorship. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged.

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We would also like to thank Dr Devi Singh, Vice-Chancellor FLAME University, for giving us the chance to do this project. I would also take this opportunity to thank Dr Santosh Kumar Kudtarkar, Dean FLAME School of Liberal Education to allow us to explore a topic such as Athangudi tiles.

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## **Abstract**

The surfaces that we walk upon define the nature of our daily movements and activities. The following research conducted on Athangudi tiles is done to academically explore an area that has not been explored much earlier. It serves the purpose of contributing well studied and authentic information to the existing realm of knowledge on the subject. The research looks upon how the significance, production and sale of Athangudi tiles have changed on time. This is addressed in the context of the Chettinad architecture and the Chettiar community in Tamil Nadu. While conducting the study, the researchers investigated role and the influence of Athangudi tiles on the region.

To carry out the exploratory research a group of researchers embarked on a journey to Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu and met eminent people in different fields who helped us answer our questions and in the process many of our pre-conceived assumptions were. One of the most important findings was that Athangudi is not originally a traditional Indian craft and is rather an idea which is borrowed from Western countries that was replicated well in Indian soil. Along with this it was also found that these tiles are relatively newly introduced as compared to other architectural elements.

This was the crux of the research that was established and carried forward throughout the on field and off field study of Athangudi tiles. Thus the following paper will address all the observations made and analysis that followed post the collection of primary and secondary data.

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*As he searched for imperfection amongst the tiles that lay before him,  
he found many – there were those with chipped edges while the others  
had a slight smudge of colour. Individually these tiles just did not make sense,  
but when he saw the entirety of them,  
he saw the slightest bit of perfection that over took him giving him a  
sense of fulfilment.  
This was the magic of Athangudi tiles.*

# Chapter 1

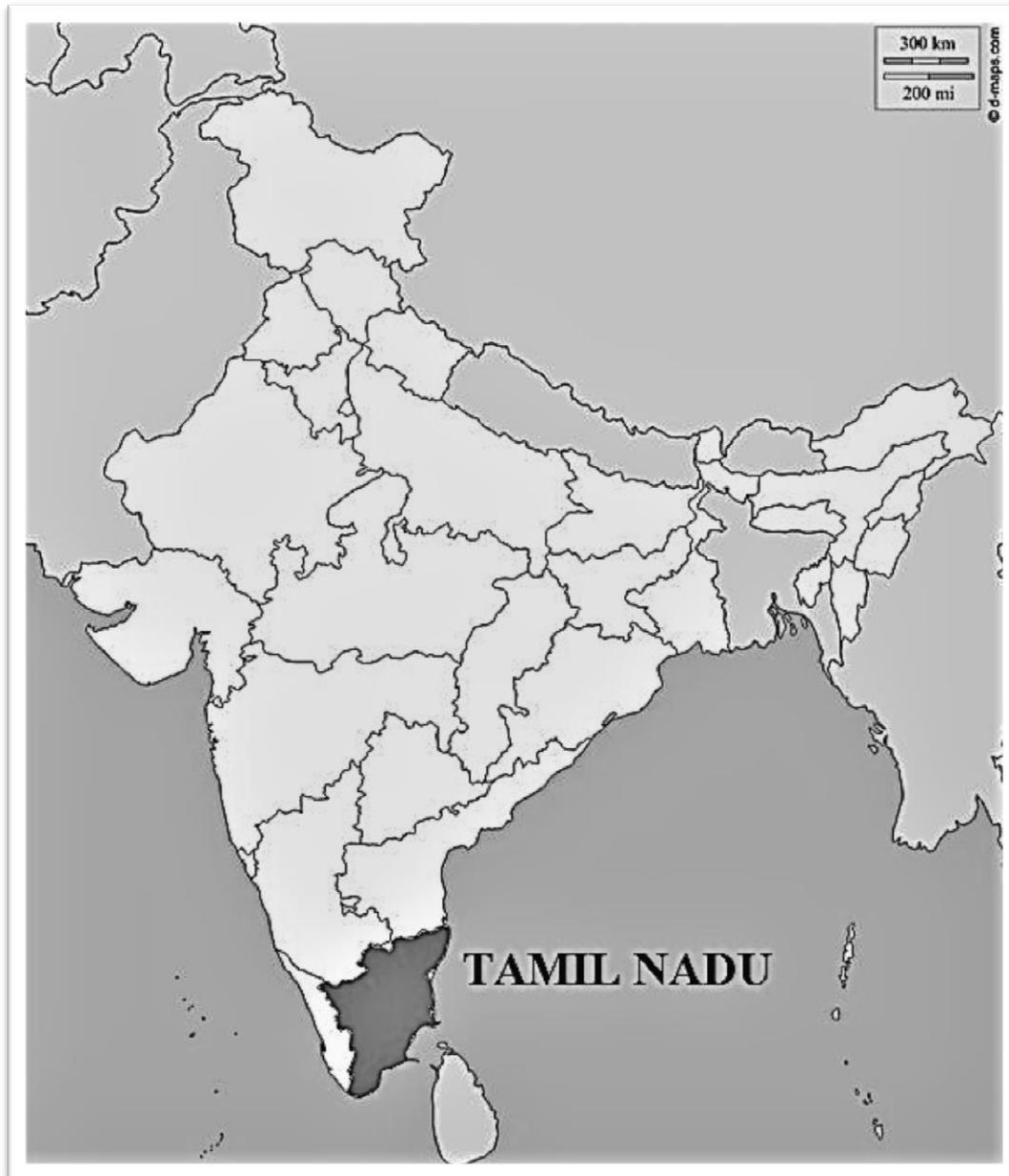
## Vanakkam Chettinad

### 1.1 Introduction

In the barren land that once fell under the Chola dynasty lies the village of Athangudi. Known for the production of beautiful handmade tiles, the village falls under the Karaikudi region in the Sivagangai district of the state of Tamil Nadu, India. Karaikudi is one of the fourteen heritage sites in Tamil Nadu by government dikat (Government of Tamil Nadu, 1994). In the order signed by Mr J.V. Chandrasekaran in 1994, Karaikudi became a heritage town, and the municipal authorities had to prepare an action plan for the conservation of the town. Karaikudi like any small town in India has its own charm and stories to tell. The town narrates its stories through large and majestic mansions and barren lands. The stories of poverty, love, respect, happiness, fights and seclusion are woven in these beautiful mansions.

Karaikudi is considered to be the heart of the Chettinad region, and is the biggest town in Sivagangai district. Karaikudi houses some reputed universities started by notable Chettiars such as Alagappa Chettiar, the founder of Alagappa University. It is also known for having several Chettinad style mansions, as well for several crafts such as *Kottan* baskets, intricate wood carvings, teak pillars, Chettinad sarees and Athangudi tiles. There is no accurate figure of the population involved in making these tiles but it is the main source of income which that has been established. Due to the arid climate and the dry nature of the Karaikudi, agriculture could not flourish in the region. They started off as gem traders, and then picked up other occupations such as money lending, handlooms, basket weaving, metal-work and wood work. However, today many Chettiars have left their traditional occupations, and have moved in the fields of higher education such as engineering, medicine, and teaching.

## 1.2 Location



**Map1: Tamil Nadu, India**

("Tamil Nadu: free map, free blank map, free outline map, free base map: boundaries, districts", 2017)



**Map 2: Chettinad region: Athangudi and Karaikudi**  
("Tamil Nadu: free map, free blank map, free outline map, free base map:  
boundaries, districts", 2017)

### 1.3 History of the Chettiar community

The word Chettiar can be broken down to Chetti which is derived from the Sanskrit word *Shreshthi* which means wealth. (Merriam Webster) True to its meaning, the land of Chettinad is a place of wealth and power. This region is the place of Nagarthar Chettiars or Nattukkottai. Nagarthar Chettiars belong to the sect of *Shaivism*- devotees of Lord Shiva.

The Chettiar community history is built around legends of their origin. According to one legend Chettiars originally migrated to South India from '*Nagandu*', the land of the *Nagas*. Others believe the Chettiars are originally from modern day Andhra Pradesh. They are believed to be 'Tondaimandalam' of the Chola kings, settling from Pulicat and Mamallapuram, all the way to Kanchipuram. This legend is strengthened by the story of heavy taxations by the early successors of the Cholas which forced them to move to Kaveripoompatinam by the second century BC. There have been records of great romances and epics where the Chettiars are referred to as traders. In the early centuries, the Chettiars played a dominant role in the business and economic affairs of the Cholas. These successful businessmen won the favour of the royalty, and sent large Chola fleets across the sea; these trade ships went as far as Malacca and Sumatra in South Africa. According to legend, this prosperity under the Cholas lasted only about one thousand years, after which the entire community revolted against the dynasty to avenge the abduction of a Chettiar woman. The community took pride in the celibacy of their women, as well the sacredness and sanctity of their marriage. There are various stories surrounding the revolt. Some speak of the migration of the entire community to Pandya Nadu (Tamil Nadu today) while others speak of mass suicide of the entire community leaving only one thousand five hundred males behind, who later migrated to Pandya Nadu. Another legend talks about the King Sundara requesting the Chola king to allow some Chettiars to migrate to Pandya Nadu to increase their prospects in business. In reality the Chettiars appeared to have migrated to Pandya Nadu (modern day Tamil Nadu) itself and were granted the Ilatathangudi temple, as well as four villages surrounding it. As the community grew it was granted new temples; over a span of twelve years, they established nine temples, over ninety-six villages, and over six hundred square mile area.

Earlier, the Chettiars were a group of prosperous businessmen, who possessed great entrepreneurial skills. In Chettiar run banks, interest was not levied on loans granted. Chettiar businesses were built on trust, honesty and respect. These were the three qualities that gave the Chettiars an edge over other communities in the same trade. The other Indian communities involved in banking and trading were the Marwaris and the Gujaratis. The assumption is that all trading communities at the time were banyas. In Tamil Nadu the banyas were the Chettiars. Their tales of trade are well known. In the 1800s, they were at the peak of their trade and banking business. They travelled overseas to Myanmar (Burma), Vietnam (Saigon), Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and Singapore (Singa Pura) to trade. The economies of these countries grew due to the banking practices of the Chettiars. The Chettiars helped small owners of cultivable land transform their farming practices into more organized forms that led to productive business. The growth of the economies was largely due to the funding given by the Chettiars. The Chettiars worked with great trust and there was no collateral demanded from the borrower. There was abiding trust between the lender and the client; it was created by not pressuring the client. This led to the Chettiars being fully accepted abroad and hence helped them setup their trade with ease.

Overseas trade increased their wealth and when they returned – they built grand mansions in the Chettinad region. This form of architecture came to be known as Chettinad architecture. Most of the mansions were constructed in the 18th or 19th century by wealthy Chettiars. These homes were designed with big spacious rooms surrounding common courtyards. The large halls were decorated with Burmese teak, marble and granite. Some of the houses even have elephant tusks on display. The marble, porcelain, ceramic tiles and chandeliers were imported from different parts of Europe. Some houses also have large decorative mirrors in the first and second halls, which were imported from Belgium.

The architecture of these houses was closely linked to the Chettiar community, their rituals, functions like weddings and festivals. The houses were usually two storeyed and there were several courtyards and halls. Four generations of a family could live in a Chettinad mansion at one time.

During this time, many arts and crafts were cultivated as a part of community living; they were *Kottan*, baskets, wicker work, and lacquer work, weaving of sarees, and Athangudi tiles. Athangudi tiles were mostly used as flooring in the inner courtyards and the corridors. However in some houses they are used as flooring in dining rooms. The Athangudi tiles were not used in the front of the house as they were considered to be the poor cousin of marble and granite flooring. According to S. Muthiah, they added local flavour and character to the majestic Chettinad mansion

#### **1.4 Rationale of the Study**

Tile work or tile art varies through different places and cultures. The flooring or tiles used in various places is affected by various factors such as, economy, weather culture landscape etc. For example, houses in places where the weather is cold use wooden flooring and houses in warmer places use stone tiles to keep the house cool. Our study of tiles aims to look beyond the production and the materials used to make tiles, and bring out the cultural context they were produced in.

Tiles have a rich cultural history that dates back to 4000 BC. Prior to the 1800s tiles were primarily used as objects of embellishments for the upper class homes and public buildings. One of the earliest proofs of decorative tiles is from 4000 BC, Egypt. The Assyrians and Babylonians also had demonstrations of the art of tile making. The next millennia saw the development of various Greek, Persian, Indian, Syrian, Turkish art of tile making. The art of making tiles also serve as historical evidences of trade between various countries. For example, the design of Persian tiles was influenced by Chinese pottery. Since the middle ages, Italy has been at the forefront of borrowing and adjusting various cultures to their own. Italian engineers have made numerous innovations to the industry that today, they could also be known as the pioneers of the modern tile making industry. In the last four decades various countries such as Spain, Portugal, Turkey, Brazil, China, and Mexico among others have followed the Italian designs and technology to advance their own industry of making tiles. This also brings us to origin of Athangudi tiles. Due to the ambiguity and distortion around the origin of the tiles, we do not know the exact date of origin. However, design of the tiles was heavily influenced by Chettiar

trade and there was a heavy Italian influence on the Athangudi tiles. House owners in Karaikudi have called the Italian tiles laid in their houses the ‘mother tiles’ of the Athangudi tiles.

Athangudi tiles have been one of the lesser known crafts of India for a long time. However in recent times there has been an increasing interest in these handmade tiles. The researchers were struck by the idea of conducting academic research on Athangudi tiles not just because of its lack of renown, but because of the socio-economic, historical, and cultural context that studying the tiles offers. The fact that there is barely any literature available galvanized the researcher's' curiosity to understand the multifaceted processes involved in the making of these tiles.

This exploratory research on Athangudi tiles will look into the history of the Chettiar community and Chettinad architecture. The mansions of Chettinad will be studied, and the production process will also be examined. This will cover the total length and breadth of Athangudi tiles.

Chettinad architecture is a vast topic, with several unique and aesthetically pleasing elements, one of them being Athangudi tiles. There have been a lot of academic studies conducted in the area of Chettinad architecture and its heritage. However we have not found any in depth studies on Athangudi tiles within the context of the architecture. Within this context, we set out on our research with our main research question:

**What are the continuities and changes in the significance, production and sale of Athangudi tiles over time?**

## 1.5 Aims and Objectives

Athangudi tiles are a part of a larger framework of Chettinad architecture and the Chettiar community. The Chettinad architecture has a rich history that extends far back into time and yet Athangudi tiles are one of the least academically explored topics. Its designs, motifs and other unique features continue to remain understudied and hence, the following were our aims and objectives to be covered during our field visit-

- To explore the origin and unique features of these tiles in Chettinad architecture
- To understand the relevance of Athangudi tiles within and outside the Chettiar community
- The ways in which the tiles
- To study the production process and sale of Athangudi tiles

## 1.6 Sampling

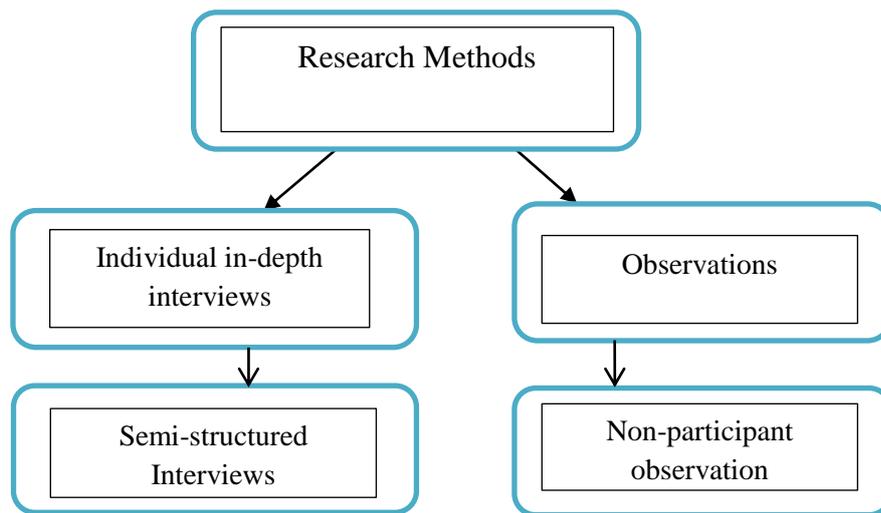
As Denzin and Lincon state, *"Many qualitative researchers employ ...purposive, and not random sampling methods. They seek out groups, settings and individuals where...the processes being studied are most likely to occur"*

Non-probability sampling techniques were utilised on field since the perspective on tiles to be gathered was according to the specialized fields that work in cohesion with the use of Athangudi tiles.

A few house owners including the president of Athangudi village were interviewed; they procured contacts of several other house owners in the village, as well as helped in establishing contact with the factory owner of Popular Tile Works, based in Karaikudi. Apart from the tile makers we also interviewed various other workers who were doing jobs such as cleaning, packaging of tiles and loading them into trucks. They led us to other contacts who gave us information on the durability and strength of the tiles, the maintenance of the tiles and the health benefits the tiles gave.

With the given aims and objectives, the researchers had to approach certain authorities who had specific areas of specialization. We approached them with a purpose of receiving information in a specific field.

### 1.7 Tools of data collection



#### Observations

During the field research, observations were a very important source of understanding the general lifestyle and routine of the workers and people involved in the making of these tiles. We carried out non-participant observation because we did not want to disturb the workers during their work hours.

#### Interviews

Interviews were one of the strongest tools available to collect rich primary data from the likes of academicians, factory owners, house owners, and workers. For the interviews, we used a semi-structure interview schedule, wherein we had already prepared a set of open ended questions; based on their answers further questions were asked.

Our first interview was in Chennai with Ms Visalakshi Ramaswamy, author of the book *Chettinad Heritage*, and owner of the M.Rm.Rm Cultural Foundation. She provided

the researchers with a brief insight in the history of the Chettiar community, its customs and traditions, the Chettinad architecture and the relevance of Athangudi tiles in the midst of all of this. The next interview was conducted with Mr S. Muthiah, renowned a historian, cartographer, journalist, and author (of the book *Mansions of Chettinad*, 2014). He gave us in-depth knowledge on the history of Chettinad region from the British era to contemporary times. Soon afterwards, an interview was conducted with Mr Paul Jacob, an architect and Ms Tanuja Jacob, an interior designer, who provided the researchers' with technical understanding of the mansions and tiles. The remaining interviews conducted were with house owners, who spoke about their experiences in maintaining the house, and the tiles. The researchers also visited factories and interviewed owners, managers and labourers who spoke about the daily business of Athangudi tiles, its production, its benefits, and problems faced.

### **1.8 Limitations of our research**

During the field trip, the researchers had to face a few setbacks that challenged the data they obtained. A few important limitations are as follows:

- As this was a qualitative study, we were looking for multiple perspectives on the socio-cultural background of the tiles. However, due to constraints of time we could interview two scholars working in this area. We felt that we could have had a more in-depth picture on the tiles had we met more scholars.
- We also experienced a language barrier while communicating with the factory owners, laborers and house-owners in the region.
- We were not able to interact with many house-owners as most of them had houses in the region but were staying in different cities. We had the chance to interact with the domestic help who could only provide us with limited information.
- While interviewing the workers in the factory, we realized that the workers felt inhibited in the presence of the manager and owner. We believe that they were not able to express themselves freely possibly due to the fear of being laid off from work or receiving a wage cut.

## 1.9 Structure of Chapters

The following table will act as a guide for the upcoming chapters:

<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review</b>	This chapter focuses on the gaps and limitations that exist in the available literature on Athangudi tiles.
<b>Chapter 3: Culture and Production</b>	In this, an in-depth understanding of the Chettinad culture, society and family dynamics will be given. There will also be a section describing the production and sale of tiles as well as the effect of time on the tiles.
<b>Chapter 4: A Journey Through The Mansions</b>	This chapter will give detailed descriptions of the famous mansions that exist in the Chettinad region. It will address issues such as the age, existence and current condition of the mansions.
<b>Chapter 5: Persistence Through Revival Conclusion</b>	This chapter will emphasize on the revival process and the current scenario of Athangudi tiles. It will summarize the research by giving the researchers' learning and contribution in the topic of Athangudi tiles.

**Table 1:** Chapter wise break up

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

This chapter aims to summarize all the literature published on the topic of this study - Athangudi tiles. As we began searching for literature on these tiles, we realized that there was very little published academic literature on the subject. In this chapter, we discuss a few important books written on the Chettiar community and Chettinad architecture. In addition, we have used material from newspapers and magazines as well.

#### 2.1 Chettiar Community

Every Chettiar is born as a member of one of the nine temples (*kovil*) - Ilaitathangudi, Mathur, Vairavanpatti, Iraniyur, Pillaiyarpatti, Nemam, Iluppaikudi, Soorakudi and Velangudi. The Chettiars donated a large amount of their wealth to the renovation and construction of temples. These temples were an integral part of the daily life of Chettiars. However, very little is known about how the temples and the division of the community were established. The members of one's temples became equivalent to family for the Chettiars, which are further subdivided into fraternal clans. One could not marry within one's own temple, similar to the 'gotram' system followed in North India and South India. The temple system was the primary authority on matters of real estate, loans, secession or partition of a certain property, and marriage. The members of the temples shared close bonds of trust and loyalty, forming the foundation of the whole system.

*Quoting Ms Visalakshi Ramaswamy (Author),*

*"Now these people settle like some of who belong to a particular temple most of them settle together in one village. So like that they spread over a seventy - five villages and built houses. Now what happened was that they slowly they started going to Burma and Saigon, Vietnam and gathered to all Eastern countries and they were in business there. They left the women only back, it was only them travelling. The men were travelling, they took three year periods like one brother goes for three years,*

*when he comes back another brother will have to go for three years and continue with the business and this was the system. So these houses had to be built. They had to be strong and they had to be protective because the women were always there and they had to be looked after and they needed the protection”.*

**Box 1: Ms Ramaswamy’s views on building houses**

The land in the Chettinad region is unforgiving, only allowing shrubs and other thorny bushes to survive. However, in the era of agriculture the community’s inborn talent for business and their shrewdness in financial matters helped them carve out a dominant position for themselves wherever they went.

The Chettiars had strong ties with the princes of South India and with the dawn of British expansionism in South and Southeast Asia, they found themselves in favour with the British. The strengthened relations with the British led them to settle in Ceylon and Burma in 1796 and 1824 respectively. With the spread of imperial rule, other countries like France and Holland sought their help and by the beginning of the 20th century, Chettiar banks spread from Mauritius to Vietnam. They established a small presence in Africa as well. The paddy cultivation in Burma, rubber acreage in Ceylon, mining and rubber growth in Malaya, petty businesses, and trade all received enormous support from the Chettiars living there.

*Quoting Mr S. Muthiah (Historian),*

*“To give you an example in Ceylon at one time there were 650 Chettiar establishments throughout the island, Burma had even more but by the time the depression came in the 1920s and the 1930s the businesses shrank to about 200 in Silone and about 200 to 215 in Burma and all these but was left was controlled by the big boys, the big families and many of the smaller families went to work for them. The big boys became very close to the crown, and once they became close to the crown, they made every use of the law of the crown, which had never been done earlier. The result was now you began to lend money on co-lateral, which had never, been done earlier. If you didn’t get your money back you went to the co-lateral. So you began to acquire land and large acres of land were acquired by the Chettiars. We’re talking of thousands and thousands and thousands of acres of land. And if you touch a man’s land, you can be sure you’re*

*going to be hated. So what was the much beloved community in the 18th from the 1790s till 1900 became a much hated community in the 20th century.”*

## **Box 2: History of the Chettiar community**

Very few Chettiars settled in these countries. They would usually go for a period of three years and come ‘home’ for the next three. ‘Home’ for a Chettiar was always the village he was born in. It was here that the wealth from the overseas travel was accumulated. The Chettiars built strong and permanent homes and with the increase in wealth, these homes turned into elaborate mansions. Burmese teak, Italian marble, tiles, satinwood from Ceylon and granite that could be polished to shine was brought home to be amalgamated with the local building structures to build mansions that still attract people from all over the country. These houses were embellished with chandeliers, artifacts, and jewels that were imported from different parts of the world. These houses are the manifestations of the grandiose Chettinad lifestyle of the early days. They hosted rituals that lasted several days, of which all the family members, relatives and friends were a part. Even in the modern era Chettiar family functions are still held in the ancestral home, where the entire family comes together. The strong family bonds among the members of the community are what keep the Chettiar legacy alive.

As independence dawned upon the South East Asian countries, the Chettiars were ousted from their positions of power. Almost seventy per cent of the Chettiar wealth still resides in Burma. Hardly any Chettiar family invested in India and with modern banking systems replacing the Chettiar banks, most families were out of jobs. However, due to the wealth accumulated over the centuries, the Chettiars educated themselves and spread themselves across the professional sector. Many of them have settled overseas, in developed countries.

However, heart of a Chettiar lies in Chettinad, The book ‘*Chettinad Heritage*’ by Visalakshi Ramaswamy, S. Muthiah, and Meenakshi Meyyappan, is one of the very few reminders of a glorious legacy of an age of extravagant homes, modern townships in an unforgiving land, and a community that helped in the economic growth of countries, and the contributed to the preservation of Tamil culture.

## 2.2 Chettinad Architecture

The Chettinad region is a dry and drought prone region and hence, agriculture could not be practiced, considering, the climatic variation, topography of the region and the location. Thus trade remained the primary occupation of the Chettiar community. The Chettiars soon began travelling to different countries for trades of goods. The community gained its recognition as a thriving business community. Money lending and acquisition of lands soon became the major business in and around the Chettinad region in the 18th century. The trades of the Chettiars brought in precious stones, wood, grains and a lot of wealth which was used to protect and decorate their homes. The Chettiars undoubtedly made money in the 'good years', from about 1850s to 1940s. In this hundred year period, they made money which was funnelled back to India. The significant investment process of the Chettiar was practiced as a tradition. Ten percent of the income was kept for charity. This was considered a mandatory practice under the Chettiar customs. The other ten percent of the income always went to temples and social activities. The only investments they made overseas outside their businesses was in temples.

The construction of a strong house became a vital aspect in the Chettiar community as the wealth and the family had to be protected during the trades of the Chettiar men. The houses were soon recognized as an exhibition of the wealth the family possessed. The houses initially built were practical and very simple. However, gradually as the Chettiars flourished in their businesses and trades with other countries like Burma, Malaysia and other European countries, the houses became more elaborate in terms of the materials used. New concepts were introduced during this time like the egg plastered walls and wood carved pillars and doors. The typical Chettinad mansions were not distinct from other south Indian houses. The traditional idea of building the house around open courtyards still prevails and is seen in the existing mansions. The only factor that distinguished a wealthy Chettinad house from another south Indian house was the lavish display of wealth. However, the literature on the architecture of Tamil Nadu is confined to a narrow spectrum of high style vernacular with very limited work on the common man's dwellings. To get an insight on the architecture of the Tamil Nadu, it is vital to understand the historical and cultural background. As the architecture develops in a socio-cultural background, it is the most efficient way to reconstruct Tamil social life.

The literature available within the state is extensively about the land of Chettinad, known for its grand mansions. It describes the stately mansions of Chettiars and their correlation with the wealth of the *Nattukkottai Chettiars*. The book '*The Chettiar Heritage*', written by the historian S. Muthiah (2000) provides a glimpse into the socio-cultural and economic life of the unique community, which has gained immense reverence in southern India. The book records the homes, history, customs, rituals, traditions and values of the Chettiar community. It dwells on the ways in which the interiors of Chettinad mansions are planned using the materials borrowed from other countries, adding to its grandeur. However, the existing literature from the book *Mansions of Chettinad, 2014* primarily anchors upon the styles of architecture, excluding the eclectic aspect of the architecture of this region, influenced by the foreign countries. Additionally, a Chettinad house, in other literature, is recorded as a microcosm of the daily Chettiar activities and observances. The spatial planning of a typical Chettinad settlement is associated greatly with beliefs and superstitions, rather than examining the ancient texts on the layout of the houses. The available literature within the state of Tamil Nadu about the traditional architecture is restricted to the temples, palaces and highly styled vernaculars. Specific literature on the common settlement is inadequate. Therefore, we studied the remarkable features of the typical Chettiar houses and its existence over generations that have provided significant clues for anticipating the future of these ancient mansions (*Mansions of Chettinad, 2014*).

The Chettiars were particular in every material used for the mansions. The colours and designs used in the tiles are yet of the bygone era with negligible contemporisation. Comparing the materials used for building, Athangudi tile are cost-efficient, environmental friendly and energy effective. The tiles have not only contributed to add the grandeur of the Chettinad homes but are an example today of sustainable development. Therefore, the objective is to explore the significance of the tiles in the Chettinad architecture and comparing it with the present scenario ("*Eco Friendly Materials Used In Traditional Buildings Of Chettinadu In Tamil Nadu, India*").

Reiterating the fact that the trades defined the wealth in the mansions. The materials brought from different countries were diverse. In the course of trading, not only were physical items were exchanged, but also the ideas, innovations and discoveries. Similarly, the idea and technique of making Athangudi tile traded by the Chettiars has

now gained immense popularity all over India. One of the significant exchanges that still prevalent in the southern India is the Athangudi tile. Athangudi tiles are not traditional to the Chettiar community. The tiles were replicated using materials and techniques native to the Chettinad region. The trades made the community prosperous and rich. Yet, the tiles have not gained recognition in the Chettinad architecture. The literature available on the architecture of Chettinad does not explicitly mention the journey of these tiles and yet do not acknowledge the contribution that Athangudi tile has made to the Chettiar culture.



**Fig 1: The caged courtyard**  
**(Discover India Program, 2016)**

## Chapter 3

### Culture And Production

In this chapter we have looked at the Athangudi tile as an individual entity. The significance of the Athangudi tile in various mansions is discussed in the first part of the chapter, we have also written in great detail about the structure and evolution of mansions. On the topic of Athangudi tiles, we have described in detail the production process of the tiles along with the change in the production process over time. The change in colours and designs is also discussed. The chapter ends on the note of the uses of Athangudi tiles today.

#### 3.1 From small houses to grand mansions

Due to the migration of the Chettiars to dry and infertile lands and the lack of agricultural amenities in Tamil Nadu, the Chettiars resorted to business. As Chettiar businesses grew, the simple Chettiar houses were replaced by mansions. The wealth amassed by the Chettiars went in the creation and embellishment of these houses. Imported tiles, chandeliers, artefacts from various countries were a part of the beauty and the grandeur of the houses. It was almost like the Chettinad house was a melting pot of various cultures.

*Quoting Ms Meyyappan, owner of The Bangala*

*“When the men went out to South East Asia to earn the money and when they brought back the money, the only thing they did was to build homes and each one built a home better than the other. It was very competitive and ego centric at that time. So that is why you find such grandeur. A lot of people used up all their money and then it was not so good after building a palatial home and not pursuing your business career. Many people have lost money just by building these fabulous homes.”*

**Box 3: Ms Meyyappans views on competition of wealth**

While narrating the story behind these mansions, Ms. Meenakshi Meyyappan drew a fascinating parallel between Chettiars and communities in other parts of the world.

*Quoting Ms Meyyappan (Owner of The Bangala,  
“This Chettinad you know really is in the back of beyond. And then to come here and see all these rows and rows of beautiful mansions. That surprises most of our guests you know...they find it very difficult to believe although in Gujarat you have Sidhpur and all that. Outside there is Lisbon and Portugal, there are places very similar to Chettinad but only one village where (people have built mansions). Portuguese businessmen went to Brazil, made their fortune and came back and built homes. There is also a place in South China where the men went out and built homes, you know it seems like a very common phenomenon. That they all came back to their villages, home towns, villages or places of origin and built these palatial bungalows or mansions. Something to say that we have made it.”*

**Box 4: Ms Ramaswamy’s views on beautiful mansions**



**Fig2: Preparations for Kolam: Typical Chettinad Rangoli  
(Discover India Program)**



**Fig 3: *Kottan* baskets: Palm leaf baskets  
(M.Rm.Rm. Cultural Foundation)**

### **3.2 The story of the Chettinad architecture**

The architecture of the Chettinad region is heavily influenced by the geography, culture and topography of the area. The structure of the houses, the materials used to build these houses were dependent on the size of the Chettiar family and the family dynamics. The basic Chettiar house was not very different from other south Indian houses. The structure of the house ensured maximized utility of every space. The spaces were well planned according to the family requirements and accessibility. Houses in the Chettinad region are built around open courtyards to keep the house ventilated. This is the ideal structure of any house in Chettinad region and in other states too like Maharashtra (Muthiah, 2016).

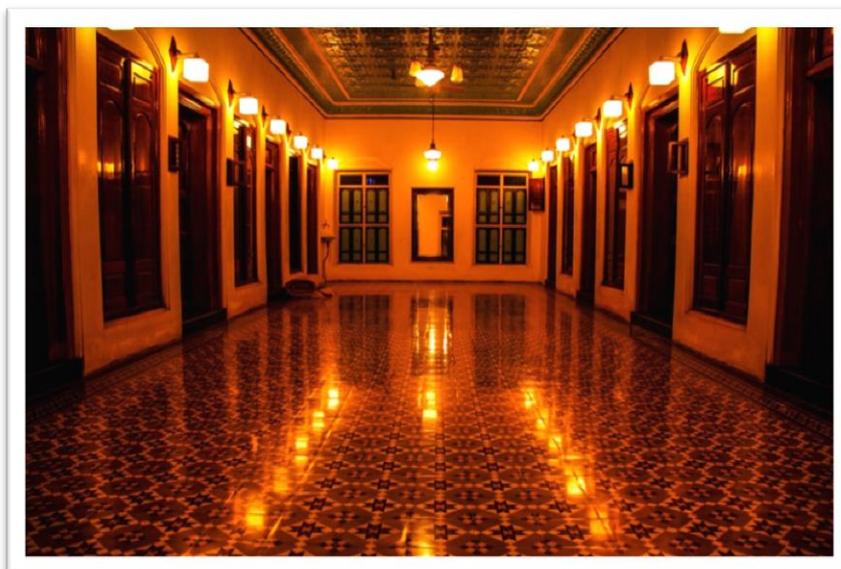
According to S. Muthaiah, the need for a big house arose as the Chettiars prospered in their business. As Chettiar businesses grew, the simple Chettiar houses were replaced by mansions.

*Quoting Ms Visalakshi Ramaswamy (Author),*

*“The first houses built in Chettinad were very simple ‘absolutely practical and very simple’ and slowly as they started picking up in their business and they started making money from Burma everything became more and more and more elaborate and there was wood carving, on the wall they had something called egg plaster which is still there in many even in my house and it’s still there in many houses. It’s very cool, it’s white but it discolours overtime and in many houses people have and painted over it which is unnecessary.”*

**Box 5: Ms Ramaswamy’s views on structure of the house**

The Chettinad house was planned according to the necessities of the time in the Chettiar families. The concept of Chettinad house is believed to have emerged from Kaveripoompatinam, situated in the Krishnagiri district of Tamil Nadu. The planning concept was solely based on occupation of the people and their desires as they were traders and needed space for keeping their valuables. The dictated introverted planning was adopted to avoid multiple accesses. For instance, the size of spaces like *bhojana* hall (dining hall) was determined by the religious and family festivals. On the other hand, the spatial organization was done on the basis of the size of the family, usage of the space and the importance given to that particular area in terms of business.



**Fig4: The hall with Athangudi tiles (Discover India Program)**

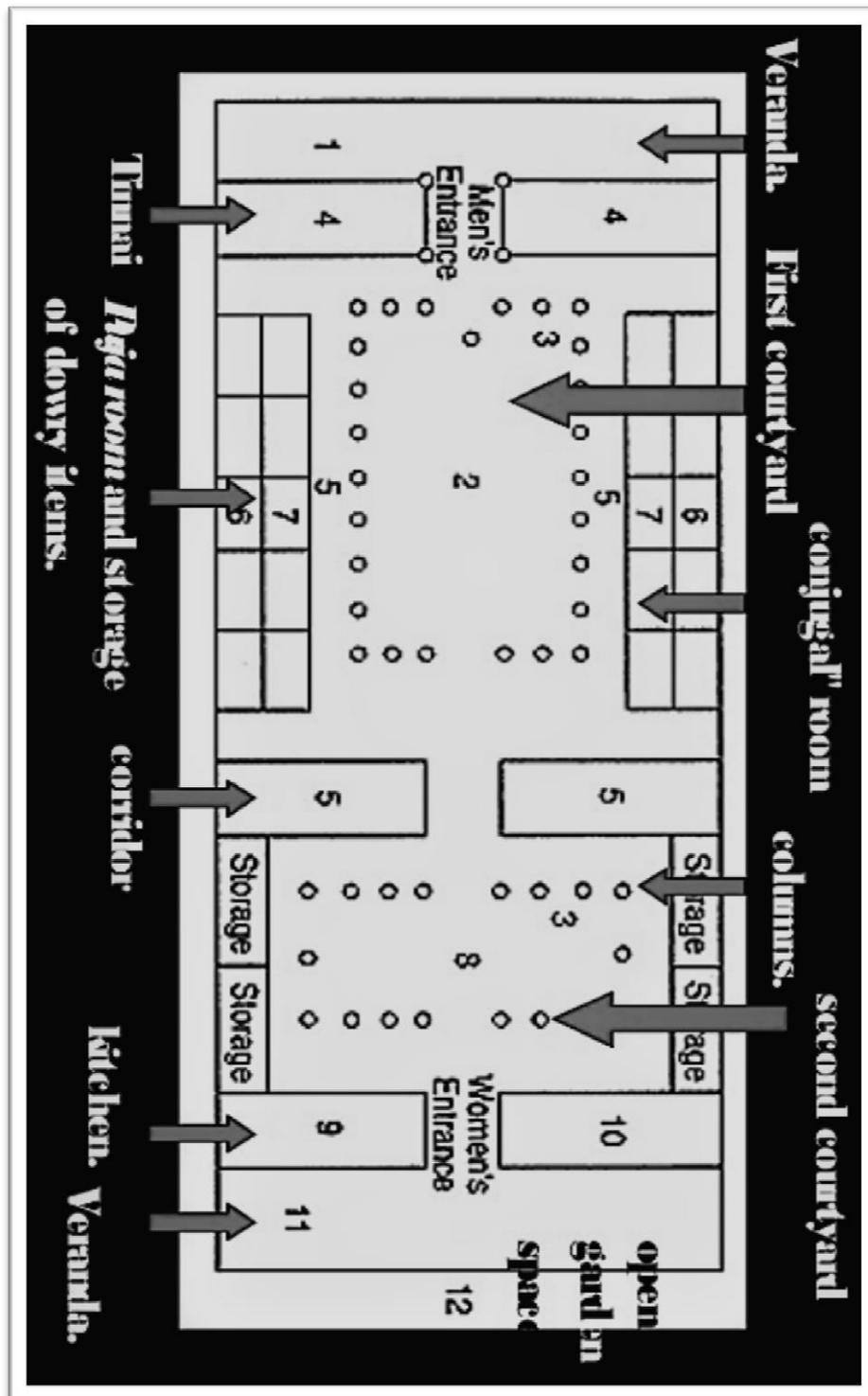


Fig5: Layout of the house ("Chettinad Architecture ". *Slideshare.net*. N. p., 2017. Web. 1 Mar. 2017).

### 3.3 Courtyards and Rooms

The Chettinad architecture is unique when it comes to the use of large hall spaces, courtyards, ornate embellishments like Belgian glasswork, intricate woodwork, spectacular ceramic tiles, stone, iron and wooden pillars. The Chettinad homes are one of the finest amalgamations of the south east and European architecture. In Chettinad, the houses are built on a transverse plot which start at one street and end in the back street. They are built in a linear manner where the courtyards lead into the other. There is one main central courtyard in the house around which the other courtyards and rooms are built (Ramaswamy, 2016). The number of courtyards built in the house correlated with the wealth the family owned (Muthiah, 2016)



**Fig6: Courtyard of the Chettinad mansion  
(Discover India Program, 2016)**

The courtyards are one of the most vital features of the Chettinad houses, as they were culturally significant to the Chettiars. Most of the rituals, ceremonies and business were held in the house itself. Thus, the courtyards served different purposes and were built accordingly in various areas of the house. These courtyards were strategically designed. They had rainwater harvesting system to collect water and a proper drainage system. Some of the courtyards were covered by grills to protect the house from thieves and animals like monkeys in the olden days. Ideally, there are two main courtyards in the

house. The second courtyard, which was essentially smaller than the main, was primarily for household activities. The second courtyard could also be categorized as the women's quarter. It courtyard was used for daily household chores like cooking, washing clothes, grinding spices 'masala' and sometimes it was also used to give birth (Ramaswamy, 2016). This courtyard was used by the women to spend time and relax. The last courtyard was the main kitchen area which was connected to the back door. The women, in the olden days, were not allowed to enter from the front door. Hence, the backyard was built solely for the women.

*Quoting Ms Visalakshi Ramaswamy (Author),*

*"Women generally did not go there at all in those days, today things have changed. And you could not walk through the front even in those days, women always had a back entrance but now everything has changed but it was a rule and even I have done it when I was young."*

#### **Box 6: Ms Ramaswamy's views on family dynamics**

On the contrary, the front portion of the house was used for 'Patale' by men for business and other purposes. The accountant room was close to the 'patale' and it was called the 'pitiyari' (Ramaswamy, 2016). The elderly men of the house mostly used the bedrooms in the Chettinad house and while the rest of the family slept in the courtyard.

The first courtyard is called 'valavu' and it had rooms on either side. These rooms were used during rituals or ceremonies and were shared between the sons of the house. Some of the rooms were store rooms during these occasions (Jacob, 2016). The store rooms were as important as bedrooms today. They were used to store the wealth the Chettiars owned. In a few instances, the bedrooms too were used for storing the wealth as the Chettiars were more comfortable keeping it in the house itself (Jacob, 2016). The rooms were divided amongst the sons of the house and were allotted in a crisscross manner. This was culturally followed by generations to ensure no family divides the house into parts. This was the reason the houses outlasted several generations (Ramaswamy, 2016).

### 3.4 Colours and Designs

According to Visalakshi Ramaswamy, colours in the Chettinad houses compensated for the lack of colour in the landscape. Drawing a connection between the dry landscapes of Rajasthan with Chettinad, Ms Ramaswamy said, *“In any place like Rajasthan for example, the surroundings are bleak and there is no greenery around you, you tend to make everything colourful. So Rajasthan is full of colour, and are also engaged in business like us, they have no added culture. Similarly in Chettinad also, the same thing happens like we have only business, no agriculture and our surroundings are dry so we have colour all over in the house, in the clothes, in the baskets we use and everything”*. There were varied ways in which the Chettiars used colour in homes. The parapets and cornices built around the homes had vibrant use of colours which added to the aesthetics of the house. Like the Chettiars used chandeliers and tiles borrowed from other countries, they also used Belgium glass to cover small windows in the house. The Belgian glass is made of varied colours which convert the sunlight falling on glass into colours like blue, red and yellow (Chettinad Heritage, 2016).

According to some historians, the idea of coloured tiles with designs came from Italy and France. According to Meenakshi Meyyappan, French architects who designed some of the mansions introduced these colourful tiles to the Chettinad region. Box, S. Muthaiah elaborates on the origin of these tiles.

*Quoting Mr S. Muthiah (Historian),*

*“Athangudi tiles are not a traditional part of Chettiar community. It is based on the facts that, these tiles came in and somebody decided to make replica in different sort of way, the Athangudi tiles in not native Chettinad. It is made native to Chettinad thanks to everybody else. In my time nobody talked about Athangudi tiles, today you all come in and everybody talks about Athangudi tiles.”*

#### **Box 7: Mr S. Muthiahs views on Athangudi tiles**

This is evident by the use of colours in the tiles – British colours. The British colours are blue, red and white. Initially, the Athangudi tiles had these colours with a

slight touch of green. Later on the tiles grew to come in shades of orange, yellow, black, beige and brown.

Many tile factories are now using colours produced in China as well.

During our visit to different mansions in Karaikudi, we were surprised to find Athangudi tiles missing from the front porches and halls. In all the mansions, Athangudi tiles were laid in the interiors of the house, while marble was laid in the main halls. These tiles were often referred as the poor cousin of marble and granite. These were put in spaces that the guests would not frequent. These were also laid in the family dining halls and other big halls used for wedding purposes. On this issue, Ms Meenakshi Meyyappan said, *“It is not an elegant tile comparatively. It is something that you would use on a patio or veranda or anything. In the house you would always use marble that was also prestigious. You can’t use Athangudi from the beginning.”*

The materials used to build these different areas of the house also differed depending on the importance given to each area in those days (Ramaswamy, 2016). Fundamentally, the materials used in the houses were selected based on three important criteria. One of them being the vibrancy in colours, second, life of the materials used and the third was return on the investment. These were vital criteria as the Chettiars believed in sustainability (Jacob, 2016). The front porch had tiles borrowed from Europe and other Moroccan tiles. The main hall was decorated by the various items the Chettiars exchanged in their trades. The hall had marble where the business was conducted. Apart from the tiles, this area had huge chandeliers, elephant tusks, mirrors and wooden carved pillars. The pillars too are a significant architectural element of the Chettinad house. The wood for the pillars was brought from various Southeast Asian countries. These pillars were intricately carved with floral motifs, deities and animal motifs. More the wealth the family had, more items were displayed in the front part of the house (Muthiah, 2016). Like the pillars were carved in detail, the houses also had stucco decoration in the interior and the exterior. These were found mostly on the compound wall, entrance towers and façade (Chettinad Heritage, 2016). In the interior of the house, the materials used were simple and easily available. The walls were made of lime plaster and the corridors surrounding the courtyards had Athangudi tiles. This area was used more for the household practices. The idea was to exhibit the wealth the family had in the front halls as it was the prime place for interactions (Ramaswamy, 2016).



**Fig 7: Intricate wooden carvings on the pillars  
(Discover India Program, 2016)**

### **3.5 Production of Athangudi tiles**

The significance of any object is formed when its creation is also taken into consideration. It is important to ask questions such as ‘How is it formed?’, ‘Where is it made?’, ‘Who makes it?’ and ‘Who buys it’. These questions help us understand the details of the processes involved in the production of Athangudi tiles.

The materials that are used to make the tiles might not have changed tremendously, but, the quality and ratios have differed to quite an extent and hence it creates an impact on the final product. According to the architect, Mr Paul Jacob the clay used earlier was relatively different than what is used today. It not only varies with the material but also the craftsmanship that was different earlier. With the change of hands there comes a change in craftsmanship as well and as it passes down generations, it brings

around distortion from person to person. The set of skills required to makes these tiles were unique and the tiles were said to be very clear and crisp without any smudging. Today due to the colour pigments used, the designs often turn out to be smudgy as compared to the earlier tiles produced. This also makes a difference to the appearance of the colours on the tiles over a period of years. The change of colour has led to the deterioration of the quality of the tiles as well. The colours are just one aspect; there are various other differences that make Athangudi tiles the way it is.

*Quoting Tanuja Jacob (Interior designer),*

*“The initial Athangudi tiles, the quality of clay was way different from what you get it now. And the craftsmanship was also very different. The patterns were very clear and crisp. Like you know you can’t see any smudging and all that but now when we actually look at the pattern, there’s a lot of smudging between colours so, that’s because that pigment or whatever is not staying in line because when you actually mix a couple of colours, it’s like paint; when they are all set together, and if it doesn’t set, it will merge into the other”.*

**Box 8: Ms Jacob’s views on quality of Athangudi tiles**

It is speculated that the cement and soil ratio has completely changed with more cement and less soil used. With respect to the soil, Mr Paul Jacob does not consider the local soil as an important concept which is quite interesting as it is believed that the soil is only available locally and that is where it gets its name from. The soil from Athangudi is characterized purely as red soil and simple to work with. The researchers were told that cement, if used earlier, was not much and it was just soil mostly. Cement’s purpose was to give some strength to hold the soil together in the tile. Today the ratio cement and soil ratio has changed and so have the prices. The increase in cement quantities, usage of chemicals in the colours and the packaging has led to a hike in the price of one overall tile. The current price goes up to around one hundred rupees while earlier it was much less. We understood after interviewing several owners and managers that the compositions varies from time to time and also depends on the different factories. The sand to cement ratio does not remain consistent and keeps changing according to the need and accuracy. However in spite of this change in use of materials, there has been little

change with respect to the production process and tools, which brings us to the most important point of the authenticity. With the information we received on field it was seen that no machines were used in the production due to the inaccuracies they cause. Moreover, it was not just the inaccuracies that stopped them from using machines, but also the need for preserving the identity of these tiles as purely handmade tiles. Their quality and uniqueness lies in the fact that they have a sustainable nature; this all comes together with the skill executed by the hands while making the tiles. These tiles cannot be laid in places which will get direct sunlight and rain because the colours tend to fade. Hence they were laid in the corridors and inner courtyards.

*Quoting Ms Visalakshi Ramaswamy (Author),*

*“Now another thing is that they are not perfect, they are really not, they are not perfect I mean they are not like a machine made tile so many times people ring up and tell me there is slightly one tile is a little this way that way. Now what I think you have to accept is that anything that is handmade, the beauty of the product is in that little bit of difference. Otherwise you can just make it in a machine, go to a tile shop, buy those perfect plastic looking tiles and used them. But this is very cool also because there is not much cement in it; it is one of the cheapest tiles that are still available but the most beautiful”.*

**Box 9: Ms Ramaswamy’s views on production of Athangudi tile**

With the slow increase in popularity of Athangudi tiles, there is a method by which people can put across their demand for their choice of colours and designs while ordering Athangudi tiles. One of the setbacks while ordering these tiles remains that they cannot be customized further. Having only one mould-maker in charge of making the required mould for the designs makes customization time consuming and hectic. There being only one mould maker is another reason why there are only a certain set of standard designs available. This could be one of the reasons why Athangudi tiles have not yet reached its full potential in business.

Athangudi tiles which are handmade tiles continue to follow the same process of production, the original process remaining relatively unchanged. The process starts by placing the stencil of a floral or geometric pattern on a glass slab which is of the same

size as the tile to be produced. The function of the glass slab is to provide the tile with a glossy effect after manufacture. There is a metal framework with handles that places the stencil firmly on top of the glass slab. In the next step, the colour is poured through the stencil over the glass slab. This is done in order to give the tile a specific design. The stencil is lifted and kept away while local sand is spread over the colour to hold the design firmly. Then cement is laid across the tile and made fine by polishing it and removing excess cement and sand. The metal framework is then removed but the glass still remains. This is then immersed in water for curing for a period of three days. This is followed by a drying period of 24 hours. The glass slab is then removed and the tile is then ready.



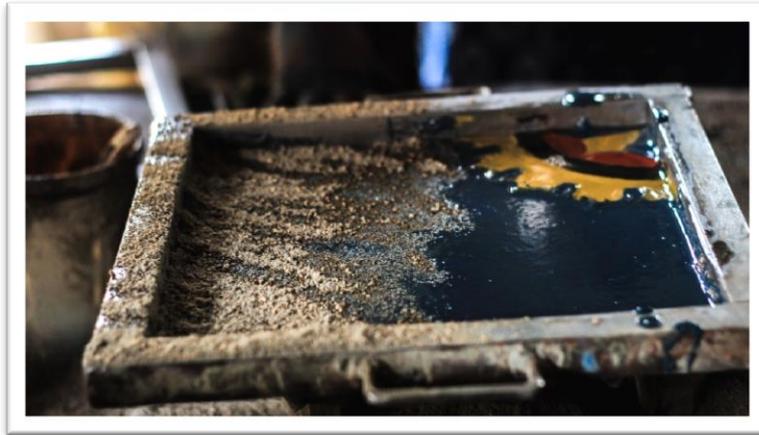
**Fig 8: Drying the glass slabs (Discover India Program, 2016)**



**Fig 9: Drying the stencil (Discover India Program, 2016)**



**Fig 10: Pouring colours in the stencil (Discover India Program, 2016)**



**Fig 11: Adding the cement and Athangudi soil (Discover India Program, 2016)**



**Fig 12: Pressing the tile (Discover India Program, 2016)**

On field, we had the opportunity to visit many various factories in and outside Athangudi. The very first factory we visited was Sri Ganesh flower tile factory, which was the biggest factory producing of Athangudi tiles in Chettinad with eight units of production and two workers working on each unit. Some of the other factories we visited did not have more than two three units. For example, factories such as Athangudi palace tile factory had 5 units and smaller factories such ASR flower tile factory and popular Tile factory had only two to three units. The larger factory was more organized than the smaller ones; nevertheless the number of tiles produced in each unit wasn't determined by the size of the factory. For example, each unit in was Sri Ganesh flower tile factory produced 200 tiles per day, where as one unit in Athangudi palace tile factory produced 500 tiles in a day.

The larger factories sold Athangudi tiles, wooden pillars; brick tiles and antiques whereas the smaller units only focused on the production of Athangudi tiles. There was a huge difference between the factories when it came to the suppliers of Athangudi tiles. The owner of Sri Ganesh Flower Tile factory gave us an insight how they primarily supplied to various metropolitan cities such as Chennai, Bangalore Mumbai and Kolkata whereas the smaller units spoke about mostly supplied to the locals. The marketing of these tiles were done through an online website with the assistance of the MRMRM cultural foundation that aims at reviving the usage of these tiles.

*Quoting Mr Subramaniyam (Factory Owner),*

*“The difference between handmade and machine made tiles is that, is that machine made tiles do not have the accuracy of the handmade tiles. The machine made tiles are not as strong as the handmade ones. With the production of machine made tiles I noticed that the colours got merged which the customer did not like.”*

**Box 10: Mr Subramiyam’s views on difference between machine and handmade tiles**

One of the other major highlights in the production of Athangudi tiles is the workers and their working conditions. In many factories the researchers observed that there were both men and women working in the production process of these tiles. After interviewing different workers, it was observed that there is a very big influence of the

authorities such as the owners and the managers in these factories. There is very little scope of attracting employees to this business due to other job opportunities and this is one of the main concerns of factory owners.

In our interviews with the labourers, we found that none of them wanted their children to work in these factories. They aspired to see their children getting educated and working in more professional settings. This is not surprising as the work of producing these tiles is strenuous and poorly paid. Workers earned a daily wage and these wages were dependent on the number of tiles made in a day. Most workers make about two hundred tiles per day on an average. Moreover, these workers were exposed to a lot of chemicals and dust and there are barely any measures were taken to prevent the side effects. This left the workers vulnerable to harmful working conditions and made the idea of producing these tiles even less appealing. Most of the workers we interviewed stated that the only reason they were tolerating these work conditions was because they had no other alternative. This is the only skill they possess and they had to do this work to make ends meet. Also the lack of literacy among the workers might not give them a complete understanding on the impact of the toxic conditions.

The socio economic condition of workers also differed from factory to factory. All the factories we visited had women labourers but the ratio of women varied. The largest manufacturing unit, Sri Ganesh Tile factory had more women working on the production of the tiles, while the men did the more labour intensive job such as loading of tiles and the woodwork. The Sri Ganesh flower tile factory also employed a woman manager, which was not there in the other factories. However the smaller factories did not employ many women. The ratio of women to men in the smaller units was not more than 1:3. After interviewing the only woman labourer in Popular Tile factory, we found that she was also assigned menial jobs apart from the production the tiles. She spoke to us about her long working hours and low wages.

The people employed in the production of tiles are from different castes. For example, the managers and factory owners of various factories were men and women from upper caste backgrounds whereas workers involved in the making the tiles were from the Dalit community. In Sri Ganesh tile factory, the manager was from Mumbai. Bihari migrants in some factories were involved in loading tiles and making cement and mud

bricks. However, they were not involved in the process of producing Athangudi tiles. The smaller factories employed mostly locals in the production process. Today, most people do not want to get involved in the production of the Athangudi tiles. Due to the shortage of labour, the factory owner's son in ASR flower tile factory worked as a manual labourer.

There is a stark contrast between the factories in Athangudi and the ones in neighbouring villages. We had the opportunity to visit Radha Mahesh tile factory in Namunasamudram, where they do not refer to the tiles as Athangudi tiles but as flower tiles. The factory did not use the Athangudi sand in the production process; rather they used chemicals to bind the components together. The condition of the factories is far worse than those in Athangudi. With only one unit of production, tiles produced in the factory faces heavy competition from the factories in the neighbouring villages.

### **3.6 Marketing and sale of the tiles**

The business of Athangudi tiles relies to a great extent on the willingness of people to continue working in it. The lack of people willing to work in these factories is raising questions in the minds of the owners about the continued existence of the factories. There is a definite gap between the generations. Although factory owners are ready to expand the business of Athangudi tiles, on the other hand the number of other opportunities for the upcoming generations keeps increasing. Everyone wants to enter the professional sector and be able to afford a comfortable life with a fixed monthly salary.

During the revival of Athangudi tiles, several competitors have risen. One of the popular competitors of Athangudi tiles is Bharat Tiles based in Mumbai. From the information we received from a factory owner Subramaniam, Bharat Tiles is one of their biggest competitors in terms of design and neatness of tiles. While this can be a disadvantage and act as a source of demotivation for the business of Athangudi tiles, it can also give an impetus to the growth of the business through further development and efforts. Another competitor we learnt about is a company (name unknown) based in Surat which makes similar tiles.

The business is slowly and steadily increasing and expanding with around twenty five units of production in Athangudi and orders coming in from different parts of the country. The day by day increase in popularity has also led to an increase in demand for Athangudi tiles in recent years. According to various factory owners whom we met, there have been consignments not just within Tamil Nadu but other major cities of India as well, such as Bangalore, Mumbai and Kolkata. They have been supplying not just to houses but also restaurants, hotels and boutiques. The tiles are popular not just amongst Chettiars living away from their hometowns, but also many other non-Chettiar people who seek to add a feeling of antiquity and character to their homes. There have not been any major promotions conducted to advertise Athangudi tiles. The maximum factory owners do to advertise is mostly through the internet digitally, otherwise most of them rely on word of mouth. One of the reasons why people often refrain from buying these tiles is because they are very sensitive and brittle. As each tile weighs two kilograms, packaging and loading them is difficult. Due to lack of appropriate packaging, these tiles often get chipped during transportation. Moreover, transporting these tiles to different parts of the country is not easy and hence when the tiles get chipped, the price paid cannot be justified. This could be looked at as one of the major hindrances in the sale of Athangudi tiles. The customers may not get exactly what they want and that could lead to dissatisfaction. Along with this, the transportation tends to get expensive as well and for a consumer it does not make much sense to pay a greater price for transportation than the tiles itself, only to eventually receive tiles in an inferior condition. Efforts are being made to look for a solution for an easy and efficient means of packaging without incurring any damage to the tiles (Jacob, 2016).

### **3.7 Changes in Athangudi tiles**

The tiles have evolved considerably since the time they were first put to use. Initially a plaster was used for the base of the tile. This plaster was prepared by mixing the soil found in the village of Athangudi with water. The mould was then placed on top of this to give the tile its design. After a few years, cement began to be used more often. The ratio of cement to the soil changed with time. The perfect ratio is a secret as it is the key to producing the finest tile.



**Fig 13: Varied designs and colours used in Athangudi tiles (Discover India Program, 2016)**

The tiles are best laid by the workers; they use a given plaster which makes the tile fit perfectly. They also know how to adjust the tiles. After laying the tiles, sawdust is put on it and left untouched for a period of 24-36 hours. After this coconut filings which are lightly fried are put into a cloth bag and used for wiping the tiles. Initially, these tiles don't have a glow, but after continuous wiping with cold water and coconut oil, the tiles develop sheen. The sheen grows as the tiles age. There are mansions with Athangudi tiles laid over fifty years back, the sheen of the tiles has only got better with time. Not much has to be done for maintenance; the tiles have to be occasionally wiped with coconut oil. The tiles are not affected by dust and dirt.

However, these tiles come with their own imperfections. Since they are not machine made tiles, the shape and arrangement of the tiles are not perfect. The beauty of the tiles is in the way that they are made. The tiles come in various colours and designs now to keep up with time and the size of the tiles has also changed. Athangudi tile designs are now being copied into border tiles and even being inlaid into tables and other wooden furniture. The uses of the tiles have seen a gradual shift from mansion courtyards and corridors to hip spaces like restaurants, cafes, boutiques, studies and bedrooms. Colours are also being experimented with; today's tiles have black and white colours as well. To keep up with the trend in the market, new designs and moulds have been inculcated. People who want to customize their tiles have also given orders for a different

kind of mould to be made. Though the making of the mould costs a lot of money, there are many people willing to customize their moulds.

## **Chapter 4**

### **A Journey Through The Mansions**

In this chapter, we have tried to document the various mansions we visited during our research. The chapter discusses the different mansions and the significance of the Athangudi tiles in them in detail. We have also touched upon the degradation of the houses due to neglect.

#### **4.1 The significant mansions in the Chettinad region**

For some people, these mansions are a retirement home. For some others, these mansions are the only homes they have as they have nowhere else to go. These houses serve as a family heirloom, meant to be treasured and preserved. As the ownership of these mansions lies with many people; even if one person is taking care of the house they are putting the best of efforts to not let the house fall into shambles.

In Karaikudi, it is not unusual to see large pieces of bare land, showing little indication of having a building there. These plots of land were once houses but now due to issues like family disputes, financial crisis, migration of the family to another place and lack of concern for the house, the mansions had to be razed.

The AVM house, which was owned by A.V. Meyyappan, was razed due to a family dispute. A.V. Meyyappan set up the A.V.M studios, Chennai in 1945. The studios are the oldest surviving studio in India. It has been associated with names such as Vyjayathimala, SivajiGanesan, Rajkumar, S.S. Rajendran and Kamal Hassan. The A.V.M house was a house with multiple owners with different financial backgrounds. When the house initially started falling into a state of disrepair, the Meyyappan sons wanted to pay for the repairs. However, the other owners did not agree and the house was sold to a third party. The third party owners were non-Chettiars and they found value in bringing down the house. This is the story of only one razed house. There are many more tales about houses that were brought down. In the seventy odd villages there are streets lined with broken houses, or land which was once a house.

According to S. Muthiah, a historian and a native of the Chettiar region, around forty per cent of the houses were pulled down because of financial reasons. The families in debt used to sell everything in the house in order to get money. This included the teak wood used to make pillars, the chandeliers and mirrors from Europe, the utensils and lacquer ware, the furniture and the dowry. These items then found their way to the vintage shops. The vintage shops have a large collection of photo frames, mugs, plates, lamps and chandeliers, ceramic goods, show pieces and furniture. Unfortunately, the Athangudi tiles were razed with the house and hence could not be preserved. The reason for this is that, once the tiles are laid they could not be removed easily and hence they got severely damaged when the house was brought down.

The locals living in Karaikudi and surrounding areas feel that the new buyers of the houses or the land may build commercial buildings. Needless to say, these new buildings will not use the Chettinad style of architecture. During our field visit we saw several new modern houses which lacked the character of a typical Chettinad home. Hence we argue that Karaikudi will lose its charm and beauty to this kind of modernization.

In Karaikudi, there are some very well maintained houses. Some of these house owners have let out the front part of their house to business men who want to set up shops. One of the houses we visited had a saree shop in front in the *thinna* – in the past it used to be the entrance of the house where men would sit. The rent from the saree shop was used in the upkeep of the house. There were three such houses which had leased out a part of the mansion to maintain the house. In a conversation with an owner he said that,

*Quoting the saree shop owner,*

*“In order to keep up this house we are forced to collect rent like this. This house is owned by sixteen families, all have moved out of Karaikudi. We have nowhere else to go, and hence to keep up the house we are collecting rent. The rest of them do not care about the property and are okay with it degrading.”*

**Box 11: Saree shop owners views on houses**

## 1. The Raja's Palace, Kanadikathan (Chettinad Palace)

This mansion was built in 1912 and is home to the Chettiar family. This is almost hundred years old and was built by Dr Annamali Chettiar. The mansion stands out even in the current era due to the materials and designs used in building the mansion. These elements add to the sustainability and grandeur of the house. The wealth of the Chettiar family is observed in the quality of the materials used in every feature of the mansion. The pillars of the mansion are made of Burma teak which has intricately carved woodwork. The materials used for construction, decoration items and the furnishing elements were mostly from the trades of the Chettiar family. These materials were mostly imported from the East Asian and the European countries where the Raja had his sprawling business. The other imported elements which added to the grandeur of the mansions are the Italian chandeliers, Belgium glassworks (Ramaswamy, 2016).

The Chettinad palace now has a museum which has a beautiful collection of authentic Chettinad artefacts. Ms Visalakshi Ramaswamy has tried reviving the Chettinad artifacts through an innovative way of displaying them in a more contemporary style. For instance, the typical Chettinad sarees are made into pillow covers for the sofa in the main hall; the various types of tiles are fitted onto the dining table itself to give it a more attractive look. This has helped the Chettiars restore their vanishing culture. There are organizations too which are helping in restoring typical Chettinad objects like the *Kottan* baskets. Some of the organizations are also associated with Athangudi tiles.



**Fig 14: Chettinad Mansion, Kanadikathan (Discover India Program, 2016)**

## **2. The Athangudi Palace, Athangudi**

This house is also called the Laxmi house and was built in 1929. The house was built by a family of four brothers. However, currently only a spinster is living in the house and maintaining it as her brothers have shifted to Chennai and Coimbatore. There are several houses in the Chettinad region which are abandoned by many of the families due to issues like maintenance. Some of the houses are broken down as people now prefer to live in small, practical houses. One of the reasons for abandoning these mansions is also that families joint families are disappearing. However, there are a few houses in this region where more than two families are residing together.

The front porch of the Athangudi palace is decorated with intrinsic design of the imported tiles. This is the only house which does not possess Athangudi tiles in any part unlike most of the other houses visited. The ceiling of the main hall of the house had European tiles and all the doors in this hall had mirrors. The Chettiars were very fond of mirrors and tried using it everywhere possible in the house. The hall had black and white marble tiles with granite pillars. The ceiling was detailed with floral designs. The chandeliers hanging from the ceiling added to the overall magnificence of the house.

The rooms of the first courtyard of the house had a depiction of story of the legends of Lord Ramdas and Krishna carved in wood on the doors. There were other halls in the mansion which were used for performing rituals and ceremonies like marriages. The marriage hall usually was made from indigenous materials as it was solely used for the people of the community and no business took place here. It was thought to be the most auspicious space in the whole house.



**Fig 15: Courtyard of Athangudi Palace (Discover India Program, 2016)**

## **5. The Bangala, Karaikudi**

The Meyyappans have converted their old mansion into a hotel which is known as ‘The Bangala’. The Bangala is an old mansion converted into a commercial building which now is a place for tourists to reside when they visit the Chettinad region. The owner of the Bangala, Ms Meenakshi Meyyappan has tried reviving and restoring the Chettinad heritage by displaying the old Chettinad items in the hotel innovatively. The Bangala has the use of every Chettinad element which was used in the ancient times. The utensils, sarees, mirrors have been displayed in the rooms and dining spaces in the hotel. Instruments like the *veena* are also placed in the corridors.

The hotel has Athangudi tiles used in every part with different designs and colours. The uses of typical Chettinad furniture flawlessly add to the significance of the tiles. The hotel is not less than a museum showcasing rare Chettinad artifacts. These artifacts add a unique and beautiful ambience to the hotel. Tourists from all over the world who wish to experience Chettinad lifestyle are attracted to this hotel.

The rooms provided in the hotel are also designed in such a way that they bring out the authenticity of Chettinad culture. There are books of the community, culture and mansions displayed in the hotel shop which the tourists can have look at. Although the hotel has elements of old mansions, there are certain modern features as well. The hotel has a swimming pool in the centre and dining areas surrounding it. The food provided has

all the variety of authentic dishes of the region. We noticed that while the hotel was converted into a modern space from an old mansion, it did not compromise in any aspect.

Apart from The Bangala, there are other old mansions too which have been converted into hotels or commercial spaces due to various reasons.



**Fig 16: The Bangala hotel (Discover India Program, 2016)**

## **5. MSMM house**

The MSMM house was built in the 1980s. The tiles on the porch are Italian, while the tiles leading up to the porch are basic cement tiles. The porch is done in white and is covered with a dome like structure. Part of the dome is done using coloured glass cut in designs. The walls of the porch have ceramic tiles from Europe. The doorways of the house are all teak and have beautiful carvings. The main hall had granite pillars and marble flooring. The paintings that adorned the walls were by the renowned painter Raja

Ravi Verma. The chandeliers in the hall were from Europe. The walls of the hall had full size mirrors. According to a popular belief, the mirrors were for guests to see themselves as members of the household and to feel welcomed. The first courtyard had red coloured cement tiles while the corridors that were along the courtyard had Athangudi tiles. The tiles were of a peach and yellow colour and had small red flowers in them. The borders were done in Athangudi tiles of green colour. Further into the house, the dining hall and the main store room also had Athangudi tiles. The MSMM house has two courtyards and the last courtyard is the extension of the kitchen.

The large store rooms were for the storage of food. The jewellery and dowry was stored in the rooms of the house. The rooms were meant for storage and not for other purposes. People generally used to sleep outside in the courtyards. Only when the husband was present the wife would sleep with him inside. The dowry in Chettiar customs was given as security. It was to remain with the bride and used only in times of emergency. The owners of the MSMM house do not reside in Karaikudi but the house is maintained by the domestic help. Ms Meenakshi Meyyappan is one of the owners of the MSMM house.

## **5. SMRM House**

The SMRM house in Karaikudi has been neglected by the owners. It is in a dilapidated state with only one man to look after it. The house though would have looked very beautiful if it had been well maintained. The porch has stained glass and old and broken ceramic tiles. The main hall has detailed woodwork and granite pillars. The roof is done in plaster of Paris and it has shades of pink and purple. There were chandeliers hanging from the roof at some point of time. The first courtyard has cement tiles while Italian marble is laid in the corridors. This house does not have Athangudi tiles. The borders of these tiles are done in imported ceramic tiles. The house has two courtyards. The second courtyard is also done in cement tiles while the corridors have a wooden roof. The dining hall walls are covered by egg plaster. The doors and windows of the house are done with Burmese teak, the knobs and handles of the doors have very fine carvings. While speaking with the caretaker of the house she mentioned *“The people who own this house had a big business in Vietnam. They also owned a lot of property there. They were one of the last families to come back to India.”*



**Fig 17: SMRM house (Discover India Program, 2016)**

## **6. AMA House**

The AMA house was built in 1944. It is one of the well maintained houses in Karaikudi. The owners of this house no longer live in it but stay in a smaller house close by. The porch is beautifully done in shades of white and blue. It is a big porch and has ceramic tiles on the wall depicting peacocks. The roof of the porch is done with stained glass and the pillars have etchings of flowers. There are two small benches on either side of the main door. The main door is made of teak; it is a marvel as it is beautifully carved and polished. The handle of this door is made in the shape of a dragon. The main hall has granite pillars and the flooring is done in black and white marble. Like most houses, even this house has floor length mirrors on both sides of the hall. The hall even has a display of elephant tusks. The roof of this hall has three chandeliers and is done with wood. The first courtyard has cement tiles while the corridors have marble flooring. The walls are painted and have pictures of the family. The pillars in the first courtyard are done in granite. The house has a good rain water harvesting system. The dining halls of the house have

Athangudi tiles with a flower pattern in green colour. The walls of this room are covered with egg and lime plaster. The roof of the dining halls is done with rose teak. The second courtyard has Athangudi tiles. The corridors surrounding the courtyard are also done in Athangudi tiles. The borders are done with Athangudi tiles as well. The second courtyard opens into the marriage hall. The marriage hall was done in pink and orange Athangudi tiles. The marriage hall led into the storeroom after which there was a kitchen. This house has toilets outside. The house is maintained by three servants who come daily to dust and clean.

## **7. SMRMA House**

The SMRMA house was the only house owned by a single owner. It is a two courtyard house. The first hall has wooden flooring and granite pillars. The hall is quite simple and doesn't have elaborate show pieces. The first courtyard has mosaic tiles and the second courtyard has Athangudi tiles. The courtyards are done with granite and cement tiles. The Athangudi tiles in the second courtyard have become rough, have cracks and are losing colour because of rain and sunlight. The roof of the house has detailed woodwork. The roof's parapet design is unique – a little like a Mughal design.

## **8. The Chidambaram Vilas**

The mansion has been converted into a hotel. The owners of the hotel did not damage the existing structure. They built rooms on the outer periphery and did not cut the large dining halls and rooms. They also laid Athangudi tiles in their porch and office. The main hall has beautiful woodwork, complimented by the artifacts bought from abroad. The chandeliers are from Europe while the flooring is done in marble from there as well. The windows have coloured glass, while the roof is done with Burma teak. In the first courtyard there is a mixture of mosaic and Athangudi tiles. The pillars of the structure are built of marble and granite brought from Italy and rose teak from Burma. The corridors have marble tiles and their roofs are covered with carved beams. As this is now a hotel, the corridors have some antique Chettinad furniture. The hotel also celebrates Chettinad history by showcasing a lot of antique clocks, utensils and lacquer ware.



**Fig 18: Chidambaram Vilas (Discover India Program, 2016)**

#### **4.2 Perspectives of the house owners:**

Quoting the famous historian S Muthiah, “*You’ll find the empty plots, you’ll find the leftover buildings in our roads which was supposed to be one of the main roads*”

The story of Athangudi tiles as part of the Chettinad mansions began on their days of trade and prosperity. After the Chettiars lost their money, many mansions of Chettinad had to be broken down as they stored immense wealth within them.

The mansions were not just manifested with wealth, but it was a storehouse of various cultures and sentiments. On field we had the opportunity to meet Mr Pallaniappan, the owner of A.M.A house. Mr Pallaniappan’s grandfather, Annamalai Chettiar, built the house with the wealth he gathered from Vietnam. Mr Pallaniappan was forced to come back with almost nothing after communism took over Vietnam. However, his family decided not to demolish their ancestral home for money. As Mr Pallaniappan showed us his house, he talked about the sentimental value attached with it. “*I was born*

*here brought up here as well. It is one with my heart. This is my attachment if I'm coming to show you my house, making this effort; it is because of my love for the house."*

Apart from his sentimental attachment, Mr Pallaniappan spoke about his house as a cultural artefact that is extensively studied by various groups. He gave examples of French students studying his house to understand the intricacies of Chettinad architecture. Even though Mr Pallaniappan was against demolishing the mansion and dividing the property, he gave an insight into how the architecture of the mansion was not suitable for the today's day and age.

*"My house is next door, my wife is diabetic, and the restroom we built later because there were no toilets inside the house. She could not walk so many steps every day; I bought a house next door"*

Even after moving to a modern house, Mr. Pallaniappan's attachment to his ancestral home remains intact.

However, for many other Chettiars living in Karaikudi, maintenance of the mansions was not feasible. From our interview with Mr Chidambaram and his wife, we found that many Chettiars living in Karaikudi preferred bringing down grand mansions and living in smaller houses that could accommodate modern amenities. The Chettinad mansions were not designed to suit the needs of modern lifestyle. As time passed by, people wanted more privacy and the joint family structure was replaced by the nuclear family structure. The Athangudi town president spoke about how a large number of Chettiars stopped doing business in their native towns and moved to metropolitan cities in search of jobs and other businesses. Many Chettiars could not keep up with the expenses of houses they weren't actually living in. Mr Chidambaram gave us an insight into the difficulties involved in the maintenance of the house. According to him, the house was not designed for modern appliances, and his walls were beyond repair. After agreeing upon dividing the property with his brother, Mr Chidambaram and his wife got a smaller house with all the modern amenities. He emphasized on how they sold most of the artifacts from the old house to the antique stores. Mr Chidambaram spoke about the use of unpolished granite in his old mansion and the use of Athangudi tiles being a very recent phenomenon. The couple preferred using mosaic over Athangudi tiles for the sole purpose of convenience. Many Chettinad mansions, with all its sentimental value and grandeur could not keep up the needs of the contemporary Chettiars.

After the demolition of a house, most of the artifacts from trade found their way to the antique shops whereas the Athangudi tiles were broken down with the house. There are no prospects of recycling or reusing tiles after breaking down a house.

However, many house owners living in metropolitan cities have a sentimental value attached to the mansions as well as the tiles. Mr Chockolingam, a well-informed Chettiar living in Bangalore told us about the importance of the mansion in their lives. He spoke about the importance of their ancestral mansion in Karaikudi. Many Chettiar families living away from their hometown come back to Chettinad every year. Today, these mansions are used for family gatherings, festivals or occasions. He explains how the ancestral Chettinad mansion with its architecture that supports communal living helps in keeping the family together. Due to the lack of feasibility, the Chettiars could not replicate the mansions in their city. However, they retained bits and pieces of their Chettinad mansions and incorporated it into their city life. Chettinad crafts like lime-egg plaster on walls, Athangudi tiles, *Kottan* baskets, and smaller wooden pillars are being used by many Chettiars as well as non Chettiars across the country.

Chettiars living in Chennai have also tried to replicate their houses in Chettinad. Ms Azhagu Annamalai's house in Chennai is designed like ancestral home in Chettinad. Her house is embellished with beautiful wooden carvings, artifacts and Athangudi tiles. She says, *' This is a renovated house and when we thought of renovating it, I wanted to do in a style which was a part of my region that's Chettinad because somehow I just loved the region so we wanted to use those tiles that was one. '*

The Athangudi tiles tend to crack easily and hence they require immense care. However, from our field research we have learnt that the tiles not only give character to the house but also tend to age with the beauty of the house. Ms Azhagu Annamalai emphasized the fact that the tiles were cost effective and hardly required any maintenance. The maintenance of the house was done by daily mopping.

The story of the Chettinad mansions and the Athangudi tiles change with the changing scenario of the community. The story of the life and history Chettiars varies from house to house. Some speak of days of great wealth and glory and others talk about

the struggles of a poverty stricken community. The empty plots of land in Chettinad are proof of the gradual change from tradition to convenience.



**Fig 19: Traditional hall with modern elements (Discover India Program, 2016)**

On conserving the Chettinad mansions Ms Meyyappan says that converting it into hotels seems to be the best idea as of now. However, the architecture of the houses should not be ruined in order to create rooms. There are hotels which have divided the large dining rooms in order to create more space for guests. The rooms should be built around the main structure. Her hotel The Bangla is a perfect example of conservation and promotion of Chettiar architecture.

The work of various organizations like the M.Rm.Rm Foundation and the migration of Chettiars around the world have helped increase the popularity of these tiles. These tiles are now being put in non- Chettiar homes as well. The other traditional Chettiar arts and crafts are also being revived like *Kottan* baskets, lime and egg white plaster, wooden carvings and sarees. The *Kottan* baskets and sarees are even being exported to other countries. Mr S.Muthiah, Ms Meenakshi Meyyappan and Ms Visalakshi

Ramaswamy are some of the few people who are actively engaged in reviving interest in the Chettinad region. They believe that the spirit of entrepreneurship and business has been an intrinsic part of the Chettiar tradition. According to them if the Chettiars come back to their roots and get back into business, the community can flourish again.

In the process of critically analysing the revival of Athangudi tiles, we wanted to understand why certain elements of Chettinad culture are now being revived.

For example the revival of Athangudi tiles and *kottan* baskets could serve a certain business interest. In the process of revival these tiles are modified in a way that appeals to a larger population outside the Chettinad region.

## Chapter 5

### Persistence Through Revival

Architecture and houses have come a long way through time in terms of providing comfort and aesthetic appeal in a rapidly growing contemporary world. Science and technology have managed to find answers in producing tiles in bulk with efficiency and uniformity. Vitrified tiles have now made their way into several modern houses and various other public and private spaces. However, this does not mean that the tradition of handmade tiles has disappeared. These tiles have a rare and unique appeal in a market full of modern tiles.

As we entered the sleepy town of Karaikudi, we were greeted with sights that are rarely seen in a fast moving city life. The town seemed to be stuck in the juxtaposition of the past and the present. We were amazed to see massive Chettinad mansions in Karaikudi and neighbouring towns. As we walked through the streets of Chettinad, the sights and sounds of the place drew us towards learning about the local people, their history and culture. The morning scene had women making *kollam* and attending to other daily chores. In addition to the mundane and regular life, the towns offered a captivating display native arts, crafts and architecture. The numerous old mansions of Chettinad reflected untold stories of family bonding, disputes, rituals and celebrations.

In our qualitative study, we aimed to establish the history and significance of Athangudi tiles in their socio-cultural and economic context and through changing times and scenarios. The study has also tried to establish the relationship between the family dynamics among the Chettiars and their emotional connection to the mansions. In this section, we have tried to highlight the role of Chettiar men in overseas business, and the importance of women in running the household. We have also looked at the spatial arrangements in the mansions and tried to critically analyse the meanings associated with the arrangement of Athangudi tiles in the interiors of the house. Our study also discussed the multiple reasons behind the demolition of many of the mansions in the region. This section also looked at the current family dynamics in the community, and the ways in which it has led to the breaking down of the mansions today. It also discussed the ways in which several Chettiars were keen to use Athangudi tiles in their modern homes because they helped them stay connected to their roots.

Furthermore, we examined the way in which Athangudi tiles were produced in different factories and the changes in the production process over time. A lot of the literature that is available on the production process of the tiles highlights the importance and uniqueness of the Athangudi sand, but after going on field, we found that the Athangudi sand is not the binding component of the tiles. We also studied the factory scenario and the condition of workers in the factories.

From the limited research we had done before going on field, our ideas of the tiles was challenged. The mansions that we visited were grand and only had Athangudi tiles in the inner portions of the house. As families were keen to display their wealth, the front portions of the mansions generally had granite and marble from Europe. As one went further inside the house, we found Athangudi tiles. Our interviews with various stakeholders confirm that Athangudi tiles were used in these areas because they were inexpensive as well as plain and simple compared to marble.

One of the most important findings of our study was related to the origin of these tiles. Our interviews with scholars, Ms Visalakshi Ramaswamy and Mr S. Muthiah confirmed that the tiles were not native to the Chettinad region. They were an amalgamation of the tiles found in Europe and South-East Asia. The initial use of British colours and similar tiles found in Italy, Portugal and France are proofs of the claim.

The tiles have now moved out of houses and travelled to various other cities and countries like Bangalore, Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, United States of America, United Kingdom and Spain to name a few, which took us by surprise we believed that they were not very popular outside the Chettinad region. In this spirit, the designs and styles of the tiles have also changed with customers asking for more abstract designs and colours such as black, grey and green. From our conversations with the factory owners and workers, we inferred that most people want to customize the tile design.

However among the innumerable things that we learnt while we were on field, one of them was that Athangudi tiles was not just a type of tile used for laying and walking over; it was pursuit of passion that required constant maintenance and care.

As discussed in Chapter 2, there is very little published academic material on this topic. In this regard, we believe that this study on Athangudi tiles has significantly contributed to the body of knowledge on this subject. The academic approach to this topic has brought in a different and nuanced perspective. We hope that it will give other scholars opportunities for further research in the same area.

Our biggest limitation was trying to establish the exact place of Athangudi tiles as a cultural artefact. With its changing relevance through history and in contemporary times, the identity of the tiles has changed from the cheap commodity used in the interior of a mansion, to a cultural commodity that has been commercialised to promote the Chettinad culture. However, in this process of commodifying the tiles, the traditional meaning associated with the tiles has changed.

As a group, we felt that it is not just the Athangudi tiles that defined the Chettiar mansions but a Chettinad mansion would be incomplete without the use of Athangudi tiles. As we studied the community, we understood the socio-economic background and status of the Chettiars in Tamil Nadu, in British India and abroad. A common notion that the entire group felt was that the community was able to pick itself up and move into other occupations post their decline in businesses abroad. We also felt that the Chettiars believed what they practiced – loyalty and honesty. Whether it was business or leisure, the Chettiars were always true to each other. Going back to tiles, they were beautiful on their own and as part of a mansion. The beauty of the tiles wasn't in its colour or design but in the imperfections of the handmade tile. As we left the land of the Chettiars, we couldn't help but practice and imbibe the qualities of patience, honesty, loyalty and most of all hard work into our lives. The following quote struck a chord with us as it captures our sentiment about the tiles:

*“Simplicity is the ultimate form of sophistication”*

With this Team Athangudi left the land of the Chettiar

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## Appendix I

- **Ms Visalakshi Ramaswamy,**

**Author of the Book Chettinad Heritage**

1. Did Burmese culture or art influence the designs of Athangudi tiles?
2. So was there any specific socio-economic group or strata of the society that was using these tiles (Athangudi tiles) or was it more spread out among all the people of the society?
3. What are the motifs used in these tiles if there are any?
4. In addition to the houses where else would these tiles be used?
5. What are the names of the nine different temples?
6. In this entire process of tile manufacturing, what are the different roles that women play in this process?
7. How have the manufacturing and sale of tiles led to the economic, social and cultural development of the community?
8. Has there been any form of government involvement in terms of providing aid in the reviving of this process so far?
9. Is the authenticity of the tiles lost if the modes are not used for the production as nowadays its mostly done freehand because of the demands of the customers have changed?
10. Do the younger generation involve themselves in keeping up this craft? Or are they involved in this?
11. So how does it benefit the workers economically? Can you just give a brief explanation on the economic background of the workers?
12. Is a major part of the population is involved in Athangudi tiles?
13. What motivated you and what got you to write the book 'Chettinad Heritage'?
14. So as far as we know Athangudi tiles are not very popular outside the Southern part of India. So what are your thoughts on it?
15. How can it be marketed well in the rest of the country so that even more people know about it?

- **Mr S. Muthiah,**  
**Historian and Author**

1. Can you tell us something about the history of the Chettinad Architecture?
2. It was also the Gujarati and Marwari community, which was very active in Burma. Do you think they were affected in the same way?
3. Where are the most Chettinad people from the village settled now in that area or in the Chennai or in other urban areas?
4. If someone from one temple marries into another temple so their previous temple does not have any authority over the person?
5. What factors do you think explains the increase in manufacturing of the tiles? So right now apparently there are 25 units in Athangudi. What are the different factors which have led to the increase in the manufacturing of the tiles?
6. What is the role of women in this community or how they are exactly treated?
7. What got you interested in writing this book, The Chettinad Heritage?

- **Mr Paul Jacob and Ms Tanuja Jacob**  
**Architect and Interior Designer**

1. Can you please tell us about the Chettinad architecture in general?
2. What is the significance of Athangudi tiles in the Chettinad architecture? Like is it given equal importance as other architectural elements?
3. what are the unique features of Athangudi tiles like you compare Athangudi tiles and other modern tiles-marble
4. What are the unique features of Athangudi tiles if compare Athangudi tiles and other modern tiles like marble?
5. Are there any differences in the designs of Athangudi tiles?
6. Do Athangudi tiles come in customized designs?
7. How do you determine which tile is of good quality and which is not that good?
8. What are the unique features of the soil used to make Athangudi tiles?
9. So we have read in an article that if you walk, the more you walk on the tiles, the more the-of the tiles. Is it true?
10. With access to both Athangudi as well as modern tiles, what population chooses to use Athangudi and why?
11. You recommend Athangudi tiles to customers?
12. Has the demand for Athangudi tiles altered from the past?
13. What are the materials used to maintain the tiles apart from coconut oil?
14. Are people working in the factories from a single community or are migrants also involved?

- **Factory owners and Managers**

1. When you started this job, were your parents and grandparents also involved in this particular job?
2. When did you initiate this business; this factory?
3. From the time you began this factory; did you see any changes in the production of these tiles?
4. Are the materials used also the same
5. Currently, is the production and sale going smoothly?
6. What is the average demand of these tiles in a year?
7. So how much time does it take to make a special design for the tiles?
8. Do you think the current generation will take up the business of manufacturing Athangudi tiles?
9. In 11 years how has the demand changed? Has it increased or decreased?
10. From which place you get maximum orders? Is there any specific place from where you get maximum demand?
11. What is the minimum amount you charge for transportation?
12. What population generally orders these tiles?
13. In 11 years how many new factories have come up in this area?
14. Who are the competitor's tiles of Athangudi tiles?
15. Have the designs changed overtime?
16. Is there a change in the colours used?
17. Can Athangudi tiles be made using other sand apart from the one found in Athangudi village? If no, any specific reasons for it?
18. What is the proportion of cement and Athangudi soil used in the tiles?
19. Why is the laying process only done by the workers who manufacture it? Any reasons for that?
20. What according to you are the unique features of Athangudi tiles?
21. What motivated you to start this business?
22. How are your products eco-friendly in nature?
23. What do you do with the tiles that get rejected?
24. Where all are Athangudi tiles used?

25. How is the packaging done for the tiles?
26. What have you studied as a part of formal education?
27. What did you do before starting this business?
28. Do these tiles get exported abroad?
29. Do Chettiars living abroad order these tiles for their homes?
30. Among the people who order Athangudi tiles how many are Chettiars and non-Chettiars?
31. Can you give us some insight on the upcoming Surat tiles?
32. Can you tell us about the maintenance these tiles require?
33. What according to you are the drawbacks of Athangudi tiles?
34. What is the uniqueness of Athangudi soil?
35. Do you do any kind of marketing of these tiles?
36. Do you think these tiles can be made with the help of machines?
37. Do you have any plans of expanding your business in future?

- **House Owners**

1. Why did you choose Athangudi tiles over Modern tiles?
2. So do these tiles have an effect to the house or does it have any cultural significance?
3. Are these tiles available in the nearby vicinity?
4. Who supplies the tiles to you?
5. Is it just you using this tile or there are people in your social circle or other people in Chettinad?
6. Would you recommend these tiles to anyone?
7. Are there any other measures for the maintenance except for using coconut oil?
8. Why do you think these tiles are not famous in India?
9. How important is the flooring and architecture of your house according to you?
10. How did the Chennai floods affect the appearance of the tiles?

- **Ms Meenakshi Meyyappan,**  
**Author**

1. Can you please tell us something about the South-East Asian influences on the Chettinad architecture?
2. How has the socio-economic mobility of the Chettiar families shaped the fate of Chettinad mansions and houses?
3. What aspects of Chettinad architecture do people coming from outside get fascinated by?
4. Why are Athangudi tiles only used in the interiors of the house?
5. What is your opinion about people converting their mansions into business establishments? Do you think this will help in promoting the heritage?
6. Do you think the younger generation can be actively involved in the process of revival?
7. Why do you think the demand for Athangudi tiles is greater outside Tamil Nadu?
8. Why do these tiles appeal tourists?

## **Appendix II**

### **GLOSSARY**

*Chettinad*- Region in south India

*Chettiar*- People from Chettinad

*Nagarthar Chettiars*- Name given to Chettiars out of respect

*Nattukkottai*- Land of the forts, refers to the numerous mansions of Chettinad

*Laxmi*- Goddess of wealth

*Krishna*- Popular Hindu divinity

*Saraswati*- Goddess of knowledge

*Shaivism*- Devotees of lord Shiva

*Nagandu*- Land of Nagas

*Shreshti*- Wealth

*Chola dynasty*- Kingdom in South India

*Pandya Nadu*- Tamil Nadu original name

*Ilathathangudi*- One of the nine temples

*Banias*- Traders

*Kottan*- Palm leaf basket

*Thinnai*- semi-open space within a Chettiar house with lines of columns on raised plinths

*Kovil*- One of the nine temples

*Athangudi tiles*- Cement tiles of local manufacture

*Mathur*- One of the nine temples

*Vairayarpatti*- One of the nine temples

*Iraniyur*- One of the nine temples

*Pillaiarpatti*- One of the nine temples

*Nemam*- One of the nine temples

*Iluppaikudi*- One of the nine temples

*Soorakudi*- One of the nine temples

*Velangudi*- One of the nine temples

*Gotram*- Clan

*Kandang sarees*- Indian style of drapery from Chettinad

*Kolam*- Design made using colourful powder (commonly called Rangoli)

*Bhojana*- Dining hall

*Patale*- Front portion of the house

*Pittiyari*- The accountant room

*Valavu*- Chettiar joint family; inner zone of a Chettiar house

*Veena*- Musical instrument

*Nadai*- Corridor

***IrandanKattu***- Dining hall

***Thottam***- Garden

***Vanakkam***- Greeting in Tamil meaning welcome

## Appendix III

### Our Interviewees

#### **Ms Visalakshi Ramaswamy**

Ms Ramaswamy is an entrepreneur and has started the M.RM.RM Cultural Foundation with the aim of conserving and promoting Chettiar culture. She is also an author and great history enthusiast.



#### **Mr S. Muthiah**

Mr Muthiah is a renowned author, journalist, historian and cartographer known for his writings on the political and cultural history of Chennai And Chettinad. He has authored several books like the “Tales of old and new Madras”



#### **Mr Paul Jacob**

Mr Paul Jacob is an architect with over twenty years of experience in design and architecture. He along with his wife manages two firms the Modarchs Consultants Chennai and Paul and Tanuja design studio. He has designed many houses with Athangudi tiles.



### **Ms Tanuja Jacob**

Ms Tanuja Jacob is an interior designer and an architect. She has worked with Athangudi tiles and loves incorporating them in modern styles like on furniture and walls. With her husband Paul manages the Paul and Tanuja design studio.



### **Mr Raju**

Mr Raju is the owner of Namansamudram tile factory. This factory does not use Athangudi soil in the production of tile but use a chemical for binding the soil. He has been in the business for more than three decades



### **Mr Chockalingam**

Mr Chockalingam, is a house owner who has a house in Karaikudi with Athangudi tiles. He has also incorporated these tiles in his house in Bangalore in innovative ways. He told us a lot about the history of the tiles.



### **Mr Pallaniappan**

Mr Pallaniappan is the owner of A.M.A house, Karaikudi. Though he doesn't stay in the house; he yet visits it every day. He returned from Vietnam in the late sixties and has been staying in Karaikudi for more than fifteen years.



### **Mr Chidambaram and Ms Gnanambal**

We met this couple through Mr Chokalingam, they had sold their Chettinad mansion and moved into a smaller house. Their old house Had Athangudi tiles. They moved into the smaller house out of convenience and ease.



### **Ms Azahgu Annamalai**

Ms Annamalai's house has Athangudi tiles for the past twenty-five years. She was very kind to give her interview in the house and also host us for lunch. According to her, Athangudi tiles have added the charm to her house and aged gracefully.



### **Ms Meenakshi Meyyappan**

Ms Meyyappan is the owner of The Bangala, a boutique hotel in Karaikudi. She is a great patron of the Chettinad culture and history. She along with her brother Mr Muthiah and Ms Ramaswamy has written the “Chettinad Heritage”. She has also authored books such as “The Bangala Table: Flavours and Recipes from Chettinad.”



**Mr RM Chokalingam**

Mr Chokalingam is the President of the Athangudi town. He has stayed in Athangudi for more than twenty-five years and has seen the popularity of the tiles grow. He was very essential in leading us to more Athangudi tile production units. He also made us meet people who had Athangudi tiles in their house.



**Mr Sagayarajayaraj**

Mr Sagyaraj is the owner of Popular Tile Factory, Athangudi. His father And grandfather were also in the business of making Athangudi tiles. His father also designed the moulds for the tiles.



**Mr Subramaniam**

Mr Subramaniam is the owner of Athagudi Palace tiles, the largest tile producing unit in Karaikudi. He has been managing the work there for more than a decade. He sends these tiles to Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore and Kochin.

