

## PUTTING THE houses in order

During the Raj, the Chettiar community of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu built thousands of palatial homes with money earned while working for the British. But after the end of the colonial era, the houses fell into disrepair. Now, thanks to the efforts of two French architects, many are being restored to their former glory, writes **Luke Duggleby**

PHOTOGRAPHS by LUKE DUGGLEBY

A builder works on a modern house  
opposite an art-deco mansion in the  
village of Kottamangalam.





**ABOVE:** the remains of a slowly disintegrating mansion in the town of Kanadukallur. Some estimates suggest that about 20 mansions a month in Chettinad are either taken down or fall down. **RIGHT:** a woman walks past a mansion in the village of Kottamangalam whose exterior wall bears a painted advertisement. The high cost of upkeep for the mansions has driven many owners to strip out and sell the valuable fittings from them onto local markets for other ways to profit from them, such as turning them into advertising hoardings

Money was no object; only the best would do. Tiles were brought in from Spain and Japan in their millions, thousands of tonnes of teak arrived from Burma, and marble and extravagant crystal chandeliers came from Italy. Mirrors were imported from Belgium, the steel came from the UK, and the whole lot was combined with millions of hand-baked roof tiles and paint made of hundreds of thousands of eggshells.

But the palatial abodes built from these international ingredients weren't one-offs, the odd individual looking down on his less-fortunate neighbours; there were tens of thousands of them, scattered across an area of 1,500 or so square kilometres.

These are the mansions of Chettinad, an arid land of bush and scrub located in the heart of Tamil Nadu in southern India. Very little grows here; summer temperatures frequently exceed 40°C

and the baked earth holds few resources of any value. But none of that mattered to the Chettians; this parched backwater was a safe place for them to live, free from interference and in the lap of a self-created luxury.

#### DISTANT ORIGINS

The Nattukottai or Nagarathur Chettians are a sub-caste of the Vaishya, the third-highest of the Hindu social classes. Their early history is sketchy at best, with no firm historical evidence to explain their origins. One legend suggests that a tsunami destroyed their coastal town and, fearing a repeat, they fled inland to the driest place they could find.

Following their arrival in this desolate part of Tamil Nadu, they made a modest living doing business locally, specialising in trade and banking. It was with the arrival of the British during the 18th century that their fortunes

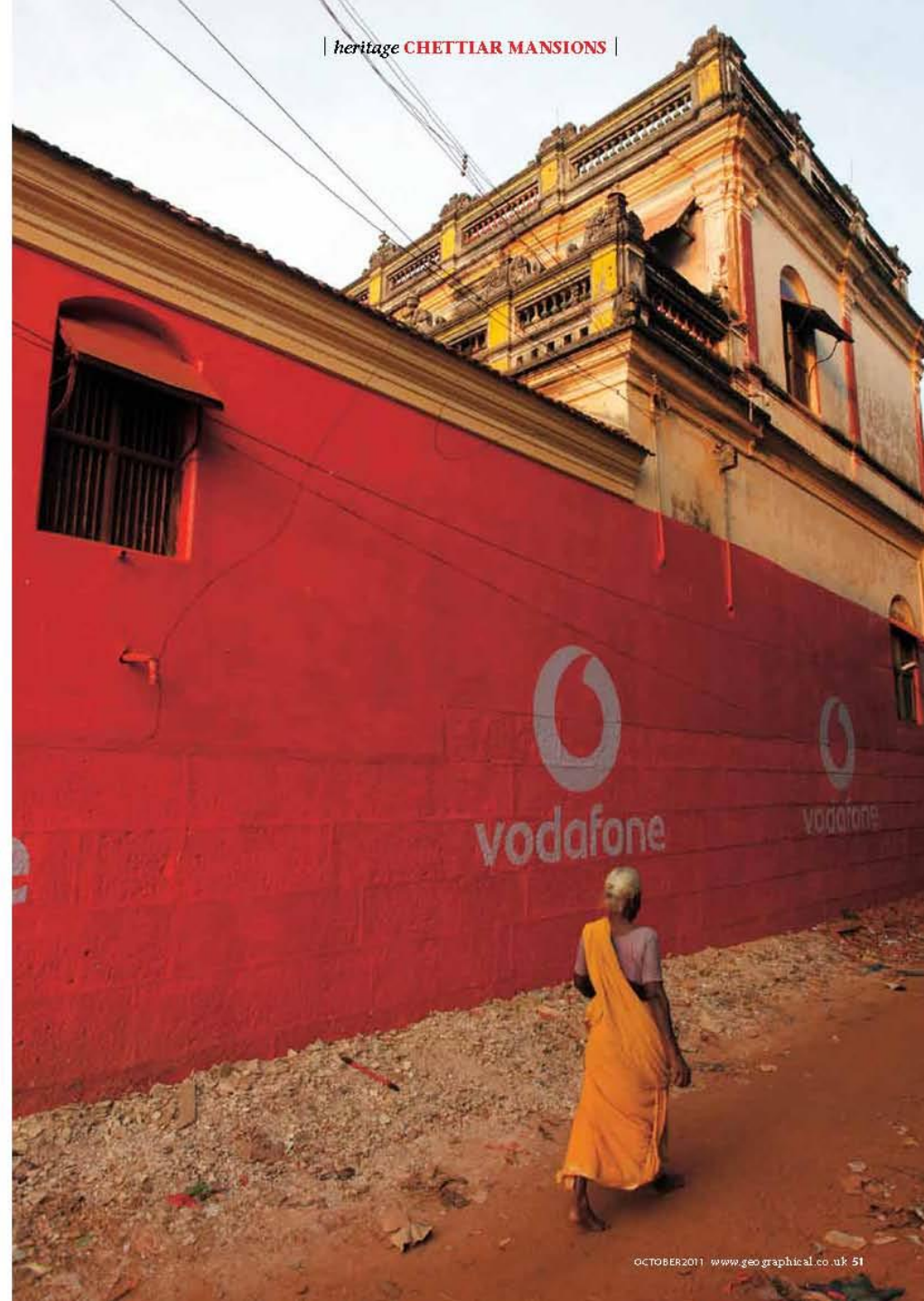
changed. British expansionism was rapidly engulfing South and Southeast Asia, country by country, and when the East India Company set up shop in Madras (now Chennai), the capital of Tamil Nadu, it brought the British and the Chettians together. The British needed reliable and honest middlemen through whom they could deal with the locals, and the rajahs of southern India recommended the Chettians, who had a reputation for reliability and honour.

Early business dealings primarily involved local transactions of modest sums, but in 1774, the headquarters of the East India Company was moved to Calcutta as the company looked to expand into Burma. The British ruled Burma from the 1820s to the 1950s, and the Chettians were never far behind, doing business on an enormous scale. 'The Chettians understood the political and geographical context of this period and took full advantage,' explains Michel Adment, a French architect who, along with his partner, Bernard Dragon, has lived in Chettinad since 2004. 'The British essentially opened up these countries one by one, giving the Chettians access.'

But despite trading in exotic and foreign materials in distant lands, the Chettians always based their operations in Chettinad. 'The Chettians were very worldly, but their society was held together by very strict rules, such as marrying within the caste and land ownership,' Dragon says.

At the height of the Chettian's success, they numbered more than 110,000, living in 96 villages and towns scattered across the region. They used the wealth they accumulated to build enormous, ornate mansions; the total number is difficult to ascertain, but is believed to have been as high as 60,000.

When Adment and Dragon arrived in Chettinad in 2004, the population was relatively unchanged, but the number of Chettian villages had decreased to 73 (as well as two cities) and the number of mansions had dropped to about 25,000. 'Houses are currently being demolished at a rate of 20 per month, and many more are ready to come down,' says Meenakshi 'Madame' Meyyappan, a hotelier based in Karaikudi – the largest city in Sivaganga district and the unofficial capital of Chettinad – and the wife of a wealthy Chettian who worked mostly

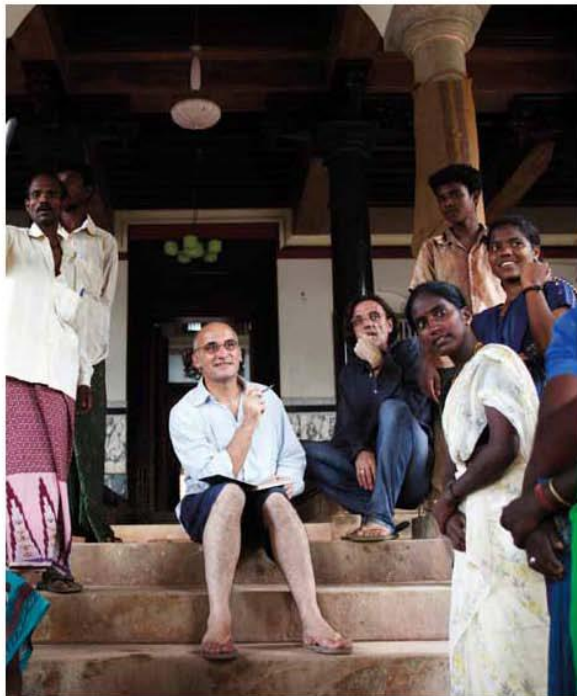






Goats walk past the elaborate entrance to a mansion in Kanadukottai, a small Chettiar village where the palatial architecture and rural heritage attracts a steady stream of tourists.





ABOVE: French architect Michel Adment (centre) counts workers in the mansion in the village of Kottamangalam that he and his partner, Bernard Dragon (to the right of Adment), are converting into a hotel. The pair have played a central role in attempts to preserve Chettinad's architectural heritage.

in Malaysia. Others dispute these numbers, but Meyyappan is adamant: 'How do you get all these warehouses full of our antiques if our heritage is not disappearing?'

### STARTING OVER

So what went wrong? While the Chettians had made fortunes making Burma the rice bowl of Asia and developing coconut and rubber plantations throughout Southeast Asia, they also acted as local moneylenders. But during the first half of the 20th century, the development of nationalistic movements in Southeast Asian countries, the growth of legislation restricting indigenous banking and the increase of industrial opportunities within India for non-British businessmen all began to eat away at the Chettians' business empire.

But if there was a single action that could be held responsible for the ultimate crash, it was the British withdrawal

from Burma. Almost 70 per cent of Chettiar wealth was concentrated there, and in the eyes of the new regime, the Chettians were the accomplices of an unwanted ruler. They were forced to flee, leaving behind everything for which they had worked. Vast tracts of paddy field and business interests were abandoned as the Chettians returned to Chettinad with nothing but the houses their fortunes had built.

Few Chettians had bothered to invest in India, distrusting the country and disgusted by the endemic corruption, yet they now found themselves back there, unable to compete in areas where other businessmen had grown strong in their absence. The Chettians essentially had to start from scratch. 'No-one was able to continue because they had no money to lend, so they began educating their children, and are now becoming successful again,' says Meyyappan.

But where did the money come from



to educate this new generation? The mansions. One by one, they began to be dismantled and sold in the vast furniture and antique markets of Karakkudi and Chennai. With some properties containing more than 1,800 tonnes of teak alone, there was plenty of money to be made by selling the homes and their contents to India's newly rich.

By 2006, more than half of the mansions had already been torn down. Dismayed by the rapid disappearance of this forgotten corner of India's architectural heritage, Adment and Dragon contacted Dr Minja Yang, director of UNESCO's New Delhi office. 'I was aware of the Tamil traditional house layout of the succession of courtyards, but I did not know about Chettinad,' Yang explains. 'I must say, I was impressed when I first saw the town-planning ambition of these Chettinad villages – their wide streets, the buildings aligned in an orderly manner.'

'Looking at the facades of "hybrid" style, that funny mix of Europe and Asia, it made me think of the "native" colonial style of some buildings in Vietnam,' she continues. 'When I walked into the Chettinad houses, I was blown over by the harmony and the tranquil beauty, despite the rather busy decorative features in some of the houses.'

Yang immediately set to work, attempting to convince the national, state and local authorities to protect, conserve and enhance the villages and towns of Chettinad. 'We decided to "adopt" Chettinad as one of the UNESCO cultural itinerary routes in India, and started to multiply our contacts and official meetings with the cultural and tourism authorities of the Tamil Nadu state government,' she says.

### RESCUE MISSION

In 2006, the newly formed Revive Chettinad Development Project successfully petitioned UNESCO to place



ABOVE: the restored interior of the Visalam Hotel in Kanadukathan. Originally built by a local Chettiar for his eldest daughter, it was rarely used and was well preserved. The art-deco facades were left untouched, while the inner halls were partitioned into 15 rooms, with the floors relaid and walls replastered using traditional methods.

Chettinad on its watch list for the World Monument Fund. As the project gained momentum, it began to receive backing from the French government, as well as the state government of Tamil Nadu and the Indian Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Once funding had been secured, the next hurdle was figuring out exactly how to save the mansions. 'There was no real conservation plan in an urban context in India. Chettinad was really the pilot project,' Dragon explains.

Because of the region's remoteness, and lack of any local written records, no-one knew how many mansions there had been to begin with, nor how many were left. There weren't even any maps. So the first step was to carry out a detailed survey of the whole of Chettinad, a group of architects and urban planners, as well as a French

geographer working for six months to document what was left.

The next step was to start work on saving the mansions themselves. Here they faced another set of obstacles. First, there was the Chettians themselves. Many still lived abroad or in one of India's major cities. Many also had little interest in their old family palaces, having left them in the hands of housekeepers and butlers, who dealt with the day-to-day upkeep but had no power when it came to decisions about the property.

Then there was the issue of multiple ownership. As these were family homes, ownership was split between the male heirs, and any decisions about sales or restorations could only be made with the agreement of all of those heirs.

Some outsiders were lucky. When the

Indian hotel group CGH Earth, which specialises in heritage properties in southern India, decided to rent and restore one of the properties in the village of Kanadukathan, it discovered that it only had one owner, who readily agreed. Between 2005 and 2007, the company carried out a meticulous restoration of the 80-year-old art-deco-styled building using traditional techniques. Thus was born the Visalam Hotel, the first hotel opened by non-Chettians in the region.

'When we opened, all the Chettians came to see,' says Johny Peter, the hotel's general manager. 'They didn't stay or come to eat, but just to have a look. Now they all call CGH Earth and ask if we want to lease their mansion.'

Peter acknowledges that the mansions are in a dangerous position, but sees the Chettians themselves as the ultimate hurdle. 'Their attitudes have to change, and the Visalam leads through example,' he says.

### GREAT POTENTIAL

Tourism is vital in bringing much-needed capital into the region. The Visalam may lead, but others are now following. 'The Chettinad region has a great potential for heritage-based development because of the diversity of its tangible and intangible heritage,' Dragon explains. 'Sustainable tourism should be an opportunity for the development of the region, but local authorities have to make the region ready for such a development by improving infrastructure, implementing conservation and protection plans at regional and village levels, and helping the inhabitants by giving grants for the restoration of their homes.'

Yang is more blunt. 'It seems absolutely crazy to allow the incredible built heritage of these towns and villages to decay,' she says. 'It's like allowing oil to spill into the open sea without capping it and making use of it.'

But saving a mansion is a lot more work and far more expensive than destroying or even maintaining one. And with people regularly knocking on their doors offering to buy the valuable resources inside, there is a constant temptation for the Chettians to simply take the money and run. So the question now is, will they take as much pride in saving their heritage as their ancestors did in building it? **CS**