

At constant risk of death by demolition, unique merchant-owned properties in South India are starting to reopen their doors

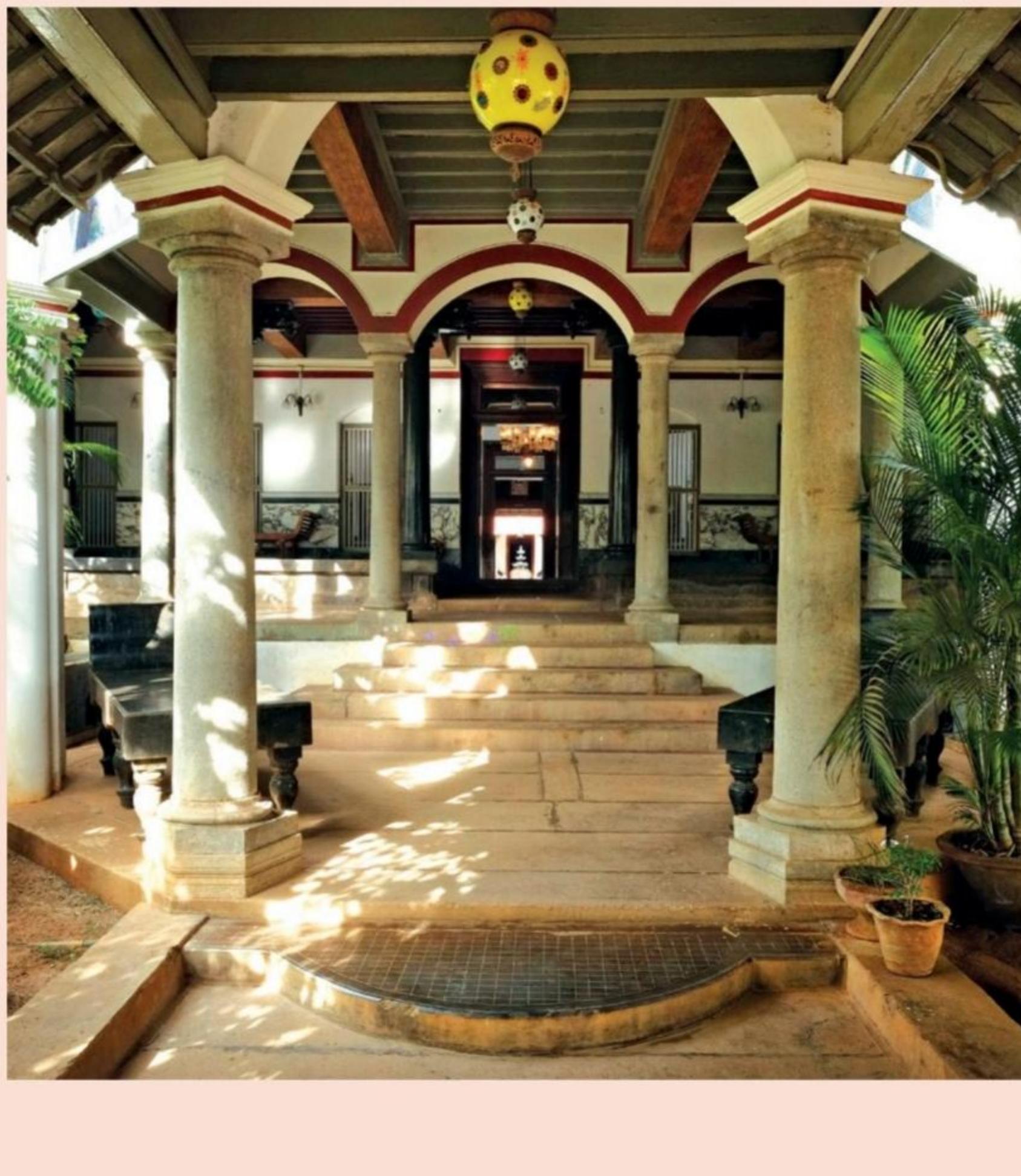
WORDS: ISABEL PUTINJA

The mansions of Chettinad

Enormous keys of heavy brass are among the many relics that can be found at Karaikudi's antique market. Their size hints at the grandeur of the palatial mansions they once unlocked the doors of: doors that have since been reduced to rubble. But others have escaped this sad fate; their ornate facades preserved as surviving architectural testaments to the heyday of the Chettinad, a wealthy merchant community. With over 10,000 of these time-worn mansions still standing, Chettinad may be home to one of the largest concentrations of heritage architecture in India.

Built from the mid 19th century, the 73 villages that make up Chettinad – located 400km south of Chennai – were meticulously planned. Compared to the often-haphazard configuration of many Indian towns and cities, the urban layout of these settlements is astonishingly orderly, with streets arranged in a neat grid plan of perfectly aligned rectangles. In between these arteries stand grand mansions, all of them arranged on an east-west axis according to the rules of the *Vastu Shastra* – an ancient Indian ‘science of architecture’ intended to marry the natural with the architectural.

Owned by wealthy teak and marble merchants from the 1850s to the 1940s, once-grand mansions in Chettinad fell into disrepair when their owners moved into main cities



The Chettinadars are a prosperous merchant community of traders and financiers who expanded their businesses and sought international trade opportunities in South East Asia in the latter part of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Amassing wealth across Burma, Indochina, Malaysia, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies and Ceylon, they put it towards the building of family retreats in their home of Chettinad.

The imposing two-storey structures create a sense of grandeur commensurate with the wealth of their owners. The monumental, ostentatious facades are often embellished with painted sculpted figures of Hindu deities, *rajas* and *rants* (kings and queens), British soldiers and hunters. Elaborate plaster balustrades, parapets, stucco cornices, colonnades and loggias were designed to add to their opulence and splendour.

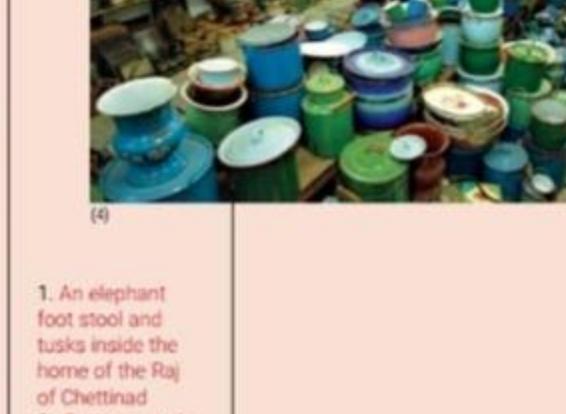
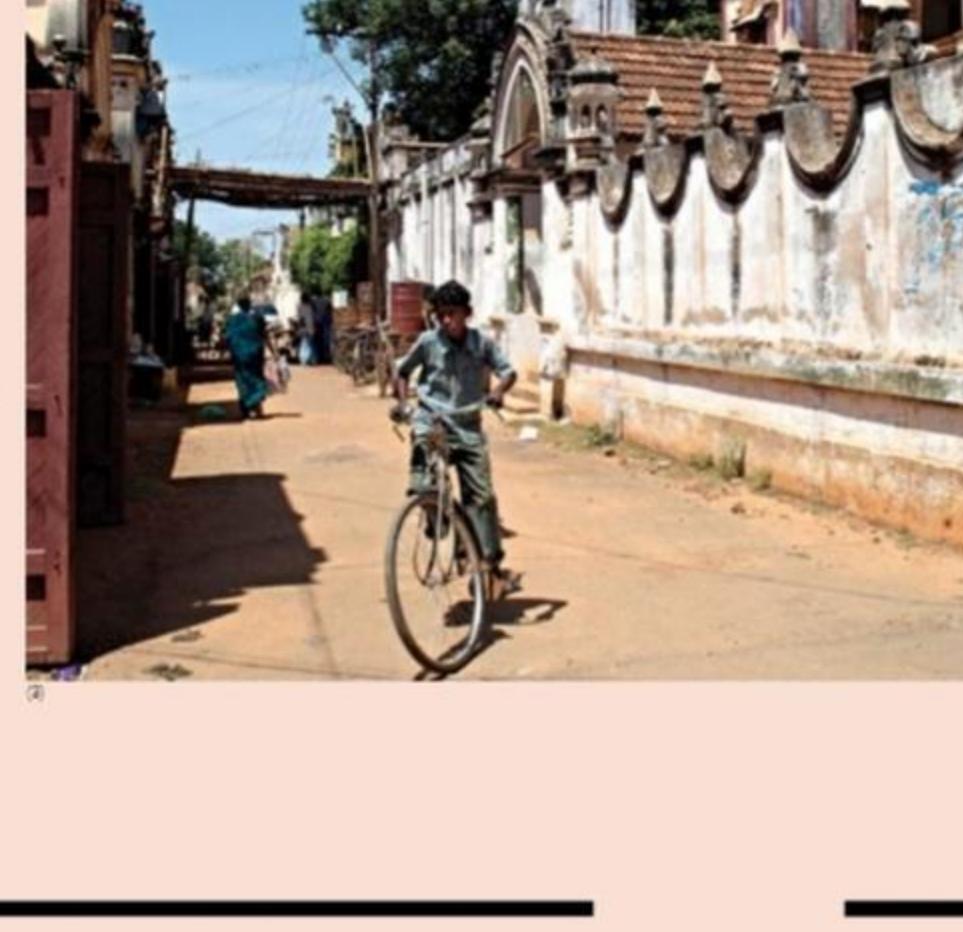
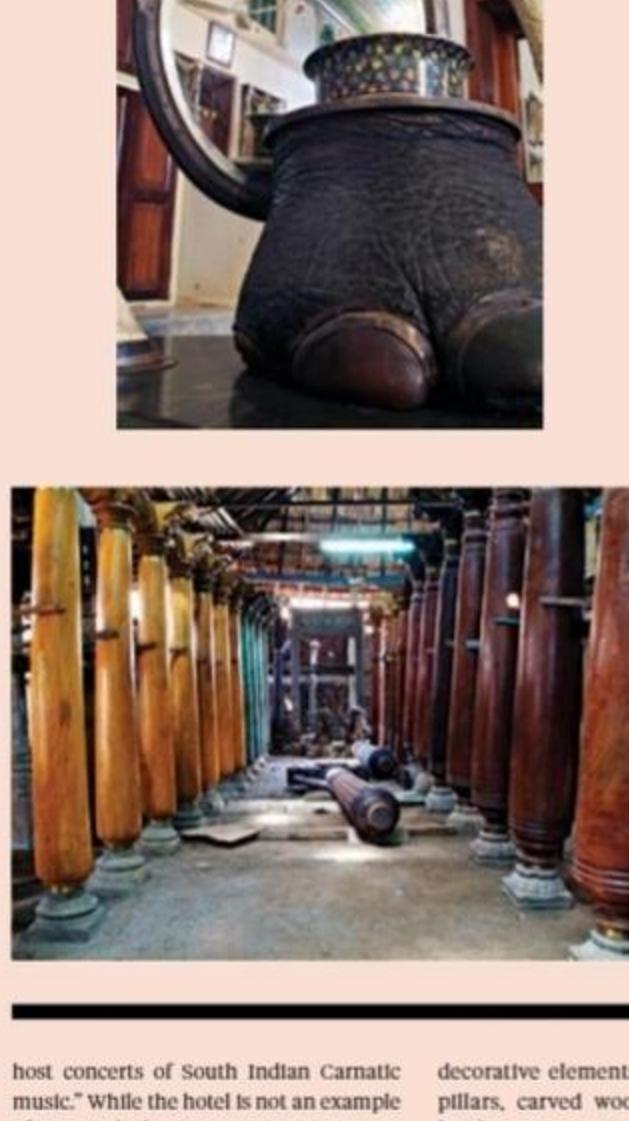
Inspired by their travels, a variety of architectural and decorative elements were integrated into their homes' exteriors and interiors.

With the Great Depression and Japanese invasion of South East Asia, the Chettinadars experienced a drastic turn in their fortunes. Hastening a return to India, many decided to settle in big cities that offered business opportunities. Unoccupied, their homes were left to slowly decay with the passage of time.

Meenakshi Meyyappan was two years old when her father left for Sri Lanka. “They started to return after World War II,” she says of the Chettinadars’ homecoming. “When they came back to their ancestral homes, they had to move on because they couldn’t make a living here. Some started businesses, while others found employment in Chennai and other cities. But they would always come back for Pongal, the harvest festival, and for important family functions like weddings.”

Now an author of several books on Chettinad heritage, Meyyappan also opened Chettinad’s first heritage hotel in Karaikudi, the economic centre of the region, in 1999.

“The Bangala was the family club,” she says of the heritage building the hotel occupies. “My father-in-law would take his friends there to play cards or tennis, and



1. An elephant foot stool and tusks inside the home of the Raj of Chettinad
2. Burmese teak and Sri Lankan jackwood pillars taken from various Chettinad mansions stand in a salvage yard in Karaikudi
3. Kanadukathan, a once-prosperous village in Chettinad
4. Colourful enamelware was imported from Europe
5. The Chettinadars were often referred to as the ‘Money Lenders of the Empire’
6. A Hindu temple in the village of Karaikudi

host concerts of South Indian Carnatic music.” While the hotel is not an example of a typical Chettinad mansion, its guests have the opportunity to visit a few in the area, including her own ancestral home, which has been impeccably maintained.

Today the upkeep of Chettinad’s mostly uninhabited heritage buildings, brimming with valuable materials and artefacts, poses a challenge. Shared ownership among several family members can complicate decisions on how they should be maintained. Many have been demolished for the tidy windfall that can be made from the sale of

decorative elements such as teakwood pillars, carved wooden doorways and heirlooms to antique markets. Others function as informal museums, welcoming visitors to explore their opulent interiors for a small fee.

In the village of Kothamangalam, one of these crumbling properties was transformed into a hotel in 2010, 100 years after its construction. The meticulous restoration of Saratha Vilas was a labour of love for Bernard Dragon and Michel Adment, a pair of French architects fascinated by Chettinad’s rich history and unique architectural style.

“These palatial homes combine a blend of architectural styles and influences which is unique to Chettinad architecture,” explains Dragon. “You can see Italian, English and French influences in their facades. But as soon as you step inside, there are traditional Tamil elements, such as wooden pillars and the central inner courtyard, which is the family sanctuary and found in every home. Equally fascinating are the different materials used in the interiors. Here at Saratha Vilas, we find marble tiles from Italy and Belgium, tilework from England and Japan, Burmese teak

and satinwood from Sri Lanka. The terracotta tiles are from France and Italy, while the mirrors come from Belgium.”

Dragon and Adment had spent years studying and documenting Chettinad’s cultural heritage when, in 2012, they were asked by the Ministry of Culture’s Advisory Committee on World Heritage Matters to assist with the application process to add Chettinad to UNESCO’s tentative list. Submitted as a site of outstanding universal value by the Permanent Delegation of India to UNESCO in 2014, it was added to India’s World Heritage list soon after.

In addition to its spectacular architecture, the region also has many examples of heritage beyond its houses: cultural practices and traditional skills, but also objects and artefacts. Sivagamasundari Thavamani is a conservation architect and conservator with roots in Chettinad. In 2016, she founded the association Muttram, with the objective to preserve and promote Chettinad’s heritage. “I’m interested in material conservation – how to conserve materials like textiles, metal, wood and paper,” she says. “Through workshops, I teach people from the Chettiar community how to

preserve the antiques they have in their homes. This includes metal and wooden objects, but also the conservation of paper materials like letters and photos.”

Permanent exhibitions of these heritage objects, many imported from South East Asia, are on display at the Chettiar Lifestyle Museum in Koviloor and Alagappa Chettinad Museum in Karaikudi. The plethora of items includes relics commonly found in Chettiar homes: colourful enamelware; Burmese fans made of cloth and leather; coins from the Dutch East Indies; rosewood carvings; Burmese teak trays and spice boxes;



7. Bullocks enjoy the shade outside the art deco manor turned boutique hotel, The Bangala
8. A typical house key in Chettinad
9. Ceiling tiles at Athangudi Palace



10. A statue inside Chettinad Mansion, a century-old mansion converted into a hotel in Kanadukathan
11. The dry region incorporates sun-dried meats and salted vegetables into its cuisine



kitchen tools; copper pots; oil lamps and bronze sculptures, to name but a few.

Craftsmanship is another strong example of intangible heritage in the region. Visitors can see artisans at work in their workshops making handmade floor tiles, weaving the region’s typical *kandangi* saris made of cotton in bright hues, or colourful palm leaf baskets called *kottan*.

Crafts and objets d’art are all well and good, but local food always remains one of the biggest reasons to visit a city or region. Luckily, the distinctive Chettinad

cuisine is a strong draw for travellers. Traditionally vegetarian, the cuisine evolved as the Chettinadars travelled across India and South East Asia and adopted new tastes. To the South Indian staples of rice, coconut and vegetables, they added meat and spices such as Telli-cherry pepper from the Malabar coast, cardamom from Ceylon, Indonesian nutmeg, and galangal from Indochina.

One of the best places to sample Chettinad fare is at The Bangala, where meals are served on a traditional banana leaf. A signature dish at its award-win-

ning restaurant is *uppu karti*, made with lamb, shallots, tomatoes, Sri Lankan cinnamon bark, turmeric and its most essential ingredient: flavourful and potent dried goondu milagai chillies.

A tireless promoter of Chettinad culture, Meyyappan also does her part for its cuisine through cooking classes at The Bangala. “We started residential cooking classes seven years ago,” she says. “We offer three-day and seven-day courses during which participants visit the local market and bazaar to source ingredients and learn how to prepare dozens of authentic

Chettinad recipes. We’ve had participants from all over the world, including a Japanese group that comes every year.”

With the growth of heritage tourism has come developments such as increased transportation links. Accessibility has improved with newly paved roads and better signage pointing the way to the main towns and villages on the heritage trail: Karaikudi, Kanadukathan, Athangudi, Pallathur, Kothamangalam and Kadipatti.

Chettinad’s growing popularity has brought economic opportunities for lo-

cal communities, says RM. N. Karuppan, the former head of the town council of Kanadukathan.

“Tourism to Chettinad began 20 years ago, but has increased over the past decade with more foreign tourist arrivals,” he says. “An awareness programme launched by UNESCO brought attention to the region. With government support, there was road and water development and street lighting was improved. In the past few years there have been more shops and hotels opening as part of tourism development, which has

brought financial flow and increased livelihoods for the local community.”

Today, Chettinad can stand confidently on the heritage map. With a historical and cultural value recognised both locally and internationally, more and more visitors are interested in exploring its architectural, culinary and artistic traditions. The next step for the conservation of its rich heritage would be measures to preserve and protect it.

Having stood the test of time, the majestic but fading mansions of Chettinad deserve a breath of eternal life.