

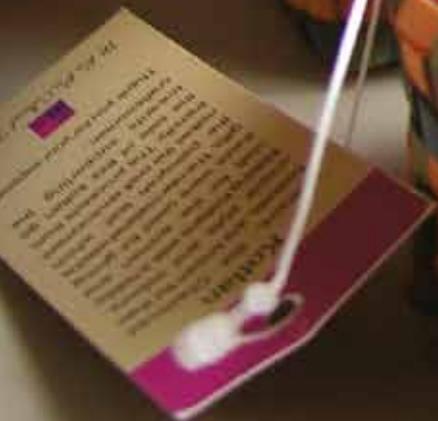
Cornucopia of ART

Chettinad is a treasure trove of handicrafts and well-known for Athangudi tiles and Kandangi saris

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Close to the temple city of Madurai lies the arid and sun-baked region of Chettinad that comprises 96 villages of which only 75 still survive. A walk through these dusty and languid villages in the Sivagangai district and one witnesses the large sprawling Nagarathar Chettiar mansions. The mansions were so huge that they spread from one street to the other and housed goods of great value: Belgium glass, Italian marble, Spanish granite, Czech enamelware and Burmese wood.

A Various products can be made with palm leaves



PALETTE
ART



B

The Chettiars poured their earnings back in their villages and built opulent houses with a mix of Hindu and English architecture



C

WARP AND WEFT

Extended families lived together in these mansions as one big family, following traditions and culture religiously. With men having gone overseas for a few years, the womenfolk would manage the kitchen, cattle stock and children efficiently. During their spare time, they would weave colourful palm leaf baskets and bold chequered saris. Typically, these Kandangi saris were worn by the Chettiar women without a blouse or petticoat and twirled around the body such that the pleats were at the back. Made of cotton, the fabric is slightly coarse but very breathable. Hence, a perfect attire for the hot climatic conditions of the region. With bright hues, broad borders, stripes and checks, the Kandangi has graced the curves of the Chettinad women since times of yore. Old Kandangi saris were converted into cradles by these frugal women. Today, when you saunter through the by-lanes of Karaikudi, the largest city in Chettinad, you might hear the clickety-clack of the handloom, weaving the rare Kandangis. Most weavers have turned to other means of livelihood as despite putting in long hours and efforts, the returns have been limited. However, a few weavers have ensured the warp and weft story of the Kandangi does not go into oblivion.

A BASKET OF REVIVAL

Keelayapatti, a village in Chettinad, has suddenly appeared on the map of art as the

B Bright handmade Athangudi tiles

C A colourful potli made from palm leaf

D Palm leaf baskets made from natural dyes



D

dying handicraft of palm baskets has been revived by M.Rm. Rm Cultural Foundation, a Chennai-based NGO that supports and works towards the revival of rural crafts, textiles and architecture. Local women are trained to make colourful baskets using natural dyes. The baskets are woven deftly with nimble fingers by 80-odd women spread across three centres. A medium-sized basket is conventionally woven in two days. These palm baskets project took off in 2002 and today, these Chettinad Kottans, the traditional palm leaf baskets, have a UNESCO heritage stamp. Beautiful baskets, pouches with crochet and beadworks find their way across the globe.

TILES FOR A MILE

A short distance by road from Karaikudi is Athangudi, a namesake for bright handmade tiles which are a riot of colours. The tiles are made from red soil found only in Athangudi. It is mixed with cement and oxides to form slurry. On a 9x9 glass tile, various colours are used and either a free hand drawing or a geometrical pattern is made after which the slurry is poured into the moulds. Unlike regular tiles, these are not baked but soaked in water for two to three days and then sundried for 10 days. Easy to maintain, they adorn the floors of most houses in this region.