

CHETTIARS OF SAIGON by Premoj Thomas

This Indian community had a migration pattern with a difference!

They are the Nagarathar Chettiars of South India. They were also called Nattukottai Chettiars ('Nattukottai' means 'palatial mansions in the countryside')

The Chettiars originate from the Chettinad region in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. They made up just a small percentage of the Tamils who came to colonial SE Asia....but they had a significant impact on its economic growth.

From the late 18thC onwards, Chettiar men, who were originally traders, were encouraged by the European colonial governments to set up their moneylending businesses in major towns in SE Asia.

They left their families ...women and children, in Chettinad...and sailed to SriLanka, Myanmar, Malaya and Singapore, Sumatra and Java, and Vietnam.

Whether one called them moneylenders or pawn brokers, Chettiars in SE Asia were the early microfinanciers of local small businesses, run by local residents or migrant entrepreneurs. In the many countries of SE Asia, the few formal European and Chinese banks catered mainly to the European merchants and the trading houses. So the Chettiars were needed to provide loans to finance the new and emerging economic growth! They had the capital, the skill and the network in finding good investments. (Loans to rice-farmers, rubber planters, tin mine or shophouse owners, small businesses and traders etc.)

Another important function was the safe and sure handling of the remittance system within SE Asia and with India through their own agents.

Their offices were in shophouses, which they called kittangi (Tamil word for 'store-house'). It was a shared workspace, with each man occupying a small office-space about 4' by 8'.

Chettiars arrived in Singapore in the 1820s. They set up kittangis along Market and Chulia Streets. Ideal locations, adjacent to both the Commercial Square and the busy loading areas of the Singapore River.

So why were they so successful?

- Trust and discipline in their dealings with their clients. Also within their network of Chettiar offices spanning SEAsia
- Chettiar men followed a simple lifestyle--with the offices on the ground floor of the shophouse, and living communally in the upper floor.

- Meticulous bookkeeping. With their knowledge of banking and English skills, they would borrow from the banks; and then write their internal accounts and bookkeeping, internal memos and correspondences in Tamil!
- Skill for numbers and mental maths!
- Charging high interest rates.

It all made for effective financing!

Boys in India, would be mentored and coached in bookkeeping and finance by a close male relative, then sent as an apprentice to another Chettiar office, till they received enough experience to return to the family office. Some boys, about 10 and 11yrs old, would leave home with a family member for cities in India or SEAsia to 'learn the business'

Then every 3yrs, each man would return to Chettinad, on 'sabbatical', to reconnect with his family, take up his householder duties, and to mentor the next generation. If they were eligible bachelors, they might get married. After a couple of years, the men would sail off again to resume their overseas career.

Note: Most South Asian migrants worked, saving or remitting their wages home to their families, for several years before even returning home for a visit.

Ancestral homes in the Chettiar homeland, Chettinad, were built for extended families. There were multiple courtyards and verandas, lined with large pillars of Burmese teak, colorful majolica tiles on the walls and marble floors. The spacious interiors displayed foreign luxury items eg Burmese teak furniture and lacquerware, European glass craft, Italian chandeliers.

Nagarathar weddings were held on a grand scale in the massive ancestral homes. Many families would join in the celebration. Dowry and gifts for the bride were gold jewellery, Ceylon and Burmese gems, European crystal, Burmese lacquer boxes, silver cutlery.

ARTEFACTS

Why was the Chettiar's migration pattern different? (Frequent travel to hometown to reconnect with family; the simple dress and lifestyle at odds with generosity towards temple; the Chettiars' French Connection in Saigon rather with the familiar English colonial story; lost it all but saved the jewels;....)

#19. DHOTI or LONGCLOTH

Dhoti H:204cm X L: 252cm Long Cloth

H: 107cm X L: 366cm

20thC, Bombay,India

Machine made cotton. Maker: The Finlay Group of Mills

(Uncertain if photo of 2 Chettiars will be exhibited, as no details of photo have been given)

In the photo, we see 2 Chettiar men in quite simple attire, just 2 unstitched white cotton cloth. Each has worn the thicker cloth wrapped around his waist, like an ankle-length sarong. Its called a dhoti (or veshti in Tamil).

The finer, softer shawl/angavastram is draped across the bare chest and over the shoulder.

The white lines of sacred ash (vibhuti) applied on forehead, and sometimes on arms and chest indicate his devotion to the Hindu god, Shiva and his son, Murugan

Both men are barefeet. Probably just about to slip on their sandals as they step out of a Hindu temple into the street, with black umbrella in hand.

The Chettiars men sailed to Vietnam (then called French Cochinchina /Indo-China) in the 1870s as moneylenders/financiers. They used the French ports of Pondicherry (renamed Puducherry) and Karaikkal in South India to sail to Saigon, which we now know as Ho Chi Minh City.

They set up their moneylending businesses in the 'Tamil Quarter', along Saigon's Ohier Street/Rue d'Ohier, with the Chettiar Association, dormitory and temple all close by. They also acquired considerable urban properties. From the 1930s, a few Chettiar women joined their husbands to set up homes there.

The Nagarathar Chettiars built temples to the Hindu god, Murugan wherever they settled in SE Asia, regardless of whether it was an area under British or French rule.

The following deity jewellery were commissioned by the Saigon Chettiar community, as 'alamkara', to decorate the statues in the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple there. They are all made in the early 20thC and probably crafted in India.

However with the reunification of North and South Vietnam at the end of the Vietnam/American war in 1975, and resulting political turmoil, the Chettiars left Vietnam losing all their possessions.

But the temple treasures were saved...and some of those items are now here on loan for this exhibition from the Saigon Chettiars' Temple Trust. (Similar jewellery, on long-term loan from the Trust, can be seen at the Indian Heritage Centre).

(Additional note: In Burma, the Chettiar presence lasted only till the 1930s. In the 1800s, rural credit offered by Chettiars, had helped in the expansion and success of rice production, such that Burma became the 'Rice Bowl of Asia'. Local rice farmers took loans using their lands and property as collateral. But then the economic depression of the 1930s resulted in foreclosures and

panic and resentment as land titles fell to the Chettiars. The Burmese government stepped in and cancelled the debts of its citizens, and nationalized the land holdings. The Chettiars lost everything, and so began their 'exodus from Burma' back to India)

30 VEL/ SPEAR

Vietnam

20th century

Length 50.8 x W 5.7 x Thick 0.7cm; Vel head: 8.8 x 5.7 x 0.7cm; weight 471.9 grams

Gold, emeralds, rubies, diamonds

Saigon Chettiar's Temple Trust Pte Ltd

Like all Hindu gods, Murugan is often identified by attributes he holds....his sacred Vel, or spear. This refers to the vel given by his mother, goddess Parvati, to defeat a demon (the evil asura, Soorapadman).

Tamils in Singapore and Malaysia celebrate that victory with the Thaipusam festival and procession held in Jan/Feb. (9 Feb, 2017)

In Saigon (Ho Chi Minh), the Thaipusam procession is no longer held since 1975 when many Indians and most of the Chettiars left. The temple is very popular with Vietnamese worshippers. More Indians have in the last couple of decades, moved to Ho Chi Minh City as professionals in IT and pharmaceutical companies.

(Sg's Thaipusam procession: Devotees commit to a month of religious preparation, as a sign of their faith in fulfilling a vow or as penance. Many carry a pot of milk or a simple wooden kavadi, while others have elaborate heavier kavadis as an offering to Murugan. They pierce their skin, their tongue, cheek, face, arms, and back with small spears and hooks. They walk from Srinivasa Perumal Temple on Serangoon Rd and Thendayuthapani Temple on Tank Rd.)

#31 KILI / PARROT

Vietnam

20th century

Height 17.5 x Width 2.79cm; Length of Kili: 11.46 cm; Weight 262.2 grams

Gold, emeralds, rubies, diamonds

Saigon Chettiar's Temple Trust Pte Ltd

Murugan is usually associated with the peacock as his vahana or vehicle. But here we see a parrot. It could be symbolic of the parrot seen on the shoulder of Goddess Meenakshi of Madurai, a popular goddess for all Tamil Hindus. (She is a form of Parvati).

Or another story goes like this:

A famous 15thC Tamil poet, named Arunagirinathar, was tricked by another jealous poet, into looking for a special herb, to heal the king. The problem was that the herb could only be found in the heavens. So his spirit left his body to enter a parrot and flew off. In the meantime, his enemy searched and found the body....and burned it to prevent the poet returning. The poor poet was so dejected. Murugan appeared and told him to create poetry praising the gods, but the poet was unable to do so. Murugan then wrote a mantra of sacred words on his tongue.....and the poet began to compose songs praising Murugan. That is why we have Arunagirinathar, as a parrot on Murugan's staff.

(Pronounced 'Aruna-giri-nathar' (aka Arunagiriar; nathar..a term of respect), a 15thC poet-saint, who composed the Thiruppugazh, a collection of 'songs of praise' with amazing rhythms and wordplays. Check out movie clip listed under bibliography)

#32GOWRISHANKARAM or NECKLACE WITH RUDRAKSHA and GOLD PENDANT

20thC, Vietnam

L 56 cm; Pendant (top): W 5.8 x H 3.6 x Thickness 1.2 cm; Locket (bottom): H 3.9 x W 3.2 x Thickness: 2.1 cm; Weight: 151.9 grams

Gold

Saigon Chettiar's Temple Trust Pte Ltd

A gowrishankaram necklace strung with Rudraksha berries and a large pendant. It is an ornament that only men wear! A Shaivite priest or a Chettiar may wear it on festivals

But this artefact is a piece of deity jewellery commissioned in the early 20thC by the Chettiar community in Saigon for the statues at the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple, Saigon.

Gowrishankaram.....Derives its name from Gauri, another name of goddess Parvati, the consort of Shiva. Shankara is another name for Shiva.

The exterior is probably densely patterned with Shiva, his consort and son, Murugan. Parvati or Nandi?

The pendant or lingam box may contains a jangam (mobile) lingam. This lingam, or sacred symbol of Shiva, but worshipped regularly and on special events.

During Thaipusam processions, Nagathar Chettiars may wear this while carrying the kavadi during Thaipusam processions

The necklace can also be called a Rudraksha Malai. Shaivite devotees may wear a chain with 1 or many berries around their neck and not remove them.

The rudraksha berries signify the Hindu god, Rudra, another name for Shiva. (fruit of *Elaeocarpus Ganitrus*). Aksha means eye or tear

#33 GOLD NECKLACE WITH NECKBAND

Vietnam, 20thC

Length: 88 cm; Pendant (top) 10.5 x 4 x 0.9 cm; Locket (bottom): 4 x 3.8 x 1.9 cm; Weight: 306.5 grams

Gold

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Similar to the Gowrishankaram with the pendant and lingam box. The green neckband reinforces the chains as it hangs on neck of the deity

#34 PRABHAVALI or ARCH IN GOLD (Highlight artefact of exhibition)

H 108.5 x W 63 cm; Weight: 6,213.6 grams

Gold

Saigon Chettiar's Temple Trust Pte Ltd

This large golden decorative arch is called a prabhavali. Prabha-vali ='Radiant circle' to frame the deity. It shows flames along the outer edge; a 'Kirti-mukha' at the top of the fire-arch. Deity statue --either a standing statue or one sitting on a raised lotus-pedestal

The Saigon Chettiars built 2 temples to Murugan ...the SriThendayuthapani Temple and the Subramaniam Swamy Temple. They even took over the maintenance of the oldest Saigon temple, the Sri Mariamman temple, which had been financed by Tamils who had come with the French, during the conquest of CochinChina.

#35 GOLD NECKLACE OR KASUMALAI

L: 50.2 cm; Coin (40 pieces): approx 18.71mm diameter; Thickness approx 0.76mm; Weight: 208.7 grams

Gold

Saigon Chettiar's Temple Trust Pte Ltd

Gold deity jewellery. Kasu means coin; and malai means necklace. A strand of 40 gold coins offered to the temple for the deity to wear on special occasions and festivals.

Markings on obverse and reverse? Hindu kasumalais often show goddess Lakshmi on each coin

FYI: FROM CHETTIARS TO FINANCIERS BY CHERN LIAN SHAN (2001)

The familiar outdoor bronze sculpture is being restored and due to return in December 2016, to a site near the ACM and Anderson Bridge. It shows a Nagarathar Chettiar and a Chinese clerk from the past and a modern female financial trader.

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IMPORTANT NOTE: Outside the time-frame of exhibition.

Early interaction between India and SEAsia is evident in several early Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms in SEAsia from the 1st millenium. In Vietnam, there were the Funan and Champa kingdoms around the 1stC to 13thC, with cultural and religious influences brought in by traders from India.

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<http://www.stemple.com/information/about-chettiars.html>

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=N1NFW4GkPpc> Great movie clip (1964) on Arunagirinathar song 'Mulaitharu'.