FULLY FED UP AND FULFILLED

Meenakshi Meyyappan, the spirit behind the Bangala and author of a fine cookbook, believes Chettinad feasts are one way to make the region a magnet for tourists, writes **Rahul Jacob**

The Bangala encourages gluttony, with lunches on banana leaf that include crab curry, crab rasam, mutton apu kari, a pomegranate raita and several vegetable dishes

It is six months since I stayed at the Bangala, a small boutique hotel in Chettinad, and yet I remember it as if I had just awoken from a dream. The memories are of dining tables with silver cutlery, surrounded by staff in white shirts and white lungis carrying salvers and pressing more food upon hotel guests. Quail curry one moment, crab the next; the Bangala felt akin to being at the home of my Tamil grandmother who awoke at dawn to prepare enormous feasts of idlis and chicken curry if we were visiting.

The first dinner I ate at the Bangala with a group of friends began with a carrot soup, which was followed by two helpings of a delicious red cabbage and orange salad. After that, we had exceptionally light appams served with fish curry, cashew curry and a sambol. I ate with the abandon of a teenager on parole from boarding school. The plates were cleared and another waiter arrived offering us a Chettinad chicken biryani. One becomes quickly acclimatised to this strange custom at the Bangala of serving two dinners for the price of one, all the while feebly protesting and promising to eat less at the next meal. And, so it went at breakfast, lunch and dinner for three days of unrestrained gluttony. Every meal was like being at an old-world Indian wedding rooted in the best of a local cuisine before "live" pasta/dosa/galouti counters took hold.

I have never accomplished less on a holiday than I did at the Bangala. We visited no temples and did very little sightseeing except to visit the fantastically grand jumble of styles of nearby Chettinad mansions. Houses in Tudor, Victorian, Art Nouveau and Indo crumbling chic all sit side by side as if the town were a large-scale model for an accelerated course in architecture. I swam in the pool regularly, but largely to work up an appetite for the next meal.

By day three, the octogenarian spirit behind the Bangala, Meenakshi Meyyappan, whose family owns it, had a quiet word with me. She was worried that I and "the boys" (my friend's sons in their twenties) weren't enjoying ourselves because we had done so little. But, erratic Wi-Fi in our wing of the 25-room hotel and epic dinners meant we had more time for conversation; I came to admire the eclectic interests of my friend's sons. One found hilarious British Indian words from *Hobson Jobson*, the colonial-era dictionary that is a reminder of the khichdi that English is, with words like shampoo and indeed bungalow and kedgeree having Indian origins. Our favourite phrase was "darwaza bandh", used by the major-domo when the memsahib and sahib did not wish to be disturbed.

Meyyappan, who will be 84 in a fortnight, is a much more energetic memsahib than her colonial counterparts. She embarked on her career as a hotelier two decades ago when she was in her sixties, an age when the rest of us are winding down. Meyyappan and a relative by marriage, Visalakshi Ramaswamy, who is responsible for the understated design of the property, were worried that Chettiars with ties to Karaikudi and the means to maintain 85-room villas were dwindling. Two decades on, their project to revive the region as a tourism destination seems about half complete. "My son tells me to take things day by day, but that is impossible for me. There is too much at stake," Meyyappan told *The New York Times* last year.

Even if you are a laidback underachiever as I am, witnessing the work ethic of this octogenarian, who now doubles as manager of the hotel after her long-time manager retired, is reason enough to visit. When I suggested a sturdy orthopaedic quadri-pronged walking stick was what she needed after hip surgery last year, she dismissed the idea with the vehement impatience of someone in a hurry. On our last evening, I asked if she ever felt lonely living away from her family in Chennai. Her reply was matter-of-fact. After overseeing dinner at the hotel — or rather ensuring that her guests had wildly overeaten while she dined on a small plate of curd rice — she returned home tired to her family's stunning Art Nouveau mansion, with checker floors that look like they have been made for a chess game; she only had time for reading "biographies". I doubt there is a hotel in the country with a better collection of books, procured from the iconic bookshop that used to be at the Connemara in Chennai.

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MEENAKSHI MEYYAPPAN

Born in Bangalore (now Bengaluru) and raised in colonial Ceylon, Meyyappan could probably run Chennai if she were younger. Instead, she has focused her energies on helping put Karaikudi, an unremarkable two-hour drive from Madurai mostly through a harsh landscape of dry shrub, on the map by opening the Bangala and publicising its cuisine through an exceptional cookbook, *The Bangala Table*, published in 2014. A cast of international chefs have been visitors to the property. I was travelling with a Kiwi friend, a well-known chef, and soon got used to her tendency to lapse into a reverential silence at meal-times at the Bangala.

Still, helping India and the world discover Chettinad remains an uphill battle. The Chettiar community had a great run as bankers in colonial times in places such as Burma (Myanmar) and Malaysia, but their genius as the equivalent of the Lehman Brothers and the Goldman Sachs of the 150-year colonial era now seems a mere historical curiosity. (The Chettiars became celebrated carnivores on their long sojourns overseas; a barbecued fish recipe in the cookbook uses garlic chilli sauce, recalling the Nyonya cuisine of Malaysia rather than southern India.)

A revival of a sort is underway. A childhood friend of mine, Priya Paul of the Park Hotel group, piled suggestions upon me of what to do in and around Karaikudi. The Park is restoring a house that will be made into a 21-room and suites hotel and open in 2019. The group will open a large café there next month. But get lost, as we did one morning wandering the streets, and Karaikudi does not feel like a place about to pole-vault onto a list of "100 places to visit before you die" as, say, Fort Cochin did a couple of decades ago.

This is part of Chettinad's charm. The guides tell you stories shot full of nostalgia and lost fortunes. I took no notes so may have this wrong but in one of the mansions we visited, I was told that the doors in the back courtyard had to be kept closed because to have the front and back doors open at the same time would result in even more Chettiar wealth flowing away. There is the melancholy of a town that looks to the past rather than to the future. Sidhpur in Gujarat, where the Bohra Muslims, a similarly globe-trotting trading community, built mansions in a very Italian style has much the same feeling. In Chettinad, one sees many wonders: Murano glass chandeliers brought from Italy, teak imported from Burma and used as handsome doors with carvings venerating Shiva and Vishnu. The tiling on the floors is one of a kind, like carpeting. The tile factory in Athangudi will leave most visitors fantasising about importing a truckload to redo their living room floors.

But, one also often sees large mansions that are darkened by soot, black mould and dust. We walked into one by mistake. The lady of the house had made a paltry business selling savoury snacks to tourists. In the gloom and squalor, I could see her husband understandably scowling at the intruders. What was once a grand mansion felt like a run-down house, like India in microcosm. The other problem is that Karaikudi is a thoroughly mofussil town, bypassed by industry and prospects. In such a setting, the grand mansions sometimes seemed a reminder, to paraphrase Joan Didion writing about grand houses in Newport built in the early 20th century by America's robber baron industrialists, of "how prettily money can be spent" but also "of how harshly money is made". As admirable as the Chettiar community is today, there is a moral ambiguity to the narrative of Chettinad: being financial intermediaries for the British in dealing with the small trader and farmer in places such as Burma, India and Malaysia must often have required being the very opposite of Robin Hood.

Back at the Bangala, the ceaseless bustle of a kitchen out of a myth keeps such thoughts at bay. Return from sightseeing and you are rewarded with lunches on banana leaf that include crab curry, crab rasam, mutton apu kari, a pomegranate raita and several vegetable dishes. (When I looked at my bill as I left, I thought I had been under-charged; lunch and dinner cost just ₹1,000 each.) We met families who had been coming back every year to the Bangala for more than a decade. My friends and I have already spoken about returning. It is an unusual hotelier who leaves guests with the illusion they are reclaiming an ancestral home. Against considerable odds, that is what Meenakshi Meyyapan's generosity has accomplished at the Bangala.

PHOTOS: DEIDI VON SCHAEWEN

TALKING POINT

SHUMA RAHA

Call of the beard

Watched the Robert De Niro video clip that went viral last week? The one where the actor, while speaking at the Tony Awards in New York, shook his fists and cussed US President Donald Trump with the F-word? Yes, yes, like most people I too laughed helplessly as he repeated the insult and got a standing ovation from the audience. But a part of me was busy with another thought: De Niro, the craggy-faced star of many virtuoso performances, was wearing a beard. A nice white beard that underlined his seniority and made his denunciation of Trump seem even more whiplash than it was.

Thing is, I've become a beard-watcher lately. I've suddenly become conscious that a huge number of male celebrities in India and the West are sporting facial hair. Straggly or spruce, abundant or close-clipped, a rippling cataract or a mere stubble — the beard seems to be very much a part of the male zeitgeist today. Heck, even Prince Harry wed his American bride Meghan Markle with his ginger beard intact — upending tradition and giving grief to those who were betting that he would shave.

In India, too, the beard has become *the* marker of masculinity. And like any other fashion trend, this too is being driven by cricket and Bollywood — the twin engines of our culture. Who can miss Virat Kohli's sharply contoured beard that's pointed almost to a V? (V for Victory, V for Virat — take your pick.) However, it's not just Captain Kohli. Most members of the Indian cricket team wear some sort of facial fur. It's as if they wouldn't be admitted into the dressing room if they left their cheeks exposed to the elements.

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The hunks of Bollywood have taken up the beard challenge too. Ranbir Kapoor, Ranveer Singh, Vicky Kaushal (of *Raazi* fame), Saif Ali Khan, Aamir Khan, Shahid Kapoor... they're all magnificently whiskered and bearded now. In the much-talked about recent film *Veere Di Wedding*, Kareena Kapoor's intended wears a patchy goatee; her friend Sonam Kapoor's one-night stand exhibits a lush, glossy beard. He also grins like a jackass, but that is beside the point.

Indeed, the only Bollywood A-listers still batting for the clean-shaven are Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan and Akshay Kumar. But given the formidable peer pressure, who knows how long they will hold out.

Our politicians are also doing their bit for the power beard. Witness Prime Minister Narendra Modi's exquisitely groomed snow-white beard, Amit Shah's somewhat scant salt-and-pepper one or Chandrababu Naidu's short white chin-beard. Rahul Gandhi too flaunts a greying stubble off and on, though one wishes he would make up his mind whether he wants it off or on.

So how did things get so, er, hairy? Time was when a beard — flowing, luxuriant — signified a certain saintly sagacity. (Think Tagore or Tolstoy.) Later, ageing movie stars took to growing beards — Sean Connery's rakish beard made him way more shekshy and Amitabh Bachchan's catapulted him into a whole new avuncular league.

But today, the beard is undergoing a tremendous democratisation. Men are embracing it — not just as a fashion statement, but as a badge of their machismo, a symbol of their surging testosterone. In India, though, it's mostly the younger lot who seem intoxicated with the idea of wearing facial fur. Even as we speak, maybe fathers are telling their young sons about the beards and the bees. Sure, women can do most things men can, but they can't grow a beard, right? So there.

Sadly, facial foliage is not for everyone. Brad Pitt's occasional unkempt beard is a perfect fright. Leonardo di Caprio's beard — now vigorous, now like a denuded rainforest — is pretty hideous too. But when fashion rules, who cares about looks? The other day I went to a busy south Delhi market and stood people-watching for five minutes. Believe it or not, every second young man passing by, including two parking attendants, sported bristly cheeks.

Guys, we get it that the beard is having a great cultural moment. But really, the world would be an awfully boring place if most of you went around with hair on your faces.