

HOMES AND GARDENS

Athangudi tiles: For a classic flooring

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Athangudi handmade tiles look chic even in modern houses, and a range of designs produced locally are available in Bengaluru now. By Ranjani Govind



Athangudi tiles are handmade and named after Athangudi, the village where they originated and located in the Chettinad area of Tamil Nadu. They are also known as 'Chettinad tiles' or 'Karaikudi tiles' portraying the legacy of Chettinad. Thousands of families were once involved in the making of these tiles, with the traditional craft passed over generations.

Well-known eco-friendly architect Benny Kuriakose who follows no-waste construction says, “Have you seen Chettinad’s brick and mortar treasures? The walls and floor belie their age and even corners look as if they were polished recently. I have delved into Chettinad interiors that bring in signature Athangudi floor tiles, making their mansions captivating. Athangudi’s vibrant floral and geometric patterns have graduated from being signatures of a Karaikudi mansion to being the ornamental pride of popular hotels in India and abroad.”

History

More than two decades ago arts boutique Kipling & Co Arts in Chennai had shared information to this reporter on how patterned Athangudi tiles were inspired by Victorian tiles in the United Kingdom, and how the tiles were later attempted to be made in Chettinadu. Originally tiles from Germany, England and Italy made their way into the homes of affluent Nattukotai Chettairs, but when the tiles were seen wearing away with time, fixing them became burdensome. That was when - more than 150 years ago - enterprising people of the area learnt tile-making for having a trademark of their own in Athangudi. The tiles processed were a blend of the originals and were expensive.

Chettinad splendour

The ethnic interior products supplied by restoration boutique Madhurya Creations in Bengaluru have an understated yet classic décor. Madhurya’s interior decorations bring reminiscences of the bungalows of Karaikudi where ancestral homes were owned by the mercantile community of Tamil Nadu. Pointing to the Chettinad treasures in the form of carved pillars, stained glass windows, Athangudi tiles and decorative doors at Madhurya’s workshop space, Bharathy Harish of Madhurya Creations says “Restoration being our motto, we can re-create homes with earthy decors more so with the Chettinad splendour. As we have our own Sri Sri Rural Development Programme (SSRDP) unit for manufacturing Athangudi tiles, we can supply them individually or take up a collective-décor package for homes bringing in pillars, Tanjore paintings, windows & doors, and the supply and laying of Athangudi floor tiles.”



Freshly made tile | Photo Credit: Madhurya Creations

Workers on the job | Photo Credit: Madhurya Creations

“River sand, white cement, natural colour oxides and water go into this distinctive traditional hand-processed tile that does not require electricity or any kind of firing. They are immersed in water for curing and dried in shade later,” says Mohan Iyer who heads the Athangudi production unit at SSRDP. “This unit was formally started in the end of 2021 under the guidance of Sri Ravishankar to encourage artisans from Athangudi to manually produce them in South Bengaluru to help locals source them and have the art remain in use. Only with increasing number of artisans will the art be practised. Today, with contemporary choices galore, it is a challenge to keep alive our indigenous hand-made craft and offer options to customers,” says Mr. Iyer, who has a civil maintenance and renovations background.

Perfecting the technique

Being a handmade tile, producing it certainly requires skill and dexterity. For, one minor error and the deficiency in the tile is so pronounced as to make it unfit for laying. Yet, interestingly, the laying appears fairly simple when the proceedings are watched, with the procedure starting from deciding the design and creating the relevant frame.

Tiles ready for laying. | Photo Credit: Madhurya Creations

The making starts with a glass plate over which the selected frame is placed. Bright coloured oxides are deftly poured into the frame, with many a time different colours being poured into each slot, taking acute care to ensure nil spillage of wrong colours into wrong slots. The oxides are then layered with mud and cement mix and left to set. The dried and set tile is then soaked in water for three days, post which it is dried in shade for a week to ten days before it is ready to be shipped.

The laying begins with a spread of wet cement and mud mixture over which thick cement milk is evenly poured before placing the tiles. Twenty four hours after the tiles set, the newly laid tiles are washed with water and yet another layer of cement milk is poured to seal the gaps between the tiles. This is followed by a layer of dry cement and colour which is later wiped clean to reveal well filled gaps. The procedure ends with the final layering of grain dust which is left to stay for a week. The tiled flooring is then ready to use with a clean soap wash, revealing sheer art on the floor.

It is laborious

SSRDP has manufactured nearly 15,000 sq ft of Athangudi tiles since Navaratri 2021. “It is laborious, a unit of four can make 200 tiles per day and they do them standing, meticulously using natural colour oxides for each tile,” says Mr. Iyer adding that oxides of red, yellow, green, blue, black and white colours are available, with more shades available through mixing these tints.

Athangudi tiles are available in 10”x10” and as skirting and border tiles in 10”x5.” Border tiles make the flooring look carpet-like. Ask Mr. Iyer about the most common complaints of fissures being developed in course of time with Athangudi tiles, and he travels back to the time of red oxide floorings that have stood the test of time for centuries. “It’s the same technology used in tile form in Athangudi. But there are more patterns and designs brought in. The tiles help in not having undulated flooring as seen in red oxide. Fissures, to a large extent, can be avoided if the tiles have been cured in exactitude, in the right process. It’s after all hand-made, so imperfections cannot be avoided although it can be minimalised with processes followed scrupulously. Even natural marble is porous, so it’s all in the way we celebrate the natural and hand-made,” says Mr. Iyer adding that even the hairline cracks in Athangudi tiles have people accepting them as a new patterning. Maintenance is easy with regular brooming, he says, while adding a few drops of coconut oil once in a month while mopping leaves the floor with a better sheen.

Cost

Athangudi tiles cost ₹ 80 per sq ft with 144 tiles making up 100 sq. ft. The laying charges are extra. Clients can come and choose their pattern and colours too at the SSRDP unit, says Mr. Iyer.

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