

# A slice of Kongu culture

The banks of Bhavani and Noyyal have retained the flavours of a different era



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**reserved** The palace at Samathur; palm sugar being stirred. (Below) an all-male kolattam

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**K**ongu' – the very word denotes, in Tamil, freshness, honey, fertility and green. Kongu Nadu is all that. Completely off the tourist trail, the area is rich in history; we have Palaeolithic burial sites along the Bhavani and Noyyal and evidence of a flourishing international trade. It is said that the Togas that Romans wore, went from here. Thagadur in Sangam literature also refers to this region.

Despite its rich history, the region is relatively less-endowed with temples, notwithstanding the important seven dedicated to Siva. For our heritage tour, we chose Pollachi for the grand zamindar palaces and the coconut plantations along the river.

Arisil Kizhar in his poem mentions the cowherds of Kongu Nadu and they continue to be passionate about their native breeds especially the Kangeyam bulls. Traditional poems talk of Kongu Nadu being bordered by the Talaimalai hills in the North, Velliangiri in the West, Kulitalai in the East and the Palani hills in the South. Owing to its proximity to both Kerala and Karnataka, the region had rulers from both areas.

Till the ninth century, the Cheras were the dominant

here for much longer than in other parts of Tamil Nadu. Their palaces are not open to public and access is extremely limited but worth the effort because they are not only immaculately maintained but also for the old-world charm and hospitality.

## In Kerala style

The sylvan surroundings of Coconut Lagoon were ideal for starting the day. Our first stop was Samathur. The oldest part of the palace is 700 years old. The low tiled roofs had quaint iron pendants in peepul tree leaf shape at regular intervals – unique to this region. The craftsmanship of the doors in Kerala style indicate frequent travel of artisans across the borders. The floors were swept clean with cowdung and perhaps, a hint of turmeric and one did not spot a single fly.

The granaries were large wooden structures with complex opening mechanisms and reminded one of the many references to similar structures in the Sangam poems set in this region. Within the palace were several old family photographs,

showing beautiful jewellery, weapons, palanquins and other symbols of royal living. The woodwork in the first floor balcony with elephant carvings added to the old-world splendour.

We had a taste of farm fresh sugarcane juice and a small helping of padhaneer (toddy to which lime is added to stop the fermentation process). Moving on to the Uthukuli estate, we were regaled with the story of how the zamin was founded. In 1235, Lingayyan was born in Vellodu near Erode. He became a chieftain under the Pandya kings. He constructed a canal on the Bhavani before it joins the Cauvery to bring water to the Poonthurai region. The canal was complete with great difficulty by 1282 on the fifth day of the Tamil month of Thai.

The canal weaves in and out to increase the drainage area in the region and remains in use even today, to the amazement of experts. In a supreme act of sacrifice, the chieftain moved away to allow the farmers to use the area. In Uthukuli, he struck water and restarted his life.

## Kongu Nadu and the zamindars help one understand the ancient Velir (local chieftain) system

We were given a royal welcome at the Agathur Amman temple the temple. It is small but beautifully planned with many open areas and pillared verandas. Devoid of sculptures except for those of a few ancestors, it gives us an insight into how ancient temples would have looked. A local palm leaf artiste delighted us with his toy-making skills.

A sumptuous lunch at the palace was a traditional spread, including – corn pongal and kollu masiyal. Coconut water and sweets made of lentils were served too. The palace stands out for its Indo-Saracenic architecture, shingled roof and magnificent collection of weapons and old hunting photographs.

## Exquisite antiques

We also visited the elegantly designed Shenbaga Vilasam, a part of the Samathur estate, now run as a homestay that is replete with exquisite antiques. We watched a per-





mentions the cowherds of Kongu Nadu and they continue to be passionate about their native breeds especially the Kangeyam bulls. Traditional poems talk of Kongu Nadu being bordered by the Talaimalai hills in the North, Velliyangiri in the West, Kulitlai in the East and the Palani hills in the South. Owing to its proximity to both Kerala and Karnataka, the region had rulers from both areas.

Till the ninth century, the Cheras were the dominant rulers followed by the Cholas, and the Vijayanagar kings from 1348-1565, when the stunning Taramangalam temple was developed. Tipu ravaged the region in the 17th-18th century after which the British supported the zamindars.

Kongu Nadu and the zamindars help one understand the ancient Velir (local chieftain) system, which prevailed

of farmers and one did not spot a single fly.

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Afternoon, we had planned a trip to Perur, where the temple has the first recorded reference to 'Kōyam Pudur,' but had to give it a miss due to time constraints.

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