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Social and Cultural Life of Nattukottainagarathars:A Historical Review

Dr.T.Balasubramanian[1] Dr.V. VVenkatraman[2]Prof. N. Dhanalakshmi[3]

[1]Guest Lecturer
Dept.of History and Tourism Studies
School of Social Sciences
Tamilnadu Open University
Chennai,India
Email:balasubramanian834@gmail.com

[2]Head
PG and Research Centre in History
Rajapalayam Raju's College
Tamilnadu,India

[3]Professor & Head
Department of History and Tourism
School of Social Sciences
Tamil NaduOpen University
Chennai, India
Email:balasubramanian834@gmail.com

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Abstract:*The Nagarathars, also known as the Nattukottai Chettiars, constitute one of the most prominent mercantile communities of South India. Traditionally, they were salt traders and gem merchants who migrated from the coastal town of Kaveripoompattinam (Poompuhar) in Chola Nadu to the Pandya Nadu region due to sea-level issues. Their contributions extend beyond commerce into architecture, religion, philanthropy, and social organization. This paper examines the cultural foundations of Nagarathar society, their distinctive settlement patterns in the* ***Chettinad region****, and the transformation of their heritage under the pressures of colonial modernity and post-independence change. The study argues that Nagarathar heritage represents a synthesis of indigenous tradition and global commercial engagement.*

Key words*: Cultural Heritage, Food Culture,Migration, Nagarathar Weddings, Textiles etc.*

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Introduction

Pre-modern Indian society was structured around interconnected principles such as hierarchy, holism, continuity, and transcendence. These value systems shaped social institutions, religious practices, and patterns of settlement. Tradition evolved through two processes: orthogenetic development (indigenous evolution within the civilization) and heterogeneity interaction (cultural exchange through contact with other societies).Within this framework, society functioned at two levels—the “little tradition” of the folk or peasantry and the “great tradition” of the literate elite. The Nagarathars belonged to the latter category, serving as custodians of economic capital, ritual orthodoxy, and institutional continuity. Their community identity was reinforced through endogamy, temple-centered networks, and clan-based settlement organization.

Tradition, which means the value themes encompassing the entire social system of Indian society prior to the beginning of modernization was organized on the principles of hierarchy, holism, continuity and transcendence. These four value themes were deeply interlocked with other elements of Indian social structure. The structure of tradition grows in two stages. First, through orthogenetic or indigenous evolution and second through heterogenetic encounters or contacts with other cultures or civilizations. The social structure of these civilizations operates at two levels, first that of the folks or unlettered peasants and second, that of the elite or the reflective few. The cultural processes in the former comprise the ‘little tradition’ and those in the latter constitute the ‘Great tradition'. *Chettinad, located in Tamil Nadu’s Sivaganga district*, is a historically prosperous region known for the *Nattukottai Chettiars*, a community of elite bankers

and traders. Flourishing in the 19th-20th centuries through trade across Southeast Asia, they built magnificent mansions, established a unique culture, and developed sophisticated financial systems. A comprehensive study undertaken by the present author reveals a quite interesting aspect of the *Nagarathaar settlement pattern around the region of Karaikudi*. The settlement pattern has been studied using construction raw materials, architectural planning of houses, their various cross diagonal dimensional layout, alignment with the humid environment, designs, and geometrical patterns used. In the cultural contributions chapter, the below-cited types of modalities have been followed to give a coherent picture of the settlement pattern encircling present-day Karaikudi town.

At the heart of this heritage lies Karaikudi, the region's economic and cultural nucleus, home to majestic mansions, intricate woodwork, and a legacy of international business acumen long before India's independence. However, this legacy now stands at a crossroads. As modern influences reshape regional identity and values, Karaikudi once-thriving heritage homes face neglect, disrepair, and even demolition. The transition from ancestral grandeur to modern minimalism has sparked a cultural identity crisis, particularly among the youth who now migrate to urban centers, disconnecting from their roots. This paper explores how Karaikudi architectural richness is more than just aesthetic it encapsulates the community's values, global vision, and social order. It highlights the business strategies of Chettiar merchants in Southeast Asia, the distinctive skill sets that sustained their success, and how their architectural investments mirrored their worldview. Through interviews, observations, and archival references, this study emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive heritage preservation policies that balance development with identity.

Chettinad region is noted for its unique heritage significance. In this study, the tourist attractions in Chettinad region are brought under four broad categories of heritage. They are Chettinad Architectural Heritage, Religious Heritage, Chettinad House Structure The structural plan and the construction of Chettinad house is the sign of Chettiars' architectural heritage. The word "Nattukottai" in the name of 'Nattukottai Chettiars' means country fort, the name itself reminds of the big houses of Chettinad. The tradition of Nagarathar community is to build big houses like castles. Most of the Chettinad mansions are treasure troves that mirror the passion for art and craft.

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The Nattukottai Chettiars have always shown a high level of rigidity in following the cultural and religious practices. The traditions are followed for centuries except for a few that were dropped or included during the important crisis periods like Great depression and Burma breakdown. The World War II and the Japanese Occupation during 1942-45 saw to the remaining Chettiars and other Indians pour out from the country and ran for their lives leaving behind the prosperity they earned in the Burma. Even after the restoration of British Rule in 1945, the Indian population did not return back to Burma. Chettiars who were elite and rich were saved from the stressful voyage, but the smaller firm owners and chettiars employed as staffs were caught in the distraught and were not able to regain their adventure spirit to go back to the torn land. The loss of property and money pulled them down in the economic status and the inefficiency in facing the change created a traditional and cultural friction in Chettinadu.

Cultural Heritage and Chettinad

Culture is the characteristic way of life inspired by fundamental volumes in which people live. It is an adventure of the dark-towards light of the low for elevating the call of perfect freedom and the freedom is a process of constant rise. It expresses itself in the form of music, sculpture, literature, customs, festivals, values and many other things. Indian culture teaches us the art of utilizing the powers. Culture requires higher sacrifices to the one who do not value any gain more than self perfection and revelation of the inner self. The culture of India grows on a firm, faith remains true. It prepares the people to face brutal foreign invasions with calm and composure. The Greeks, the Huns, the Sakas and the Mongols came and leaved with no memory in the racial consciousness of the Indians. Whatever they did was not true. Truth is always good and beautiful. It is a way of transforming abstract truth to practical experiences. Einstein said, ‘you get from truth only what you dare’. The Indians dare with the whole of truth. True culture does not isolate any part of our being. It is a continuous rebirth from the forces of negation. It is not a straight race towards light. It is the art of returning to the dark womb of nature.

Fairs and Festivals India had been a meeting ground melting spot of different peoples following different religions. They unite in different festivals and joyful celebrations of significant events. Fairs, festivals, rites and rituals assist the presentation of customs and traditions. They have their links with cultural and heritage of the country. In this regard the custom, and respiratory of social heritage is remembered.

In Sivaganga district, festivals, rites, and rituals play a vital role in showcasing local customs and traditions, reflecting the culture and heritage of the region. The repository of social heritage holds a unique place in the observance of these festivals. Such celebrations foster unity and solidarity among the people, and they are conducted on specific occasions without distinction.The Skanda Sashti festival is one of the most prominent festivals celebrated in temples across Tamil Nadu. Lasting six days, it takes place during the Tamil month of Aippasi (October–November). On the final day, the epic story of Sura Samhara is performed in its entirety, attracting lakhs of devotees. Prior to the festival, devotees from various districts participate in the famous Kavadi procession. This grand celebration is especially renowned at the Tiruchendur Temple.

Dancing is one of the oldest art forms in Indian culture, serving as a medium to please and honor the divine. Since early Vedic times, dance has been closely associated with religious rituals. It was believed to reflect the performances of gods and goddesses themselves, upholding the spiritual and divine ethos of the era. The styles, forms, and modes of dance were carefully shaped according to aesthetic principles.

Bharatanatyam

Bharatanatyam, one of India's most ancient and revered classical dance traditions, has its origins deeply rooted in the religious and cultural milieu of Tamil Nadu. Characterized by intricate footwork, codified hand gestures (mudras), rhythmic precision, and expressive facial abhinaya, Bharatanatyam functions as both an aesthetic and spiritual discipline. Historically performed in temple precincts, the dance form served as a visual and devotional medium to narrate episodes from sacred texts such as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and various Puranic traditions. Beyond artistic performance, Bharatanatyam embodies bhakti (devotion) and has historically contributed to fostering collective cultural identity and social cohesion.

Chettinad, located in the Sivaganga district of Tamil Nadu, is distinguished by its architectural grandeur, distinctive culinary traditions, and the mercantile legacy of the Nattukottai Chettiars.

The Chettiar community has historically played a pivotal role in patronizing and sustaining artistic and cultural expressions. The temples of Chettinad, marked by expansive courtyards and ornate mandapas, have traditionally functioned as vibrant centers for ritual observances and cultural performances, including Bharatanatyam recitals. Festivals such as Skanda Sashti and Panguni Uthiram frequently incorporate classical dance performances, thereby enabling the community to experience Bharatanatyam simultaneously as an act of devotion and as a refined artistic spectacle.

The Folk and Tribal Dance

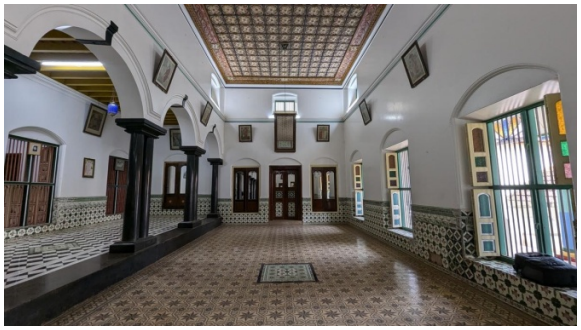
Are recognized as one of the major indigenous elements of Indian style. Apart from the classical dance, India presents varied style of folk and tribal dances. They have a systematic gesture, language, foot work, body movements and rhythm. The folk dances are the outcomes of the imagination of urban people.

Tradition and Culture of the Nagarathars

Tradition, which means the value themes encompassing the entire social system of Indian society prior to the beginning of modernization was organized on the principles of hierarchy, holism, continuity and transcendence. These four value themes were deeply interlocked with other elements of Indian social structure. Hierarchy was engrained not only in the system of caste and sub-caste stratification but also in the Hindu concepts of human nature, occupational life cycles (ashrams) and moral duties (dharma). Holism implied a relationship between individual and group in which the former was encompassed by the latter in respect of duties and rights. This principle of individual by collectivity persisted all along the line of traditional social structure, e.g., family, village, community, caste and nation. Similarly, communalism in traditional social system was reinforced through the value system of continuity which in Hinduism was symbolized by principles of karma, transmigration of soul and cyclical view of change. Finally the principle of transcendence formed a super-concept contributing to integration as well as

rationalization of the other value themes of tradition. The structure of tradition grows in two stages. First, through orthogenetic or indigenous evolution and second through heterogenetic encounters or contacts with other cultures or civilizations. The social structure of these civilizations operates at two levels, first that of the folks or unlettered peasants and second, that of the elite or the reflective few. The cultural processes in the former comprise the 'little tradition' and those in the latter constitute the 'great tradition'.

Social Status and Heritage



The chettiars still seems to live in the glory of their past and hence still haunted by their bitter experiences. The social status of the chettiars as per the Government of India norms are "Forward Caste" and there is contradicting opinions among the younger and older generations of the community. It would be better for the community to revisit the past to learn the lessons and not only bask in the glory of the past. It would be fruitful if the past is used to ensure the values and ethos that are transferred down the generations. The heritage of the mansions can be used for tourism entrepreneurship as already some of the mansions are converted into hotels. Instead of locking up the heritage houses unused, the avenues to remake the history should be identified and utilized.

Sprit of Entrepreneurship

The revival of the spirit of entrepreneurship and adventurous risk taking ability for which the community is known for is the need of the hour. The education and thinking of the community members may be focused towards establishing business rather than finding employment. The natural business acumen that has followed them for generations would be put to use, if the community members follow the pattern of past and kindle the cooperative coordinated business ventures, which is not seen now. The associations that are working towards the cultural sharing can be used as a platform to bring in the spirit of business, by starting up angel investment initiatives.

Nagarthar Marriage Tradition

Nagarathar weddings are elaborate, lasting multiple days and featuring specific rituals like *Veevu Irakkuthal* (offering of food items), *Mappillai Azhaippu* (reception), and *Pen Azhaippu* (welcoming the bride). Like many other Hindu communities, the Nagarathars too regard marriage as a very important and indispensable milestone in the life of any man or woman. But the marriage traditions and customs of the Nagarathars are often vastly different from those of other Hindu communities. Their marriage involves several religious rituals and ceremonies which are unique in nature. For Nagarathars, marriage is also a complex economic transaction between two families, necessitating meticulous planning and execution. The Nagarathars are traditionally linked to one of nine temples, and individuals from the same temple are considered siblings; hence, marriage within the same temple is generally prohibited. Exceptions exist in certain temples like Mathur, where subdivisions permit specific marital alliances. Marriages must be approved and registered in the groom's temple, and a ceremonial garland from the temple signifies official sanction. Chettinad Nagarathar marriages are celebrated with grandeur, typically lasting three days and involving elaborate rituals. Gifts are presented to the bride in multiples of seven, symbolizing prosperity. Despite living away from their native places, Nagarathars prefer to conduct marriages in their ancestral villages. Traditional practices such as the 'Nadu Veettu Kolam' and the festive bridegroom procession highlight the rich cultural heritage of the community.

Contribution of Temple Priest

The Nagarathars have been regularly and systematically helping the temple priests who generally do not have a regular monthly income and hence, solely depend upon the gifts and donations offered to the temple by devotees. Many rural temples do not attract a large number of devotees

and hence, the donations and revenue received by these temples are minimal. In such circumstances, the Nagarathars have often rendered financial support to the priests. At many temple festivals, the priests are honoured and accorded lavish gifts. They have also built agraharams close to temples for the priests to reside and render service to God.

Education

The ***Nagarathars' love for and patronage to education*** dates back to the pre modern age when learning was imparted mainly in the homes of the teachers (gurukula system) and within large temples. These traditional schools or educational centres imparted instruction in subjects such as Sanskrit and Tamil 122 language and literature, arithmetic, Hindu religion and philosophy, logic, medicine (mainly the ayurveda system of medicine) and yoga. Ancient temple inscriptions contain ample references to the Nagarathars giving liberal gifts in the form of land, money, etc., to various further, as observed in an earlier section on 'Religion' in this chapter, the Nagarathars often specifically sponsored Veda patasalas (schools), some of them attached to temples, where Brahmin boys could learn the Vedas, the oldest Hindu scriptures in Sanskrit. They also sponsored schools imparting instructions in Agamas (Hindu ritual guidelines) and Tamil scriptures such as Tevaram and Tiruvachakam. Many of the Nagarathars themselves learnt these Tamil scriptures. In certain parts of rural Tamil Nadu, mainly in the Tanjavur-Chettinad region, there are numerous stories and legends pertaining to the Nagarathars' contribution for the promotion of the study of the Vedas, other Hindu scriptures and temple rituals.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the British introduced modern English- medium high school education and university education in the British territories in India. Most parts of the Nagarathar homeland of Chettinad except the Pudukkottai region were under the British rule. This new educational system laid emphasis on the basic sciences and technology. Initially, the Nagarathars, like many other communities in all parts of India, did not feel the need and hence, did not evince much interest in this new system. Many of the Nagarathars studied in the local elementary schools or else were tutored at home. They were taught to read Tamil including the ancient Tamil classics. They also learnt to write Tamil in an attractive flowing cursive style that only a few outside the community can correctly read or decipher. The boys, in particular, were given rigorous training in Mathematics, including the concepts of fractions and percentages, most essential for their business profession, before they were sent outside India to work as apprentices in the kittangis or kadais (small business establishments or shops). Members of other communities frequently remark that the Nagarathars are unusually quick and correct in complex mathematical calculations, all done mentally without the use of pen and paper. Later in the twentieth century, the Nagarathars, like many others, were attracted to modern high school and college education that widened their cultural horizons and business interests.

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The educational contributions of the Nagarathars constitute a significant chapter in the history of Tamil Nadu's social and intellectual development. Rooted in a strong tradition of philanthropy and community responsibility, the Nagarathars viewed education not merely as a means of personal advancement but as a powerful instrument for societal progress.

A defining feature of Nagarathar educational initiatives was the establishment of major institutions. Among these, Annamalai University, founded by Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar, stands out as a landmark in higher education, particularly for its emphasis on Tamil studies and indigenous knowledge. Likewise, Alagappa University, established through the vision of Dr. Alagappa Chettiar, became a prominent center for learning in southern Tamil Nadu.

Beyond universities, the Nagarathars invested extensively in schools, colleges, and educational infrastructure across the Chettinad region and beyond. They established hostels, offered scholarships, and provided free boarding facilities, thereby enabling students from economically weaker sections to access quality education. Their efforts significantly reduced educational disparities and encouraged social mobility.The community also played a crucial role in promoting the Tamil language and culture. By supporting research, publications, and academic forums, they contributed to the preservation and dissemination of Tamil heritage. Their institutions often integrated traditional knowledge with modern education, creating a balanced and inclusive learning environment.In essence, the Nagarathar approach to education combined philanthropy, cultural commitment, and modern vision, leaving a lasting impact on the educational and cultural landscape of Tamil Nadu.

Chettinadu Culinary Tradition in India

Spicy culinary delicacies are popular across India in her gastronomic tradition, particularly in the case of Tamil Nadu. The world-renowned Chettinadu Samayal is simply a unique blend of spices, varieties of ingredients, and their traditional cooking methods. In local parlance, the ***Chettinadu culinary tradition is also known as the "Achi Samayal".*** To enhance the taste of cooked food in those times, different kinds of firewood were used by them, which gave different tastes to the dishes. Chettinadu cuisine, as an exclusive concept of gastronomy, has been largely

confined to the Nagarathar community. Notably, several of their preparations are unique to this community alone. Those who are experts in Chettinadu preparations have, of late, gained the status of better master chefs. Varieties of vegetarian food items are very popular now in the Chettinadu region. Nagarathar cuisine represents a distinctive culinary tradition shaped by geography, trade, and community practices. It is characterized by the extensive use of freshly ground spices such as *kalpasi*, star anise, fennel, and pepper, which give the dishes a unique aroma and flavour. Due to the dry climate and mercantile lifestyle of the community, food preservation techniques like sun-drying meats (*uppukandam*) and vegetables were widely adopted. The meal structure is predominantly rice-based, accompanied by sambar, rasam, and kootu, and is traditionally served on banana leaves. The culinary expertise of Nagarathar women, known as "Achis," plays a crucial role in maintaining and transmitting these traditions, especially during large communal events such as weddings. The cuisine includes both vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes, with popular items like *Nattu Kozhi Kozhambu* and *Aatukari Kozhambu*. Signature foods such as *Kavuni Arisi*, *Athirasam*, and *Paniyaram* reflect both indigenous practices and external influences from historical trade contacts.Food holds deep cultural significance among the Nagarathars, symbolizing hospitality, social unity, and ritual continuity, particularly in life-cycle events like marriages and funerals.

The Arts and Crafts o Nagarathar

Handicrafts represent a creative heritage of India. It is vividly artistic, inventive, and spiritually significant. Indian crafts not only fulfil a practical need, but appeal to the aesthetic senses too. Folk art and handicrafts are an integral part of Indian life. Despite rapid social and technological changes, the tradition of Indian handicrafts maintains its unique character. The broader classification of them is: a) pottery – woodwork, b) stone work – ivory and carvings. c) basketry – mats; d) metalwork – jewelry, toys, textiles, and embroidery. The Chettinadu region is also known for its arts and crafts. The baskets of Tamil Nadu have intricate patterns. They are made with the use of date-palm leaves. These patterns are as fine as embroidery. It is the specialty of

the Chettiar community of the area. Bronze plays a significant role in the art history of India. Bronze image making is extremely popular in India.

Food Culture and Hospitality of Nagarathars

Chettinad cuisine is an integral component of the Nagarathar traditions. The Nagarathars are well-known not merely for their unique business skills and social customs but also their rich culinary traditions. Food is an important component of all Nagarathar lifecycle rituals and ceremonies, mainly marriage. Like all devout Hindus, the Nagarathars too regard food not merely as a source of enjoyment but as a means of physical nourishment and spiritual development.

Jewellery From Chettinadu

Jewels are also highly valued in Tamilnadu, particularly in the Chettinadu region. With the tradition of the ear-boring ceremony, the custom of wearing jewels commences. The jewellery used by women all over India is similar. In the Chettinadu region, ornaments worn by the upper class vary depending on age groups, etc. The variety of nose and neck ornaments is limitless. Similarly, you will notice certain distinctive forms developed by specific sections, groups, or areas. Also, the jewellery of the upper class is a class by itself, especially the Chettinadu jewellery of Tamilnadu.

Textiles and Fabrics

It must be pointed out that the techniques, designs, varieties, and materials in Indian textiles are determined by geographical and climatic conditions. They also influence the style of weaving, colors, and motifs. There are eight categories of textiles based on the material and technique used. They are : a) handloom cotton fabrics b) silk weaves and brocades c) tie and dye fabrics d) hand printed fabrics e) dyed and painted fabrics f) folk embroideries, g) shawls and woollen weavings, h) tribal weavings. Chettinadu is also the home of cotton and textile products. Cotton fabrics were and are an export commodity. Certain varieties were extremely popular, especially the cotton sarees of the Chettinadu region. The cookware furniture, household articles, woodwork, handloom, culinary are worth mentioning. Karaikudi Veenai are known for their exceptional tradition. Mention must be made about the decorative wood frames and wooden panels which are done with intricate patterns. Several figurines of goddess are usually carved in the wood panels.

Chettinadu Places and Mansions

The rich in cultural heritage Chettinadu region is known for its art and architecture besides its well known magnificent houses and their excellent embellishment and aesthetic floorings. Also they are known for their exotic furnishing with Burma teak, wide and spacious courtyards, several interior rooms and such other lavish outlays. Chettinadu homes are known for their grandeur and magnificent appearance, which account for more than 15,000 homes across the Chettinadu region. These monuments of aesthetic and artistic beauty were built over the course of a century between 1850 and 1950. Sprawl across around 1550 square kilometers, these memorable monuments are worth visiting. These buildings most of them, contain more than sixty rooms. Also they have spread over interiors as large as one and a half acres. Standing as an external symbol of British Era of architectural heritage, they are evidences for aristocratic opulence and magnificence of the Nagarathars. These mansions of the Nattukottai Chettiars embodies in itself their period of prosperity and richness during the colonial times.

Conclusion

Through this study, we studied the historical background of heritage areas and buildings in the Chettinadu region. Indeed, using a scoring system to assess different heritage built values, we attempt to highlight the significance of this region for humanity in general and Indian people in particular. The scoring system was developed using a set of variables from the literature, which are architectural, socio-cultural, environmental and economical values. Different results was then highlighted in the paper especially the interest of respondents in the conservation of the built heritage and its importance for this region. Architectural value is in the top of the values judged as one of the unique features in the built heritage of Chettinadu. We believe that the findings of this research have several implications on government policies, conservation priorities and of course the public community that should be aware of different risks affecting this region. Furthermore, we have taken into consideration the limitations of our f indings, especially the correlation between the different values with the respondents' social and economic situation. Consequently, a natural perspective of research may be a deep dive analysis into this correlation.

Chettinad cuisine is an integral component of the Nagarathar traditions. The Nagarathars are well-known not merely for their unique business skills and social customs but also their rich culinary traditions. Food is an important component of all Nagarathar lifecycle rituals and ceremonies, mainly marriage. Like all devout Hindus, the Nagarathars too regard food not merely as a source of enjoyment but as a means of physical nourishment and spiritual development. They spent a lot and invested in trade and commerce in India, established various Educational Institutions in Tamil Nadu and adjoined states. Chettinad is the settlement area of Nattukottai Chettiar, Chettinad, Kanadukattan, Karaikudi and Kottaiyur. Chettinad is located in Chettinad area. A railway station is located on the Madras Dhanuskodi railway line. It is the centre home of Nattukottai Chettiar. Another town of Chettinad is Kanadukattan. It is one of the chief centres of Nattukottai Chettiar. It is a most impressive village with massive and lengthy buildings elaborately constructed with well polished walls and stones. Kanadukathan palace is the best example for the art and architecture.

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