

Kamalan

THE INDIAN TRAVEL CRAFTSMAN

The Jasmine Lady of Madurai

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“Let this delicate blossom not toil on the rugged sylvan earth. Let its dainty buds wind their way up my glorious chariot and adorn it with their mesmerizing fragrance.” Said King Pari when he saw the wild, yet fragile jasmine buds and the vine creeping on the floor of the forest in which he went hunting. Thus the jasmine, called *Mallipoo* in Tamil, rose to significance. So says a legend from one of the earliest Tamil poems of the *Sangam* Era, between 300 BCE and 300 CE. Another legend goes that the King of Ayodhya, Parthan devoutly worshipped Lord Shiva in a forest full of jasmine vines. Several other legends and mythological stories surround the significance of jasmine in the ancient texts. These tales allude to the prominence of the flower in the history of Tamil culture, which at the time flourished around the city of Madurai. The matron of Madurai, The Fish-eyed Goddess, *Meenakshi*, who is a manifestation Goddess Parvati, is

adorned with the *Mallipoo* every night, in a ceremony that prepares her for her time with her husband, Lord Shiva. A common belief held is that the goddess' love for the flower makes the unique variety of jasmine grown in and around Madurai, called *Madurai Malligai*, the most coveted one of all.

With a long lasting interest in perfumes, I had done some research and come across a wonderful lady, Dr. Uma Kannan. She is a well reputed anthropologist and an expert on the *Madurai Malligai*. She undertook years of research and studied the social and cultural implications of the flower, its impact on the local economy and the special place it holds in the history of Madurai. I tried to get hold of her book, *Madurai Malligai: Madurai and Jasmine, A Celebration*, in which she details its history, its journey from the gardens to the markets and covers a whole range of subjects pertaining to the flower. But I couldn't buy her book on line, so I made up my mind to meet with her in person. The day I arrived in Madurai, my first stop wasn't the abode of the Goddess but the abode of Dr. Kannan. I was armed with some basic knowledge of her book, reading reviews and other material available over the worldwide web.

The vivid picture she had painted of the *Madurai Malligai* in my mind had captivated me to no end. I looked forward to the meeting with the enthusiasm of a little child who's been promised a trip to Disneyland! Mr Siva, my Kamalan representative, had informed me that our appointment was at 11 am. Although we took a few minutes to find her place, we finally made it. Her house was a large edifice with a generously spread out garden. Even more welcoming was Dr. Kannan's reception. Mr Siva and I eased our way into her hospitality and it wasn't long before we had struck a conversation. Speaking to her was intellectually liberating. Our whole interaction lasted for over two hours. It was from her that I heard the legend about King Pari and Parthan. She spoke to us about the flower gardens and their workers and I learned a great deal about the supply chain of the flower; its life from the branches to adorning the goddess, or the locks of a South Indian woman's hair or a perfumery. During the course of our conversation, she had mentioned that she hailed from Chettinad, a region known for its palatial mansions. It then made sense that her house reminded me of a glorious replica of a Chettinad mansion.



From the interaction, I discovered that jasmine is uniquely used as a bud for most purposes and when it blooms, its fragrance is lost. What remains of and in the flower is used as compost. The plant then buds again, the next day. The average life of a bud is about 24 – 36 hours. The high-season is between March and September and the harvest peaks between April and July. Although, the plant does bud even between October and February, the harvest is quite low and prices, high. The sulphur rich soil around the Madurai area is the secret behind the distinctly rich fragrance of the variety of jasmine grown here, whose botanical name is *Jasmine Sambac*. This feature is what brought the flower its ‘Geographical Indication’ or ‘GI’ tag from the Indian government. The tag ensures that the names ‘*Madurai Malligai*’ or ‘*Madurai Malli*’ are not used for any other variety of jasmine or any by-product thereof unless it is grown in this region.

Dr. Kannan wasn’t just an expert on the flower but also an activist dedicated to empowering the local women. The rationale behind her activism was dispelling a set of superstitions surrounding the usage of flowers. A belief prevails that women shouldn’t make garlands which are used extensively in temple worship and such occasions like weddings. This is because of their monthly cycles of bodily ‘impurity’. There is also a myth that women’s hands aren’t dextrous enough to handle the complexity of garland making. So, they were only permitted to string the flowers in a narrow pattern which are then sold for personal adornment. Thus, garland making, the task that fetched more money had remained the realm of men. She helped dispel these myths by organizing workshops to train women in garland making and helping them become self-sufficient, thus improving their income. Most of these women are flower sellers coming from the surrounding villages. These workshops have provided them with a livelihood which they wouldn’t have had otherwise.

Upon Dr. Kannan's suggestion, the next morning I visited two jasmine fields, a short drive outside Madurai city. The day began at 6 am. There were several women in the gardens, hard at work. We observed the workers and spoke to the owner. They usually begin harvesting between 5 and 6 am every morning and go on until 7 – 8 am when the farm owners gather the produce and take it to the market. The workers, who are almost all women, usually work in the gardens to supplement their income, since most of them also work in the markets. Some of them are also flower-sellers who buy the buds from the market, work on stringing them and selling them. Harvesting goes on at different times of the day and the workers return to the gardens in the afternoon as well, since the plants may even bud in the afternoon. However, these buds are not preferred and are sold at a lower price. I spoke to a whole family of workers – a mother, a daughter and a son. The daughter and son were both students in a nearby college. Their excitement at meeting a foreigner was palpable.

From the fields, we headed to the only flower market in Madurai, the Mattuthavani Market and thus got a glimpse of the whole process which usually begins at around dawn every morning. The plucked flowers are brought by the farmers in large sacks and taken to the commissioning agents who fix the prices for the day. The prices vary and fluctuate a lot, depending on the weight of the produce of the day, the quality of the flowers, the day of the week, special events on the day etc. For instance, on Fridays, the day of special *Pujas* or prayers at the Meenakshi Temple, on festival days, the prices go up because the demand for them is high on those days. A part of the produce is also exported out of the city to the larger metros and abroad, especially to the Middle East. For exports, the flowers are sealed in special airtight packages. Since the flower's life is about 24 hours, its demand is highest in the morning when the buds are fresh and goes significantly down by the end of the day, by which time the buds begin to bloom. The remnants of the auctions are sold at dirt-cheap prices. The buds on the plant bloom a little after sunset, but when plucked, they bloom earlier. Therefore, the loss of its fragrance in the evening makes the flower less valuable.

The auctions and vending ultimately bring the flowers to their destinations – the temples, the baskets of the flower-sellers, the beautifully embellished locks of hair, the inconspicuous perfume manufacturers, horticulturists and scientists' laboratories. After tracing *Jasmine Sambac*'s silent journey, I made my way to the most celebrated citizen of Madurai, Meenakshi Ammal, the goddess whose 'fish-eyes' watch everything. The magnificent temple dedicated to her never ceases to impress me. On this third journey to Madurai, the goddess and her abode did amaze me as before, but even had an added impact. Ending my trail of the *Jasmine Sambac* by the visit to the temple during the night ceremony made it extra special. At this time, Meenakshi is bedecked with huge garlands of these magnificent blossoms that exude the magical fragrance I am so fond of.

I guess it is for this mythical jasmine lady of Madurai that I took this long journey to South India this time and I know somehow that I'll be back again and again.

