

On the scent of Malli



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“You want to hear it, it’s a mesmerising story,” she says. Those who have lived long enough in Madurai know how passionate Dr.Uma Kannan is about the mallipoo, ever since she came from London 35 years ago and settled in Madurai. “The city revelled in an abundance of jasmine then,” she says. Apparently the only Indian Airlines flight to Chennai from Madurai was known as the “Malli Special”.

“Baskets of Madurai Malli would be loaded for onward transportation and I would often wonder at the fact that there were more jasmine baskets than passengers on the flight!” says Uma. As the years rolled on, the jasmine acquired a new meaning for Uma, Correspondent, Thiagarajar College of Arts. “Its engaging history, the social and literary perspective, its use in everyday life, everything appealed.” “The significance of jasmine in ceremonies and rituals,” says Uma, “from puja rooms to wedding mandapams, as an offering to guests to the strands tucked neatly in our hair, as an alankaram (decoration) in kolams, doorways, statues and on photos, to their use in making of perfumes, incense sticks, candles, tea, sherbet and other recipes, I strongly felt it all had to be documented.”

That malli is as synonymous with Madurai as the Meenakshi Temple, that malli is not just a flower but an intrinsic part of the city’s ethos, prompted Uma to tell the flower’s story. Her book “Madurai Malligai—Madurai and Its Jasmine, A Celebration”, which releases quietly today (November 30), is a treasure trove of flowery facts and the folklore, the religious and the commercial face of malli, the trade and logistics, and the floral things to do. It is a charming tribute to the sacred flower that has a unique link with Madurai dating back to 300 B.C., or even earlier. Uma draws from the extensive references to the flower in Sangam literature. One of the Tamil poems of that period sings of King Pari, who could not bear to see a delicate jasmine creeper lying on the rough forest floor. He gifted his royal chariot to the plant so that the jasmine creeper could twine itself around it. Another mythological story says Parthan, the King of Ayodhya, became “Malleeswaran” after he worshipped Lord Shiva in a forest filled with jasmine creepers. The flower also finds mention in the oldest Hindu scriptures, the Vedas, in ancient and medieval literature in various Indian languages, the epic Mahabharata and Vatsyayana’s Kamasutra.

The jasmine, writes Uma, is one of the oldest flowers cultivated by man for its fragrance and is also known as the plant of love as it is believed to have aphrodisiac qualities. As a key member of INTACH, Madurai chapter, Uma was instrumental in organising several malli workshops over the last five years. “No other flower rivals the mallipoo in allure or popularity and Madurai wears nothing so well or with such pride as its Malligai,” says Uma.

When she started interacting with the flower weavers and observed them at work, she was struck, she says, by their humility and dedication, the magic in their fingers to transform the mounds of soft white fragrance into works of art, their joy and peace at stringing and selling flowers.

The first book It was 18 months of research before Uma thought of a book – her first, and also the first full book ever written on jasmine by anybody and particularly the Madurai malli. “Malligai has got passing mention in some books here and there. My friends wondered how will I write an entire book on one small flower! From the very beginning, the book had a mind of its own...what started as a story of the flower couldn’t be completed without talking about all those who grow and weave them and are a crucial link in the floral chain.” The book, Uma insists, is a “speciality” and not a “coffee table book”. It contains stunning photographs – by her daughter Sala and Meenakshi Doctor. Uma points out that it was quite a challenge. The flower is small and white, so a backdrop was needed, and it fades quickly. The text is concise and informative. In 21 chapters, Uma takes the reader through the mystique of malli and why Madurai is known as the jasmine capital of India. She describes the varieties that are grown and the areas in which they are grown, with tips about cultivation and comprehensive notes about the major flower groups.

At the heart of the book is a depiction of how commission agents set the prices depending on the season and demand and how storage and transportation have changed with the times. Uma gives profiles of the flower sellers who string two buds and a knot to make a respectable living. There are interesting chapters on ingenious uses of jasmine, weaving techniques and innovative designs in art and jewellery, and its versatility in recipes.

The book is aimed at florists and horticulturalists, historians, discerning tourists, and all those who call Madurai their home.

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