

JAS MINE

SAMBAC

Jasmine sambac
in perfumery

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SEZ + LMR *the naturals notebook*

INTERVIEW

**THE ROLE OF
JASMINE IN
CREATING TIES**

*Interview
with Uma Kannan*



A social and cultural anthropologist, Dr. Uma Kannan works for women's empowerment in Tamil Nadu. Her book, *Madurai Malligai* (2012), discusses the socio-economic impact of India's white gold on the Madurai community and the Tamil Nadu region.

As an anthropologist, where does your interest in jasmine come from?

I did my Ph.D. in Social and Cultural Anthropology in 2007, which had very little to do with my interest in jasmine! I'd often been asked to write about Madurai; however, there were already many books on the city and I didn't want to repeat them. Three things unique to Madurai are the Madurai sungudi fabric, the Meenakshi Amman temple and jasmine sambac. I was involved in the revival of sungudi fabrics, mainly for saris. I always admired the simplicity and delicate nature of Madurai malli along with its unique fragrance and wrote a book, *Madurai Malligai*, to pay tribute to it.

How many species of jasmine can be found in the Tamil Nadu region?

There are more than 20, including three varieties cultivated commercially – gundu malligai/Madurai malligai (*Jasminum sambac*), mullai (*Jasminum auriculatum*) and jathi malligai/pitchi (*Jasminum grandiflorum*). Tamil Nadu is now the leading producer of jasmine in India.

What role does the flower play in the local economy?

Madurai's production of sambac has made it the jasmine capital of India. Its vendors and garland makers are an important element in the social fabric of the city. Jasmine plays a vital role in the region's economy. From farm to consumer, an economic chain of activity is triggered which benefits the larger economy. The flower is a local product used in most religious ceremonies and celebrations. It is important to the tradition and culture of Tamil

Nadu and its social and religious practices, and throughout a person's life cycle.

What role do commission agents play?

As soon as the jasmine buds are harvested, hundreds of farmers make their way from the fields with their fragrant loads. Traversing deserted streets, they reach the flower market well before dawn. There, they hand the flowers over to commission agents, who act as middlemen between farmers and buyers.

How are prices fixed?

The flower market is a buyer's market and not a farmer's market. Small-scale flower vendors, shops, temples and certain traditional households purchase the flowers from the commission agents, who play a crucial role in determining the price of the jasmine based on the quantity that arrives and the demand for the flowers. During the festival season, for instance, the price rises sharply. The commission agents set the prices, sell the flowers, determine what is due to each farmer and hand over the money to them. In short, they control the value chain.

Where do the flowers go after that?

Harvested from the fields around Madurai, the flowers are sent to the flower markets of various cities like Coimbatore and Bangalore by road, and to Chennai, Mumbai and Delhi by air. They are also exported to places like Dubai, Singapore, Malaysia, London and France.

All around town, flower sellers can be seen stringing flowers and garlands, who are they?

These small-scale flower sellers who are at the market as early as 3 or 4am represent

the most important customers. There are those who sell their flowers door-to-door to regular customers, traversing familiar neighbourhoods with a basket perched on their head or hip. Many vendors spread their wares and settle down in the niches and alcoves they have marked out and tacitly made their own, on the pavement in the market square or around the temples. Sitting propped against a wall or tree, the flower sellers give wings to their imagination and string the flowers, all day, every day. Very often, this has been their traditional occupation for generations. Most of the them are uneducated.

What is the difference between stringing flowers and garland-making?

Stringing flowers is the process of knotting two flowers at a time by fastening and securing the buds with a length of string made of banana fibre. This is quicker and simpler than making a garland. There are numerous styles of weaving, knitting and knotting the jasmine into garlands, which are longer, heavier and more time-consuming. As the imagination of the person making them soars, it yields countless variations of unparalleled intricacy. The flower sellers of Madurai are famous for their expertise and the speed with which they manage to weave their creations.

Do women have a role?

Women are usually given the labour-intensive, monotonous job of tying jasmine strings, for a few rupees per metre, although some men do it as well. Men dominate the market for ornamental garlands, which are much more complex to make. In this environment, men prefer that the women stick to gender-specific roles assigned by the



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industry of picking and selling jasmine flowers. However, by selling flowers, women become economically empowered, it boosts their confidence and brings them respectability at home.

You are personally involved in developing specific schemes to improve women’s livelihoods. Do you consider jasmine flowers as a means to an end?

For 17 years I have been involved in empowering women from rural areas and helping them learn income-generating skills, like jasmine-tying, garland-making and basket-making, as well as offering English lessons and computer training. Jasmine flowers grow in abundance in Madurai. They grow in rural areas where many rural uneducated people live – this gives them a livelihood. I am convinced it helps them to be self-sufficient and earn money. Jasmine flowers can thus provide women with a gateway to independence and empowerment.

Do you believe this weaving tradition can be anchored in today’s contemporary lifestyle?

Yes, it can, but with a lot of effort and support. The younger generation are now educated and seek higher education. Many no longer want to continue the traditional occupation of flower weaving and aspire to find jobs suitable to their education. There was a time when all women and young girls would wear a string of flowers in their hair. Now, largely due to westernisation and modernisation, young women sport shorter hair styles which don’t accommodate flowers! So we need to come up with contemporary ideas and designs to accommodate a changing lifestyle.

Uma Kannan, *Madurai Malligai: Madurai and its Jasmine. A celebration*, Thiagarajar Publication, 2012.



Fruity, green, with hints of orange blossom and cut grass, jasmine sambac leaves a truly unique fragrance in its wake. In India, it is woven into garlands, used as offerings to the gods and decorates women's hair. In Europe, it has recently become a regularly featured ingredient in the formulas of leading perfumes. Explore every facet of this sacred flower, from botany, history, art, anthropology, agriculture and chemistry, to the perfumers who use it and the perfumes they create.

Nez éditions (*Nez, the olfactory magazine*) has teamed up with IFF-LMR, the gold standard in natural ingredients for the perfume industry, to present a collection that is unique in the field: *The naturals notebook*.

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