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Coming Into Bloom

The story of malligai or jasmine, which pervades Madurai's soul.

Written by N V Shoba

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Come dawn and the flower market near the Mattuthavani bus stand in Madurai rolls out its aromatic magic carpet. This is where Francois Demachy, star perfumer for French fashion house Christian Dior, comes, year after year, for inspiration and for the precious jasmine that gives J'Adore, the iconic fragrance, its lush floral heart. Earlier this year, the Madurai malligai or malli (jasmine) got a Geographical Indications tag (it certifies the product's reputation due to its geographical origin or traditional method of manufacture), joining the ranks of iconic products like Darjeeling tea and Pochampalli saris. For the people of the temple town in Tamil Nadu that has now bloomed into a tier-II city, the flower has perfumed their entire lives. Take R Eeswaran, a jasmine wholesaler, who was led by the nose as it was, to Madurai in 1971. "My father used to string flowers in Chennai. It was when I wove my sister's wedding garland — a dense pattern that took hours — that I decided to come here. I saved enough money to buy a small house in Madurai, and now this place is home," he says. "There is no malli (jasmine) like Madurai malli."

On a good day, Eeswaran, 56, sells about 150 kg of jasmine. In the evening, when it is time to wash down two idlis with a tumbler of filter coffee, he strings together a couple of mozams (about two and a half feet), interspersing malli with

kanakambaram (firecracker flower) and fragrant herbs. “Every day,since we married,I have brought home flowers for my wife,” he says. It isn’t because he is a flower seller. On the streets of Madurai,women proudly wear long strands of malli tucked into their plaited hair or wound around a bun,while men stop by flower stalls to get a strand wrapped in a banana leaf for the women at home. “When I arrived in Madurai after my marriage,the city seemed to revel in an abundance of jasmine. The only Indian Airlines flight to Chennai,which was known as the ‘Malli Special’ in the 1970s,would be loading baskets and baskets of Madurai malli,” writes Uma Kannan,cultural anthropologist and secretary,Thiagarajar College,Madurai,in her book,Madurai Malligai,published last year.

Over 80 species of jasmine are found in India,of which three are cultivated commercially — gundu malli or *Jasminum sambac*,mullai or *Jasminum auriculatum*,and jathi malli or *Jasminum grandiflorum*. It is the gundu malli (literally,the rounded jasmine) that is cultivated by about 5,000 farmers in and around Madurai — in places with moist,sandy,red soil like Aruppukkottai,Natham,Melur,Thirumangalam and Nilakottai,all located within 50-60 km of the city. Florists across [Tamil Nadu](#),the largest producer and consumer of jasmine,swear by the fragrance of the flowers from this region. “It has thicker petals than jasmine grown elsewhere; it also has better longevity and an unmatched heady aroma,” says N Jagadeesan of S Nagaratnam & Sons,a flower distribution and export company based in Madurai and Chennai. In a month,Jagadeesan ferries about 30 tonnes of the flowers from Madurai to other cities across India. He exports five tonnes of jasmine,strung into meter lengths and garlands,to Canada,France,West Asia,Malaysia,Singapore and Sri Lanka. The strands are packed carefully,first in butter paper to absorb excess moisture,then in a thermocol box with cool gel packs within. “Jasmine is highly perishable. Cold storage does not work — when you bring it back to room temperature,it wilts quickly,” he says.

The jasmine,an evening bloom known as the ‘queen of the night’,is handpicked early in the morning. It is in season for 10 months in a year. A plant starts to yield flowers in six months and could be commercially useful for up to 10 years. “About 10,000 tonnes of jasmine are sold at the Madurai market every day. Four years ago,we used to get 13,000 tonnes. Now,with the industrial development around Madurai,many farmers have sold their fields and made a neat profit. Others prefer to go to local flower markets in Nilakottai,Aruppukkottai and Dindigul,” says Jagadeesan. P Mani,a 35-year-old third-generation farmer from Perungudi

village,near Madurai airport,was forced to sell his two-acre jasmine plantation when his ageing mother had to undergo a cardiac bypass surgery in a Chennai hospital. He now works at a friend's plantation. "The smell of the earth and the smell of jasmine,these are my earliest memories," he says. "I am not trained to do any other work."

N Selvaraj,a 39-year-old malli weaver,echoes these sentiments. "Everyone in my family — my parents,my sisters — makes a living weaving jasmine garlands and strands. In a day,we supply strung flowers worth Rs 4,000-5,000 to the Meenakshi Amman temple alone. Other sales total Rs 20,000-25,000 a day," says Selvaraj,who runs a shop near Meenakshi Theatre and employs 40-45 weavers. Selvaraj specialises in elaborate garlands and décor for weddings,besides flowers for the gods of Madurai. "One never goes to the temple without buying a ball of malli for the gods," says Bhuvana Dorai,a 44-year-old teacher who lives with her husband and two children in GR Nagar.

Back at the flower market,the price of jasmine hovers around Rs 80-100 a kg,though it is known to fluctuate wildly. Jagadeesan says perfumery is not feasible at these prices,with 800-850 kg of flowers yielding just a kilo of jasmine concentrate.

"Despite the GI tag,customs rules do not allow us to export flowers directly from Madurai. We must route them through Chennai," he rues. There are other concerns. "Madurai is famous for its malli,but things are changing — with short hair styles and western clothes,there is a feeling that it is not trendy to wear flowers," says Kannan,who,in her capacity as executive committee member of INTACH,has conducted malli workshops in the city. "We wanted to create awareness about the versatility of the malli and to bring about a sense of pride and ownership in all those involved in the growing,picking and tying of the malli,which is often taken for granted," she says. It is true that Madurai takes the malli for granted,for it has bloomed here for centuries — possibly since 300 BC — making the unforgiving summer nights more bearable. "After that long,we all have jasmine in our blood," Dorai says.