

Madurai: Why this ancient temple town is known as India's Jasmine City

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October 24, 2020 10:01 AM

As many know, Madurai is India's Jasmine city, where the famous, sweet scented 'malligai' has been grown in the temple city for centuries.



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Ever longed to visit India's Jasmine City – Madurai? The scent of Jasmine is synonymous with the splendour of Madurai's glorious Meenakshi temple. As many know, Madurai is India's Jasmine city, where the famous, sweet scented 'malligai' has been grown in the temple city for centuries. In fact, the earliest references to Madurai's jasmine is documented through extensive references to the flower in Sangam literature which dates back to 300 BC to AD 300. Other Hindu scriptures including the Vedas as well as ancient and medieval literature mention the jasmine flower as a

sacred offering. In this context, it is pertinent to mention that Madurai is known to be the 'jasmine capital' of India.

Madurai's jasmine growing regions include Aruppukkotai, Natham, Melur, Thirumangalam, Perungudi, Uthappaanaickanur, Ammainaickanur and Nillakota. Notably, these are places that have moist, well-drained and sandy loam soil in which the jasmine can thrive, according to Dr. Uma Kannan's book titled 'Madurai Malligai: Madurai and its Jasmine Celebration.' In this book, the author has not only interwoven Madurai's rich culture but has also interviewed many malligai farmers, sellers, agents and exporters.

What makes Madurai the 'Jasmine capital of India'?

Curious to know how a city can become synonymous with a flower? Jasmine, or the malligai flower as it is called, is a way of life in southern India, where almost no Hindu ritual, puja or auspicious occasion feels complete without the family members decorating their homes and beautiful tresses with fresh, sweet-scented jasmine. For children, young girls, brides and married women as well as the elderly women, tucking in a strand of jasmine is a part of their identity, an extension of their personality and a celebration of an auspicious occasion.

In Madurai, a popular saying goes that there can be no wedding without jasmine. Simply put, what this means is that an occasion as special and sacred as a marriage becomes complete only with the decking up of jasmine flowers.

Madurai Malligai: What makes it unique?

Madurai is home to the largest jasmine market in the country. According to the book, the following parameters make Madurai's jasmine unique and each facet is explained in detail:

Fragrance

Petals

Colour

Freshness

What is Madurai famous for?

To most Indians, the first thing that springs to mind about Madurai is its magnificent Madurai Meenakshi temple, coupled with the craft of Sungudi artisans who make beautiful Sungudi sarees and of course, the hard working jasmine flower growers and weavers in the city.

Weaving and selling sweet-scented jasmine marks a life of tremendous work and unspoken sacrifices for the flower sellers in the temple city.

The book documents how they lead a life that begins when the first light of dawn has yet to touch the horizon and their work continues late into the night, fetching them 'decent' returns but not profit as such.

These are the humble men and women that the book pays homage to. In their selflessness, they remain committed to their craft of weaving though it is the commission agents and big players who mint profits in the business of selling jasmine.

Why write a book about jasmine?

In the preface to the book, the author addresses this in the following words, "Over centuries, Madurai has seen the rise and fall of Kings and dynasties. Amidst the shifting sands of history, the city, like any other, has undergone many upheavals. But through all the vicissitudes of time, the aroma of a small white flower continues to linger gently in the air..."

As you travel along through the book, your journey spans the malligai's origins in antiquity to its current role, not only as one of life's simple pleasures, but also as a viable commodity that is woven into a city's temple culture and social fabric. The hard lives of the city's flower sellers and weavers will touch a deep chord within as readers will be able to empathise with their hardships.

In 'Madurai Malligai', the author also establishes the linkage between the glorious Meenakshi temple and the Madurai Malligai (as Madurai's celebrated home grown jasmine is known) as being synonymous with the heritage and lifestyle of the sacred temple city in Tamil Nadu.

A glorious temple town with its traditions come alive in this book, that is layered with rich and stunning visuals of jasmine growers, flower sellers and weavers.

Published by Thiagarajar College, Publication Division in Madurai, the green-and-white jasmine-inspired blurb sums up the author's compelling blend of the city's cultural and historical facts with these words, "Long live the Madurai Malligai and the humble malligai weaver!"