

Of Gods and People - The Story of Jasmine

By Seema Shah

At dawn, Madurai wakes to the sound of the Vedas and the air is perfumed with the scent of flowers.

British historian Michael Wood's evocative image of Madurai, ancient India's seat of power, highlights the city's inextricable relationship with its native flower, the famed *jasminum sambac*, known locally as *Madurai malligai*.



The Madurai Meenakshi Amman temple

On a recent visit to this bustling city in southern India, I visited a frenetic market where buyers of the French perfume houses of Dior and Chanel come to locate these jasmine flowers, which help create the scents they are renowned for. I also had the opportunity to meet with Dr Uma Kannan, a cultural anthropologist, whose passion for the flower led her to write a book about it.

Although the jasmine flower is cultivated across the subcontinent, few places are as closely linked with it as is the temple town of Madurai. Jasmine has played a vital role in Madurai's social fabric and economy from time immemorial, making the city the flower's motherland. This can be attributed in part to the large number of temples here, the most famous being the Madurai Meenakshi temple, one of the few whose presiding deity is female.

Grown for centuries and offered to the gods, the fragrant white blossoms can also be seen adorning the long, plaited hair of women who throng the streets of this pilgrimage centre, very much as we do on the streets of Little India in Singapore.



Dr Uma Kannan who has worked tirelessly to gain the Geographic Indications (GI) tag, a measure of quality

"When I arrived in Madurai in the 1970s, the city seemed to revel in an abundance of jasmine. The only Indian Airlines flight to Chennai, known as the 'Malli Special', would be transporting basket loads of Madurai *malli*," writes Uma Kannan, in her recently published book, *Madurai Malligai*.

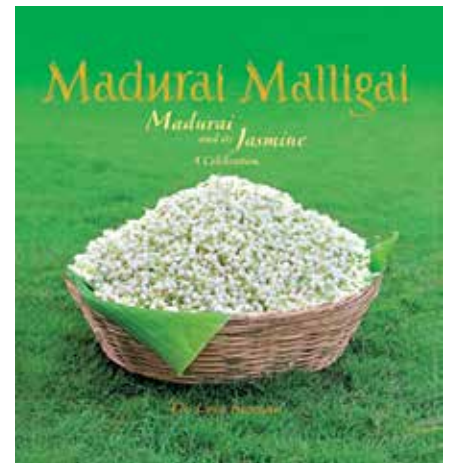
Kannan further shared her insights into the special relevance of this flower, as well as the lives and stories of the jasmine weavers.

The Indian jasmine, poetically referred to as "moonbeams in the garden" or "the queen of flowers", is one of the oldest fragrant flowers to be grown commercially.

Considered *sattvic* (pure) and auspicious, it has been mentioned in the *Vedas*, the *Mahabharata* and *Kama Sutra*. Tracing its history, she says, "There are extensive references to the flower in *Sangam* literature – the Tamil poems of the period 300 BCE to 300 CE." The poems describe how Pari, a Tamil king, gifted his royal chariot to a jasmine vine so it could wrap itself around it, simply because he could not bear to see the frail creeper on the hard forest floor.

There are also numerous representations of the flower in the sculptures of South India, dating to the fifth and seventh centuries. Deities are depicted wearing jasmine garlands and sometimes the flower features on the borders of sculpted panels. At the Madurai Meenakshi temple, one of the grandest temples in southern India, rituals are performed six times a day, all involving the extensive use of the *malligai*.

In the spring festival of Chithirai, it appears as if all the jasmine produced in this temple town in Tamil Nadu ends up adorning the goddess's shrine – from garlands to the decorations on her mythical beast *yaali*, to her floral palanquin, which will carry her to her wedding with Lord Sundareswarar. The couple – incarnations of Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati



Dr Uma Kannan's book on the Madurai Malligai



The unique greenish buds of the jasmine from Madurai

– live happily ever after, the jasmine on Meenakshi’s nuptial pendant marking their contentment and love.

According to Kannan, the Madurai jasmine has four characteristics that help it stand above the rest. The region’s unique laterite soil, rich in sulphur, is the secret behind the heady, fragrance-causing alkaloids, jasmone and alpha-terpineol. Compared to other varieties of jasmine grown in various parts of the country, Madurai *malligai* has thicker petals, which allow the flowers to retain moisture and delay the process of withering. As a result, the flowers are easier to work with, especially for garland weavers.



Brisk trade at the local flower market

“Madurai *malligai* is the only variety that is greenish white when it is picked in the morning”, she adds, “It turns milky white and then shiny, creamy white in the evening.” Another unique feature is that the *malligai* blooms after 6:00 pm, unlike the other varieties that bloom by 5:00 pm, ensuring a longer shelf-life for the flower.

The *malligai* are handpicked by women whose day begins as early as 3:00 am. Armed with headlamps, they make their way to the farm to pick the fleshy white buds and don’t stop until it’s time for their morning rice gruel. Packed in jute or palm-leaf baskets, the buds are hurriedly transported to flower markets by 6:00 am,



Women usually string the flowers

as even the smallest delay can cause the buds to unfurl in the heat. “It’s like a stock market here; prices fluctuate daily depending on the season,” says Palaniswamy, who owns four processing units in Coimbatore, Madurai, Bangalore and Agra. “Flowers that cost Rs 100 per kilo could go up to Rs 102 per kilo the next minute,” he says. During peak festival season, prices have shot as high as Rs 1,000 per kilogram.

Middlemen-traders sell the blooms to garland makers and flower sellers. Strings and loose flowers are wrapped in banana leaves, tied with banana twine – a trend that’s sadly changing owing to plastic bags and cotton thread – and sold on the streets of Madurai the same day. Bulk orders of its commercial varieties are packaged and transported to other cities and countries in thermocol boxes lined with tekno-ice packs to keep the buds fresh. There is a great demand for them among the Indian diaspora in places such as Malaysia, Singapore, Dubai and also in western Europe, especially France.

In 2013, the Madurai *malligai* or *malli* (jasmine) received a GI tag, (given for goods whose quality and reputation are

attributable to their place of origin), joining the ranks of iconic products such as Darjeeling tea and Pochampalli saris.

As one of the key supporters of the farmers’ efforts for the GI tag, Kannan has spent hours with farmers, flower sellers, shopkeepers and garland weavers, studying the life cycle of the graceful bloom. “The GI tag gave the flower its due credit and respectability,” she says.

She has also been instrumental in organising garland-



Jasmine garlands adorn deities

making classes for women. “Women were given the labour-intensive, monotonous job of tying jasmine strings, which barely yielded a few rupees per metre, while men dominated the garland market, which needs less labour, but fetches up to Rs 300 per garland. It’s clearly a business where women do much of the work, but it’s the men who seem to be reaping the rewards,” she recalls.

Recognising that modern, western-attired women no longer wear jasmine strings in their hair, Kannan organises workshops for local flower weavers and tourists where they learn innovative ways to use the flower, making bracelets, in-home décor pieces and personal products. This was done in association with the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, with which Kannan is associated.

The workshops also urged members of the flower industry not to wrap the flowers in plastic bags but revert to the traditional method of wrapping them in plantain leaves.

“I wish the market was more organised so that these women’s lives would also bloom along with the industry; they are constantly in debt to middlemen. Even then, they never complain. They say tying jasmine strings gives them a lot of peace. Who knows? Perhaps it is owing to the benefits of aromatherapy,” she adds. In the end, the Madurai *malli* symbolizes ancient Tamil traditions, and as long as women love flowers and people need them for rituals and weddings, there will always be a market for the Madurai *malli*.

Seema Shah has been actively involved with the Friends of the Museums and the ACM in various capacities. Her areas of interest are traditional textiles and Indian art and history.

Photos by the author and from Dr Kannan’s book