



▲ Madurai Malli: Celebrating Jasmine

Madurai malli has recently been awarded the Geographical Indication label that gives legal protection to the jasmine growers and entitles them to label their produce Madurai jasmine – a byword for quality

profitable crop, and its only pest is the stick bug, against which it can, to some extent, be protected.

There are over 80 species of jasmine in India but in Madurai there are three main types; two are used for flower sales and a third which is used for perfumery. Some of the big European perfume manufacturers visit Madurai regularly to obtain jasmine for their products, but in her book Uma has chosen to concentrate on the local uses for jasmine. Some of this is taken up in locally sold cosmetics such as soap, shampoo and oil, or for incense sticks, but the bulk of the crop is sold as flowers.

Jasmine flowers all the year round so there is constant employment for the pickers: their day starts at 4.00 a.m. in order to pick the buds before they open. Jasmine must be sold on the day it is picked as it can only be kept fresh for 24 hours; the transport network, therefore, has to be extremely efficient. There are regular flights to Chennai and

on to Singapore, Malaysia, and Dubai where the flowers are in demand for temple decoration.

The buds sold locally are wrapped in banana leaves which keep both the scent and the flowers fresh. Traditionally the flowers are then packed in palm leaf baskets. Inevitably modernisation is creeping in at all stages of the process and Uma laments the current move away from the traditional baskets. If they are no longer required, it will mean a loss of employment for the weavers as well as the loss of another old skill. They are still as effective as they ever were, she argues, and preferable to plastic which causes a problem when it is discarded.

An intricate art

It is at this stage that the flower sellers come into the story, and this is perhaps the heart of *Madurai Malligai*. The flower sellers have many different backgrounds, life stories and attitudes. Some were particularly proud of their dexterity in tying the strings of jasmine

buds which they then weave into garlands. Others however see it as a lowly task which they do not wish their children to take up, but many women appreciate the independence the money they earn gives them.

In addition to researching the history and business of jasmine, *Madurai Malligai* also contains detailed sections on knot tying—with illustrations for those who may wish to try it themselves—and on weaving. There are many photographs demonstrating the different ways jasmine garlands are used to decorate temples and houses and finally—unexpectedly for me—a section on using jasmine in cooking! I had heard of jasmine tea, but *Madurai Malligai* goes further with intriguing recipes for jasmine syrup and the ways in which this can be used.

In a fitting finale to the jasmine story, and a neat coincidence of timing, Madurai Malli has now been awarded a Geographical Indication label. This gives legal protection to the jasmine growers and entitles them to label their produce Madurai jasmine—a byword for quality. Farmers were pleased with this endorsement of their crop, which will be confirmed in a presentation ceremony in April.

In her introduction, Uma Kannan writes, "Very few places in India, or elsewhere, are as closely linked with a flower as Madurai is with the malligai." It seems fitting therefore that there should be a publication recording this relationship and the book is the first of its kind. It serves as a valuable document of Madurai jasmine as well as a tribute to the skills of the people who work with the flower. It is lavishly illustrated with splendid photographs, all taken in the Madurai area, and will be a welcome addition to the books on Madurai's cultural heritage.

Madurai Malligai: Madurai and its Jasmine by Dr. Uma Kannan is published by Thiagarajar College and is available from the college and from bookshops in Chennai. Price: Rs. 600 ■

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Nilgiri Tahr: MOUNTAIN ACROBATS

Loretta Dean writes about her first encounter with the shy elusive mountain goat—the highly endangered Nilgiri Tahr in Eravikulam National Park, Munnar that has the largest viable population of these ungulates. After her close encounters with these fleet footed hooved animals, she says that she agrees with field biologist George Schaller who described them as "Mountain Monarchs"

By Loretta Dean
United Kingdom



The Nilgiri tahr, 'monarchs of the mountains' ▲

As we make the vertical ascent through the High Ranges of Munnar, Kerala, around the vast, undulating slopes of the teeming tea plantations, you must forgive me for thinking that I have entered the sculpted garden of a prized landscaper. After all, the Eravikulam National Park is renowned for being "the cleanest park in India" and a home to stunning views, rare foliage and, let's not forget, the endangered Nilgiri Tahr (*Nilgiritragus hylocichus*), endemic to the Western Ghats.

The steep slopes contained in the 97 square kilometers of Eravikulam National Park provide a sanctuary for the shy, skittish Nilgiri Tahr. But don't make the mistake of thinking that this extraordinary creature is a mere goat. Rather, this special species shares an evolutionary link between the primitive goat antelopes, sheep, and true goats. With instinct as a guide, the endangered Nilgiri tahr execute acrobatic leaps as they seek refuge in the steep terrain of the park which protects them from their natural predators: the leopard and the wild dog.