

Chapter 3

Sandalwood in Indian Culture



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1 Introduction

There is no fragrance in this world that does not emerge from a certain culture. Every scent that exists bears the mark of a particular part of the globe and preserves its ethos, climate, history, geography, topography and collective thought process.

While it is only later in its history that 'India' was deemed a nation determined by fixed political boundaries, the culture of this part of South Asia dates back several millennia. One of the oldest-known eras in its history is the Indus Valley Civilization which is considered the world's oldest cradle of creativity and innovation. It was then that 'perfumery', a modern term for the art and science of making fragrance or scent as a commodity or a product of utility was first discovered and invented.

2 India's Pioneering Contribution

Archaeologists are said to have excavated a unique distillation apparatus known today as 'Deg-Bhapka' from the remains of that great civilisation. This process was used to distil natural materials to derive fragrant oil. These oils were used as medicine, aphrodisiac and as many believe, perfume to scent the body and clothes. India, though being the world's largest treasure house of natural fragrant materials, namely flowers, woods, spices, roots and herbs, is particularly synonymous with Sandalwood, literally the scent of its soul. Although Indian distillers and perfumers lament about western perfumery's apathy towards acknowledging India's natural fragrant reserves and the fact that iconic perfumers of Europe themselves source mammoth amounts of raw material from here, her mind-boggling array of fragrant

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flowers, health-giving spices, herbs and many-old reserves of woods like ‘agar’ or ‘oud’ and ‘sandalwood’ are indisputably one-of-their kind.

As compared to Australian and African Sandalwood, India’s *Santalum album* with its formidable 95% santalol content is a key ingredient in world perfumery. Beyond the cheery effervescence of Mysuru or ‘Mysore’ and the happy bustle of the charming city lies the world’s greatest abode of Sandalwood. Dating back to the Vedic era, the wood and the oil derived from the ancient methods of distillation have been an integral part of liturgy traditions.

3 Sandalwood in Liturgy

Offered to the sacred fire during the age-old ‘Agnihotra’ or ‘Havan’ rituals, sandalwood, known in Sanskrit as ‘chandan’ is sacred for numerous reasons. Apart from its importance in spiritual rituals, the creamy, woody, rich, often musky, smoky and spicy accords of sandalwood oil are deeply healing, both psychologically as well as spiritually. When burnt over charcoal or offered to the sacred fire, the wood emits a soothing, calming, meditative aroma. The venerated Rishis and mystics of India have widely advocated the use of Sandalwood. It has been a way of life with them.

Although delving into the medical benefits of Sandalwood would call for an encyclopaedia in itself, classical Indian texts like Ayurveda which advocate a perfect balance of mind, body and spirit, acknowledge its incredible healing properties. The ‘Charak Samhita’ as well speaks about chandan as a decimator of foul odours, a reliever of burning sensations, infections, fatigue and psychological disorders along with several other ailments.

Chandan pastes are often used as face packs or as ingredients of skincare products considering their incredible skin-nourishing properties. This paste also bears a unique symbolism and is used as a ‘tilak’ on the centre of the forehead or between the eyebrows by Hindus and Jains.

In many regions of India like the south, chandan or ‘chandanam’ is an integral part of ‘pooja’ worship rituals and the paste and incense are offered to various deities. Those who can afford the oil and can avail of it consider themselves blessed by Almighty himself and include it in their spiritual routine.

The Zoroastrians, Iran’s original inhabitants share astounding theological and cultural similarities with ‘Sanatana Vaidic Dharma’ or ‘Hinduism’. When they fled the Arab invasion of their motherland and sought refuge on Indian shores, they adapted marvellously to Indian customs and way of life. One of them was Sandalwood which is a quintessential nuance of Zoroastrian religious liturgy. Pure Mysore sandalwood chips are offered to the ‘Atash’ or sacred fire in the ‘Atashgah’ or Fire Temple.

Zoroastrian shops situated close to fire temples selling religious items sell high-quality sandalwood sticks and chips to be offered to the sacred fire. But not many can afford them as the price for each piece is over a Rs. 100–200. Hence, a lesser quality, affordable fragrant wood is offered instead as an alternative. ‘The generic term for

fragrant woods we use is 'sukhad'. 'Su' in Sanskrit is 'pure' or 'good', and 'khad' refers to wood', explains senior Zoroastrian Mr. Rohinton Mehta, the proprietor of Minoi Meher, a Zoroastrian religious shop adjoining Mumbai's towering Anjuman Na Atash Behram Fire Temple.

4 The Backbone of Indian Perfumery

Sandalwood is also the backbone of traditional Indian perfumery and India's ancient fragrance heritage. There are two distinct varieties of Indian perfume oil distillate extracts. 'Rooh', Arabic for 'soul', or pure extract, and 'Attar', Arabic for 'distillate' which is pure extract over a sandalwood base. Both are oil concentrate varieties devoid of solvents like alcohol or water.

Experts differ when it comes to whether Sandalwood is chosen as a base on which petals of various flowers are distilled, or whether sandalwood oil is mixed with the floral distillates or 'Rooh'. All the same, these classic Indian Attars contain judicious proportions of Mysore sandalwood, sought after for the richness of its aromas especially when aged.

One of India's oldest-living traditional perfumeries is old Delhi's Gulabsingh Johrimal, established in 1816. The seventh-generation torchbearer of this revered tradition is perfumer Mr. Mukul Gundhi. Speaking about Sandalwood in Indian perfumery, he explains that India's stunning diversity of fragrant flowers, when distilled over a sandalwood base, give us the gift of the world's most exotic natural perfumes. 'While a lay person can be easily fooled by Indian fragrance vendors who sell synthetic compounds in the name of sandalwood for as cheap as Rs. 20, pure sandalwood is subtle, rich and provides a firm backbone to, and enhances the distillate extract of each flower, be it Gulab or rose, Jasmine, Kewda, Molshri, Gul Hina, Kadamba, Rajnigandha, Champa or Chameli to name just a few' he explains.

He talks about how Sandalwood finds place in the classical Indian 'Ashtagandha' or selection of eight natural fragrant treasures. 'The phrase 'chandan-yugal' or 'sandalwood pair', probably referring to white and red sandalwoods is mentioned in a poetic 'Doha' verse that speaks about these eight ingredients, which also include agar, saffron, camphor and musk', he shares.

'Attar Shamama', one of India's most sought after traditional fragrances, truly glorifies Sandalwood. Its inherent warmth makes it the world's pioneering classical winter fragrance. 'Several indigenous Indian herbs and spices are distilled through hydro distillation and the resultant extract is cooked with pure sandalwood oil in a special container called 'Pateela' for long periods of time. Sandalwood oil is a key ingredient in Shamama and the secret to its legendary richness. Shamama is also extensively employed in Arabian perfumery', explains Mr. Moosa Khan of Ali Brothers, one of India's leading traditional fragrance distillers from Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh, known as India's and the world's oldest fragrance capital. The city upholds the authentic traditions and techniques of steam and hydro distillations to derive natural fragrance oils.

5 Sandalwood as an Incense Tradition

India also pioneered the art of incense making and Sandalwood along with agar or agarwood has played a pivotal role in the heritage. Although one might rightfully presume pure Sandalwood was once a form of Indian incense, today due to the exorbitant cost of pure Sandalwood and its unavailability, many synthetic alternatives have arisen in the incense market.

Artisans find the persistence of strict laws against the possession, sale or purchase of Sandalwood crippling. They explain that in India, while the possession of drugs is a bailable offence, Sandalwood is non-bailable. 'Australian and African sandalwoods, despite possessing a lesser santalol content than the legendary Indian Sandalwood, are exported to India and supplied to agarbatti manufacturers to be included in their incenses. What a pity! Mysore's Sandalwood is depleting despite being the sandal capital of the world. The reserves and the production are dwindling rapidly', they lament.

The word 'agarbatti' or incense stick literally translates as 'light of agar' (agarbatti) considering that pure agarwood power was once the key ingredient of the most original form of agarbatti. But over decades, India has witnessed a growth in synthetic compounds and incense powders for the manufacture of agarbatti and dhoop incenses due to the unaffordability of pure agar. However, veterans like renowned agarwood distiller Mr. Tajul Islam Bakshi of Assam Aromas, a legend in the world of agarwood, have revived the original tradition of pure agarwood incense sticks that he manufactures from agarwood dust. 'I have created these incense sticks without the inclusion of a single synthetic ingredient. The agarwood dust provides an untainted experience of the aroma of pure agarwood or oud and many of my clients purchase these incenses for meditation', Mr. Bakshi says.

Sandalwood too has its passionate upholders who include a percentage of Sandalwood refuse to their incenses which also comprise of other materials to aid longevity, strength and to make the aromas palatable to those who remain unacclimatized with the authentic fragrance of Sandalwood. Though 'pure sandalwood' labels can be misleading and often disappointing, many of these incenses are masterfully crafted to successfully provide the user with the accords of original Sandalwood.

Incense manufactures throughout India dream of the day when restrictions with regard to the purchase and sale of Sandalwood will be finally eased and the ancient fragrant treasure will be made available to all Indians equally in its most original form and purest glory.