Historical perspective on the usage of perfumes and scented Articles in ancient Indian literatures

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Abstract: In India perfumes and scented articles were in use from pre Vedic and Vedic periods for religious practices, social customs, and domestic rituals and later gradually became part and parcel of human life. Perfumes were also used in cosmetics and beauty aids. Medicinal values of many perfumes were well known to ancient Indians and were used in both rituals and to treat diseases. Medicated fumigation (dhupan) was an advanced method for medicinal purposes. Medicated oils, collyriums, powders were prepared from perfumes used externally in many diseases. Perfumes were also anointed in various body parts (Anulepan). Chewing betel leaves along with fragrant material like nutmeg, mace, etc. (Tambulam) was used with a view to rendering mouth clean and fragrant. Usage of scented oils to massage body (Abhyanga) which keeps the skin smooth, healthy and invigorating; Udvartanam, massaging various body parts; Udgarshanam, scrubbing; Utsadanam rubbing with scented powders etc., were some of the health protective and disease eliminating procedures. Scented drugs and perfumes enhance the quality, activity and pleasantness of these processes.

Use of perfumes and scented articles in Vedas, Puranas and contemporary ancient Indian literatures

The Vedas are generally admitted to be the source of Indian philosophical thought, religious practices, social customs, professions and functions of different social classes. In short Vedas are considered as almost all spiritual and secular conventions, observations and pursuits. Varied usages of perfumes along with individual beautification and medicinal purposes can be seen in Vedic literatures. In Rigveda (IV.38.6; V.53.4; X.184.2) Srak is used for flower garlands and Aswins were called as Pushkarasrajau, wearing garlands of Lilies.

The word Sugandhi is used for Agni (the god of fire), well-wisher of men, who carries the oblations with his redolent-mouth (Aasaa Sughandhinaa… R.V. VIII.19.24). The fragrant mouthed Agni was also considered as augmenter of material prosperity and ensures of immortality through divine grace.

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Tryambakam yajamahe sugandhim
pushtivardhanam Urvaarakamiva
bandhanaan mrutyormukshiya maamrutat
(R.V. VII.59.12.1)

In Rigveda collyrium (Anjana), perfumed unguents (Punya gandha or Surabhi), beautiful garments and flower garlands (Suvasah) were mentioned. The word Punya gandha was also mentioned in Atharvaveda.

Striyo yah punyagandhastah sarvah svapayaamsi- R.V. VII.55.8, A.V.IV.5.3;

In Rigveda (R.V.X.18.7), un-widowed dames were advised to use kohl and unguent to become free from sorrow.

In Atharvaveda (VI.102.3) use of fragrant drugs like licorice (Glycyrrhiza glabra Linn.), Kushta (Saussurea lappa C.B. Clarke); Nalada (Verivertia zizanioides (Linn) Nash) etc. were mentioned.\(^2\)

In Atharvaveda Kushta (Saussurea lappa C.B. Clarke - a scented rhizome) was mentioned in many hymns as an important drug to relieve many diseases and to provide eternal life.\(^2\)

In Kaushika sutra (35.21) a paste from Kushta, (Saussurea lappa) Tagara (Valeriana wallichii DC.) etc. mixed with butter is mentioned to anoint the Partner. Ashvalayana grihyasutra (III.7.1) mentioned that a pupil was supposed to furnish flower garland, ointment (Anulepanam), perfumed powder and eye salve along with other beauty aids like earrings, necklace etc. for himself and his teacher at the time of convocation. In Shaunaka's Brihatdevata (400BC) VII.77-78 origin of scented drugs were described. While Agni (The god of fire) was officiating as Hota, his bones were transformed into Guggulu (Commiphora mukul (Hook ex stocks) Engl.), and his sinew into Sugandhi tejana, which was considered as fragrant Tejana grass.\(^3\)

In excavations in Mohenjodaro revealed items, which support the use of powders and perfumes after the bath. Excavations and studies on many ancient literatures proved prevalent use of cosmetics and perfumes in all strata of society.\(^1\&4\)

Valmiki Ramayana

Dasaratha’s (the king of Ayodhya) dead body was kept in a special taila droni (a wooden tub filled with oil processed in medicines and aromatics) to protect the body from decay (Ramayan, 11.70.16-17);

In another reference dead body of a Brahmin was also preserved in taila droni filled with medicated and scented oils.

Baalasya ca shareeram…..
Ghandhaischa Paramodaaraistailaischa
Sugandhibhibh…. Ram VII.66.2, 3

In cremation of Dasaratha’s dead body, Candana (Sandal wood), Sarala (Pinus roxbbergii Sarg), Padmaka (Prunus cerasoides D.Don), Agaru (Aquilaria agallocha Roxb.), Devadaru (Cedrus deodara (Roxb.) Loud) etc. were used. (Ramayan, 11.70, 16-17)

Sandal paste was used to anoint the body (Ramayan11.70.4). It was described that when Bharata went to the forest with his army to see his brother Rama, the path was perfumed with sandal water and flowers.

Candanodaka samsikto nanakusuma
bhushitah- Ram.II.74.13

In another reference, during nights when the king Ravana desired to see Seetadevi, the
paths were lit with many lamps filled with perfumed oils.

“In Deepikaabhirane kebhih samantaavabhasitam gandhatailaavasiktaa…” Ram. V.16.18.

Many other scattered references of the use of perfumed water, scented waters, scented oils, scented powders and other cosmetics can be observed in Valmiki Ramayana.

Mahabharata

In Mahabharata 3 types of Dhupas (incense) were mentioned.

1. Dhupa (fumes) by burning Niryasa (aromatic resin exudation from trees) like Guggulu (Commiphora mukul (Hook ex stocks) Engl), Shallaki (Boswellia serrata Roxb.) etc. is considered as dearer to Gods and Godesses.

2. Dhupa by burning of leaves of trees like Sara (Pinus roxburghi Sarg), Agaru (Aquilaria agallocha Roxb), Shallaki (Boswellia serrata Roxb) etc. is dearer to Yakshas and Rakshasas.

3. Kritrima (artificial) Dhupa produced from fermented substances like Molasses etc. is dearer to Daanavas, (demons) Bhutas (ethereal beings) and men. (M.B. XIV.49.41-42)

During these periods lamps were filled with perfumed oils; fragrant powders were used for face and body; bed sheets were variegated and scented; arrows and weapons were worshiped by applying sandal paste and decorating with flower garlands. (M.B. VI.93.70; VIII.8.16; XIII.57.40; VII.121.31)

Buddhist and Pre Buddhist literatures

In pre Buddistic period, people were trained in 64 arts. Gandhayukti (The art of blending perfumes) is one among them. Lalitavistara mentioned that the young Bodhisatva had excelled in 64 arts. Sikkhapadas of Khuddaka Pada contain few restrictions for Buddhist monks. The monks are prohibited from use of pomade (Perfume oil), perfumes and anointing the body.

In another Buddistic text in Pali, namely, Brahmajala sutta, a list of procedures for bedecking, dressing, Uccaadana (anointing with perfumes), Maalaa Vilepana (applying pomade and anointing and wearing flower garlands), Mukhacunaka (applying fragrant talcum powder to face) etc. were described.

Vatsayana Kamasutra (1st Adhikarana, 3rd Adhyaya)

Vatsayan kamasutra states that both male and female should learn 64 arts. Gandhayukti (the technique of making perfumes) is one among them.

Kalika Purana

68th chapter of Kalika purana describes in detail, 10 types of Gandha dravyas Viz. 1. Isthagandha, 2. Anishthagandha, 3. Madhuragandha, 4. Amlagandha, 5. Kathugandha, 6. Nirharigandha, 7. Samhatgandha, 8. Snigdhagandha, 9. Rukshtagandha and 10 Vishadagandha according to the smells.

Pleasant smell like musk, sandalwood etc. is considered as Isthagandha; unpleasant smell like carcass (dead body) is considered as Anishthagandha; sweet smell of flowers etc is Madhuragandha; sour smell of Citrus fruits etc is Amlagandha; pungent smell of pepper etc. is Kathugandha;
spreading smell of asafetida etc is Nirharigandha, mixture of many perfumes is Samhatgandha; sweet oily smell of ghee etc. is Snigdhagandha; pungent oily smell of mustard oil etc. is Rukshagandha; fermented rice etc. smell is considered as Vishadagandha.

Kautilya Arthashastra

Arthashastra has the descriptions of many fragrant drugs, which were used as cosmetics like Sandalwood, Agaru (Aquilaria agallocha) and Taila Parnika (Eucalyptus?) (Book-II, Chapter-XI). Candana (Sandalwood) was used as Anulepana (external application) and as beauty aid and fragrant material. Qualities of Sandalwood were mentioned as light, soft, moist (Asyana, not dry) as greasy as ghee, pleasant smell, adhesive to the skin, absorptive of heat, and comfortable to the skin. Various types of Sandal wood were mentioned. Satana is red and smells like the earth, Gosirshaka is dark red and smells like fish; Harichandana is of the color of the feathers of the parrot and smells like tamarind or mango. Similarly Tarnasa, Grameruka is red or dark red and smells like the urine of a goat, Daivasabyeya is red and smells like a lotus flower; Aupaka (Japaka), Jongaka and Taurupa are red or dark red and soft; Maleyaka is reddish white; Kuchandana is as black as Agaru (Aquilaria agallocha) or red or dark red and very rough; Kalaparvata is of pleasant appearance; Kosakaraparvata (bud shaped and is a product of a mountain by that name) is black or variegated black; Sitodakiya is black and soft, and smells like a lotus flower; Nagaparvata (that which is the product of Naga mountain) is rough, possess the color of Saivala (Vallisneria) and Sakala is brown.

Agaru was said as heavy, soft, greasy, smells far and long, burns slowly, gives out continuous smoke while burning, is of uniform smell, absorbs heat, and is so adhesive to the skin as not to be removable by rubbing; Its types were mentioned as Jongaka which is black or variegated black and is possessed of variegated spots, Dongaka is black and Parasamudraka is of variegated color and smells like cuscus or like Navamalika (jasminum).

Sauvarnakudyaka, product of the country of Suvarnakudya is reddish yellow and smells like a blue lotus flower or like the urine of a cow; Grameruka is greasy and smells like a cow’s urine. Sauvarnakudyaka, product of the country of Suvarnakudya is reddish yellow and smells like Matulunga (Citrus medica Linn); Purnadvipaka, the product of the island, Purnadvipa, smells like a lotus flower or like butter; Bhandrasriya and Paralauhityaka are of the colour of nutmeg; Antaravatya is of the color of cuscus- the last two smell like Kushtha (Saussurea lappa C.B. Clarke); Kaleyaka, which is a product of Svarna Bhumi (gold-producing land), is yellow and greasy; and Auttara-parvataka (a product of the north mountain) is reddish.

Vishnu Dharmottara Purana (450-650 A.D)

Sixty fourth chapter of 2nd Khanda of Vishnu Dharmottara Purana has the chapter Gandhayukti, in which 8 phases in manufacturing perfumes were described. They are 1. Sodhanam, 2. Vaasanam, 3. Virechanam, 4. Bhaavanam, 5. Paaka, 6. Bhodanam, 7. Dhupana and 8. Vaasan. Gandhatala, Gandhajala, Dhupa, Varnakara dravya, Mukhavaasas and karna patra were also described.
Preparation of Incenses: -  
Nakha (perfumed shell of land snail Helix aspera⁹), Kushtham (Saussurea lappa C.B. Clarke), Ghanam (Cyperus rotundus Linn¹⁰), Mamsi (Nardostachys jatamansi DC), Sprukka (Delphinium zalil Aitch & Hemsl¹⁰), Saileyakam (Parmelia perlata Ach.), Jalam (Baalakam- Valeriana hardwickii wall¹⁰), Kumkuma (Crocus sativus Linn.), Laaksha (lac), Candana (Santalum album Linn.-sandal wood), Agaru (Aquilaria agallocha Roxb), Natam (Tagaranga- Delphinium brunonianum Royle¹⁰ or Valeriana wallichia DC⁹), Sarala (Pinus roxburghii Sarg), Devakatham (Cedrus deodara (Roxb) Loud), Karpura (Cinnamomum camphora Nees & Eberm), Guggulu (Commiphora mukul (Hook ex stocks) Engl.),etc. were used in the preparation of incenses. Mixing two of these drugs along with Sarja (Shorea robusta Gaertn,f.) and Liquid storax (Pinyaka) various types of Dhupsticks can be prepared (ref- Vishnu Dharmottara Purana I.II.64.20-23). Perfume oil can be prepared by keeping the oil extracted from sesame seeds sandwiched in between scented flowers (ref-Vishnu Dharmottara Purana II.64.32).

Mukhavasas:-  
Ela (cardamom), Lavanga (cloves), Kakkola (Piper cubeba Linn.f.), Jaatiphal (Myristica fragrans Houtt.), Nishakara (camphor?), Jaatipatrika (Mace), were used as mouth fragrant or Mouth fresheners.

Karpura (camphor), Kumkuma (saffron), Kaantam (Badrela- Amomum subulatum Roxb), Mrugadarpam (Musk), Harenuka (scented drug mentioned in Susruta’s Eladigana), Kakkola (Piper cubeba Linn.f), Lavanga (cloves), Jaatikosa (Mace), Drukpatra (?), Truti (cardamom), Musta (Cyperus rotundus Linn), Latakasturi (Hibiscus abelmoschus Linn.) are ground to fine powder. Tablets are prepared from this powder by mixing with Khadirasara (Catechu) and Kanyasara (juice of Aloe barbadensis). These tablets render the mouth fragrant and healthy.

Manasollasa of King Someswarana (1130 A.D)¹¹  
Twenty types of royal enjoyments were mentioned in this text. Among them perfumes and scented articles were used in Snaana bhogah (enjoyment of bath), Tambula bhogah (enjoyment of betel leaf chewing), Vilepana bhogah (enjoyment of anointing the body), Maalyopabhogah (enjoyment of flower garlanding) and Dhupa bhogah (enjoyment of incense).

Snaanabhogah:-  
Sesame oil scented with flowers of Ketaki (Pandanus odoratissimus Roxb.), Jati (Jasminum officinale Linn.), Punnaga (Calophyllum inophyllum Linn.) and Campaka (Michelia champaka Linn.) was used for Abhyanga (oil massage). After oil massage Udwartana (massage or rubbing the oily body with dry powder in the opposite direction of hair follicle) was indicated with scented and medicated powder prepared from the roots of Kushtham (Saussurea lappa C.B. Clarke), Musta (Cyperus rotundus Linn), Patola (Trichosanthes dioica Roxb.), Nisha (Curcuma longa Linn.), Pushkara (Inula recemosa Hook.f.); leaves of Nimba (Azadirachta indica A. juss.), Tulasi (Ocimum sanctum Linn.) etc.; seeds of Ela (cardamom), Sarshapa (Brassica nigra Linn.), Bakuchi (Psoralia corylifolia Linn.), Cakramarda (Cassia tora Linn.)etc.; stems of Padmakam (Prunus cerasoides D.Don), Lodhra (Symlocos recemosus Roxb.), Sreekanda (sandal wood), Saral (Pinus roxburghii Sarg) etc.; flowers of Nagakesara (Mesua ferrea Linn.), Punnaga (Calophyllum inophyllum Linn.), Kumkuma (saffron), Campaka
(Michelia champaka Linn) etc.; Niryasa (exudations) of Guggulu (Commiphora mukul (Hook ex stocks) Engl.), Bola (Commiphora myrrha Holmes) Sarjaras (Shorea robusta Gaertn.f) etc.

**Tambula bhogah**

Areca-nuts obtained from Nailaavartti, Isvarpura and Kandikapura were considered best. Betel leaves collected from one year old creeper nourished with river water are considered best. Areca nuts were dried in shade and perfumed with Musk water. Musk camphor, Kakkola (Piper cubeba Linn.f), nutmeg, Khadirasara (Catechu powder) blended with musk, sandal and camphor water were used as ingredients of Tambula.(Pan)

**Vilepana bhogah**

Based on seasons different ointments were advocated to anoint the body. During spring (Vasanta kaala), ointment prepared from Sandal wood, Agaru (Aquilaria agallocha Roxb), Camphor, Musk, Saffron etc was prescribed. To get rid from bad odors anointing armpits, thighs, belly and ears with scented ointments and incenses was advocated.

**Malyopa bhogah**

Wearing garlands was advised after dressing. Based on individual taste various combinations of flower garlands were advised. They are, Campaka (Michelia champaka Linn) and Mallika (Jasminum); Campaka and Utpala (Nymphaeas stellata Willd); Campaka and Surabhi (Ocimum sanctum Linn.); Campaka and Patala (Stereospermum suaveolens DC); Mallika and Patala; Mallika and Bakula (Mimusops elengi Linn);

**Dhupa bhogah**

Various types of incenses (Dhupa bhogah) were described. Those are, Churna dhupa (incense in the form of powder); Pinda dhupa (incense in the form of paste); Varti dhupa (incense in the form of sticks); Samputa dhupa (incense burnt in a censer) etc. Methods of aromatizing living rooms, harems, garments, beds, and cloths with the help of handled censors of different shapes were described. All these descriptions indicate the extensive, imaginative and ingenious manner of application of incenses and advanced stage of civilization and royal enjoyments.

**Brihatsamhita**

Chapter LXXVII (77) of Varahamihra’s Brihat samhita is on Gandhayukti (preparation of perfumes). Perfumes and scents said to have been manufactured for the benefit of royal personage and inmates of harems. Common people also used some of them.

**Royal head bath**

Scented water fit for washing of king’s head is prepared with equal quantities of Twak (Cinnamomum zeylanicum Blume), Kushtha (Saussurea lappa C.B. Clarke), Renuka (Amomum subulatum Roxb?), Nalika (Gandha dravya vishesha-Ref-9), Sprukka (Delphinium zalil Aitch & Hemsl), Rasa (Bola- Commiphora myrrha Holmes), Tagara (Valeriana wallichii DC), Balaka (Valeriana hardwickii Wall), Nagakesara (Mesua ferrea Linn.) and Patra (leaf of Cinnamomum tamala Nees & Eberm)

**Scented hair oil**

Hair oil having the perfume of Champaka (Michelia champaka Linn) flower is made by mixing together the powder of Manjishtha (Rubia cordifolia Linn.), Vyagranakha (scented shell of sea animal), Nakha (shell of Helix aspera), Kushtha (Saussurea lappa C.B. Clarke) etc. along with sesame oil and sun heated.
Other scented oils and incenses:-

Mode of preparation of perfume named Smaroddipana from Patra (Cinnamomum tamala Nees & Eberm), juice of Turushka (Liquid storax), Baala (Valeriana hardwickii Wall) and Tagara (Valeriana wallichii DC). The above ingredients being fumigated with Katuka (Picrorhiza kurroa Royle ex Benth) and Guggulu (Commiphora mukul (Hook ex stocks) Engl.) yield a scent named Bakula.

Similarly Costus (Kushtha) generates lotus scent; same with Sandal wood Campaka scent; nutmeg (Jaatiphala), Twak (Cinnamomum zeylanicum Blume) and coriander produces jasmine scent. Preparation of delightful perfumes by mixing Haritaki (Terminalia chebula Retz), Shankha (Conch shell), Ghana (Cyperus rotundus Linn?), Bola (Commiphora myrrha Holmes), Costus, Benzoin etc in different proportions was also explained.

Clothes and body were perfumed using, powder of Twak (Cinnamomum zeylanicum lume), Usira (Vetiveria zizanioides (Linn) Nash), Patra (Cinnamomum tamala Nees & Eberm), Cardamomum are mixed with musk and camphor.

Sixteen substances namely Ghana (Cyperus rotundus Linn?), Baalaka (Valeriana hardwickii Wall), Saileyaka (Parmelia perlata Ach), Karpura (Camhor), Usira (Vetiveria zizanioides (Linn) Nash), Nagakesara (Mesua ferrea Linn.), Vyagranakha (scented shell of sea animal), Sprukka (Delphinium zalil Aitch & Hemsl), Agaru (Aquilaria agallocha Roxb.), Madanaka (Randia dumetorum Lam?), Tagara (Valeriana wallichii DC), Dhanyaka (Coriander), Karchura (Hedychium spicatium Ham.ex Smith), Coraka (Angelica glauca Edgw) and Candana (sandal wood) are mixed by selecting any four drugs to obtain 96 varieties of incenses.

Ayurvedic Literatures

Many of the scented drugs, those used in contemporary literatures, were also mentioned in ancient Ayurvedic texts. In Caraka samhita, Susruta samhita, Ashtanga hridaya, Ashtanga sangraha etc., many scented drugs and perfumes were used for improving the complexion and as deodorant. These were used as ingredients in the preparation of oils, powders, collyriums, tablets (Vatis), Vartis (sticks) etc. Sugandha tailas (scented oils) were used to anoint body in many skin diseases. Dhupas (incenses) were used for disinfecting the body or the room. Various scented powders were used for Udavartanam (massage with dry powder in the opposite direction of hair follicle). Sugandha Paniya (Scented waters) were used for Pariseka (sprinkling of medicated liquid over body surface).

Peculiar descriptions regarding perfumes and scented articles in ancient literatures

Sarangadhara samhita mentioned that by drinking the fragrant waters with Sandalwood, Cardamomum, Usira (Vetiveria zizanioides (Linn) Nash) and Tagara (Valeriana wallichii DC.) one’s body becomes redolent. Drugs which give the body the smell of Campaka (Michelia champaka Linn) flowers; incense that destroys reptiles, mice, bugs and lice in the house were also described. In this text preparation of various incenses dearer to gods and kings were described.14

In Bhaishajya ratnavali purification of aromatics by washing (Kshalana) in the juice or decoction of Pancapallavas9, 15 (five shoots or tender leaves of Amra-Mangifera indica Linn.; Jambu-Syzygium
cumini Skeels T; Kapiththa- Feronia elephantum Correa; Bijapuraka- Citrus medica Linn; Bilwa- Aegle marmelos Corr.) was mentioned.

In Rasaratnakara of Nityaananda siddha, special procedures were described to make sandal from the root of Nimba- Azadirachta indica A. juss (probably to change the qualities of Nimba root to that of the sandal). This is called as Chandanakaranam (Ref-R.R 9/89-91); In the same way making camphor from boiled rice is called as Karpurakaranam (Ref-R.R 9/92-96); Making Kasturi from Panasa- Artocarpus or Madhuka- Madhuca indica J.F.Gmel etc. is called as Kasturikaranam; Making Safron from Palasha (Butea monosperma (Lam) Kuntze) flowers or Coconut is called as Kumkumakaranam.

Conclusion:-

Among the vast literature on perfumes and scented drugs, few references were quoted in this article. The aim of this article is to highlight the usage of perfumes and scented articles of medicinal value in ancient India.

It is not an exaggeration, that in olden days use of perfumes and scents was very prevalent to maintain mental, psychological and physical health. In contrast, the present generations are very much exposed to synthetic, spurious perfumes causing ill health. Many of the fragrant substances like Saffron, Musk, Sandal wood and Camphor etc. are on the brink of extinction and have become costly.

Traditional use of perfumes, scented oils, garlands, incenses has also been restricted to marriages, festivals and other annual ceremonies. Healthy scented oil massage, scented water baths and other rituals have been replaced by artificial and hazardous perfumes. Being a country with enormous heritage and knowledge to cultivate many scented drugs like saffron, Sandal wood, Camphor etc. necessary steps should be under taken by the scientific fraternity to develop the perfumes and scented drugs.

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