

Desi Scents—Sandal, Jasmine and Green Tea Indian Perfumers trying to develop New Aromas

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1. Jasmine—Strong, sweet, floral scent. 1 ml of essential oil is extracted from 8,000 jasmine flowers.

2. Sandalwood—Woody, milky notes. Sandal Wood tree takes 25 years to mature, so oil availability is scant. Its fragrance reduces stress and promotes sleep.

3. Musk—Extracted from a small gland in the musk deer, the oil is used as a base note in perfumes. Strongly sensual smell considered an aphrodisiac in many cultures.

4. Tuberose—Strong floral feminine scent. Has long been known for its aphrodisiac properties.

When most Indians still swear by French classics like Chanel No. 5 and J' Adore by Dior, it's strange to hear of a scent that smells like chai. But that's exactly what 30-year-old perfumer Manan Gandhi has created. Along with a team of international noses, the founder of *Bombay Perfumery* has introduced a line of uniquely Indian scents like Chai Musk that sells for Rs. 4,100 for a 100ml bottle. "Our perfumers were keen to make a wearable chai. They created a blend from ginger, lemongrass, green tea essence and sandalwood to develop a musky chai fragrance," says Gandhi who launched the brand in 2016. A darker formulation, Moire, is a homage to the Indian tuberose. "To give it a dark, narcotic edge, we added a hint of leather," adds Gandhi who prefers a peppery, spicier Calicut for his daily personal use. Each perfume takes about a year to develop.

Bombay Perfumery isn't the only one trying to capture India's aroma in a bottle. Despite a strong tradition of oil-based perfumes (attar), desi scents had fallen out of favour with Indian consumers but now some cosmetic and fragrance brands are trying to give them a new push.

Forest Essentials has a popular line of body mists created from blends of traditional Indian scents. "From the Bengal tuberose to the Kashmiri nargis, each flower is hand plucked at a particular time of the day when it is at its maximum potency to ensure high quality essential oil production," says Dr Ipsita Chatterjee, senior beauty consultant at *Forest Essentials*. She says these mists are among *Forest Essentials'* top selling items.

Many younger users swear by desi scents. Jhelum Biswas Bose, a 36-year-old beauty expert, switched to oil-based Indian perfumes a year ago and now refuses to use anything else. "Natural oils feel very different, and over time your nose gets trained to sniff out what's natural and what's not. You just need a drop or two of oil-based perfumes and

they keep you smelling nice through the day as well as lift your mood," says Bose. After attending a perfumery workshop, she now develops her own scents at home, using natural ingredients.

Perfumery is not new to India. In fact, it dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization. Perfumer Jhanvi Dameron Nandan points out that ancient Indians used aromatic ingredients like camphor and sandalwood to create fragrances. "Indians were the first in the world to use solid perfumes such as sandalwood paste. It was applied on the forehead and chest. Special wood burnt in yajnas and resins in earthen pots would give off aromatic vapour which was used to scent interiors, garments and even hair," she says. The practice of using flowers for perfumes came to India with the advent of the Muslim rule. "Muslim rulers used to plant floral gardens and hedges in their towns and cities. The fragrance from the flowers was used as an olfactory compass to help people find their destination at night," says Nandan whose brand, *The Perfume Library* has more than two dozen perfumes concocted using traditional Indian ingredients, and is selling in Mumbai, Delhi, Jaipur, Kolkata.

Aptoori Absolute is a fruity, smoky perfume Nandan has created by blending jasmine, sage, smoky musk, grass leaves, tobacco, and green tea. An earlier offering from Nandan was the intoxicating Bhang Bang. Her inspiration goes beyond her nose to ancient texts like the 15th century *Ni'matnama (Book of Delights)*. Written by Ghiyat Shahi, sultan of Mandu, the book details the perfuming rituals of the time. A recipe mentioned in this book lists around 35 ingredients including musk, white ambergris (a sweet, earthy scent from a wax-like substance produced by sperm whales), chickpea flour, civet musk and wheat.

It was the perfumers of Kannauj in Uttar Pradesh who created the scents Mughal emperors loved, and it still boasts of some 400 perfumers who make Indian scents. One of their most unique offerings is mitti attar which smells like wet earth and is made using a traditional system of capturing rain water and distilling it.

In recent years, the clampdown on the sandalwood trade in Karnataka and on the use of musk deer for its essence has adversely affected the local industry in India. "Now, we can buy sandalwood oil only from a registered Govt. agency and it is very expensive, \$2,500- 3,000 per kg," says Gandhi.

(Contd. on page 46)