

Welcoming Lord Ganesha with the scent of spirituality

Mallika Iyer | **Updated:** Thursday, August 22, 2019, 12:01 PM IST



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The sense of smell has a strong association with spirituality across cultures. As we welcome Lord Ganesha into our homes, Mallika Iyer shares how the Vighnaharta is also associated with this human sense

The city of Mumbai is gripped with the festivities of Ganeshotsav and its people overwhelmed, as they take in the myriad sights, sounds and tastes of the 10-day festivities. Seldom pandered to in this feast of the senses, is the often-ignored sense of smell. And yet the olfactory sense organ is just as significant if not more, than its other counterparts that help us soak in and make sense of the world around us.

While it is commonly known that objects with aromatic properties like flowers, incense, sandalwood paste etc are an important part of worship in India, it is interesting to note that these practices date back several centuries to codified texts. Formulas for preparing fragrances are found in ancient texts like the Puranas and the Agamas. The PujAprakasa (The Elucidation of Puja) by Mitramisra is a text with instructions on the preparation of perfumed pastes (gandha) and incenses (dhupa) and the use of appropriate flowers for worship of specific deities.

For the new beginnings

Lord Ganesh too has come to be associated with certain symbols, colours and fragrances. The red hibiscus offered to Ganesh and its constant scent is associated with balance. The mild grassy scent of the durva grass is said to be symbolic of determination. The fragrant lotus blooming in his hand is the symbol of purity. Other scented offerings like marigold flowers are also made during Ganeshaa puja.

“Scent is a way we can connect with the divine,” says Pratishka Hemrajani Manjiramani, a double-masters in Perfumery, who today runs her own perfumery enterprise. “Out of the five senses, it is only the sense of smell that connects with the limbic system which determine our moods and emotions. So, what we smell influences the way we feel,” she explains.



Lord Ganesha is regarded today as the Vighnaharta or the Remover of Obstacles and his name is invoked before embarking upon new endeavours. Inspired by this central idea, Pratiskha has created a collection called New Beginnings which employs a variety of 33 different ingredients associated with the son of Shiva. "Ganesha is associated with durva grass and several other such elements. The collection makes use of all these ingredients including durva grass, marigold, anthuriums, tuberose and more to a perfume, modelled on the traits of the Elephant God."

Tying torans of flowers and leaves outside gates and doors on auspicious days, arranging pu-kulam or flower-rangolis, offering flowers to the deity, lighting of agarbattis and incense sticks in temples and homes are all different manifestations of invoking the divine through the sense of

smell.

“Smell is an amazingly creative sense,” explains Pratiksha. “By using the right aromas, it is possible to begin the process of transformation from negative perceptions to positive and empowering experiences. Ganesha symbolises new beginnings. I believe that it is possible to invoke the lord through the scents associated with him to help us along, in our path of new beginnings,” she adds.

A global phenomenon

Traditional cultures across the world have linked scent with higher realms and innovated various methods of providing stimuli for the nasal nerve cells.

The Ongee people of the Andaman Islands for instance, define their entire Universe by their sense of smell. Their annual calendar is named on the basis of the various fragrances that one can smell at different times of the year. The sense of smell was to them, the very crux of the cosmic principle and they believe that the spirit resides within the nose. A lack of a sense of smell according to them, is a sure sign of death.

In the Biblical account, Baby Jesus is gifted frankincense and myrrh, apart from gold by the three men of the Orient. The literature of the ancient Greeks and Egyptians refers to many fragrances born out of balsam, aloes, pine, myrtle, juniper, cedar and more. Kyphi was a very popular ancient Egyptian incense used in temples and homes that also made use of many of these herbs. Greek gods were known to take great joy in the smell of a well-stocked altar.

The ancient Babylonians recorded the significance of sacrifice with incense in their Epic of Gilgamesh. Fragrant flowers like champa, marigold, jasmine, mogra, mahua, etc., are used to worship gods in Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist and other eastern faiths. Flowering trees like champa and parijsaat are planted in Muslim cemeteries and burial grounds, so that the graves of the dead may be showered by their fragrant blossoms. The Shia tradition places a great deal of

significance on fragrance specifically in relation to its martyrs and the purity of Paradise.



Embalming dead bodies with scented oils before burial has been a practice in ancient cultures. In the Hindu tradition, the earth element is associated with the sense of smell. "The use of fragrances and aromatic substances to elicit memories and responses via the sense of smell has long been the cornerstone of ancient spiritual practices. It is a known fact that cells in the olfactory bulb impact the amygdala and hippocampus of the brain. It is hence used in therapy too," explains Jayshree Mannie, an international master life coach.

To explain the overpowering nature of the sense of smell, Pratiksha introduces a simple experiment. "If I were to blindfold a person and then place in her mouth a slice of potato but place in front of her nose a juicy apple, it is the apple that she will taste! And that is because taste is 70% smell!" she smiles.

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So, this festive season, as you soak in the various sounds and sights and indulge your taste buds, remember also to provide stimuli for the nerve cells in the nose. For perhaps as the Ongee people of the Andaman Islands believe, the spirit may indeed reside within the nose!

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