



History of Cleansing Material in Indian Culture

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Abstract

Covid 19 brought to light the importance to personal and environmental hygiene and hence masks came into usage. Personal hygiene and community hygiene are an integral part of health and needs to be a priority for all. Throughout the Indian History and culture, we find importance given to the same. This paper tries to look into the historical understanding of hygiene and materials used for cleansing. Literature review and understanding of hygiene in the present day have been used to analysis and frame this paper. Through this paper the author shall conclude that no matter how much did the society change over a period of time in history, it still stressed upon the cleansing agent and cleanliness.



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Introduction

The word Culture has been defined as ideas, customs and social behavior that is practiced by group of people or by a society. Personal hygiene and Community hygiene have been an integral part of every evolving culture. The year 2019 was marked by discovery of a new strain called the Coronavirus, which has gripped the world. They are zoonotic, i.e., are transmitted between animals and people. To prevent the spread of this infection one important recommendation of the World Health Organization was/is to maintain a hygienic environment by regularly washing hands, covering mouth and nose while coughing and sneezing (*WHO*,). Hygiene is bottom line of healthy and happy life. According to the Cambridge International Dictionary of English, hygiene is defined as the degree to which people keep themselves or their surroundings clean, especially to

prevent disease (*Cambridge International Dictionary of English, 1995*). A barrier to many of the infectious diseases which also include faecal oral disease is good hygiene. In order to have better health and well-being, it is important to maintain good hygiene. There are various types of hygiene like personal, domestic, Community and food hygiene. Personal hygiene involves handwashing, bathing and laundering of clothes and bedding, sinks etc (*WHO, Water Sanitation*). Personal hygiene has been stressed upon in ancient India as understood from Manusmriti, wherein usage of earth and water has been mentioned for the removal of 12 kinds of impurities from body. These 12 impurities include oily exudations, semen, blood, urine, faces, mucus of the nose, ear wax, phlegm, tears, rheum of the eyes and sweat and brain. Further *Manusmriti* also refers to how many times each part of the body must

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be cleaned (Manusmriti, 1886). One of the important aspects of personal hygiene is bathing and soaps of different kinds are associated with it. The focus of this paper shall be looking into various cleansing agents that were used before the introduction of soaps as we understand today and history of soaps in Indian culture.

Over the centuries, people have given equal importance to both mental and physical hygiene. To begin with, the earliest evidences of measures taken to maintain hygiene came from the evidences found in Indus Valley Civilization. There have been evidences of drains along/under the streets in Mohenjodaro, Dholavira and Nausharo. Writing about the account of drains and drainage system in the city of Mohenjodaro, John Marshall in his work "*Mohenjodaro and Indus Civilization*" said that the system was an elaborate one even in the poorest quarters of the city (Marshall, 1931). *Agnipurana* refers to various modes of cleansing oneself and others (Agni Purana, 1954). Sushruta Samhita, a medical treatise remarks that if a person used waters, to drink or to bathe, from the pool of water that is filled with poisonous worms or is saturated with urine or filled with germs, decomposed animal organism or has growth of any kind of aquatic plants, etc., would fall a victim to internal and external, both kinds of diseases (*Sushruta*, 1907). Further Sushruta Samhita also refers to castor oil as a cleansing agent for the internal channels of the body and is wholesome to the skin. We also find references to bathing (*snanopabhoga*) in *Manasollasa* (*Somesvara*, 1939). Hence one can understand clearly that cleansing and bathing have been very essential part of one's life. In this paper let us look into various cleansing agents used in India before the introduction of soaps as we understand today.

Over the years, one product that has witnessed largest growth across the world are the production of soaps. In India itself one would find as many as 15 soap brands. In the global soap market, US has maintained its position as the largest producer and exporter of soap. Amongst the Asian Countries, Indonesia is the largest exporter of soap. Let us first see the history and science behind the art of soap making and what was its history in India. The word soap (*Oxford English Mini Dictionary*, 1995), is a term derived from Latin word *sapo*, which is a

corrupted form of German word *Sepe* (*Campbell*, 1856). is a substance used in washing things and is made of fat or oil and an alkali. Soaps are divided into two principal types – hard and soft. *Hard soaps*, like castile soap, white curd, mottled, yellow and transparent soap, are produced when soda and water are combined with fatty matters. *Soft soaps* are produced with potash combined with horse-oil, fish, and other inferior oils. *Pliny* (*Pliny*, 1855) attributed the invention of the soaps to Gauls, who used it for giving a reddish tint to their hair. In preparation of these soaps, tallow and ashes of beech¹⁴ and yoke- elm were used. *Pliny* also refers to two kinds of soaps- hard and liquid, both of which was used by people of Germany, especially men (*The concise Columbia Encyclopedia*, 1983). It was probably from the Germans that it was passed to Romans. In the ruins of Pompeii, a soap maker's soap was found, which was destroyed by an eruption from Mount Vesuvius (*Alexander*, 1896). Germanic tribes as early as 1st century A.D began to use soap made of tallow and wood ashes. Since 8th century, there were many soap manufactories which were started in Italy and Spain. However, it took 500 years for soap manufacture to be introduced in France. Soap, in American colonies were made from waste fats and lye which resulted in chemical reaction called *saponification*, which is the basis of soap making today.

As mentioned above, soaps are of two principal types- Hard and Soft soap. Hard soaps are combination of tallow, palm oil, coconut oil, olive oil or other fatty substances with caustic soda. When tallow is boiled in *caustic* soda for a considerable amount of time, the fatty matters, *stearine* and *palmitine*, assume a granular or curd like appearance and loss out its greasy and oily character. The process involved in production of soft soaps is less extensive

when compared to hard soaps. Unlike in case of hard soaps where soda is employed which provides the hardness to the soap, in soft soaps, potash is the alkali used in manufacturing it. Potash gives a soft, tenacious and make the soap more or less transparent, when used. One variety of soft soap is scotch soft soap. Resins are also used in making soft soaps. On the other hand, vegetable oils in addition of oleic acid, tallow or other animal fats, are employed in making soft soaps in Belgium and Holland (*Alexander*, 1896). One would find in

the markets various kinds of soaps like *sand soap* (Dussauce, 1869), *silica soap*, *palm oil soap*, etc. Other than the above mentioned soaps, one would also find soaps which are medicated, like *liquid glycerine soap* (Alexander, 1896), *medicinal soft soap*, etc. Having understood the evolution of soaps across the world, now let us look into history of soaps and its substitutes used in India.

The word soap, usually is called Sabun or Saban in Indian languages as given by Dalgado (Monsignor, 1936). Two important Smriti's, namely Manusmriti and Yajnavalkyasmriti, both refer to usage of various substitutes for removing stains and washing the objects. Manusmriti remarked "Silk and woollen stuffs with alkaline earth and blankets with pounded Arishta, linen cloth with yellow mustard". In other words in the employment of saline earth of cleansing silk and wool, while *arista fruit* (Nairne) are recommended to be used for cleaning blankets made of goat's wool. On the other hand, to clean fine fabric. Manusmriti refers to usage of *bael fruit* and linens to be washed and cleaned with yellow mustard (Buhler, 1794). On the other hand, YajnavalkyaSmriti remarked that woollen and silk clothes be purified with alkaline earth, water and cow's urine, and that the linen cloths were to be purified with paste of white mustard, an earthen vessel. Mitaksara's commentary on YajnavalkyaSmriti stated that "the Linen cloth- cloth manufactured of the threads of the plant (linumusatissimum, called in Sanskrit ksuma) becomes pure by washing with the paste of white mustard, water and cow's urine (Yajnavalkya). Hence one can clearly understand that during this period a paste of white mustard, water and cow's urine was considered as a cleansing agent. Let us look into the two main components of this mixture- white mustard and cow's urine. White Mustard (also called yellow mustard), whose origin is attributed to Mediterranean Region and has functional properties like allergenic, antibacterial, digestive, emetic etc (Ravindran, 2017). Cow's urine contains 95% water, 2.5% urea and 2.5% is synthesis of various kinds of minerals, hormones and salts. It promotes *phagocytic* (NCBI) activity to defense against bacterial infections (Dirgha, 2019).³⁴

Two fruits that have been mentioned by Manusmriti, arista and bael fruits have been grown in India for centuries and he states that blankets were pounded with Arishta and Amsupattas with Bel fruit (Buhler).

Arista mentioned in Manusmriti, scientifically called Sapindus Trifoliatatus, is known in India with various *Ritha*, *phan-kottai* and *Kunkudu-kayalu*. Also known as soap nut, it is used in India as a soap substitutes for washing (Rai Bahadur, 1896). It belongs to the family of Sapindaceae. Its powder acts as an antibacterial and antifungal agent. Of its numerous benefits, one is keeping the hair long and healthy, and free from lice and dandruff. It is also used a detergent (Ariharan, 2005). Martin Montgomery, refers to soap nut or ritha as a common to Bhagalpur district, which grows to a good size. He also refers to the fruit being used for washing silk and woollen cloths and also in medicines (Martin, 1838). Bael fruit, is known by different names in different languages like Bilva, shivadruma, *shivaphala* and *Vilvain* Sanskrit, while it is called Bel patra in Marathi, Bilivaphal in Gujarati and Bilva Pandu in Telugu (Prabodh Chander, 2007). Chemical analysis of bael seeds showed 62% of protein, 32% oil, 3% carbohydrate and 3% ash. The pH range of this tree is from 5 to 10 and can grow even on clay soils (SusantaK). Bael fruit is also common to Aravalli hills, Western peninsula, along the coast, especially Sriharikota, and is also cultivated in Bengal and in other parts of Northern India.

Chakrapani, writing in 1060 A.D., wrote recipe for making a soap that could be used as a depilatory. The recipe included ashes of *schreberaswiet* and cassia fist are mixed with lime from burnt shells and lixiviated with urine of ass and then this is boiled with certain quantity of mustard oil (P.C.Raym 1903). *Manasollasa* (Somesvara, 1925), also known as Abhilasitarthachintamani, a work composed by Chalukya King BhulokamallaSomesvara, son of Vikramaditya, has a chapter on *Snanopabhoga* (enjoyment of bath), wherein he recommends for the King certain procedure for bathing. He recommends the usage of an ointment made from *kostha*, etc., mixed with water or *Kanjika* (Rupa, 2017) to rub and clean the skin and then application of Khali, an ointment made of wheat-flour, to remove grease from the skin, which serves the same purpose as the modern soap (Somesvara, 1939). Somesvara's work also comprises of a section which dealt with *padabhyanga-bhoga* (massage of the feet). In this section he also provides with various materials like ghee, buttermilk etc, that could be used in massage based on the seasons. Of these materials he refers to foam of the jujube (*badari-phenaka*), which must

have been a soap prepared from jujube and also refer to soap prepared from jujube or pepper (*kola-phenaka*) (P.K.Gode, 1960). He also refers to mixture of masur powder and turmeric to remove grease from the feet.

Abul Fazl, the court historian of Akbar, remarks that Akbar was fond of perfumes and also refers to extraction of oils from various flowers. Similarly, he also provides recipes for a few products which are produced by the department of Perfumery. Of these products, one was a scented soap called *Opatnah* and the other was *Ghasul* which was a liquid soap (Abul Fazl, 1860). Writing about Lunar, a division of Makhar, in the Subha of Berar, Abul Fazl remarks that here there is a reservoir, whose waters are brackish, but when taken from centre or its sides, it is sweet. The waters of this reservoir contains such materials that are used in manufacture of glass and soap (Abul Fazl, 1891). We also find reference to the word soap in the memoir of Jahangir, where he remarks that Sajara's air is poisonous and that the soil there has very little water content. Remarking about the water there, Jahangir stated that it was very bad and unpalatable and that the waters of the wells are salt and bitter and that the waters from the tanks of the neighbourhood have become like buttermilk due to washer men's soap (Jahangir, 1914). Jean Baptist Tavernier, writing about Kasim bazar silk remarks that they are yellow like the silks from Persia and Sicily. However, the people of kasim bazar know how to whiten their silk with a lye made of ashes of Adam's fig tree (Jean Baptiste, 1889). In all probabilities ashes of Adam's fig tree must have been used as a cleansing agent.

In the 16th century A.D., Guru Nanak's prayers provide an important reference to the word sabun (Abdur Rahman, 1999). Writing in 1811-12, Francis Buchanan provides us information regarding his survey of Bhagalpur and remarked that a place close to Patarghata had saline earth. Further he wrote that washer men used this saline earth in place of soap (Francis, 1930). Francis Buchanan writing about Company's factory at Jahanabad, refers to 75 washer men being employed to bleach the finer cloths. These washer men are provided with factory soap, soda lime and requisite implements. He also refers to soap made at Bihar, where there are large number of manufacturers of the same (Buchanan,

1939). Writing about Patna and Gaya, Martin Montgomery, states that there are 21 artificers who retail soaps in shops or on the street.

Sir George Watt, who was asked by the Government of India to bring out the corrected and abridged edition of his previously published work entitled '*The Dictionary of the Economic products of India*', between 1885-94, wrote in his work *The commercial products of India*, about soap and its import and export in India. Watt observed that soaps were not very important for natives of India, instead they used its substitutes like natural earth or vegetable materials. He remarks that the India's demand for foreign soaps had been growing over years. He also provides the import value of soaps for 6years, starting from 1901 and further states that of the total import half and quarter are consumed by Bombay and Bengal respectively (Sir George, 1908). Two factories were established at Merrat in Bihar towards the end of the 19th century, wherein European methods for manufacturing soap was put into practice. About 9808 mounds of soaps were produced by these two factories by 1891 (A.K.Bag).

On the other hand, the Gazetteer of India, provide information regarding soap manufactories that were established with the arrival of the Europeans. Referring to 259 factories located in Bengal in 1903, Imperial Gazetteer of Bengal Presidency division states that 75 were located in 24 paraganas, which by 1904 reached to 79. These factories included jute pressing and weaving, cotton spinning, paper making, soap making etc (Imperial Gazetteer, 1907). The same Gazetteer further records that one of the towns in 24 Parganas district, *Maniktala* had numerous factories that include soap factories also.

For the Bombay city and Island, we get the information from Gazetteers, which refers to 1st soap manufactory being opened in Bombay in 1879 at Mahim. However, this business was discontinued, and taken over by a Parsi, who carried out his business from Tardeo. Here he began to manufacture various kinds of soaps like toilet soap, bar soap, soft soaps, etc. These soaps were manufactured from castor oil, coconut oil, caustic soda. One important variety of soap manufactured here was marine soap which is manufactured from coconut oil and meant to be used after sea bathing.

In providing an aroma to the soaps, tallow was used. There were 19 of these soap factories in Bombay (*The Gazetteer, 1909*). According to the Gazetteer of Bombay city and Island, there were 18 soap factories in Bombay island between 1908-09 (*The Gazetteer, 1910*). The same Gazetteer also refers to a *Techno-Chemical Laboratory*, established by Professor T.K.Gajjar in 1899, where a 3 years course of study in higher chemistry and one year course for technological study was offered. Amongst the technological subjects taught in this laboratory one was soap manufacture. It was by 1918 that the 11 large soap manufacturing unit established in India began to produce modern type of soaps (Usha, 1988).

Although we find many modern manufacturing companies been setup, yet there were people like the Lepehas in Sikkim who used their own substitute for soaps. According to B.L.Manjunath, in 1948, Lepehas used *Artemisia indica* wild (*J S Gamble, 1902*), as a substitute for soap to wash their hair (*B L Manjunath, 1948*). Locally this plant is known with various names like Titepati, Khempo, Nagdona etc, mainly has properties to remove dandruff and improves the hair growth (*AK Panda, 2012*). This plant could be found in Dehradun, Kumaon, and in other parts of north India. Since then the soap manufacturing units have grown in number in India, yet many people are still opting for the indigenous products like ritha and other plant products.

Conclusion

From the above given evidences, one can clearly understand that Hygiene had been an integral part of the Indian society and its culture and that the people

of India across ages had knowledge about various cleansing agents that could be used as substitutes for soap, before the arrival of modern-day soaps and sanitizers. One can also understand that the Indian culture has throughout history been stressing on cleanliness and hygiene and over age with change in time and modernization modern soaps have taken over the local cleansing agents. Despite all the changes that every society undergoes personal and community hygiene has always been the top priority to maintain good health and environment for sustainability.

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