

# Blossoms in the bottle

India manufactures some of the finest *ittar* and *sugandhi* which are now being used by the West for making soaps and food flavourings. NEETI NIGAM reports from a recent festival

If there is one place that has managed to keep its century old tradition of *ittar*-making intact, it's Kannauj, a small, but culturally rich district of Uttar Pradesh. In fact, it is said that even the sewages of this town smell of flowers! Since time immemorial, a handful of *ittar*-traders there have been supplying the most sought out fragrances to the royal families across the world. To promote and showcase India's rich heritage in the field of natural perfumes and essential oils, Delhi Tourism recently organised the *Ittara & Sugandhi* Festival, a first-of-its-kind at Dilli Haat, Pitampura.

In India, the *ittar* history is as old as its civilisation. From the Indus Valley Civilisation to the entry of Mughals, essential oils extracted from the herbs and



Ramakant Harilalka

flowers have been the privilege of the royals. Not many know that it was Mughal empress Noorjehan first discovered *rooh gulab ittar*, which is now considered to be the most expensive of all *ittar* forms. The credit for another *mehndi*-like (henna) fragrance also goes to these Muslim rulers who, claimed Kannauj-based *attar* (aroma oil) manufacturer Vinod Saini, brought it to India in the 12th century. One of the festival participants, Saini recalled the stories his elders told

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him of how Kannauj industry was first set-up. "The industry came into being during the Mughal period when they brought new plants like henna with them. This was the beginning of natural fragrances in India, which progressed in and around Kannauj—which has now become a huge hub," said Saini, whose ancestors has been in this business for over 150 years.

Around 80 per cent of the total families of the town are now engaged in the fragrance business,

either through cultivation process or through distillation and sales.

Going a notch above regular scents like rose, *mogra*, *khus* and sandalwood, Saini has come up with his own innovation called *Divyagandha*, which is made by combining rose, *mogra*, *kewra*, *chameli*, *bela*, *genda* and sandalwood oil with extract of organic herbs. "It smells divine and is wonderful for meditation and relaxation and provides a soothing effect when used while practicing yoga," he informed.

Another participant Ramakant Harilalka, who has also taken an initiative to plant saplings of various herbs, flowers and sandalwood across the nation. "Sandalwood is the base for all the *ittars*. During King Harshwardhan's reign, sandalwood was flown in river Yamuna from the forests and thereby taken to the state for *havans* and other purposes. But over the years, due to deforestation, it is impossible to get sandalwood from Himalayan belt. Therefore, I have taken the initiative to grow its saplings," said he. According to Shakti Vinay Shukla, deputy director (fragrance



and flavour), ministry of MSME, some of India's traditional fragrances like rose, sandalwood and *genda* have a huge demand in the international market. "India manufactures some of the finest *ittars* and *sugandhi* which are now being used for making soaps and food flavourings," Shukla said. "What makes an *ittar* different from *sugandhi* is that *ittar* is purely made of one fragrance and should be prepared through traditional method. A *sugandhi*, on the other hand, is a combination of various chemicals," he summed up. photos Sahil Kathpal

holistic scent to the stick," said Harilalka, who has also taken an initiative to plant saplings of various herbs, flowers and sandalwood across the nation. "Sandalwood is the base for all the *ittars*. During King Harshwardhan's reign, sandalwood was flown in river Yamuna from the forests and thereby taken to the state for *havans* and other purposes. But over the years, due to deforestation, it is impossible to get sandalwood from Himalayan belt. Therefore, I have taken the initiative to grow its saplings," said he. According to Shakti Vinay Shukla, deputy director (fragrance

