



InteMed: International Journal of Research in Integrated Medical Sciences (IJ-RIMS)

Journal homepage: www.intemed.in

Vol.: 2 | Issue: 8 | August 2026



Article History: Received: 15-08-2026

Accepted: 17-08-2026

Published:30-08-2026

Review Article

Cosmetic Culture in Ancient India: Beauty, Hygiene and Personal Care Traditions

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Abstract

Cosmetic practices in India have a long history, but they were never limited to facial decoration. Archaeological evidence, Ayurvedic texts and Sanskrit literature describe a culture in which bathing, oil massage, herbal pastes, hair care, eye applications, oral hygiene, fragrance, flowers, clothing and ornaments were all part of personal presentation. Ayurveda placed these practices within a wider idea of well-being, linking outward appearance with cleanliness, nourishment, daily routine and mental balance. This narrative review examines the historical development of cosmetic culture in ancient India and discusses the role of practices such as *Abhyanga*, *Udvardhana*, *Snana*, *Lepa*, *Anjana*, *Dantadhavana*, *Gandusha* and *Kavala*. It also considers commonly used materials, including sandalwood, turmeric, *lodhra*, *manjistha*, *amalaki*,

saffron, sesame oil, aromatic woods and flowers. The surviving literature shows that grooming was practised by both women and men and carried hygienic, social, ceremonial and sensory meanings. Some traditional ingredients now have preliminary scientific support, but historical use alone cannot establish modern safety or effectiveness. Carefully standardized formulations, toxicological assessment and clinical testing are therefore needed before traditional practices are adapted for contemporary cosmetic use. Ancient Indian cosmetology is best understood as an integrated culture of health, hygiene, aesthetics and self-care rather than as a collection of early beauty recipes.

Keywords: *Ancient India; Ayurveda; herbal cosmetics; personal care; skin care; perfumery*

INTRODUCTION

The wish to look well and feel clean is not unique to any one civilization. Ancient societies developed their own ways of caring for the skin, hair, mouth and body, often using locally available plants, minerals, oils and fragrances. In India, however, grooming became closely connected with daily hygiene, seasonal routine, social life and ritual. Archaeological interpretations of the Indus Valley tradition point to an established culture of bathing, combing, ornamentation and personal grooming. Archaeology cannot tell us the exact formulas that were used, but it does show that cleanliness and bodily presentation already mattered in early urban life.^[1]

Later literature provides a fuller picture. Historical accounts of Indian cosmetics describe herbal pastes, bath powders, perfumes, hair preparations, oral cleansers and decorative applications.^[2] Classical Ayurvedic works place many of these practices within the daily regimen. The *Charaka Samhita* discusses health, complexion and groups of medicines related to skin care, while the *Ashtanga Hridaya* gives practical guidance on activities such as oil application, oral hygiene, eye care and bathing.^{[3][4]} The well-known *Varnya Mahakashaya* is specifically associated with maintaining a healthy complexion, and the *Sushruta Samhita* also records several external and cleansing measures.^{[5][6]}

The range of products mentioned in historical reviews suggests that ancient Indian cosmetology was organised and varied rather than occasional or informal. Facial applications, depilatories, hair washes, hair dyes, fragrant rinses, deodorising powders and oral preparations all formed part of this tradition.^[7] The present review brings these medical,

historical and cultural strands together. It does not treat every traditional claim as established clinical evidence; instead, it asks what the sources tell us, which practices remain relevant, and where modern testing is still needed.

AIM

To review cosmetic culture in ancient India, with particular attention to Ayurvedic ideas of beauty and hygiene, daily personal care, skin and hair preparations, eye and oral care, perfumery, social meaning and possible relevance to contemporary cosmetic science.

OBJECTIVES

The review examines the historical background of Indian grooming practices; explains the Ayurvedic understanding of complexion and healthy appearance; describes traditional skin, hair, eye and oral care; considers the place of fragrances and natural materials; and identifies the scientific, safety and sustainability questions that arise when this knowledge is used in modern herbal cosmetics.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This narrative review draws on classical Ayurvedic literature, historical writing on Indian cosmetic traditions and selected contemporary scientific publications. The *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita* and *Ashtanga Hridaya* were used for descriptions of *Varnya*, *Dinacharya*, *Abhyanga*, *Udvaartana*, *Anjana*, *Dantadhavana*, bathing and external applications. Historical sources were consulted for social customs, perfumery and personal adornment. Modern studies were included where they helped to interpret plant oils, turmeric, hair care, skin ageing, essential oils and quality control. Evidence was considered according to its source: a classical or

historical record was treated as evidence of traditional use, not as automatic proof of present-day clinical effectiveness.

COSMETIC CULTURE IN ITS HISTORICAL SETTING

Personal grooming in ancient India was both practical and expressive. Bathing removed sweat and dust, oils softened the skin and hair, powders absorbed excess oil, and aromatic materials improved body fragrance. At the same time, grooming communicated refinement, status, marital identity and readiness for social or religious occasions. The same substance could therefore have several meanings: turmeric might be used in household skin care, in medicine and in a marriage ceremony; sandalwood might cool and scent the body while also carrying ritual value.

Literary sources show how closely cosmetics were tied to cultivated social behaviour. In the *Kamasutra*, dress, fragrance, hair arrangement and graceful presentation appear among the arts of urban life.^[8] The story of Draupadi living as *Sairandhri* in the court of Virata similarly reflects familiarity with women who were skilled in grooming and adornment. Such accounts are literary rather than clinical, but they help reconstruct how cosmetics were understood and used in society.

THE AYURVEDIC VIEW OF BEAUTY

Ayurveda does not separate outward beauty from general health. Clear skin, well-maintained hair, clean teeth, a pleasant body odour and calm behaviour were seen as signs of appropriate care and internal balance. External applications could improve texture, comfort or appearance, but they were not expected to compensate fully for poor nourishment,

illness, lack of sleep or an unsuitable routine. This broader view is close to the modern idea of wellness-oriented personal care, although the underlying concepts and vocabulary are different.

Several Ayurvedic terms are relevant to cosmetic care. *Varnya* refers to substances traditionally used to support a clear and healthy complexion; *Vayasthapana* concerns the maintenance of youthful qualities; *Tvachya* denotes measures considered beneficial for the skin; and *Rasayana* addresses healthy ageing and vitality more broadly.^[9] Reviews of Ayurvedic cosmetology also note the importance of groups such as *Eladi Gana* and *Lodhradi Gana*, which contain drugs used in skin-related preparations.^[10] These categories show that care of appearance was integrated into classical medical thought rather than treated as a separate luxury.

Varnya AND COMPLEXION

The term *varna* is sometimes translated too narrowly as skin colour. In its cosmetic context, it also includes clarity, brightness, evenness and a healthy appearance. This distinction matters because the classical aim was not simply artificial lightening. The *Varnya Mahakashaya* is better understood as a group of substances traditionally associated with supporting the quality and appearance of the skin. Modern research may test individual ingredients or formulations, but the classical category should not be reduced to a single pigment-related effect.

DAILY ROUTINE AS PERSONAL CARE

One of the most practical features of ancient Indian cosmetology is that many grooming measures belonged to *Dinacharya*, the daily regimen. Care was preventive and regular rather than reserved for visible problems or ceremonial events. Oil application,

powder massage, oral cleansing, eye care and bathing formed a sequence that supported comfort, cleanliness and social presentation.

Abhyanga: Oil-based care

Abhyanga is the application and massage of oil over the body. Sesame oil and medicated oils were used according to need and context. From a cosmetic standpoint, oiling can reduce dryness, improve softness and give the skin a smoother appearance. Research on plant oils offers a plausible modern explanation for some of these effects: certain oils can influence skin-barrier function and may have anti-inflammatory or antioxidant activity, although their performance depends on fatty-acid composition, processing and formulation.^[11] Traditional use therefore supports the idea of oil-based conditioning, but therapeutic claims still need product-specific evidence.

Udvartana: Herbal powder massage

Udvartana involves rubbing the body with a herbal powder or paste. The procedure could remove surface oil and dirt, leave the skin feeling smoother and add fragrance when aromatic ingredients were included. In modern terms, it resembles cleansing, mild exfoliation and body polishing. That comparison is useful, but it also points to a safety issue: particle size and abrasiveness must be controlled because a powder that is too coarse can irritate the skin.

Snana: Bathing and cleanliness

Bathing was important for comfort, hygiene, ritual and appearance. Fragrant herbs, pastes and powders could be used before or during the bath. In a warm climate, regular removal of sweat and dust would have offered an obvious practical benefit. The continuing association between cleanliness and

attractiveness is perhaps the clearest bridge between ancient personal care and present-day cosmetic practice.

Table 1. Important practices in ancient Indian personal care

Practice	Traditional purpose	Contemporary interpretation
<i>Abhyanga</i>	Oil application for softness and comfort	Skin conditioning and massage
<i>Udvartana</i>	Cleansing with herbal powder	Exfoliation or body polishing
<i>Snana</i>	Bathing and purification	Hygiene and skin cleansing
<i>Lepa</i>	External herbal paste	Mask, paste or topical preparation
<i>Anjana</i>	Eye care and adornment	Traditional eye cosmetic
<i>Dantadhavana</i>	Cleaning the teeth	Oral hygiene
<i>Gandusha/Kavala</i>	Care of the mouth	Mouth-rinsing practices
Hair oiling	Hair and scalp maintenance	Conditioning and grooming
<i>Gandha</i>	Pleasant body fragrance	Perfumery
Flower decoration	Adornment and fragrance	Natural personal decoration

FACIAL APPLICATIONS AND TRADITIONAL MATERIALS

Lepa, or the application of a paste to the skin, was a major form of external care. A preparation might contain herbal powders, water, milk, oil, decoctions or aromatic substances, with the base chosen according to purpose and season. Many pastes were expected to do more than cover the skin. They could cleanse, cool, absorb oil, provide fragrance or gradually improve the appearance of the complexion.

Haridra

Haridra (*Curcuma longa*) remains one of the most familiar links between household skin care, ceremony and medicine in India. Turmeric paste is still prominent in pre-marital rituals, where it carries both aesthetic and symbolic value. Modern clinical research has explored turmeric and curcumin in several dermatological conditions. A systematic review found encouraging signals, but differences in preparations, doses and study designs prevent broad conclusions.^[12] Turmeric is therefore a promising traditional ingredient, not a universally proven cosmetic treatment.

Chandana, Lodhra, Manjistha and Amalaki

Chandana (sandalwood) was valued for fragrance, a cooling sensation and its suitability for facial and body pastes. *Lodhra* was used in complexion and skin preparations, especially where an astringent quality was desired. *Manjistha* appeared in formulations concerned with skin appearance, while *Amalaki* was used in both skin- and hair-related products and in the wider context of *Rasayana*. These ingredients illustrate a characteristic feature of Indian cosmetology: fragrance, texture, comfort and appearance were considered together rather than as separate product categories.

Table 2. Natural materials associated with traditional Indian cosmetics

Herbs	Traditional cosmetic use
<i>Haridra</i>	Skin pastes and ceremonial applications
<i>Chandana</i>	Fragrance, cooling paste and complexion care
<i>Lodhra</i>	Skin and complexion preparations
<i>Manjistha</i>	Complexion-related formulations
<i>Amalaki</i>	Hair, skin and <i>Rasayana</i> preparations
Saffron	Fragrant complexion preparations
Sesame oil	Massage and skin conditioning
Jasmine	Hair decoration and fragrance
Agarwood	Perfumery
Camphor	Aromatic preparations

HAIR CARE AND ADORNMENT

Hair care was a specialised part of grooming. Historical accounts mention hair washes, preparations for hair fall and greying, dyes, aromatic rinses and fumigation. Daily care included washing, oiling, combing, arranging and perfuming the hair. Flowers, especially jasmine, added both scent and ornament. Hairstyles and decorations could also communicate gender, status, marital identity or the nature of an occasion.

Hair oiling is one of the strongest living continuities between ancient practice and modern Indian personal care. Oils reduce friction between hair fibres and can coat or penetrate the hair shaft to different degrees. Experimental work has shown that

coconut oil, for example, can reduce protein loss from hair more effectively than some other oils under specific conditions.^[13] Such findings support the general idea of conditioning, but they do not validate every herbal oil or every claim made for it.

EYE AND ORAL CARE

Anjana and eye cosmetics

Anjana was included in the daily regimen and used in different forms for eye care. Dark preparations also emphasised the shape and contrast of the eyes, combining an aesthetic effect with traditional health-related use. This overlap is typical of ancient Indian cosmetology, but it requires particular caution today. A product applied close to the eye must be tested for heavy metals, microbial contamination, particle characteristics and ocular irritation. Cultural familiarity is not a substitute for ophthalmic safety.

Oral hygiene as part of appearance

Ancient personal care did not exclude the mouth from the idea of beauty. Clean teeth, healthy gums and pleasant breath influenced both appearance and social interaction. Practices included *Dantadhavana* with selected twigs, tongue cleaning, *Gandusha*, *Kavala* and aromatic mouth preparations. Their primary value was hygienic, yet their cosmetic importance was equally clear. Current interest in practices such as oil pulling should be assessed through modern clinical methods rather than relying only on the age of the tradition.

FRAGRANCE, DRESS AND SOCIAL MEANING

Fragrance was central to ancient Indian grooming. Sandalwood, agarwood, camphor, saffron, aromatic roots, resins and flowers could be used on

the skin and hair, added to bath water, applied to clothes or burned in living spaces. Perfume was therefore part of a wider sensory environment rather than an isolated finishing product. Literature associates fragrance with refinement, romance, ritual and social standing.

Appearance also depended on clothing, jewellery, flowers, forehead marks and hair arrangement. Cosmetic culture should therefore be studied as part of the social history of the body, not simply as a list of medicinal plants. Importantly, grooming was not confined to women. Men also used oils, sandal paste, perfume, styled hair and ornaments in appropriate settings. The tradition was gendered in its forms and occasions, but personal beautification belonged to both sexes.

CEREMONY, SEASON AND AGEING

Cosmetic materials often carried ceremonial meanings. Turmeric used before marriage, sandalwood used in ritual or social settings, flowers worn in the hair and particular ornaments all expressed identity as well as beauty. Their meaning depended on context; the same plant could be a household ingredient, a medicinal material and a ceremonial cosmetic.

Seasonal adjustment was another practical feature. *Ritucharya* encouraged changes in routine according to climate, while historical descriptions refer to seasonal facial applications. The principle remains sensible because temperature, humidity and environmental exposure influence how the skin feels and behaves. A heavy oil preparation that is comfortable in cool, dry weather may feel unsuitable in a humid season.

Ageing was approached through the broader framework of *Rasayana* and maintenance of vitality rather than through the concealment of wrinkles alone. This resembles present-day interest in nutrition, sleep, antioxidants and general health as part of skin care, but classical ideas should not be reduced to a single modern biochemical mechanism. Natural compounds are being studied for antioxidant and anti-ageing activity, yet the evidence varies widely among ingredients and formulations.^[14]

RELEVANCE TO MODERN COSMETICS

Many traditional Indian preparations occupied a space between hygiene, beauty and health that resembles the modern idea of a cosmeceutical. A facial paste might cleanse, absorb excess oil, soothe the skin and add fragrance. A hair oil might condition the shaft while also being used for scalp complaints. This functional overlap helps explain the renewed commercial interest in Ayurveda and herbal personal care.

The comparison has limits. A historical description may identify an ingredient worth studying, but it cannot establish the effectiveness of a commercial product. The final result depends on botanical identity, plant part, extraction method, concentration, excipients, preservation, packaging and route of use. Essential oils are a good example: their fragrance and biological activity make them attractive cosmetic ingredients, but some can cause irritation or sensitisation.^[15] A familiar natural origin does not remove the need for dose control and safety testing.

SAFETY, QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Reviving traditional cosmetic knowledge requires modern safeguards. Herbal ingredients may cause

irritant or allergic contact dermatitis; aromatic compounds may provoke sensitivity; eye products may contain unsuitable particles or metals; and water-based preparations may support microbial growth if preservation is inadequate. Products containing colours, minerals or traditional pigments deserve careful testing for heavy-metal contamination.

Quality assessment should begin with correct botanical identification and traceable sourcing. It should also include testing for microorganisms, heavy metals, pesticide residues and relevant contaminants, together with stability studies and preservative-efficacy testing when water is present. Established approaches to the quality control of herbal drugs provide a useful framework, but cosmetic products also require formulation-specific dermatological or ophthalmic assessment.^[16]

Natural does not automatically mean sustainable. High demand for sandalwood, agarwood and other aromatic materials can place pressure on wild resources. Responsible modern use therefore requires cultivated or legally sourced material, transparent supply chains, efficient processing and restrained packaging. Traditional knowledge is better preserved through careful stewardship than through uncritical commercial expansion.

DISCUSSION

The available evidence presents ancient Indian cosmetology as a broad and coherent culture. It included bathing, massage, skin pastes, hair care, oral cleanliness, eye applications, perfume, clothing, jewellery and flowers. These were not isolated acts. Together they shaped how a person felt, smelled, appeared and participated in social life.

Ayurveda gave this culture a preventive framework. *Abhyanga*, *Udvaartana*, *Snana*, *Anjana* and *Dantadhavana* were part of regular care, while categories such as *Varnya*, *Vayasthapana*, *Tvachya* and *Rasayana* linked appearance with wider health maintenance. Historical descriptions broaden the picture by documenting seasonal applications, hair preparations, perfumes, bath powders, deodorising substances and oral cosmetics. The participation of both women and men further shows that grooming was a shared social practice, even though its forms differed by gender, status and occasion.

The main challenge is interpretation. Classical texts, literary works and later cultural practices do not provide the same kind of evidence, and they should not be blended without distinction. Traditional use can suggest promising ingredients and formulations, but scientific plausibility is not the same as clinical proof. The most productive approach is therefore interdisciplinary, combining textual scholarship with pharmacognosy, analytical chemistry, dermatology, formulation science and carefully designed clinical research.

RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several priorities emerge from this review. Historical formulations should first be reconstructed accurately, with clear identification of the plant, plant part, proportion and method of preparation. Chemical fingerprinting can then be used to assess batch consistency. Safety testing should match the intended site of use, especially for preparations used near the eyes or on damaged skin. Clinical trials should examine specific, measurable outcomes rather than broad claims such as 'improves beauty.' Research should also distinguish between evidence from

Ayurvedic treatises, Sanskrit literature and later customary practice. Finally, sustainability and benefit-sharing should be built into product development from the beginning rather than treated as afterthoughts.

CONCLUSION

Ancient India developed a rich cosmetic culture in which beauty was closely tied to health, cleanliness, fragrance and daily life. Ayurvedic texts describe regular care of the skin, hair, eyes, mouth and body, while literary and historical sources show an equally developed social world of perfumery, dress, flowers, ornaments and grooming for both women and men.

The continuing appeal of turmeric, plant oils, hair preparations and aromatic materials shows that this tradition is not merely of historical interest. Even so, age and popularity cannot establish safety or efficacy. Traditional knowledge is most valuable when it guides careful questions: which ingredient, which preparation, for whom, at what dose and with what measurable effect? Botanical authentication, chemical standardisation, toxicological assessment, clinical evaluation and sustainable sourcing are essential if selected practices are to contribute responsibly to modern cosmetics. Seen in this way, ancient Indian cosmetology is neither a primitive version of the beauty industry nor a complete substitute for contemporary science. It is an integrated tradition of hygiene, aesthetics and self-care that deserves both respect and critical study.

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