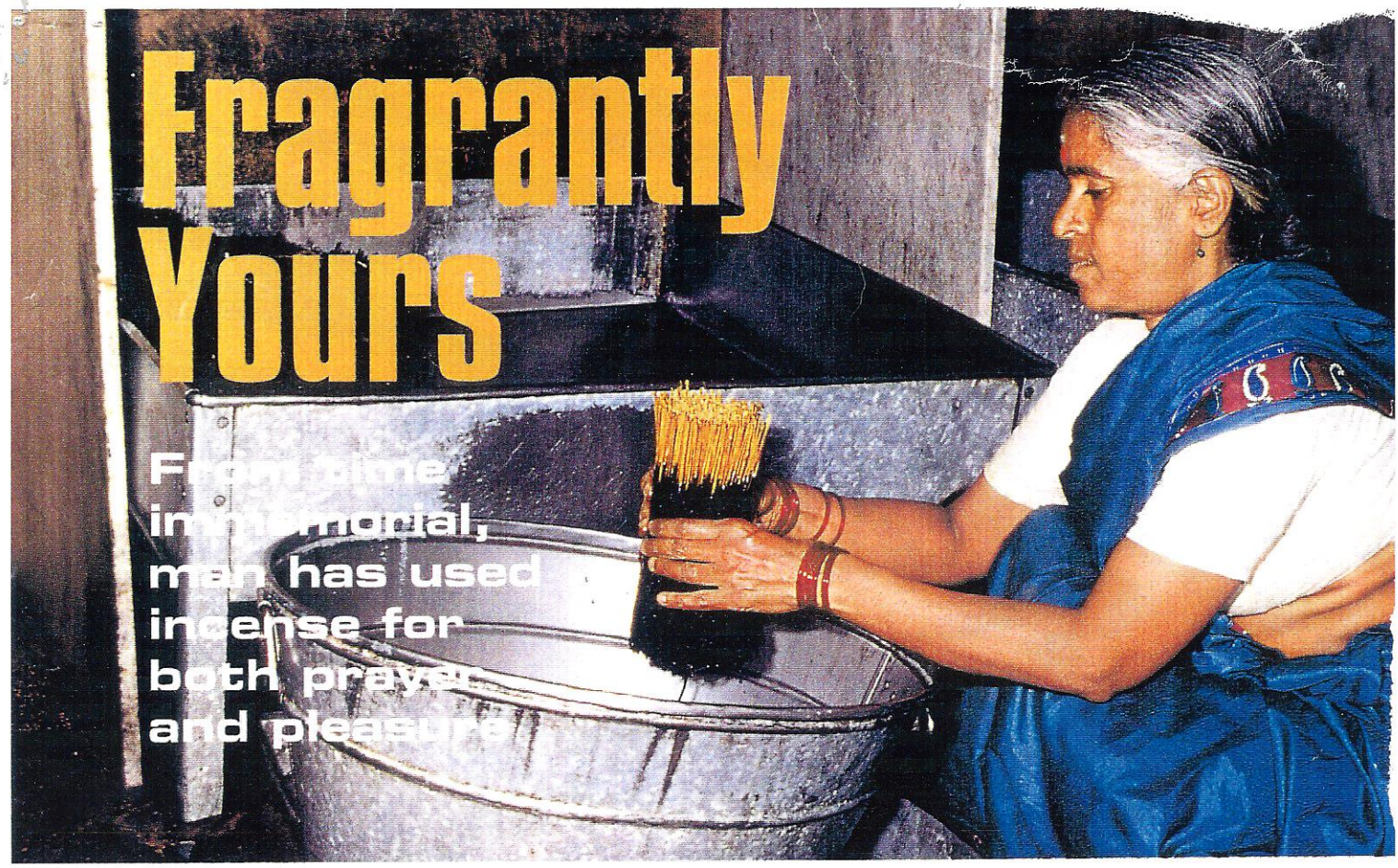
Fragrantly Yours



The raw sticks are dipped in a sweet-smelling blend of perfumed oils and solvents.

The three wise men carried some along to Bethlehem to present to the Infant Jesus. The Queen of Sheba brought some to King Solomon to perfume his couch.

The Chinese used it centuries ago to enhance the enjoyment of musical performances. In Japan, it played an important part in the classic tea ceremony. And in Korea, Buddhist monks scarred their flesh with it on entering the priesthood. What was this valued substance? Incense. Mystic, aesthetic, utilitarian incense.

Ever since antiquity, when fragrant mixtures of gums and spices were employed to mask the odours of sacrificed animals, incense has been burned in many regions of the world to honour deities and people, sanctify objects and places, exorcise evil, heal diseases or simply to sweeten the air.

Derived from the Latin word *incendere* (to burn), incense has been widely used in religious rites, often as a symbol of worship, its aromatic smoke curling upward bearing man's supplications to heaven. But even in ancient times the Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Hebrews and Romans all used the cherished commodity as much for sensual pleasure as for pious prayer.

In today's ecology-conscious world, concern over the effect of chlorofluorocarbons on the earth's ozone layer has sparked an upsurge in the popularity of incense as a more natural way to purify and scent the air. In India, the incense manufacturing industry reports a substantial increase in export and domestic sales, reflecting the trend toward environment-friendly products.

Centred in the Bangalore area of Karnataka State, over 100 factories of the 'fragrant fraternity' are turning out record quantities of incense in the forms of slender agarbathi sticks, chunky dhoop logs and squat cones. This area is a logical locale for incense manufacturing, having a plentiful supply of forest products, particularly sandalwood, bamboo, tree gums and resins. The valuable sandalwood tree, the prey of poachers until the government stepped in to protect the forests, provides two of the principal ingredients in incense production — sandalwood dust, made from ground-up spent wood, and sandalwood oil.

In Bangalore and its environs, more than 250,000 persons are employed directly and indirectly in the incense trade. The industry comprises many family-owned businesses with 'secret' aromatic formulas and special skills passed down through generations. Banded together in closely knit trade groups like the All India Agarbathi Manufacturers' Association, an intimate sense of brotherhood prevails. The organisations search out new sources of raw materials, lobby the government for lower tariffs and campaign for export subsidies.

As an inquisitive visitor to one of the region's leading agarbathi factories, I entered the cavernous building to be almost immediately enveloped in a redolent cloud of fragrances that giddied me with its heady mix. My nose worked overtime trying to sniff out the separate aromas in the overpowering bouquet; rose, sandalwood, jasmine, patchouli and lavender perfumes assailed my olfactory membranes.

At the end of a long corridor formed by ceiling-high stacks of crates destined for Saudi Arabia, the Ivory Coast, Britain and beyond, was a labyrinth of small workrooms. Young and not-so-young sari-clad women sat cross-legged on the tile floor deftly rolling agarbathi sticks on little stone tables. Their agile fingers kneaded clumps of a dark brown dough-like mixture of combustible charcoal, sandalwood dust and an adhesive called jigat. They twisted bits of the gummy substance onto the thinnest slivers of hand-cut bamboo. Each worker turned out about 3000 to 5000 pink-tinted sticks a day, I was told.

In an adjacent room, girls were dipping bundles of raw sticks into sweet-smelling vats. A few seconds' immersion was enough for the agarbathis to absorb the blend of perfumed oils and solvents.

The production line flowed into the next room where nimble-fingered young men packed the 'bathis' into colourful boxes bearing exotic brand names like Aphrodisia, Spiritual Guide, Quick Money Attraction, Magic Lamp and Double Good Luck. Grouped in small teams, one youngster counted off twelve sticks, a second one tucked the dozen into a plastic bag, while a third thrust the bag into the container, twirled a cellophane wrapper around it and hurled the box onto an ever-mounting pile ready for shipment.

Most incense factories today operate without any kind of machinery or power source. Incense manufacture is perhaps the only large-scale Indian industry relying entirely upon manual labour. The government encourages this greater use of the available labour force with subsidies and lower taxes. Advocates in the incense industry assert that skilled hands create a better quality product. They also point to the substantial numbers of persons provided with employment, including subcontractor workers in the cottage and village industries. Furthermore, the proponents warn of the divisive social problems inherent in widespread displacement of the labour force by mechanical production. Acquiring costly machinery, they say, will necessarily raise prices. An agarbathi today is probably the cheapest-selling item in India.

Other concerned voices in the fragrant fraternity, however, declare that the incense trade is at a crossroads. The industry urgently needs upgrading, they contend, to keep pace with overseas competition. Upgrading, they stress, can only come from the introduction of technology. They cite Japan, which exports an impressive array of quality incense products made by the extrusion process using modern mechanised equipment.

One Indian manufacturer who does employ state-of-the-art technology is Padmini Products. A fourth generation firm, and one of the foremost exporters of agarbathi sticks and dhoops, Padmini maintains a Research and Development division equipped with an up-to-date laboratory. The lab's director, Surekha Vermulkar, granddaughter of the firm's founder, holds a Master's degree in chemistry and the distinction of being the only professional female perfumer in India. Surrounded by shelves lined with hundreds of bottled samples of subtly differing fragrances, the winsome Ms Vermulkar works with computers and such specialised instruments as a mass spectrometer and a gas chromatograph to discover new fragrances and perfect quality control of essential oils and aromatic chemicals.

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Packing the agarbathi sticks.

Surekha says the advanced technology can do a far better job than the human nose in detecting nuances of difference in the purity of aromas. 'Some lab workers have as high as a 60% accuracy,' she explains, 'but they gradually lose their sense of smell during the day. They often have to go up on the roof to "clean their nose".'

In the future, the making of incense may rely more and more on high-tech lab technicians scientifically developing and analysing delicate fragrances. But the burning of incense — a custom as old as India itself — will still continue to stimulate the mind and senses, inspire religious faith, hail the dawn or end of the day, or simply delight the nostrils.

Bangalore is easily accessible from Chennai, to which SIA flies from Singapore daily.

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