

BEAUTY TIPS FROM ANCIENT INDIA

Sitaram Dixit

INTRODUCTION

The very mention of an Indian woman conjures one's imagination of a lady, wearing highly coloured ankle length dress called Sari. One can hardly overlook the coloured dot that adorns the centre of the forehead, black kajal around the eyes, colourful henna designs on the palm or flowers gracing their long hair. Almost all women in India and of Indian origin wear this coloured fascinating eye-catcher dot on the forehead. Usually mistaken, as a sign of matrimony the little dot is a beauty spot passed down the generations and worn by women making them extraordinarily attractive and ravishing.

BEAUTY SPOT

Hindu women married or unmarried wear, 'Tilak', 'Pottu', 'Kumkum', or 'Bindi' on the forehead. It is applied daily after a bath and on special occasions before or after a ritualistic worship or visit to a temple. When worn after worship it is termed as 'Tilak'. At other times it is normally called, 'Pottu', 'Kumkum', or 'Bindi'. Varying in colour and form, wearing a 'Tilak' was not very prevalent in the 'Vedic' period. It gained popularity and prominence during the 'Puranic' period. The use of Kumkum or bindi is believed to have originated in Southern India. Wearing a 'Tilak' invokes a feeling of sanctity in the wearer and onto others. It is usually made up of sweet smelling sandalwood paste 'Chandana', red and yellow, 'Kumkum', made out of turmeric powder, and 'Bhasma' or grey or black ash. It is applied in different shapes namely 'Ψ' or '≡' or '•' simple dot, etc.

Human body emanates energy in the form of electromagnetic waves. The forehead and the subtle spot between the eyebrows are said to be the seat of memory and thinking. The point is called as the 'Anjna Chakra' in the language of the 'Yoga'. Application of 'Tilak' is said to cool the forehead, protecting the body from energy loss. The 'Tilak' or 'Kumkum', apart from fulfilling the religious necessity of the devout also serves the purpose of decoration, beauty, and good health.

The 'Tilak' is usually applied with the prayer, "May I remember the Lord at all times, his power pervade all my actions and activities and may I always be righteous in my deeds". Even when we temporarily forget this prayerful attitude, the mark on another's forehead reminds us of our solemn resolve. The mark apart from being a beauty spot is also a blessing of the lord and a protection against the forces of evil and wrongful tendencies present in us. Nowadays plastic reusable 'Stick Bindis' being more convenient to use is popular and largely serves the purpose of decoration.

CLEANING AGENTS

Soaps in ancient India were made at home by gently heating a mixture of sweet almonds, bitter almonds, Ghee, almond oil, aromatic oils, etc. Sanskrit texts, Sushruta Samhita, and Charaka Samhita, also mention the preparation of lime and caustic soda from aqueous extracts of ashes. Marathi saint, Sant Tukaram immortalised soap in his devotional hymns, where in he sings, "*What will soap do if the character is not clean*" proving that soap and its cleaning properties were well known to the masses in early times. Natural clays both neutral and alkaline, Borax, Trona (Sodium Sesquicarbonate), potassium carbonate, all acquired from nature were also used as cleaning agents.

SKIN CARE

Cosmetics for women in early times were as important as it is today. The difference is that cosmetics were prepared at home using ancient beauty recipes that have been passed down through generations and centuries unlike present times when American, French and local synthetic cosmetics are popular. Non-availability of modern cosmetics and the inherent dream to keep themselves, beautiful and attractive gave rise to very effective household remedies. These simple recipes took adequate care of their dreams of everlasting youth and beauty thus making a virtue of a necessity.

Vedas the earliest records of ancient India, notably Rig-Veda & Atharva -Veda, Smrutis and Samhitas, refers to various codes of routine behaviour laying great emphasis on personal cleanliness. It strongly advocates that daily routine functions should not begin without the daily bath in clean flowing water. Water not only cleans out the dirt but also refreshes the body to carry out one's daily tasks efficiently. Applying soft earth, saponaceous fragrant soft plant materials on the body before a water bath to remove dirt and other impurities from human skin is clearly spelt out as a means to maintain personal cleanliness and hygiene. The Atharva -Veda, Sushruta Samhita, and Charaka Samhita detail the Ayurvedic School of medicine, a comprehensive system of living and health care. It details the use of herbs some of them credited and endowed with supernatural powers to heal and revitalise human body systems for healthy living.

The most common ingredients that were used and are used till present times include, Astringent plants like Amla (*Emblica officinalis*), aromatic plant Nagarmotha (*Cyperus Pertenuis*), oils of almonds, sesame, lather producing local fruits like Ritha, Shikkakai, etc. An aqueous extract of Harda (*Terminalia Chebula*), Bheda (*Terminalia belerica*), and Amla (*Emblica Officianalis*), was used as an antiseptic preparation to keep one free from bacterial ailments like pimples, acne, and keep skin complexion soft and smooth.

ORAL CARE

Modern woman today uses lipstick to colour their lips. In ancient times, orthodox women chewed 'Pan' a combination of crushed areca nut; betel leaves spices, and lime. 'Pan' is not only a popular refreshing delicacy, but it also promotes salivation, improve digestion and at the same time imparting a reddish brown hue to the lips, a colour very popular as a fashion statement.

Today talcum powder that comprises largely of mined stuff is used, but in olden times, talcum powder was prepared using natural vegetable agents. Ancient Indian face powder was made up of rice powder; violet roots or freshly ground sandalwood. Rouge was obtained from the combination of various juices, namely plums, cactus fruit, red beet, ripe strawberries, or green walnut husk. All these beauty preparations were neither costly nor unattainable luxury by the common masses.

COSMETICS FOR EYES

Eyes are the reflection of our soul. It is said that eyes should necessarily outshine other parts of the face by their sparkle and size. There are reams of poetry that describe the beauty of the eye and link it to the beauty of the individual. Thus, eyes and the region around it are considered areas that are more important for one to address to enhance self-beauty. For a long time right from the epic ages, women have used 'Black kajal' or 'Kohl' eye paste around the eyes to make the eyes appear bewitchingly large in popular fashions styles like almond, mango, lotus, fish, etc. Temple sculpture and painting show nymphs of the skies and trees (Gandharvas and Yakshis) use Kajal paste, encircling the eyes to create an illusion of a larger size eyes.

Kajal Paste like all ancient Indian make up was made at home. A small earthen lamp is filled with 'Ghee' (milk fat), and a cotton wick placed in the lamp is allowed to burn over night. The black soot created by the flame is collected in a bronze or copper pan arranged at an angle above the flame. The soot obtained is mixed with some Ghee, and a drop of castor oil and Kajal paste is ready for use. The Kajal paste has a very long shelf life extending to years, but it is exhausted rather very quickly as Indian women both old and young use it regularly. Little babies are applied with Kajal paste, around their eyes, as it is also believed to promote the growth of long silky eyelashes and protect them against evil eye. A very popular fashion among women is to achieve almond shaped eyes by extending a line of Kajal paste beyond the corner of the eye in addition to the paste applied around it.

COSMETICS FOR HANDS AND FINGERS

The red juice of 'Mehendi' or 'Henna' plant is used by women in place of nail polish to colour the finger and toenails. The leaves of 'Henna' are ground into a very fine paste and the juice that oozes out is used to colour the palms of the hands and the side soles of the feet. It is the traditional custom to

colour the feet and palms of brides and young girls during celebrations. Dancers usually colour their palms and feet in tune with the latest fashion trends before a stage performance.

The painting on women palm is usually done by female relatives or by a local artist. The design selected as per the prevailing fashion is gracefully done surprisingly without using any designing implement, brushes, etc. but by bare hands. The wearer will then have to wait with sufficient patience, keeping still until the Henna juice in the paste dries up and stains the skin. The clarity and the redness of the design traced on the palms and soles remain intact for weeks even after daily washing and cleaning of the hands during normal routine activities. Henna leaves boiled in mustard oil when regularly massaged on the scalp promote growth of abundant hair and helps in treatment of baldness. Henna in addition is also beneficial for prickly heat treatment.

HAIR CARE

Curry leaves when consumed internally prevents premature greying of hair and when boiled in coconut oil and used regularly, stimulate hair growth and help retain the natural pigmentation of hair keeping it black for a longer duration. Methi (Fenugreek) seeds, soaked in water overnight is ground into a fine paste and applied on the scalp. The paste is left for about 15 to 20 minutes and then washed with Ritha or Soap nut to remove dandruff. Fresh Methi leaves paste when applied regularly before bath promotes hair growth and keeps hair black and silky.

Long hairs up to the knees were once every Indian women pride. Extreme care was devoted to a woman's tresses so that it grows long, silky dark and magnificent. Long hair even in today's times is considered a very important beauty asset. Young women and little kids strive hard to achieve it by taking utmost care of their hairs. Young girls have their scalp rubbed with pure expressed coconut oil, and have their hairs plaited. Pure coconut oil used regularly is said to promote growth of healthy hair and keeping it dark and silky.

DEPILATORIES

Hair on arms, faces, and legs were as unpopular eyesore in earlier times as it is now. It is believed that to prevent subsequent growth of hair, Indian midwives rub newborn babies with placenta a few hours after birth. Haldi or Turmeric paste when applied on the body suppresses the unwelcome growth of hair. Young adolescent girls have their skins painted with hot cow dung ash and the little hairs plucked by hand. This process repeated every month was believed to make the skin smooth and free of unwanted hair. A thick paste of oatmeal, almonds oil and newly ground sandalwood is massaged into the facial skin and allowed to dry. On drying, the paste falls off. Friction is generated on the skin when the paste dries. This friction is said to not only discourage growth of hairs but also remove blackheads and supply essential nutrients to the skin. India is a dry country and natural compress made out of grated orange, lemon, or cucumber peels are used to keep facial skin moist and prevent drying.

BODY MASSAGE

Oil massages of the face and whole body have been used right from the Vedic times to keep skin fresh and supple especially during the dry winter months. This fact is borne by numerous sculptures on temple walls where celestial nymphs are depicted massaging their breast muscles with oil to keep them smooth and without wrinkles. Rejuvenating oil baths of southern India that is world famous today were used to retain the youthful freshness and keep skin without blemish. Coconut Oil, sesame oil, or mustard oil is first scrubbed in the whole body and lightly rubbed with a rough sponge to remove dead skin. Hot compress is then applied to open the pores. The body is massaged well with warm oil and allowed to dry for about 15 minutes. It is then scrubbed with sandalwood powder to remove oil residues. The scrubbing is carried out in circular motions that are supposed to remove all dry and dead skin making it smooth. A cold shower at the end of the process closes the pores thereby keeping the skin fresh and youthful.

CLEAR WRINKLE FREE SKIN

An unfailing remedy to keep facial wrinkle at bay is the application of a mixture of half a cup of milk cream, a drop of benzoin and some rice flour, every day before retiring to bed and washing it off in the morning. A mixture of Alum, rosewater and almond milk is also supposed to prevent wrinkles that one develops naturally with advancing age.

Smooth and clear complexion is the most desired beauty asset necessary for any women whether in India or anywhere in the world. "*Ananga Ranga*" is the well-known book of love written more than 1500 years old. It recommends young girls to rub their face with a paste of sesame, milk, white mustard and ground caraway for one week before their marriage so that their skin on the wedding day is pure and spotless as white snow of the Himalayas. "*Kamasutra*" is a treatise on love written by Vatsyayana. According to Vatsyayana to enhance ones beauty, the individual should inculcate healthy living habits. The author recommends regular meals, frequent exercises or gymnastics, intake of ample amount of liquids, occasional use of laxatives and sufficient sleep in a room with open windows to let in fresh air as necessary for a beauty cure.

FOR THAT EXCLUSIVE YOUNG AND HEALTHY LOOKS

The wise men of ancient India advise on the beneficial effects of abstinence from meat and animal food. It also advises on the detrimental effects of alcohol and nicotine on skin. Every system needs a break from its daily rigours. Regular overhauling is necessary for any system to work at full capacity. Rest and change of diet is thus necessary for the digestive system to keep it in shape. Fasting or "Upavaasa" is one of the means to achieve this objective. 'Upa' means near and 'vaasa' means to stay. Literally, "Upavaasa" means staying near the lord, meaning the attainment of close mental proximity with the lord almighty. Ancient Indians believed that certain type of food make our minds dull and agitated, which in turn affect external body beauty. In certain days, one should consume simple light food or totally abstain from eating so that the mind becomes alert and pure.

The mind that is normally pre-occupied by the thought of food should entertain only noble thoughts of the lord during fasting. Fasting should not be forced upon but self-imposed form of discipline and adhered with joy. It is a common knowledge that more one indulges the senses the more they make demands on us. Fasting helps us to cultivate control over the senses, subjugate desires, increase willpower, and guide our mind to be at peace. The most wholesome of external living habits and the best of cosmetics will fail to make one beautiful externally if one does not cultivate inner life culture. Although fasting intermittently is good for health, it should not make one weak, irritable or create an irresistible urge to indulge in larger amounts of food later. This can only happen when there is no noble good and positive commitment behind fasting.

CONCLUSION

The "Bhagavath Gita" urges us to eat "Yukta Saatvik Aahaar" that is to eat sensibly neither too much nor too less, simple, pure and healthy food, even when not fasting. The ancient's advice women to cultivate a gentle cheerful, well-balanced disposition, avoid emotional outbursts, and unnecessary passion that cause wrinkles. Needless pursuit of power, money, pleasure and fame leads to stress, poor health, loss of magic attraction and serene beauty. A gay disposition, harmonious inner life full of contentment is the only true secret for, ever-lasting beauty and happiness.