Kannauj - a Quest for Attars

A Beautiful personal experience of the traditional system of manufacturing 'attars' (fragrance concentrates prepared in the tradition of the great Mughals) in Central Indian town of Kannauj, lovingly catalogued by Seema V.Jerajani, leading Aesthetician, Hair stylist and Aromatherapist.

During ancient times fresh sweet-smelling flowers were collected in a basket and kept in the rooms, people bathed in them or wore them in their hair or on their shoulder with a pin. Even barks of trees and leaves are placed in cupboards to give a fragrance to clothes.

The art of extracting oil to create perfumes was acquired later. These attars are in great demand today, extracted from various oils to get wonderful smelling non alcohol-based perfumes. I saw the process of making attars on my way to Kannauj.

Flowers from the rose plants were hand picked early morning and gathered in the jute (gunis) bags.

On my way to Kannauj, we stopped at a place where they made attars. It was interesting to see the process of manufacturing by the traditional method.

In the traditional process, various flowers, roots, herbs, spices, etc are hydro-distilled in copper vessels into a receiving vessel containing sandalwood oil or other base materials like DOP, DEP, and Paraffin etc.

The attar manufacturing for floral type takes place in remote places because the flowers are required to be processed

quickly after plucking. The traditional 'Deg' & 'Bhapka' process which is a hydro distillation process, is being used for centuries and even today in Kannauj.

The flowers are put into the copper vessel The process is carried out in copper stills called ' Degs' and their capacities can range from 10-160 kilos of floral/herbal materials.

The lid of the 'deg' is called 'Sarpos' and is also made of copper having opening for connections to one or two receivers A special piece of metal, curved at both ends, and called a 'kamani' spring is then slid under the lidof the 'deg' and over the lid. A wedge of wood is then driven between the spring and the lid forcing it down onto the clay ribbon and creating a tight seal between it and the deg.

Separately, another long necked receiver called a 'Bhapka" is

A ribbon of clay perhaps 3" thick is placed around the rim of the deg and a lid placed on top of that.

filled with 5 kilos of pure sandalwood oil. Into its mouth a cotton wrapped bamboo pipe is inserted The 'deg' and 'Bhapka' are connected by a 'Chonga'. This is a hollow bamboo pipe wrapped with twine for insulation.

After four hours when the condensed material and sandalwood have filled the receiver, a new one is fixed and the process continue for another four hours. At the end of it, the process is stopped for the day and the two receivers are allowed to cool overnight before the oil and water separate. Once this occurs, the water is siphoned off and added to the 'deg' for the distillation to take place. The water is decanted and added back to the deg for the next day's distillation.

Sandalwood oil is the base with which each extracted oil has to be mixed to give a distinct smell and whiff. These vapours condense, and after days of distillation, the water and oil separate, allowing most of the aromatic molecules to become adsorbed into the sandalwood oil.

Normally wood or coal is used for heating, Dried cow dung is used too and the heat is controlled manually.

Great care is taken in maintaining the proper heat and pressure, so that the floral material suspended in water does not burn. As the proper pressure is reached, the flowers begin to release their aromatic chemicals and these pass along with the steam into the receiving copper vessel. As it gets warm, the water is changed in the water bath, since it is critical that it

should stay cool for condensation to occur.

The other end of the bamboo pipe is inserted into the 'Bhapka's' lid and a tight seal is formed there using cotton and clay. As the pipe is affixed to the lid, the receiver is placed in a water tank or 'Gachchi'. This is used for cooling the distillate from Deg.

Copper has been the main structural material for 'Deg' and

'Bhapka' because it is malleable, good conductor of heat & easy to repair

The process, in the case of flowers like rose, jasmin, kewda, raat rani (night queen), is repeated for a minimum of 15 days until the sandalwood becomes totally saturated with the perfume of that particular flower. The process for making heena and amber is much more sophisticated and requires numerous other steps and as many as 60 natural ingredients go into their production, which takes months. Some other floral attars are Sona Champa (Michaela champaca,), Bakul (Mimopsus elengi,) Marigold (Tagetes minuta,) Kewda or Kadi (Pandanus odoratissimus,) Henna (Lawsonia inermis) and Lotus (Nelumbo nucifera varieties.)

Very interesting attar is Mitti, made from the earth of Central India near the Perfumer's city of Kannauj. Mitti is supposed to evoke the first rains of the new monsoon and the rebirth of all life, as the year's cycle continues. Within the gentle yet powerful cradle of sandalwood, the rich and hopeful earth notes slowly and subtly unfold in faithful reproduction of the season's first raindrops hitting the parched earth of Central India. I got some with me and treasure it, to use it on special occasions

We then visited a place where the bottles are made from leather these are called kuppi

The reason for making these bottles is their semi-permeability towards water. It is used for removal of moisture from attars. The leather allows water to move-out and attar to be remaining, as such, thereby separating the moisture from attar.

Our final destination was the Fragrance & Flavour Development Centre (FFDC) , where I was attended a workshop cum training on Perfumery and Aromatherapy. The course is designed to give an overview of the subject related to essential oils, fragrance & aromatherapy right from natural sources to application stage including quality assessment

Fragrance and Flavour Development Cente, Kannauj, is engaged in multitask activities in development, promotions, quality assurance, standardization, training and testings. Here was the opportunity to see how the modern scientific methods were used in the manufacturing, Quality control and analysis of essential oils.

(Pics & Text by Seema V. Jerajani)