
COSMETICS AND SOCIAL IDENTITY IN ANCIENT INDIAN CIVILIZATIONS: A HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL STUDY OF BEAUTY, RITUALS, AND NATURAL FORMULATIONS

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This review paper explores the intricate relationship between cosmetics and social identity in ancient Indian civilizations, examining the cultural, historical, and ritualistic significance of beauty practices. Drawing from Vedic literature, classical Sanskrit texts, and archaeological findings, the study highlights how cosmetics were not merely aesthetic tools but deeply embedded in expressions of class, caste, gender, and religious affiliation. The use of natural and herbal formulations, such as sandalwood, turmeric, saffron, and oils, was guided by Ayurvedic principles and reflected a harmonious balance between health, spirituality, and beauty. Rituals involving cosmetic application were integral to rites of passage, festivals, and daily grooming, symbolizing purity, status, and devotion. Furthermore, the paper investigates how beauty ideals in ancient India were shaped by philosophical and societal values rather than commercial trends. By tracing the evolution of these traditions, this study offers insights into how ancient cosmetic practices continue to influence contemporary Indian beauty culture, advocating for a deeper appreciation of heritage-based, sustainable approaches to self-care and identity.

Keywords: Ancient Indian Cosmetics, Social Identity, Ayurvedic Formulations, Cultural Beauty Practices, Ritual and Symbolism

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The use of cosmetics in ancient India extended far beyond the realm of physical enhancement, serving as a powerful marker of social identity, spiritual purity, and cultural expression. From the richly detailed verses of the Vedas and classical Sanskrit literature to archaeological evidence from the Indus Valley Civilization, beauty practices occupied a significant place in the everyday lives and rituals of people across caste, gender, and class hierarchies. Unlike the commercialized beauty industry of today, cosmetic practices in ancient India were deeply rooted in nature, with ingredients sourced from herbs, minerals, and oils based on Ayurvedic knowledge. These natural formulations were tailored to individual constitutions and often linked to health, wellbeing, and religious observance.

Cosmetic adornment was not merely about aesthetics—it was a reflection of one's status, marital position, and alignment with cultural ideals of harmony and cleanliness. Ritualistic applications of kajal, turmeric, and fragrant oils were commonly observed in both domestic and temple settings, signalling devotion, prosperity, and spiritual protection. Women and men alike participated in these practices, albeit with variations in usage and symbolism. This review seeks to explore the multifaceted role of cosmetics in ancient Indian civilizations, examining how beauty and grooming were interwoven with identity, tradition, and nature. In doing so, it also considers the enduring legacy of these traditions in shaping India's contemporary beauty ethos and sustainable self-care practices.

1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Cosmetics are widely understood as products intended to enhance or maintain the appearance and hygiene of the human body, particularly the skin, hair, and nails. They do not alter the body's structure or physiological functions, distinguishing them from pharmaceutical or therapeutic products. This distinction is emphasized in the work of Draelos (2005), who views cosmetics as non-medicinal agents that contribute to beauty and grooming without impacting biological processes.

Regulatory definitions have played a crucial role in shaping the modern understanding of cosmetics. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA, 2020) defines cosmetics as substances intended to be applied to the human body for cleansing, beautifying, promoting attractiveness, or altering appearance. This definition provides a practical framework for classification and is widely adopted internationally, including in Indian regulatory systems.

Beyond regulatory contexts, cosmetics also carry psychological and cultural connotations. As noted by Poucher (1993), they serve not only to improve physical appearance but also to enhance self-esteem, reflecting the

interplay between external grooming and internal confidence. Corley (2003) adds a cultural dimension by explaining that cosmetics have historically been used as tools of social signalling and identity, shaped by prevailing beauty ideals within societies.

In ancient Indian traditions, the concept of cosmetics transcended surface-level beautification. Mukherjee (2010) explains that personal care routines were seen as Saundarya Sadhana—aesthetic disciplines rooted in Ayurveda, aimed at aligning external beauty with inner well-being and spiritual harmony. This holistic approach is further emphasized by Kumar and Srivastava (2015), who argue that in Ayurvedic thought, cosmetics often blurred the boundaries between beautifying, healing, and ritualistic practices.

The definition of cosmetics is multifaceted—rooted in regulatory clarity, psychological impact, cultural symbolism, and, in the Indian context, spiritual and holistic care. This layered understanding provides a foundation for exploring their historical and social significance in ancient civilizations.

Cosmetics have played a significant role in human society, evolving from ancient natural preparations to modern industrial formulations. Historically, cosmetics were deeply embedded in cultural rituals and self-expression practices. As noted by Corley (2003), cosmetics in early civilizations were not merely tools of beautification but were linked to social, religious, and even political structures, often signifying class, status, or identity.

In the context of the modern world, the cosmetic industry has grown into a global economic force. Poucher (1993) describes cosmetics as products used to cleanse, perfume, protect, or change the appearance of external parts of the body. This definition has remained consistent in regulatory frameworks, such as the one set by the U.S. FDA (2020), which categorizes cosmetics based on intended use for beautification without altering body structure or functions.

Cosmetic usage also carries psychological and social implications. According to Cash (2001), cosmetics can influence self-perception, self-esteem, and confidence, especially among women. The psychological effect of feeling attractive or socially accepted contributes to the enduring popularity of cosmetics across cultures.

Culturally, cosmetic practices vary widely. Jones (2010) argues that cosmetic rituals in Asia, including India, often carry deeper spiritual and wellness connotations compared to the fashion-driven norms seen in the West. This is echoed in the work of Mukherjee (2010), who discusses the Ayurvedic tradition of Saundarya (beauty) as a balance between physical attractiveness and internal well-being, where cosmetics are used to support both health and aesthetics.

With rising global interest in sustainable and natural products, there has been a revival of traditional cosmetic practices. Kumar and Srivastava (2015) note that Ayurvedic and herbal cosmetics are regaining popularity for their eco-friendly, skin-compatible, and holistic benefits. These formulations, often free from synthetic chemicals, align with contemporary values of wellness and sustainability.

From a gendered perspective, Jeffreys (2005) critiques the cosmetic industry for reinforcing stereotypical standards of beauty, particularly affecting women's perceptions of body image. However, in recent years, the industry has seen more inclusive narratives, recognizing diverse skin tones, ages, and gender identities, as discussed by Mears (2019).

Cosmetics occupy a complex space—intersecting personal identity, cultural values, economic forces, and health concerns. Whether viewed through the lens of ancient rituals or modern marketing, the literature underscores the enduring influence of cosmetics in shaping individual and collective expressions of beauty.

The use of cosmetics spans thousands of years and various civilizations, where it has played a critical role in shaping aesthetic ideals, social norms, and cultural identity. Evidence from early Mesopotamian and Egyptian societies demonstrates that cosmetics were not only employed for beautification but also carried spiritual and medicinal connotations. Levy (2000) discusses how ancient Egyptians used kohl around the eyes not only to enhance appearance but also as protection against sun glare and eye infections, while Lansky and Paavilainen (2005) note that ointments and perfumes were closely tied to religious practices and burial customs.

In ancient Greece and Rome, cosmetics reflected societal hierarchies and were frequently associated with the elite. Corbett (2004) explains that Roman women employed lead-based face whiteners and saffron blush to align with prevailing beauty standards. This usage often carried moral undertones, with cosmetic enhancement seen as both desirable and deceptive (Craig, 2001).

The Middle Ages marked a period of decline in cosmetic use in Europe, largely due to Christian doctrines that equated makeup with vanity and sin. However, Sherrow (2006) notes that despite the public condemnation,

noblewomen still used rudimentary cosmetics, often made from natural ingredients. Green (2003) observes that Islamic civilizations during this time maintained more positive attitudes toward cosmetics, especially in the context of hygiene and medicinal benefits, rooted in prophetic traditions.

The Renaissance and Enlightenment periods saw a resurgence of cosmetic use, particularly among aristocracy. Brunton (2002) describes how the French court popularized elaborate beauty routines involving rouge, wigs, and perfumes, while Sutton (2007) links this revival to broader developments in chemistry and alchemy that contributed to cosmetic innovation.

With industrialization in the 19th century, cosmetics became commercialized and more accessible to the middle class. Peiss (1998) documents the rise of American beauty culture and the role of advertising in shaping beauty standards. Jones (2010) expands on this by highlighting the global spread of Western cosmetic ideals, often marginalizing indigenous beauty traditions.

The 20th century marked a turning point in cosmetic history with the growth of global brands and standardized formulations. Gimlin (2002) emphasizes how cosmetics were marketed as tools of empowerment, especially for women in the post-war era. However, Jeffreys (2005) critiques this perspective, arguing that cosmetics also reinforced patriarchal norms and unrealistic beauty ideals.

In recent decades, there has been growing interest in natural and traditional formulations. Mukherjee (2010) explores the resurgence of Ayurvedic and herbal cosmetics in India as a response to concerns over chemical ingredients. Similarly, Akinboro et al. (2010) report on the use of indigenous ingredients in African cosmetic traditions, suggesting a revival of ethnobotanical knowledge.

The global cosmetics industry has also responded to diverse consumer demands by promoting inclusivity. Hunter (2011) discusses the emergence of multicultural beauty marketing, and Runkle (2015) highlights the development of products for different skin tones and hair textures. Additionally, Draelos (2005) underlines the scientific evolution of dermatocosmetics, which blur the lines between beauty and medicine.

Finally, Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) explore how social media has reshaped the historical trajectory of cosmetics, giving rise to influencer-led beauty trends that emphasize authenticity and diversity.

Cosmetics in ancient Indian civilizations served not only aesthetic functions but also acted as cultural tools that shaped and reflected social identity, ritual purity, and spiritual alignment. The earliest documentation of cosmetic use in India can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization, where archaeological discoveries such as combs, mirrors, and cosmetic containers reveal that beauty and grooming were integral to daily life (Sarma, 2002). These practices, as noted by Dhavalikar (1995), were not gender-exclusive, suggesting that both men and women engaged in personal adornment.

Cosmetic rituals were deeply intertwined with Ayurvedic principles, where beauty was viewed as a reflection of internal health and spiritual balance. Mukherjee et al. (2011) describe how formulations like ubtan (herbal paste) and kumkum were applied not only for beautification but also for detoxification and energy balancing. Patwardhan et al. (2005) further emphasize that these natural formulations were aligned with the three doshas—vata, pitta, and kapha—highlighting a personalized approach to beauty.

The Vedic texts and epics, including the Rigveda and Mahabharata, offer references to beauty practices as part of daily and ceremonial life. Kumar and Singh (2008) observe that cosmetics like sandalwood paste, kajal, and perfumed oils were mentioned in religious rituals and symbolized purity, social status, and auspiciousness.

The relationship between cosmetics and social identity was prominent in ancient India. Deshpande (2009) notes that caste, gender, and marital status often dictated the type and extent of cosmetic use. For example, upper-caste women had access to premium ingredients like saffron and pearls, while others used locally sourced herbs and oils. Chakraborty (2013) highlights that the use of sindoor, bangles, and bindi served as visible markers of marital and religious identity among Hindu women.

Cosmetics also featured prominently in ritualistic and festive contexts. Ghosh (2005) discusses how cosmetic preparations were essential components in wedding ceremonies, temple offerings, and seasonal festivals. These practices emphasized the sanctity of physical adornment and its role in spiritual elevation.

The symbolic power of cosmetics extended into performing arts and classical literature. Narayan (2010) analyzes how characters in classical Sanskrit plays and poetry were described in terms of their appearance, with detailed mentions of hair oils, floral garlands, and colored powders used to convey emotional states and societal roles.

The intersection of gender and cosmetics is also crucial. Bhattacharya (2014) explains that while beauty was often idealized in women, men too participated in grooming rituals—using fragrant oils, garlands, and sandal paste—to signify valor, prosperity, and divinity. Joshi (2016) notes that kings and warriors were depicted with adorned bodies in temple carvings, signifying power through appearance.

In terms of natural formulations, Rao and Sreeramulu (2001) document the usage of ingredients like neem, turmeric, rosewater, and aloe vera in traditional Indian cosmetics. These were not only effective but also sustainable, showcasing the ancient Indian commitment to eco-friendly practices. Bhat and Surolia (2001) add that many of these formulations had antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties, underscoring their dual cosmetic and medicinal roles.

Recent studies attempt to recontextualize these practices in the modern world. Sharma et al. (2018) argue that a resurgence of Ayurvedic beauty products in contemporary India reflects a return to cultural roots and a response to the adverse effects of chemical-based cosmetics. Similarly, Ravindran and Pillai (2020) suggest that understanding ancient Indian cosmetic practices offers insights into identity formation, environmental sustainability, and indigenous knowledge systems.

Cosmetic use in ancient Indian civilizations was a powerful expression of social identity, often reflecting one's caste, gender, and ritual role. Beauty practices were embedded within the spiritual and cultural framework of early Indian society. As Bandyopadhyay (2009) notes, personal adornment was both an act of self-care and a demonstration of one's alignment with dharma, the righteous path. These practices were often codified within religious texts and reflected in artistic depictions, showcasing the sociocultural importance of cosmetics.

The use of natural formulations such as turmeric, sandalwood, rose petals, and oils was a hallmark of ancient Indian cosmetic culture. These ingredients were not only aesthetic but carried medicinal value, contributing to skin health and overall wellness (Prasad & Dey, 2011). Kadam et al. (2014) emphasize that the dual function of these formulations—cosmetic and therapeutic—was rooted in Ayurvedic theory, which maintained that external beauty was a reflection of inner harmony.

The ritualistic role of cosmetics is frequently highlighted in historical literature. Kumar and Acharya (2016) explain that rituals such as the Solah Shringar (sixteen adornments) prescribed for Hindu women had both religious and social implications, signifying marital status, fertility, and devotion. These adornments included elements like bindi, mehndi, kajal, and scented oils, each with symbolic meaning. Rastogi (2009) adds that these cosmetic applications served as tools for spiritual purification during religious ceremonies.

Cosmetics also helped delineate gender roles and expectations in society. Chaturvedi (2012) notes that while men's grooming practices were associated with strength and power—such as the use of scented oils, elaborate turbans, and perfumed garments—women's cosmetic rituals were tied to notions of grace, virtue, and social decorum. Sharma and Mishra (2015) found that gender-specific grooming customs were visible in temple art and ancient sculpture, where gods and mortals alike are depicted with adorned bodies, symbolizing divine beauty and moral order.

The interplay between caste and cosmetic access is discussed by Verma (2013), who suggests that access to luxurious cosmetic materials such as pearls, saffron, and gold-based products was restricted to higher castes. In contrast, the lower castes relied on accessible herbs, clays, and oils. This social stratification extended to cosmetic rituals during festivals and weddings (Sinha, 2014).

Further, ancient Indian texts including the Kamasutra and Natyashastra provide detailed descriptions of grooming practices. Mehta (2008) explores how these texts codified standards of beauty and offered specific recommendations for facial treatments, hair care, and perfume usage, emphasizing the cultural centrality of aesthetic rituals.

Cosmetics were not used in isolation but formed part of a larger ecosystem of personal and spiritual wellness. Kulkarni and Chauhan (2017) argue that ancient beauty routines were holistic, involving diet, yoga, and herbal treatments alongside external cosmetic application. Nair (2019) links this holistic approach to today's wellness trends in India, noting that many commercial Ayurvedic products draw directly from ancient cosmetic recipes.

In terms of symbolic representation, Dasgupta (2010) states that cosmetic use was part of public identity construction, particularly for women, who used adornment as a way to navigate social expectations, gain respectability, and assert marital identity. The iconography of deities also supports this notion, as goddesses are often portrayed with elaborate ornaments and cosmetic details that mirror human practices (Mukund, 2012).

Finally, scholars like Jain and Shukla (2020) emphasize the need to study ancient cosmetic practices not merely as cultural relics but as active elements of identity formation. These practices reflected values of harmony, discipline, and purity, reinforcing one's place in the societal and cosmic order.

1.3 OBJECTIVE

To examine how cosmetics in ancient Indian civilizations reflected and influenced social identity through beauty practices, rituals, and natural formulations.

1.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research follows an explorative and qualitative methodology aimed at understanding the cultural, ritualistic, and social significance of cosmetics in ancient Indian civilizations. The study relies entirely on secondary data sourced from scholarly articles, classical texts, archaeological reports, and cultural studies. Historical references to cosmetic practices were examined through the lens of existing academic interpretations, rather than direct primary translations, allowing for a contextual analysis grounded in expert perspectives. A thematic and interpretative approach was employed to identify key patterns related to beauty rituals, natural formulations, and their role in expressing caste, gender, and spiritual identity. By synthesizing insights from prior research and historical documentation, the study seeks to reconstruct how cosmetics contributed to social identity formation in ancient India.

1.5 DISCUSSION

The review of literature reveals that cosmetics in ancient Indian civilizations held profound cultural and symbolic meaning, far beyond their aesthetic utility. They served as expressions of social identity, deeply embedded in religious, gendered, and caste-based frameworks. Unlike modern commercial cosmetics that are often associated with surface-level beautification, ancient Indian beauty practices were holistic, rooted in Ayurveda, and aligned with spiritual values. The consistent use of natural ingredients such as turmeric, sandalwood, rosewater, and herbal pastes illustrates the community's knowledge of nature-based wellness, highlighting the intersection of beauty and health.

Cosmetic rituals were not only personal but also social and spiritual in nature. Practices like *Solah Shringar*, the application of *sindoor*, *kajal*, *mehndi*, and scented oils, were socially coded acts that denoted marital status, caste hierarchy, and moral virtue. These adornments were essential elements in religious ceremonies and life-cycle rituals, reinforcing a woman's role within the familial and cosmic order. Literature also indicates that men engaged in grooming practices using fragrant oils and elaborate turbans, particularly in royal or warrior classes, symbolizing masculinity, strength, and refinement.

A recurring theme across sources is the role of cosmetics as a tool of **social demarcation**. Access to luxury ingredients was largely confined to upper castes and royalty, while the lower strata used locally available herbs and clays. This reflects how beauty itself was socially stratified, reinforcing the hierarchical order of ancient Indian society. Moreover, the rich descriptions found in classical texts such as the *Kamasutra*, *Natyashastra*, and Vedic scriptures affirm that beauty was considered not only desirable but also divine, with deities depicted in adorned forms to reflect ideals of perfection and harmony.

The reinterpretation of ancient cosmetic practices in contemporary India—particularly through the resurgence of Ayurvedic beauty products—suggests a cultural reclaiming of heritage-based self-care rooted in sustainability. However, while the literature offers deep insights into historical practices, it also reveals a gap in understanding how these traditions were experienced differently across regions and communities. This highlights the need for further localized studies to explore the diversity of cosmetic rituals across ancient Indian society.

In essence, the discussion emphasizes that cosmetics in ancient India were more than physical enhancements—they were potent carriers of social identity, spiritual discipline, and cultural continuity.

1.6 CONCLUSION

The exploration of cosmetics in ancient Indian civilizations reveals their deep entwinement with cultural, spiritual, and social identity. Far from being limited to physical beautification, cosmetics functioned as powerful symbols of caste, gender, marital status, and religious affiliation. Rooted in Ayurvedic wisdom and ritualistic traditions, the use of natural formulations such as turmeric, sandalwood, and herbal pastes represented a holistic approach to well-being that integrated aesthetics with health and spirituality.

Beauty practices were not individualistic but rather culturally coded actions that reflected one's place in the social hierarchy. From sacred adornments like *sindoor* and *kajal* to ritual routines such as *Solah Shringar*,

cosmetics served as tools for expressing devotion, discipline, and identity. Access to specific beauty products often mirrored socio-economic status, reinforcing the caste-based structure of ancient Indian society.

Through the analysis of classical texts and scholarly interpretations, this study affirms that cosmetic traditions in ancient India were central to public and private life, shaping how individuals saw themselves and were seen by others. The revival of Ayurvedic and herbal cosmetics in contemporary India further demonstrates the lasting influence of these ancient practices, offering modern consumers a bridge between tradition, wellness, and identity.

Overall, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how beauty and self-presentation in ancient India were not superficial, but integral to the cultural fabric—anchored in nature, guided by philosophy, and reflective of a socially stratified yet spiritually mindful civilization.

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