



History of cosmetology in ancient India

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Abstract

Cosmetology in ancient India was a sophisticated integration of aesthetics, health, and spirituality, where *saundarya* (beauty) expressed holistic physical and mental harmony. This research offers a comprehensive historical and literary analysis of its evolution, drawing on archaeological findings, *Vedic* literature, and *Āyurvedic* classics. The study critically examines references to cosmetic practices from the Indus Valley Civilization, revealing advanced knowledge of personal hygiene, adornment, perfumery, and grooming tools. *Vedic* and post-*Vedic* texts—including the *R̥gveda*, *Arthaśāstra*, and Epics—detail the ritualistic and social significance of *añjana*, herbal pastes, and perfumery. A primary focus is on *Āyurveda*'s contribution, where beauty results from *doṣa–dhātu–agni* balance and *ojas*. The research reviews daily regimens (*dinacaryā*), *rasāyana* therapies, and specialized texts such as *Haramekhala Saṃhitā* and *Gandhasāra* to document ancient knowledge of perfumes and aesthetic procedures. By consolidating scattered references into a systematic resource, including classification of cosmetics and procedural monographs, this study establishes that ancient Indian cosmetology was an evidence-based, holistic science. It demonstrates that these traditional practices remain profoundly relevant to contemporary natural and integrative cosmetology, bridging ancient wisdom with modern applications.

Keywords *Saundarya · Āyurveda · R̥gveda · Doṣa · Dhātu · Agni · Dinacaryā · Añjana*

1 Introduction

Cosmetology, the science and art of enhancing beauty through care and treatment of the body, hair, and skin, holds a profound and ancient legacy in India. Far beyond mere adornment, beauty in ancient Indian culture was deeply intertwined with health, hygiene, and spirituality. References to cosmetology can be traced back to the Vedic period (1500–500 BCE), where the concept of *saundarya* (beauty) was considered a reflection of inner purity and balance (*śarīra–manas–ātmā sāmya*). Texts such as the *R̥gveda*, *Atharvaveda*, and later *Āyurvedic* classics—notably the *Caraka* and *Suśruta Saṃhitā*—elaborate on regimens for personal grooming, herbal formulations for skin and hair

care, and the maintenance of overall body aesthetics as an essential aspect of health (*svasthya*).

In ancient India, cosmetology was not regarded as a superficial pursuit but as a holistic science combining *Āyurveda*, *Rasasāstra*, and *Gandhasāstra*. Natural ingredients like turmeric (*haridrā*), sandalwood (*candana*), saffron (*kuṅkuma*), aloe (*kumārī*), and various oils and clays were used for therapeutic and beautifying purposes. The ancient Indians emphasized *dinacaryā* (daily regimen) and *ṛtucaryā* (seasonal regimen), which included practices such as *abhyāṅga* (oil massage), *snāna* (bathing), *dantadhāvana* (oral hygiene), and *añjana* (eye care), all contributing to external beauty and internal wellbeing.

The art of adornment, evident in archaeological findings from the Indus Valley Civilization, reveals the early use of cosmetics, jewellery, and perfumes. Sculptures and literary sources from the Mauryan, Gupta, and Classical Sanskrit periods further indicate the refinement of beauty rituals and their social, cultural, and religious significance. Thus, the history of cosmetology in ancient India reflects a synergy between aesthetics, health, and spirituality, demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of beauty that transcended the physical form. This research project examines the origins, evolution, and principles of cosmetology in ancient India

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from literary, archaeological, and Āyurvedic perspectives, highlighting its enduring relevance in contemporary holistic and natural beauty sciences.

The study was carried out under the following chapters:

- I. Introduction
- II. Description of terminologies and *saundarya* as per different *śāstras*
- III. History of cosmetology in different time periods
- IV. Review of Āyurvedic literature on cosmetology
- V. Review of exclusive works (books/chapters) on cosmetology
- VI. Classification of cosmetics
- VII. Monographs on cosmetic procedure
- VIII. Monographs on herbs used as cosmetics

1.1 Terminologies related to cosmetology

The concept of beauty has been recognized since ancient times as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing physical, mental, and spiritual aspects. While modern usage often limits beauty to external appearance, Sanskrit literature presents a holistic understanding through the terms *sundara* and *saundarya*. *Sundara* signifies that which pleases the senses, melts the mind, and illuminates inner consciousness (Tapaswi, 2019), whereas *saundarya* denotes harmonious coordination and aesthetic judgment (Ānandavardhana & Abhinavagupta, 1990). Classical Sanskrit texts enumerate numerous synonyms emphasizing charm, radiance, and virtue. The terms “cosmetics” and “cosmetology,” derived from the Greek word *kosmetikos*, which roots back to the concepts of order and harmony, focus on beautification and the modification of appearance. Together, these concepts reflect an integrative vision of beauty rooted in balance (*sāmya*), ethics, and wellbeing.

1.2 Saundarya as per different śāstras

The concept of *saundarya* in Indian thought transcends physical appearance and reflects harmony among body, mind, and soul. Rooted in the ideal *satyam–śivam–sundaram*, beauty is viewed as an expression of truth, goodness, and bliss (Śivarudrappa, 2011). The *upaniṣads* regard beauty as spiritual bliss (*ānanda*), while *āyurveda* links it to health, balance, and *ojas*. Jainism and Buddhism emphasize inner purity, knowledge, and detachment as true beauty. Epics like the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* portray beauty through virtue and perception. Aesthetic texts, *purāṇas*, and devotional works integrate physical, ethical, and spiritual dimensions, affirming beauty as a holistic and experiential reality (Aurobindo, 1997).

2 History of cosmetology in different time periods

The history of cosmetology in ancient India reflects a holistic integration of beauty, health, spirituality, and social life. During the Prehistoric period and within the Indus Valley Civilization, excavations at Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, Lothal, and Kalibangan reveal advanced hygiene, grooming, and cosmetic practices (Mackay, 1938). The finds include terracotta scrubbers, kohl pots and sticks, face paints, bronze mirrors, combs, hairpins, razors, cosmetic jars, and dressing tables. Kohl (*añjana*) was used for beauty enhancement and protection from sun glare and insects. Colours held magical and symbolic significance (red, green, yellow). There is evidence of the use of henna, pigments, eye decoration, and floral adornments. Terracotta figurines display elaborate hairstyles and jewelry, indicating that grooming was a socially significant practice. Daily bathing rituals signified purity—a principle later reinforced in vedic practices.

In the Vedic period (*Rgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Atharvaveda*), beauty was regarded as a manifestation of divine grace (*saundarya*). Notable practices included the use of *añjana* (collyrium), perfumed unguents, garlands (*srak*), and flower decorations (Mukhopadhyaya, 2013). Herbs such as *kuṣṭha*, *yaṣṭimadhu*, and vetiver (*nalada*) were used for their complexion-enhancing, cooling, and fragrant properties. *Rājikā* (*āsuri* herb) was used to enhance beauty and attraction, while *śaṅkhapuṣpī* is described as *vīryavardhaka* (vitality-enhancing) and *saubhāgya-kāraka* (auspiciousness-inducing). Hairstyles such as *stukā*, *kurīra*, *kumba*, *opaśa*, and *kaparda* were popular (Chandra, 1940). Vedic women used *karañja* seed as a powder, ointment, and eye salve. *Añjana* served as a symbol of beauty, and various herbs were employed to treat hair whitening (*pālitya*). The *añjanakārī* (female collyrium-maker) is explicitly mentioned as a professional vocation.

In the *Brāhmaṇa* period (*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*), it was believed that *añjana* gives “lustre to the eyes.” The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* narrates the mythological origin of *añjana*. After bathing, the eyes and feet were anointed to ward off negativity. During the *Gṛhyasūtra* period, ritual sacrifices involved the application of eye paint, body paint, and flower ornaments. The use of different razors for depilation—a practice also seen in the Indus culture—was documented. In marriage rituals, fragrant water infused with herbs and fruits was an essential component of the ceremony. In the *Āśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra*, the graduation ceremony included decorating the student with jewellery, garments, and a turban—signifying grooming as a rite of passage.

In post-Vedic texts, such as the *Rāmāyaṇa*, personal decoration was highly refined; terms used included



pratikarma (self-decoration) and *ālaṅkāra-vidhi* (ornamentation). Anointing (*anulepana*) was universal. *Sītā* received divine beauty-enhancing *aṅgarāgas* from Anasūyā Devī. Rāma used *tilaka* made of *manahśilā*, *candana*, *padmaka*, *agaru*, and *devadāru*. Bathing with fragrant waters, anointing with sandal paste, and the use of eye kohl, *sindūra*, and *kuṅkuma* were common. Perfumes and aromatics made from agarwood, sandalwood, and flower garlands were prevalent in palaces. Fumigation (*dhūpa*) was practiced for ambience and ritual. Cosmetic use was even seen in mortuary practices (*tailadroṇī* for preserving bodies). Hair care included fragrant oils, flowers, and neat grooming for both men and women. Beauty was equated with virtue, purity, and *sattva* (with *Sītā* as the ideal example) (Prasad et al., 2011).

In the *Mahābhārata*, the *cāndrāyaṇa vrata* for beauty is mentioned. Daily use of fragrant oils, sandal paste, and scented powders was standard. *Draupadī*, acting as a *sairandhrī* (cosmetologist/aesthetician), reflects professional expertise in grooming. Beauty was linked with divinity (*tejas*). *Alaka* (forehead curls), *kastūrī*, *kuṅkuma*, and *candana* were common beauty aids. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, a detailed classification of hairstyles across Indian regions is provided, including curled locks (*Mālava*), topknots and plaited braids (*Gauḍa*), and two-plaited braids (*Ābhīra* women). Southern styles like *kumbhipādaka* show highly developed hairdressing arts. In the *purāṇas*, descriptions of Kṛṣṇa with *kastūrī-tilaka*, pearl ornaments, and *haricandana* are abundant. The *purāṇas* and *dharmaśāstras* describe nail painting, breast painting (*patralekhā*), hairstyles, and various cosmetic rituals (Prasad et al., 2011).

Buddhist literature reveals that while cosmetics were restricted for monks, texts record extensive knowledge of practices such as *ucchādana* (perfumed anointing), *parimardana* (massage/shampooing), *añjana* (eye cosmetics), *mukhacunnaka* (face powders), and *śikhābandha* (hairdressing). The *Brahmajāla Sutta* lists nearly eighteen cosmetic and grooming practices.

Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*, though primarily political, contains detailed descriptions of fragrant substances, cosmetics, and perfumed oils. Sandalwood varieties are described by their colours, fragrance types, and textures. *Agaru* (aloeswood) is classified by properties like adhesiveness, slow burning, and deep fragrance. *Tailaparnika* oils are described by origin, colour, and smell. It includes cosmetic formulations for altering skin and hair colour: mustard oil processed with goat urine to change the complexion, and herbal mixtures for whitening or blackening skin. It demonstrates scientific observation and chemical processing in early cosmetology.

The history of cosmetology in ancient India shows a continuous evolution from ritualistic beauty to medicinal cosmetology. The integration of herbs, minerals, aromatics, and

alchemical techniques shows that aesthetic practices were tied to health, spirituality, social identity, and gender roles. Ancient India had a highly sophisticated, culturally embedded system of beauty science long before the development of modern cosmetology (Patkar & Bole, 1997).

2.1 Review of āyurvedic literature on cosmetology

Cosmetology in *āyurveda* is a holistic science that views beauty as an expression of physical health, mental balance, and inner vitality. It emphasizes *dinacaryā* (daily regimen), *ṛtucaryā* (seasonal regimen), diet, and lifestyle to maintain natural radiance. Classical texts describe herbal cosmetics, oils, collyriums, perfumes, and rejuvenative therapies to enhance skin, hair, and body health (Parida, 2014). Disorders affecting appearance are addressed therapeutically under *kṣudra-roga*s. Suśruta made pioneering contributions through cosmetic surgery, including rhinoplasty, otoplasty, and treatments for pigmentation and hair disorders (Sakharkar, 2018). Thus, *āyurveda* integrates preventive care, therapeutics, and surgery, uniting aesthetics with overall wellbeing. *Āyurvedic* texts provide scientific reasoning for beautification linking *doṣa* balance, diet, lifestyle, herbs, and therapies (Das et al., 2015). *Āyurveda*'s contribution to skin physiology, trichology, anti-aging techniques, and psychocosmetics (mind–beauty interrelation) seems limitless. The influence of Aesthetic, Erotic, and Alchemical Texts was vast.

2.2 Review of exclusive works (books/chapters) on cosmetology

Classical Indian literature contains several exclusive texts dedicated to cosmetology and perfumery, reflecting advanced scientific, aesthetic, and cultural understanding of beauty. Works such as *Hāramekhalā Saṃhitā*, *Gandhasāra*, and *Gandhavāda* systematically describe cosmetics, perfumes, hygiene, hair care, depilatories, deodorants, and aromatic preparations. *Hāramekhalā Saṃhitā* demonstrates early understanding of herbal dermatology, cosmeceuticals, and aroma therapy. It reflects the integration of beauty care with medicine, rituals, and lifestyle. It shows the systematic classification of cosmetic practices centuries prior to modern cosmetology. It contributes to the understanding of *āyurvedic*, tantric, and folk cosmetic traditions (Mahuka, 1938). It provides formulations for herbal cosmetics, natural skincare, and traditional beauty sciences, and offers insights into holistic beauty concepts that combine health, aesthetics, and psychology. It also serves as a base for research in ethnopharmacology and historical dermatology (Sharma, 1986). *Gandhasāra* is one of the earliest systematic works on Indian cosmetic science (Vyasa, 1989). It demonstrates advanced knowledge of formulation techniques and perfumery chemistry. It emphasizes seasonal



usage, *doṣa*-based personalization, and aromatic therapeutics. It indicates a strong link between cosmetics, ritual practice, and social refinement. *Gandhavāda* acts as a technical, recipe-based companion to *Gandhasāra*. It offers practical, hands-on formulations for musk, camphor, incense, *javādī*, scented oils, powders, and pills. It has a rich mixture of Sanskrit verses with regional (Marathi/Hindi) commentary, indicating knowledge transmission across regions. There is a strong focus on identification, testing, and quality control of perfume ingredients. *Kāmasāstra* texts, including *Kāmasūtra* and *Kāmaratna Tantra*, integrate cosmetics with attraction and personal refinement. *Kāmasāstra* literature in cosmetology represents India's earliest systematic writings on beauty science. Provides sophisticated understanding of skincare, haircare, perfumery, body hygiene, aphrodisiacs, and sexual aesthetics. It shows advanced knowledge of formulation, aromatics, and herbal chemistry and emphasizes daily hygiene, ritual grooming, seasonal beauty care, and personalized cosmetics. *Strīvilāsa* uniquely focuses on women's beauty and health. (Prasad et al., 2017) *Rasaśāstra* expanded beyond metallurgy into high-value products like cosmetics, aromatics, and perfumery, which were commercially profitable. Many cosmetic preparations rely on alchemical extraction, purification, distillation, incineration, and blending techniques. *Nityanātha Siddha* (thirteenth century) stands out as a major contributor, linking alchemy, *tantra*, cosmetics, and perfumery. *Rasaratnākara* was one of the earliest systematic Indian texts to document synthetic cosmetics, perfumery compounds, incense production, and aroma-extraction techniques (Nityanātha, 2020). It demonstrates advanced chemical processes centuries ahead of modern chemistry, such as recrystallization, distillation, extraction of essences, sublimation, and substitution for rare aromatics. It shows how alchemy and cosmetics were commercially interconnected and provides insight into medieval Indian cosmetic industry, product manufacturing, and ritual use.

Thus, *Hāramekhalā Saṃhitā*, *Gandhasāra*, and *Kāmasūtra* emphasize grooming, fragrance, and adornment as elements of refinement. Alchemical texts introduce processed metals and minerals, suggesting early proto-dermatological knowledge. The gender dimensions of beauty practices reveal that although cosmetology is often viewed as female-oriented, texts mention grooming for both men and women. Together, these texts demonstrate the sophistication, diversity, and holistic approach of traditional Indian cosmetology.

3 Classification of cosmetics

Cosmetics are systematically classified by site of application and purpose into facial cosmetics, oral hygiene products, depilatories, body cosmetics, and hair care formulations. Facial cosmetics address complexion, acne, pigmentation,

lips, eyes, auspicious markings, and ageing. Oral hygiene includes teeth cleaning, mouthwashes, odorants, and deodorants. Body cosmetics include complexion promoters, bath and body powders, perfumed oils, deodorants, foot care products, and breast developers (Patkar & Bole, 1997). Hair care formulations addresses hair growth, hair fall prevention, dyes, bleaches, dandruff, alopecia, lice, and scalp disorders. This classification demonstrates the comprehensive, methodical, and therapeutic approach of traditional cosmetology.

3.1 Cosmetic procedure monographs

This section presents detailed monographs of cosmetic procedures in *Āyurveda*, emphasizing their principles, methods, and therapeutic value. *Lepa* and *mukhalepana* are core external applications that enhance complexion, treat pigmentation, acne, and ageing through *doṣa*-based selection and precise application rules. Procedures like *abhyāṅga*, *udvartana*, *mūrdha taila*, *kavala*, and *svedana* improve skin texture, hair health, and radiance. *Pañcakarma* therapies—*vamana*, *virecana*, *raktamokṣana*, *nasya*, and *basti*—address systemic imbalances underlying cosmetic disorders. Collectively, these procedures illustrate *āyurveda*'s integrative approach, in which internal purification and external care together promote lasting beauty and wellbeing (Acharya, 2015).

3.2 Monographs on herbs used as cosmetics

This section presents extensive monographs on medicinal plants traditionally employed in ancient Indian cosmetology, detailing their Sanskrit synonyms, botanical identities, parts used, morphology, and cosmetic applications. The listed drugs—ranging from *āmalakī*, *haridrā*, *candana*, and *bhṛṅgarāja* to *kunkuma*, *jaṭāmāmsī*, and *yaṣṭimadhu*—demonstrate a systematic, evidence-based approach to beauty care. These substances were used for complexion enhancement, hair growth, prevention of greying, deodorization, depilation, acne management, and skin blemishes (Pathiraja, 2018). The monographs reveal that ancient cosmetology was deeply integrated with *Āyurveda*, emphasizing therapeutic beauty through natural, plant-based formulations grounded in health and balance (Patkar & Bole, 1997).

4 Conclusion

Cosmetology in India was not an isolated practice but a synthesis of *āyurveda*, aesthetics, ritual sciences, literature, and alchemy. Evaluating the overlap among beauty practices, medicine, spirituality, and social customs offers new insights into ancient Indian life and reveals the interdisciplinary nature of Ancient Indian Cosmetology. Indian beauty



theories go far beyond physical attractiveness; they integrate ethical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Beauty was seen as a reflection of inner harmony, unlike purely external definitions in modern cosmetology, revealing the conceptual depth of *saundarya*. A clear progression in sophistication is evident from simple natural pigments (Indus Valley) to complex formulations (*āyurveda*, *rasaśāstra*), showing how cosmetic practices evolved over historical periods.

Socio-cultural significance of cosmetics includes ritual functions (auspicious marks, sacred scents), social markers (status, community practices), medicinal purposes (skin protection, hair health), and psychological wellbeing. This encourages reflection on cosmetics as tools of identity rather than mere embellishment. Most ancient cosmetics were plant-based, with selective addition of minerals and metals. Traditional Indian cosmetology predominantly used eco-friendly, biodegradable, and ethically sourced materials. Many cosmetic practices (kohl, turmeric pastes, hair oils, fragrances) remain unchanged to this day, possibly due to cultural acceptance or religious significance. Several formulations described in classical texts are potent, but require modern research to verify safety, standardize dosage, and identify pharmacologically active compounds, thereby bridging traditional knowledge and modern cosmetology. Ancient Indian cosmetology offers a holistic, preventive, and herbal-based model. It may prove extremely useful in natural skincare product development, herbal dermatology, aromatherapy, and anti-aging research.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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