

Dhoop, Dua aur Yaadein

Incense, Prayers and Memories



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The smell hit me the moment I opened the tin box – the smell of Sandalwood.

Not just any sandalwood- it was like petrichor or like a rich and ancient story. I lifted the bundle of incense sticks, wrapped in crinkly plastic, it was open from one end. The scent grew stronger and fuller like comforting glow of a hearth. It was not only sweet and warm but it felt like a sacred whisper bringing calmness to my soul.

Just a day before Diwali, I stood in the puja room in our house. A tiny sanctuary built in our living room. The walls of the room were closed together, but it had everything- covered in marigold flowers, a brass diya with dried oil stains which my mother would clean later. It had a small brass bell (ghanta) hanging overhead and the window letting soft sun rays that made red dupatta covering the mandir glow like flame.

It was quiet. Except the whispers of grandmother's prayers and continuous stirring of gram flour in the kitchen. My mother was making besan laddoos- the smell of roasted gram flour was floating in the air but got overpowered by sandalwood. The sticks were dry and smooth yet velvety texture. I slid one out and lit the tip of it, the fire hissed softly like it knew a secret.

The tip first turned yellow and orange, and then red and then finally it died, left behind a slender trail of grey smoke. And with it, smell changed. It did not take any longer for the sharp dry Chandan to become rich and deep, just like a warm, Kashmere blanket being wrapped around you to provide a sense of comfort and tranquility.

My hands became stock-stilled when I placed the incense sticks in its holder. The smoke started to get curled up and dancing steadily and gracefully as if time has become sluggish. I was able to hear my slowed breath and ticking of the clock. The room, the light, the smoke, the quite – it felt like it all wrapped inside that single smell.

That aroma had brought something precious with it.

A memory.



Sandalwood for Hindu God Worship (Image Courtesy and Source: eshubhpooja on Instagram)

I was seventeen again.

It was Diwali morning and me and my sister were sitting on the floor alongside with our father. He was wearing a simple light pink kurta but his presence filled the whole room. He was smelling like Chandan- not just the incense sticks but the actual paste he used to dab on his forehead. It dried and cracked gently. Left a pale mark on his forehead just like chalk dust.

He was chanting slowly, every word could be heard firmly and full of weight. I did not understand most of it but I listened to his words carefully. And the incense sticks - they were burning. Chandan. Always Chandan.

That year, he held my hand and guided me to offer flowers to the Gods. The marigold and rose flowers scratched my hands but it felt like a gentle kiss from sun. I remember how diya flickered on my face when I was offering flowers, the way smoke filled the gap between us, like a thread stitching us together.

I don't remember the gifts I got that year but yes, I remember the smell, taste of sweets and most importantly - Prashad for which I wait whole year.

Whenever I recall that day, memories surround me and hugs me.

I feel Safe. Loved. Home.



Now, I was sitting here years later and that same smoke was back. The same smell. It made me smile - small and quiet. A smile which comes with a little ache.

I whispered without even thinking, "You are back."

If smell could reply back, then I think that it would have said, "I never left. You did."

I laughed softly.

Then I asked, "Where were you all this while?"

And it answered, "In the corners. In the folds of your memory. In the clothes you did not unpack. I was waiting. I was in the silence between you and your family. I was there with you all this time. But you did not notice."

The incense sticks then burned slowly and I watched the ash form a flawless curve just like an artist's masterpiece.

If smell could tell a story, it might sound like this:

"I was born in the quiet heart of sandalwood. I was carved from centuries old trees. I waited in silence. I was pressed in between the thin velvety sticks and was bundled with others like me. Then, on one Diwali, a gentle hand slid me through the darkness and lit my tip. I woke up in the flames, slowly was turning into smoke and rising through the prayers and songs. I saw your eyes- curious, stressing about her future and wide. I started dancing in the air, wrapped your surroundings to give you comfort. I carried memories - of father chanting, mothers singing bhajans, home filled with love, light and blessings. I was not just a fragrance - I was time itself which would take you to the lanes of your memories, burning slowly. And when I turned to ash, I did not end. I lingered in your home—in your almirah, books, in hearts. Every time you light me, I come back- not as smoke but as memory."

Later that evening, my mother asked me to put diyas outside and to save one for the mandir. Her hands were sticky with sugar and ghee. She smelled like Diwali- sweet, sweat and something warm.

As she walked past me, she paused and sniffed. "You have found that old packet of Chandan incense! I was looking for it since morning."

She smiled and her face softened as if she remembered the same thing I had.

In the evening, me and my sister cleaned the house. The floor was cold against our bare feet.

We started decorating living room with Peacock Rangoli with Kalash on his back; placed Diwali Bandhanwar with golden beads and yellow sunflower on the gate sides. The air was filled with Bhajan songs on television, bangles clinking, oil crackling in the kitchen, and Kishore Kumar's songs echoing from a smartphone.

We covered mandir with garlands of marigold flowers and mango leaves as they were considered to be auspicious as their vibrant colours and strong fragrance were believed to represent prosperity, purity and positive energy, helping attract good fortune and ward off negative energy. A small brass bell hung overhead and string of fairy lights blinking lazily in the corner. There was a steel plates decorated with flowers, filled with rice grains and patashe (air-incorporated sugar drops), ghee lamps, kaju katli sweets, and sugar candies shaped like tiny diyas.

My mother decorated pooja room. She first placed Lord Ganesha and Goddess Lakshmi's clay idols at the center of the room, then placed some rose petals in their feet and one lotus flower at the feet of Goddess Lakshmi. She placed one kalash (pitcher or pot) filled with sacred water, wrapped one raw coconut in red cloth and placed it on the kalash.

When all the preparations were done, mother called us to do puja. My father lay sheets on the floor and then we all sat together. The house was lit in yellow and orange. Fairy lights were blinking like sleepy stars.



Mother and Child praying at Diwali Puja (Image Source: <https://tinyurl.com/yc7rfbdn>)

I lit one stick, it smelled the same.

We started doing aarti. Voices and clapping were in rhythm. We offered rice grains and patashe to the Gods. We prayed for their blessings. The smoke wrapped around us again- soft, silent and sacred- as if gods has granted our wish.

Sounds of crackers could be easily heard but later that night, its noise died down. And there was a smell like leftover sweets and as if someone has burnt paper. I walked back to the mandir and sat down.

The last stick had burnt out. Only small trail of smoke remained and that too was slowly fading.

I sat there. I observed it leaving.

But something stayed.

It was the calmness, warmth it had brought. The memory. The feeling that I had come home, not just to a house but to a part of myself.

A few weeks later, my college started. A new life. A new rhythm. I bought bottles of Chandan perfume. One kept in the almirah and the other one in the bag.



Sometimes, on quiet nights, when the noise of the world feels too sharp, I spray some of the perfume.

And the smell rises again.

Like a rich, creamy comfort of old wood.

Like a bridge of inner peace and divine connection.

Like an aromatic balm for stressed soul, saying: "You are home."