

*A lexicon entry on  
itr and its curious  
existence in the  
Muslim world.*

اثر ittar

*Itr is just perfume. Apply some before the Friday salah.*

اثر attar

How do you experience a community through its smells?

اثر itr

When I first started researching on attars in Chandni Chowk, I had not thought of asking random men and women about it. My modus operandi had been fairly simple: find as many attar traders as possible, ask them about the process of making it, try to convince them into giving me contacts they had of anyone who owned an attar factory, and when they would eventually refuse, move on to my next target. I spent many a days in Chitli Qabar going from one tiny shop to another, smelling far too many varieties of rose, jasmine and mogra attars and buying too many copies of Davidoff's Cool Waters. It was not until one particular visit into a shop that I had a breakthrough.

Attar is a fragrant essential oil that is often used as a perfume. Most traders I met were forthcoming in information about the process of making one. Attars come in a variety of scents— rose, jasmine, mogra, khus, champa, bela, Davidoff's Cool Waters, Zara's Red Vanilla, etc. To make "natural" scents like the first five, the base element goes through an extensive distillation process— heated until its steams can be collected and melted with sandalwood oil. The fragrance from an attar, when a few drops are rubbed in the inside of your wrist, can last anywhere between three to eight hours. If the base element is a rose, the resultant oil is called rooh gulab ki (the soul of a rose). "Mumtaz Mahal discovered the attar when she was taking a bath. The petals in the water had melted to create a thin layer of oil over the water. The oil was later called rooh gulab ki," a trader told me once. I tried to verify his claims through some books later, but whether he was right or wrong is irrelevant —

—much like the gulab's rooh. The more I researched, the more curious I was to set the attar in parameters of pure and impure. The rose attar smelled different at every shop; it

was the base oil's quality, they told me. Why would anyone buy a gulab attar that did not smell like a rose then, however cheap it was? I was sitting at Jama Masjid one day with my day's loot— one bottle of Farzi Gulab and two others of vanilla and cinnamon, when I passed it to a woman who sat next to me and had started a conversation. She was dressed in a worn out salwar-suit, her cotton dupatta covering mehendi coloured hair. I gave her the bottle and asked her to smell the attar. When she was done, I asked her what it smelled like. "Jasmine," she said. "Are you sure?" I asked her. She looked away for a second before smiling at me again, and told me she had never smelled an attar. My oldest memory of itras are that of Dada putting them on Eid mornings. He would dab a little bit of itra every Friday, but on Eid he used an especially fragrant variety. Fridays are called Choti Eid in our house— the juma namaz happens every Friday at the masjid. Dada would wake up early on Fridays to bathe and dress himself. He would trim his greying beard and do the wudu (we call it wazu) at home. In his white kurta, which in winter was accompanied by a grey jacket, he would comb his wet hair back and choose his walking stick for the day. It was only at the end, right before he was leaving the house, that he would put some itra on his kurta. It was potent and pungent, a smell I could never place on a single object. One that I did not try to either, for he was always in a hurry. Only on Eid would I get a proper whiff of his itras. Every Eid, he followed the same routine he performed every Friday, except that instead of the masjid he would leave for namaz at Bada Eidgah. The namaz was offered early morning, and along with Abba and Chachu, Dada would be back home by the time I woke up. I did not greet anyone until I had dressed up, however. Showered and dressed in fancy new clothes, I would go to Dada's room to wish him Eid first. Eid mubarak Dada, I would whisper as I hugged him— the same every year. And he would smell the same every year too. Another potent scent I could not place, but one that did not smell like every Friday. I just knew it was an itra, but I never bothered to ask him its name.

"Jannat-ul-Firdaus," Chote Chachu told his father-in-law years later, as he passed him a bottle meant as a gift to the small number of people attending Subbo and Amaan's engagement. "It's the same one Papa used to wear." His father-in-law had come over to our house after a long time. I called him Dada to his face, but in my head he will always be Mr. Mirza. My own Dada had been dead for long now, and the only scent I could think of when I thought of him was of rotting sweat and perspiration, not the perfume of some ittar. He had been confined to his bed the last I saw of him, eyeing the gosht we were eating for dinner like a dying man. Chote Chachu was a peculiar case, however. He

seemed to have remembered a different Dada than the rest of us. “Oh. He liked wearing Firdaus?” Mr. Mirza asked Chote Chachu. The man nodded enthusiastically and proceeded to uncap his own bottle to rub some into his palms. Amaan’s father was sitting across from them on another sofa, whereas Subbo and Amaan sat on a smaller couch placed at the head of the arrangement. The sequins on Subbo’s coral gharara glimmered under the light like they did in the photos of our Quraan Khaani. Back then, she had stolen Amma’s lipstick and her thin lips had appeared cherry red in each photo. Today, they smiled in muted shades of pink as Sana, Amaan’s sister teased her with jokes only the two could hear. I was sitting in a corner, adjusting the silk saree I borrowed from Amma since I did not want to add to the lineup of glittery salwar suits. Mr. Mirza, meanwhile, took a sniff of the bottle he had been given in an intricately embroidered pouch and frowned, turning it around in his palm. He seemed to be contemplating something, but all of us knew what was coming.

He was predictable like that.

When Chachi had eloped the five hundred metre distance between the posh Pratham Apartments and the eyesore that was our lane in Civil Lines with my Chachu, Mr. Mirza must have made that same expression about Chote Chachu as well. He must have surveyed Chachu like he was surveying the ittar, and he must have frowned the same way he was doing now, telling Chote Chachu he was too poor to be worthy of his daughter. Not in those crass words, of course. He was not the heroine’s rich father in a ‘90s Bollywood film, he was one of the first few people who studied at La Marts’, and his tone always befit his schooling. He would never tell Chote Chachu his clothes did not look good, simply ask what brand they were. At dinner parties, he would always enquire too much about the teetar Abba got cooked specially, but never compliment the effort. The difference between our surnames extended longer than our shijras. “In Delhi, there are many places that make copies of Firdaus,” Mr. Mirza started. “In Chandni Chowk. Jannat-ul-Firdaus sells for 50 a bottle.” Chote Chachu, the only fair-skinned one in our family, was almost pink now. He answered, “Ji Papa, but this is from—“  
“Kannauj? Lucknow?”

“Papa got his ittar from Arab during his hajj. I specifically asked Danish to bring these bottles after his Umrah.”

Mr. Mirza smiled then, changing the topic. He never argued further, he didn't need to. Janna'h (we call it jannat) and Firdaus actually have the same meaning in Arabic— janna'h means heaven, whereas firdaus means paradise, the topmost layer of janna'h. It perplexed me the first time I looked it up, but I had heard far too much about heaven from my grandmother to be surprised. Muslims may be equal, but the janna'h is divided in seven layers, stacked on top of each other. There is a stringent system deciding where you go. One hajj is never enough for firdaus. The five basics of being a Muslim— reading the Quran, maintaining rozas, offering all five namaz, going to hajj, and doing jihad— are just that, basics. People go to umrahs before and after their hajj, like Mr. Mirza did every year, for a higher layer of heaven. The rules that decide who earns a higher spot seem to be arbitrarily decided by a few people. Syeds, Mirs, the Mirzas of the city. They seem to know which perfume is the smell of firdaus and which act of sunnat leads to firdaus.

There is a curious grave somewhere in the middle of Old Delhi. Outside Jama Masjid metro station, rickshawalas line to take you through the ten minute walk from the metro to Jama Masjid at twenty rupees per ride. In autumn, this stretch is marked by guava sellers and hawkers who peel and cut oranges in quarters and sell them at ten per plate. At the only turn, when Jama Masjid comes into view, the smell of chickens—dead and alive, announces your arrival. The rickshawala pulls further into the chaos of strollers, bikes, autos and more rickshaws. While people munch on the juiciest Afghani kebabs on one side of this street, people flock to and from the entrance to Meena Bazaar on the other. Jama Masjid is to your right as the rickshaw stops, but don't walk that path just yet. Take the lane right in front of this monument instead. Have a few kebabs at Karim's, they're quick to serve you. Eat some maha jalebi ten meters further, or have some shahi tukda at the stall on the other side of the road. Fill your stomach, but don't turn back to the Masjid yet. Keep walking, push through women carrying twice their weight in groceries and homeless men sitting outside restaurants in a line that's cutting through the road for some food. Occasionally, some rickshawala will scream at you to move aside, or a bike will come out of nowhere on your left. Keep walking through until you reach an intersection where the chaos splits into two thinner gullies. Gullies, because there's too little of them left to be roads anymore. Take the left and keep going until you can see another intersection, this time dissecting into thinner gullies. In the middle of this intersection rests a flower shop that only has roses and jasmines for all occasions. You don't have to ask the boy who sits beading garlands which way to go, the curiouser of the two roads announces itself. On the left lies a road that seems to be a continuation of what you've seen so far. On the right, a distinct smell of bread and rusk. As you walk further into the

right one, a small masjid sticks to the right side of the road barely broad enough for two people to walk freely. On the left, before the small shop the breads and biscuits of which are the root of the tantalising scent that attracted you in the first place, is a small grave. Inconspicuously a dead man lies under a gravestone within the faded green walls, flowers scattered around the small nook that will perhaps be his house forever. His name on the stone outside the nook seems to have faded away, but everyone who looks like he belongs here knows the grave. You are at Chitli Qabar, the attar trading hub of Chandni Chowk.

Every seller here knows Firdaus. I once sat in a small shop with two men and asked them which attar sells best, and they were quick to tell me it was Firdaus. I asked them what it smelled like. "It's a compound. We import it from Arab," they answered. Yes, I told them, but what did it smell like? They opened a bottle and showed me. I asked them the price. It was 100 rupees for a bottle as big as my pinky. "100% Alcohol Free," the packaging read. The men saw me reading the labels and started explaining. "It has to be alcohol free because we don't wear alcohol," they told me. Clearly my kurta/ripped jeans combo did not make it clear I belonged to the same "we" they were talking about (demographically anyway). As I bought the bottle, one of them gave me a visiting card with a peculiar attar rubbed on it. It left green stains, and smelled of some flower mixed with rubbing alcohol. Pocketing it, I went on my way, chasing the smells of shahi tukdas and seekh kebabs. I stopped at the end of the street towards Jama Masjid, thinking of getting some food packed for dinner before I left. I would have to wait a week for some korma otherwise. An old man was sitting at Al Jawahar outside Karim's, between aluminium degs and a cash counter, looking at the entire street from his spot three feet away from me. I asked him if I could get some food packed from the place, but he refused. "Wait for a few minutes," he told me, "the men have gone to offer namaz." I was about to ask him why he had not gone himself but the gauze wrapped around his left foot was an answer enough. Instead, I asked about Matiya Mahal instead— it was my focus area for next week. His attar was a pleasant discovery in that street where smells of food battled each other for passers-by. I took a good whiff and tried to figure out which attar it was. Failing to do so, I was almost hesitant in enquiring after something that may seem so personal, but he answered me with a pleasant smile. "It is called Jannat-ul-Firdaus," he said. I had smelled too many attars to be surprised by the fact that it did not, in fact, smell anything like the bottle in my bag. Regardless, I proceeded to ask him whether he put the attar every day. "No, just on Fridays." Just like my grandfather, I told him. For the first time in my research in Chandni

Chowk, I asked this man a question that had bugged me from the minute I had smelled attar on my grandfather: “Why do you put it?”

He smiled at me again, as if I was his own five year old granddaughter scrunching my nose at the revolting smell of Firdaus. “It is for equality. When we go to the masjid, nobody would want to smell bad, right?”

“No. Firdaus. Why Firdaus?”

He tried hard to find an appropriate answer. At first, he told me people liked to put scents according to the season. There was rose and chameli and mogra for winter and khus with its cooler undertones for summer, and that he put rose almost every day except Friday. But then he seemed to contemplate further. “The people in Arab, they wear Jannat-ul-Firdaus too,” he told me. “It’s a wonderful scent. Your father probably wears it too.” I passed him the dropper of the bottle I had just bought, asking him to recognise the scent. “Jasmine,” he said without a doubt. I smiled then, asking him how long his cook would take to come back as I put the dropper back in the 100% alcohol free bottle, keeping it safe for summer vacations in which I would meet family, Mr. Mirza included.

How do you experience a community through its smells? Ask for Firdaus.