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New Sensory Approaches to the Past

Applied methods in sensory heritage and archaeology

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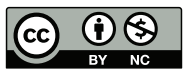

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Ancient olfactory materialities for divine encounters: reflections from Asian regions

Neha Khetrapal

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to throw light on past or ancient (olfactory) material culture from regions of Asia by seeking to work out the relationship between people and their things (material objects) within space. This opening section of the chapter lays the groundwork, in theoretical terms, for the analysis that has been undertaken. To several critics, an endeavour like this is meant to be infused with challenges, because it requires researchers and archaeologists to coordinate efforts in the service of recreating multisensorial means of engaging with the world. How can we, in the present times, bring up evidence for (ancient) human sensory processing, that is ephemeral and ethereal, in order to decipher the world of people and their sensorial modes of engagement with their material space? As impracticable as this question appears to be, the question itself, in an implicit and subtle manner, calls for a unique way of looking at architecture and cultural landscape that belonged to the ancient societies. In my attempt to make this question more realizable, I take inspiration from authors who recommend following a holistic sensorial approach for enriching archaeological endeavours and practices (for example, Hamilakis, 2013; Skeates and Day, 2019; Porath, 2008; Tilley, 2019). Furthermore, I also take inspiration from my own socialization experiences, associated with Hindu ritualistic engagements and training in the cognitive sciences, psychology and linguistics.

Touching upon the subject matter or the focus of my analysis, ancient olfactory materiality of the Asian regions (particularly belonging to North India), I similarly adopt a holistic approach to experientially colour my encounters within the ancient and contemporary Hindu

places of worship in North and Central India (both functioning and non-functioning temples of Khajuraho, New Delhi, Prayagraj and Vindhyachal) and within the museum sites of New Delhi and Sariska (Rajasthan) that host several ancient sculptures and statues of Hindu deities. The essential impressions of these encounters – consistent with the aim of this chapter – emerge from my bodily movements through these spaces and concomitant interactions with the built and decorated parts (for example, the heavily sculpted temple walls, aromas of the burnt camphor, enchanting sounds of bells and countless other elements). I consider these features very important as they afford unique opportunities to experience the space and the divine, specifically in the absence of real people who could have narrated the significance of these constructed elements. I further enrich this phenomenological experience with my knowledge of closely associated folk stories and myths, which have prevailed for years. In this pursuit, I also look for literature from other parts of the world (such as China and Tibet) which I have not yet had the privilege to visit.

As much of this chapter is developed around the Asian traditions, I briefly delve into various aspects of the region-specific traditions before moving onto the main part of the chapter. Readers would acknowledge that ancient societies devoted their efforts to narrowing the divide between the sacred and the profane – in the service of experiencing divinity. In this endeavour, societies sculpted their physical spaces in a manner that helped the visitors and the worshippers to perceive the divine. In other words, the materialities were meant to make the imperceptible more perceptible.[1] I will explain further with the help of two examples, towards the end of this section.

There are still problems and challenges here. The affordances or the opportunities for olfactory, haptic and auditory encounters have faded, specifically, from the ancient sites and museums. However, the available images and the visual artworks still have the potential to modulate my present encounters. What we are left with are gradations of these potentialities – that are stronger within the actual sites or the functioning temple spaces. Therefore, a contemporary visitor can still hope to experience the divine in a multisensory manner. Or would it be viable to say that visitors are better placed to experience divinity, just like their predecessors, by engaging with the space in a multisensory, holistic manner – an experience that could be further enriched by supplying associated folk tales and myths?

Before I end this introduction, I bring up an example to showcase how visually available materials or artworks could have the potential to

communicate the physical effects of imagined sounds (divine music, for example). Through this example, I attempt to show the significance of audition against a rich multisensory backdrop.[2] In the latter part of the chapter, I also strive to underline the significance of olfaction against such a backdrop. Even though I examine or lay emphasis on audition or olfaction, I do not attempt to isolate these senses from each other because in our real-world encounters our senses co-mingle. In other words, the senses work in harmony (Porath, 2008; Tilley, 2019). And, it is the totality of our sensory experiences that makes our world so enriching.

Cognitive psychologists may be inclined to use a different label – synaesthetic[3] materiality – to refer to this kind of sensory co-mingling.[4] An example from the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea is briefly described, here, to illustrate sensory co-mingling. The Kaluli people of the Highlands appreciate the close association between their culture, aesthetics – entailing various sensory experiences – and the natural sonic patterns evoked by their rainforest (Feld, 1988). However, and despite sensory co-mingling, I am motivated to lay emphasis on a particular sensory modality, against a rich multisensory backdrop, because of experiential gradations or graded sensory affordances associated with the material objects or material remains. I take an everyday example to illustrate experiential gradation. For instance, a sacred spoon, compared to an everyday spoon, is a material medium that embodies both taste and touch, because it affords eating while being held. At the same time, it offers comparatively less scope for embodying audition unless it is used against another object to create sound. In this manner, a spoon does not embody all senses evenly but it does not preclude the possibility of evoking other sensations (sound, in this case).[5] As such, a spoon offers opportunities for graded sensory experiences. However the possibilities of evoking other sensory experiences may become more evident, if the sacred spoon may have been placed in its original context or its interpretation may have been infused with locally available stories or ritualistic practices. To put this differently, a particular spoon is a materialization of taste and touch more than serving as a materialization of audition – unless accompanied by locally available ritualistic practices.

In my endeavours, similarly, I examine these gradations within spaces. This kind of theoretical attention and the consequent endeavours assume significance, as several material remains have been taken away from their original contexts (such as antique statues, dislodged from their original temple sites) and are now placed within contemporary museum exhibits. See Figure 3.1 as an example of how The Buddha sculpture could embody various senses. A few questions may be asked

Figure 3.1 A statue of standing Buddha, from the second century, at the National Museum in New Delhi. *Source*: author.

in this regard. As an artefact, should the sculpture be appreciated for its visual appeal or does The Buddha's standing posture – as opposed to the usual sitting posture – signify a different kind of enlightened state? If we grant scope for the theorizing that the standing statue of Buddha, akin to the sacred spoon, offers room for graded sensory experiences – opportunities for which are stronger in the original worship site – then it becomes essential to work out a strategy to spotlight how these other senses have been materialized as a part of the sculpture. I propose that ancient texts and literature, and local cultural stories, could serve as an important source of information for such endeavours.

The next example, taken from a non-Asian region, helps to illustrate the importance of pairing knowledge about local ritualistic practices with material remains. The example hinges upon the Greek ritualistic

use of caves, during the classical period, for the reverence of agricultural deities, the cult of the invisible Pan – a deity connected to natural sounds – and the nymphs (Yioutsos, 2014).

Ritualistic activities, devoted to Pan, involved the production of different kinds of sounds that resonated and echoed through the caves, in order to evoke the presence of an invisible Pan (Yioutsos, 2014). Given the prominence of sounds in the worship of Pan (known through various sources), it comes as no surprise for present-day visitors that Pan is represented as a musician on several votive reliefs discovered at the relevant cave shrines (Laferrière, 2019). Several of these reliefs also bear a surrounding rocky frame, a feature that replicates the relation between the interior space of the caves and Pan, and by implication also serves as a symbol with a potential to evoke an image of the ritualistic sound echoes within the caves; echoes that were produced by the worshippers back then (Laferrière, 2019). In a similar manner, other votive reliefs also depict images of music-making and dancing, that, in turn, helped to augment the holistic sacred experience within the cave. As such, and quite crucially, the process of perceiving the divine (Pan) is one of collaboration between the worshipper and the cave – with all its associated materiality. While the worshipper may have revelled in the conflation of sensory perceptions – brought about by the sculpted parts and decorative embellishments, deep inside the cave – the job of a researcher and an archaeologist is to decipher the opportunities for this multisensorial engagement, as afforded by the materialities. He or she may, further, delve into recreating or deciphering the auditory sensorium against a multisensorial backdrop. For my interpretive analysis, the focus will be on deciphering the olfactory sensorium in an analogous manner.

Overview

Taken from different parts of the world, the Greek reliefs, the standing statue of Buddha and the hypothetical spoon are multisensory objects. Their new placement in contemporary museum spaces, however, affords the possibility for visual engagement. Contemporary visitors have the opportunity to appraise these objects for their aesthetic potential, as a result. The devotional significance of these objects, enmeshed with the opportunities for multisensory engagements, is subdued in their new contexts.[6]

The materiality of senses

The following vignette is worded as a thought experiment, addressing an essential goal of this chapter, which is to underscore the importance of olfaction within ancient religious traditions.

In a small Indian village, the worship of a village deity is not complete unless the chimes of bells and the use of colour is matched by the burning of incense. The chief priest of the village mentions that transcendence is only possible if all the senses of the worshipper are stimulated. It is not sufficient to witness the main deity of the village temple only visibly. As such, there are well-planned attempts to stimulate the senses for all ritualistic practices.

Although the vignette is described as a thought experiment, the contents of the vignette are based on the author's personal experiences associated with ritualistic practices of India (the Hindi-speaking Northern region, to be precise). Framed as a hypothetical scenario, one may still expect to find similar real-world instances, wherein onlookers and passers-by appreciate the significance of multisensorial sacred encounters. The emphasized multisensoriality could also be an important aspect of nonsacred encounters. An example includes the sound of blooming lotus flowers at the Shinobazu Pond in Tokyo (Gould et al., 2019). At the outset, it is essential to draw multisensory parallels between sacred and nonsacred encounters because different cultures may attribute different values to the senses (see Joyce and Meskell, 2014) and it is these values that become an important element of materialities (both sacred and nonsacred) that cultures produce (Price, 2022; 2018).

The multisensory parallels between the Japanese and the Indian examples, pertinently, provide a glimpse into a, hitherto, lesser examined domain of archaeology. Archaeologists, in their attempt to examine ancient religious sites and the excavated objects, are often guilty of downplaying the significance of past human (sensory) experience (see Johnson, 1999; Tilley, 1994). In those instances, where investigative efforts are deployed to spotlight sensory aspects of experience, these have mostly been devoted to what can be gleaned from the sense of sight (for example, Cummings and Whittle, 2003; Tilley, 1995).

An apprehension that has restricted archaeological efforts is the reluctance to grant scope for deliberations about the human senses. The fear is that this step would imbue archaeological endeavours with subjective and unscientific overtones. Even for those who are willing to place emphasis on human senses, there is an overreliance on textual

analysis as a means of decoding the importance of human senses for ancient ritualistic practices – a stance that rests on an implied understanding that individual experiences are personal and private. Hence, it might appear safe to choose the texts, over other materials like sacred objects.

As an author, I gradually unsettle this stance by showing that past human experiences can be examined with the help of material remains.[7] The contention is that human (sacred) experiences from the ancient world are reflected in the sacred and cultic objects that people produced in the past or their material remains. In other words, the material remains[8] can help us decipher the experiential repertoire of our ancestors even in the absence of reliable text.

Cognitive psychologists can describe such an endeavour in different ways (for example, Gibson, 1977). For them the idea of affordances, or sensory affordances associated with materiality of cultures, is paramount. For my endeavours, multisensory affordances are of prime importance. The multisensory affordances are exemplified with the help of the same example that was used before. For instance, an excavated spoon, made of a special metal, invites human interactions in several ways. It affords or helps one to eat, experience a metallic taste while eating and can also be used for creating enchanting sounds when used against another object.[9] The task of a researcher, working at the intersections of archaeology, phenomenology and cognitive psychology, is to uncover these affordances. Uncovering these affordances, however, does not happen in a cultural or a historical vacuum. Thus, combining archaeology with local stories and information about past cultural practices, can help us gain insight into the experiential repertoire of common people or those who have been – in myriad ways – underrepresented in sacred texts or who may have remained *less* involved with the preparation of such texts (Hunter-Crawley, 2017).

Including local stories and information about cultural practices, that, in turn, are influenced by culture-specific sensory models, also allows scope for including culturally diverse ways of perceiving or knowing the world. In cultures, where the sense of vision – for instance – is ranked higher than other sensory modalities, the customs, beliefs and the material culture would reflect this sensory ordering. Consideration of local sensory orders comes with another added methodological advantage – it paves the way for undertaking sensory-based investigations or 'phenomenological walks', for instance (Tilley and Bennett, 2008).

Temples in India

The use of phenomenology in the study of archaeological landscapes is gradually yielding a rich amount of analysis for deciphering relations between people and their environment (Brück, 2005; Sulzmann, 2019). In this section, I embark on a phenomenological journey in the temples of Khajuraho[10] (Central India) to explore the (multisensory) architecture – an endeavour that has not been thoroughly reported, thus far.[11] As I embark on this journey, my central focus will be on resurrecting past or lost experience of smell, against a multisensorial backdrop – an attempt that has rarely been documented. The temple architecture affords several opportunities for sensory experiences in this regard. For instance, the interior passages that are less lit, by natural light, during the day, invites haptic exploration. The exquisitely carved exterior walls of the temples also afford similar opportunities. The innermost chamber of one of the temples allows only a narrow beam of sunlight that naturally illuminates the main deity – nudging visitors to focus their attention on the main deity. By undertaking this phenomenological journey, I do not interpret the temple imagery and other aspects of the temple architecture as mere representations of the ancient world but as important elements of my entire experience of the temple space. This phenomenological endeavour would be similar to the efforts undertaken by a different archaeologist or a researcher, as he or she enters, for instance, the Greek caves and attempts to reconstruct the associated experiential demeanour by taking into account the significance of votive reliefs belonging to the invisible Pan. Both of these instances demonstrate how a contemporary researcher can expect to experience historic places from the perspective of a moving and sensing body. In other words, a researcher is able to experience these spaces with the help of her body (refer to Tilley, 2004).

Before entering the premises of the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple,[12] its grand exterior beckons my attention (see Figure 3.2). An overarching visual feature of this temple is the graded (visual) ascent (Kramrisch, 1939). A devotee, as he or she enters the temple, progressively walks from the entrance (on the left) to the main tower, which houses the inner dark chamber. As the devotee advances towards the most sacred part of the temple, the main tower which houses the main deity (Shiva), this gradual progression towards the divine is analogously mirrored in the visual ascent that is evident in the picture. As such, the visual arrangement of the exterior reflects the gradual progression that a temple visitor takes inside the temple. In other words, the visual

Figure 3.2 The Kandariya Mahadeva Temple in Khajuraho, depicting the physical movement undertaken (left) and the inner chamber of the temple (right). *Source*: author.

arrangement of the temple architecture serves as a visual analogue for experiencing the divine.

As I traversed the same path – designed for the mediaeval visitor – I gathered that the temple architecture afforded opportunities to experience this graduated progression and by implication the graded spiritual ascent. The central part of the main tower, holding the main deity, resembles a small dark cavity – perfectly designed to amplify sacred multisensorial (including olfactory) encounters (see Figure 3.2). Before I arrived here, I was treated with mundane themes of everyday human life and encountered minor deities that were carved along the walls of the temple. These themes are expressed in a three-dimensional (sculptural) manner that can be experienced visually and haptically, en route to encountering the main deity, Shiva.[13] In other words, it is a (spatial) key to transcend the boundaries of daily and mundane life with the aim of bringing people closer to God and his pantheon (see Renfrew, 1985). Thus, the worshipper's body is fully prepared, in an all-encompassing sensorial manner, to experience the divine. As my description explicates, there are graded opportunities for evoking sensory experiences within the temple premises (for example, the central part of the main tower versus the other parts of the temple). Comparable thoughts have also been offered by other theorists in the context of other Hindu temples (see Sinha, 2014). To put this differently, as a visitor, I have opportunities to engage with the temple architecture in a multisensorial manner. Within this multisensory context, there are opportunities for haptic and olfactory engagements too – opportunities that might be lost, if I appraised the temple with a mere visual frame.

It is of crucial importance to mention that the Khajuraho temples are not functional, in the sense that there is no active worship of deities that takes place every day in a ritualistic manner. Nevertheless, my phenomenological (bodily) experience in this context could be equal to those at other, active, sites of Hindu worship that I have attended. In a functional worship space, as well, there is active and cumulative engagement of various human senses – an engagement that is afforded by both the features of the built temple space and other ritualistic objects.

Critics could still argue that my current experience in both the contemporary and the mediaeval temple space is not sufficiently informative about the sensory experiences of the past. While I am sympathetic to this criticism, I also underscore that the point of combining phenomenology with archaeology is not to replace the past sacred experiences but to help draw commonalities across the contexts (see Moyes, 2023). This position allows scope for situating phenomenological endeavours within archaeological investigations – for as long as there are commonalities across the experiencing bodies, there are bound to be similarities in experiences. With these constraints, how can we move this endeavour forward? In other words, how can we continue to decipher the past sensory (sacred) experiences based on the material remains? A different solution is offered by evoking analogies. Ascher (1961; 317) offers an important point of thought for practising archaeologists: 'In its most general sense interpreting by analogy is assaying any belief about non-observed behaviour by referral to observed behaviour which is thought to be relevant.' To put this differently, using analogues across contexts or the deployment of analogies assumes importance for informing further endeavours along these lines.

In elucidating methodological concerns, I may have drifted far from my main objective (marking the significance of human olfactory sensibilities to decipher the nature of older or ancient religious traditions) but I suppose that thoughts about methodological rigours help set the stage for the upcoming analysis. In the next section, I exclusively focus on the relevance of smell for the experience of divinity. And, I evoke various kinds of analogies, experiential and linguistic, for this endeavour. My own multisensorial engagements with Hindu ritualistic practices serve as the basis of experiential analogies. Subsequently, I reflect on the importance of smell and the concomitant importance of materialities that have been creatively developed in the Asian traditions, to enhance a fragrant, smelly or an olfactory experience of the divine.

Relevance of smell for experiencing divinity

I again begin with a vignette, but this time, I focus on my real experiences associated with visiting the National Museum in our capital city – as opposed to a functional temple space (see Figure 3.3). Here, I have had the privilege of viewing ancient sculptures of deities – taken from their original contexts and subsequently placed within the museum space.

The sculptures of deities, quite imbued with opportunities for evoking multisensorial experiences in their original context, appear isolated within the confines of the museum. It is possible to admire these ocularly and to still appreciate their aesthetic appeal but these sculptures no longer appear to evoke other sensibilities. The visual appeal is remarkably striking and unparalleled but it is relentless that the opportunity for multisensory *Gesamtkunstwerk*[14] is severely restricted.

Interested readers might question my emphasis on smell, for the experience of divinity, despite the focus on *Gesamtkunstwerk*.[15] In other words, holistic sensory encounters, wherein senses work in harmony. The answer to this concern again lies in experiential gradations. A fully functional temple offers several opportunities for evoking different sensory experiences in comparison to a museum space. In contrast, researchers may have to devote their analytical attention to material objects within the museum space in order to decipher their significance. I explicate this argument with the help of incense burners[16] that were routinely deployed within temple or other worship spaces, but are now placed within a less complex sensory environment (for example, a museum space). How do we decipher what an incense burner embodies in such contexts? Does an incense burner only function as an object for visual gaze? Or, does it serve as the materialization of olfaction, vision and touch? An example from the mediaeval Chinese period is described here.

Smells prevailed in the mediaeval Chinese world (Jia, 2023). Aromatics were deployed at temples, shrines and altars during ritualistic practices. Even poets, active during this time period, were drawn to the material aspects of burning aromatics (Romaskiewicz, 2022). A popularly cited censer is the *boshanlu* or the hill or mountain censer, which – as the name suggests – is shaped like a mountain. A few inscriptions on these censers mention 'xunlu' (Erickson, 1992), implying that *boshanlu* were known by various names. Made of either metal or bronze, the hill censer dates back to the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and includes a tall lid that is shaped like a layered mountain, which, in turn is adorned with motifs of trees and plants, humans and creatures of all

(a)

(b)

Figure 3.3 Juxtaposed views of (a) one of the galleries of the National Museum at New Delhi and (b) of a functional temple of Prayagraj, which offers various opportunities for multisensory engagements. *Source*: author.

kinds (Kirkova, 2018). At the bottom, the *boshanlu* is supported by a vertical stem that stands on a circular foot. In some other versions, the lid is embellished with decorative motifs of flower petals (Kirkova, 2018). In the latter case, the censer looks like a flower bud. Incense was burnt inside the central part of the *boshanlu*.

Several theorists interpret the *boshanlu* as a representation of a sacred or a cosmic mountain or as a mythical island of immortals (Rawson, 2006). Early texts also highlight the worship of mountains, as gateways to heaven (Erickson, 1992). The smoke that was produced, as a result of burning incense, was considered as sustaining to all lives or as an attempt of establishing contact with immortal beings. These interpretations are derived from mediaeval poems and other historical sources.

Motifs of *boshanlu* – among other motifs – are also found on Buddhist votive steles, belonging to the late fourth century (Shi, 2014). Carvings of The Buddha appear alongside these motifs, implicating a close association, back then, between aromatic ritualistic practices and the worship of The Buddha. The discovery of the *boshanlu* in ancient tombs prompted several theorists to propose that this may have been associated with a prayer or a wish for immortality (Kirkova, 2018).

The description of *boshanlu* shows that sensory experiences potently mattered for past societies. And, our predecessors capitalized on the functionality of our senses, designing sacred objects like incense burners. Thus, it becomes necessary that we pay close attention to the fact that our contemporary ways of engaging with the world – with its vision-centric outlook – could be different from endeavours of the past. And, relying on a vision-centric approach entails disregarding other sensory affordances. It may, therefore, be worthwhile to decipher ancient sensory frameworks by paying close attention to the ancient material finds paired with their localized practices. By paying attention to these historical objects, in this manner, we may be in a better position to surmise how these objects might have narrowed the divide between the sacred and the profane.

Sacred artworks from other Asian regions

In this section, I examine Buddhist artworks and excavated finds, in support of my argument, to showcase how people or worshippers made use of olfaction and corresponding materialities for narrowing the divide between humanity and divinity, the sacred and the everyday.[17] In order to elucidate this argument, I begin with an experiential (multisensorial) analogue from the Kandariya Mahadeva temple of Khajuraho. The walls of the pathway that worshippers must traverse, in order to reach the inner chamber where the main deity is situated, is replete with mundane themes and other themes of minor deities. These themes are expressed in a three-dimensional, sculptural manner that can be experienced visually and haptically, en route to the encounter with the main deity. The immersive nature of the pathways, as afforded by the temple architecture, becomes an important part of the sacred experience for the worshipper who traverses the pathway to discover the divine. This example serves to spotlight the importance of two different senses – vision and touch – that help worshippers in constructing their sacred experiences. Similarly, my fieldwork alludes to the possibility that the enclosed design and structure of the inner chamber was developed to trap scented air just as the echoes inside the Greek caves would have helped to create a divine echoic ambience. The trapped scented air helped further enhance the worship experience. The objective may have been to induce feelings of awe in a worshipper. In other words, a key to transcend the boundaries of daily and mundane life, with the aim of bringing people closer to God and his pantheon (see Renfrew, 1985). As such, the architectural space not only afforded visual and haptic experiences but olfactory experiences as well.

Critics may have reservations about the use of experiential analogues that are closely associated with one's own culturally specific sensory frameworks, because even sensorially aware researchers and archaeologists may end up imposing their familiar frameworks, inadvertently, while working with excavated materials. Critics also warn against assuming that some non-Western societies may make use of nonvisual sensory frameworks (see, Classen and Howes, 1996). As such, a viable alternative is to make judicious and careful use of both experiential analogues and synaesthetic materiality or multisensory affordances[18] that allow researchers to move beyond the ocular privilege (for example, Houston and Taube, 2000; Mrázek, 2011). In the next two sections that follow, I attempt to work with a multisensorial framework for analysing the selected South Asian artworks, to highlight the significance of their olfactory materiality for ancient sacred experiences or encounters.

Introducing the fragrant Buddha

Followers of Buddhism fondly recognize their revered Buddha as both iconic and aniconic (Seckel and Leisinger, 2004). There is merit in devoting space to the aniconic forms to further exemplify the adoption of synaesthetic materiality. To explicate this line of thought, I briefly focus on the famous Buddhist stupa that was found in Bharhut (Central India). In its popular visual form, a stupa serves both as a container for holy relics and also as a memorial that characterizes the location of an event in The Buddha's life. If we inspect the stupa further, we notice a creative juxtaposition of visual and olfactory imagery.[19] The lower portion of the stupa bears a row of palm prints that are interpreted to be perfumed palm prints, the use of which is also mentioned in relevant Buddhist texts (see Coomaraswamy, 1956; Schopen, 2015). The artists of the time have crafted a creative tension between the subtle or implied presence of smell as a subject for art and its absence as a human sensory experience (comparable arrangements of floral motifs are also observed across the perimeter of one of the Khajuraho temples, Figure 3.4). To further explain this artistic tension, I examine another fragrant aspect of aniconic Buddhist art – the hut motif.

The hut motif is an aniconic depiction of The Buddha. Belonging to the second century BCE, The Buddha's hut (or, the apparent dwelling place or an abode[20]) is both visual and olfactory. This structure (or, the signifying motif) is also known as *Gandhakuṭī* or the perfumed chamber. Despite scant reference in canonical Buddhist text (Strong, 1977), *Gandhakuṭī* is

Figure 3.4 Floral motifs as repetitive patterns. *Source*: Shilpa Shinde's blogpost (used with permission).

understood to be a repository of floral offerings. Importantly, the nature of offerings (that included sweet-smelling flowers) helped transform an ordinary chamber into a perfumed chamber.[21] These fragrant connections are often depicted in architectural spaces[22] as floral canopies and pavilions. For the followers and worshippers, the sweet-smelling fragrance, when present, potently signals the presence of the absent Buddha.

In several monasteries of Odisha (Eastern India), with the passage of time, the image of The Buddha filled the empty central part of *Gandhakuṭī* (Schopen, 2015). This spatial arrangement, then, explains the interchangeable use of the terms – 'Buddha's chamber' and 'perfume chamber'. This is why The Buddha is also considered the aromatic one.[23] This proposal is also closely aligned with the explanation offered by sinologist, Edward Schafer, according to which, the word *gandhā* simply means 'pertaining to the Buddha' (Schafer, 1963). Consistently and remarkably, sandalwood has often been used for carving Buddhist statues (Guggenmos, 2020).

The interpretation of the hut motif and the palm print imagery on the stupa signify that archaeologists can hope to develop and refine the concept of synaesthetic materiality, embodying sensory co-mingling, by relying on a number of interpretive sources. The contemporary or decontextualized placements of fragments of stupa may encourage onlookers and researchers to interpret these as mere visual objects akin to the (decontextualized) interpretations, which may be evoked for artefacts used by Kaluli people and the votive reliefs associated with the cult of the invisible Pan (for instance). In my present endeavour, I have attempted

to recreate the olfactory sensorium, associated with the hut motif and the Bharhut stupa, against a multisensorial backdrop.

Implications for sacred experiences

The previous sections allude to the importance of both experiential analogues and synaesthetic materiality for archaeological endeavours. As researchers, we are also interested in focusing on the relevance of olfactory materiality for sacred experiences. Many people are acquainted with common deliberations that emphasize how divinity is distinct from humanity but that humans can still hope to discover godly presence in a pervasive manner. We can frame the question, under consideration, in a slightly different manner: why did our predecessors construct sacred (material) objects that afforded olfactory experiences among other sensory opportunities?

Based on the premise that divinity is distinct from humanity but that humans can still hope to discover Godly presence, I propose that olfactory materiality may have been developed for narrowing the divide between the sacred and the profane. It then comes as no surprise that connection myths (of bridges, for example) are consistently found in religious rhetoric. An Indian example includes the *Rama Setu*, connecting the southern point of India to the Mannar Island that is off the coast of Sri Lanka. For Buddhist followers, as well, unenlightened states are regarded as the middle world (Barrie, 2013). Hence, olfactory materiality – associated with olfactory affordances for experiencing the divine – could have been developed as a sacred or a spiritual bridge.

Representing odour in iconography

Given that much of the tangible material – that becomes the focus of contemporary archaeological interpretive endeavours – could be labelled as visual art, the point of contestation is understanding the representation of odour in iconography. This can happen in distinctive ways. In the likeness of *Gandhakuṭī*, I note an interesting discovery from the region of Ladakh (North India). Here, painted mandalas appear on the walls of one of the shrines (Sumtsek) that belongs to the Alchi Buddhist monastery in the village of Alchi. A relevant aspect of these painted mandalas, from the perspective of this chapter, includes the visual presence (motifs) of goddesses – *Dhūpā* and *Gandhā* (also Sanskrit

words for fragrance or perfume) (Goepper, Poncar and Linrothe, 1996). The goddesses personify the human sense of smell and embody fragrant ritual offerings (Lessing, 1956). As such, the motifs of the goddesses testify to the significance of fragrant ritual offerings.

Similar motifs are also found in Buddhist sanctuaries of Western Tibet that date back to the eleventh century (Bazin, 2013; Neumann, 1998). If we further examine Tibetan Buddhist ritualistic practices, it becomes evident that the followers used a wide variety of metal incense burners (Bazin, 2013), the motifs of which appear not only as a part of different Buddhist paintings but also closely resemble real burners from the tradition, that are on display in several museums. For example, the Guimet Museum in Paris hosts an oblong incense burner and a pair of canopy-shaped incense burners, complete with chains.

In other words, the representation of odours in Tibetan Buddhist iconography appears to be inspired by the long-standing tradition of fragrant ritualistic offerings for The Buddha. We find parallels in other traditions too, wherein these parallels hinge upon distinctive ways of representing odours in iconography. Much of the time, this representation appears as a part of synaesthetic materiality. Another similar example includes a thorough analysis undertaken by Day (2013) of stone blossom bowls and ceramics belonging to Minoan Crete (c.3300–1200 BCE), and bearing relief flowers and petals.

In elucidating these examples briefly, my intention is to reiterate that the historical material records could be used to access contextualized (past) multiple sensory experiences, where the relevant contexts include ritualistic practices and religious or spiritual worldviews.[24] By moving beyond a visual interpretive framework, we can expect to uncover the full range of sensory affordances, associated with material culture. Although I have focused on recreating the olfactory sensorium against a multisensorial backdrop, others may like to focus, for instance, on recreating sonic, haptic[25] or taste sensoria for cultures that remain under-explored. En route to this agenda, there could be biases or rather filters that researchers should acknowledge. An important form of bias is the difficulty in completely transcending one's own culturally familiar sensorium (Day, 2019). This is why it becomes imperative to adopt a range of strategies (analogies and local stories and practices) in order to ensure a successful endeavour. The upshot is that the past historical record, consisting of sacred artworks, should not be viewed as a series of two-dimensional visual snapshots but as material that offers graded opportunities for multisensory engagements (see Pallasmaa, 2012). The latter argument is also in line with cognitive and neuroscientific studies

that have shown activations in brain areas responsible for taste while participants simply looked at pictures of food (Avery et al., 2021).

Creating alternate sensibilities for processing

The stance on materiality, as seen so far, remains instrumental for explaining humanity's attempts to transform the unknown and abstract world into a concrete and perceptible one. Descriptions and examples show that a site of divine residence is considered a sacred space. This sacred space is maintained and established with the help of ritualistic acts. Some of these sites are physically accessible, such as a constructed temple, whereas the others may not be easily accessible, such as the mountains or even the heavens. Olfaction, then, served as a bridge that narrowed the divide between the divine and his followers. However, we haven't settled issues with respect to another closely associated abstract domain – the domain of time or sacred time. Just as humanity allocated a perceptible space – associated with graded sensory encounters – for the divine that occupies a spaceless world, the divine timeless also required a concrete counterpart. Here too, incense played a role. The godly fragrance not only permeated the space where the divine dwelled (*Gandhakuṭī*, for example) but it also transcended the 'here' and 'now'. Our ancestors not only constructed incense clocks to measure sacred time or the time duration for ritualistic activities, but they also used incense sticks. Material evidence for the use of incense, in this manner, is available from China, Japan, Taiwan and Korea. Incense spirals for marking durations are still used in the present times in a few Chinese temples (Voytishek, 2022).

Use of incense timekeepers

The use of incense for measuring time has been closely associated with the spread of Buddhism from one country to another in Asia. Inasmuch as the use of incense in Buddhist worship began in India, it is not unexpected that various prototypes of incense timekeepers originated in India before their introduction into other countries, such as China and Japan. Several theorists would suggest that timekeepers, given their secular nature, were used for merely measuring time in the absence of other developed methods, but a closer look at history suggests that the use of incense-based timekeepers was restricted to Buddhist temples, at least, this was the case in Japan during the Tokugawa period

(1603–1867) and Korea (Bedini, 1963). In these settings, they were deployed by priests to announce prayer times – with the help of a loud bell – to community dwellers (Bedini, 1963). Besides utilizing incense for sacred purpose, people in China have also made use of incense clocks in the form of elaborate dragon boats (Bass, 2019). In this case, the latter served as an alarm clock, as the burning incense was used to release weights that, in turn, would cause sounds. Considering both the religious and the mundane contexts, it may thus be proposed that incense served a dual purpose for societies. Whether used as an object of prayer or as an object for telling time, beautifully carved burners – replete with culturally relevant imagery – served as microcosms of the world. Burning incense in these helped create sensual experiences to bring both worshippers and non-worshippers closer to the divine – spatially and temporally.

Decline of olfactory materiality

A few questions assume importance, here. Why have we witnessed a decline in olfactory materiality? Do we attribute this decline to the Western taxonomy of organizing the senses that infiltrated other cultural circles through routes of travel or trade? Or, do we attribute the decline to the legacy of post-Enlightenment romanticist Protestant bias that structures the modern way of looking at religion (Meyer, 2010)? Or, are there different factors that could have played a role?

Before offering reasons for the decline, a very brief (global) history on the rise and fall of smells is warranted. Renaissance technologies of print elevated vision to the sphere of objectivity even though olfaction may also have played a prevalent role in premodern Europe. Furthermore, sensory hierarchies – considered of modern origin – also helped elevate the status of vision and consequently relegated lower senses to the human primitive past (refer to Jenner, 2011). Therefore, the demise, in status, of olfaction has been attributed to post-Enlightenment Western cultures by several theorists (Classen et al., 2002). At any rate, the desacralization of scents was also marked by the destruction of olfactory materiality, for example, incense burners (Baum, 2013). This meant that the devaluation of olfaction and olfactory materiality happened simultaneously.

Although people are well-acquainted with the history of smells from the Western perspective, less is known about other cultures. Here, an attempt is made to elucidate the close relation between our natural

environments and smells, before concluding that the decline of fragrant material assemblages could have been associated with our gradual detachment from natural environments. The contents of this section are based on ancient texts and literature, and local stories – cultural myths – that people have narrated for centuries.

The closeness between smells and natural environments could be gleaned from the fact that ancient Hindu thought associates *gandhā* (smell) with the element of earth (*pṛthivī*). Beyond this association, there are written texts that underline the significance of fragrance for ritualistic activities. For instance, the *Mahābhārata* – a major Sanskrit epic of ancient India – lays emphasis on fragrance as a medium of spiritual connection between the worshipper and the worshipped. Therefore, the use of fragrance and scents, in various forms, have been very pervasive in Hindu ritualistic practices. When we consider forms, there is rich evidence to suggest that Hindu worshippers are familiar with perfumed waters, scented oils and pastes, other than the ritualistic use of *dhūp* and incense sticks. The ingredients used for these substances have been naturally derived from trees and plants. Examples include musk, saffron, sandalwood and camphor. Besides making scented offerings, these natural materials have also been utilized for carving statues of deities, making prayer beads and in the construction of temples.

While the use of incense is still prevalent in Hindu ritualistic practices, along with other traditions of South Asia, it is evident that smells and fragrances do not serve as a major conduit between the earthly and the heavenly worlds. For people living in close proximity to nature, reliance on the sense of smell is still comparatively pervasive. An example is the Ongee people of the Andaman Islands, an archipelago in the Indian Ocean. The Ongee community is still attuned to odour (Pandya, 1993). For them, everything in the universe is characterized by smell. And, smell serves as a crucial intermediary in their cosmology. They also practise several rituals that are odour-based. Similarly, the significance of smell is noted with other hunter-gatherer communities, residing in different parts of the world and in close physical proximity with their natural environments (Hoover, 2010).

Based on the available evidence, I propose that our detachment from natural surroundings may have contributed towards the decline of the importance of olfaction, for various groups and communities of people, thereby impacting their religious rituals. What is at stake here? The decline of olfactory significance, at best, implies that olfactory experiences are not counted as legitimate religious experiences in

the modern world. In a contemporary world, as we know today, where vision dominates sacred experiences, olfaction provides meagre knowledge of the divine.

Discussion

There could be different, creative, ways of doing sensory archaeology, with rich potential for uncovering multisensory affordances for sacred and nonsacred objects. Skeates (2010; 2011) offers a few suggestions for traversing the sensory pathway in a theoretical manner. These include reflexivity, creative writing, experimentation, thick description and inventory. Others have offered different means, such as, autoethnography, combining archaeological and textual evidence, imaginative reconstruction and exploring sensory affordances (for example Betts, 2017; Hamilakis, 2013). Several or many of these methods could be deployed for making sense of our past material world.[26]

A brief note on future directions

I conclude this section by offering further thoughts for future exploration of olfactory opportunities from the ancient temples of India. Visitors to these temples are familiar with a common motif of 'a woman and tree' (*Salabhanjika*). The origins of the motif could be attributed to ancient flower festivals of India, paired with the belief that the relationship between the tree and a woman signifies fertility (Kumari, 1988). Would it be possible to discover the significance of fragrance for fertility, given the fact that, based on the *Mahābhārata*, it was believed that a young woman could precipitate 'fragrant' blossoms with the help of her touch?

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to (re)create ancient sacred sensorium from hitherto lesser discussed geographical areas, with the hope of showcasing the significance of senses, in general, and olfaction, in particular, for religious (sensory) experiences. In doing so, I maintained a focus on materiality paired with an overview of religious texts, communal stories, personal sensory experiences and beliefs. There are two advantages to this endeavour. First, examining sensory and

material aspects of religion can assist us in deciphering the essence of everyday (past) religious life. Second, we can aspire to develop alternate religious scholarship in ways that complement, yet expand, traditional approaches to investigating religion. Besides the advantages, this kind of endeavour has relevance too. We are all embodied beings and learn about our surroundings with the help of our senses, as much as we learn from reasoning. To ignore our embodied understanding, while studying religion, is akin to sidelining our essential human nature. I also adopted a comparative approach, wherein I placed emphasis on bringing up examples from different religious traditions, belonging to the Asian regions. This endeavour again has relevance because we, as embodied beings, occupy different worlds and environments. This also means that we prioritize our senses differently. To rely only on vision, as many may be inclined to do, is analogous to devaluing the knowledge that our predecessors have gained from other senses.

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Notes

1 In this instance I deliberately avoid the use of the term 'see'.
2 See Díaz-Andreu et al. (Chapter 11, this volume) for a review of the methods that are devoted to addressing a comparable aim – spotlighting archaeoacoustics of rock art sites.
3 See an argument offered by McHugh (2011) for the use of 'intersensoriality' over synaesthesia.
4 Here, other examples could be noteworthy. For instance, a rounded versus an angular shape could evoke different kinds of sounds among the Himba people of Namibia (Bremner et al., 2013).
5 See Howes (2019) for a similar analysis about a motion picture projector.
6 There are several questions that remain unanswered at this juncture. For instance: does de-sanctification of devotional objects entail removing opportunities for multisensory engagements?
7 I have also done this, albeit partially, in the introduction.

8 Materiality means tangibility or characteristics that can be perceived by the human senses (sight, touch, hearing, smell and taste).
9 See Hunter-Crawley (2019) for similar descriptions about 'cups'.
10 I focus on Khajuraho temples because these were built during the mediaeval times when significant artistic development gained momentum in India.
11 Refer to the work by Monika Baumanova (Chapter 5, this volume) for multisensorial corporeal experience of precolonial Swahili stone-built environment.
12 The word *Kandarya* means a cave. This particular temple is devoted to Lord Shiva. The temple building is the tallest of all the Khajuraho monuments.
13 As esoteric as my encounters at Khajuraho may sound, these find resonance with important Hindu textual material. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (tenth century CE) underscores the importance of human senses for consuming the god's presence.
14 The use of *Gesamtkunstwerk* entails a different kind of analogy – a linguistic analogy. Other authors have used *Gesamtkunstwerk* to describe multiple art forms, while researchers interested in ritualistic experiences have used the term, analogously, to describe the activation of multiple senses, intricately linked with religious rituals (Winter, 2021).
15 I use the term in an analogous manner to refer to the multisensorial nature of seeing the divine (Hindi: *darśan)*. Although I translate across the languages, the act of witnessing the divine is not in a simple manner equivalent to 'seeing', in the English sense of the term (Low, 2019). This argument makes it all the more pertinent that localized sensoria should be examined within its own framework.
16 There is compelling evidence to show that ancient societies used burners and aromatics that offered possibilities for olfactory encounters within a multisensorial framework.
17 This has been a significant and pervasive goal within several South Asian religious traditions.
18 A parallel could be drawn to the use of the word 'rose', which can refer to both the plant and the colour or even the distinctive smell that it evokes (see Géczi, 2006).
19 Here, mental odour is considered synonymous to olfactory imagery, which is popularly defined as the experience of smell sensation in the absence of a corresponding odorant (Stevenson and Case, 2005).
20 Refer to Ashraf (2008) for various interpretations about how the 'hut' motif is understood to be the dwelling place of The Buddha.
21 Even today, the offerings of flowers and lighting of incense is an essential part of worship for the followers of The Buddha.
22 Visible in *Gandhāra* art.
23 Olfactory Buddhist divinity resonates with early Christian practices in mediaeval Europe, where bad smells were considered to emanate from bad things while good smells from good things (Brazinski and Fryxell, 2013).
24 See Khetrapal (2023) for a relevant example in teaching and pedagogy.
25 See Assaf (2005) for touch.
26 Refer to Chapter 1 by Hamilton for further deliberations on orchestrating sense-based investigations.

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