

## Olfactory Social Stratification

Sayantana Ghosh

***Abstract:** Smell plays a crucial role in our everyday life. From dawn till night, social actors go through different types of smells, react differently and build an image on an olfactory basis. At a bazaar, we sniff out our preferred lemon or mango, we opt for our best perfume or deodorant during intimacy, we also opt for deodorants or perfumes for official purposes, but the choice of the fragrance and its intensity may vary. It is not only about food habits or self presentation but smell also plays a key role in stratifying individuals, groups and spaces. Each group in the hierarchy has a specific social and olfactory position. The social construct and olfactory construct often go hand in hand. Whether actual or not, the olfactory perception of each stratum is different. Thus, whether upper class and lower class people really smell different or not, they are socially constructed and hence are expected to smell differently. Similarly, men and women are often portrayed as having different olfactory identities.*

*Smell tells the tale of a person – about his/her gender, caste or class position. Just like individuals and groups, spaces are also classified or stratified in terms of olfaction. It is often argued that each group in the social hierarchy has a distinct smell –whether it is real or not is not the search here. Rather this paper focuses on how each group (in terms of caste, class and gender) and space is socially constructed in specific olfactory terms and how groups and spaces are stratified in terms of olfaction. I have opted for literary sources and in-depth interviews as my method of study. This paper is an effort to reveal the relation between olfaction and social stratification.*

**Keywords:** olfaction; stratification; marginalization; identity; transformation; rank; olfactory mask; scented class; stigmatization; social construct.

### **Introduction**

Breathe deep. What do you smell? Flowers, your kitchen, the dirt in the wayside, pollution or the sweat or perfume of your co-passengers? Whatever it is, you just cannot refuse. Actually if we want, we may close our eyes, we might not open our mouth, we might shut our ears (with hands or cotton) but we cannot stop our nose. In order to live, we must breathe and if we

breathe, we will smell. Thus smell is a lifelong process which starts at birth and ends only at death.

From dawn to night we go through different types of smell and react differently to each and draw an image from it. At the bazaar we sniff out the best lemon or mango, we opt for our favorite perfume while going on a date. We also opt for deodorant or perfume at the workplace but the degree and intensity may vary. Anthony Synnott rightly puts it saying: 'We are simultaneously emitting and perceiving odors, smelling and being smelled and these play important roles in virtually every area of social interaction.' Smell is not only physical or real but also symbolic. For example, while driving if one gets an acrid smell one knows that there is something wrong with the car and gets alarmed, because acrid smell stands for burning, symbolizing danger.

Just imagine if a stink breaks your dream and you discover its source – a dead rat in the bedroom how would you react?

- a. If you have a whole-time servant you may call him/her to clear it.
- b. If you have a part time cleaning servant who is present at that time you may scream for him/her to clear it.
- c. But if you don't have a cleaning maid present, but a cook working, then you would hesitate, eventually you may call her but the response is not guaranteed.
- d. In the last case if you don't have a maid present and the cook refuses to help, then
  - i. You would have to do it yourself
  - ii. In a male dominated family a female member would have to clean
  - iii. In a neo-local family there might be an argument.

So whoever does the cleaning, it is evident that prompt action will be taken and in this scenario all other works become secondary as smell would snatch away paramount attention. The importance and place of smell in our everyday life is quite evident from this example. The above mentioned episode also reflects the relationship between olfaction and social stratification as this situation and the options to counter it reflects the class and gender hierarchy and the intermingling between these two. Thus social stratification and olfactory stratification often go hand in hand.

Each group in the social hierarchy has a special position in terms of class, caste, gender and the like. Social actors often make and receive comments like “feminine smell” “the lower class smell” or “the stink of untouchability”. These are not just olfactory remarks but more importantly moral judgments and social constructs. Thus each stratum in the hierarchy has a constructed olfactory and hence social and moral identity. Particular smells carry particular constructs with it. For example, in Saratchandra Chattopadhyay’s *Pather Dabi* the police of the British Government was in search of a freedom fighter – commonly known as Sabyasachi. The image which the police had was of a highly educated middleclass person, therefore they let go a suspect who smelled of “Nebur Tel” (cheap lemon scented hair oil) and dirt. Later we, the readers, come to know that that very person was Sabyasachi. He fooled the police with his olfactory disguise. The reason was that the police had a prior constructed olfactory image of an educated middleclass person as well as of a “lower-class individual” And Sabyasachi’s olfactory image conformed to the lower class identity. Here the police reflected the social construct about olfactory images of different classes or groups.

From the above examples it is clear that odour plays a significant role in our everyday life. Thus –

Odour is many things: a boundary marker, a status symbol, a distance maintainer, an impression management technique, a schoolboys joke or protest, and a danger signal – but it is above all a statement of who one is. Odours define the individual and the group. (Synnott 1993:18]

This paper deals with the relation between olfaction and social stratification and the social and moral construct of individual and group identity. However due to limitations of time and funding we have mainly interviewed people of middle class background in Kolkata. Therefore this paper will largely represent the middleclass view of the relation between olfaction and stratification. Moreover this study is based on literary sources and data gathered from in-depth interviews. Although this paper deals with the olfaction and stratification due to limitations of space, I would briefly deal with aspects of class, gender and caste. As a researcher I must acknowledge that this is a small study and smell perceptions varies a lot according to region, time, space and culture. Different parts of India and the world addresses olfaction differently. Thus this study does not claim generalization. However in my research I have found certain trends which confirm and strengthen the existing olfactory discourse in sociology. Some contemporary social trends are being noticed which definitely analyze the present, but

perhaps more predict the future. Some recent trends are found which are not ubiquitous but are surely present and diffusing. This paper records the traditional olfactory stereotypes and analyzes these changing social trends.

### *Class and Smell*

‘That we smell the atmosphere of somebody is a most intimate perception of that person’ (Simmel 1908|2009: 578)

Smell constructs individual and group identity. Smell tells many a tales about a person or a group - about the person’s occupation, cultural taste, gender, class, caste and above all who one is. Smell determines the class of an individual and group. Class hatred is perhaps well explained in four words as George Orwell puts it: “The lower class smell”.

The lower class people are often portrayed as foul smelling. They often receive remarks from higher classes as stinkers.

‘... a white collar worker may be heard expressing a repugnance towards those who emit a ‘stinky sweat’ or those who “smell like a farmer” - dirty and unclean (Largey and Watson 1972: 1023).

Class stereotypes against lower classes and class hatred are often expressed in olfactory terms. Orwell puts it in this way:

I do not blame the working man because he stinks, but stinks he does. It makes social intercourse difficult to persons of sensitive nostrils. The matutinal tub divides the classes more effectively than birth, wealth or education (Orwell 1937:161, cited in Synnott 1991)

In Buddhadev Guha’s *Kojagar* the factory owner ordered his subordinated that the wage laborers (Kulis and Kamins) will be allowed to enter and receive their wages from the office only when he has left the place because they are “badbu lok” or foul persons. We can see the similar trend in our everyday life while describing or dealing with a toilet cleaner or sweeper. Thus the lower class is often portrayed as stinker or foul.

Even if there is no mention of foul odour or stink, there is no mention of fragrance either. For example Tilottoma, a princess in *Durgeshnandini*, is depicted as sweet smelling and compared to a spring jasmine. Aisha, the *nababjadi*, is compared to a morning lotus which attracts with its aroma while the same author Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay portrays Rajani the “malini” or garlander mentions nothing of the girl’s olfactory identity though she is the protagonist. However there exist vivid descriptions of the fragrant

flowers and the garlands with which Rajani is working and selling. She said:

She is in her room –

But there is no description of Rajani the garlander's own smell. Thus the lower classes are either portrayed as foul smelling or there remain an olfactory silence in their depiction. There exists a third trend in the olfactory construct of the lower classes. Often their olfactory identity is described in terms of their profession. For example Satyabati of Mahabharata was tagged as Matsyagandha as she was the daughter of the leader of the fishermen community. It is not only her olfactory description but it became her olfactory identity.

In everyday life in the description of the lower classes the smell of the individual is absent. It is only the smell of the profession which is omnipresent. Thus a fisherman is portrayed as smelling of fish, a sweeper of dirt, a farmer of mud, cow dung or manure and the like. That is to say the objects with which the person is working, as if the smell of those objects are the smell of the individual. Thus there is an objectification of subjects.

In contrast, the upper class is always portrayed as the fragrant class. Kings, queens and aristocrats are always believed to emit a rich aroma, consume aromatic meal and the atmosphere is always scented. In Banavatta's Kadambari the king takes a long bath which is a classic example of describing a royal bath with great olfactory vividness.

রাজা প্রবেশ করলেন স্নানগৃহে।

শেতকরবীর মত স্নানগৃহের চন্দ্রাতপ। গৃহের মাঝখানে কাঞ্চন জলদ্রোণী – গন্ধসলিলে পূর্ণ।

স্নানগৃহের একান্তে রয়েছে অতিসূরভিত গন্ধজলে-ভরা শত শত স্নানকলস; -

কলসগুলির মুখে ভিড় করে রয়েছে সৌরভাকৃষ্ট মধুকরের দলঃ-

বারবিলাসিনীরা তখন রাজার মাথায় সুগন্ধ আমলকীচূর্ণ লেপন করে দিল।

স্নানার্থ জলদ্রোণীতে অবতরণ করলেন রাজা।

.....

স্নান সমাপ্ত হতেই...

মৃগমদ কর্পূর ও কুঙ্কুমবাসিত চন্দনপঙ্কে

অনুলিপ্ত হল সর্বসঙ্গ। চূড়ায় রচিত হল আমোদিমালতী কুসুমের মালা।

(কাদম্বরী বাণভট্ট অনুঃ গ্রী প্রবোধেন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর)

Fragrance is not just a part of the preparation or the atmosphere of the upper class, rather sometimes fragrance becomes their identity. For example, Draupadi was regarded as Nilotpalgandha or Padmagandha. This is not just a part of Draupadi's beauty or status rather it becomes her identity. Thus during that time period Padmagandha meant Draupadi. Similar description can be found in history of Rajput queen Padmini.

To what extent fragrance was important to upper classes is evident from the following lines as Draupadi laments to Bhima in the Virata Parva of Mahabharata.

The above portion reflects that using of sandal paste was an everyday habit of the upper class. But the preparation part was performed by the people of "lower strata" while the consumption and hence the fragrant representation was enjoyed by the higher strata.

Such was the olfactory construct of the upper class environment that even the natural or biological processes were advised to restrict or manipulate. Thus, while advising the Pandavas to lead a proper life at the court of King Birata, purohit Dhauma warned them to control while breaking wind. This is also present in modern times as the "fart taboo" and conforms to the olfactory construct of society. In recent times also perfumes are often advertised as having an association to a royal heritage i.e. used by Cleopatra or Queen Elizabeth. This denotes the class of the perfume and constructs and confirms the belief that the upper classes are the scented class.

Individuals and groups are segregated and marginalized not only in terms of their physical or actual odour but also and perhaps more in terms of their alleged, perceived or symbolic odour. Brill observed: 'On the basis of reactions to forty-three different odours, respondents 'disliked most' the odour of perspiration....this was not only because of its very sour smell, but, because it was associated with people of the lower class' (Brill 1932: 40). Now I will conclude with Largey and Watson 'Class prejudices are equally supported by imputations that those of the lower class are "foul smelling and must be avoided' (Largey and Watson 1992:1025.

***Olfactory transformation equals class transformation?***

‘When I am in my bank working, I often find persons well dressed and from a distance it seems that they are of a high class, but in proximity when they smell foul, it destroys my impression. But once I saw a Lady who was dressed in ordinary clothes, I did not look twice at her but when she came near I got a sweet mild fragrance and thus I instantly knew that she belonged to a higher class.’ –This is how one of my respondents described his experience and viewpoint about the relationship between smell and class. Actually class or profession is often identified via smell. For example Helen Keller also identifies in the following way ‘...from exhalations I learn much about people. I often know the work they are engaged in. The odors of wood, iron, paint and drug cling to the clothes of the men who work with them. Thus I can distinguish the carpenter from the ironworker, the artist from the mason or the chemist’ (Keller 2006: 182).

My study also reflects similar trend as 95% of my respondents identify class along with space, occupation, religious community and gender in terms of smell. This is how social actors construct and conform to the constructs about the role of olfaction in social stratification. Just as smell constructs class, similarly it plays a key role in transforming class identity. This might not be ubiquitous but each group in the class hierarchy often tries to follow the immediately higher one. As each group in the class hierarchy has an constructed olfactory position and the “lower classes” are often marginalized as “stinkers” so along with other efforts like increase of income, opting for education, trying to lead a healthy life and many others, they also opt for olfactory transformation or metamorphosis consciously to uplift themselves in the class hierarchy. These efforts of mobility can be traced in two spheres – in the sphere of individual body and in the spatial sphere. They are trying to clean, deodorize and to some extent fragrantise their bodies and homes idealizing the middle class standard – as the large portion of middle class bodies are perfumed bodies and their houses are deodorized. Now the question is, do these efforts result in upward mobility? Is there really a relation between olfactory transformation and class transformation?

Let us take some examples. In Mahabharata, Satyabati, daughter of the leader of fishermen community was mentioned as “matsyagandha” in her early years. Later, meeting and mating with Parasara (a great scholar and intellectual, father of Vyasa) she became uniquely fragrant and was regarded as Yojangandha (someone whose fragrance travels miles). Afterwards her marriage with Santanu, the great king of Hastinapura strengthened her identity. Later queen Satyabati’s fragrance became a legend. Thus olfactory

transformation and class transformation go hand in hand. In this case there is a transformation from lower class occupational smell to upper class individual smell as she belonged to a fisherman community; the adjective “matsyagandha” was the smell of the profession. But when she lived with a Brahmin and afterwards married a king she became “yojangondha” which is not only her adjective but her unique identity. So there is a transformation from an objectified “lower class” smell to a subjective, individualistic, unique upper class fragrance.

Similarly the description of Rajani of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay or Titli in Kojagar of Buddhadev Guha, the mention of fragrance in terms of flowers, soap or scented hair oil occurs only when they are loved by or married to a person of higher class as Rajani is a daughter of a garlander and Titli a house-maid. Especially in case of Rajani there are mentions of the fragrance of the flowers, that is the things she deals with, but there is no mention of her individual fragrance before she was loved by an upper-class man. Thus when they belong to lower class there remain olfactory silence and in connection with upper-class they become fragrant.

As the olfactory construct varies according to class, so lower classes of contemporary world are trying to change their olfactory “presentation of self”. Nowadays it becomes difficult sometimes to differentiate due to the olfactory mask, between a middle class person and a lower class person. It is really difficult to judge a person’s class just from the appearance as due to the synthetic and/or artificial and cheaper version of the perfumes, hair oils, cosmetics are often used by lower class people to remove class boundary and mask their class identity. Sometimes these imitations look so original that it becomes difficult to differentiate. Therefore efforts of upliftment in the class hierarchy from an olfactory angle become successful to an extent. However, this is perhaps more apparent than actual. This olfactory mask is so intense that it raises doubt. In this regard Largey and Watson observed:

...deodorizing-odorizing practices to avoid being “foul-smelling” and thus being associated with the lower class remain widespread. And, as with the racial minority groups, it appears that the lower class often utilizes a great deal of perfume to avoid stigmatization – so much so that the lower class is sometimes described as being “scent smothered” or “daubed in cheap perfume”, cheap being a term used to imply lower class (Largey and Watson 1972).

This doubt itself distances the perceiver – contributing to further segregation and marginalization. Thus in order to counter olfactory, class constructs, efforts of upward mobility via smell is a social trend, particularly in some urban areas and it is diffusing surely. However, olfactory stigmatization in terms of class still remains. We may conclude with Synnott:

Times change and standards of living have risen. Perhaps the lower classes no longer smell so different from the upper classes. Or perhaps they do. Evidence suggests that hygienic practices vary significantly by socio economic status (Synnott 1991).

### *Gender and smell*

Gender classifies smell and in turn smell also defines gender. Connotations and social meanings associated to smell vary according to time, space and culture. But the relation between gender and smell can be traced in different cultures across time and space. Women are often portrayed as fragrant. In literature most upper and middle class women bodies are perfumed bodies. As for example Kalidasa depicts Uma in Kumarsambhavam:

তঁার সুরভিনিঃশ্বাসে তৃষ্ণার্ত হয়ে একটি ভ্রমর তঁার বিশ্বফলের ন্যায় রক্তিম অধরের সম্মুখে বিচরণ  
করছিলো। প্রতি মুহূর্তে ভীত ও চঞ্চল দৃষ্টিতে তিনি হস্তস্থিত লীলাপদ্মের দ্বারা তাকে বারণ  
করছিলেন। (তৃতীয় সর্গঃ অনু-জ্যোতিভূষণ চাকী: ১৪৮)

Such was the aroma of Parbati's lips that bees were attracted being misled, assuming it as a flower. Radha in Vaishnav Padabali is also portrayed with vivid aromatic description as she comments about Krishna-

আমার অঙ্গের                      পরশ সৌরভ  
যখন যে দিগে পায়।  
বাহু পসারিয়া                      বাউল হইয়া  
তখন সে দিগে যায়।।

(নরহরি দাস, সম্পাদক সুকুমার সেন :১৯৫৭-৩৬)

Such is the connection of fragrance with women that they are often compared to flowers. A scented flower is often used as metaphor for women. In everyday life a girl is sometimes named after a flower and often it is a fragrant flower like শেফালী, যুঁই, পদ্ম, গোলাপ, কমল, কুলদলিন্দিনী and like that. Moreover in everyday preparation of women fragrance takes a key place. For example while participating in a marriage ceremony or a religious ceremony the women often opt for different types of fragrance to present themselves socially. My study shows that most young women and some middle aged women opt for flowers and garlands in ceremonies. Deodorant or perfume is more common as it is used not only in ceremonies but regularly

in official purposes, although the degree and intensity may vary. The use of different types of scented cosmetics is a regular or habitual aspect of the presentation of the female self in everyday life. Thus women are socially allowed to spend a substantial time in their regular make up specifically in terms of deodorization and fragrantization as they are socially expected to smell fragrant. In this context the proscription and prescription of Kamasutra regarding the female self are noteworthy.

ঘর্ম, দন্তমল ও দুর্গন্ধ স্বামীর বিরাগের কারণ

ইহা বৃষ্টিয়া ওই সকল অপসরণ করিবে।

And

বহুভুষণ, বিবিধকুসুম ও অনুলেপন গ্রহণ এবং বিবিধপ্রকার অপরাগে অমুক্তল বসন পরিধান এই প্রকার বেশ আভিগামিক নামে খ্যাত। বসন অতি সূক্ষ্ম ও পরিমিত হইবে তাহাও পরিমিত দুইখানি পরিধান করিবে, পরিমিত আভরণ এবং গন্ধদ্রব্য গ্রহণ করিবে অতিরিক্ত অনুলেপন করিবে না এবং শুক্লপুষ্পসকাল ধারণ করিবে ইহা বইহারিক বেশ (বাস্যায়ন, অনু তর্করত্ন ১৩৩৪-১৫২)

From all these above mentioned descriptions and prescriptions it can be derived that society objectifies the female body as women are expected to smell fragrant not for themselves but for their male counterparts. Therefore most women bodies are perfumed bodies. To speak of their gendered role in intimacy the traditional social construct is it is women who must prepare and wait with a scented appearance and it is men who must come and consume.

Smell, for women, is not just a part of their social identity but in some cases it becomes their identity. The stories of Satyabati or Padmini are the cases in point. Satyabati in the *Mahabharata* is referred to as Yojangandha. It is not that Satyabati is Yojangandha, but that Yojangandha is Satyabati. Any other identifying mark or word is not required. Similarly Rajput queen Padmini is Padmagandha. So in case of women olfaction denotes identity.

On the other hand in case men the following trends can be traced. First, in describing men, sometimes there is an olfactory silence. For example in Vaishnabapadabali there are thick and vivid descriptions of Radha's fragrant preparation and presentation but very few words are used to describe Krishna's olfactory representation. He is described as:

কি রূপ দেখিনু মধুর মুরতি  
 পিরীতিরসের সার।  
 হেন লয় মনে এ তিন ভুবনে  
 তুলনা নাহিক আর।।  
 নব জলধর রসে ঢর ঢর  
 বরণ চিকনমালা  
 অপের ভূষণ রজত কাঞ্চন  
 মনি-মুকুতার মালা।।  
 (দ্বিজ ভীম, সেন, ১৯৫৭-১৬)

While Radha is portrayed as

কানড় ছান্দে করবী বান্দে  
 নবমল্লিকার ফুলে।।  
 ...  
 ফুলের গেড়ুয়া ধরয়ে লুকিয়া  
 সথনে দেখায় পাশ।।

This construct of olfactory description in terms of gender can also be traced in Kumarsambhavam in the description of Uma and Maheshwara as Maheshwara is described:

তাঁর জটাপুঞ্জ ভূজঙ্গের দ্বারা উন্নত করে আবদ্ধ। দুই কর্ণে দ্বিগুনীকৃত রুদ্রাঙ্কমালা অলঙ্কার রূপে শোভিত,  
 গ্রন্থিমুক্ত যে কৃষ্ণ মৃগচর্ম তিনি পরিধান করে আছেন, তা তাঁর কণ্ঠনীলিমার আভায়ে গাঢ় নীলবর্ণে লিপ্ত

Whereas Uma –

যে অশোক পদ্মরাগমণীকেও পরাজিত করেছিল, যে কণিকার কুসুম স্বর্গের দীপ্তি আকর্ষণ করেছিল, যে  
 সিন্ধুবার মুক্তামালায় স্থান পূর্ণ করেছিল, বসন্তকালীন সেই সকল কুসুমে ভূষিতা ছিলেন পার্বতী

In my study I found that more women, particularly young women spend more time and thought on their olfactory presentation than their male counterparts. Second there are some instances where fragrances occur in male descriptions but this is mostly in case of upper class and some middle class individuals. For example the king in Banabhatta's Kadambari takes a long bath which includes a variety of scented materials as mentioned earlier. In other descriptions of men, fragrance only appears occasionally – i.e. – a lover going for a date with garland or an elite male coming in a “Mahafil” adding lots of Ittar or a Babu having an elite meal with lots of aromatic herbs and spices. But in usual descriptions of men smell does not constitute a part. Thus unlike women, traditionally olfaction does not occupy a position in the masculine everyday.

The third trend in male descriptions is, in many instances smell does occur but that is the smell of sweat or blood. Interestingly these smells are not recognized socially as pleasant or desired. Specially the sweaty smell is often linked to the working class or for that matter any “lower class” and regarded as foul. But these smells are often the describing words for upper

or middle class men – indicating hard work, bravery, heroism. Especially in case of middle class men it glamorizes the male bread earner role. For example there was a ritual of “shir aghran” or smelling the head among *kshatriyas* especially after returning from a journey, a war or difficult mission and the like. Chances are high that at that time the person may smell of dust, mud, sweat, blood and the like which are categorized as “stink” or “foul”. But in this case the ritual is upheld and glamorized.

Even in intimacy which is glamorized as the most fragrant part of one’s life, a man can smell less fragrant or sometimes even sweaty which is proscribed socially for a woman. Yes men do opt for perfumes and fragrances during intimacy but the degree and intensity do vary. If a man smells less pleasant than desirable or sweaty that is traditionally accepted in society. However in the case of a woman, she is expected to look down upon this issue. As in the social construct of traditional gender roles men are the consumers and women are the consumed. So in case of men smell is often an added thing, not a constituent part of male identity while in case of women the olfaction is a paramount and indispensable part of the female identity.

### ***Household***

The olfactory construct of gender is quite evident from the household. Women (depending upon class) usually perform the preparation part of the meal - Cutting of fish or vegetables, cleaning and adding spices, marinating and cooking, cleaning the utensils and the kitchen in the post cooking phase - this entire process is mostly reek or foul. It has lots of undesirable smell. This is the preparation part. Men receive the prepared food with the desirable smell with aromatic spices and herbs at the dining table. It is not that women do not consume - they do but often with the leftovers of their male counterparts, at best only after the males have finished their meal. This reflects the patriarchal social structure. There are many instances in the literature which depicts a queen or an elite wife (who does not have to do all the cooking or cleaning by herself) is waiting for their male counterpart, preparing lots of delicious and fragrant food but the reverse picture is rare. So, in a patriarchal structure, women play the preparatory role while men are enjoying the prepared and desired fragrances. Whether at dining or at sex, it is women who must prepare and wait with aromatic meal or scented body; and it is men who must come and consume.

**Gender and other factors**

The story does not end here, as along with gender, aspects of age, class or race are intermingled. Age is not just a biological issue but also a social and olfactory phenomenon. Maybe women of different age smell differently but the point here is women of different age are categorized in olfactory terms and are socially expected to smell differently. For example a girl child is often portrayed as sweet smelling while a young maiden is often depicted in literature as fragrant and having a scented attractive appearance. An old lady on the other hand is odorless and sometimes foul. A young girl child is often compared to a bud while a maiden is compared to a fully bloomed flower with its fragrance. The teenage phase is compared to a transitional stage - a bud becoming a flower.

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay described his three female leading characters in *Durgeshnandini* accordingly - Tilottoma the heroine, a teenage girl is described as sweet smelling and compared to a spring jasmine; Bimala in turn is an experienced lady, Tilottoma's stepmother who is also beautiful compared to an evening lotus and described as odorless (*nirbasa*). Ayesha another important female character is in between the two. She is neither as naive as Tilottoma nor is she as vastly experienced as Bimala. Her beauty is compared to a morning lotus which is in full bloom and full of scent which attracts.

...কোন কোন তরুণীর সৌন্দর্য বাসন্তী মল্লিকার ন্যায়, নবস্ফুট, ব্রীড়াসঙ্কুচিত, কোমল, নির্মল, পরিমলময়।

তিলোত্তমার সৌন্দর্য সেইরূপ। কোন রমণীর রূপ অপরাহ্নের স্বপ্নময়ের ন্যায়, নির্বাস, মুদিতোন্মুখ, শুল্কপল্লব, অধিক বিকশিত, অধিক প্রভাবিশিষ্ট, মধুপরিপূর্ণ। বিমলা সেইরূপ সুন্দরী। আয়েশার সৌন্দর্য নব রবিকর ফুল জললিলিনীর ন্যায়। সুবিকশিত, সুবাসিত, রসপরিপূর্ণ, রৌদ্রপ্রদীপ্ত, না সঙ্কুচিত, না বিশুল্ক, কোমল অথচ প্রোচ্ছল

Therefore the olfactory construction of gender and age are intermingled.

People who are segregated from mainstream society are perhaps the worst victims of olfactory social stereotypes. For example, a witch is always described as ugly, dirty, foul and obviously a person who stinks. Perhaps this is more symbolic than real. Anything which does not fit in “normal” or “good” category of society is either glamorized as brave/heroic or in most cases segregated and victimized as cruel, bad, mischievous and the like. And the very binary of fragrant foul summarizes the entire story. For example, sex workers are often segregated of smelling too strongly of cheap perfume or smelling foul. Lucilius wrote: ‘It was possible to distinguish a “good” girl from a prostitute by their different scent, that of the former being of course preferable to that of the latter.’ While Timocles wrote: ‘Old prostitutes smell like swine’ (Lilja, *Treatment of Odours*, Cited in Classen et al 1994).

Similarly witches are also taken 'as completely antagonistic to the social order and even more repulsive.' (Classen et. al. 1994: 38). So the physical smell is interlinked to and often overshadowed by the moral smell. Thus the desirable is fragrant and undesirable is foul. 'Olfactory symbolism thus was used very effectively to pass value judgements on different groups of people' (Classen et al 1994: 38)

### ***Recent Trends: Continuity and Change***

The gendered stereotype of olfaction and the consumer consumed dichotomy are undergoing significant transformation in contemporary urban spaces. The bipolar categorization of male and female smell world and the consumer consumed dichotomy are being challenged. In the contemporary world due to the breakdown of the joint family, increasing number of working women and increase of neo-local families - the traditional smellscape is undergoing a metamorphosis. The second significant transformation is that women, like men are also becoming consumers. As women and men are both earning members and are sometimes equal earners, so the consumer-consumed divide is breaking down. Men are not only sharing household responsibilities (cooking, washing clothes, shopping and so on) they are also preparing themselves with fragrance to be presentable to their female partners. Previously only female bodies were expected to be perfumed bodies and ideally a woman should wait for her partner with her scented appearance to be consumed by him while in case of the male smell - society was either silent or ignorant. Sometimes men did opt for perfume or other fragrances at intimacy but the masculine social ideal also allowed the men not to smell fragrance and sometimes to smell sweaty. Nevertheless in recent years the increasing number of male perfumes and cosmetics tell the tale. For example Fair and Lovely For Men, Fogg Deo for Men, Wild Stone, Old Spice etc. Male bodies are also becoming perfumed bodies. The consumer-consumed dichotomy is breaking down as both the sexes are consuming and are being consumed by each other. Although this contemporary trend cannot be generalized as there are lots of variations and still a huge number of people experience and conform to the gender stereotypes of olfaction but this social trend, particularly in urban areas is quite clear and it is diffusing surely. Thus olfactory research reveals gender stratification in society. Just as olfactory stereotype represent gender stereotypes, similarly, as the contemporary social trend suggests olfactory equality represents gender equality.

***Olfactory Caste Hierarchy***

In the traditional Indian Varna system each group has a specific occupation associated with specific types of materials and hence smells differently. Like the occupation smell also helps to construct group identity of a specific caste. Therefore the olfactory hierarchy and the caste hierarchy shape each other. This olfaction may be physical and actual but it is definitely social and moral. For example the people who deal with sandalwood, flowers, ghee, incense, aromatic goods are Brahmins - usually stand at the top of the caste hierarchy. They are the “holy” caste, pure and fragrant caste. They are believed to establish the direct connection with God and sometimes they are regarded as “equal to God” – “Brahmin Devta”.

In contrast people who professionally deal with human and animal excrements (for example cleaning toilets, carrying shit on their head) dead bodies, skin of dead animals are marginalized as “stinkers”. They are the untouchables.

The seriousness of the issue and the importance of smell is quite evident as Brahmins are not only not allowed to eat or drink some food or beverages, they are not allowed to smell them either. Although the degree may vary, but eating and smelling were both considered as sins in the Manusamhita. One set of sins include the following -

Making a Brahmin cry, smelling liquor or substances that should not be smelt, cheating and sexual intercourse with a man - tradition calls these sins that cause exclusion from caste (McHugh 2012: 26).

The significance of smell is articulated in the above lines as smelling of proscribed substances was put into equal footing to harming a Brahmin or cheating someone.

In fact the Tagore family is also considered a “Pirali Bamun” a lower status of Brahmin. One explanation holds the view that one of Rabindranath Tagore’s ancestry had smelled beef. This act of smelling resulted in the decline of the family in the caste hierarchy.

Thus certain foods, beverages and the groups who consume them are not only considered as untouchable but also unsmellable.

Between Brahmins and untouchables there are broadly three Varnas – Kshatriya, Baishya and Sudra. According to their occupation and olfaction they are posited in between the above mentioned two groups. These three groups – although they have lots of variations among them are usually

neither purely fragrant as Brahmins nor as foul or polluted as the untouchables.

### *Continuity and Change*

কত হাজার হাজার শরীর  
আমায় রোজ ঝুঁয়ে যাচ্ছে,  
তাদের গন্ধ আমার নাকে মুখে গায়...

The traditional olfactory caste hierarchy is being challenged in the contemporary cosmopolitan urban life. You can neither avoid the smell nor the touch of your co-passenger in a crowded bus or train. In a traditional Indian village usually all the members know each other's caste identity but in a modern metropolis it is impossible to know the caste of one's co-passenger. Therefore a Brahmin will smell a Sudra or an untouchable unknowingly and no one will atone. However smell does have a close connection with occupation. The materials with which a person works daily can and do cover or mix with his own smell. Thus a toilet cleaner, a sweeper, a fisherman can be identified via smell and thus will receive some comments, stares and hence would be avoided or marginalized for olfactory reasons. Thus certain changes are definitely occurring particularly in large cities mainly due to "Civil inattention" and efforts of sanskritization by the lower castes in terms of smell but this is perhaps a recent social trend and a partial picture. As in many areas, still people are segregated in terms of caste and all other efforts for upward mobility may be in vain if the mission of olfactory transformation is not accomplished. This is evident in our everyday life as whenever we receive an unpleasant smell from an individual or a place or space, we tend to associate these with lower castes and would try to avoid in future, stigmatizing those as unsmellables.

### *Smell, space and the social*

Just like caste or gender, social actors tend to classify space in terms of its smell. Let us take a restaurant for example. Along with the visual, tactile and gustatory perceptions, olfaction is also a significant way in perceiving a restaurant. If a restaurant smells of previous day's food, leftovers or the utensils, tables declare the previous day's menu cards, obviously via olfaction the restaurant will be classified as a "low rank" or "cheap". A *jhopri* or some of the roadside *dhabas* can be examples. While, if a restaurant has a clear smell, maybe a smell of disinfectant, fresh air or mild fragrance, moreover you are unable to know the previous day's meal and the dining

space is not occupied by kitchen smell then that could be ranked at the middle. Now speaking of upper tier the difference with the middle is subtle but identifiable as along with some aspects mentioned in the middle category an upper ranked restaurant would have a fragrant atmosphere. This scented ambience may include room fresheners, table may include flowers. Perhaps the most significant difference in terms of olfaction would be identified in the toilet. As the toilet in a middle ranked restaurant may smell of urine or strong disinfectant or a complex combination of the two. Sometimes it can also be stuffy. Thus entering into the toilet from the dining hall, it suddenly affects your impression while the toilet like the dining hall, in an upper ranked restaurant would also be fragrant, generally not include the smell of urine or strong disinfectant, but rather have a mild aroma. The ambience is fresh, which will enable to stay with a more pleasant impression. Viewing from the perspective of Goffman, in the lower ranked restaurant and to some extent the middle ranked restaurant along with the kitchen and other preparatory places, perhaps the toilet also becomes the part of the backstage while in case of the upper stratum the toilet is a part of the front stage. Thus smell reflects the hierarchy of the restaurants. Moreover sometimes the restaurant's smell also occupies the adjacent ambience and the neighborhood smell is also linked with it. Thus restaurants contribute to entire smellscape of the social space.

For example Victoria Henshaw records in *Urban Smellscapes* –

Those living in the area appeared to be more concerned with doorstep issues such as waste and litter, associating those with the neighborhood's food businesses. Participants contrasted front-of-house operations, the official face of the business with activities at the back.

She quotes one of her respondents in this context –

...one of them had been burning their cardboard...and there was tins and that...the back alley had been full of black bags and you couldn't get down it, it was completely full of 'em...all they're interested in is the front and it's about time that the environmental health brought the area down (Henshaw 2014: 97).

Smell and space and therefore the moral judgments are interlinked which can be traced in our everyday life. For example Park Circus Railway Station or the area adjacent to it, or Dhapa in Kolkata is often frowned upon and the citizens often try to avoid these places. The former includes tanneries and leather works while the latter is a vat which includes huge amount of garbage from the city daily. Social actors not only stigmatize these areas

for olfaction but often some of them pass moral judgments that ‘these areas are bad or full of lower class people’, etc. All these comments come on the basis of smell and there are more alleged or perceived judgments rather than actual. Thus here smell determined the standard or rank of the space as a space is morally constructed as “good” or “bad” in terms of olfaction.

***Conclusion: Social, moral and olfactory constructs***

We smell individuals, groups and social spaces not only through our biological nose but also via our social and moral nose. We smell classes, castes, genders, races, spaces, regions, occupations and religion. Segregation are made not just in terms of occupation but also in terms of Olfaction. People are as much stratified in terms of olfaction as they are socially. The social, moral and olfactory classifications are all so intertwined with each other that one definitely leads to the other and once these classifications are made then it becomes really difficult to determine which one is the cause and which are its effects.

“Lower castes and classes” are segregated socially and in this process smell is a crucial factor. The moral constructs along with these is perhaps the most dangerous components/factors as people, groups and social settings are marginalized not just in terms of real odor but perhaps more in terms of their perceived or alleged odors.

So as Synnott puts it ‘what smells good is good; what smells bad is bad’ – a social construct. But the story does not end here as in turn, ‘what is good smells good’ and ‘what is bad smells bad’ – a moral construct. Therefore it is not just an olfactory construction but many other social and moral aspects are associated with it. So truth, virtue, honesty, these are fragrant while evil, vice, impurity, dishonesty etc. are foul. Shakespeare made us aware that we, ‘think through our noses’ and so Hamlet sniffed out that, ‘Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.’ He again remarked: ‘I doubt some foul play: would the night were come! Till then sit still my soul: foul deeds will rise’ (Act I scene ii). On the other hand Keats also commented ‘Fragrance is truth, and truth fragrance.’ Thus, ‘the physical and the moral are united in odor’ (Synnott). Largey and Watson also dealt with this issue in their famous work, *The Sociology of Odors*. They referred to the British social psychologist Ronald Goldman (1969). He referred in his work, ‘a problem member’ of a youth club: ‘In personal terms ... Jim was always smelly and dirty and many teachers reported the obnoxious smell that came from him

during school hours. Very few people who dealt with him could dissent from the judgment that he was sly, vicious and totally unreliable.’ Here, Largey and Watson concluded, ‘in this case, Jim the individual stank physically and therefore morally.’

Along with the social constructions, Synnott significantly points out the story of moral construction. According to him social actors often identify and explain food, environment or other social actors in terms of their moral smell instead of their actual odors. So it is not and not only “what smells good is good” but also in turn “what is good smells good.” So he writes, ‘we may describe someone as smelling “divine” or “beautiful”, “lovely” or just a “plain good”’; yet all these adjectives are evaluations and moral judgments. Description is prescription. The aromas are converted from physical sensations to symbolic evaluations’ (Synnott 1991: 443).

This trio of social, moral and olfactory stigmatization creates insurmountable barriers and marginalizes groups. In my research I have found that 95 per cent of my respondents identify space, occupation, religious community, gender, caste or class in terms of their smell. Some identify Muslims with their garlic smell, the urbanites identifies the rural as smelling of mud, cow dung, manure etc. while the rural identifies them as smelling industrial and artificial. In this context Tarashankar Bandopadhyay records:

ঘুরল বনওয়ারী। ইন্টিশানের এলাকার মধ্যে ঢুকল। লম্বা – এই এখান থেকে সেখান পর্যন্ত চলে গিয়েছে সারি সারি ঘর। পাকা ঘর, পাকা মেঝে, সামনে খানিকটা উঠান, এক এক ঘরে এক এক সংসার; বেশ আছে। থাকবে না কেন? সায়েবসুবোর কারখানা তাদের ‘আশ্চর্যে’ আছে কিন্তু বড় ঘূপচি। পাকা ছাদ, পাকা দেওয়াল, পাকা মেঝে হলেও এর মধ্যে থাকতে হলে বনওয়ারির হাঁপ ধরে যেত। তাদের ঘর এর চেয়ে অনেক খারাপ, কিন্তু উঠানটি খোলা। তা ছাড়া এদের সংসারের ঘরদোরের গন্ধ যেন কেমন কেমন। এলেই নাকে লাগে। তাদের ঘরের গন্ধটির মধ্যে গোবর মাটির গন্ধ, গরুর গায়ের গন্ধ, ধানের গন্ধ, কাঠ-মুটে-পোড়ার গন্ধ, সারগাদার গন্ধ, পচাই মদের গন্ধ, বাড়ির আশপাশের বাবুরি তুলসী গাছের গন্ধ মিশে এক ভারি মিষ্টি প্রাণ-জুড়ানো গন্ধ। আর এখানকার গন্ধ আলাদা, ভারি কটু গন্ধ, ইঞ্জিনের ঝাড়া কয়লা আর জলে মিশে একটি ভাপানি তেজিয়ান গন্ধ এসে নাকে ঢাকে। ডাক্তারখানায় তেজী ওষুধের ছাড়া আর কোথাকারও গন্ধ এমন তেজী নয়।

Thus let me conclude with Simmel, ‘The social question is not an ethical one, but also a nasal question’ (Simmel 1908/2009: 577).

### References

Bandopadhyay, T., 1354 (Bongabdo). *Hanshuli Bnaker Upakotha*. Kolkata: Bengal Publishers (Pvt.) Ltd.

- Banvotto, 1356 (Bongabdo). Kadombori, (trans. ProbodhendunathTagore). Kolkata: Belle Vue Publishers.
- Chattopadhyay C. Bankim, 2003. *Durgeshnandini*, in *Bankim Rachanabali*. Kolkata: Ashoke Book Agency.
- Chattopadhyay C. Bankim, 2003. *Rajani*. in *Bankim Rachanabali*. Kolkata: Ashoke Book Agency.
- Chattopadhyay, Sarat Chandra, 1392 (Bongabdo). *Pather Dabi* in *Sarat Sahita Samagra*. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers.
- Classen Constance, David Howes and Anthony Synnott, 1994. *Aroma: The Cultural history of Smell*. London: Routledge.
- Dutt, Anjan, 2011. *Ranjana Ami ar Ashbona* (a film). Kolkata: DAG Creative Media.
- Goffman, Erving, 1956. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Social Sciences Research Centre, University of Edinburgh.
- Guha, Buddhadeb, 1984. *Kojagar*. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers.
- Henshaw, V., 2014. *UrbanSmellscapes. New York and London: Routledge*
- Kalidas, 1984. *Kumar Sambhaban* (trans. Murari Mohan Sen) in Jyotibhushan Chaki (ed) *Kalidasa Samagra*. Kolkata: Nobopotro Prokashon.
- Keller, Helen, 2006. 'Sense and Sensibility' in Jim Drobnick (ed) *The Smell Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg.
- Largey G. P. and D. R. Watson, 1972. 'The sociology of odors', *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol.77. No. 6.
- Low, E.Y. Kelvin, 2009. *Scent and scent-sibilities: Smell and Everyday Life Experiences*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars.
- McHugh, James, 2012. *Sandalwood and Carrion Smell in Indian Religion and Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Porteous, J. D., 2006. 'Smellscape', in Jim Drobnick (ed) *The Smell Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg.
- Sen, S. (ed). 1995 *Baishnab Padabali*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi
- Simmel, Georg, 2009. *Sociology: Inquires into the Construction of social forms (Volume II)* (trans. Anthony J. Blasi et al) Boston: BRILL.

Synnott, Anthony, 1993. *The Body Social*. New York: Routledge.

Synnott, Anthony, 1991. 'A sociology of Smell', *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 28.

Thekaekara, Marcel Mari, 2005. 'Combatting Caste: the stink of untouchability [In India] and how those most affected are trying to remove it', *New Internationalist Magazine*.

Vatsyayana, (1334 B.C.). *KamSutram*. (trans. Panchanan Tarkenton). Kolkata: Natabor Chakraborty.

Vyaas, (1356 B.C.). *Mahabharata* (trans. Rajsekhar Basu). Kolkata: M. C. Sircar and Sons Pvt. Ltd.