

Bukhur across Arabian, Biblical, and Hindu Traditions: An Intercultural Study

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This work is dedicated to the cherished memory of my paternal aunt, Batul Shabbir Hussain Saify bint al-Mafsuḥ Abdullah ibn Al Shaikh al-Fadil Abd al-Ṭayyib al-Waleed. May Allah through the Wasilah of al-Khamsat al-Aṭhar (as) envelop her in His boundless Raḥmah. Amin.

Abstract: Tibb al-Nabawi often discussed under the broader title of Tibb al-Islam, frames health as a preventive discipline grounded in the coherence of lifestyle, wherein spiritual orientation, emotional balance, and bodily care are treated as mutually reinforcing. In many classical deliveries, illness is not approached as an isolated physiological malfunction but as the downstream effect of disrupted habits: irregular rhythms of living, excess and imbalance, weakened self-regulation, and lapses in cleanliness and environmental order. Building on this preventive orientation, the present paper examines the use of Bukhur as a Sunnah-inflected practice that participates in health maintenance and disease prevention primarily through the governance of space, habit, and affect. Bukhur is the Arabic category-name for incense, denoting both the aromatic substance and the practice of fumigation. It commonly includes resins (notably frankincense and myrrh), treated woods-especially Agarwood/Oud and compounded perfumed blends, sometimes bound with a sugary syrup that helps carry and prolong fragrance. Traditionally warmed on charcoal in a Mabkhara (and, increasingly, on electric burners), Bukhur releases fragrant smoke that perfumes interiors and clothing. Within Arabian life, such fumigation is not merely cosmetic; it is an established grammar of hospitality, cleanliness, and dignity, where scent communicates welcome, freshness, and social regard. The market valuation of Bukhur further reflects this material culture: higher-grade preparations typically employ superior Oud chips, natural herbal ingredients, and enduring fragrance profiles. Drawing upon Nabawi reports encouraging the cleaning and perfuming of Masjid-particularly in relation to Jumuah Salaat, this study reads Bukhur as an extension of Taharah and Adab: a discipline of space that accompanies bodily hygiene, orderly dress, and attentiveness in worship. Rather than overstating biomedical claims, it proposes that Bukhur contributes to prevention in three interlocking ways: (i) it structures repeatable routines of environmental care (tidying, airing, and “resetting” rooms); (ii) it supports affective regulation by associating fragrance with calm, uplift, and focused presence; and (iii) it reinforces social harmony through etiquette, reducing friction by cultivating pleasant shared atmospheres. The paper also notes the importance of moderation and ventilation, preserving the Sunnah’s preventive intent while avoiding avoidable irritants.

Keywords: Bukhur; Mabkhara; Agarwood; Oud; frankincense and myrrh; incense trade South Arabia; Dhofar; smoke hospitality; Masjid perfuming; Biblical incense; Puja; Islamic perfuming traditions, Ismaili Tayyibi Bohra traditions, Spiritual symbolism of fragrance, Medicinal & Psychological Aspects,

Bukhur is the Arabi name for incense, both as a practice and as a substance. It refers to aromatics-often resins, treated woods such as Agarwood/Oud, and perfumed blends-warmed on charcoal in a Mabkhara. The heat releases fragrant smoke. In Arabian life, this smoke is not only about a pleasant smell; it is also sensory adornment, social etiquette, and a ritual medium. In Arabia, Bukhur is closely linked to an older incense economy. South Arabian regions-especially the frankincense-producing areas of Dhofar-and the caravan and port networks running north supported a major international trade in frankincense and myrrh. Over time, the domestic “afterlife” of this trade became a clear material culture: distinctive burners, recognised scent profiles, and “smoke hospitality”-a practice where fragrance signals welcome, status, and cleanliness. In Biblical literature, the vocabulary is Hebrew rather than Arabi, but the underlying world is similar. Incense appears as a regulated sacred technology: a compounded formula, restricted to cultic use. It’s rising smoke and pleasing aroma communicate approach and offering, and later-more explicitly Dua. At the same time, the Bible often treats frankincense as a prestige import associated with Arabia, so aromatics become both a theological instrument and an economic-cultural shorthand for luxury, tribute, and distant wealth. In Hindu Literature and practice, incense-Dhupa is less about one fixed recipe and more about a standard offering-form within Puja (often among the Upacaras). Fragrance is a disciplined act of service to the deity. The same term also extends into household and therapeutic-religious uses-fumigation, cleansing, and environmental “purifying”-so smoke and scent connect devotion, domestic order, and embodied well-being. Taken together, Bukhur, biblical incense, and Dhupa reflect one shared civilisational grammar: aromatics as commodity, cult, and culture-but with different emphases. Arabia highlights hospitality and heritage rooted in trade; the Bible highlights sanctity, restriction, and symbol; traditions highlight repeated liturgical offering with an open boundary between temple rite and home practice.

Bukhur is a fragrant smoke produced by burning chips of Oud, incense (aromatic biotic material) or compounds of various aromatic ingredients bound by a sugary syrup. Bukhur produces a more concentrated smell when burnt slowly. These chips are burnt in Bukhur burners called Mabkhara to infuse the surrounding and clothes with fragrant aromas on special occasions. Charcoal discs are also used to burn Bukhur. While nowadays many people use electric incense burners, charcoal is still considered as an excellent manner to burn Bukhur. Not only Anbiya Bani Israel (as), but Rasulullah (S), his Ahl al-Bayt (as) and Ash’ab (ra) would regularly use Bukhur, especially on the day of Jumuah. Ibn Majah recorded a Hadith:

“Masjid should be perfumed with Bukhur and scented, especially on the day of Jumuah”.

According to Ahmad Abu Daud, one of the wives of Rasulullah(S) reported:

“Rasulullah(S) ordered that Masajid should be built in residential areas and that they should be cleaned and perfumed regularly”.

Fragrance is enjoyed by almost all the people of all faiths. However, in Islam it occupies considerable amount of importance as compared to any other religion. According to some sources, Rasulullah (S) decreed to burn Bukhur inside Masjid. Sirah resources underline that Rasulullah frequently burned Bukhur in the incense burner to wear its fragrance before attending Masjid. During the golden era of the Fatimi Empire, Bukhur was burnt while performing religious ceremonies in Masajid and Mashahid.

In Al Atabat al-Muqaddasah, Al Najaf al-Ashraf and Karbala al-Muqaddasah, at present there is a separate department which looks after perfumes. Staff is commissioned for this ritual that regularly prepare the fragrance and maintain the essential raw materials for this purpose. Whenever the leader of the Salaat of Jum'ah is seated on the Minbar, someone prominent from the congregation usually places Mabkhara and burns Bukhur. One may use any Bukhur or oil - in fact, any scent as per choice. This is because fragrances have positive energy and attract the Malaek and pious Arw'ah. Rasulullah (S) loved fragrances and never refused its offer. Through the powerful Nabawi institution, this Sunnah is alive today in the Muslim world.

Among Arabs it's a tradition to burn some Oud or Bukhur on arrival of the guests and to offer the scented smoke to each guest so that the lasting scent will permeate the whole garment. This is as integral to traditional hospitality as serving Qahwa and dates. Arabs also acknowledge the listed advantages of Bukhur:

- i). It repels negative forces*
- ii). It dispels depression and improves and enlivens mood*
- iii). Enhances memory and awakens the mind*
- iv). Cleanses the atmosphere*

The exclusive location of Bukhur preparation for centuries is the beautiful land of Yemen. Best Bukhur comes from the highest peak of Yemen, Shib'am, where the famous shrine of the celebrated historian and paramount writer of esoteric literature, the 19th Ismaili Tayyibi Da'i, Sayyiduna Idris Imaduddin (ra) is located. It may interest readers that in the noble family of Ismaili Du'at of al-Waleed dynasty usage of Bukhur was essential on all occasions. During the period of pregnancy, elder ladies prepared special Bukhur to be used immediately after delivery which was believed to protect the mother and child from germs. The women in Yemen prepared large amounts of Bukhur comprising of cardamom, different sorts of herbal fragrances, sugar, and other ingredients according to their family recipe.

According to the valuable source of "Qaratis Yemeniyyah," during the period of the Sulayhi dynasty - first from Sanaa and later Zijiblah - a large quantity of expensive Bukhur along with other fragrances were regularly presented to the Al Haramyn al-Sharifayn, Kabah and Raudat un-Nabi (S). It was the illustrious Queen of Yemen, Al Sayyidah Arwa bint Ahmad al-Sulayhi, who sent loaded large wooden boxes of Bukhur to Al Najaf al-Ashraf, Karbala al-Muqaddasah and al-Muizziyah al-Qahirah, besides other Shrines of Ahl al-Bayt (as) in Ramadan, Muharram and on Mil'ad occasions. When it was burnt, not only the atmosphere of the shrines but its surroundings turned pleasant and people knew that the Gift of Yemen had reached its destination.

When the learned Sulayhi Queen Sayyidah Arwa bint Ahmad conducted a series of Asb'aa (traditional lectures on sciences of Islam) behind the curtain, in Zijiblah, Yemen, Oud was used to create a pleasant environment and add to the pious experience. In this way, the learned students were able to enjoy the spiritual experiences along with the precious fragrances. To praise the traditional Shi'i Fatimi Ismaili seat of learning at Zijiblah, a Sulayhi poet says:

*Ma Mişru ma Baghdadu ma Ṭabariyyatu(n),
Ka-Madinatin Qad Haffaha Nahrani.*

*Misr, Baghdad, and Tiberias are no match;
For a city embraced by two rivers.*

The sense is comparative praise: the poet elevates Dhu Jiblah-often described as “the city of the two canals”-above renowned cities like modern city of Tiberias, northern Israel, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, Baghdad and Qahirah.

Aromatherapy experts of the West have discovered that the adequate usage of Bukhur elevates the mood for a long time because it calms the nervous system and cultivates focus and alertness. Regular Bukhur users burn it in the morning to freshen up and tranquilise the atmosphere. It is also used after a meal due to its calming and therapeutic effect to reduce tiredness. Some 225 years ago, a distinguished intellectual of Yemen, Sayyidi Abd al-Qadir bin Al Qadi Habibullah al-Waleed - Wali of Yemen on behalf of the Ismaili Dawoodi Da’l:

i). Bukhur alters the moods to bring peaceful, tranquil, refreshing, uplifting and inspiring feelings.

ii). Burning it increases spirituality and diverts oneself from the worldly impurities.

iii). It awakens the mind and helps with solitude.

iv). It accords the mind with leisure when it is busy.

v). Age does not affect the efficacy of Bukhur and its frequent use is harmless.

vi). Burning Bukhur is a soothing and uplifting activity.

vii). It is a good haemostatic and antiseptic and an excellent healing agent.

viii). When applied on wounds, it internally reduces inflammation of UTI and respiratory tract infections.

ix). It dispels malicious and distressing psychic forces.

x). It improves memory

(“al-Nadirah Fi Attur Fakhirah”, Sayyidi Abd al-Qadir bin Al Qadi Habibullah al-Waleed, manuscript, Hiradh, Yemen).

Before advances in transportation and the ease of trade, it was transported over a thousand miles up to the Mediterranean before it could be traded on to Europe. Furthermore, Bukhur was used extensively by the ancient Misr and the Romans. History provides us with significant details about the uses of Bukhur in Biblical literature. It was one of the fragrances presented to infant Essa (as) and is always used during Biblical religious ceremonies. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the newly established Christian Church adopted several traditions, including the ritual burning of Bukhur. Moreover, it is well documented that it was the custom implemented by every king of England once in a year to offer Bukhur on the Feast of Epiphany (Jan. 6th). Bukhur was widely used for important ceremonies such as the sanctification of churches and bishops. The Crusaders inculcated a wide range of Arab and Berber traditions due to their benefits. Spain was then ruled for centuries by Muslims giving an excellent opportunity to spread the Muslim customs. Later on, the Ottomans promoted the cultural heritage of Islam in the West through their victorious military expeditions whose relevance is noticeable even today. Little attention has been paid to the cross-cultural dimensions between Biblical and Islamic cultural traditions. Sources for the Islamic context include Ahadith, which provide abundant information on perfuming practices, as well as early Islamic suggestions of various fragrances, unlike the Qur’an with its very few fragrance-related references. In short,

prior to demise of Rasulallah(S), scents served as a distinguished mark of goodness, in the conceptualization of Jannah, as a component of Muslims' body hygiene and dress and in the context of Ibadah.

It is important to note that each Bukhur formula has a different cleansing, healing, or purifying effect. Burning Bukhur is not just a way of masking unpleasant smells, but a way to refresh the heart and soul. Fragrant aroma has a profound subconscious impact in reviving positive memories and cultivating good thoughts and feelings. Oud is prized as one of the finest aromatic woods burned for Bukhur purposes. It grows and is harvested in the wild in Southeast Asia.

One of the nine methods of preparing Bukhur is discussed in chapter 5 of "Risalah Itrya'i Nauras Shahi". According to the writer, that section provides the recipe for preparing of Aloeswood (Oud) Bukhur. He suggests breaking up Oud chips of approximately 1 kg into small pieces and soaking them in rose water for three days and nights. All the better, he adds, if the rose water can be strengthened with petals of Rosa (Gull'e Surkh). The chips of Aloes wood are to be dried in the shade and later are finely crushed. To execute this process, about one and a half kg of sugar syrup is to be prepared, to which approximately 25 g of ambergris soaked in rosewater and crushed Aloeswood are to be added and set aside to be cooled. Finally, small balls, each the size of a grape (or alternatively, each the shape of a small three-sided Sanbosa, or Samosa), are to be made. Around 100 pieces can be manufactured from this paste. These are then kept in a china dish and dried in the shade before they are ready to be used. The above mentioned "Risalah Itrya'i Nauras Shahi" was written for Ibrahim Adil Shah II, Sultan of Bijapur (1580-1627). (Perfuming the Heart, a Study of a 17th century Perfumery Treatise from Islamic India, By: Ali Akbar Husain.

Since the usage of Bukhur, Attar and aromatics was encouraged by Rasulallah (S) himself, Muslims have incorporated the usage of Mabkhar (Bukhurdan) in daily life and ceremonies quite frequently, in both public and residential spaces. To give one example of Bukhur usage, every Jumuah night and day at the time of Salaat, whenever guests came, it would be served may it be during the Tilawat of Qur'an, Majlis or any other religious ceremonies such as the Milad al-Nabi (as) etc. After the extension of Muslim boundaries, this tradition was also adopted by elites elsewhere.

In no other artefact of the Shi'i Ismaili Tayyibi Bohra material culture is this as relevant as in the case of Bukhur and Mabkhar (Bukhurdan) incense and incense holder inherited from the Nabawi culture. A Bukhurdan can be made up of soil, metal or just plain container for holding coals into which pieces of incense is dropped. As the glowing pieces of charcoal heat up the Bukhur, it starts to emit its perfumed vapors that spread throughout the room or wherever the Bukhur is placed. Usually ceramic Bukhurdan has tiny holes on the sides for better circulation of the incense. Bakhurdan is a classic example of scientific imagination. Once Bukhurdan is hot, the Bukhur melts and the air is infused with the fragrance of Bukhur, depending on its ingredients those may be Oud, Rose, Sandalwood, flowers or Musk to mention a few. The finest Bukhur comes from Yemen and its demand multiplies during the month of Ramadan when people love to have their clothes scented with the essence of Bukhur at the time of ibadah.

Making Bukhur was a unique experience for me around 40 years ago, under the supervision of my grandmother Fatimah bint Munawar Ali, who learnt this traditional art in Yemen from her elders from the al-Waleed dynasty of the Ismaili Tayyibi Du'at. Each family has their own Bukhur recipe, which is gifted to them by their ancestors. The recipe required sugar, sweet-smelling bark of Sandalwood and sweet-smelling Oud small chips. However as is common among women who cook without using precisely weighed ingredients, I was not told each ingredient because they simply did not measure every item. All I was told was that sugar bark and perfumery ingredients had to be cooked over low heat. I naturally poured all the ingredients in a metallic pan and took turns to stir the mixture. As the heat melted the sugar it helped bind the bark. The fragrance was absorbed by the bark and all the fragrance ingredients set to the stability of thick dark brown treacle.

When the ingredients were thoroughly mixed, I poured the Bukhur in little round metallic plates, made small rectangular cut, and allowed it to cool. My house was engulfed with rich smell of the Bukhur ingredients. By the next morning the Bukhur had cooled and looked like hard toffee. I was able to break the pieces and store them in small jars. Bukhur is so popular with the Ismaili Tayyibi Bohras that many families use it daily, or on Thursday and on the day of Jum'ah, while in Ramadan and Muharram it is used frequently. Women make sure that clothes worn by the family to the Salaat are perfumed by Bukhur. Clothes are first washed, ironed and then spread over the arms, back and seat of a chair that is placed in a room where all windows and doors are closed. An incense holder with Bukhur placed over glowing charcoal is put under the chair. Clothes are left in the room until all the embers have died and the Bukhur has turned to ash.

Lastly, preparing Bukhur water may be an interesting method for many as it is an old Yemeni tradition which I have learnt from my grandmother. To infuse Bukhur's beneficial contents in drinking water through its smoke, you need two containers of equal size and dimension. First fill water in one of the containers, and keep it aside. Now burn the Bukhur and once it starts emitting smoke take another empty container and cover the Bukhur with it, make sure that smoke does not leak from anywhere, after a few minutes, quickly lift the container with accumulated Bukhur smoke and fill it with the water immediately from another container. Once done, tightly seal the two containers one over the other and let the smoke settle and infuse in the water. After sometime, when the smoke penetrates and settles down, remove the covering empty container. Thus you will have medicinal fragrance water infused with Bukhur ready for drinking.

Summarizing the article, Bukhur is one of the favourite Sunnah which is largely practiced by Muslims worldwide today. Aimmah Fatimiyyah, Ottomans and other Muslim monarchs further populated this practice wherever they went. Uniquely designed Mabkhar are displayed in the leading art galleries and are a reminder of the rich cultural heritage of the Muslims. Certainly, fragrance itself is a useful symbol for intellectual exchange: it can create spaces across physical boundaries and it can appear to be everywhere and nowhere, at the same time. Fragrances are etched into memory associated with particular people and times. I conclude by presenting a poem:

*Make strong and clear your Aqidah.
Turn your face to the Qiblah.
Lift your hands and make Du'a:
"Forgive me. Bless me.
Give me Your Rahmah."*

*The Imam of the Time is near,
Sending rain of Barakah
Even for sinners,
Even for those who have done wrong.*

*A Malak calls every soul
And offers holy gifts:
Milk and honey from Jannah.*

*The scent of Bukhur calls us too
It invites the heart to come closer,
And to wear the Nur of Walayah.*

*My heart is like a Mabkhar,
A small incense burner,
Where Oud of Muwaddah is burning.
This sweet smoke will not end.*

*Its gentle fragrance leads us
To a pure spiritual life,
To a holy nearness,
To the home of true guidance.*

*Leave what is false and dirty behind, Tabarra.
Hold tightly to love and Tawalla.
Then, in the Hereafter,
You will receive your reward.*

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