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Warding off buri nazar for six generations

Arif Banatwala talks about the two-centuries-old tradition of surma and kohl making, and their preparation today.

Written by [Radhika Singh](#) | Updated: February 8, 2016 1:37:15 pm



Arif Banatwala with the workers and the bottled surma Prashant Nadkar

On April 14, 1944, Fort Stikine exploded. Thirty-one crates of gold bullion in bars vaulted into the air, scattering across the city. One bar landed squarely on the roof of 78 Hazrat Ali Street. The residents were not surprised; the building had seen such windfalls before.

Nearly 200 years ago, Ratanbai Datu Manji Padamshi Surmawala, better known as Budhia, opened her door to a dishevelled fakir who asked for food. After his meal, the fakir stood up, handed Budhia a sheaf of papers, telling her that it would feed her family for the next 10 generations, and then disappeared into the distance. Inscribed were formulae for 35 different types of surma and one for kajal. Budhia went on to buy the entire building — and nine others in the area — with the profits from the new recipes.

Five generations later, Arif Banatwala still enjoys the fakir's boon. But a lot has changed. The surma is no longer ground by hand in staggeringly heavy stone kharals and sold in small paper packets for two paise. It's now tested for chemical content, mixed in throbbing steel machines, packaged in plastic vials by people wearing masks and hair-nets, and sold with clearly printed ingredients, instructions, prices, and manufacturing and expiry dates. The building looks different, too. Its exterior is beautifully painted with seductive, kajal-lined eyes and


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supplies his products all over India, the Middle East, and Europe. On the building's door, the words "Beware of Fake Surma: **Sign in** Kajal Sold in Palagali" are painted in bright red. "Budhia's products strictly follow FDA guidelines," he says.

The main difference between surma and kajal is that surma goes inside the eyes and is mainly used as medicine, while kajal can go inside and out, and is used for its medicinal and cosmetic properties. Both are classified as unani, which is distinguished from ayurveda and siddha, because they contain no preservatives. While kajal is usually safe, surma can be dangerous because the stone it is made from has a high lead content. "But we have a special technique to separate the sulphite, which we use to make surma, and the free lead content, from the stone," says Banatwala.

The surma stone, which is black with a coating of silvery film, is imported from Morocco in 25 kilo blocks. It is ground to form a base powder into which other ingredients such as different kinds of peppers, neem powder, and of course, zinc oxide, an astringent, are added. But more specialised ingredients are getting increasingly difficult to attain. Mamira root, for instance, which you can only get in Assam and China, was Rs 90 a kg, now, 20 years later, sells at Rs 40,000. From the 35 original formulae, Budhia now only produces 14 varieties. Many of the original recipes used ingredients that are not available any more.

Once all the necessary ingredients are combined, and lime, rosewater and distilled water added, the mixture is pulverised. The pulverizing machines, which



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ear-splitting clank and grind while they churn away; each batch of surma is worked on for eight hours a day for a month. The mixture is then poured into giant pans to dry. Later, the surma is heated in a furnace to a certain point to induce the separation of the sulphite and lead. Once the surma is ready, it is packaged by a dozen or so very efficient men and women in an adjacent room smelling strongly of zinc oxide. Nearly 10,000 bottles can be prepared in an eight-hour shift. Kajal is much easier to make. It is often prepared at home, and requires the basic ingredient of beeswax, which holds the kajal in place. Then there is coconut, sesame, or almond oil to make the carbon; ghee; a small quantity of zinc oxide for its cooling effects; and a few drops of rose extract to counteract the odour of the ghee. Banatwala whips up the lot in a simple, albeit giant mixie, and puts the paste through a machine that shapes it into sticks. "It's a grandmother's recipe that is going strong until now," he says.



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