

The culture of flowers

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culture
Dawn. 27 Jan

THE culture of flowers seems to have recently become widespread and popular, evident from the mushrooming flower shops and kiosks around. It has now become practice to present a bouquet or put garlands around a friend's neck as a gesture of love and respect.

However, flowers have been used since time immemorial as a symbol of love in nearly all ancient civilizations except for the three great Semitic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Poets, artists and intellectuals are so enthralled by their delicacy, colours, and beauty that they use them as vehicles to express their inner emotions and sentiments.

When we trace the history of the culture of flowers we find its existence in the civilisations of ancient Egyptian which regarded the lotus flower as sacred and on occasions of religious festivals displayed it and other flowers as a mark of respect and devotion. It was their belief, that their god 'Ra' was born out of the lotus flower. However, in Greece and Rome, the use of flowers was secular rather than religious. Their favourite flower was the rose which they displayed on every occasion. Such was its widespread use that most phrases of daily use referred to it. (Such as "a bed of roses"). As the demand for roses increased, merchants and traders planted a number gardens to meet consumers' demands. Soon, flower shops, emerged in every nook and corner of the cities and vendors started to sell them in the markets and streets. Another important change that took place during this period was that instead of human sacrifice, now flowers were offered to deities, a reflection of how man's bloody nature had changed.

With the decline of the Roman Empire, the culture of flowers also declined. When Christianity replaced the Roman power, it adopted a hostile attitude towards flower culture. The Christian

increased, it no longer remained confined to the nobility but became accessible to the common people. Now, one could see flowering plants in front of shops and in the balconies of house of the common people

In 1554, the Austrian ambassador saw the tulip flower at the court of the Ottomans. He was so impressed by its beauty that he took it to Vienna. In 1560, it was planted in Holland, Belgium, and Germany. In 1778, it was so widely cultivated in Holland that it became its national symbol.

The culture of flowers suffered in England when the Parliament under Cromwell came to power. The Puritans prohibited the use of flowers and perfume in churches. In 1660 an act was passed by the Parliament that warned women not to use flowers and perfumes. The culture reflowered after the restoration of monarchy and as a result of the separation of politics and religion. Secular ideas encouraged the use of flowers while religious extremists made attempts to suppress their use. Later on, industrialization further promoted the culture and made it an important part of modern society's daily life.

Jack Goody writes in his book 'The Culture of Flowers' how in the Indian civilization: "An attractive women's apparel was hardly complete without 'buds, flowers, wreaths, blossoms and tendrils'. Picking flowers was one of Sita's pleasures; her fondness of lotuses, which she places in her hair. Men too wore flowers, especially as garlands which were a favourite bed-time adornment. They were used not only to decorate individuals but also chariots, roads, houses, palaces and even cities. The gift of garlands was connected with courtship and marriage." The Lotus flower, like it was in Egypt, is regarded sacred in Hindu society. It is the favourite flower of Vishnu, Krishna, and Lakshmi. (Now it is a party symbol of the BJP)

However, gradually, the prejudice against flowers and perfumes diminished and in the 9th century, flowers were used for decoration in churches and monasteries. Different flowers became symbols for different ideas and concepts such as an olive for peace and a rose as a symbol of the blood of a martyr evolved. During the Renaissance, the culture of flowers flourished extensively. It became the favourite topic of writers and painters. Such was the enthusiasm that competitive flower exhibitions were organized and nurseries established to produce the best flowers. As the production of flowers

religious extremists, like the early Christian Fathers, condemned the use of flowers for religious as well as for secular purposes. Saiyyed Ismail Shaheed in his "Taqwaiyatul Iman" and "Sirat e Mustaqeem" forbade the use of garlands (Sehra) by the bridegroom in the wedding ceremony.

Interestingly, flowers were widely used in shrines where devotees offered flowers to the graves of Sufi saints. The culture of flowers suffered whenever religious extremists came to power, but flourish in secular environments. observation is correct today.