

## Smell in Blind Everyday

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**Abstract:** European philosophy originating from Plato and Aristotle has arranged the senses hierarchically with sight at the top. Later after Hegel and Descartes the supremacy of sight in human life was emphasized. Aspects of reason, logic and intellect were regarded as “human” in contrast to emotion, feeling and sensory gratification which were regarded as “animalistic”. Sight was associated with intellect and hence was upheld as the human sense, while smell and some other senses were associated with emotion and therefore believed to be animalistic. Although contrasting perspectives were also present, particularly that of Locke, Hume and Marx who emphasized on the role of senses in human life not only as gateway of knowledge but also something as the very core of human existence. Nevertheless, the dominant trend was that of the supremacy of sight in the hierarchy.

India in ancient period largely emphasized on multi-sensuality. In this context, Vyasa, Kalidasa, Vatsayana can be referred to. However later due to the impact of Western modernity and colonial rule, Indian consciousness has largely been dominated by sight and sound. Our lived experiences in everyday life are believed to be mainly mono-sensual (sight) or bi-sensual (sight and sound). In this background this paper would focus on those who lack this “supreme” and “human” sense of vision that is to say the blind persons. This paper aims to explore role of smell in the everyday life of blind students - in their education, in identification of a person or place, in selecting or rejecting a particular food, in getting alarmed of a danger and so on.

In doing this research, in depth interviewing is used as a data collection technique.

Keywords: Smell, Everyday life, Blind, Smellscape, Identification

Introduction – Indriyes or senses are gateway of knowledge. We touch, we taste, we smell, we listen, we see and through these we know. Among these processes sniffing is specifically crucial as it is linked with breathing and therefore with life. However, “sociologists have

rarely researched senses ...” A reason may be that dominant trend in western philosophy and social sciences have regarded sight and sound as linked with logic, human beings and hence with knowledge, while smell, taste and touch have been regarded as connected with emotion and hence animalistic – as if not dependable as sources of knowledge. Marx and prior to him Hobbes, Locke, Hume, although have emphasized on senses as connected with knowledge and something fundamental to human existence. But the dominant trend has either posited senses in opposition to logic and knowledge or at best favoured sight and sound as dependable sources of knowledge. Thus “Hierarchy of the Senses” (as Aristotle and Plato would put it) remained and it’s still influencing not only philosophy but also modes of our experiencing and analyzing our everyday life. India had a multisensory tradition both in literature and in philosophy as Vyasa, Kalidasa, Vatsayan have emphasized senses not only as tools of pleasure but also as significant means of knowledge. However due to colonial rule and western modernity, Indian experiences and philosophy have largely been influenced by the west. As a result, knowingly or unknowingly people become disciples of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Hegel.

Smell in Blind Everyday:

“ - What is your research area?

- Sir, I am trying to work on ‘The Role of Smell in Everyday Life.

- Oh! That’s interesting!!If you don’t mind, do you have any difficulty in your vision?

- Yes, I am partially sighted.

- Oh! Then it’s easy, it’s easier for you.”

This is a conversation in a conference between me and a professor. The underlying thought was that persons who lack one sense are better in other senses. Since I am a partially sighted person, in this view, my other senses are stronger than fully sighted persons. It is a common belief that blind persons have a better sense of smell, that they can smell more than others just because they lack one sense, in this case, the “supreme sense” – sight. I, like many other blind and partially sighted persons, receive these kinds of comments both from non-academicians and academicians in everyday life. Therefore, it is a common social belief. Now, do blind people really have a better sense of smell? What is the role of smell in the blind every day? How does the blind identify persons and places? Does smell help them in the basic requirement of food and security? Do blinds use the sense of smell in their everyday purchases? Is smell a blind stick in their daily commute? I have dealt with these questions in a larger project. However, I would focus on some of these in this paper.

Now, my learned friends, I request you to close your eyes and try to do all those things which are a part of your daily routine, or at least think how you are going to do that without seeing – starting from getting up in the morning, searching for your toothbrush and putting the toothpaste on it, clipping your nails, locating the soap, the shampoo or oil before bathing, cooking or locating spices and other ingredients while cooking, determining what is being served on the plate or which item to select at the bazaar, how to know where there is garbage or a high drain or just the plain road while travelling, and so on and so forth. Let us now focus on how these activities are done without the help of sight. Particularly in this paper, I am focusing on the role of smell in the everyday life of the blind students. This is a larger project to search how the sense of smell works in our everyday life and this paper is only a small part of the project where I have included some blind respondents along with the sighted in order to:

- (a) Make a comparison
- (b) To have a different perspective other than the sighted to understand the role of smell in our everyday life.

Due to lack of time and funding, I have selected a few numbers of blind students. Thus, this paper does not claim generalization but is a humble effort to throw light on the everyday lives of those who lack light.

**Food** – A few years back, we once were attending a guest in our house. My mother served different kinds of sweets on a plate and a glass of water which were arranged on a table. He enquired, “Auntie, what are these?” Our guest was a blind person. Thus, in the case of blind persons, the difficulty starts from the very basic need – to eat. What am I eating, what is the condition of the food, who has cooked it – all these information are conveyed to them often via smell. Though it is true that in warm condition or while cooking smell helps most in identification even from a distance. In the case of a sighted person, the option of vision is available to know what she/he is going to eat. The fear of the unknown often haunts us but we try to solve it more often than not via vision. In the case of blind people, this riddle is often solved with the help of their nose. They smell and get to know, thus making the unknown known. Thus, smell is a medium of knowledge. How it works in the everyday life of the blind, that we will get to know in the course of this paper.

During the interview, in answering my question ‘what can you identify via smell?’, the blind persons, like the sighted, first talked about food items. For example, they identify meat (chicken, mutton, beef), rice, fried egg and some other home-made items through smell. They can also differentiate via smell food cooked at home and food brought from restaurants, like biriyani. All these responses are very common in my sighted respondents too. Now, very interestingly, the blind respondents can identify food items like rice, roti, fried brinjals, saag, kheer, cheese, suji and many others only via the sense of smell which my sighted respondents could not do. So, “strong smells” and “occasional smells” can be identified by both the sighted and the blind. But along with that, the blind persons can also identify the food items of their day-to-day meal like roti, saag, suji. It is often argued that people generally do not identify the habitual or mild smell, but in the case of the blind, they perfectly identify their everyday habitual smells. Thus, the logic of getting habituated with a particular smell and hence not identifying it has been challenged by the blind respondents.

Regarding the condition of food – whether it can be identified by smell or not – there are three questions –

- (a) Whether the food is burnt or not
- (b) Whether the food is fresh/preserved or rotten
- (c) Whether the food is perfectly boiled or not.

In answering the first, all the respondents have answered in the affirmative, whether blind or sighted. Many respondents identify fresh, rotten or preserved condition of food via smell but in the case of the blind it is not many but all. One respondent comment, “I can differentiate between the rice cooked yesterday and the rice cooked today...as it smells.” Very few sighted persons can identify via smell whether or not the food is perfectly boiled. But most of the blind respondents smell and can determine whether the food is perfectly boiled or not. Interestingly, “Every taste has a smell, sweet/sour” - a student of 27 observed. Finally, blind persons judge, accept or reject food on olfactory basis. “One day, the chicken served for lunch was unclean – it smelled of blood. I immediately put it aside and went away” – said a 22-year-old student. For the readers, this person is staying in a hostel for years and knew that after rejecting the chicken he will not have many other options. Moreover, he does not cook, so the logic that a person who cooks has a better idea about the condition of food does not

hold true for him. He recognized that the meat was not washed properly and there was blood after the entire process of cooking was over.

Thus, smell is a medium of knowledge and in the case of blind persons it is judgmental in their everyday lives – starting from the very basic need to eat. Their identification definitely gives birth to impression – “what smells good is good” and “what smells bad is bad” (Synnott 1993: 190). The story does not end here as in turn, “what is good smells good” and “what is bad smells bad” (Synnott 1991: 444). So, in the case of the blind person, the relation between smell and food is not just a gustatory thing or aspect of pleasure, but it is the determining factor.

**Everyday Purchase:** “Smell tells me that the bazaar has started. As I move forward, I know the fish market; vegetables send me the message through the mixed smell of water and leaves. I turn around and there is the butcher shop. Smell informs me that I do not have to move any further as the bazaar has ended.” This is a 21-year-old student. To contextualize this experience, just recall yours. The blind persons depend a lot on their sense of smell and often it is the prime sense in their everyday purchase. “The smell of rice, daal and oil tell me that I am near a grocery shop” – says another respondent. In these ways smell helps blind to conduct their everyday purchases.

Among all the products, fruits are something where smell is the determining factor in purchase. Fruit is followed by bread and cake and white meat is at the bottom of the list and the percentage of fish and vegetables is also very low. The reason may be fruits, cakes and to a large extent breads, are eaten in that very form. As we eat these products in their original form (generally without cooking) so there lies a direct connection between the consumer and the consumed. Therefore, smell becomes the determining factor in purchase. But objects like meat, fish and vegetables are often cooked with other items, i.e., other vegetables, spices and added flavor. So, there is a complete olfactory metamorphosis. Smell has an indirect relationship with this product as we smell these in a cooked form; we get a manipulated smell as lots of other smells are consciously used to take precision over the original smell of these items. So, when people purchase these items, smell becomes secondary. However, even here smell is important at a basic level to determine whether the food is rotten or fresh. For example, one respondent comments regarding fish, “The smell detects its freshness” while another comments on fruits, “Oh! In the case of fruits, it is the deciding factor.” People often

sniff out rottenness rather than freshness because the former is generally strong smelling while the latter smells mild. So here positivity is derived from negativity (what is not rotten is fresh). This holds true for both sighted and blind persons. In the case of sighted persons, smell is important along with other factors while in the case of few items like fruits, it plays the determining role. However, in the case of blind persons from locating the particular shop in the entire bazaar to choosing a particular item and in determining whether to buy it or not, smell guides them in this entire process.

In the purchase of some other products like beauty products, toiletries, perfumes/deodorants, smell plays a key role. In the case of perfumes and deodorants, predictably, smell is the “main factor”, whether it is the sighted person or the blind. However, in the case of beauty products or toiletries, smell is an important factor along with other factors for the sighted person. But for the blind, almost all the respondents said that fragrance is the main factor in determining the purchase. The reason may be that it is smell through which they relate to products. Smell provides them with information about the product and it becomes the identity of the product. Thus, for the sighted person, factors like advertisements, effects on the skin, aspects of look and touch play crucial roles while purchasing a particular product. For the blind persons, smell is the decisive factor in everyday purchases because it not only determines the freshness of the product but also helps to choose the best among the better ones as smell provides the entire information about the product to them. Thus, for the blind, smell controls their pocket.

**Identification:** “That we smell the atmosphere of somebody is the most intimate perception of that person” (Simmel 1908/2009: 578). In my research I also found reflection of Simmel’s comment. In or everyday life, we sniff out each other. “*Maayer Gondho*” or the mother’s smell is often identified by individuals. Apart from that, sighted persons do identify few other individuals by their smell – father, spouse or that person who has a special, often foul, smell. “My uncle stinks. When I was a child, he would love to tease me by grabbing me around the waist and planting sloppy kisses on my cheeks, inevitably making me inhale his bodily odor which was, to say the least, a never-failing source of near asphyxiation...I made up my mind not to like him very much” (Low 2009:1). Blind persons smell various individuals accurately in their everyday lives.

Blind persons depend a lot on their sense of smell in their everyday life. They identify individuals, groups, professions, spaces, festivals, seasons and many aspects through smell. The following sections will try to explore some of these above-mentioned aspects in relation to smell in blind every day.

**Individuals:** “We are all constantly emitting and perceiving odors, smelling and being smelled; and these odors play important roles virtually in every area of social interaction” (Synnott 1993: 182). They can recognise mother, father, siblings, friends, lover, etc., via the sense of smell. In a famous test, new born babies were kept in a room full of breast-feeding mothers and from all the women they accurately identified their own mothers by their smells. In our study we have found that blind persons can identify almost every one of their acquaintances by smell. “The doorbell rang, I received a smell and knew who it was”, said a student of twenty-one. Another respondent comments, “My history teacher has a specific smell. He again remarked “when I am waiting for someone, I get to know from a distance that the person is approaching, pioneered by her smell. As the smell intensifies, I know that she is nearing.” An ex-student of Ramkrishna Mission Blind Boy’s Academy, Narendrapur, recalls, “Sanyashis carry a smell of incense in Narendrapur.” Among our relationships friendship takes a significant role through our entire life. For sighted person visual cues are crucial in choosing a friend and maintaining friendship. But for a blind person it is non-visual ones. For example, smell helps to construct an image of a person which influences to establish and the entire journey of friendship. “As I cannot see, smell helps me to recognize friends” – an university student comments. Just as blind persons identify individuals known to them via smell, similarly, smell sends the message of unknown and an unidentified individual smell means to them a stranger. Thus, smell has a key role in indentifying individuals as each individual has a distinct and unique olfactory identity to the blind.

**Space:** Blind persons also recognise space – home, road, transport, workplace, food corners and many others as well through olfaction. “Everything has a distinct smell. The road from the hostel to my department has a smell – smell of specific trees, the building has a smell, my department on the second floor has a distinct smell. My HOD’s room smells of air-conditioning. I know the toilet via smell. As I come back, the smell tells me about Sujit Da’s canteen and I know I have arrived at my hostel” – this is a student of Jadavpur University. In

the above-mentioned way, he reaches his workplace and comes back each and every day. Smell guides him in his entire journey, smell is the blind's stick.

“Home has a smell of my dog and the room freshener, Baramashi's (elder maternal aunt) place has a special smell, Grandfather's house smells of flowers and fruits” – a twenty years old student said. Another respondent comments, “From smell I came to know about the residents of that house – whether a newly married couple or an old couple live there. The fragrance of Johnsons tells me that there is a baby in this house” (a student). Thus, blind persons can smell different stages of life. They can recognise a festival and can differentiate between a marriage and a funeral through their noses. A temple, a hospital or a private nursing home and other places are also recognised via smell.

“Sickrooms have a smell and a recovering patient's room smells different.” Thus, each institution, festival and different bodily states of a single individual has a distinct smell. Actually, each physical space, the activities going on there, the individuals who are and were present, even the season and a lot many other factors culminate and construct the smellscape of that space which people identify, recognise and build an image upon.

Smell is a source of knowledge and a mode of guidance for the blinds. For example, a blind student comments, “College Street has a particular smell, Jadavpur station smells of onions, Dhakuria station smells of the toilet, each local train has a specific smell – I can recognise Budge Budge local via smell and differentiate it from Laxmikantapur local and Canning local.” To put this comment in context, Ballygunge station is a junction where all these above-mentioned local trains come from and pass through different locations following distinct railway lines and there is ample scope for a newcomer to get misled and reach a completely different part of the state. In this critical scenario, the above-mentioned comment is very significant and it proves the potentiality of smell and how it guides the blind persons in their everyday journey. Let me conclude this section with the following remark – “It was a long day in the department. When I was coming back, I was hungry and tired. I was in search but initially I could not locate it. I became sad and was walking slowly. Suddenly I received the smell of ‘singara’(a spicy snacks item). I got excited, my hopes went up, I followed the smell and reached the destination. Yes, it was a sweetshop. I filled my stomach and yes, I was happy.” Thanks to his nose.

**Group:** “There is no doubt that the surrounding layer of air scents every person in a characteristic way. And in fact, it is essential to the olfactory impression...towards the subject as liking it, disliking it, and towards the object, as recognising it...” (Simmel 1908/2009: 577). In spite of rigorous efforts of modern social actors to perfume their body, smell is something very unique of individuals, often providing social messages on his or her identity. Smell is a dimension of identifying, stratifying, constructing and reconstructing individual and group identity. However, at the base, smell at first is a medium of knowledge. We smell class, caste, gender, race, space, region, occupation and religion. Segregations are made not just in terms of occupation but also in terms of olfaction.

“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 garments of those that work in them. Thus, I can distinguish the carpenter from the ironworker, the artist from the mason or the chemist. When a person passes quickly from one place to another, I get a scent impression of where he has been – the kitchen, the garden or the sick-room...human odors are as varied and as capable of recognition as hands and faces. “The dear odors of those I love are so definite, so unmistakable, that nothing can quite obliterate them” (Keller 2006: 132).

In my research I have also found that my blind respondents identify profession, gender, class, ethnicity, religion and so on in terms of smell.

- **Profession:** If a person works with certain objects in a particular place for years or for a long time then the smell of that object, place often envelopes her/him and gives a distinct smell through which his /her profession can easily be identified. This identification gives birth to impression, effecting everyday interaction. The following section will uncover the social nature of smell. In the context of profession, one respondent comments, “By the smell of fish, I recognize fish-mongers, from the shoe-polish –cobblers, toilet-cleaners can be easily identified through smell.” Another student recalls, “From the smell of books, naphthalene, I know that the person was in the library for a long time.”
- **Gender:** There is an existing social construct that women are fragrant or sweet smelling while men smell of sweat (bread winners’ role) denoting their respective “social roles”. Although increasing number of male bodies are becoming perfumed bodies and many women are now in paid work still this gendered binary exists in

terms of olfaction. How far this is everyday experience or how far this is perception that is difficult to prove. However, the following responses of my respondents reflect the binary itself. “Sweat means male while perfume means female”, a student of nineteen years said. Another respondent comments, “By smell I know whether the approaching person is a man or woman.” The olfactory gender stereotype is well explained by Anthony Synnott “Men are supposed to smell of sweat, whisky and tobacco...women, presumably, are supposed to smell good, clean, pure and attractive” (Synnott 1991a: 449).

Since we are talking about experiences of blind persons Helen Keller’s experience becomes very significant. Acknowledging her gendered location, the following comment not only expresses the social construct of olfaction but gives us much deeper understanding of masculine smell. Helen Keller comments, Masculine exhalations are as a rule stronger, more vivid, more widely differentiated than those of women. In the odor of young men there is something elemental, as of fire, storm and sea-salt. It pulsates with buoyancy and desire. It suggests all things strong and beautiful and joyous and gives me a sense of physical happiness (Keller 2006: 183).

- **Religion and Ethnicity:** The process of smelling is a political one. As often smell becomes a medium of marginalization. People expresses their delight or disgust while sniffing out other as people are otherized through and for smell. “...many alleged odors of groups are related with stereotyped notions about their moral laxity. For example, Pakistanis in Britain are described by a London dockworker (Time, May 20, 1970, p.38) in the following way: “They seem passive and weak. They smell, don’t they?” Similarly, an American white may be heard speaking of the “stench of niggers”, suggesting that it arises from their failure to bathe and follow “decent human standards” and because they “live like pigs” (Largey and Watson 1972: 1023).

Smell helps the blind person to recognise a person’s religion, which state or region she/he is from, which can and do affect interaction and relationships. A blind cricketer who represents the state (Bengal) identified and expressed his disgust in the following way – “After playing, people from different states

have different sweat smells, especially boys from MP (Madhya Pradesh) and Maharashtra.” Moreover, he identifies “Hindustani women, Bihari, Santhal” – people via smell. Another respondent comments, “Muslims have a smell.” Often people from different religious communities identify, otherise or marginalise each other on the basis of smell. For example, Muslims are often identified in terms of the smell of garlic or ittara and otherised by non-Muslims. Thus, smell is a medium of identification and representation of group identity.

- **Class:** George Orwell has argued that smell is the “real secret of class distinction”. In his words, “The real secret of class distinctions in the West...is summed up in four frightful words... The lower classes smell...” (cited in Synnott 1991:445)

Orwell again comments – “I do not blame the working man because he stinks, but stink he does. It makes social intercourse difficult to persons of sensitive nostril. The matutinal tub divides the classes more effectively than birth, wealth or education” (Orwell 1937: 161).

People identify each other’s class via olfaction. Whether the person smells of sweat, manure, perfume blind persons can identify and do place each individual in a specific class position. Not only the present condition, but also where the person previously was and what s/he is up to. “From the smell of my classmates I know who they are and how they have reached the department. If there is a smell of sweat or sweat mixed with perfume, it means that they have travelled a long way by a local train or by bus. If they smell fresh or smell of perfume only then it means s/he has travelled by car and s/he is well-off”, says a student pursuing post-graduation.

Actually, each class has a smell association – to some extent physical and also social. Largey and Watson comment in this context – “...it would be rare to find a steelworker who dabbed himself with cologne before going off to work. By the same token, a white-collar worker may be heard of expressing a repugnance towards those “who emit a stinky smell” or those who “smell like a farmer” – dirty and unclean. And his before-work ritual is more likely to include odorizing himself with cologne” (Largey and Watson 1972: 1023). Thus, both the blind and the sighted identify people in terms of their class via olfaction.

In our research we have found that people do “sniff each other out, literally as well as figuratively” (Synnott 1991). Smell is a source of knowledge as individuals do determine each other’s identity in terms of olfaction. Yes, for the sighted it is crucial, or it is perhaps believed to play a key role but smell is not only important but the determining factor of group identity for blind persons. Sight can and does mislead but smell is a trustworthy friend. As one sighted respondent comments, “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. However, when she came near, I got a sweet mild fragrance and thus instantly knew that she belonged to a high class.” However, the blind persons do not have this option, and yes, sound can and does play a role, but from a distance or if there is no interaction, or in initial interactions, it is difficult to know one’s group position and identity (apart from gender) only through sound. In all these scenarios, smell plays a principal and determining role in blind world as they do sniff out an individual’s class, gender, regional, religious and professional identity.

The effect of everyday lived experience of an individual facilitates the blind in their everyday. For example, if a blind person is walking on a foreign street and needs a cobbler immediately, how would he find one? He might walk here and there and when he receives the smell of leather and shoe polish; he knows his destination is near. Thus, the everyday life of the cobbler gives him a distinct smell and that very smell facilitates the blind person and helps him to fulfill his need in his everyday life. Hence, the smell one has from his everyday helps another in his every day.

**Security:** Situation 1 – Just imagine, you are driving on a highway, smoothly, suddenly you get a burning smell, or the smell of petrol or diesel. What would you do? Yes, you would get alarmed, stop the car as soon as possible, open the bonnet, check the parts, the oil tank (if there is any leakage); then if you cannot manage, you would go in search of a mechanic immediately.

Situation 2 – You are relaxing at home; your nostril encounters a burning smell. You would rise immediately, rush to the kitchen (check the gas cylinder, oven, etc.). You would check all the wires of your house and search the immediate surroundings.

In both situations 1 and 2, no other sense but the sense of smell alarms you and threatens your security. The sense of security is re-established only when the alarming smell gets or is getting removed. The relationship between smell and security is thus universal; however, it takes a special dimension in the blind every day.

Ariff was going to his new tuition from his hostel for the first day. He is generally a very smooth mover on the streets. As he was in search of his new tutor's home, he suddenly stopped and retreated – the reason being he smelled danger. Actually, he received the smell of garbage mixing with water coming from an open drain. This caused him to change his course. It was until that moment when he could no longer smell the high-drain that he felt relieved, secure and took the right path. Thus, smell helps the blind in road security.

Smell and security take a significant dimension in the blind person's life. Smell is linked with their aspirations and ambitions. One respondent with a glowing face promisingly comments, "I love the smell of books as these have brought me so far and these books brought me to Jadavpur University." To put things in context as to why smell and security have an inseparable connection and is crucial for the blind, one must understand the dependency of the disabled. A blind person in his or her initial stage of blindness is often solely or highly dependent on others. Gradually through his efforts and training he tries to overcome this dependency as far as possible. But there are some areas where a blind is always dependent, partly because of physical reasons and largely because of social and institutional reasons. One of these key areas, or perhaps the key area of dependency, is dependency for one's career. A blind is dependent on others for reading and writing – the two basic pillars of education. In later stages the reading part can be done to some extent through the use of modern technology but for the other one, the blind remains dependent – dependent on his amanuensis or writer. The amanuensis often is not fixed, it is ever changing. Every now and then, sometimes for each examination, a blind encounter a different amanuensis. Often s/he gets acquainted with the person on that day or just before the exam starts. It is the blind who has to adjust with the skill, speed, mood, mentality, educational ability of his/her writer, often during the examination. His entire preparation for a year or years is dependent on a completely unknown

individual. Although it is often difficult to prove but he might not get the reward she/he deserves because of the lack of the ability or intention of the writer. I think an incident, for example, would be sufficient to represent the scenario. One blind student got zeroes in all the papers in his Madhyamik examination. As he was confident enough, he challenged and to his utter despair discovered that all his papers were just blank or only scribbles on them after he had spoken so much during the examination. This student had paid Rs. 2000 twenty years back, then a hefty amount, to his writer with that result achieved (information received from the Blind Persons Association). In this hard world, that is the reason why the blind student feels such insecurity at the time of examinations. Their entire career is dependent largely on others, specifically on writers. In this scenario, the following comment represents the value of smell to the blind: “When the pen of the writer is going on the paper, the smell of ink tells me that my answer is in full flow and when the smell has intensified, I know my answer has struck the right note.”

**Smell and the New:** Just like the smell of one’s residence (particularly when coming back from a long trip or a hectic day at work) gives a feeling of security, similarly, a new smell makes social actors inquisitive in anticipation. The everyday, habitual smell comforts or soothes a person, but it can also cause boredom and there is always an underlying need to explore something new. The new smell often elevates a person – be it a new food item, a new place to visit or a new person in life.

Manoj stays in the Jadavpur University hostel. During a vacation, he went home and was pleased with the known smells of his house, his mother’s cooking. But while entering his room he sniffed here and there and asked his mother, “Ma, what is new in my room?” It was a surprise gift for him – a bag from his parents – which he anticipated through smell. Thus, smell makes the unknown known.

Like a new object, the smell of new a subject also delights them. Whether it is a new friend, a new member in the family (bride) or a new born baby – the blind person can recognise it immediately.

If a person’s presence is unknown to them, they would definitely know it just by the presence of a new smell before interacting. “Soon after the wedding when the bride takes a bath for the next few days, she has a very specific smell which I like.” This respondent also recognises a breast-feeding mother from the way she smells. “If a mother breast-feeds her child, there is a

specific smell post that period from her body, her clothes.” “Biyer Gandha” or the smell of marriage is often recognised or memorised by many. One respondent comment – “During my cousin’s marriage, I recognise, I got the smell of marriage even after ten days.” Individuals both blind and sighted receive the new smell but the blinds smell it more accurately, vividly and in an in-depth way which the sighted cannot or do not bother with altogether. The new in the habitual everyday life comes to the blind via smell.

Just think of travelling, which is an important part of our life, it involves moving out of the routinized every day, getting reinforced and coming back to the routine. Imagine, on a trip, we often talk about “seeing the place” or “sight-seeing”. For the blind, “seeing” is absent. Thus, they go to listen, feel, smell and touch the place, often the new place reaches to them through its smellscape and in this process, the first message saying that they have reached the place is often conveyed via smell. One respondent talked about the smell of the mountain, the changing smell of the air. Thus, the relation between a blind person and something new is often established through his nostrils.

### **Conclusion: Smell as a Gateway of Knowledge**

Smell is not only a domain of pleasure and hedonism but also, and more importantly, a gateway of knowledge. Smell is indispensable to human life. If we want, we may close our eyes, try to shut our ears (with our fingers or with cotton), opt not to taste or touch, but we cannot stop smelling. In order to live, we must breathe and if we breathe, we will smell. As we cannot stop breathing, so we cannot stop smelling. The act of smelling starts at birth and ends only with death.

Smell tells many a tale of our everyday life. “Odor is many things: a boundary marker, a status symbol, a distance maintainer, an impression management technique, a schoolboy’s joke or protest and a danger – signal – but it is above all a statement of who one is. Odors define the individual and the group...and mediates social interaction” (Synnott 1991: 438).

Throughout the paper I have tried to sniff out blind every day and discuss the role of smell in various aspects of their life from identification of an object or space to constructing individual and group identity. I have found that in areas of security, travel and recognizing the new, the osmology of blind every day is specifically significant.

Since my research included both sighted and blind persons, I discovered that contrary to popular belief sighted persons do follow their nose in various areas of their everyday life. As many of them remarked after the interview that they themselves were unaware about their immense dependency on smell because of the perceived supremacy of sight inculcated through socialization, sighted persons generally trust their vision more than other senses. Even if they know, judge, choose through their nose, they do not depend on it as they think that it is their vision which is paramount while blind persons are aware of their dependency on their sense of smell.

Sight and to some extent hearing are considered as sources of knowledge while smell and other senses are linked to emotion and as if contrary to logic and knowledge. In this paper I have tried to give an account of how smell helps blind persons to know and act upon in their everyday life. At the end I argue that Smelling is Knowing.

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