

Prodigal Son: A Return to India

Coconut oil: India's Brylcreem

Earlier today, as I sat morosely patting the emerging bald spot on the back of my head which my 10-year old son viciously brought to my attention after I told him to work on his equivalent fractions, I began to wonder if my broken love affair with coconuts was to blame for the thinning of what was once an impenetrable thicket envied by one and by all.

Indians love a good coconut. We like them green, lopping off their tops with the careless flick of a rusty machete, sucking out the water, and slurping up the tender insides like maniacal shamans feasting on monkey brains in a Steven Spielberg movie. We like them brown, ripping off their tough external husk to reveal a three-eyed shell containing the basic ingredient for exotic Indian dishes. We use every part of the coconut – the water is used to restore electrolytes, the meat is used in cooking, the shell is used for artwork, and the fibrous outer casing (called "coir") is the raw material for ropes, carpets, mattress stuffing, and doormats.

Hindus will break a coconut every chance they get as a propitious offering to the gods. But of all the uses of the coconut, it is the oil that I recall most vividly from my childhood.

Coconut oil is India's hair gel of choice. At least it was for South Indians when I was young. Northern India seemed to prefer amla (gooseberry) oil – a pungent, radioactive green, luminescent liquid capable of inducing migraines in anyone within 50 feet. I have also heard tell of olive, sesame, and shikakai oils being used, but thankfully, have no direct experience with them.

When I was growing up in Delhi, my mother would pour four tablespoons of Parachute Brand Narayal ka Thayle (coconut oil) on my head every day before school and vigorously massage it in till every strand of my hair glistened in the morning sun and the faint smell of coconut pina colodas wafted gently from my being. She assured me, with no supporting evidence, that this daily ritual would make my hair rich and thick for the rest of my life. This, of course, is the same mother who once powdered my head with the now-banned carcinogenic insecticide, DDT, to get rid of a suspected invasion of lice.



I used to hate having coconut oil in my hair. It made my face greasy. If I tried to pat on some Ponds talcum powder (another Indian favorite) to absorb the oil slick, I ended up looking like a confused Kabuki dancer. Plus, if I ever jauntily ran a hand through my curly locks, I couldn't grip bus railings – deadly when jumping from one Delhi Transportation Corporation (DTC) bus to another. As soon as I left Delhi for college and the United States, I stopped using coconut oil.

Now, I'm now beginning to wonder if my mother was right.

Middle class India seems to have largely given up on traditional approaches to hair management. The rich smell of coconut now emanates from roadside restaurants rather than people. Television advertising extols the virtues of western styling gels which, as Yuvraj - a star cricket player - tells it, "baal ko soft banaaye" ("makes hair soft").

And, now, an epidemic of emerging male pattern baldness looms, presenting yet another dark repercussion of wanton globalization.

I think I'm going to introduce my son to the joys of coconut oil. Four tablespoons every morning, kneaded in with love. And if he objects, I can always point, as he did, to the back of my head.

Posted by Madhu Rao at December 22, 2008 12:41 a.m.

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