

In Kannauj, hope in a bottle

India is the world's largest exporter of attar, but the olfactory art and science inspired by Nur Jahan's love for the damask rose has changed in its profile from a high-end personal indulgence to an industry additive. Soma Basu goes on a sniffathon to discover the city in Uttar Pradesh that revels in the recognition and revenue of the trade



The traditional hydrodistillation equipment used in making attar. | Photo Credit: Richard Kujur

In Kannauj's Bara Bazaar, where people, pattering vehicles, and buffaloes mix in labyrinthine streets, thumb-sized glass bottles of lightly coloured liquid are everywhere. In rows of shops — even those selling shoes, clothes, utensils, and groceries — the shiny made-in-China bottles are proof of a booming business. Punctuating the lanes are century-old perfumeries housed in decrepit ancestral havelis, ancient scents wafting out of their half-open wooden doors. Attar, distilled extracts of flowers and herbs in a base of sandalwood oil, got its geographical indication (GI) tag a decade ago, but like **Kannauj** itself, a city just 130 km from Uttar Pradesh's capital Lucknow, and spread across just 8 sq km, was beginning to feel tired.

That changed this September, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave out gifts representing India's heritage to G-20 dignitaries. Kannauj's attar, in two fragrances — the pink damask rose native to the region and the earthy petrichor — were made for the occasion, and presented in embellished glass bottles.