

SKIN SCIENCE

Forest Essentials's brand new sheet masks bring Ayurveda into the present in a unique, unprecedented way, and Bazaar gets an exclusive look at the product

By Divrina Dhingra

It can be disconcerting to have a stranger determine some of the traits that you've always thought of as fairly personal, just by looking at your face. But that's exactly what happened at skincare brand Forest Essentials's headquarters in the Uttarakhand hills. In under an hour, their consulting Ayurvedic doctor, Dr Akanksha Kotibhushan, could tell that I dislike the cold, am prone to a sore throat and backaches, love bread, and ask too many questions. Apparently, that is how *doshas* manifest themselves. I am a mix of *vata* (air) and *pitta* (fire). To balance the two, she recommends regular oil massages and moderate quantities of ghee—I am a fan of both. If I wasn't previously entirely convinced by Ayurveda, I am definitely a believer now.

According to Ayurveda, the body is constituted of three elements: *Vata* or air and ether, *pitta* or fire, and *kapha*, a mix of earth and water, and the goal is to achieve balance, for good health and skin. That has been Forest Essentials's manifesto since the company was founded in 2000. Each of their 220 products comes from the wealth of knowledge found in Ayurvedic texts that date back to 200 BCE. The difference, of course, is that they have been modernised in their textures and fragrances; ease of use is a big part of the brand's 'luxurious Ayurveda' tagline.

We see this again in their latest launch: Sheet masks. Not only are they the first Indian brand to make what is perhaps the trendiest product in the beauty market, they are also the only one in the world to introduce Ayurveda to this Korean practice. Three versions set to launch this month promise hydration, skin brightening, and age arresting.

So just how do the two seemingly incompatible practices—edgy Korean and ancient Indian skincare—come together?

"Most Eastern cultures have a skincare tradition that includes masks. In India, we have used *lep*, usually made of clay. In fact, a version of the 'sheet mask' has existed for centuries, where banana fibre or wood pulp was infused with Ayurvedic *kashyams*—decoctions of herbs, and used for the face or body," explains Mira Kulkarni, managing director of the brand.

Making these ancient skincare solutions accessible has always been a prime motivation for Kulkarni whose own skin, at age 62, is testament to the efficacy of the products. From the first lot of handmade soaps made with honey and beeswax to the recent Rasa and Tejal hydrating water duo, this philosophy is always in evidence.

"I believe in balance, and in looking good to feel good," she says. "The importance of pure, fresh, and natural ingredients is something we have always known about, and maybe even taken for granted. Now, it's fashionable again."

The best place to see the slow processes that honour the brand's philosophy is at their manufacturing unit in Lodi, Uttarakhand, which sits on a sun dappled hillside at 1,100 ft.

Inside the network of rooms where the Forest Essentials's botanical actives are made, time slows down a little. There are no machines at all. Instead, in the large, sunlit room, you see mud stoves and huge 200-litre ▶



Mira Kulkarni,
Founder and MD,
Forest Essentials

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iron *karahis*, a traditional *deg* and *bhapka* distillation set-up, wicker baskets, 50-litre brass drums, and glass jars full of sugared rose petals, raw turmeric, pulses, dried herbs, and orange peels. Two men sit over a massive pot that holds a slurry for one of the brand's signature soaps, stirring it continuously until it is the right consistency. In another room, a woman rhythmically pounds together the ingredients for *ubtan* in a mortar and pestle that's as tall as she is, never missing a beat. Everything is done at an even, measured pace. If there were a poster for Slow Beauty, this would be it.

Everything in Ayurveda that relates to beauty stresses ritual and slow progress, and because we live in an era of tall claims, had I not seen the elaborate processes behind the slick-looking serums and whipped creams, I might have remained a skeptic. The Ojas, Sundari, and Tejasvi masks, made using Indian and Korean know-how, are an all-new level of East-meets-West beauty in the best way.

The masks contain active ingredients and concentrates that are prepared using processes prescribed in the ancient texts. For example *shata-dhauta-ghrita*, or ghee washed 100 times over to make it easily absorbed by skin, which can then benefit from the omega 3 and 6 fatty acids as well as vitamins and conjugated linoleic acid found in cow's ghee.

The process takes 10 days, but the Ojas age-arresting mask takes me barely a minute to apply, and another 20 minutes till I can feel how much softer it has made my skin. The cotton sheet is thick, as is the emulsion it is dipped in, which has a lotion-like consistency. The Sundari hydrating mask has a clear gel base and the aloe vera in it works marvellously to revive my chlorine-parched skin after a long swim.

Ayurveda, according to Dr Kotibhushan, views skin as the “site of *vata*, and therefore always requiring hydration”. Happily, modern science concurs with this theory.

Sheet masks work on a simple principal, as dermatologist Dr Kiran Lohia explains. “They are basically cotton sheets that are infused with humectants—ingredients that draw water to the skin—and because the sheet forms an occlusive barrier, the absorption of the moisture is improved considerably, and that really is the most important thing for good, healthy skin.”

Throw in the fact the Forest Essentials masks are also full of organic botanicals, and they deserve a place in every beauty regimen.

“I can't imagine a 20-step skincare routine, and my own is extremely simple, but I have begun using the masks. If you find something that does make a difference, why not adopt it? In the end, we all just want skincare that works,” says Kulkarni. We couldn't agree more. ■

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