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BANAFŠA

BANAFŠA (Mid. Pers. *wanafšag*, arabicized as *banafsaj*; cf. the cognate Kurd. *wunawša*, Māzandarāni *vanūše*, Semnāni *benowša*, etc., and the Armenian loanword *manušak*), common name for the genus *Viola* L. in New Persian.

Of the very large group of violas distributed in temperate regions of the northern hemisphere, A. Parsa, *Flore* I, "Violaceae," pp. 956-70, lists and describes the following 16 species as native to Iran: 1. *Viola alba* Besser.; 2. *V. armena* Boiss. & Huet; 3. *V. cinera* Boiss.; 4. *V. ebracteola* Fenzl (= *V. modesta* Fenzl var. *parviflora* Fenzl); 5. *V. hymettia* Boiss. & Heldr.; 6. *V. kitaibelina* Roem. & Shult (= *V. tricolor* L. var. *kitaibelina* Ledeb.); 7. *V. modesta* Fenzl; 8. *V. occulta* Lehm.; 9. *V. odorata* L.; 10. *V.pachyrrhiza* Boiss. & Hoh.; 11. *V. riviniana* Reich.; 12. *V. silvestris* (Lam.) Reichb. (= *V. caspica* Freyn., and the var. *mesenderana* Freyn. & Sint); 13. *V. sintenisii* W. Bekr; 14. *V. spathulata* Willd.; 15. *V. suavis* M.B. (= *V. odorata* L. var. *suavis* Boiss.); 16. *V. tricolor* L. var. *arvensis* Murr. (In the 7 published vols. of A. Ghahreman's *Flore de l'Iran*, vol. I, no. 40, a new variety, *V. spathulata* Willd. var. *latifolia* Ghahreman, and vol. VI, no. 748, the species *V. stockssi* Boiss. are also found.) Details about these species and varieties may be found in these works. In this article only the *V. odorata* L. and the *V. tricolor* L. will be discussed.

The *Viola odorata* (or some other odoriferous species and varieties popularly assimilated to it), called simply *banafša* or sometimes *banafša-ye īrānī* "Iranian violet" (in contradistinction to *banafša(-ye) farangī* "European violet" i.e., pansy; see below) or *banafša-ye moʿaṭṭar/ʿaṭr* "the fragrant violet," grows wild in Iran, typically in out-of-the-way shady cool spots both on high and low lands

almost everywhere where climatic conditions are favorable, but, reportedly, it is particularly abundant in Rostamābād (in Gīlān), in Kandavān valley (near Čālūs), in the forest around Rāmsar, and in the woods in Gorgān (for Gorgān, see A. Ḵalīqī, p. 365; cf. *banafša-ye ṭabarī* "the violet native to Ṭabarestān," sometimes used in classical Persian poetry to designate it). An old favorite in Iran, this violet is already mentioned in the *Bundahišn* (tr. Anklesaria, 16.13, pp. 148-49) among plants having sweet-scented blossoms and (16A.2, pp. 152-53) is said to belong to [the Īzad] Tīr. In the text *King Xusraw and His Boy* (par. 82) it is said that the scent of violets is like the scent of girls.

Violets, whether *Viola odorata* or others, are not necessarily violet in color: hues ranging from white to deep, blackish purple (including yellow, blue, lilac, dark blue [*kabūd*], violet, etc.) have been reported. Some earlier historical evidence to this effect can be found in Persian literature and in some works on materia medica: a white violet is attested in the poetry of Manūčehrī Dāmḡānī (d. 432/1040-41; *Dīvān*, ed. M. Dabīrsīāqī, 5th ed., Tehran, 1363 Š./1984, p. 207); the (dark) blue vault of heaven has been qualified by some as *banafšagūn* "violet-colored," and Bīrūnī (362-440/973-1048) quotes Būlos (i.e., Paulus Aeginata, fl. 640) as having written, "Some people use the oil from the purple [*banafsaj*], some that from the saffron-colored one, and some that from the white one" (*Ṣaydana*, p. 102; see also below on the color implications in reference to the hair on the head and the down on the face of poets' sweethearts).

From certain botanical features of violas there have developed some violet-based similes and metaphors in classical Persian literature. The peculiar corollas of violets or, perhaps, a bunch of these suggest ringlets, disheveled or curly hair, or a loose lock of hair. This feature plus the blackish purple color of some varieties, with or without the idea of fragrance, have formed the basis for such a metaphor as *banafša* : hair, and for such similes as *banafša-mūy/zolf* "having violety hair," referring to the hair of some poets' sweethearts. The poet Qāʾānī Šīrāzī (d. 1270/1853), in the opening distich of a picturesque *mosammaṭ* (*Dīvān*, Tehran, 1363 Š./1984, pp. 669-71), has this further heightened comparison for violets: "Violets have grown on brooksides as if the houries of Paradise had loosened their hair" (*gosasta ḥūr-eʿīn ze zolf-e ḵᵛīš tārhā*). The bluish gray hue of some other varieties has resulted in similes such as *banafša-ʿāreż/ʿeḏār* "having violety cheeks/face," referring to the grayish nascent down on the cheeks and upper lip of the poet's (imaginary) adolescent inamorato (these similes are often chromatically enhanced by a contrast to the

color of the cheeks/face compared to *lāla* “[rosy] tulip” or *saman* “[white] jasmine”).

Also typically, violets are low-growing plants with inconspicuous, humble, pensive-looking (cf. the etymology of *pansy*, *Viola tricolor*, in English) flowers which, in some species, slightly bend on their stalks, as if looking down for shame. Further, they seem to prefer secluded, shady spots (underbrush, hedges, cracks in alpine rocks, etc.), almost overshadowed by neighboring vegetation. A certain combination of these features has given rise in Persian literature to three romantic associations of ideas: (1) modesty, bashfulness, humility; (2) neglectfulness; (3) neglect, regret, sorrowfulness, mournfulness (an Arab author quoted by Šehāb-al-Dīn Aḥmad Nowayrī, 677-733/1278-1332, *Nehāyat al-arab* XI, p. 229, even compares the sweet violet to “a forsaken lover, resting his head [in grief] on his knee,”—a motif also found in the Persian poet Ḵāqānī, d. 595/1199: “like the violet, I am laying may head on my knees, while these are a thousand times more violetish [i.e., bruised] than my lips”).

Wild sweet-smelling violets may also be naturalized as garden plants. As early as 921/1515-16, the agriculturist Abū Naṣrī Heravī (*Eršād al-zerāʿa*, pp. 207-08) provides instructions for the cultivation of *banafša* (in the Herat area), of which he mentions three varieties: “dark blue, both double (*sad-barg*, lit., “centipetalous”) and ordinary (*rasmī*), purple, and white.” Eʿtemād-al-Salṭana, in his *al-Maʾāṯer wa’l-āṯār* I (ed. Ī. Afšār, Tehran, 1363 Š./1984, p. 136), which records all the innovations and achievements during the first forty years of the Qajar Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah’s reign (1264-1313/1848-96), mentions the cultivation of “three hues of double [*por-par*] Iranian violets” as well as the introduction of “three varieties of pansies [*banafša-ye farangī*]” in city gardens in Tehran. Incidentally, Abū Naṣrī Heravī (op. cit., p. 223) also mentions a *banafša-ye kūhī*, lit., “mountain violet,” “whose plant grows up to half a cubit high, and whose flowers are purple and fragrant.”

Wild pansy, *V. tricolor* L. var. *arvensis* Murr., grows in woods and meadows in the north, northwest, and west of Iran as well as in the Alborz and Tehran regions (see Ghahreman, op. cit., VI, no. 749). In contrast to its fragrant relative, *V. odorata*, it is scentless (this may account for its local Māzandarāni name *vasnī-benafše*, mentioned by Ghahreman, ibid., lit., “violet of the *vasnī* [i.e., the co-wife]”). The cultivated, hybridized pansy, *V. tricolor* var. *hortensis*, generally called *banafša-ye farangī* “European violet,” as indicated by its Persian epithet and by Eʿtemād-al-Salṭana (see above), is a rather new addition to garden flowers in Iran. Although scentless like its wild parent, it has become

very popular, because it blooms early in spring and is associated with the Iranian Nowrūz festivities, all the more so as the strange markings on the blooms make them look somewhat like jovial human faces, an anthropomorphism appealing particularly to the Persian imagination.

Phytotherapists or physicians of the Islamic era, generally indifferent to the botanical diversity of native species of *Viola*, have recognized numerous medicinal properties in *banafša/banafsaj* (occasionally called *forfīr/ferfīr* in some Arabic sources; from Gk. *porphyra* "purple color") in general, an account of which will be found in most works on traditional materia medica (e.g., in Arabic, Ebn al-Bayṭār, *al-Jāmeʿ* I, pp. 114-15, and, in Persian, ʿAqīlī Ḵorāsānī, *Maḵzan al-adwīa*, pp. 127). The earliest reference in Persian works to *Viola* varieties from a medicinal viewpoint probably is that by Mowaffaq-al-Dīn ʿAlī Heravī, author of the oldest extant independent Persian treatise on materia medica, *K. al-abnīa* (probably compiled in 339/950?), ed. A. Bahmanyār and Ḥ. Maḥbūbī Ardakānī, p. 67: "The best is [first] *banafša-ye kūhī* [mountain violet], and then *banafša-ye eṣbahānī* [Isfahan violet], and the more fragrant [they are, the better]" (on "Isfahan violet," see also below). Aḵawaynī Boḵārī (d. ca. 373/983?), author of the oldest extant medical text in Persian, *Hedāyat al-motaʿallemīn*, mentions the following uses for *banafša*, some of which, absent in previous works, probably are from his personal experiences. He uses it as part of an enema against quinsy (p. 308); in a pectoral poultice against a kind of "dry" cough (p. 318); in an emollient enema against pleurisy (p. 328); in an enema against ileus (p. 429); in a hepatic poultice against jaundice (p. 467); in a dorsal (or lumbar) poultice against nephritis, and in a concoction "to be poured" on the patient's back in case of suppurative nephritis (p. 482); in an ointment against vesical inflammation (p. 503); in an infusion to be used as a sitz-bath against uterine cancer (p. 538); in a poultice against sciatica (p. 572); in an infusion "to be poured" on the patient's head in case of fever caused by sunstroke (p. 649); in a sitz-bath against fever caused by grief and preoccupation (p. 654); in baths against hectic fever (pp. 665, 667), etc. The internal uses of *banafša* and of *banafša-ye eṣbahānī* (the difference between the two is not specified by the author) are: (*banafša*) in a mixture (with some other simples) against headache of bilious origin (p. 225); (*banafša* preserve) in *kašk-āb* against vesical inflammation (p. 501); in a linctus against pleurisy (p. 329); in a laxative infusion against anorexia (p. 357); (*banafša-ye-eṣbahānī*) in an electuary against colic (p. 434); in a drink with rosewater against hepatic dysfunction (p. 437); with sugar against tertian fever, etc. Nowadays, in popular or traditional therapeutics, dried violet blossoms are sometimes used

by themselves in infusion as febrifuge, but usually with some other vegetable simples, the best-known combination of which is the *č(ah)ār-gol* (“the four flowers,” i.e., violets, water lilies, mallows and squash/pumpkin flowers) in a concoction indicated as febrifuge, “coolant,” emollient, or pectoral.

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