

## The Bindi and the Sindoor

The heroin of Mala Kishoendajal's first novel "Dame Blanche" mentions about the origin of the rite of applying sindoor during a Hindu marriage ceremony as follows:

*In the Middle Ages Muslims kidnapped Hindu girls and raped them. As a mark of this rape they applied sindoor in the partition of hair of the victims. Somewhere in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a clever Brahmin got a bright idea to mislead the Muslims. From their birth the sindoor was applied at the partition of the hair of the girls. This way it was not possible for the Muslims to find out who was raped and who was not.*

These remarks raised my curiosity to find out the origin of the Hindu rite of using tilak, kumkum, sindoor and bindi. The result is this article.

Bindi originally is a round mark on the foreheads of Hindu females. Bindi is derived from the Sanskrit word *bindu* meaning dot or drop. Making a mark on the forehead is a very old tradition among Hindu men and women. The old name for this mark is *tilaka*. *Tilaka* is made with coloured earth, ashes of *yajna* (the fire offering), sandalwood paste or unguent. The term *tika* or *tikka* is a distorted form of the term *tilaka*.

Indian religious texts, scriptures, myths and epics mention the *tilaka* and *sindoor*. The mention of *tilaka* can be found in Maha Bharata, in Sanskrit plays of Kalidasa (1<sup>st</sup> century BC) and other works like Panchatantra or Kathasarita Sagara. Tulsidas mentions it in his Ram Charit Manas at the time of the marriage between Ram and Sita. The term *bindi* is rather new.

The red colour is connected with *rajas*, one of the three constituents of *prakriti* (*nature*) that is *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. These three constituents of *prakriti* represent goodness, passion and darkness. Each of these is represented by a colour. White colour is for goodness, red is for passion and black is for darkness and ignorance. These three constituents of *prakriti* are described in *Sankhya* philosophy of Hindu religion. The red colour of *bindi* or *sindoor* represents the passionate aspect of *prakriti*. The red implies also love, fertility and strength. *Sindoor* (vermilion) is sublimed mercuric sulfide and is a brilliant red pigment.

Modern Hindu wedding rituals are described in books of rituals for the householders called *Grahya Sutras*. The most extensive of these is the Pāraskara Grahya Sutra (6<sup>th</sup> century BC). In Pāraskara Grahya Sutra there is no mention of *bindi* or *sindoor*. However it is mentioned that in addition to the

rituals described in these books, people can also perform the rituals that are in vogue in the community.<sup>1</sup>

The colour red is significant. The red colour, some believe, symbolizes the far more ancient practice of offering blood sacrifices to please the Gods - particularly the Goddess Shakti. In time, communities put an end to actual sacrifices and offered gifts instead, but the colour red remained. Scholars differ about the origin of using bindi or sindoor. According to some scholars in ancient times, in Aryan society, a groom used to apply his blood on-his bride's forehead as recognition of wedlock. The existing practice among Indian women of applying a round shaped sindoor or red tilak could be a survival of this. In a Hindu marriage ceremony the groom places sindoor on the bride's head, at the partition of the hair. This is a symbol of eternal, everlasting married life. In Bengal the groom dips a ring in sindoor and traces a red line through the parting in the bride's hair. Application of sindoor is also the change of status from bride to wife. The bridegroom's make-up is incomplete without the tilak. Red kumkum made from turmeric is also applied on the forehead. But kumkum and sindoor are not synonymous. Unmarried women can use kumkum, but they will never wear sindoor.

Significantly when an Indian woman has the misfortune of becoming a widow she has to stop wearing this mark. The sindoor, apart from being an auspicious adornment, also plays the role of a silent communicator. If there is a death in the family, women don't wear sindoor. Many married women would use turmeric as a substitute merely to indicate not widowhood but a state of mourning in the family. During menstruation, some women refrain from wearing sindoor.

The positioning of the bindi in between the eyes is significant. According to the Indian sages, the area between the eyebrows is the seat of latent wisdom. This point between the eyes, known by various names such as Ajna Chakra, Spiritual Eye, and Third Eye, is said to be the major nerve center in the human body. In the Kundalini yoga and Tantric tradition during meditation, the "kundalini" - the latent energy that lies at the base of the spine is awakened and rises to the point of sahasrara (7th chakra) situated in the head or brain. The central point, the bindu, becomes therefore a possible outlet for this potent energy.

Some scholars associate the bindi with the birth of Kali from Durga's forehead. It is supposed to signify the mystic third eye of a person. It is applied on the forehead on all religious and ceremonial occasions and means welcome. The tilaka is of more than one colour although normally it is vermilion. It does not have any standard shape and form and is applied differently by members of different Hindu sects and sub-sects.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Dr. Indu Srivastava for her comments and corrections.

The Vishnu worshippers apply a red, yellow or saffron tilak in the shape of “U”. The worshippers of Devi or Durga apply red sindoor. Worshippers of lord Shiva apply a tripundra (three horizontal lines) and it consists of ash (Bhasma). Soot (Abhira) is also used as a pigment for applying a tilak. The forehead dot found on the 2nd and 3rd century AD sculptures of Lord Buddha are known as the "urna".

In some areas the term *tilak* is also used to represent the rite performed a little before the marriage ceremony to finalise and to give an official stamp to the betrothal. After the groom’s family accepts the proposal of the bride’s family and the horoscopes have been compared an auspicious day is finalised by the priest for the tilak and the wedding. This is an old custom. Tilak symbolises that the groom is ready for marriage.<sup>2</sup>

In the past Kshatriya queen used to apply this little mark on her husband's forehead to bring him luck in the battlefield or used it to welcome him back home. In modern times too the same custom is used to welcome guests. The bindi and kumkum carries with it a wealth of meaning and is an on-going link with a very ancient tradition and past. In today’s world not only the Hindu damsels use bindi but it also found its way to the homes of Muslims and Christians

Kumkum can be obtained as liquid, paste, powder or in stick form. The bindi comes also in many shapes. The new trend is "sticker-bindi". They are sold in the market in small packets of different colours and designs and have a little bit of glue at the back so that they can be put on the forehead easily. The sticker-bindi is made of felt, with glue on one side. Some are truly exotic creations, using thin metal in gold and silver colours, encrusted with glittering semi-precious stones. Modern fashion conscious ladies today have a variety of bindis to choose from. Bindi is a necessary part of an Indian woman's makeup, and has found its way to the international fashion world.

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(This article was published in different magazines in India, The Netherlands, UK and USA.)

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<sup>2</sup> Kanya Dan, The why’s of Hindu Marriage Rituals by Sarita Boodhoo published by Mauritius Bhojpuri Institute