

Semiotic Study of Sindoor

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Abstract

This social commentary aims to examine a semiotic study of Sindoor or Vermilion (a red colour powder) which is applied between hair partings by married Hindu Indian women. Sindoor is applied by the groom to the bride on the day of the marriage. By applying Sindoor, she is then considered to be his wife and enters the matrimonial life. The social commentary intends to shed light on the feminist and sociological aspect of Sindoor in Indian society and how it is celebrated by Hindu married women, yet it place the women lower in the social gender hierarchy as they are often socially expected to wear such symbols to mark a new beginning. On the other hand, married Hindu men wear no such markings to show their married status.

Keywords: Hinduism, patriarchy, sacred, sindoor, tradition, women

Introduction

Marriage is considered to be a sacred and an important institution in the Indian society across all religions. In India marriage is not only a bond between two individuals rather an alliance between the two families. Indian families usually spend their life savings on their children's marriages. Marriage rituals and customs have been mentioned in different religious Hindu texts such as the Upanishads¹ and Vedas as a sacrament. Since ancient days, different marriage customs and rituals are observed throughout India. These rituals vary according to the region, caste, and clan. Although there is a lot of dissimilarity in the rituals associated with marriages throughout India. There are certain rituals which are common and hold a special significance in the marriage ceremony.

Haldi, Sapthapadi, Homa, Mangaldhyarana, Gruhaparvesh and Sindoor are some of the other important customs followed in Hindu marriages. In the Haldi ceremony turmeric paste is applied to the bride and the groom on the morning of the marriage by their own maternal families in their respective homes. Sapthapadi is the seven steps taken by the bride and the groom around the holy fire marking a new beginning to their lives. Homa denotes the sacred fire ceremony, and then

¹ Upanishads: Upanishads are a collection of religious texts written between 800 BCE and 500 BCE. Upanishads constitute of the Vedas, Hindu sacred scripture. Vedas are the sacred scripture in Hinduism. There are four Vedas, consisting of the four parts. The Vedas were compiled in 3500 BC. Vedas means knowledge and it is derived from 'vid'.

Mangalyadharana denotes tying of mangalsutra or the auspicious thread tied by the groom around the neck of the bride. Mangalsutra is a gold chain with black beads. Mangalsutra is derived from Sanskrit term Mangal which means Holy and Sutra which means thread. Mangalsutra is worn by married women. The groom ties this auspicious thread on the bride's neck. By tying this thread, it denotes her marital status.

Gruhaparvesh is the most important post-wedding ceremony in which the bride enters the groom's house for the first time by stepping into a red liquid. Of all such rituals, application of sindoor by the groom in bride's hair parting is an essential ritual of religious Hindu marriages.

Importance of Sindoor

The Sindoor has an important role in Hindu rituals and festivals. It is socially considered to be sacred and auspicious by married Hindu women and their families. During the day of marriage, the husband applies sindoor on wife's "maang"² which is represented as the centre of all romantic feelings.

When the groom applies sindoor to the bride the ceremony is known as "Sindoor Dana", thus symbolising her marital status. An unmarried woman and a widow are exempted from applying sindoor. Red as the colour of sindoor or vermilion represents auspiciousness and sacred, therefore, by applying sindoor it denotes a new beginning for the woman. Red Sindoor is a symbol of sacredness, auspiciousness and the joy that the lady symbolises and brings with her in the new house, when she is married. She brings happiness in the form of red color in her new house. The woman expresses her respect for her husband's longevity, but after his death, she is forbidden to apply sindoor as she mourns for her dead husband.

Applying sindoor after marriage is a traditional cultural practice among Hindu married women. In the earlier times, Indian Hindu widows were forbidden to wear any of the marital symbols such as the mangalsutra, sindoor and bangles and they were made to shave off their hair as well

² Maang: The bridegroom applies vermilion or sindoor by parting her hair or maang on the day of the wedding. This ritual is considered to be auspicious and applied everyday by the bride by parting her hair(maang)

The colour red also signifies Shakti or strength (Saleh, n.d.). It is commonly believed that during the Aryan times, Aryan groom would apply his blood on the bride, thus signifying their wedlock. Mahawar or the red dye which is applied by the bride on the wedding day and application of sindoor are done to please God.

However, during the present age, sindoor is more of a representative of a decorative role. The colour red expresses religious and auspicious significance in Indian society. Red paste or tilak is applied on the forehead during festivals, or sindoor is applied by married women.

This paper intends to bring forth the background of semiotic ideology in Sindoor or Vermillion.

Preparation of Sindoor

Traditionally, sindoor was made with alum, and turmeric (Kapoor, 2007). Sindoor becomes moistened with lime juice, iodine, camphor with oil, sea shell powder kasturi and sandalwood. Sindoor can also be made with sandalwood which is mixed with musk and a mixture of kusumbha (saffron) flower. During the preparation of sindoor one had to cover the mouth since sindoor is a sacred component. It is used for marriage and offered to God.

When alum is mixed with lime and turmeric, it changes the yellow to red colour. Thus, imparting the red colour to the sindoor. Mercury helps in lasting the red colour.

Nowadays sindoor is being manufactured by big capitalist brands (Kapoor, 2007). The process in the manufacturing of sindoor involves different chemicals, synthetic dyes and mercury sulphite. The use of this liquid for a long period could lead to health hazards such as skin disease and poisoning.

Etymology

The word Sindoor is derived from the Sanskrit term Sindoorā. The etymological meaning of Sindoor is Red Lead. In the South Indian States of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, kumkum is applied on the pottu³ and netti⁴ region. In Northern part of India, sindoor is applied on matha, region which is the forehead. Sindoor and Bindi are both shola shringar (sixteen adornments of an Indian bride).

³ Pottu (Tamil language and Malayalam language): Red Dot worn by married Hindu women

⁴ Netti (Tamil language and Malayalam language): The center parting where red dot is worn.

Scientific Benefits

Uma Devi⁵ mentioned there are scientific benefits of applying sindoor it reduces anxiety and stress. It increases the power of concentration. The area where sindoor is applied is known as the pituitary gland, which is the centre of all feelings. The region has mesmerising factors which induces the woman towards her husband. However, during festivals or weddings, the elders in the family apply tilak or red paste at the centre of their forehead.

Followers of Vishnu⁶ known as the Vaishnavites wear tilak on their forehead which is white in colour made of sandalwood paste, ashes and turmeric.

Myths related to Sindoor

According to Dr. Uma Devi (2014), assistant professor Delhi University, Goddess Parvati⁷ epitomises strength and power. She is considered to be an ideal wife for the Hindu married women. It has been said that Parvati wanted to marry Lord Shiva and therefore she performed tapas⁸. Finally, Shiva⁹ appears, he accepts her offer of marrying Parvati. He puts a condition of marrying Parvati; the condition is for Parvati to sacrifice her third eye, which is on her forehead. Parvati accepts his offer. On the day of marriage, Shiva removes the third eye, it starts bleeding. Thus, the area becomes the place, where women apply sindoor.

Another myth is about the orange sindoor which comes from Ramayana. Sita and Hanuman are central figures in the Indian epic, The Ramayan. Sita is known for her self-sacrifice. She had to prove her chastity to her husband, when she was enticed by Ravana who had come in a deer's disguise and taken her to Lanka. Sita had to make to prove her devotion and chastity to her husband

⁵ Dr. Uma Devi, Assistant Professor, Department of Modern Indian Languages & Literary Studies, University of Delhi. I took an interview with her where she discussed different issues related to Sindoor.

⁶ Vishnu: One of the principal deities of Hinduism, the other two being Shiva and Brahma. Vishnu is the sun god.

⁷ Parvati: Parvati is the wife of Lord Shiva.

⁸ Tapas: A Sense of Self- Discipline. It comes from the Sanskrit word meaning to burn. It is to achieve self-discipline in a spiritual manner by meditating and fasting.

⁹ Shiva: Shiva is one of the supreme beings of Shaivism. He is considered to be the God of destruction.

Rama. Hanuman is a devotee of Lord Ram. He is the monkey god. He is considered to be a major character in the Ramayan. He was sent by Rama to rescue Sita from Lanka. The Ramayana is one of Indian epics written by Valmiki. The epic revolves around Rama who was banished from Ayodhya by his father King Dasharatha, while they were away in exile. Rama his wife Sita and Lakshman were away in exile. However, the epic ends with Ram becoming the crowned King of Ayodhya.

During a conversation, with Sita, Hanuman saw her apply a red dot to show her devotion and love for Lord Ram (Bail,2005). Seeing her, Hanuman smeared his entire body with sindoor, to show his devotion to Lord Rama. Rama was pleased to know that Hanuman smeared his body with sindoor to add years to Lord Rama's life. Thus, his devotees apply orange sindoor to show their love and devotion to Lord Hanuman and their husbands. This is prevalent in the northern part of India, where women apply orange sindoor. This coating is called chola or robe.

Mahabharata is another Indian epic written in the Sanskrit language by Vyasa and later translated in Indian languages. The story focuses on the Kurekshetra war between the Kauravas and Pandavas. The Kauravas were 100 brothers and the Pandavaas were five brothers. Draupadi was the sole wife of the five Pandava brothers. Kauravas were the descendants of Kuru and Pandavas were Pandu's sons. In the Mahabharata, it is believed that Draupadi, the wife of Pandava brothers, had removed her sindoor in anger and disgust after the Pandavas lost a game of gamble to the Kauravas. Goddess Durga is known as Triyambake. Her left eye signifies desire the moon, her right eye signifies action the sun and the central eye represents knowledge the fire (Rajhans, 2017).

Shidoor Khela

In Bengali sindoor, refers to shidoor. *Shidoor Khela* is an important ritual among Hindu Bengali married women (Shukla, 2012). On Bijoya Dasami, women smear other women's face and iron bangle with Shidoor or Vermillion. During Shidoor Khela, they offer Baran (Farewell) ritual to Goddess Durga (Nasreen, 2014). This ritual is practiced only by married women wishing one a happy married life. They first apply Shidoor on Goddess Durga's feet and forehead and then start applying to each other.

This ritual is played before the immersion of Goddess Durga. The priest announces the end of Puja. According to an informant, the origin of ritual goes back to the belief that Goddess Durga is going back to her marital home. It is believed that Goddess Durga had come to her parent's home (Vaidyanathan, 2010). The origin of this ritual dates back to four hundred years. The women pray for her husband's long life.

Shidoor Khela also becomes a representation of the patriarchal world that women become a bondage to (Nasreen, 2014). Shidoor Khela can be seen as a patriarchal festival where a woman prays for her husband's long life whereas the husband doesn't follow any such practices.

Sociological Analysis

Sindoor marks the identity of a married Indian woman. By applying sindoor to the bride, the groom becomes her socio-cultural guardian. According to Manu Smriti, a Hindu law book, a girl when she is young she should be subject to the father, when she is married, she should be subject to her husband. She can never have her own identity. By applying sindoor the bride becomes a territory of her husband. She becomes his subservient. In the earlier times, a married Hindu wife would have to apply Sindoor, but in the present times a lot of married women opt to not apply sindoor.

The Poithe or thread ceremony in the Bengali tradition which takes place among the Brahmin elevates the boy's position in the society. This is governed by caste and faith. Likewise, by applying sindoor the woman becomes his subservient. This is governed by the patriarchal nature. The thread ceremony exalts the boy's position, whereas the sindoor becomes a representation of subservience. Sindoor becomes an abstract sign of a man's territory. Sindoor also represents that a woman has to become sacrificial, submissive and totally dependent.

The sindoor, mangalsutra¹⁰ and the red chudiyani (bangles) are decorative pieces which take a woman into womanhood, thus giving her marital status. However, unmarried women also wear colourful bangles but in some customs like among Punjabi women chooda, which is red and white in colour and made of ivory or plastic and similarly Bengali married women wear Polla and Conch Shell Shaka, Sindoor is offered even to Goddess. In some temples, it is the priest who puts a red dot on the woman's forehead; a woman is exempted from doing so. It shows the patriarchal nature

¹⁰ The mangalsutra, sindoor and bangles are denotative of a woman's marital symbol.

that is still prevalent in our society. It is applied only by Hindu women thus differentiating her from other religious women¹¹. By applying sindoor, the woman follows the customs and traditions, and it is done so to satisfy the needs of the society (Bhattacharya, 2011). In Bengali marriages, the groom smears sindoor on the bride's forehead. Red also signifies the colour of passion, when a woman applies red sindoor she is seen as sexually desirable and passionate because of this widows are exempted from applying sindoor as their bodies only belonged to their husbands. Red also signifies the colour of blood. Menstrual blood means reproduction, by attaining puberty, a woman becomes more sexually desirable. There is a change in her body and she enters into womanhood. The Sindoor also brings a change to a woman's life. It makes her husband's property. Thus there is an inter link between the colour red by connecting blood and sindoor

Conclusion

By wearing sindoor, mangalsutra and chudiyas the woman becomes committed, the man on the other hand does not wear any of the symbol (Chowdhury, 2013). Widows and unmarried girls are exempted from applying sindoor. The sindoor is a sign of auspiciousness; it shows her devotion towards her husband.

It is a cultural internalisation that a woman undergoes from a young age. On the day of marriage, the bride is adorned with mangalsutra, sindoor and bangles. She decorates and submits herself to her husband and becomes his property. Mangalsutra, Sindoor and Bangles differentiate a woman as she enters from a girl to fertile life. She is submitting her body to her husband. She becomes fertile and starts reproducing for her husband's next generation.

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