

## GENDERED SOCIO-CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF UTTAR PRADESH AND JAMMU KASHMIR

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Hindu married women in India are adorned with gendered symbols signifying their married status. These symbols are in the form of Sindhoor, Bindi, Churi, Nathuni, Mangalsutra etc. The use of these symbols is so ubiquitous that no one questions their origins or reasons for use. Most of the women using them are very superstitious about these symbols and attribute their husband's lifespan to some of these symbols. Thus, in Hindu Culture, the representations of patriarchal dominance are visible through symbols of marriage hood imposed on women not only through their psyche but also adornments. These become a part of a Hindu woman's life and daily routine after marriage. Every day we see women embellished in these symbols and wonder as to how and why Indian women alone were conditioned, habituated not only to wear these symbols but also to revere them wholeheartedly and further pass on the tradition to their daughters and daughters-in-law.

Hindu women in India start wearing the Sindhoor, Bindi, Mangalsutra etc immediately after their marriage. The symbols are administered during the wedding ceremony by the husband upon the wife and then she adheres to them every day for the rest of her married life. The mechanism employed for the implementation of this tradition is dipped in a sprinkling of superstition passed on through folk tales of Gods and Goddesses. The element of superstition is supplemented by the element of fear of non-adherence of the tradition. The role of the Hindu ideology in perpetuating and continuation of these symbols is significant and noteworthy.

Though women in Pre-Vedic times sometimes put the Bindi on their foreheads, its purpose was only ornamentation and they consisted

of various types- like decoratively cut leaves (patra) or sandalwood powder. But later with the formation of the Varna system the Bindi and Sindhoor acquired deeper connotations and became the hallmark and the identity of the Hindu married woman. In fact gendered symbols are the tools employed to enforce brahmanical patriarchy, a system that ensures continuous subordination and control of women for generations. The term "Brahmanical Patriarchy" denotes the stringent system of endogamy and exogamy in marriage among the Brahmins in India and which could only work by practicing strict control upon whom Brahmin women marry. Thus total control and guarding of women was necessary. Control was implemented through segregating and especially marking the Brahmin woman. A preliminary analysis of brahmanical patriarchy in early India reveals that the structure of social relations that shaped gender was reproduced by achieving the compliance of women. The compliance itself was produced through a combination of consent and coercion. Women's perpetuation of the caste system was achieved partly through their investment in a structure that rewarded them even as it subordinated them at the same time. They too subscribed to the ideology of the caste system is evident from an account in the Jatakas of two high caste women who ran to wash their eyes when they sighted two low caste untouchables.

In this article the researcher has also aimed to study the 'Regional Dimension of Gendered Cultural Symbols' through a comparative study of specific symbols in two distinct regions – Uttar Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. Even though these symbols are adhered to by women all over India, the study here takes into account only these two states of northern India.

At the outset a preliminary understanding of the problem of research was studied. There were in-depth dialogues / interviews with married Hindu women inquiring about their use of gendered symbols. Women from both the states of Uttar Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir were interviewed. The historical, geographical and cultural differences of both states have been taken into account.

The secondary data was collected from library in the host institution and many other libraries and institutions of Delhi, Lucknow and Jammu.

The issue was discussed with many other academicians who are working in similar field and interest. Apart from the feminist angle to the study an anthropological aspect is also being kept in mind. Habits and behaviour of women regarding the use of gendered symbols, in remote areas like Bundelkhand in Uttar Pradesh and Kishtwar in Jammu and Kashmir were studied in detail. In order to deconstruct the origin of these gendered symbols various ancient Indian Sanskrit texts are being referred to. Old architectural buildings, temple sculptures were being studied, keeping their time period in mind.

For the primary data a questionnaire was prepared and distributed amongst married women in various districts of Lucknow and Banda district of Uttar Pradesh and Jammu, Udhampur and Kishtwar districts of Jammu and Kashmir. Primary data was also collected from the adjoining villages surrounding these districts.

Then subsequently documentation and computerization of all the primary data was adhered to. Then a detailed analysis of the same was attempted with the help of chi-square method to prove the hypothesis and understand the statement of the problem. Finally the data was studied to understand the regional perspective with a comparison of Uttar Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir.

The study of the secondary data enabled the researcher to understand the concept of Brahminical Patriarchy and how it used Gendered

Symbols as tools to implement this particular type of patriarchy.

The Teeka and the Sindhoor marked her as - first of all a Brahmin woman, secondly as a virtuous and chaste woman. The marked women with auspicious marks like the Teeka and Sindhoor, could not be touched by any other man apart from her husband and especially no man from other castes may lay their eyes on them. The punishment for defiling married Brahmin women was either death or castration of the sexual organs for the untouchable or dalit men. The significant point was that after Manusmriti, the King or the State helped in implementing the Varna system and thus all men and women who broke the law were punishable by law. The Varna system was prevalent before Manusmriti but it did not have the sanction of the King. Thus all who transgressed the law became liable to strict punishment.

Cultures have a way of evolving and moving forward despite what one may want in reality. Thus the auspicious mark or the Bindi and the Sindhoor above the forehead acquired very respectable and chaste connotations for the Brahmin woman. Even though it represented patriarchal control over freedom of choice (absence of choice to marry outside their caste) for women, it also gave them a sense of power in being complicit with the system. Use of these symbols gave them respectability that embodied morality and the characteristics of chastity. Besides, opposing the system meant death or total ostracization for the full family. Observing this development, women of other castes also started following the culture of putting Bindi and Sindhoor. This process of social change where the values and practices of the dominant community are emulated by the lower caste or class is termed as 'Sanskritization' or Hinduisation by scholars. Thus women of the other castes too began to apply these symbols and also followed the norms accompanying these gendered symbols.

Thus today we see many Hindu married women wearing the Sindhoor, Bindi and other symbols like the mangalsutra, churi, bichiya, nathuni etc also implying their being married. Today even

the media and advertising use these symbols to connote chastity, steadfastness and also unavailability in terms of courtship. A woman sitting in a car has just to raise her chura and mehndi adorned hand to her face to ward off a boy wooing her. Whether women are defined as the same as men, or different from them, men remain the reference point, the ungendered 'norm' against which women are compared ..

Thus the use of the gendered symbols by women is an identification of their relation to men. Women who wear Bindi and Sindhoor on their forehead and hair parting respectively can be marked as a married woman. Men themselves do not use any of these symbols. Widows are barred from wearing any of these gendered symbols as the relevance of the symbols becomes obsolete with the death of the husband. Barring the widows from wearing the various gendered symbols like the Teeka and the Sindhoor demarcated them from the other married women and their presence too was considered inauspicious during holy rituals and lifecycle ceremonies. Thus they are mistreated as the 'Other' as against the universal or human.

Historically Women were ordained by the prescriptive texts to follow certain norms and usually these norms were executed with myths and stories of Gods and Goddesses. The mechanism of execution of these symbols was done with the help of ideology of pativrata and streedharma .

The goal of the life of women was thus to get married and procreate sons- in fact according to the texts (Stripumasa, V. 19). The rituals at the time of marriage explicitly recognize the crucial place of procreation. This is evident in the Brahmanical texts and anthropological analyses of the Hindu marriage ceremony repeat the centrality of reproduction in the rituals so evident in the brahmanical texts. For example, in the crucial haldi ceremony that precedes the actual marriage rites, the spouse is smeared with turmeric. According to informants the effect of turmeric application is that the body is heated up for sexual intercourse. The source of sexual energy that haldi is believed to create is located unambiguously in women, in which sense they are perceived as

active agents in the process of reproduction. Further, the colour most often associated with brides is red: red is the colour of vitality because of its connotation of blood. It is appropriate where something important and life giving is about to take place. The red kumkuma or sindhoora applied only by married women symbolizes the sexually active or sexually potent female. The bride's red sari and kumkuma together represent the fluids of creation, life, female creative power and specifically, the capacity to be children .

In the concept of the wifehood, the prescriptive texts are constantly resolving the basic contradiction that women represent between their nature and their function. A demoniac and innately promiscuous nature is ascribed to their lot due to the previous bad karma that produces female birth, it must be suppressed in favour of their function as wives. Women are perceived as being caught in a trap caused entirely by their Karma; they are the sights of conflict between striswabhava, their innate demoniac nature which is lustful and stridharma, their function as wives. The innate promiscuity of women requires the legitimate channelization of their sexual energy in a stringently organized system of reproduction, without which the social order would collapse. The innate sinfulness and lustfulness of women can easily lead them to adultery, which is severely punishable by every form of humiliation to be publicly heaped upon the adulterous wife. Surveillance of the wife within marriage is regarded as necessary and is repeatedly recommended in the prescriptive texts. The marking of the married women with auspicious marks of the Bindu, Kumkuma and sindhoor was one way of surveillance through identification as married Brahman women.

According to the prescriptive texts of the Brahmanas , which is the Manusmriti by sage Manu – To be pure, a high caste woman should have only a single sexual partner throughout her life. Those castes which allow a woman to marry once are considered to be higher than those which allow widow remarriage, or which allow women to divorce and remarry. When a Brahman jati is said to have no divorce, what is meant is that a woman is not

allowed to have a second husband. Men, whether Brahmans or of other castes, are allowed to have more than one wife. Even as his first wife is virginal, so a Brahman's second or subsequent wives are virginal upon marriage. Since contact with lower caste caused impurity it was mandatory to mark the lower and the upper caste men and women to identify their caste. different types of teeka ,dress, Bindi and sindhure for married women were symbols to signify their castes and their married status for the Brahman women. Significantly women had to wear the same mark as the Shudra- especially the Brahmin women initially as it was mandatory to control the Brahmin women's sexuality in order to maintain the purity of the Brahmin caste. Contact with women, even of upper caste was an agent of impurity especially when she was menstruating or for a certain number of days after childbirth.

The Gendered symbols in India and their etymology and meaning are discussed in detail. According to H.L.Shukla in *Semiotica Indica*, *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Body-Language In Indian Art & Culture*, the meaning of the word Bindu is a dot or mark on the body; bindi (Hindi) mark (usually red) put on a forehead by a married woman: bindi tikia tikli, boyyu, pottu is unique in Hindu woman. According to him that history has it that the Dravidians practised the custom of sacrificing an animal when a new bride entered her marital home for the first time. They made a dot her forehead with the blood of the animal. Since girls were less in numbers, brides from non-Aryan who were considered inferior had to be taken. Hence an animal was sacrificed and the bride was purified by applying a dot of its blood on her forehead. Later, this dot of blood was replaced by red powder. Again, at a time when society was less civilized and when might was considered to be right the bride was forcibly taken away by the suitor. Other suitors had to be defeated and kept at bay. To establish the winner's right over the bride, a red mark was smeared on her forehead.

The exact spot prescribed by the scriptures for the application of the Bindi is in between the eye brows because this place is considered to be the abode of intellect, consciousness and wisdom-in

short, the abode of the sixth sense and hence has to be protected by the Bindi.

In *Semiotica Indica*, *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Body-Language In Indian Art & Culture* the writer H.L.Shulka describes the meaning of the word Sindura as zinc oxide, vermilion. According to him the custom of applying Sindura on the head by married woman is described in *Matsya Purana*(61.20- 21), when a cattle or a vehicle is bought a little portion of vermilion is applied to it. This indicated the abode of goddess of money (Lakshmi). According to the Indian Symbology. The auspicious associations attached to the colour red are clearly related to the process of bridal defloration(signifying chastity) and its implications of fertility and child-bearing. The colour red symbolizes the rupture of the hymen and the husband's access thereby to his wife's body which is in turn seen as a field awaiting fructification. The same idea informs the wearing of green bangles and a green sari at the time of marriage. As Scholar Sindhu S.Dange points out, pre-wedding rites have been given a significant name in the Vedic tradition: *Indrani-karma*. Dange clarifies the term by explaining that *Indrani* stands for tillable land in the *Rig-Veda*- the bride therefore is one such tillable land which will be fructified by the bridegroom. Red and green, colours associated with fertility and marriage, demarcated female roles within marriage and were reserved, in the context, exclusively for the wife.

The *Skandapurana* ('*Brahma-khanda*', '*Dharmaranua section*',chapter 7) states that a *pativrata* should always use *haldi* (Turmeric), *KumKum*, *Sindoor*, outline her eyes with lamp black, braid her hair,and wear a bodice, *tambula nad* auspicious ornaments(vv. 28-29). According to the *Padma-Purana*(*Srsti- khanda*, chapter 47,v. 55), a *pativrata* is like a slave when at work, a courtesan when making love like another, when serving food and a counsellor when the husband was in distress ( Known scholar Kane).It was also emphasized that, in the husband's absence from home the woman was expected to give up the prescribed adornment of her body.

The mangal-sutra, tied by the husband around the bride's neck during the marriage ceremony is another gender based symbol of matrimony. Scholar P.V Kane ,points out that the Sutras are silent about this ritual, while even the Smritis are devoid of any mention of the nose-ring. analyzing the reasons for the solah shinghar or the 16 kinds of adornments/ jewelry worn by Indian women as mentioned above, the first thing that comes to mind is that each part of the body beginning from the forehead to the toe tip have been designated an adornment or a jewellery. Most of these symbolic representations are enforced through habituation, acclimatization and are considered as necessary by most women. If they do not wear these adornments then other women and sometimes men consciously make them aware of the same too. The most commonly applied sringhars or adornments are the bindi and the sindhoor and they have an element of superstition attached to them. They are ascribed to have a connection with the lifespan of the husband as widows are forbidden to wear these symbols.

Thus all symbolic representations like the bindi, sindhoor, churi, nathuni acquire mandatory undertones. Toe rings are more prevalent in Uttar Pradesh than in Jammu and Kashmir. The significant part is the romanticizing of the application of these symbols as they are used following marriage and in fact introduced as a part of the matrimony rituals. The girls feel a sense of privilege in using these symbolic manifestations of their marriage hood rather than a burden. A feeling of romanticism, idealism and naivety is attached to the use of these gendered symbols. Media images exalting, idolizing brides with all the wedding accessories and the jewellery industries innumerable advertisements are responsible for this attitude to some extent.

As interpreted by feminist in India, the gradual emergence of hierarchical caste and property order marked a distinctive shift in social attitudes to women. Women's movement were restricted to home and reproduction. Moreover women's sexuality came to be viewed as wild energy that must be carefully controlled and husbanded. That is why all these symbolic representations are

used in relation to the husband and his lifespan. . But Indian women are mentally trained and oriented towards wearing these since childhood days. They see their mothers and their role models not only using these symbols but also revering them, fearing their non-adherence. In this way these gendered symbols are used as techniques of control and subordination. They presume the superiority of the male gender and assume the inferior gender for the females as no men are supposed to wear any jewellery to show their marital status in India. Rings are a western culture influence, not defined in Indian culture for men.

## GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE PRACTICE OF CULTURAL SYMBOLS

The prevalent discrimination in the practice and usage of the gendered symbols in a patriarchal setup can be seen around us in daily existence as men do not need to adhere to any symbolic representation to prove their alliance or fidelity to women and women on the contrary have to bear a mark of marriage hood at all times on their forehead and continue to reaffirm the same on the rest of their body too. Even though our constitution gives us the right to equality yet we continue to discriminate with our daughters and young brides. The phenomenon encourages son preference and control over child brides through representation of these symbols. Radical feminists locate the root cause women's oppression in patriarchal gender relations. They focus on the theory of patriarchy as a system of power that organizes society into a complex of relations based on the assertion that male supremacy oppresses women.

## COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE GENDERED SYMBOLS IN UTTAR PRADESH AND JAMMU AND KASHMIR

A comparative study of the two states of Uttar Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir from the analysis

of the questionnaires collected from women and also a detailed analysis of group discussions and individual interviews from the two respective states has been attempted. The area of study is Lucknow and Banda district in Uttar Pradesh and Jammu, Kishtwar and Udhampur district in Jammu and Kashmir.

Quantitative method of research helped to quantify data and generalize results from the sample of women interviewed for example 95% of these Indian women in both the states use one form or another of gendered symbols.

The sample for this qualitative research was collected from a large number of women from districts of Uttar Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir and their adjoining villages. Structured techniques such as questionnaires, on-street and methodological interviews and group discussions were organized. Respondents were randomly selected, within the defined area and research domain. Some statistical data has been derived at with conclusive and descriptive findings.

The results show that the education level does not change the psyche related to traditional value system of application of Bindi and sindhoor and other symbols associated with marriage. . It means that the education level is not able to change the superstitious nature of women as far as their relation to marriage symbol is concerned. The table showed the significance of chi- square test and validates the results. Thus most women do believe that bindi and sindhure specially are equated with the lifespan of the husband in both the states.

The variable of employment associated with various marriage symbols in both the states has no different result. The chi-square method proves that despite employment status women in both the states believe in all the marriage symbols and non-adherence is subject to personal decision making rather than upon employed status. Moreover very few women are employed. But those who are employed are less intensely insecure and have more confidence in their survival if their husbands befall to some misfortune or death.

In the series of questions one of the questions was regarding the Gungat. A detailed analyses shows that most of the women in the backward area of Bundelkhand practice the gunghat and not only in front of men but also women in-laws. Thus the village women here are not only in gunghat when outside but even inside their homes.

Not only in the past but even today gendered symbols are still very prominently used in both the states of Uttar Pradesh and also of Jammu and Kashmir. The hypotheses is proved that none of the men adhere to the gendered symbols. The symbols do have a negative effect on the psyche of the women. They fear for the lifespan of their husbands if they do not wear the bindi and sindhure symbol. The women do not think they have a choice as far as gendered symbols of the hindus are concerned. The symbols and codes imposed upon the women are discriminatory towards them. That the market forces and civil society impose and reinforce these symbols through different methods was observed during various research methods .

An understanding of the subject is drawn when equated with education and resources of women. The lesser the resources and remote the place, more is the effect of these gendered symbols .When the level of education and resources is less then lesser the decision making power of these women and more the influence of the symbols. Yet one cannot draw this conclusion categorically , as there are many women who are accomplished and educated and independent financially independent , yet they are psychologically and habitually conditioned to use bindi and sometimes sindhoor regularly.

Even though the Constitution of India empowers women with equality before the law, yet age-old cultural bondages have conditioned women into subjugation and suppression. This study aims at understanding the method and the mode of this subjugation through the study of symbolic representations like the Teeka and Sindhoor.

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## CITATIONS FROM

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