

Sindoor in Indian Culture: A Historical, Cultural, Religious and Scientific Review

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ABSTRACT

Sindoor, commonly known as vermilion, occupies an important position in the cultural and religious life of many Hindu communities in India. Traditionally, it is applied in the hair parting by married Hindu women and is widely regarded as a visible marker of marital status, auspiciousness and *suhag*. Its significance, however, extends beyond a social custom and can be understood through historical, religious, symbolic and cultural perspectives. Archaeological evidence from the Indian subcontinent indicates the use of red pigments and cosmetic materials in ancient societies, although such evidence should not automatically be interpreted as conclusive proof of the modern Hindu practice of wearing sindoor. Literary and religious traditions have subsequently associated red colour and vermilion with marriage, fertility, sacredness, feminine power and devotion. Traditional interpretations also connect the application of sindoor with the region of the forehead and with concepts such as the *Ajna Chakra* and *Sahasrara Chakra*. These interpretations belong primarily to religious, yogic and traditional knowledge systems and should be distinguished from scientifically established physiological effects. Contemporary scientific literature has also raised an important safety concern regarding the composition of some commercially available sindoor products, particularly the presence of lead. Therefore, the cultural significance of sindoor can be acknowledged while its health-related claims should be evaluated carefully through scientific evidence. This paper reviews the historical, cultural, religious, symbolic and scientific dimensions of sindoor and examines the continuity and changing interpretation of this traditional practice in Indian society.

Keywords: Sindoor, Vermilion, Indian Culture, Hindu Tradition, Kumkum, Women, Symbolism, Cultural Heritage

INTRODUCTION

Indian culture represents a complex interaction of customs, religious practices, social traditions and regional identities. Among the many cultural symbols associated with Hindu society, sindoor holds a distinctive place. It is generally a red or reddish-orange powder traditionally associated with married women and is commonly applied along the parting of the hair.

The practice of wearing sindoor is particularly associated with the concept of *suhag*, referring to the state of married life and the continued well-being of the husband. In many communities, its application is therefore understood as a symbol of marital commitment, auspiciousness and emotional attachment. The meaning

attached to sindoor, however, is not uniform throughout India. Its form, method of application and social significance may differ according to region, community, family tradition and religious practice.

The red colour of sindoor is frequently interpreted symbolically as representing energy, vitality, strength, fertility and auspiciousness. In religious and cultural narratives, red is also associated with feminine power and sacredness. Consequently, sindoor has developed into more than a cosmetic substance; it functions as a cultural sign through which marital identity and social belonging may be expressed.

The present paper examines sindoor from historical, cultural, religious and scientific perspectives. Particular attention is given to the distinction between traditional

beliefs and claims that can be supported by modern scientific evidence.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is a qualitative, literature-based review. It does not report an original laboratory experiment or clinical investigation. Information has been examined through secondary literature, historical and archaeological references, religious texts and published academic research concerning sindoor, vermilion, traditional Indian cosmetics and their cultural significance.

The study also considers scientific literature concerning the composition and safety of sindoor. Traditional and religious beliefs are presented as cultural interpretations rather than as established biomedical facts. This distinction is important for maintaining academic objectivity and research integrity.

Historical Background of Sindoor

The use of red pigments and cosmetic substances in the Indian subcontinent has a long history. Archaeological studies of the Indus Valley Civilization provide evidence for the use of pigments and cosmetic materials. References to archaeological findings from sites associated with the Harappan cultural tradition have been used by scholars to discuss ancient cosmetic practices.

B. B. Lal, in his discussions on the continuity of Indian culture, examines cultural practices and material remains associated with the Indian subcontinent. Similarly, archaeological work associated with Chanhudaro has provided evidence relevant to the study of ancient cosmetic and personal adornment practices (Lal, n.d.; Mackay, 1951).

Kenoyer's work on the cities of the Indus Valley Civilization also discusses objects and cultural materials associated with personal adornment and appearance. A female figurine from Nausharo has been described in connection with traces of red pigment in the region of the hair parting. Such evidence is culturally interesting, but it should be interpreted cautiously (Kenoyer, 1998).

The presence of red pigment in an ancient figurine does not, by itself, establish that the exact modern practice of applying Hindu sindoor existed in the same form during the Harappan period. Therefore, the statement that modern sindoor application is definitively a 5,000-year-old continuous tradition cannot be established solely from archaeological evidence. The evidence supports the

antiquity of red pigments and cosmetic practices, while the historical development of sindoor as a specific marital symbol requires separate textual and cultural evidence (Samriya *et al.*, 2013).

Cultural Significance of Sindoor

Sindoor has traditionally been associated with married Hindu women. Its application may take place during marriage ceremonies, particularly in the ritual commonly known as *sindoor-daan*, in which the groom applies vermilion to the bride's hair parting.

The practice is generally interpreted as a public indication of marital status. For many women, sindoor may also have personal emotional significance because it represents marriage, family relationships, cultural belonging and continuity of tradition.

The symbolism of sindoor is closely related to the cultural importance of the colour red. Red is commonly associated in Indian traditions with energy, prosperity, fertility, celebration and feminine power. Consequently, the red colour of sindoor has acquired meanings that extend beyond its physical appearance.

At the same time, contemporary scholarship has pointed out that symbols of marital status can also reflect gender expectations within society. Dasgupta (2017), in a semiotic and feminist discussion of sindoor, examines how the symbol communicates marital identity and how expectations surrounding its use may be experienced differently by women. Thus, sindoor can simultaneously be understood as an expression of cultural identity and as a symbol shaped by social structures.

Sindoor, Kumkum and Traditional Materials

The terms *sindoor*, *vermilion* and *kumkum* are sometimes used interchangeably in popular discussions, although their traditional compositions and ritual uses are not necessarily identical.

Historically, different red cosmetic and ritual powders have been prepared using a variety of substances. Traditional descriptions may include turmeric-derived materials, alkaline substances and other natural ingredients. However, it would be inaccurate to assume that every form of sindoor has always followed one fixed formula.

The composition of modern commercially available products can vary considerably. Some products may contain synthetic colourants or mineral substances. Therefore, statements regarding the traditional

composition of sindoor should be distinguished from claims about the composition of contemporary commercial products.

Religious and Mythological Associations

Sindoor has been incorporated into numerous Hindu cultural and religious narratives. Traditions associated with figures such as Sita, Parvati, Radha and other female figures have contributed to the symbolic interpretation of vermilion and the colour red.

The association of sindoor with Sita and Rama is particularly prominent in popular religious traditions. Stories concerning Hanuman and sindoor are also widely circulated in Hindu devotional culture. According to a well-known traditional narrative, Hanuman applied sindoor to his body as an expression of devotion to Lord Rama after observing the significance attached to sindoor by Sita.

Similarly, Parvati is frequently associated with marital auspiciousness and feminine power in Hindu traditions. Such narratives have contributed to the cultural understanding of sindoor as a symbol of marital devotion and sacred feminine identity.

References to beauty, adornment and vermilion can also be found in Sanskrit literary and devotional traditions. *Saundarya Lahari*, traditionally attributed to Adi Shankaracharya, contains descriptions of the divine feminine and has influenced later devotional interpretations of feminine beauty and sacredness. However, individual verses should be interpreted according to their textual context rather than used as direct scientific evidence for the physical effects of sindoor (Shankaracharya (n.d.)).

Sindoor in Hindu Literary Traditions

Hindu religious literature contains numerous descriptions of women's adornment, marital identity and auspicious symbols. Popular interpretations connect sindoor with the ideal of married womanhood and the protection and prosperity of the household.

References to marital adornment also occur in cultural interpretations of the *Ramcharitmanas* of Goswami Tulsidas and other devotional literature. These traditions have played an important role in transmitting cultural practices across generations (Tulsidas, n.d.).

The *Mahabharata* also contains powerful narratives concerning Draupadi, marriage, honour and the social position of women. However, claims about specific

actions involving sindoor should be distinguished between the original Sanskrit text, later regional retellings and popular oral traditions. Academic writing therefore requires careful identification of the precise textual source before attributing a particular episode directly to the epic.

Traditional and Yogic Interpretation

Traditional Indian knowledge systems sometimes associate the forehead region with important centres of consciousness and spiritual awareness. In yogic traditions, the *Ajna Chakra* is commonly located in the region between the eyebrows and is associated with perception, awareness and concentration.

Some traditional interpretations extend the symbolic application of sindoor from the forehead region towards the hair parting and connect this practice with the *Ajna* and *Sahasrara* concepts. These interpretations are part of religious and yogic thought.

However, such concepts should not be presented as established anatomical or physiological facts. The *Ajna Chakra* is a concept within yogic philosophy and should not be equated directly with a particular endocrine gland without appropriate scientific evidence. Similarly, claims that applying sindoor stimulates the pituitary gland, controls blood pressure, reduces stress or improves fertility have not been sufficiently established through controlled clinical research.

Thus, the traditional interpretation of sindoor may be valuable as a cultural and philosophical explanation, while its physiological effects require separate scientific investigation.

Scientific Perspective

The scientific discussion of sindoor requires a distinction between traditional beliefs and experimentally established evidence.

A study by Dasgupta (2017) examined sindoor from a semiotic and sociological perspective. The study discussed the meaning of sindoor as a marker of marriage and gender identity. It should not, however, be interpreted as experimental evidence that applying sindoor biologically increases emotional attachment, concentration or hormonal activity.

Similarly, traditional claims that sindoor improves mental health, regulates blood pressure or enhances fertility require controlled biomedical studies before such effects can be considered scientifically established.

An important scientific issue concerns the chemical

composition and safety of some sindoor products. Shah *et al.* (2017) analysed sindoor samples obtained from South Asian stores in New Jersey as well as samples from India and reported measurable lead in a substantial proportion of the samples. Their findings demonstrate that the safety of sindoor cannot be assumed solely from its traditional or religious identity.

Therefore, the scientific importance of sindoor lies not only in investigating possible physiological effects but also in examining its composition, quality, toxicity and safe use.

Health Considerations

Traditional practices may continue for generations, but their contemporary commercial forms can differ significantly from historical preparations. This is particularly important in the case of cosmetic products.

Lead-containing sindoor presents a potential health concern because lead exposure can be harmful, especially when products are accidentally ingested or transferred to children. Shah *et al.* (2017) highlighted the presence of lead in several tested sindoor samples. Consequently, consumers should not assume that all products labelled as sindoor are chemically identical or equally safe.

The presence of mercury or other potentially hazardous substances in particular traditional or commercial preparations should also be approached cautiously. A historical description of an ingredient does not establish that the substance is medically beneficial or safe for routine cosmetic use.

For this reason, scientifically responsible discussion of sindoor should encourage quality control, accurate labelling, appropriate manufacturing standards and avoidance of products containing hazardous substances.

Sindoor as a Symbol of Women's Identity

Sindoor has a strong relationship with the social identity of married women in many Hindu communities. It can communicate marital status without the need for verbal explanation. In this sense, it functions as a cultural sign or semiotic marker.

For many women, wearing sindoor is associated with personal faith, family tradition, emotional attachment and cultural continuity. For others, its use may be influenced by social expectations. The meaning of sindoor is therefore not identical for every woman.

Dasgupta (2017) highlights the gendered dimension of the practice, particularly the fact that women are more

commonly expected to display visible symbols of marital status than men. This observation demonstrates that cultural practices can have multiple meanings and should not be reduced to either purely religious or purely social explanations.

Conclusion

Sindoor is an important cultural symbol associated with marriage, auspiciousness, feminine identity and religious tradition in many Hindu communities. Its significance has developed through the interaction of cultural practices, religious narratives, social customs and symbolic meanings.

Archaeological evidence demonstrates the ancient use of red pigments and cosmetic materials in the Indian subcontinent, but such evidence alone cannot establish that the modern practice of sindoor application has remained unchanged for 5,000 years. Similarly, traditional beliefs concerning chakras, concentration, fertility, stress or physiological benefits should not be described as scientifically proven without adequate experimental evidence.

Modern research also indicates that some sindoor products may contain potentially harmful substances such as lead. This highlights the importance of examining traditional cosmetics not only from the perspective of cultural heritage but also from the perspective of consumer safety.

Sindoor therefore represents a rich subject for interdisciplinary research. Its historical, religious, social, symbolic and scientific dimensions together demonstrate how a traditional practice can continue to carry cultural meaning while also requiring critical examination in the context of modern academic and scientific knowledge.

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