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Sindoor and the Nation: Gender, Identity and Symbolism

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ABSTRACT

One of the most enduring symbols in Indian culture is sindoor, the vivid crimson powder that married Hindu women traditionally wear along the parting of their hair. With strong ties to the Indian subcontinent, it is connected to marriage, commitment, and female energy. The use of red pigments for body decoration is suggested by archaeological discoveries from the Harappan civilization, demonstrating the cultural significance of such markings throughout history. Sindoor is strongly connected to goddesses in Hindu mythology, such as Sita and Parvati, representing love, fertility, protection, and the holy force of Shakti. Sindoor has historically been used to denote a woman's marital status and is firmly ingrained in marriage ceremonies. Its use at wedding ceremonies and its removal upon widowhood demonstrate how it serves as both a public symbol of life stage and a personal adornment. These practices continue to influence women's roles in traditional and community environments.

Sindoor has also become a symbol of politics in recent years. The Indian Army operation was given the name "Operation Sindoor" in the wake of the 2025 terrorist strike in Pahalgam. Sindoor was utilized by the government as a representation of national unity and the respect for Indian women. Feminist academics have criticized such applications, claiming that they exploit women's bodies and traditional roles in the

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service of nationalist ideologies, frequently failing to address underlying gender inequalities, even though this action struck a chord with cultural emotions. The significance of Sindoor varies in modern society. For many women, it remains a valued symbol of their spiritual faith and commitment to their marriage. For others, particularly in progressive and urban contexts, rejecting or reinterpreting the practice becomes a means of expressing independence, questioning gender norms, or redefining cultural traditions. The complexity of the interplay between gender, tradition, modernity, and national identity as represented by a single sign is highlighted by these disparate selections. From historical, mythological, and feminist viewpoints, this article examines the cultural development and political usurpation of sindoor. Its goal is to demonstrate how regular behaviors related to sindoor continue to influence and be influenced by larger discussions on womanhood, cultural continuity, and India's collective identity.

Keywords: Sindoor, Identity, symbolism, Indian Politics, Culture.

Introduction

Cultural Symbols have always been vital to the construction of the Indian Culture, where objects, colours and cultural rituals imply Indian identity, belonging and moral order of the land. From the *Janehu of the Dwij male* to the *Mangal sutra and bangles* adorning Indian Hindu Women, bodily markers carry the social status, their community & relational identity. Among these Sindoor, a vivid vermilion powder worn along the hair parting of married Hindu Women, stances out as one of the most durable and visible signs of womankind in Indian culture (Fuller,2004). Its character lies not only in its appeal but in deeply rooted social, cultural & political meanings that it contains.

The History of the Sindoor underlines its massive cultural permanency. Archaeological evidences from the great Indus valley civilization submits the use of red pigments in body decoration. In Hindu Classical Shashtriya Parampara Sindoor is associated with divine femineity and marital devotion specially in figures of Maa Parwati & Sita. With long period of time its ritual assimilation in Hindu Marriage has reinforced it as a visible signifier of marital status of Indian Hindu woman (Leslie,1992). Yet Sindoor is not just a private ornament. Its presence or absence openly indicates the woman's marital status, aligning her personality with societal expectations, gendered discipline and patriarchal systems. The Present Paper is concerned with the understanding Sindoor as more than a cosmetic or ritualistic material. Its stances three central research questions:

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- How has Sindoor evolved culturally & historically and its present-day role in religious, social and even political contexts?
- In what ways does Sindoor intersect with broader themes of gender, identity & Nationalism?
- How do feminist critiques reinterpret and resist symbolic weight of Sindoor?

The central need of these questions has grown in contemporary Indian context where cultural sign & Symbols are gradually appropriated for the political ends in the country. The recent supplantation of Sindoor in the Indian State Discourse as its symbolic positioning in Operation Sindoor by the Indian Armed Forces in the wake of Pahalgam Terrorist Attack 2025 in Jammu & Kashmir, highlights how a woman martial symbol can be co-opted with communal and National Security. Feminist ideology argue that such uses concurrently exact women symbolically while ignoring the societal and structural inequalities they face.

Research Methods

From Methodological point of view, the study adopts Interdisciplinary qualitative research approach. It magnets upon historical and cultural analysis including archaeological findings & mythological accounts to trace the deep origin of Sindoor in Indian culture. Paper also uses sociological perspective to explore how Sindoor functions as gendered practice that's regulate female body and reinforce patriarchal structure of the society (Dubey,1997). The study is using Discourse analysis to examine about how sindoor is mobilised in recent political and feminist debate particularly in context to Indian nationalism, identity politics and cultural continuity.

The Thesis advocated here is that sindoor is not just a material adornment but a complex symbol that symbolises the religious devotion, cultural & gendered identity and contested politics of Indian Nation. Its power lies in its ambiguity. For many women, sindoor remains a precious expression of faith & marital commitment. By placing Sindoor within broader debates on womanhood, Cultural Nationalism, and Feminist resistance, the study contributes to an understanding of how a apparently simple practice summarizes the tensions between tradition and modernity, devotion and discipline. It underlines the value of studying everyday cultural symbols as sites where personal lives and national identities intersect, where history and politics are adorned onto the body & where gendered meanings are continually contested (Yuval Davis,1997).

Historical and Archaeological Evidences Related to Sindoor in Indian Culture

A. Sindoor in Prehistoric and Harappan Culture

The origin of Sindoor can be drawn on the earliest stages of Indian civilization, where the symbolic use of red pigments appears have been integral to physical ornamentation & ritual practice. Archaeological evidences from Indus valley or Harrapan Civilization suggests the use of numerous coloured minerals including hematite and cinnabar as cosmetic and ritual powders. Some of Harrapan sites display traces of red powder on hair parting or forehead, hinting the possibility of the use of proto forms of sindoor application were practised among women at the contemporary times. Though conclusive evidence linking these practices to contemporary Sindoor traditions is lacking (wright, 2010).

The red colour itself has long held cosmological implication in South Asia. across numerous ancient cultures, red was associated with life force, energy & reproduction system of humankind. Scholarly Anthropologist have noted that in agrarian societies, the colour of red was symbol of blood, bravery & fertility. This cultural semiotics of red colour carried over into Vedic and later Hindu traditions, where the red colour came into existence associated with power of Shakti, the creative famine energy of our cosmos.

B. Transition to early Vedic Hindu Tradition

The transitional shift from protohistoric practices to early Vedic rituals brought with it categorization of red powders in symbolic and ritual life. Indian Ved system and Smritis mention the use of coloured substances in the rites of passage including marriage, birth and protection ceremonies in contemporary society. Sindoor gained the vital importance in ceremonial deeds like marriage at the moment. Sindoor ceremony emerged as a central marker where groom applied the Sindoor over bride's hair parting.

Early oral traditions and epic narratives further indorsed Sindoor as a mark of marital devotion. In our Epic Ramayan Sita's adornment with Sindoor is presented as an expression of loyalty to her husband lord Ram, on the other hand in puranic narratives Parvati is depicted as applying Sindoor in honour of Lord Shiva, thereby linking the practice to ideal of wifely devotion and divine conjugality. (pitchman, 2007) These kinds of mythical associations set up Sindoor not only as material symbol of marriage but also as a personification of sacred femininity and the cosmic balance sustained through marriage. The application of Sindoor thus united personal life-cycle transitions into broader cosmological and social frameworks.

C. Permanency of symbolism Through the Ages

With the long span of time, In Hindu Society, the symbolic significance of Sindoor persevered and adapted social and political contexts. During Ancient Indian & Medieval Period of Indian Society, the practice was armoured through Sanskritic traditions & organized rituals that placed Sindoor at the centre of Hindu Marriage. Grihya- Sutras described the ritual of applying Sindoor as a vital element in securing the husband's long life. Among the royal families Sindoor became the synonyms of fame virtues & respectability. It was the visible reminder of the social roles allotted to the woman by the patriarchal structure of the society.

At the Medieval Period bhakti movements further contributed to the beatification of Sindoor by linking it with devotional practices of that period. Female devotees often employed Sindoor as an expression of their spiritual loyalty to deities, conceived as divine husbands blurring the line between marital and religious devotion. Thus, Sindoor became a broader metaphor for loyalty. The medieval bhakti movements further contributed to the sanctification of sindoor by linking it with devotional practices. Female devotees often employed sindoor as an expression of their spiritual fidelity to deities conceived as divine husbands, blurring the line between marital and religious devotion (Harlan, 1992). Thus, sindoor transcended its immediate ritual use to become a broader metaphor for loyalty, surrender, and the sacred bond between devotee and deity.

During the colonial period, the continuousness of the Sindoor as marker of cultural identity became particularly significant. The Britishers, Administrative, missionaries' reformers often remarked over Hindu women's body markers like Sindoor and bangles etc. At the same time Nationalist reformers revalorized these practices as symbol of cultural legitimacy and resistance against colonial defamation (Sangari,1990). The picture of the married Hindu woman, ornamented with sindoor, came to represent the holiness of Indian tradition and the sacredness of the domestic arena (Chatterjee, 1993). This tightness between colonial critique and nationalist assumption ensured that sindoor remained central not only to women's personal identities but also to the symbolic politics of the evolving Indian nation in recent times.

The role of Sindoor's continuity in preserving cultural identity in India

The persistence of Sindoor across prehistoric, Vedic, medieval, and colonial eras underscores the significance of continuity in maintaining cultural identity.

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Symbols like sindoor acquire resilience when they operate across various dimensions: personal, familial, community, and political. The application of Sindoor by women has historically represented not only personal marital status but also participation in a cultural heritage that transcends generations (Karve,1965). Thus, Sindoor functions as a cultural text, as characterized by Clifford Geertz (1973), serving as a multifaceted symbol that communicates significance across many historical and social settings.

The endurance of Sindoor also reveals the adaptability of cultural symbols. While its ritual and mythological roots are ancient, its meanings have been reinterpreted in each era-whether as a devotional offering, a marker of wifely fidelity, or a symbol of national identity. This continuity, alongside transformation, helps explain why sindoor remains such a powerful emblem of Indian womanhood today. By tracing its archaeological and historical trajectories, we see how a seemingly simple cosmetic substance carries the weight of millennia of cultural memory, gender norms, and identity politics.

Sociological Dimensions of Sindoor

Sindoor occupies a vital sociological role in shaping and regulating the identity Indian Hindu women by its aligned with marital status. In Indian culture marriage is not a personal contract like Islam, but it is the deep connection of the two souls for the many births that defines the respect, honour and belonging to each other (Uberoi,1993). Within this sociological framework Sindoor functions as public declaration of a woman's commitment and legitimacy signalling her transition socially certified role of a wife. The expectations that married Hindu woman should wear Sindoor is not mainly an aesthetics but also a deep-rooted norm tied to the notions of the family wellbeing. The presence of Sindoor is a sign of respectability, loyalty and devotion to Dharma. Its absence indicates the widowhood may invite doubt or moral judgment. In this way, Sindoor functions as a punitive marker that organizes women's bodies and identities within patriarchal social structures of the given society.

The disciplinary function of Sindoor becomes vibrant when understood as device for applying patriarchal norms through bodily adornment. Michel Foucault's idea of the body as a site of discipline and regulation (1977) is particularly apply here: the application of Sindoor concentrates a woman's marital status understandable to society, transforming her body into a text that signs obedience to established norms. By applying Sindoor women prove compliance with community expectation, there by maintaining social order and family prestige. Equally refusal to wear Sindoor by married woman in rural or urban spaces invite social criticism. This Familial implementation

ensures that the Sindoor is not a optional adornment but a duty embedded in rhythms of everyday life, reinforcing the patriarchal control through the intimate space of the family(Chakravarti,2003). Thus, Sindoor demonstrates how culture engrave gender discipline on to the female body, normalising submission while concurrently framing it as sacred duty.

At the same time, the meanings and practices nearby Sindoor vary meaningfully across India's rural-urban divide, reflecting the tensions between continuity and change in a quickly modernizing society. In rural and traditional contexts, Sindoor remains a powerful and undisputed marker of marital identity, with its absence often seen as transgression or moral laxity. The fact that Sindoor has been marketed in beauty industries as a cosmetic product, often detached from its ritual significance, additional illustrates this redefinition in modern contexts (Donner, 2008). Social media and popular culture also play a role in reforming its meanings: Bollywood heroines often appear adorned with Sindoor in marriage-related scenes, supporting its traditional symbolism, while urban influencers sometimes experiment with it as a fashion statement rather than a religious or marital marker. This variety of meanings highlights how Sindoor has become a contested symbol in contemporary India—simultaneously upheld as sacred in some spaces and redefined or resisted in others.

Sindoor in National Politics and Identity

The figurative power of Sindoor has not remained confined to the personal and religious domains but has gradually been drawn into the political ground, where it is appropriated to coherent ideas of nationhood, sacrifice, and cultural continuity in India. A striking example of this was the Indian Army's naming of its counterterrorism operation in Pahalgam as *Operation Sindoor in 2025*. The choice of this specific terminology was more than a strategic label; it was a cautious attempt to appeal cultural emotion by mobilizing Sindoor as a nationalist metaphor. In imagination of public, Sindoor is closely related with marriage, fidelity, and female sacrifice, and its supplication in a military context symbolically positioned the nation itself as a woman whose honour required protection and defence. The metaphor successfully compared the sacrifice of soldiers to the commitment of married women, placing military action within a moral and cultural framework recognized by Indian audiences. By linking the images of Sindoor, the state used a store of representative capital that showed unity, sacrifice, and the sacredness of the homeland (Ramaswamy, 2010). This way, a symbol of home and gender was changed to serve the national identity and the safety of everyone.

The use of the term Sindoor in today's scenario shows how government

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and political entities strategically influence traditional symbols to nurture emotional character and legitimacy of the country. Nationalist discourse in India have historically dependent on the feminization of the Nation, often represented as *Bharat Mata*, a figure overstated with characteristics of Hindu femininity, including symbols of marital devotion. (Chatterjee, 1993, Sarkar, 2001). Political narratives influence the symbolism Sindoor, connecting women's bodies to concepts of honour & purity, so mobilising public sentiment around a well known and emotionally significant cultural symbol. The symbolism is not special to Sindoor, it is the part of a larger trend where rituals of society, festivals, and religious practices intersect with national politics.

Though, the use of word Sindoor in politics has faced opposition in Indian academic as well as political world. Feminist scholars and activists have condemned these appropriations as unequal, contending that they exploit women's bodies and cultural roles while failing to confront the systematic injustice that women persistently encounter (Menon, 2012, Narayan, 1997). By utilizing Sindoor as a metaphor for National glory, the state symbolically uplifts women while materially disregarding them. The real experiences of many Indian women spanning constrained autonomy in marriage, assault, pay disparity & inadequate political representation are overshadowed by symbolic adulation.

Feminist Perspectives and Critiques

Discussion of feminist perspective on Sindoor often point out while it looks like small, everyday practice, it transmits deep social and cultural meanings that replicate gender inequality. Usually, Sindoor has been celebrated as a sacred symbol of marital dedication and devotion but so many scholars of the feminist approach argue that this kind of celebration pelts the unequal roles it enforces. It is not the personal choice of adornment somewhat it ties a woman's identity to her husband in the society. In a social system only the married women are allowed to wear it that is why respectability becomes linked to her new conjugal role. On the other side, widows and unmarried women are totally excluded, sometimes facing stigma or pity because they do not carry this visible symbol of marriage. Thus, Sindoor reminds us that women are valued often not for themselves but their relationship or connection to men through this mark.

Against this Framework, many feminist scholars have pushed back by treating the rejection to apply Sindoor as an act of individual freedom. In the case of highly urban areas, choosing not to wear Sindoor after marriage becomes a way of advocacy of freedom to herself. It is the condition of autonomy, an insistence that they will not be reduced to a single symbol. On

the other hand, some feminist scholars prefer to reinterpret Sindoor using it as a marker of Fashion accessory or festival adornment rather than a necessary symbol of marital life. These redefinitions create space for women to play with tradition rather than being bound by it. But this has not ended the current debate over the Sindoor. Critics argue that even women choose Sindoor Fashionable reasons it still reinforces the marital identity. The feminist discussion continues to move between those who want to remove the symbol altogether and those who believe it can be reshaped to carry new, self-defined meanings.

Feminist approach also helps us think about Sindoor in terms of power and control over women's personality. The Daily act of applying the Sindoor it is kind of self-surveillance: a woman shows she is dutiful and respectable. At the same moment, its visibility invites constant community judgement. People notice if a married woman stops applying Sindoor and widows are identified by its absence. Prominent Scholar Judith Butler (1990) would call this a performative act because through wearing it, woman endorse and repeat social rules about marriage and gender. Yet, like all acts of power there is also room for confrontation. A Hindu woman might wear Sindoor in a fashionable way or she might refuse it altogether. In both cases, woman unsettles the rigid meanings patriarchy has placed on the practice. This is why Sindoor feels so ambivalent. It can be both a sign of oppression and a space for women to proclaim themselves.

Even so, Feminist scholars caution us not to confuse symbolic freedom with real empowerment. As Menon (2012) describes, whether or not a woman wears Sindoor does not inevitably change the deep structures of the inequality in her life. The perseverance of issues like domestic violence, dowry deaths and limited rights to property shows that patriarchy is far more than a central question of symbols. Rejecting Sindoor may make individual statement, but it does not on its own dismantle the systematic injustice women face. This is why feminist approach insists that critique of Sindoor as a symbol must also be connected to broader struggles for material and structural change.

In the end, Feminist scholarship shows that Sindoor is both simple and complex: a small strip of colour that represents huge debates about gender, identity and power. For some women, Sindoor continues to be a meaningful part of faith and marriage; for others, it is oppressive or irrelevant.

Conclusion

Throughout the discussed paper, we have explored how Sindoor carries the layers of meaning, attached with it that stretch across Indian history, Hindu Mythology, Indian society & political arena of the country. From its evidences

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in Indian ancient civilization, its connection with Vedic entities, Sindoor has been a thread linking to woman's body to sacred and cultural world. After passing so much times it became the central concept of Indian marriages, marking the vital transition of a Indian woman in wife. Yet, as we have seen Sindoor is more than a personal adornment, its communal sign that signals a woman's place within the household and her community, and gradually within the nation itself.

One of the Major arguments of this study is that Sindoor embodies contradictions. It represents Love, Devotion and continuity of tradition, on other hand its can be easily symbolising control, inequality and gendered discipline. It is once empowering and oppressive, sacred and profane. when a woman receives Sindoor on her wedding day it is the moment of the joy and cherish but when a widow wipes it away, the same symbol became the cue of loss and exclusion. In political arena, Sindoor has been drawn into the service of Indian nation, as in Operation Sindoor, where it was just used to stir patriotic emotions. These different layers show how Sindoor is never just colour or ritual, it is about power, meaning and identity.

The core claim of the paper is that Sindoor is a perfect example of how social symbols work in complex and sometimes contrary ways. On the other hand, it replicates continuity with the past, connecting women to the generations to traditions that stretch back thousand of years. It also reveals the ways in which tradition can be used to support unequal gender roles or to serve political agendas. This kind of duality is what makes Sindoor so captivating, never fixed, always open to explanation and always negotiated in relation to changing social backgrounds.

The theoretical implications of the given discussion go beyond Sindoor itself. Anthropologists highlight the importance studying everyday object and practice In the case of Sindoor we see how women bodies often become the stage on which these struggles are performed. Examining such symbols help to understand not just social continuity but also the tensions and conflicts that shape identity in modern India.

At last, Sindoor reminds that the culture is not static. Symbols continue because they adapt, ever-changing in meaning while absorbent their emotional and historical depth. The journey of Sindoor from Ancient red pigment to the modern symbol of identity, shows how a single tradition can carry the weight of dedication, chastisement, continuousness & politics at once. Its future will probably continue to reflect this complexity, neither wholly sacred nor wholly secular, neither fully redeeming nor entirely oppressive, but always alive in the partialities and lives of the women who wear it, reject it or redefine it.

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