



# THE SACRED ART OF TILAKS!

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*The art of making tilaks on the forehead and on the various parts of the body dates back to Vedic times. Over a passage of time this custom became a ritual amongst Hindus and grew in dimension and diversity as each Shiva and Vaishnava sect developed their own special tilaks. This practice continued down the ages and the tilak remained the customary symbol of all Hindus irrespective of caste, creed and colour.*



Left: A Ramanandi sect sadhu at Vrindavan — thinking beyond the Vaikuntha  
Right: Bengali widow in Vrindavan sporting a tilak of 'Nabodip' origin

In the Rig Vedic age, a tilak was applied when the *yagya* or *homa* (fire) ceremony was initiated. At the end of the *homa* ceremony, the people put marks on their forehead, the lower end of the neck, on the arms and on the chest. These marks were made with ashes and *ghee* (clarified butter) mixed together on the sacrificial ladle and applied on the body with the index finger.

The famous *Brahma Purana* (ancient text) records that without the mark of the tilak, gifts of cows, offering to the fire, the recital of holy texts were all worthless! The *Brahma Purana* further says that a vertical mark was to be made with mud and three horizontal marks with ashes, but a Dwija Brahmin or twice-born, might mark his tilak with sandal paste.

The *Brahma Purana* also says that different fingers of the hand were used to mark the tilaks and the meaning of their application is also elucidated. It records that the thumb was used to ensure sound health, the middle finger for longevity, the ring finger for wealth and finally the index finger was used to achieve emancipation.

To understand the passage of tilak culture we first delve into Shaivism.

Shaivites mark their body with *bhasma* and *Tripundra* tilaks. *Bhasma* (ashes) is needed to besmear the body and *Tripundra* tilak is a drawing mainly of three horizontal lines with a dot in varied sizes, either superimposed or drawn above or below between the two eyebrows (space for the third eye).

H.H. Wilson noted that *Tripundra* was a triple transverse line made with the ashes which should be taken from the fire of an Agnihotra Brahman, or they may be the ashes of burnt cowdung from an oblation offered to the God.

Ritualistically speaking, Kasikanda refers, "Whoever marks the Tripundra with ashes, agreeable to rule, is purified from sins of the first and second degree; who makes it on his forehead without the *mantra* (chant), being ignorant of its virtue, will be purified from every simple sin."

The law of *Bhasma Dharana* (practice of besmearing) is encoded in *Bhasmajabolopanishad*. Sanskrit Scholar Dr. T.R. Sharma noted, "I am the Brahman alone, which remains after the illusion of the existence of anything except that the self has been reduced to ashes by the fire that burns at the time of dawning of right knowledge".

One finds in ancient scriptures that *sadhus* (ascetics) used to besmear their bodies with the ashes from the cremation-ground. God is identified with *maha vibhuti* (ashes) and whosoever sports *vibhuti* inculcates the spiritual semblance of God. Besmearing one's body with ashes may be indicative of many things. It gives us the impression that the world is perishable, that divinity is only apparent and not real, that the body is just a modification of earth and that one should adopt an attitude of renunciation towards every worldly object.

The ingredients of *Bhasma Dharana* and its symbolic spiritual aspiration are explained mainly in two *Upanishads* (ancient texts), namely, *Brahmajabolopanishad* and *Bhasmajabolopanishad*.

The ash is prepared out of burnt cowdung. It is said that in a cow's body the Goddess Lakshmi resides and so the cowdung is used for the tilak-paste. Thus this ash removes the foul odour of human body and purifies the body of a devout. According to the *Upanishad* there are five types of *vibhuti* derived from particular breeds of cows and having its own significance. These



Above: Sporting Tripundara tilaks sadhus worshipping at the ghats of Varanasi — the land of Shiva  
Below: Sri Chaitanya followers still come to Vrindavan from Nabadwip in West Bengal

are Vibhuti, Bhadra, Bhasma, Ksara and Raksa.

On the score of application of *bhasma* and smearing of the body we have two main schools of thought. *Brahmajjobolopanishad* prescribes that the ashes should be smeared on thighs, private organs and feet apart from the forehead which is fundamental. *Bhasmajobolopanishad*, on the other hand, states that *bhasma* should be applied on the neck, right side of the neck, cheeks, eyes, mouth, heart, naval, both side of the shoulders, both elbows and wrists and the back of both palms and

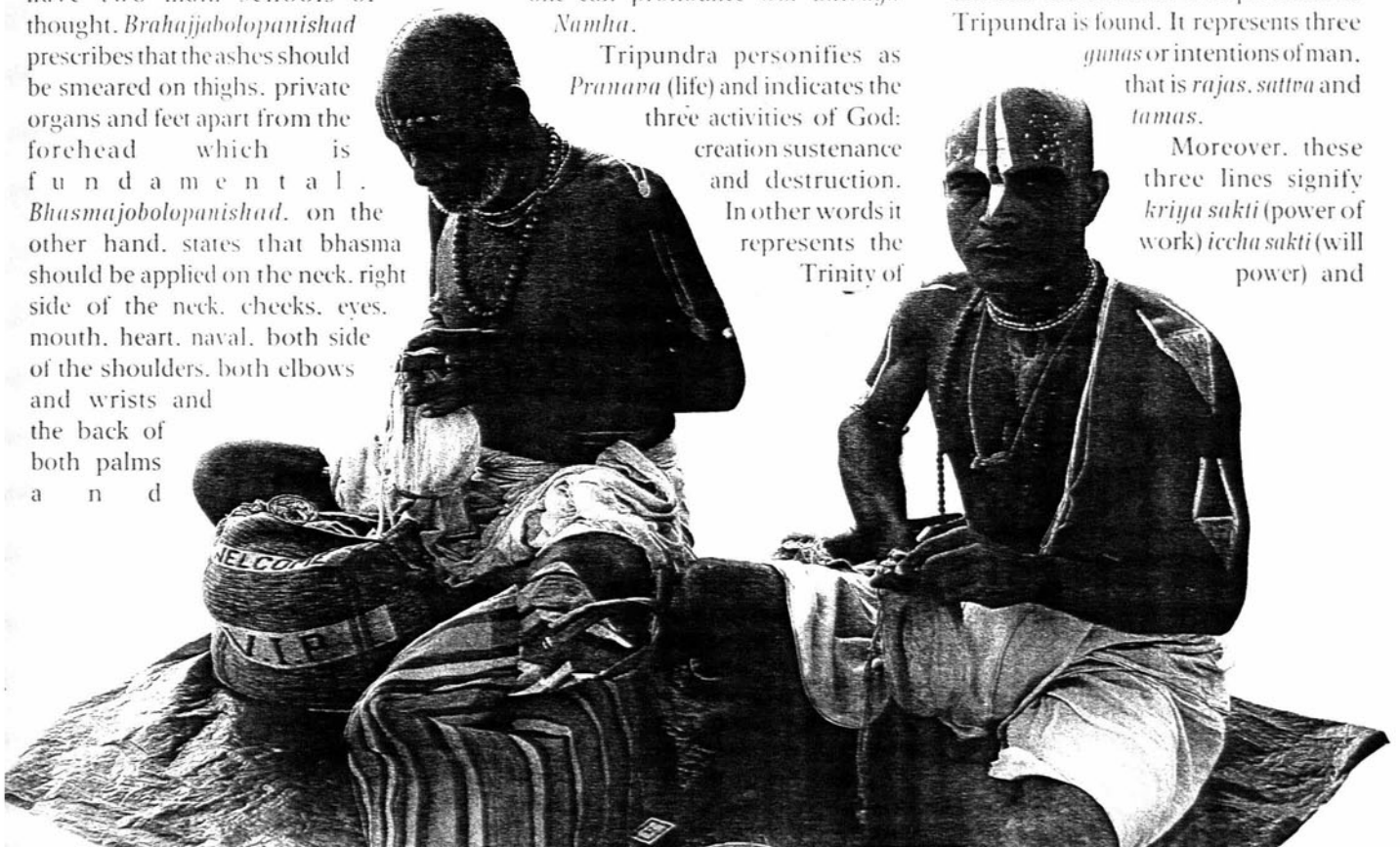
shoulder blades. For besmearing of the body and wearing of Tripundra tilaks different types of mantras are prescribed. However, if one is ignorant one can pronounce *Om Shrivaya Namha*.

Tripundra personifies as *Pranava* (life) and indicates the three activities of God: creation sustenance and destruction. In other words it represents the Trinity of

Hindu Gods — Brahma, Vishnu, Maheshvara (Shiva). Thus Tripundra signifies the supreme God himself.

In the text of *Kalagnirudropanishad* another dimensional interpretation of Tripundra is found. It represents three *gunas* or intentions of man, that is *rajas*, *sattva* and *tamas*.

Moreover, these three lines signify *kriya sakti* (power of work) *iccha sakti* (will power) and





*jnana sakti* (power of knowledge). The text further states that these three lines represent three moods of Shiva like *Mashesvara*, *Sada Shiva*, *Mahadeva*, which are the symbolic representations of Tripundra.

Dr. T. R. Sharma explained "The Upanishad says that by applying the Tripundra tilaks over the head, one causes all the sins accumulated through various previous births to perish. Sins committed by parts of the body above the throat will perish by wearing the Tripundra mark (over the neck). By wearing the Tripundra mark over the ears will perish the disease of the ears and sins committed by ears. By wearing tilaks over the arms the sins committed by arms will perish, by wearing it over the chest the sins committed will perish, by wearing tilaks over the head, the sins committed by mind perish. Over the navel the sins committed by sex organ..."

Tripundra tilak has lived down the ages as a symbol of Shiva himself. But today wearing of this tilak has only remained as a custom for most of the devouts as much of the meaning is lost to them. On the banks of Varanasi Ghats one finds professional 'tilak makers' who create those tilaks for the disciples who come to the Shivabhoomi i.e. Varanasi for a sacred bath. Explore the land of Hardwar as well which remains another center for Shaivites.

Now from Shaivite land we go to Vrindavan (Brajbhoomi) to understand the dynamics of Vaishnavite tilaks. It can be observed that Vaishnavites are more particular in wearing of tilaks than the Shaivites. A devout Vaishnavite marks all the twelve parts of the body with *Urdpundra* tilak or the U shaped one. In addition to the vertical marks, figures of the conch shell, wheel, club and lotus all attributes that Vishnu holds in his four hands are drawn on various parts of the body. Many names of Radha and Krishna are also stamped on the body. The four emblems and names of gods and goddesses are carved on wooden stamps with which they are marked on the body.

Different mantras, each especially prescribed for different parts of the body, are chanted as the Vaishnavite applies tilaks on the twelve parts of the body. It is commonly believed that every part of the body represents a particular form of God and thus every tilak is applied with the devotion a

particular god commands.

The most visually prominent tilak is on the forehead. This again differs from sect to sect even among the vast Vaishnavite following. This Vaishnavite forehead tilak is called the *Harimandira*. According to the *Haribhaktibilasa*, the Vaishnava authority composed in 1562 A.D., *Harimandira* is really the abode of God for the open space represents Vishnu and the two side lines represent Brahma and Siva.

There are vast numbers of Vaishnavite sects scattered all over India. The *Harimandira* tilak is as varied in number as in range and differs from family to family and region to region. The tilaks worn on the forehead vary in colour as well and are mainly made from *sindur* (vermilion), *pitta varna* (yellow) and *Krishna mrittika* (a blackish soil). But the main shade is sandal paste which is creamish with a white tone. Turmeric and lemon are used to extract the *pitta* or yellow colour while for *sindur*, lemon is mixed with a higher percentage of vermilion to give it its bright hue. *Krishna mrittika* is obtained from the ash of scented incense sticks and mixed with lemon.

In Bengal the Vaishnavites wear different kinds of tilaks which range in number from forty to fifty separate varieties. There are, however, six most commonly worn tilaks which comprise mainly twin perpendicular lines which are parallel and marked on the forehead at the center of the nose, so that downward triangle is formed which differs in size. This kind of tilak is worn by the followers of Nityananda Prabhu, Adyaita Prabhu, Acharaya Prabhu and Gandhar Prabhu. They draw two lines on the forehead but the base is ornamented with motifs of leaves of the bamboo, banyan tree and sesame flowers.

In Bihar the Ramanuja sect is widespread and their tilaks have a different design. The Bhumihar Brahmanis of Tihut draw zig-zag lines between the eyebrows from which two straight lines move upwards across the forehead.

The Ramanandi sect dominates northern India. They are worshippers of Rama, Sita, Lakshman and Hanuman. The tilak of Ramanandi sect is semi-circular and painted with sandal paste between the eyebrows. Two vertical lines of sandal paste which are ultimately based on two perpendicular

lines end between the eyebrows where the semicircular line is drawn. This is called *sinhasan*. The singular line centering the nose is drawn with *sindur* and is known as *agya chakra*.

Another Vaishnava sect is called Achari. The word Achari originates from Acharaya which is the name given to the chief gurus. Like the Ramanandis, the Acharis draw two upward lines on the forehead. Unlike the Ramanandi tilak, there are parallel horizontal lines and the *shree* is drawn with the yellow of *pitt varna*.

One of the main sects is the Ballabhachari which is predominant in north-western India. They worship Radha Krishna. On the forehead they draw two parallel lines with sandal paste, while between the eyebrows at the top of the nose, the mark is shaped like a half moon. Between the two lines they draw a circular tilak with vermilion.

Madhavacharya, the founder of the Madhavachari sect, hailed from a place called Ananta Pati Tulab in South India. This sect has an unique system of tilaks. They use a hot iron block to emboss their bodies, especially the shoulders, with the four symbols of Vishnu. They draw tilaks on the forehead with two lines of sandal paste which begin at the tip of the nose and move upward to the roots of the hair. Between these two lines they draw a black line with the ashes of incense sticks offered to Vishnu. The *shyam* mark ends at a circular mark of yellow

between the eyebrows. Likewise various sects like Atibari, Bindu Dhari, Harivayashi, Ramprasadis... have various tilaks.

Thus the tilak symbolises not only a sect, it is also a way of life and philosophy of Indian people. It is an integral element of Hinduism and, applied with reverence, it becomes an act of worship.

Re-enactment of Sri Chaitanya's lila

