

*A Vaishnav from Nabadwip decorated with the Aditya Prabhu Tilak, at Keshi Ghat in Vrindaban*

*Overleaf: The various kinds of Vaishnavite tilaks*

# vaishnavite TILAKS

*Written by Gautam Chattopadhyay  
Photographed by Sanjoy Chatterjee*

**T**he art of marking tilaks on the forehead is a very ancient one and dates back to the time of the Vedic Aryans. Over 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.

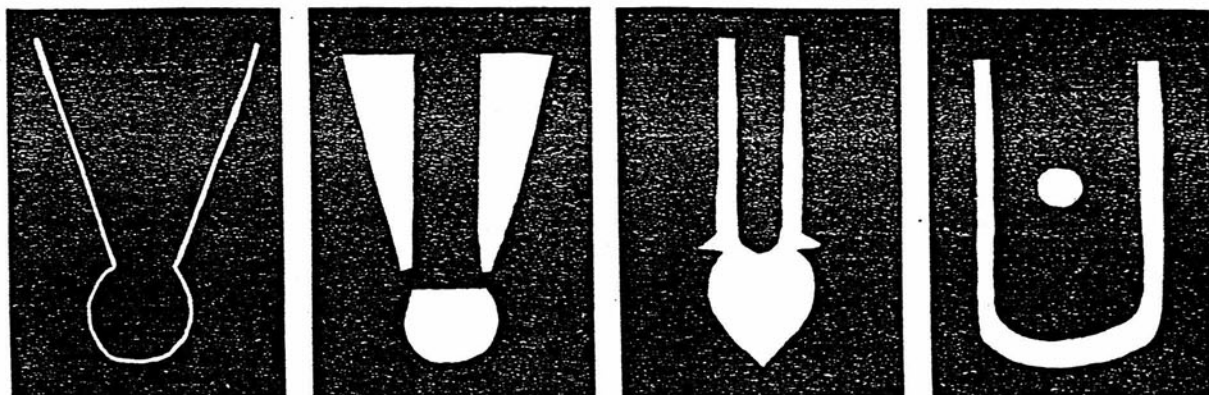
In the Rigvedic age, a tilak was applied when the *yagnya* or *homa*

ceremony was initiated. At the end of the *homa* ceremony, the Vedic people put marks on their forehead, the lower end of the neck, on the arms and on the chest. This mark was made with ashes and ghee mixed together on the sacrificial ladle and applied on the body with the index finger.

Raghunandan, the great law giver from Bengal, quoted the *Mahabharata* saying that, "after bathing, the tilak was to be affixed with mud and after the *homa*, with the ashes in order to save one from such sins as the sight of the Chandalas and others".

The famous *Brahma Purana* 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 records that "a vertical mark was to be made with mud and three horizontal marks with ashes, but a *Dwij*a, Brahmin or twice born, might mark his tilak with sandal paste".

The *Brahma Purana* further explains 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.

From the Vedic texts it is gathered that there were four different kinds of tilaks for the four *varnas*, or castes. The marking of two vertical lines on the forehead which in recent times has become a U shape is called *urdhapundra* and is only applied by Brahmins. The tilaks for Kshatriyas, the *tripundra*, has three arc-like wide upward marks on the forehead above which a circular spot is drawn. The Vaishya tilak is known as the *ardhachandra* or half moon and a *bindi* or circular mark is drawn at its mid point. Finally, there is the *partal*, the tilak of Sudras, which is a larger circular mark on the forehead.

The noted 19th century researcher, L.S.S. O'Malley, in his study has observed that "despite the fact that the *urdhapundra* was intended for Brahmins, the Vaishnava generally wore this mark in varied form while

the Shaiva prefers the *tripundra* which was originally meant for Kshatriyas". His observation proved to be correct and the modern practice of marking a tilak supplements this fact.

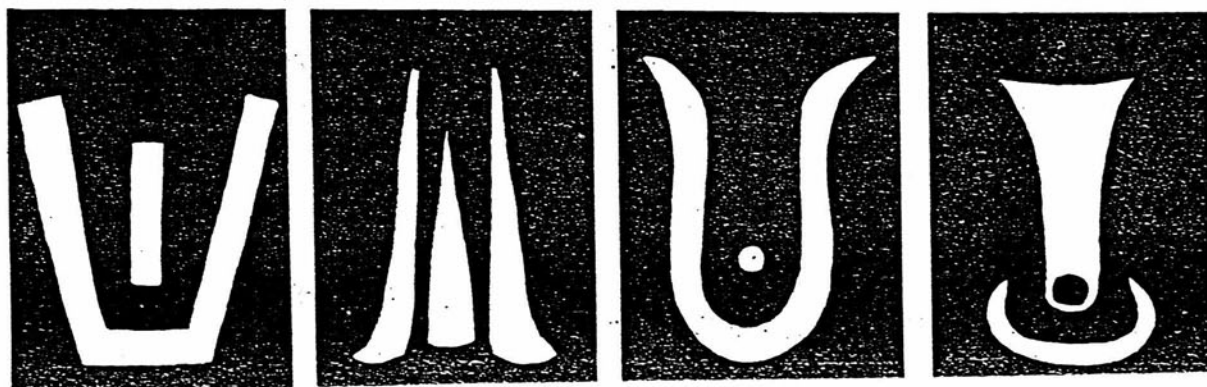
In recent times it can be observed that the Vaishnavites are more particular in the wearing of tilaks than the Shaivites. A devout Vaishnavite marks all the twelve parts of the body with tilaks. In addition to the vertical marks, figures of the conch shell, *sankha*, wheel, *chakra*, club, *gada*, and lotus, *padma*, all attributes that Vishnu holds in his four hands, are drawn on the various parts of the body. The 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.

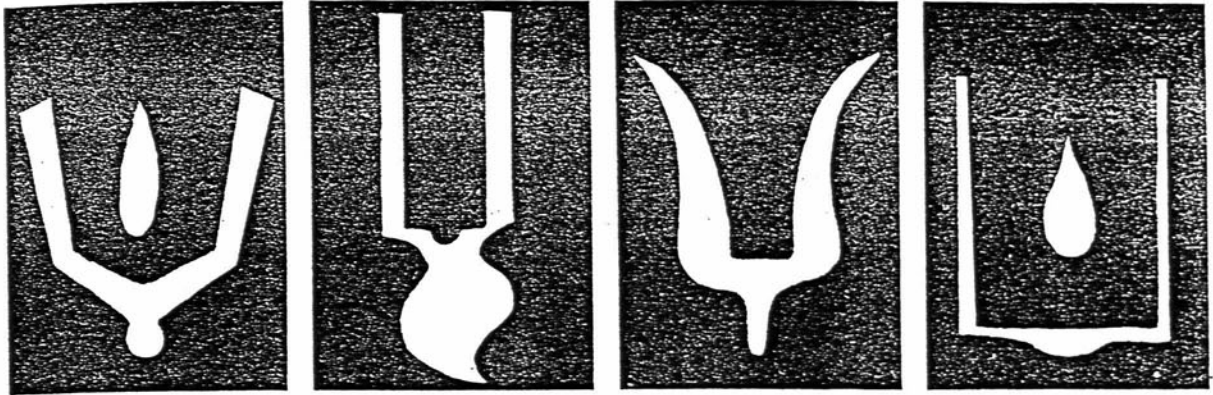
Different mantras, each especially prescribed for different parts of the body, are chanted as the Vaishnavite applies tilaks on the twelve parts of

the body. For the forehead the mantra is *namaha Kashabaya namaha*, for the stomach, *namaha Narayana namaha*, the chest *namaha Madhabaya namaha*, the neck, *namaha Govindaya namaha*. When tilaks are applied on the right side of the chest they chant *namaha Vishnave namaha* for the right arm, *namaha Madhusudanaya namaha*, the right shoulder, *namaha Tribikraya namaha*, for the left side of the chest, *namaha Bamanaya namaha*, the left arm, *namaha Shree-Dharaya namaha*, the left shoulder, *namaha Rishekesayay namaha*, the back or *Prishta-desha*, *namaha Padmanabhyay namaha* and finally, the waist or *Kotidesha*, *namaha Damodarayay namah*.

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 Vaishnav authority composed in 1562 AD, "*harimandira* is really the abode of god, for the open space represents Vishnu and the two side lines represent Brahma and Siva." The trinity is thus worshipped. The *Purana* accepts Brahma as the creator, Vishnu or Narayana is the god who maintains the created ones while Siva destroys and paves the way for creation. This then is the importance of the forehead.

There are vast numbers of Vaishnavite sects scattered all over India. The *harimandira* tilak is as varied in number and 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*, vermillion, *pitta varna*, yellow and *Krishna mrittika*, blackish soil colour. But the main shade is sandal paste which is creamish with a white tone. Turmeric and lemon are used to

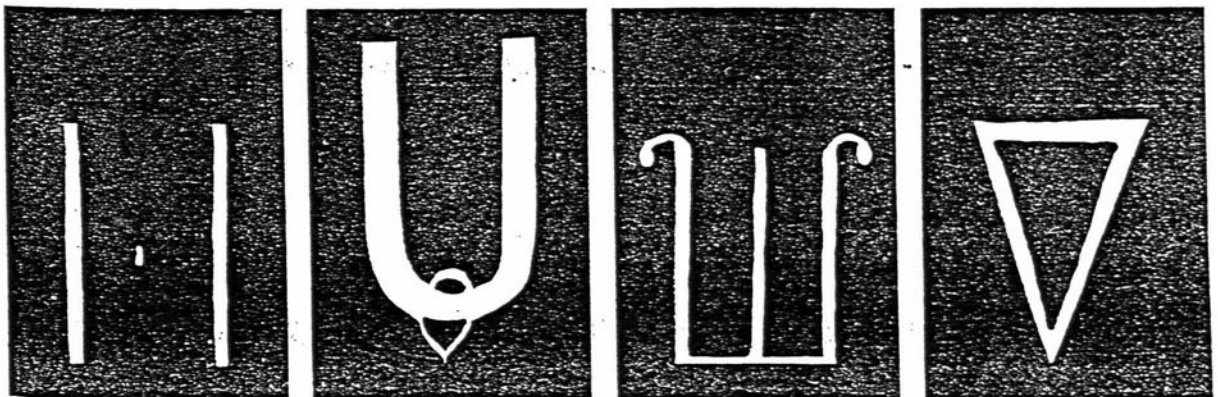
extract the *pitta* or yellow colour while for *sindur*, lemon is mixed with a higher percentage of vermillion to give it its bright hue. *Krishna mrittika* is obtained from the ash of scented *dhoops*, incense sticks and mixed with lemon.

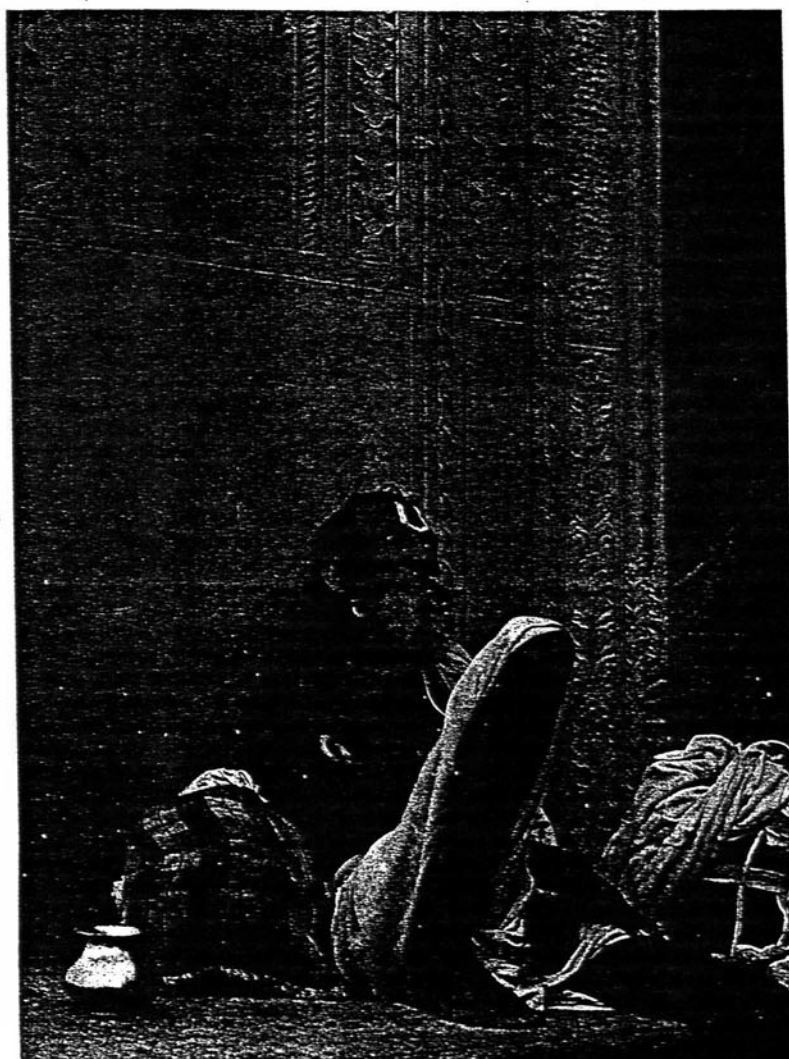
The Vaishnavite chapter of Bengal was unfolded by the great Indian mystic, Mahaprabhu Sri Chaitanya in the 15th century AD. Thus the path of *bhakti* was paved for emancipation of the soul. After this many schools of Vaishnavites came up in Bengal.

In Bengal, the Vaishnavites wear different kinds of tilaks which range in number from forty to fifty separate varieties. However, there are six most commonly worn tilaks which comprise mainly of twin perpendicular lines which are parallel and marked on the forehead at the centre of the nose, so that a downward triangle is formed which differs in size. This kind of tilak is worn by the followers of Nityananda,

Prabhu, Adyaita Prabhu, Acharya Prabhu and Gadhadar Prabhu. They also draw two lines on the forehead but the base is ornamented with motifs of leaves of the *banaspatra*, bamboo, *batapatra*, banyan tree and *tilapushpa* or *til* flowers.

In other parts of India, the Vaishnavite tilaks follow their own traditional fashion. Ramanuja Vaishnavas are more common in the Deccan plateau than in the north. The founder of this sect, Acharya Ramanuja was born in Parembar (sic) and studied in Kanchipuram. On the banks of the Kaveri river at Shree Ranga he propounded his philosophy. He then travelled around the country meeting other learned men, indulging in spiritual discourse where he defeated many pundits. The most famous occasion was in Venkatgiri where he initiated a Vaishnav puja in a Siva temple after he had won a particularly long scholastic discussion with the pundits there. He set up many *maths* or temples where the Ramanuja sects





flourish till today. The followers of Ramanuja worship Vishnu and Lakshmi in their singular and twin forms. They also worship Rama and Sita.

Tilaks form a prominent part of their religious ritual. They apply *gopichandan* or sandal paste on the twelve parts of their body. They draw two lines with sandal paste from the tip of the nose to the end of the forehead, at the juncture of the hair. Between these two lines, they draw another in yellow or vermillion, in the middle of the forehead. This line is called *Shree*.

In Bihar the Ramanuja sect is widespread but their tilaks have a different design. A peculiar tilak the *bargain*, is worn by the Bhumihaar Brahmins of Tirhut. A *bakra-rekha*, or zigzag line is drawn at the middle of the eyebrows, from which two straight lines move upwards across the forehead. The base is joined and the tilak looks like a flower held upside down. The *shree* or middle line is drawn in the centre and also joins at the base.

The Ramanandi sect dominates northern India. They are worshippers of Rama, Sita, Lakshman and Hanuman. Hearsay has it that Ramnandi was disillusioned with the Ramnuja sect and his guru,





Raghabandra. He left them and settled on the banks of the Ganga at Varanasi. His disciples were from all castes and creeds and some of his principle followers included Kabir, a weaver, Boydas, a leather worker and Sen, a barber. As with other Vaishnavite sects they also worship the *tulsi* and *shalgram shila* which are accepted as the embodiment of Narayana.

The Ramanandi sect tilak is a semi circular arc painted with sandal paste in the middle of the eyebrows. Two vertical lines of sandal paste which are ultimately based on two perpendicular lines, end at the middle of the eyebrows where the semi circular line is drawn. This is called *sinhasan*. The singular line centering the nose is drawn with *sindur* and is known as *agya chakra*.

Another Vaishnav sect is called Achari. The word *achari* originates from *acharya* which is the name given to the chief gurus. The Acharis are worshippers of the conch, *chakra*, *gada* and lotus, the emblems Vishnu holds in his hands. Only Brahmins are permitted to join the Achari sect. The Acharis are mainly from the Deccan and are descendants of families who were followers of Ramanuja's philosophy.

Like the Ramanadis, the Acharis

draw two upward lines on the forehead. Unlike the Ramanandi tilak, these are not vertical lines but parallel and the *shree* is drawn with the yellow of *pitta varna*.

One of the main sects is the Ballabhachari which is predominant in north western India. They are worshippers of Radha and Krishna, and the child Krishna, Bal Krishna, has recently become very popular. In some respects the Ballabhacharis are considered modern Vaishnavites as Ballabhacharya preached the abolition of stringent practises of self torture like starving and so on. They have a fairly materialistic outlook and believe in a family life. There are clear instructions that all disciples should offer *mana*, mind, *tana*, body and *dhana*, wealth to their gurus who are called Goswamis.

On the forehead they draw two parallel lines with sandalpaste, 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. Like other Vaishnavites they draw the conch shell, *chakra*, *gada* and lotus on their shoulders and chest.

Madhyacharya, the founder of the Madhyachari sect, hailed from a place called Ananta Pati Tulab in



Opposite page:

Above left: An Aditya Prabhu Vaishnav sadhu-ma

Centre: A sombre Vaishnav smeared with tilak

Right: A Hariyashi Vaishnav with a big question writ large on his face

Below: A Ramanandi Vaishnav at peace with himself

This page:

Above left: A mixed group of Chaturbhuj

and Urdhapundra tilakdhari Vaishnavs

Right: A lady Vaishnav from Bengal

Below: A singing Vaishnav at the Govinda Temple in Vrindaban



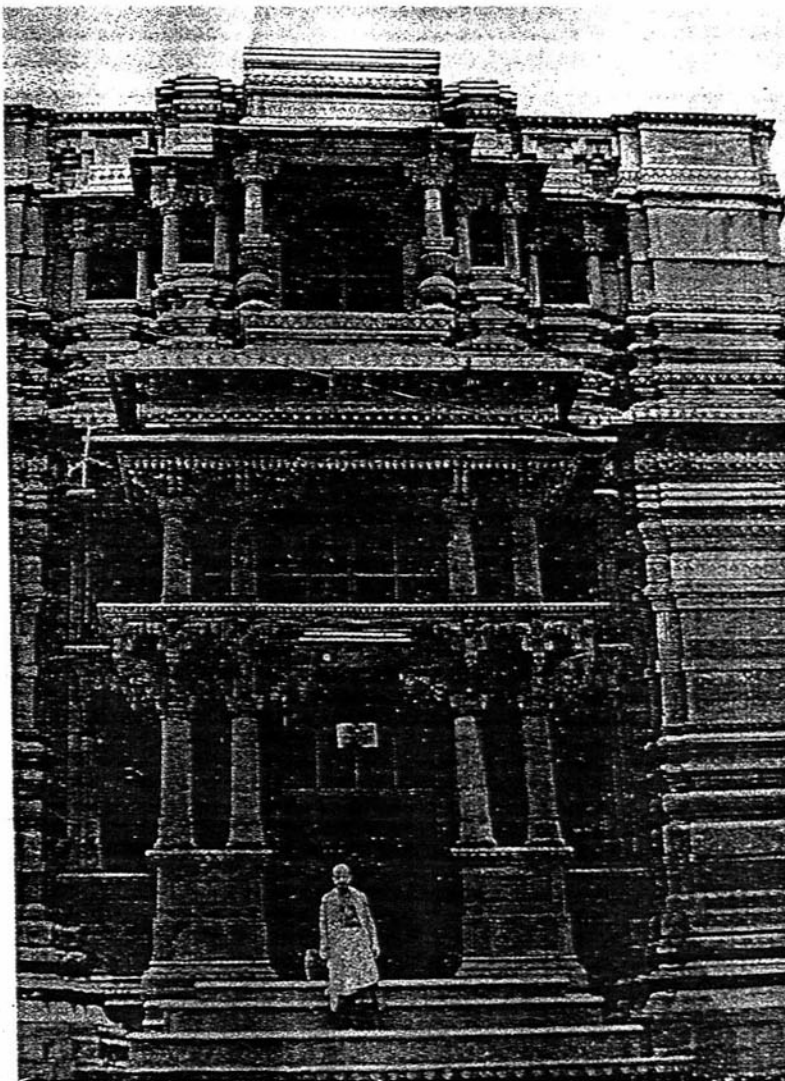
south India. He was born in 1121 AD and began his intellectual life in Anantshwar Vidhyapith at the age of nine. He studied the Vedas under his Guru Vyash-Deva in Badrikedar. Vyash-Deva finally gave him three *shalgram shilas* which he later placed in the three *mathas* founded by him where he erected statues of Vishnu. Udipi is their main centre of pilgrimage. Only a sanyasi or Brahmin could become a disciple by performing *dikshas* or penance.

The Madhyacharis use hot iron blocks 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 *dhoop* or incense sticks offered to Vishnu. This *shyam* mark ends at a circular mark of yellow at the middle of the eyebrows.

In Gujarat sects like the Atibari, Bindu-dhari Vaishnavite sprang up while in northern India, Harivyashi, Ramprasadi, Baragal were the main Vaishnavites. All these sects were formed and named after their gurus. The Harivyashis unlike Ramanandi, draw only a singular semi circular line instead of the round circular spot at the middle of the eyebrows. From this semi circular line they draw two vertical lines with sandal paste.

On the other hand the Ramprasadis mark two vertical lines in the middle of which they draw a *gopi-chandan* spot of a bigger size. This is known as the *Beni-tilak* and legend has it that Sita drew this tilak on the forehead of Ramprasadi with her own hand.

The centre of the Varagal Vaishnavites sect is in Surur village in the Gorakhpur district. They are believers of the Sanskrit shastras and worship Vishnu *shakti*. They are also found in south India. Like other Vaishnavs they draw tilaks of vertical lines on their forehead but they do not make the circular line in the middle of the eyebrows. They draw



*The Govinda Mandir at Vrindaban, abode of Vaishnavites*

the *shree* in various colours in the middle of the forehead centering the nose.

The Ayodhya based Laskari Vaishnavs draw a tilak similar to the Ramanandis. The only difference lies in the *shree* which is white rather than red or yellow. The Chattarbhuji Vaishnavs draw similar vertical lines which end on a circular line, but their tilak does not have a *shree* and the space in between remains empty.

No study of tilaks will be complete without some mention, no matter how brief, of Shaivite tilaks, which play an important role in the Hindu

way of life. The Shaivites use several tilaks called *tripundras*. Mainly three horizontal lines with a *bindi* in varied sizes, either superimposed or drawn above or below between the two eyebrows. They are made with ashes, sandalwood paste and vary in colour. A common *Shakta tilak* has three wide arcs made from ashes which encompass the entire forehead with a *bindi* between the eyebrows.

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