

## [To Catch Your Eyes](#)

Category : [October/November/December 2007](#)

Published by Anonymous on Oct. 02, 2007

### CULTURE

## To Catch Your Eyes

The traditional bindi is an expression of one's religion and a symbol of our spiritual sight

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Ah, the bindi, that unmistakable dot on the forehead of a Hindu. It is worn by the woman to attract and by the saint to display detachment; mysterious to Westerners, revered by mystics, traditional to all Hindus. The most visible, in-your-face symbol of Hinduism, the bindi can be as multifaceted, lofty or mundane as the all-encompassing religion that it represents.

The use of the bindi is as old in Indian life as it is widespread. Though many millions wear it every day, few know much about its significance, mystical meanings or varied forms. In all cases, however, the bindi is a display of one's faith, a proud statement that one follows the great Sanatana Dharma.

### Jewels and ashes

The word bindi comes from the Sanskrit bindu, meaning "a drop, small particle, dot." Mystically, it represents the "third eye, " or the "mind's eye, " which sees into the spiritual world. The forehead dot is a reminder to use and cultivate this spiritual vision, to perceive and understand beyond physical appearances. Hindu scriptures have a powerful place for the dot. It is said that, in the beginning, all 36 tattvas--the primeval categories of existence that comprise the whole universe--were condensed in one single dot, called the Parabindu. One could claim the bindi to be India's

prescient acknowledgement of cosmic singularity.

Deep metaphysical roots have never been a barrier for esoteric wisdom to manifest in a Hindu's daily life. The bindu takes a much more known and visible form as the widely-known, traditional mark that is worn by most Hindu women. Over the centuries, feminine creativity turned the simple dot into works of art--princesses had theirs made in the most intricate jeweled patterns; delicate designs are painted on a bride's forehead for her wedding; and the modern cosmetic industry offers them in endless shapes, styles and colors, even including innovative stick-ons.

The other end of the spectrum has the devout Hindu religious man and women, and often rishis and saints, piously wearing the bindi on their foreheads as part of a tilaka. A tilaka is a mark made with clay, sandalwood paste or, in some cases, ashes, using sacred vibhuti. It indicates affiliation with a specific denomination of Hinduism. Vaishnavas, who worship God as Vishnu and His incarnations, wear a vertical V-shaped tilaka called urdhva-pundra made from clay or sandalwood paste. The Saivite, who worship God as Siva, wears the tripundra, three horizontal strips of holy ash with a red bindi between the eyebrows or centered on the forehead. There are countless variations, and all honor the central dot.

## Roaring red

It is said in common lore that a bindi on the forehead is supposed to enchant the lover. Poems have been written through time about a lady's beautiful bindi. Whether the seductive powers of the bindi are fictional or real, it does catch people's attention and draws their eyes, which is certainly true of a lady's prospective husband.

An old custom that well states the attractive power of a red bindi is that a widow, in her modesty, will not wear it unless she is willing to find a new husband. She will still wear the bindi, symbol of her religion, but it will be black and unassuming. In northern India, only married women will wear bindis.

Red in Hindu symbology represents shakti, power and energy, a fact that finds a

parallel in many of the world's religions. In human color psychology, red is associated with emotions that stir the person, including anger, passion and love. For Saivite and Shakta mystics, red signifies the manifest shakti, while white stands for transcendent Siva.

The point between a person's eyebrows is the seat of the ajna chakra, the energy center present in all humans that controls and evokes divine insight. Its name means "command." A common yogic discipline is to focus awareness on that point, letting all other thoughts subside. As one goes deeper in mystical contemplation toward samadhi, the physical eyes naturally roll a little upwards, as if focusing on the inner third eye. It is said that the energy accumulated by an adept yogi in meditation will manifest in the ajna chakra as wisdom, divine sight and power.

The bindi and the tilaka are also used in pujas, ceremonies that honor and invoke God and the Gods. During puja, the red powder is applied to the Deity and then passed to all who attend as prasadam, blessed offerings that carry the God's vibration. It is following a puja, in fact, that most Hindu men will be found wearing the sacred marks. A temple murti will have many bindis applied to it, in addition to the customary one on the spot of the ajna chakra, accounting for the manifold powers, shaktis, that a Deity emanates.

There is no one recipe to make the red kumkum powder used for a bindi. Common ingredients include turmeric, lime (calcium carbonate, not the fruit) and various natural and man-made dyes, some of which have proven to be toxic. A silent watcher, the kumkum has travelled thousands of years through time until today. Hindu religious stories mention it in their ancient pages: Radha turned her kumkum tilaka into a flame-like design; Draupadi, in despair and disillusion, wiped the kumkum off her forehead at Hastinapur.

Today, a bindi can even be applied as a "sticker-bindi " made of felt, an easy-to-use substitute. The sticker-bindi is found in many creative forms and different sizes: sequined, dusted with gold powder, studded with beads or glittering stones. Some are exotic creations, using thin metal encrusted with jewels. Even the red color is not necessarily the norm in today's fashion, and many women choose a color to match their saris. But beware that serious skin reactions have occurred from the glue.

## The Western fad

The elegance and silent appeal of the bindi has not gone unnoticed in such places as Hollywood or London. Singing star Madonna has sported a bindi in her show--not to mention accoutrements derived from a variety of religions. Actress Uma Thurman has also been spotted in New York with a jeweled one.

The bindi has even been used as a tool for promoting religious tolerance. In 1998, a documentary was produced in Canada called "Just a Little Red Dot, " telling the story of a little Hindu girl who was assailed by classmates because of her bindi and how her teacher used the incident to teach the class tolerance and respect for differences.

From the foreheads of saints to the makeup of brides, in the East or in the West, the bindi is a humble dot with many faces and no boundaries. A truly apt symbol for broad, all-encompassing Hinduism.

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## A Bindi for the Guest

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A non-Hindu may first encounter the bindi when visiting a Hindu home, temple or ashram. The Taittiriya Upanishad encapsulates the Hindu attitude toward care of the guest in the statement, *atithi devo bhava*, meaning "Revere your guest as God." The reverence starts right at the front door as a guest is adorned with a bindi upon the threshold, just as one adorns the Deity in the temple or home shrine.

Application of the bindi is the minimal portion of a larger ceremony wherein a guest to a traditional home will be greeted with an offering of rice and waving of a lit oil lamp, usually by two women. When visiting a temple, it may be the head priest or, in case of Prince Charles' visit to the Swaminarayan Mandir in Naesden, England (above), the head swami, who applies the bindi. In the home, however, the welcome is under the purview of the women of the family, and serves to protect the home's spiritual vibration.

In ancient times, the greeting of a guest included not only the bindi, rice and lamp, but foot-washing, offering of new clothes and more. When guests arrived for the coronation of Yudhisthira, Lord Krishna personally attended to these duties.