Significance of applying tilak on the forehead

Katūrī-tilakaṃ lalāṭa-phalakē vakṣasthalē koustubhaṃ
Nāsāgre nava-mouktikaṃ karatalē vēṇuṃ karē kaṃkaṇaṃ
Sarvāṇge haricandanaṃ ca kalayaṇ kanṭhē ca muktāvalīṃ
Gopastrī-parivēṣṭitau vijayatē gopāla-cūḍāmaṇiḥ

Meaning: May Lord Śrikrishna, the crown-jewel of the cowherds, who adorns His forehead with the sacred 'kastūri- tilaka', who decorates His chest with the 'Koustubha' gem, whose nose is decorated with a pearl, who adorns His wrist with a bracelet, who holds a flute in His palm, who applies harichandana (a type of sandal paste) to His body, who wears a pearl chain around His neck and who is surrounded by many cowherd-women, shower victory!

Lord Śrikrishna would always apply tilak (Kumkum) on His forehead and would anoint His body with sandal paste. From this it is evident that tremendous power is contained in applying tilak.

Tilak is the mark applied at the centre of the eyebrows, which happens to be the location of the sixth spiritual centre, the Ājna chakra. The thousands of nāḍis (subtle astral nerves) that run through our body have their focal point at this location. It is from this centre (Ājna chakra) that life-energy (prana shakti) from us eternally drains outwards. Kumkum (red colour powder/liquid), Vibhuti (holy ash), Kasturi and sandal paste have in them the ability to prevent the life-force from flowing out and hence Yoga-shastra (the ancient treatise pertaining to Yoga) mandates everyone to wear tilak at that location.

Vedas, our other traditional texts, and our learned saints have, on innumerable occasions, repeatedly spoken about the unbelievable power contained in Kumkum and other auspicious ingredients and hence have recommended their application at this focal point, the Ājna chakra. As such, in abiding by this tradition lies our well-being.

What could be the significance and necessity behind applying Urdhva-puṇḍra (the U shaped tilak worn by followers of Lord Vishnu) or tripuṇḍra (the three horizontal lines drawn on the forehead)? Every ancient text extensively covers this subject! At this juncture, let us understand the significance contained in holy ash (vibhuti) through a few examples.

Eons back, a great saint named Karuṇa, who belonged to the lineage of Maharishi Vasiṣṭa, erred slightly and hence was reborn as a mosquito. For a hundred years he underwent punishment after which Mother Arundhanti, wife of Maharishi Vasiṣṭa, compassionately sprinkled holy ash (vibhuti) on him. With its mere touch he was freed from sin!

On another occasion, the celestials were enamoured by Ahalya's beauty at the time of her marriage with Maharishi Gautama. As a result of this impious deed, wisdom depleted in them. Their knowledge of mantras was eroded. Their memory failed. Helpless and clueless, they lamented, 'Shame on us! Our impious deed has thrown us to these despicable levels. Only Maharishi Durvasa has in him the ability to uplift and rescue us. Let us fall at his feet and beg pardon'.

Having concluded thus, the celestials approached Maharishi Durvasa and beseeched him for help. The kind sage thought of Lord Shiva and then sprinkled holy ash on them. The moment holy ash fell on them, the celestials regained their previous glory! Their wisdom was restored, so was their memory. They began to glow divinely.

At another time, Lord Vishnu took a grain of holy ash from Lord Shiva's chest and sprinkled it reverentially upon his head. He applied it to his body and also placed it on his tongue. That's it! Vishnu, who inherently is dark complexioned, suddenly turned fair complexioned! In utter amazement he addressed Shiva saying, 'O Lord! What to say of the glory of vibhuti (holy ash)! Its glory is beyond description'.

Yajnavalkya Maharishi once said to Emperor Janaka, 'O King, the person who applies vibhuti on his body is bound to obtain liberation'.

Our Lord Datta holds Vibhuti very dear. Akin to Shiva, He too smears Vibhuti all over his body. Aruṇi, Śvetaketu, Durvasa, Budha, Nidāgha, Jadabharata, Raivata, Bhusunḍa and others could reach highest states purely due to application of holy ash. To apply holy ash there are no restrictions. Everyone has been permitted.

Desirous of understanding the significance of holy ash, once Lords Vishnu, Brahma, Maharishi Pippalādi and King Janaka enquired of Lord Shiva, who however said, 'O Supreme personalities! Even I fail in completely explaining the glory of holy ash! It is beyond me'. In addition to highlighting this incident, the Brihad-Jābālopanishad reveals many more specialities and significances of holy ash.

Henceforth, all of you must apply holy ash or sandal paste upon your forehead every single day. It will change your destiny and will increase your longevity. It will cause a spurt in positive thoughts and mental-setup. It will help positive thoughts translate into positive actions. Negative thoughts, sinful actions will be kept at bay. Ability to judge between good and bad actions will intensify.

A blank forehead is comparable to a village devoid of temple or to a house devoid of a prayer room. Applying tilak on forehead rewards us with knowledge and dispassion. Virtuous traits see a surge thereby washing away inner and outer impurities. Learning abilities strengthen. Ability to focus upon the mantra fortify. Our participation in homas, worship-rituals and such meritorious deeds yield proper fruit. Worthiness to reside in the Lord's abode is obtained.

We have understood that Krishna himself applies Kasturi-tilak, Shiva applies holy ash, the celestials wear tilak on their forehead while anointing their bodies with sandal paste. As we look up to the celestials and would love to walk on the path treaded by them, we too must habituate ourselves to applying tilak on forehead. More importantly, we must train our children and help them inculcate this habit. By doing so, we are paving the way for the betterment of our future generations.

With the blessings of primordial Guru Datta, may you all put into practice this ancient auspicious tradition! May dharma eternally reign supreme! May the grace of that Supreme Lord flow towards you! May adherence to this tradition reward you with positive transformation on all fronts- in thoughts, words and deeds thereby bestowing you with many fruitful positive results!