

LIKE
A
LOCAL

Mehndi: a fanciful imprint of India

By Shoba Narayan

The old crone pulled me closer. I was 25, shy, and about to have an arranged marriage with a Wall Street banker. Both of us had studied in the United States, met a couple of times, but hadn't dated in the Western sense of the term. A few days before the wedding, two Rajasthani women came to my home to apply *mehndi* for my 25 cousins and me. By Indian standards, we were a small family.

"What is his name?" asked my henna lady. "The man you are going to marry."

Ram. His name was Ram.

She frowned. She needed a longer name. She was going to hide the letters within the floral patterns on my palm.

I knew the tradition, common in north India. After the wedding rituals, surrounded by cackling relatives, the bridegroom would hold the bride's hand and search for his hidden name. It was a great icebreaker, particularly in traditional marriages where the couple were seeing each other for the first time.

My henna lady bent her head and began inserting the letters of my fiancé's last name—Narayan—within the watery, wavelike lines

and floral trellises that she had drawn. She wrote the letters in Hindi. They disappeared into my palms like a mirage, even as she drew them. How was my husband going to find them on our first night together?

"He won't let go of your hand on your wedding night," she said with a devious smile.

That he didn't—and hasn't for the last 23 years that we've been married. (Cornny, I know, but hey, just in case you were wondering.)

Like most Indians, I grew up with hovering grandmothers, bubbling kitchen aromas, and a henna plant in our backyard. Called *mendhika* in Sanskrit, *maruthani* in Tamil, *mehndi* in Hindi, and henna from the Arabic *al-hinna*, the flowering shrub *Lawsonia inermis* has multiple uses, many of them involving hair. India's indigenous medical traditions like ayurveda and Siddha, which differ on many points, agree that henna is good for hair. It prevents dandruff, graying, hair loss, and verily old age. Indian women infuse its leaves into the coconut oil that they massage into the scalp.

Henna is also marketed as an herbal hair dye. The process is painstaking. Henna powder is mixed



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with brewed tea, lemon juice, and coconut oil, and left overnight in a cast-iron pot before it is applied to a woman's flowing locks, or a horse's mane for that matter, which is what nomadic tribes used to do. In south India, we pick fragrant white henna flowers by moonlight

In preparation for a wedding, elaborate henna designs are applied to the hands and feet of an Indian bride and her friends.

and put them under our pillow for a good night's sleep.

Henna's greatest use, however, is for adornment, a purpose it has served for nearly two millennia—at least since a scholar named Vatsyayana wrote the *Kama Sutra* around the third century. In the

text, Vatsyayana outlines the various arts that a woman needs to learn in order to please and seduce. Applying mehndi on the palms, shoulders, and back is one of them. (Breasts can also be decorated, but those designs are made with saffron and musk.) Nearly two

millennia later, Indian women continue the practice—mainly for special occasions like weddings and festivals. For visitors to India, getting a mehndi is a unique cultural experience that they can take home with them: The dye may fade, but the memory will last long after.

India, Egypt, and Persia all lay claim to the origin of henna designs. Early Egyptians dipped their palms into henna paste and discovered that it cooled their body. Indians used to draw a simple circle on their palms and cap their fingers with henna paste. South Indian women still use these traditional designs: a large circle on the palm surrounded by smaller circles, with capped fingers. For the most part, however, mehndi adornment has evolved into an intricate art.

"Henna designs begin with common Indian motifs like the *bela* or creeper vine, *mor* or peacock, mango or paisley, lotus, and other flowers," says Durga Singh, a folklorist and tour guide who has converted his family property in Jaipur into a boutique hotel called Dera Mandawa.

I am in Jaipur to get a mehndi lesson. My elder daughter has left for Carnegie Mellon University in Pennsylvania to get an undergraduate education. Like any good mother, I want to prepare for her wedding, and yes, she rolls her eyes every time I say this, which really is the point of saying it.

While she is taking programming classes at CMU, I dream of painting her hands with elaborate henna patterns as part of what's known in Indian aesthetics as *solah shringar*, or the "16 adornments" of the bride. I'm not content just to hire an expert. I want to beautify my daughter with my own hand.

Rajasthan boasts the mother lode of henna artists in India, but even in Bangalore, where I live, there are dozens to be found in the yellow pages. Before trekking to Jaipur, I get some recommendations from friends and meet five henna ladies to get an initial private lesson. They all speak only Hindi, except for Saba Noor, 21, who speaks fluent English. Noor works at a Bangalore start-up, does henna on the side, and is taking M.B.A. classes at night. "Can you draw?" she asks before even agreeing to see me.

Over her lunch break, she starts to unpack the mysteries of henna.

"There are three trends," she says. "The Arabic design is linear with big flowers. Lots of empty spaces. Indian design has Radha-Krishna, peacocks, and floral motifs. Indo-Arabic fusion has geometric triangles along with flowers."

So begins the education of Shoba—potential henna artist extraordinaire.

Noor shows me designs and patterns that I must endlessly repeat on paper with a black pen—



DHRUV MALHOTRA

not pencil. Henna is unforgiving and doesn't allow for mistakes, so it's important to practice without an eraser. The paisley-peacock-floral motifs, familiar to generations of Indians, are repeated not just in henna but also in India's woven saris, block-print textiles, carved wood furniture, stone sculptures in temples, wall frescoes, and the *rangoli* patterns that adorn courtyards.

Most designs start with a circle; then you draw petals around the circle, fill in the petals with straight lines, and go from there. After a few weeks of practice, you make a paste with *atta* or wheat flour that's about the consistency of cake icing. The flour paste won't stain, so the novice can now experiment with impunity. Noor, my first teacher, is a purist and makes her own mehndi-cones—for squeezing out thin lines of the paste in careful patterns—with plastic. Most others buy them ready-made.

Tulsi Yadav teaches Shoba Narayan about the application and design of mehndi at the Dera Mandawa Haveli in Jaipur, Rajasthan. Formerly a private mansion, the Dera Mandawa is now a hotel.

Over several days, I practice squeezing floral vines across my palms and geometric "bangles" around my wrist using flour paste. They smudge. They're not uniform. They're disproportionate. Still, I can see myself getting better.

"Don't worry," says Noor kindly. "True henna artists have three things in common: patience, persistence, and an eye for proportion."

She encourages me to go to Rajasthan, which holds the deepest claim to the "Indian style" in henna design.

Some of the best henna comes from Sojat, a town in Pali district, Rajasthan. Here, the short, green henna shrub spreads for miles, across the horizon. Women in Rajasthan apply mehndi throughout the year: for festivals such as Dussehra, Diwali, Teej, and Karva Chauth, and for family weddings.

"Professional mehndi women were an oxymoron in Rajasthan until

about 15 years ago," says Durga Singh over a meal of *aloo paratha* (potato flatbread), dal, and okra curry. "Until recently, women used to apply mehndi on each other's hands, singing folk songs."

He sings a popular ballad, "*Bhanwar puncho chodo hatha me rach rahi mehndi.*"

"Oh my beloved. Leave my wrist. You will smudge my mehndi. You yourself got the mehndi. It is for you that I adorn my hands."

Another folk song talks about the choicest mehndi that has been brought from the Malwa Plateau "very lovingly for this beautiful girl who everyone dotes on," and then lists all the relatives—uncles, aunts, grandfather, grandmother, cousins, and brothers—who brought the bride the orange paste that will stain her fingers.

Traditional Rajasthani families disdain henna leaves. Instead they harvest the fruit in season, and store it in a box for use throughout the year. They take out small quantities when needed, mashing and mixing it with a mortar and pestle.

"In Sojat, machines harvest mehndi—taking in fruits, leaves, bark, and stem," says Singh, curling his mustache with a frown.

Singh belongs to a *thikana*, or large landowning family. He is an alumnus of the famed Mayo College where most Rajputs send their sons for an education. We search for a skilled henna artist through his web of connections that spreads throughout the state. There are frantic phone calls to Jodhpur and Jaisalmer. Finally, we locate a young

woman, Tulsi Yadav, who applies mehndi for a living in nearby Amber (pronounced Amer) Fort.

The day before I've to meet her, I practice using wheat flour late into the night. I look over the henna designs that I've drawn in my notebook, as if preparing for an exam.

Yadav arrives at noon. She is 27 years old and quite beautiful. Like most henna artists, she learned her skills from her mother. She shows me her pattern book: page after page of photographs, each more elaborate than the other. Here on one arm is the Hindu elephant-headed god, Ganesha, smiling beatifically; on another arm Krishna,

the cowherd god twirling with his lover, Radha. With henna, the Hindu universe can be compressed into the palm: rain clouds, flowers, peacocks, lovers, climbing vines, and water, all intertwined to form one beautiful pattern. Yadav specializes in bridal mehndi with designs reaching up to the elbows and knees.

Our lesson begins. Hold the mehndi cone like a pencil, she commands, and squeeze gently. She shows me how to draw a peacock, and I am amazed at how simple it is. An S-shape, some other curves, a dot for the eye, and you have a peacock. Then come the mango-paisley designs.

Those proficient with cake icing will have an advantage with mehndi. Not being a baker, I have trouble with the continuous pressing. It has to be consistent so that the paste comes out in one thin line instead of a series of clumps. I start strong. It's easy to draw a single line or petal perfectly. Doing a dozen of them, of the same proportion, in a small palm, is about stamina and a steady hand. I notice that my hand wobbles after 45 minutes. Yadav's bridal mehndis take at least three hours to apply.

All around us, parrots shriek. Rain clouds gather. Schoolchildren return home, chattering excitedly. Someone giggles. This is the milieu of mehndi: women gathered together to take a break from their chores, to bring some beauty and lightness into their hands and lives.

After a couple of hours, Yadav has to leave. She's heading to a hotel where an American family awaits her and her henna kit. I glance at my notes and photos as

Sidebar head

Wherever you go in India, you can find henna artists. Friends can offer recommendations, but I found many through the Internet. Rates vary from place to place.

Tulsi Yadav is at Tulsi Heena Parlour in Amber, Rajasthan, and she visits Jaipur regularly. Email: neetutulsi@gmail.com. Mobile: 91-98-2932-6291. She charges \$15 to \$100 depending on how elaborate the work is.

Durga Singh is a great raconteur and a constant presence at his charming *haveli* (traditional Rajasthani home and guesthouse) in Jaipur. <http://www.deramandawa.com/>

Saba Noor in Bangalore explains henna and also can apply it for visitors. Saba199321@gmail.com. Her number is 91-98-8034-1144.

Most beauty parlors will do henna for a small fee. You can find them on justdial.com, which serves as India's yellow pages. Among those I visited:

Afsha Koheturz Mehendi (spelling theirs) is a mother-daughter team that works from home in Frazer Town, Bangalore. Call 91-90-0875-1766 or 91-85-5337-3920 and ask them to visit your hotel. On the day I visited, the daughter had gone to Dubai to apply mehndi there.

Zaiba Nayeem of Mast Mehendi has outlets in Eva Mall and other locations throughout Bangalore. Call 91-98-4550-8293 for details.

she walks out. "Practice," she says encouragingly. "Don't give up. It will get easier."

After Yadav departs, all I can do is loll around in bed. Covered with henna designs that need to set, my hands are useless. I periodically dab a solution of sugar water and lemon juice over the mehndi to deepen its color. After a half hour, I rub my hands together over a rose bush. Dry green henna flakes fall like pixie dust over the plant.

Women do many things to deepen henna's orange color. They apply eucalyptus, or any other oil; sleep overnight with the henna wrapped in plastic gloves; and don't wash with water once the plastic is removed. The average henna "tattoo" lasts about three weeks. If you are constitutionally what Ayurveda calls "pitta," or "high in heat," denoted by a ruddy face and being prone to red rashes and early balding, the color is darker—like rich chocolate. Mine is the color of Bordeaux wine.

That evening, I go to Bapu Bazaar in downtown Jaipur. At the entrance, a line of migrant men from different parts of Rajasthan sit on makeshift stools, drawing henna designs on passersby for a small fee. I chat with one young man named Rajesh. He learned the art from his brother, he says. He glances at my hands quizzically. "Why one hand good and the other hand bad?" he asks.

"This hand, teacher did. This

hand, I did," I reply, imitating his English.

He smiles. "Don't give up. It took me six months to get perfect," he says.

Henna is a child of leisure, or in the case of Indian women, the mother of leisure. It engenders relaxation. It gives them time and space to pause, removing them briefly from the responsibility of running homes. It also turns them into gossipy, giggling youngsters.

Two college girls sit across from Rajesh and put out their palms. With lightning hands, he draws the designs I've become familiar with: petals and peacocks, Radha and Krishna. The girls chat and chortle as a tapestry of tradition is painted on their hands. It reminds them of home perhaps, just as it does for Indians of the diaspora in Chicago and Queens, who get orange patterns drawn on their palms during holidays.

I glance at the peacock on my palm that Yadav executed with quicksilver strokes. It seems to be winking at me. I watch the henna artists all around, fiercely concentrating on the outstretched hands in front of them. Will I get that good? I have a few years. My daughter is just a sophomore, swimming in advanced calculus and thermodynamics. She doesn't know my "secret plans and clever tricks," as Roald Dahl put it. I will get better. Tradition is a transmission over eons, involving delivery, handing over, and for the student, surrender along with practice. With mehndi, I feel like I am reaching back into India's deep history to grasp what is tangible and beautiful, and shrink it into the palm of my hand. ○

Follow the hand

There is no one key to unlocking the mysteries of India, a nation at once so traditional and so dynamic, so anarchic and so arresting. But mudra, the gestural vocabulary used in imagery, dance, and yoga, can help. With root meanings in a verb that can signify cleansing and purification as well as satisfaction and delight, mudra is used in Indian rhetoric to denote "the expression of things by their right names." More concretely, a mudra is a seal or an emblem. As a system of hand gestures, it can sum up a god's or goddess's character—or a dancer's mood—in a moment of concentrated symbolism and meaning.

What follow are illustrations of some of the most common mudras used in Indian iconography, whether Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain. Understanding these symbols can enable a visitor to make sense of who's who in a prolifically carved Hindu temple, or give an indication of the message conveyed in a brightly printed calendar hanging behind a shopkeeper's counter. The attentive visitor may even see reflections of these ancient gestures in the everyday bearing of ordinary people, whether the truck driver, the waiter, or the temple priest.

—Andy McCord



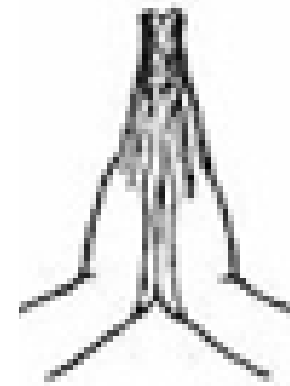
CHIN OR VITARKA MUDRĀ
"Consciousness or Deliberation Mudra."

This touch of the thumb and forefinger evokes mind and mindfulness. A yogi will assume this gesture—accompanied by outstretched arms and upturned palms resting on knees—while meditating in the lotus position. Or the dreadlocked god Shiva, with a crooked elbow and a vertical palm, might use this while explaining yoga to his consort Parvati.



ABHAYA MUDRĀ
"No Fear Mudra."

A gesture familiar from statues of the Buddha, it's also used by the fearsome Hindu goddess Durga as she looks out at you while riding a tiger. It's commonly employed as well in modern daily life—to calm a crowd, or an impatient traveler.



NAMASKĀRA MUDRĀ
"Giving Honor Mudra."

Probably the most familiar gesture in all of Indian physical culture. This can be a deeply felt sign of reverence or simply a polite form of greeting.



BHŪMĪSPARSHA MUDRĀ
"Earth-touching Mudra."

Another signature gesture of the meditating Buddha. He is said to have touched the soil like this at the moment he simultaneously attained enlightenment and came back to Earth. Shiva, Hinduism's great erotic-ascetic god, can also be found in this posture.



DHYĀNA MUDRĀ
"Meditation Mudra."

The archetypal, centered position of contemplation. Hands are held still in the lap, between the upward-facing soles of the feet in lotus position, exemplifying symmetry and stillness.

TARJANI MUDRĀ
"Index Finger Mudra."

Indicates anger, but do not fear. Raised by a guardian spirit at a temple doorway, or in the iconography of a terrifying goddess like Durga or Kali, the finger is meant to point away from you and vanquish what would harm you.



VARADA MUDRĀ
"Giving Mudra."

You'll often see this in statues of the standing Buddha as well as in calendar-art prints of Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth, which are often posted by the cash box in Indian shops.

