

[Hindus React To Madonna's MTV Show](#)

Category : [January 1999](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jan. 01, 1999

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Did the juxtaposition of mehendi hand design, forehead tilaka, Sanskrit verse and sex turn homage to insult?

MTV isn't the usual place, and Madonna wouldn't be your first guess for the singer, but right there on the MTV music awards September 10, the "Material Girl"--best known in the past for "I, me and mine"--sang with acceptable pronunciation her all-Sanskrit song "Shanti." Accompanying her were the Patnaik sisters of San Diego in an Oddisa-style dance routine choreographed by them for the song. Madonna herself was lavish, adorned in mehendi hand paint, tilaka and Indian jewelry. All performed against a huge backdrop of Hindu Deities.

So far, so good, but for her next number, Madonna traded in her long black dress for a see-through tank top and, still wearing the same makeup, launched into a sensual dance with her guitarist while singing her hit song, "Ray of Light." While this was stock Madonna, there were complaints in the Indian ethnic press in America that Madonna had committed a sacrilege by keeping the Hindu ornamentation in her second number.

Madonna Ciccone, 40, for those who don't know, is one of the most popular singers in America, having made it big in the early 80's with an album called "Like a Virgin." She's had dozens of hits since then, and is today worth an estimated ^{US} \$200-plus million. She became famous for her frequent makeovers, turning, for example, into a Marilyn Monroe clone. She was criticized by Christians for gratuitously using their religious symbols in her earlier videos.

As discussion of the performance continued in the press, the American Hindus Against Defamation said that if Madonna's interest in Hinduism is sincere, they are willing to forgive her. If not, they demand that "in the future she refrain from inappropriate use of Hindu symbols."

Madonna herself appears to have undergone a very real transformation since the birth of her baby girl, Lourdes, in 1996. "I've been practicing yoga for a while now, and it's an incredibly powerful and positive force in my life," she said. "Along with yoga, I've been studying Sanskrit, and 'Shanti' really came out of those aspects of my spiritual search." The song is a musical adaptation of a section of the little-known Yoga Taraval. In part, it says, "I worship the guru's lotus feet,

awakening the happiness of the Self revealed." Asked to comment on the reaction to the MTV show, Madonna retorted, "If they're so pure, why are they watching MTV? The essence of purity and divinity is non-judgment." It is one sign of sincerity that she recently accepted an entertainment show's fashion award dressed in a stunning sari.

Madonna's interest is part of a larger phenomenon in which the use of bindi, mehendi, saris and other Hindu body art and fashions have become popular in America. As to sensuality being an automatic affront, Hindus would have a difficult time complaining without first explaining the erotic sculptures of Khajuraho temple and the existence of the classic sex manual, the Kama Sutra.