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Tattoo Culture of the Baiga Women

(A study of the significance of tattoo culture of the Baiga tribal women of Madhya Pradesh)

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Abstract

According to some anthropologists, the word “tattoo” may be derived from the Polynesian word ‘Ta’, which means striking something, or from the Tahitian word ‘tatau’, which means ‘to mark something’. The act of tattooing, the art of body modification, has been a part of the culture for several tribal groups around the world since before the beginning Christ Era (CE). The anthropological evidences of several designs of tattoo found in different cultures also prove the fact that the art and culture of tattooing had developed independently in different parts of the world.

The practice of tattooing has been an integral part of life among several tribal groups across the country. The women of the Baiga tribe consider tattooing as an integral part of their tradition and culture. The act of tattooing, locally known as Godna, a popular method of body decoration among the tribal people of Central India, has a profound association with their social, economic, spiritual and cultural lives.

The current paper makes an attempt to discuss and examine the significance of tattoo culture among the women of the Baiga tribe of central India. With a short introduction of the Baiga tribe, the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of Central India, the paper also makes an attempt to explain the process of tattooing from the technique of developing the indelible ink to inserting the ink into the dermis layer of the skin of a Baiga woman.

Key Words: Tattoo, Tribal People, Baiga, Culture, Tribal Tradition

Introduction

Tattoo, an artistic of body modification, made by inserting indelible ink into the dermis layer of the skin to change the pigment, has been a part of numerous tribal groups across the world. The discovery of more than four dozens of tattoos on the body of Ötzi the

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Ice man, a well-preserved natural mummy of a man, who was presumed to have lived around 3,300 BCE, found in September 1991 in the Ötztal Alps on the border between Austria and Italy proves that tattooing has been one of the ancient cultures of the human civilisation. The anthropological evidences of several types and designs of tattoo in different cultures also support the hypothesis that practice of tattooing did not originate in one place, but developed independently in various locations across the world.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word tattoo may be derived from “tattaow”, “tattow” or “tatau”. The word “tatau” was introduced as a loan word into English and over the time it got changed to “tattoo”. According to a group of anthropologists, the word “tattoo” may be derived from the Polynesian word ‘Ta’, which means striking something, or from the Tahitian word ‘tatau’, which means ‘to mark something’. Tattooing is a primitive form of decoration said to be derived from *tato*, strike, which explains the operation. (Sharma, 1998)

The practice of tattooing has been found to be a popular culture among numerous tribal groups across the seven continents. There have been several reasons to wear tattoos – both among the tribal people and those copying them. But, whether it is a sign of belongingness to a group, sacred symbol or talisman or religious identity or to show spiritual devotion or any other reasons, the practice of tattoo art has been a part of the tribal culture with having strong connection with the ecology of tribal groups around the world.

The different designs of tattoos, depicting social, cultural and spiritual beliefs, have been prevailing among the men and women of the tribal people of China, Borneo, Cambodia, Japan, the Mentawai Islands, New Zealand, Australia, Philippines, Taiwan and some other parts of the world since time immemorial. The practice of tattooing as part of body decoration has been an integral part of the art and culture of many Indian tribes too. With specific types and designs of tattoos, they express different cultural, social and spiritual values and beliefs.

The tradition of tattooing as part of body decoration is found among the tribal groups of India in general and the tribal groups of Madhya Pradesh in particular. The women of the Baiga tribe of Madhya Pradesh consider tattooing as an integral part of their social, cultural and spiritual customs. Locally known as Godna, the Baiga women decorate their body from childhood to different phases of life with symbols of social, cultural and spiritual significances. This paper focuses on the study of the legends, process and significance of tattooing the life of a Baiga woman of Madhya Pradesh from social, cultural, religious and spiritual perspectives. The objectives of the paper are to briefly look into the lifestyle of the Baiga tribe of Madhya Pradesh, to explore the legend that connects the tattoo culture of central India with socio-economic, religious and spiritual lives of the natives, to know briefly the technique and material used in the process of tattoo making among the women of Baiga tribe, to understand the significance of tattoo in tribal life with special reference to the women of Baiga tribe of Madhya Pradesh and to briefly comprehend the meaning and significance

of the symbols of tattoo designs of Baiga tribe.

The Baiga: The primitive tribe



Image: 1
A Baiga family at village Pharrisemar,
Amarkantak (MP)



Image: 2
A Baiga house on the backdrop of the forest
at village Pharrisemar, Amarkantak (MP)

Of the several indigenous groups of Madhya Pradesh, Baiga tribe still exhibits the primitiveness in the anthropological sense. The Baigas are one of the most ancient, most remarkable and most delightful of the people of India. The Baigas live in deep forest have remained beyond the pale of plan development. (Elwin, 2007). Identified as one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of Central India, the concentration of the Baiga people lies mainly in Mandla, Dindori, Shahdol, Anuppur and Balaghat districts of Madhya Pradesh. The Maikal extension of the Satpura ranges mainly encompass the area of the Baiga population with the holy river Narmada. The unique culture, close bonding with nature, living in the deep forest, low level of literacy and ancient ways of living life make the Baiga special among the other tribal people of the region. The cult of magic, be it war or shifting cultivation, use of traditional medicine, unique skills and methods of hunting and several other unique practices of the Baiga can transport anyone back by many centuries.

The Baiga people are spiritually attached to the Mother Nature. They never plough as ploughing the Earth is like scratching the breast of their mother for them. According their belief, how can they ask mother to produce food from the same patch of earth again and again. If they do so, they believe that the Mother Nature would get weak. Therefore, the Baigas practice bevar cultivation, where they slash and burn forest.

They are courageous woodsman and skillful hunters. They are proud to call themselves the

people of the forest, who lead a life on the produce of the forest. They do not work under any other tribes, as they consider it below their dignity. The primitive style of living life makes them resemble the semi-nomadic tribes.

Tattoo: The art of body decoration

The tribal art, craft and architectures reflect some of the unique and fascinating parts of their social and economic identity. In fact, it connects them to spirituality and their immediate ecology. The tribal people transmit their art and culture from generation to generation through oral tradition. Traditionally, mothers take pivotal roles in the process of the transmission. Godna or tattooing is a popular method of body decoration found among the men and women of the tribal people of Central India.

There is a popular legend in central India that connects the tattoo culture with socio-economic and spiritual lives of the inhabitants. According to the story, during the ancient times, there existed a casteless society among the tribes. One day, the God decided to designate castes to the people. The group of people, whom the God gave the pen, was called the Brahmins. He gave the plough to the Gond and water to the Kewat (fisherman community). The god was only left with a dhol, which he gave to the Ojha. The Ojha started his livelihood by singing songs and playing the dhol. But after sometimes, he found his profession unexciting and less paid. One day, he returned home empty and found nothing to eat. Being angry, he beat his wife. On the behaviour of her

husband, she became very upset and gave up food and water. The God was unable to see her suffering and decided to appear in front of her. The God took out fluid from the Sarei tree and marked her face with black dots. He told her to take tattooing as profession and decorate the women of other tribes with tattoos. Since then, tribal people of central India believe that tattoo became the popular art and culture of decorating different parts among them.

Tattoo among the Baiga Women

Among the Baiga tribe, one of the most primitive among the tribal groups of Central India, comprised of a population size of merely 3,17,549 (Census of 1991), tattooing is an integral part of their lifestyle. Sporting tattoos on almost all parts of the body is a famous and distinguishing feature



Image: 3
A young Baiga lady with her traditional
attire, jewelleryes and tattoos

of the Baiga women.

The tattooing among the Baiga women starts with the beginning of winter and continues until summer. The rainy season is not preferred for tattooing due to the possibility of infection. The women of Ojha, Pradhan, Badni and Dewar tribe, who are locally called Godharins, go to the Baiga villages to tattoo the women's arms, legs and torsos. They have wide knowledge of different types of tattoos preferred by the Baiga ladies. The remuneration for Godharins depends on their designing skill and the part of the body where tattoo is done. Usually, it starts with Rs 5 for a small tattoo and Rs 100 for almost the entire body.

According to the Baiga tradition, a man is not allowed to watch the woman when the process of tattoo making is in progress. The Baiga believes that if a man watches a woman while getting her body tattooed, then he will be unable to hunt sambar deer. It is believed that if he does so, he will be unable to locate the tell-tale marks like sambar blood in the forest. Usually, the Baigas determine the location of sambar deer with such marks in the jungle.

Tattoo making process

Nature provides them the ink for the tattooing. The process of developing ink starts with the roasting of black til (sesame) in a vessel. The roasted til is hand-pressed to make rolls. These rolls are then burnt to obtain the ink. Sometimes, the Bija (Pterocarpus marsupium) wood colour or tehra colour is mixed to form a rich colour. Some use fluid obtained from the Malwan tree as ink. Verrier Elwin, in his book *The Baiga*, writes that the ink used for making tattoo is made of charred snake skin and oil.

The part of the body, where tattoo to be made, is cleaned and the predetermined design is drawn upon it. The needles are dipped in the ink before piercing the skin. Piercing is done all over the design. The piercing makes the process painful and filled with pool of blood on the design. In fact, the piercing is so painful that the Baiga girls often scream with pain and curse the Godharins.

Nowadays, religious and cultural fairs and weekly markets are emerging as places for tattooing with battery operated machines. In general, the Baiga ladies avoid tattooing in fairs and markets, or by a machine.

Ramtila oil is applied on that part of the skin from where blood comes out. They apply



Image: 4
A battery operated tattoo making machine

natural ingredients available in the immediate natural surroundings such as cow-dung, soya-bean and turmeric oil on the tattoo. The Baiga believe that these natural ingredients have medicinal value to serve as anti-septic. Some apply soap-nut water for its cooling effect that decreases the pain. These same soap-nuts are then strung on a string and put round the necks of small children. They believe the soap-nuts protect the children from bad spirit. After couple of weeks, the needle marks disappear and design of the tattoo remains for entire life.

Significance of Tattoos among the Baiga woman

Among the Baiga woman, tattoos are not merely made to decorate her body. In fact, each tattoo has a definite meaning and significance in the life of a Baiga woman. The meaning of different Baiga tattoos include social class, status and rank, local and ethnic identity, religious and spiritual belief, recognition for bravery work, sexual lures, love and affection, punishment, amulets, talismans, protection etc.

Prosenjit Das Gupta, in his book – *After Elwin*, while exploring the remote areas of central and experiencing the Baiga culture, documented the names and symbols of different tattoos popular among the Baiga women.

Tribal terms & Symbols of Tattoos

Generally, a Baiga woman gets her body decorated with different kinds of tattoos on different locations of her body in different phases of life. Every tattoo design has a definite meaning significance. *Seeta Rasoi*, a tattoo design consists of a hearth, plate and spoon, is tattooed on the forehead of a Baiga girl when she turns adult (Das Gupta, 2007). The concept of *Seeta Rasoi* tattoo has a link to *Sita*, the wife of *Rama* of *Ramayana*, who cooked unlimited delicious foods in her kitchen for the *Pandavs*. They believe that the nature help a lady with such tattoo to cook delicious food for unlimited people.

S. No.	Symbol	Adivasi name	Age/Period	Location of the body
1	Lines of dot	Kajeri	After marriage	Thighs
2	Lines of dot	Palani	After marriage	Thighs
3	Round shaped flower	Phulia		Knee
4	Flies	Mokhi		Back
5	Fish bones	Machhli haddi	After marriage	Leg
6	Steel	Chakmak	After marriage	Leg
7	Hearth, plates and spoon	Seeta Rasoi	After adolescent	Forehead
8	Turmeric foot	Haldi gath	When a girl reaches her puberty	Arm
9	Peacock		When a girl reaches her puberty	Breast/chest

10	Basket	Dauri	When a girl reaches her puberty	Breast
11	Triangular pattern	Jhopori	about five years at the time of marriage or later	Forehead on the back of the hand
12	Pattern of any type			
13	Magic chain	Sakri		
14	Scorpion	Bichchu		forearm

Source: *After Elwin*, book written by Prosenjit Das Gupta (2007)

Tattooing has several social, cultural and spiritual significances among the Baiga women. They also make tattoos of various symbols related to their totem, god and goddess. The Baiga believe that symbols of deities and ancestors protect them from different natural calamities, evil spirits, black magic, enemies, wild animals, etc. Even it is believed that life of a Baiga woman is incomplete without tattoos on her body.

(a) Tattoo for eternity

According to the Baiga, even though, every human being leaves the body on earth after death, but the tattoos remain with a Baiga lady throughout life and after life. Tattoo can neither be stolen nor taken away from her. They also believe that if a Baiga woman fails to get her body tattooed in her lifetime, she would be tattooed with a ploughing instrument after her death.

(b) Ornamental value

In a Baiga culture, tattoo is treated as the ornament of the women. They believe that any ornament made of metal, plastic, wood and grass are not permanent and can be broken or theft at any time. Even not every Baiga women can effort to buy costly jewellery due to their poor economic condition. But tattoo is permanent and never leave the body even after death. A Baiga woman treats tattoo as wealth and loves to decorate her body with different designs of tattoos in different phases of life.

(c) Sexual expression

Among the Baiga, female decorates her body with tattoo to provoke sexual desire. In the eyes of Baiga males the tattooing greatly enhances a girl's beauty. Women themselves take a great pride in their marks (Elwin, 1939). They are a form of sexual expression and a powerful sexual stimulant. This is partly indicated by the fact that a girl's arm



Image: 5
An elderly Baiga lady with tattoos on her whole body

and breasts are not tattooed until she is adolescent, nor her leg until her marriage. (Luard, 1905)

The tattoo of an oblong figure just above the buttock of the Baiga female made to represent the gate. Girls are tattooed on arrival at puberty with representations of the tulsi or basil, four arrowheads in the form of a cross and the foot-ornament known as pairi. (Russell, 2003). Likewise, the symbol of a peacock is tattooed on the breast of a Baiga girl, when she reaches her puberty. The symbol of basket (dauri) on the breast of a young Baiga girl is made to attract male counterpart.



Image: 6
Illustration of tattoos on chest

(d) Healthy life

The Baiga believe that tattooing on some specific parts of the body has medicinal value. The particular designs of tattoos on specific parts of the body cure them from typical diseases. The process of tattooing acts as acupressure treatment to them.

The Baiga women believe that tattooing of a cobra below to the mouth protects them from the effects of eating any poisonous substance. Likewise, tattoo of the image of Chandi mata (goddess moon with dots and lines) at the forehead preserve and guard the parting of the hair. The Baiga women believe that the process of tattooing and their presence on their body increases their strength to fight against the blood-related disorders and prevent them from arthritis too. They also believe that tattoos make them immune to weather changes and effects of poisonous substances on their health.

(e) Traditional customs

It is necessary for a Baiga girl to get her first tattoo by the age of eight. Even sometimes, girls as young as five are seen with tattoos. It is considered as sacred duty of the parents to get their daughters tattooed. They believe that if they gift ornaments to their daughters, they may easily sell them. But tattoos can be neither sold nor removed, they last forever.

Traditionally, a Baiga girl gets a "V" mark tattooed on the centre of her forehead at the age of eight. Apart from this, three dots, a vertical and horizontal line are also tattooed.



Image: 7
Tattoos on the feet of a Baiga lady

The Godharin, who makes this tattoo, is given some turmeric, salt, chilli and some other items with some money as token of respect. She blesses the newly tattooed girl after the completion of the ritual.

At the age of 16, the girl's back is tattooed with various designs such as chains, dots, circles, parallel, horizontal, slanting and vertical lines. After this dries up, nearly four months later, the thighs of the girls are tattooed. Subsequently, the entire legs and hands are designed with tattoos. By the time, she turns 20, the entire body of a Baiga girl gets covered with beautiful tattoos.

Interestingly, a Baiga girl should tattoo her body prior to her marriage, if she does not follow the social custom then in-laws may demand compensation for it. In fact, tattoo on her body is considered as the best dowry in a Baiga social custom in addition to satisfying aesthetic needs, body decoration or adornment may be used to delineate social position, rank, sex, occupation, local and ethnic identity, or religion within a society.

(Ember et.al, 2007)

(c) Social conformity

Different designs of tattoos act as identification marks from distinguishing one tribe from another. For an example instance, the women of the Oraon tribe of Surguja and Raigarh districts of Chhattisgarh get three lines tattooed on their foreheads. On the other hand, the women of Bison Horn Maria tribe of Bastar get their forehead and chin tattooed in a typical traditional design. The women of Bhil tribe get a bird like tattoos near their eyes, which give them a permanent long-lashed look. The bird and scorpion like popular motifs are unique features of Bhil community. Likewise, the 'V' shaped mark at the centre of the forehead of Baiga women makes them distinguish from the rest of the tribes of central India.

The unique designs and places of tattooing make the Baiga women to feel a sense social conformity and uniqueness from the other tribal women. It gives them social security, satisfaction and togetherness.

Conclusion

Godna or tattooing is no longer the traditional custom of the Baiga or any other tribal people. Being a part of modern fashion, tattoo has entered the life urban. From several centuries, with traditional method and handmade colour, the Baiga women have been reflecting social, cultural, traditional, spiritual and erotic expressions from generation to generation.

From the traditional method of tattooing with wooden nail or iron needle to battery operated tattooing machine, from the natural ink to chemical colours, the designs, materials



Image: 8
Tattoo of *Sita Rasoi* on
the forehead of a Baiga
lady

and methods of tattooing has been changing. The commercialization and modernization may have brought traditional tribal culture to modern life style but the tattoos of the Baiga women of different flora, fauna, deities, animals, insects etc. still reflect the social, cultural and spiritual aspects of their lives.

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