



## Tattoo: A Cultural Heritage

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### KEYWORDS

Body Painting. Traditional Art. Santhal Tribe. Social Ritual. Tattooing

### ABSTRACT

*Tattooing is considered a “visual language,” which inscribes cultural traits on the skin of the owner. This paper tries to explore the importance of tattoos in tribal life as a cultural heritage, by means of a case study in two Santhal villages to find whether there is any age and sex wise perceptual difference regarding tattooing. A focused group interview was conducted in Balipara and Phuldanga villages of the Birbhum District, West Bengal, India to understand the status and significance of tattooing among the Santhals living there. Descriptive analytical research method has been adopted to portray different styles and patterns, materials used to ink the body, and myths and beliefs woven around this art form. Tattooing, as a tribal art, is losing its significance: to keep this tradition alive, the market segment and its appropriate strategies have to be identified in order to favor traditional tribal tattoo designs to prevent their extinction.*

## Introduction

Tattooing is a process of marking almost indelible designs on the human body by inserting pigments into the skin. It can be considered as a “visual language” in which culture is inscribed on the skin of the owner. But for tribal people, it is not only a design or an art form, rather it is a complete emotion, incorporating myths and beliefs, which have played important and diverse roles in society since the dawn of humankind (Ferguson-Rayport et al. 1955). In the words of Krutak (2015:1) “tattooing is integrated into the social fabric of community and religious life, and typically speaking, it is a cultural, clan or family-mandated ritual that anchors social values on the skin for all to see”. Though tattooing is conceived as a ritual, its artistic value cannot be neglected. So, it may be considered as an art form, a painting which uses the human body as canvas, and also a ritual associated with integrated societal emotions. Thus, it becomes a part of the cultural heritage of a society. “The understanding of a cultural heritage includes and highly values its intangible aspects, such as esthetic, historical, scientific and social values, which in turn serve identity purposes” (Dryjanska 2015: 40). Tattooing is not all about ink and design: primarily, it is a process of knowledge transmission in the form of a visual language, where culture is inscribed and preserved in a special way (Krutak 2015). A tattoo as a piece of art can be considered tangible, but its preservation is difficult, because even an undeletable tattoo terminates with the mortal body it is attached to. But the knowledge and skills of

tattoo making are transferred from one generation to another. Thus, the 'ritual' aspect of tattooing can be considered an intangible aspect of a cultural heritage.

Moreover, tattooing has a long history around the world: "Tattoo by puncture was probably a deliberate invention of some genius who saw a way of making a magico-religious colouring more permanent" (Humbly 2009:19). According to Green (2003) as cited by Poli et al. (2012) the oldest evidence of tattooing was found in 1901, when the "Iceman" mummy was discovered on the Italian-Austrian border, with tattoos carbon dated back to 5300 years ago. On the other hand, the first figural tattoos were found at Gebelein, Egypt on two naturally preserved mummies from 3351 to 3017 BC (Friedman et al. 2018). Traces of this ritual can be found in Greece, Persia, the Sudan, China, Japan, as well as in the Polynesian Islands, "where an artistic peak was reached and where the word "tataua," meaning artistic, originated" (Ferguson-Rayport et al. 1955: 113). Poli et al. (2012) have identified some important events throughout the world, which shows the ups and downs of tattooing as a human practice. By 2000 B.C.E. the process of tattooing was known to Egyptians and Southeast Asians. And by 1200 B.C.E. probably the first Polynesian tattoo was drawn. The first record of a decorative Japanese tattoo dates in 247 C.E. During the medieval period tattoos faced a drastic decrease in popularity when it was banned in some parts of the world. In 787 C.E. Pope Adrian banned tattooing after which it started losing its importance. After a long spell in 1691 William Dampier brought a heavily tattooed Polynesian to London and reintroduced tattooing to the West. By the seventeenth century, it had been either lost its meaning "or at least pushed far underground" (Wright 2009: 100). In 1891 Samuel O'Riley invented the first electric tattoo machine. By 1900s tattooing became common practice in Western countries. But it surfaced again in a modernized form as a fashion statement when celebrities and rock stars re-popularized it during the twentieth century (Krutak 2015). So, research could say that tattoo has different connotation on a different spatio-temporal scale. Here tattoo both as a type of painting and as a social ritual has been studied with a special reference to the Santhal tribe of Eastern India.

## **Objectives and methods**

This paper has a twofold objective: to find out how tattoos as a cultural heritage is perceived differently in different groups of people and to study the meaning of tattoos in tribal life with a special reference to Santhal tribe and its changing pattern. The first part of the paper deals with the tattoo in the context of cultural heritage with the help of definitions given by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Then to find out how tattooing represents different cultural aspects the researcher studied five major uses of tattoos as identified by Krutak (2015), and found ample of examples of the contradictory motivations behind wearing tattoos within those five categories. This part is followed by a case study of the Santhal tribe, one of the most populous tribes of eastern India who practice tattooing as a social ritual. To understand the status and significance of tattooing among the Santhals a focused group discussion was conducted with the tattoo bearers in two villages namely Balipara and Phuldanga of Birbhum District, West Bengal. The descriptive analytical method was adopted to report different styles and patterns of their tattoos, materials used to ink the body, and myths and beliefs related to it. Photographs, observation and case studies methods adopted supplement the strength of the findings.

## **Discussion**

A tattoo is a special kind of painting whose uniqueness lies in the medium and technique it uses and the myriad cultural expressions which come out through its display. But tattooing is not only an

expression of the mentality of an individual or a community. So, it can be seen from two perspectives, first, it can be seen as a form of painting, hence designs and motifs are the main concern, and second, the craftsmanship of the art and the motivations of the tattooed are considered. According to the UNESCO's definition, a tattoo as a body painting that falls in the movable tangible cultural heritage category (see <[www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)> for more detail). On the other hand, the UNESCO's Convention for the Intangible Cultural Heritage identified five domains in which it is manifested. Tattooing as an intangible cultural heritage comes under three of these five domains. Those are: oral tradition and expressions, social practice and rituals, and traditional craftsmanship. Tribal communities do not just wear tattoos as a motif inscribed on the skin. There are folklore, myths and beliefs which strongly recommend to wear a tattoo, though the traditional stories and characters differ from community to community. Tattooing is also considered a social practice or ritual, where it is mandatory for people from different age or sex group. It is a ritual which has been practiced for centuries and believed it would be practiced by next generations too. It is weaved in the culture and expresses the uniqueness of a community. The traditional craftsmanship to draw a tattoo on the skin is very special and it is known by a few. The process differs according to the communities in every step starting from ink making, to the instruments used to make the impression. These oral traditions and craftsmanship should be protected and that could be done by growing awareness among young generation so that the ritual does not fade away with its special stories and art.

### *3.1 Different Uses of Tattoos*

Wright (2009) says that in tribal community tattooing is done for a number of reasons, including denotation of adulthood, fertility or tribal rank. These are generally non-consensual and indicate membership in a particular group. On the other hand, in a 'modern society' wearing a tattoo is a fashion statement, which indicates uniqueness and beauty in an individual. Krutak (2015) explores five ways in which tattoos, as instruments that transmit culture, has been deployed through time. These are identity, adornment, status and position, therapy and apotropaic. Interestingly, it is often observed that in different cultures, though the way of using tattoos is similar, the purposes they serve are very different from each other.

#### *3.1.1 Identity*

Identity probably is the most important purpose of wearing tattoos. For most indigenous groups a tattoo signifies attachment to a particular clan: it symbolizes togetherness. Whereas, tattooing in 'modern societies' is a result of 'individualism': it denotes uniqueness and helps the tattooed to stand out of a crowd. For instance, getting tattooed with religious symbols, for example, the date of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem once was a common practice for Christian pilgrims (Sinclair, 1908). Therefore, a tattoos may be considered as a mark of a personality (Ferguson-Rayport et al. 1955).

#### *3.1.2 Adornment*

Similarly, tattoos worn by urban people are mainly to enhance outer beauty. It's a kind of fashion statement for young adults. Nowadays, it even became a part of makeup. Eyeliner and eyebrows are being tattooed to make them permanent. On the other hand, there are tribes like the Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh, India who tattoo their women to make them unattractive so that other rival tribes do not abduct the prettiest ones (Baruah 2011).

#### *3.1.3 Status and Position*

In many indigenous groups tattoos advertise the social position and status of an individual. Tattoos

cannot be worn by anyone, at any time or on any part of the body. Ascribing a member a special status, such as, being adult, being eligible for marriage, being married etc., involves a ritual. For instance, the married women of the Singpho tribe of North-eastern India were tattooed on both legs from the ankle to the knee, men could wear tattoo on their limbs, while unmarried people were not allowed to wear a tattoo (Baruah 2011). In some cases, tattoos are worn by people with special powers or special status like priests or the head of a clan. As Raveendran (2017) reported in *The Hindu Daily*, the Konyaks 'head-hunters' would wear tattoos on different parts of their bodies to display courage and honor chopping someone's head. Thus, tattooing is also associated with honor and pride. But there was a totally different story of tattooing linked with disrespect and taboos. Even in the early 1900s Western society, tattooed people were thought to be pimps, homosexuals and neuropsychiatric disables (Ferguson-Rayport et al. 1955). In the colonial India prisoners were forcefully tattooed as a method of identification. Criminals were often tattooed with the word "thug" on their forehead.

### *3.1.4 Therapy*

Tattoos are often believed to have healing powers used as a substitute of acupuncture. Tattooing, for some culture is an alternative medical treatment which is either magico-religious or pseudoscientific. The 'iceman' mummy discussed before also had therapeutic tattoos. At present this type of tattoos are used by the Kayan tribe of Myanmar. In contrast, present day biological research shows that the ink used during tattooing, when exposed to sunlight, damages skin cells. Puncturing of epidermis gives way to bacteria and viruses which cause skin infections. Tattooing, without proper hygiene can lead to serious diseases like, hepatitis B and C, tuberculosis or even HIV/AIDS (Poli et al. 2012).

### *3.1.5 Apotropaic*

Tattooing in most traditional societies has been a custom often attributed to supernatural entities. For some tribal community it is a way to allure good luck by keeping evil spirits away. For example, Sinclair (1908:365) wrote: "If the Dakota believed that the ghosts of none of them could travel the ghost road in safety unless they had a tattoo device on their forehead or wrist, it is certain that all Dakota had this mark". Some people mimic an evil spirit by wearing tattoos similar to those worn by the spirit itself. "So that tattooed spirits see the tattooed human as a fellow spirit and not as a prey" (Krutak 2015:4).

Thus, tattooing being an intangible aspect of cultural heritage, serves multiple purposes in different societies. This is an age-old practice, with great stories and art skills handed down from one generation to another with continuous modifications. Perception towards tattoos changes cross-culturally through time. A case study of the Santhal tribe helps understand how a 'ritual' like tattooing changes over time in an indigenous society.

## **3.2 A Case Study of Santhal Tribe**

The Santhal tribe is one of the oldest tribes of Indian subcontinent and belongs to the Proto-Australoid racial group. According to the Census of India 2011, it is the country's third largest tribal group with 7.4 million population, concentrated mainly in the states of Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa and Assam. They are also found in some parts of Bangladesh and Nepal. The main occupation is agriculture, though hunting is practiced during festivals. The characteristics of Santhal society is well depicted through their festivals, marriage alliances, annual hunts, economic activities and religious practices (Gogna 2011). Sarnaism is the traditional religion, and they worship several 'bongas' (spirits). At present they also worship Hindu Gods and Goddesses, while many of them are converted to Christianity. Superstitions, witchcraft, thought of afterlife strongly influence their social beliefs.

### 3.2.1 *Tattoo as Body Art*

Tattoo is known as 'Khuda' in Santhali language, meaning 'Making Impression'. Mainly are worn by Santhal women, though men also have a kind of body modification known as 'sikka', i.e. 'coin'. These are coin-sized burn marks usually found on the upper side of left hand (Fig. 1). Some common tattoos of the Santhals are:

- the *Nekkii Khuda*: *Nekkii* means 'wooden comb' in Santhali (Fig. 2).
- the *Had Khuda*: Santhals called themselves *Had/ Hor*. Having this tattoo on the body implies that the owner belongs to the Santhal community<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 3).
- the *Kadam Baha*: *Baha* means flower in Santhali, and the *kadam* is a common flower found locally. This tattoo represents the Kadam flower (Fig. 4).
- the *Pan Sakam*: it implies the leaf of beetle nut (Fig. 5):
- the *Miru Khuda*: *Miru* means Sun. The Santhals worship sun as one of the most powerful bongas (Fig. 6).
- the *Sim Kata*: *Sim* means hen and *kata* means its leg. The tattoo looks like the legs of a chicken (Fig. 7).

These common designs with a particular name were observed and photographed during the field survey, but why these particular designs are being tattooed again and again is not known, at least to the people with whom the author has interacted. The main reason of the ignorance might be because tattooing is perceived as a ritual by the community and the main focus is to gain the virtue of wearing it. That is why the pattern to be inked is a matter of choice.

### 3.2.2 *Tattoo as Craftmanship*

Tattoos are drawn in the winter season by the 'Khudnis', mainly referred to the womenfolk of a particular group of people, who do not belong to the Santhal tribe; most probably they are nomads and believer of Islam. The process of making a tattoo on one's skin is very painful. Tattoos are drawn by injecting pigments into the skin with the help of a bunch of very fine needles. Traditionally, the pigment is made from the carbon remains on the back side of the cooking utensils. Such carbon is generally mixed with water to make the ink to be inserted into the skin. Sometimes lactating 'Khudnis' use their breast milk instead of water. The pigment is primarily black but after applying it in the skin it becomes greenish.

### 3.2.3 *Tattoo as Ritual*

In the Santhal community a tattoo is mainly used to show the identity and social status of a person, especially women. Tattoos are inscribed by different natural objects. And these are mainly painted on both hands, along the neck, shoulder and outer part of the palms. Unmarried girls usually have tattoos on their right hand whereas married women have tattoos on left hand. But these rules are not strictly maintained. In March 2019, during the informal interaction about forty Santhal people were interviewed (individually and through focused group discussions) to know the importance of tattooing in their lives. According to the elderly people of this tribe, ritual of tattooing comes from the belief that nothing could be taken from the material world once death happens, hence tattoos or body marks are the only things which could help survive in afterlife. Because Santhali myth says that a person without a tattoo would be eaten up by insects after death (Kislaya 2013).

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1 The 'Nekki' and 'Had' are the most common designs.

### *3.2.4 Changing Pattern of Tattooing*

With modernization, the concept of tattooing is changing rapidly in the Santhal community. The observation is that perception in the Santhal society regarding tattoos differs according to sex and age. Globalization connects tribal communities with the outer world and accelerates cultural change. Yet, “for some reason the disruptions created in rapid culture change hit the men more directly, leaving the women less changed and less anxious” (Spindler and Spindler 1958: 217). Thus, traditional tattooing, both process and motifs, is more common among women, while men choose ‘modern’ designs over traditional ones. Similarly, formal education teaches that there is nothing like afterlife at all. So, young adults are losing interest in traditional tattooing; they are either ignoring tattoos or making very tiny ones just to fulfil a mandatory social norm (see Figure 8). According to Kislaya (2013) youngsters are reluctant to get a tattoo and those who got one wish to remove it. On the other hand, elderly people still think tattooing is a mandatory part of life and traditional motifs and stories are important for them. Gradually, a sense of inferiority is being associated with tattooing. This problem is common not only among the Santhals, but also among other Indian tribal groups. For instance, college-going girls of the Oraon tribe in Ranchi, Jharkhand, want their tattoos removed because they think having a tattoo in an exposed part of the body is embarrassing and people would treat them differently (Kislaya 2013).

Contrary to this, having a tattoo on one’s body is fashionable for many. In India, tattoo parlors or tattoo studios are mushrooming everywhere. Urban citizens are spending huge sums of money to get a pattern, designed thousands of miles away, to be inked on their bodies. On the other hand, people are being ignorant about ancient tattooing methods and motifs associated to their own culture. That is why the conservation of this ‘art’ or ‘custom’ is needed. Yet, preserving tattoos is not an easy task. What to preserve, the designs, the mythological tales regarding tattoo or the instruments, is a big question. However, it is well known that goods and services go better in a market driven economy. Youngsters have a typical choice to decorate themselves. Thus, as to tattoos, the target may be a segment of the population who are prospective consumers. To popularize positively young people, psychological statements may be made to circulate through different electronic and print media. In market places, aggressive demonstrations may be made emphasizing the price, package, place, population and performance. Promoting traditional tattoos in a modern way of life can make them gain back their popularity. A ray of hope can be seen after the report by Das (2012) in Times of India daily, about a Manipuri artist, who has set a school where he teaches the ancient practice of tattooing on the body to both experts and as well as novices. Santhali tattoo designs too can be promoted in a similar way. Researchers can definitely think of a model tattoo parlor, where people would get a tribal motif inked on their bodies with modern tattoo machines, while witnessing the ancient tools of tattoo drawing exhibited in the parlor and listening about the stories and myths about getting a tattoo a particular tribe once believed.

## **Conclusion**

Tattoo culture in India has had its origin since immemorial time. As a cultural practice it must have evolved as an ethnic marker through cultural contacts among the members of a community. Over time this cultural heritage experienced a lot of ups and downs. Being an intangible cultural heritage, it is considered an animated part of tribal culture. On cross cultural comparison, it is ascertained that this ancient practice is not just an art, but an important custom of tribes with myths and stories associated with it. Perception regarding tattooing reveals a huge variation among different cultures at different times. It is a mandatory custom for some societies, while for some it is prohibited. Some

use it for body beautification, some for safety purposes because of its magical tenets. Some believe it has health benefits, while others consider it the cause of skin diseases. However, among many tribes, despite having a lot of taboos, tattoos are inseparable cultural traits. To preserve this custom one has to understand tribal cultures, which includes worldview, social norms, beliefs and a lot more things about their life. Tattooing has two broader forms. The traditional one with age old tools, strongly believed tales and recurring designs, mainly associated with a tribal society. And the modern one with advanced less painful output through machineries with colorful artistic patterns and a sense of fashion, initially believed to be associated with culture of the Hippies. The former one is dying while the latter one is burgeoning day by day. To retain both forms, a link between these two is needed. In contemporary modern society this vanishing practice can revive a new life if traditional tattooing is made a market-driven service of body care.

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## Images



1. 'Sikka', traditional body mark worn by male members of Santhal tribe



Figure 2. 'Nekki Khuda'



Figure 3. 'Had/Hor Khuda'



Figure 4. 'Kadam Baha Khuda'



Figure 5. 'Paan Sakam Khuda'



Figure 6. 'Miru Khuda'



*Figure 7. 'Sim Kata Khuda'*



*Figure 8. Smaller version of 'Miru Khuda' worn by school going girls*