

THE PRACTICE OF TATTOOING: INSIGNIA, MEANING AND COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: The popular culture comprises of music, film, television, sports and fashion. As diverse a form of media as they may be, they all transmit and communicate meanings. While meanings are effectively communicated through spoken as well as written languages, they can also be conveyed through symbols, insignia, totems or emblems, engraved on body as tattoos. Tattoos are a form of art or design made on the skin, which changes its pigment. Tattoos engraved on body as symbols signify varied meanings. They speak to society or simply to the members, making social life replete with messages. Similar to text, tattoos convey stories that may relate to existential questions like genealogy, identity, status, achievement, medicine/therapy as well as ontological relations like ancestors, spirits and animals. Tattoos being an integral part of all the cultures played significant functions like medicinal, spiritual, social and semiotic. The understanding and perception of tattooing as a practice itself has undergone several changes over different time periods. Further, tattooing as a cultural practice has attracted the interest of Anthropologists, Sociologists and Psychologists. This work tries to understand provenance of tattooing as a cultural symbol in aboriginal/primitive as well as modern societies and culturally specific meanings attributed to them in both Indian as well as other contexts.

Keywords: Rites of passage, semiotics, subculture, sacred

Introduction: Body as a Canvas

Once the domain of medical enquiries and certain philosophical schools of thought, 'the body' appeared in the 1970s as a central site of discourse wherein scholars across the social sciences and humanities began almost all forms of inquiry. By the mid-1980s, 'the body' assumed such an important place in anthropology that its study emerged into a full-fledged subfield- "the anthropology of the body". For anthropologists the questions of power and oppression could not be tackled unless first questioning the dichotomies like: civilized/primitive, culture/nature, mind/body, subject/object, self/other etc. Since then, 'the body' has become field of large numbers of inquiries from theoretical and ethnographic contexts. Thus, for Baudrillard, 'the body is the site where social relations directly occur'. Also, for Giddens, 'the body is the way of personal expression in man's ongoing identity project'. According to him, the body is the reflection of individuality as well as group affiliations (Waskul and Vannini, 2006).

The branch of anthropological studies connect body to vast gamut of socio-cultural structures like body as a *norm* (body disciplination), body as an *artefact* (body modification) and as an *idea/meaning* (body as semiotization).

Within the structural level of disciplining the body, human bodies and functions

are subordinated to social norms and expectations. The theme of disciplining the body has been theorized by Michel Foucault in his analysis of biopolitics (Foucault, 1977). The discipline is a pressure that specialized institutions exert to body to force it to obedience. The supervision/control over population is exercised through social standards, control over sexuality and reproduction, elimination of anomalies and disease etc. Within the area of body as an artefact or modification comes as all forms of bodily alterations desired by the culture where one lives. These may range from scarification, body-marking, tattooing to plastic surgery, weight loss or body augmentation procedures. The semiotization of body takes place through the culture, which has effects on the human body and its processes. Through culture, the body gains specific meanings, as also people adapt along the ideas of body normality, health, disease and the ideal appearance.

Above socio- structural levels of body assumes culture and body as linked, since body is seen as a construction and product of culture that it belongs. Thus, the body is transformed into a significant symbolic site for representation of cultural identity. What an individual does with his body does not just denote his personal beliefs but also cultural backgrounds. Also, since culture is dynamic, so is the notion of ideal body. As such there is no guarantee for how long a socially accepted body will remain so. Such fluid notion of body to connects it with tattoo practices industry.

Tattooing is one of the oldest modes of communicative culture predating even sports. Culturalogical data suggest that tattooing, corporal art that is the insertional of ink in deep layers of epidermis, has been well in practice in ancient societies. Akin to inscriptions on parchment, tattoos written on skin have the ability to preserve events of the past in concrete visual detail, simultaneously, giving a form to one's personality/ identity. Sanders argues that the proof of antiquity of the practice of tattooing can be derived from mummified bodies of priests which were believed to have medicinal or fertility functions (Sanders, 2008, 9). In Bryan Turner's study of Sociology of Body, 'the pre-modern body was a principal site for display of an array of cultural factors like social status, family position, tribal membership' (Turner, 1991, 4). The early tribal societies practiced marking out physically the status differentials, clan, family and ethnic affiliations of their members through body-scars and tattoos. Such marks signified key status and moments in individuals lives particularly with respect to rites of passage between different statuses.

Tattoo-discourses associated with disciplines like psychology, anthropology and sociology, have focused largely on queries regarding the motivation/ intentions and functions behind tattoo practices. Thus, they basically dwell on: "why do people tattoo themselves?" What is the motive of tattooing under certain circumstance? What function does tattooing perform for an individual, group, or a community?"

The first two questions invariably take us to history, situations, impact and audiences of specific objects. Various theories have been used for understanding why people tattoo themselves.

1. Sigmund Freud's *psychoanalysis* sees tattoos as an expression of individuality and tattoo as an image having an unconscious meaning (besides conscious one). In his work *Totem and Taboo* (1913), taking instances from primitive societies, Freud described people marking the image of their totem on their body to ward off fear of abandonment, establish association and as a reminder of the forbidden.
2. *Symbolic Interactionist theory* perceives individual as active and creative 'actor' engaged in meaningful interaction. Tattoos have the potential to be seen as a communicative tool and used for communicative intentions. Tattoo bearers, thus, distinguish their body and themselves from others and tattoos have a deep and important impact on their interactions. In modern societies, to have a tattoo is a deliberate and conscious decision. Based on this theoretical frameworks of G H Mead (1934), Herber Blumer (1969) and Erving Goffman (1959), the body is a socially constructed phenomenon and a determinative factor in social relations: it is an objectified phenomenon, a source of communication and signification which is based on several practices like fashion, hair styles and tattoos, Therefore, tattoos (or for that matter other body modification tools) are vital practices for analyzing how the body is constructed and used for personal expression and communication.

The third question regarding 'functions' of tattooing has been found in the works of anthropologists: like tattoo practices in the Pacific; cultural contexts of tattoos among Maori of Aotearoa/New Zealand, and sacred tattoos inscribed as totems among Hindus emphasizing cosmic relations to deities, and the afterlife; *nuyē*¹ in Japan for medicinal treatment, power, sympathetic magic.

In its essence tattoos communicate meaning upon the body frequently tell stories, myths, rituals, achievements; signify key moments/events and developments in a life, power relations and cultural reproduction. In effect, tattoos speak to the world semiotically. Practically, human beings practice tattooing because there is/was something that needed to be said but could not otherwise be expressed via other media of communication. Emile Durkheim in his significant work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1976 edn.) suggested that totems held considerable place in social life of the primitives. Totems are like heraldic emblems, badge of a group. The Australian Aborigines and Indians of North America carved and engraved not only things which they possessed: their arms, walls, utensils, canoes and ornaments, but also on their bodies.

"they do not put their coat of arms merely on things which they possess, but also upon their person, they imprint it upon their flesh, it becomes a part of them" (Durkheim, 1976, 115).

According to Durkheim,

“it is frequently upon the body itself that the totemic mark is made for this is a way of representation within capacity of even least advanced societies... .. In religious ceremonies, those who took part of officials as priests/shamans or even as assistants always had designs engraved representing totem on their bodies” (Ibid, 118).

Also, the elaborate facial incisions have been understood as similar to engravings by anthropologists. Apart from engraving among Aruntas, in sacred rite of sub-incision, certain gashes are cut on women in form of certain sacred object called *churinga*. Among Haida Indians, observed Durkheim, it was general custom for them to tattoo themselves with the totems (Ibid, 116-117).

Evans Pritchard in his anthropological studies observed that among *The Nuers* (1940), in the ritual of initiation (gaar) among boys, scarification/engraving of horizontal lines on forehead was practiced (Evans Pritchard, 1940, 249); and among Azande (1976), during the training for witch-doctor, the practitioners made incisions on the face, chest, shoulders and wrists of the youth towards the end of the ceremony (Evans Pritchard, 1976, 95).

Also, in reference to Maori tattooing, Levi Strauss believed that purpose of tattoo was “not only to imprint drawing onto flesh but also to stamp onto the mind of members all traditions and philosophy of the group” (Levi-Strauss, 1963, 257).

In his work, *Wrapping In Images. Tattooing in Polynesia* (1993), Alfred Gell distinguished between the ‘deeply embedded tattooing practices of the Polynesian’ as against unanchored tattoo practices in Western societies, played no role in ‘the fundamental mechanisms of social reproduction’. Here, his primary premise was that: *“in the Polynesian societies tattoo practice played an integral part in the organization and functioning of major institutions like politics, warfare, religion etc... ..and that the explanation of tattooing practices were invariably, a description of the wider institutions”* (Gell, 1993, 1-3).

Most anthropologists suggested that in the early modern period similar to magico-medical processes, the corporal marks were immersed in occult and religious symbolism. The medico-magicians/ the shamans and the physicians for whom religious or astrological inkings represented astral empowerment, medical healing, or life-giving force- for them these symbolic engravings were a celebration and purpose within themselves. Anthropologists were also interested in ‘involuntary form of tattoos’, that were an ‘instrument of control’ of subjects and their movements by state. They held the idea that forced tattooing of slaves, deviants and criminals were like ‘inscriptions on their body’ to mark social ‘others’ and outcasts.

Tattooing as evident, were deeply embedded within cultural traditions and were explicitly functional in some senses. Practically, tattoo like writing, functioned as a structure of inter-communication based on the production of bodily marks/ scars. As a form of communication, tattoo integrated actions within socially agreed

and institutionalized arrangement system that was patterned and represented a narrative. Tattoos bear stories that have lasting effect as similar to texts, they are formed of symbols related to things like identity, status, genealogy, medicine and of relationships with spirits, ancestors and animals. Antiquity and universality of tattoos point out to the fact that they need to be analysed in terms of meta-discursive qualities: their textuality, as form of bodily narratives, and spiritually.

History and evolution of Tattoo culture

In his anthropological and cultural survey titled *The History of Tattooing* (1925) Wilfred Dyson Hambly associated evolution and cultural functions of tattooing to religion, magic and status communicating practices. For example, in Hindu traditions, tattoos were believed to have religious properties and were inscribed in order to be identified in the afterlife, whereas in the Antarctic, tattoos communicated symbols of virtuosity and goodness after death. Maori (New Zealand) warrior *moko* tattoos were not designed for ornamentation but to signify prowess in battle and social status within the group. Similarly, the *Picts* people, native of British Isles decorated their bodies with ferocious animal-tattoos to trigger fear among their enemies (Barron, 2013. 113).

Tattooing was prevalent in Europe in the Anglo-Saxon period before it was barred by the Church, only to return during crusades with a new religious avatar. New tattoo forms took the shape of religiously inspired symbols like crucifixes. While the practice of tattooing continued within western culture, the name given to it was 'pricking'. It is believed that with *The Tahitian expedition* of Captain James Cook that the Tahitian word *ta -tu* (to mark or 'strike') became a widespread phenomenon-*tattoo*. However, tattooing soon came to be seen as 'vulgar affectation' and 'unsavory types.' Association of tattooing with social disrepute was strengthened by the work of Italian criminologist Caesar Lombroso in his book *Criminal Man* (1876). According to Lombroso, criminals were biologically determined towards anti- social behaviour, were physically different, primitives, and one of the most remarkable features of primitive men was frequency with which they underwent tattooing (Lombroso, 2006, 48) Tattooing, according to him occurred mostly among the lower strata/ classes of society- like among the shepherds, workers, sailors, soldiers and among criminals (Ibid 58). Though Lombroso's thesis of criminality came under severe criticism, the association of tattooing with deviant culture remained unquestioned in Europe. Several other studies have also described tattooed individuals as uninhibited and impulsive, and linked tattoos to severe personality disorders (Hambly, 1925). Steward (1990) found expressions of narcissism, exhibitionism, compensation for physical handicaps and gang membership as motivation for tattoos (Barron, 2020, 17). Richard Post (1968) contends that the personality disorders manifested in the form of delinquency among several tattooed subjects.

In his work *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art* (2003), Michael

Atkinson has tried placing development of tattooing practice in distinctive eras. The earliest period according to Atkinson can be termed as *The Circus/ Carnival Era* falling between 1880 to 1920, and characterized tattooing as a source of public entertainment and a form of social division. Tattoo-art represented social clubs of individuals existing on the margins of society. This was followed by what Atkinson called, *The Rebel Era* developing in the immediate post world war period. This era saw both proliferation of tattooing as well as its disrepute in terms of social reactions. This was so because many individuals chose to wear tattoos as deliberate badges of defiance and advertisement of their discontent against social order. Such expressions frequently related to youth cultures and youth gangs (referred to as motorcycle-gangs) that used tattoos as encoded language of rebellion (Atkinson, 2003, 36-38). Atkinsons also linked tattooing with stigma in instances like Japanese tattooing technique of *irezumi*² and tattooing of Russian prisoners by authorities as a way of permanently marking criminals with symbols.

The motif of symbolic self-expression via tattoo symbols has become widespread within the contemporary tattoo culture initiated by the tattoo renaissance or the *New Age Era* that began in 1970. This was the beginning of a period in which tattoos became a self-chosen statement after much deliberation and no longer the result of impulse or possible subjection. Consequently, from the 1970s tattoos progressively became chic products, personal ornaments and cosmic jewelry. Steadily tattoos became personalized motivations linked to self-expression and the middle class became increasingly interested in tattoo culture. Hence, “tattoos came to be linked with issues like self-actualization, social and personal transformation, ecological awareness and spiritual growth” (DeMellow, 2000, 143).

Such personalized communication practices drew on materials from popular culture to adorn themselves in the era what Atkinson called as *The Supermarket Era*, i.e., late 1990 and 2000. It represented discovery of markets in which consumers driven by the principles of freedom of expression and self-exploration shopped for best artists (Atkinson, 2003, 47).

Anna Felicity Friedman (2015) in her comprehensive survey on tattooing globally established practice of tattooing as both a historical and modern practice. According to her, contemporary tattooing: “exists in nearly every country on the skins of a phenomenal array of people. Perhaps at no other time in history has this art form been so prevalent, both in terms of its geographical reach and the sheer number of people who wear tattoos” (Friedman, 2015, 9).

Semiotics, tattoos and meaning

Within the study of media and popular culture, according to Jonathan Bignell (2004), ‘semiotics is a methodology for reading the meaning of cultural texts as disparate as newspapers, cinema, television, computer games, advertising images etc.’, in

some cases, to discern their overt meaning, in others to potentially uncover their ideological underpinnings. Ferdinand de Saussure considered father of Semiology i.e., science of signs. In his work, *Course in general linguistics* Semiology was proposed to be systematic means by which to explain what constitutes sign, and what law governed them. Signs are drawn from systems of language that exists in society. All signs according to him adjoin a form and concept that he called a signifier and signified.

Umberto Eco in his 1976 work, *A Theory of Semiotics* argued that sign is regarded as ‘communicative device taking place between two human beings intentionally aiming to communicate something and signified is a fusion of mental image, concept and psychological reality’ (Eco, 1976, 14-15). Eco emphasized the fact that objects within culture can ‘speak’ and can be replaced by alternative objects/symbols. The idea of communicating by symbols instead of words is simplified in contemporary culture by the roles of cinema, advertising, graffiti and theatre. Same holds true for tattoo- practices since main function of tattoo is to convey distinctive meanings for the wearer as well as the society at large. In contemporary tattoo practices, the interest in writing on the body, is in a way turning the body into the site of the story. In this context, the body is not only perceived as a sign, but is made to speak as the text. The body becomes the key sign of the narrative. Thus, as Peter Brooks argues: “Along with the semiotization of the body goes what we might call the somatization of story” (Brooks, 1993, 38).

In her work on American tattoo communities, Margo DeMellow (2008), using semiology identified a range of motivations by those who have chosen to get inked designs such as totems of group affiliation, commemoration of a significant life event, dissatisfaction with wider society, etc. According to DeMellow, politically disparate issues like challenges of development, movements like feminism, ecological groups and self-help groups gained popularity in tattoo patterns (DeMellow, 2008, 143).

Orend and Gagne’s ethnographic study of people who had corporate tattoos expressed that tattoos should communicate specific meaning related to their group, their communities or their life-style. ‘it was like send out signals of what one is into’ (Orend and Gagne, 2009, 509). No longer culturally imposed practice, tattoo-culture is concerned with individuals charting out their own rites of passage on their bodies in forms of lyrics and poetry, insignia and superstition, religious expression and inspirational quotes. Reiterating these positions, one can suggest that though individuals may select tattoos themselves, many decided on signs that symbolizes personal issues, important dates, hobbies, religious iconography, celebrities or popular comic characters. The individuals may have narratives behind their inked icons. Similarly, when tattoos are shared by specific groups, in this regard, tattoos operate as polysemic interactive device. Punk subculture, for example, utilized tattooing in a manner that invited moral outcry and condemnation from the

mainstream society. According to Wojcik, “punk subculture relied on convoluted system of visual symbols often depicting essence of human mortality signified by skulls, death bones etc. in their tattoos. Range of communicative mediums, self-expression, rebellion, marks of deviance and threat, and often reflected alternative subcultural ethos that defined them” (Wojcik, 1995, 6).

Consistently visible in the popular cultural media of television and films, many of the vital elements of the tattoo practice found expression there as well. In films like *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2005), *Aquaman* (2018), *Moana* (2016), tattoos represent key elements: from the symbol of distinctiveness/otherness, to group/cultural solidarity and a typical body art form, to the self-communicative potential and nature of tattoo designs. Further, there are several studies attempting to understand celebrity tattoos their signs and their meanings. Celebrities are products of mass consumption and capitalism and their bodies are transformed into medium of advertising and social influence. Since celebrities are social entity, tattoos on their skin assume immense potential. Celebrities often found narrating the meanings of their tattoos. Such actions can serve to reinforce their popularity, recognition and identity.

Yet another category of evocative tattoos were holocaust tattoos. In 1965 Germany offered to survivors who were willing to remove from their arms the numbers tattooed at Auschwitz death camp. Many survivors retained it as sign of tragic events and Jewish pride (Papp, 2020, 43). Popularly classified as trauma tattoos, they are perceived as mechanism for coping with trauma within a socio-cultural context as well as a cultural practice of creation of meaning. The meanings attached by trauma survivors include revealing ones’ trauma for recognition, witnessing, control, and transformation. Paul Sweetman has suggested ‘tattooing as means by which individuals/groups attempted to secure a sense of stable identity in a potentially bewildering, fluid postmodern world through the permanence of tattooed symbols and signs’ (Sweetman, 1999, 71).

Tattooing in South Asia: Meaning and Functions

Tattooing in South Asia has a long history. In the fifteenth century, the Italian traveller Nicolo Conti’s record of people of the Irawadi Valley (Myanmar) ‘puncturing their flesh with pins of iron and rubbing pigments therein’, and French merchant Jean-Baptiste Tavernier’s accounts of the Banjara women of East Bengal tattooing their skin ‘in such a manner to appear as though the skin was a flowered fabric’ speak about prevalence of the practice (Anderson, 2000, 102). The roots and connotations of such tattoo-practice, known as godna are diverse. Ornamental tattooing among the tribal (adivasi) and Nomadic communities in the Indian subcontinent have existed for centuries. Communities tattooed themselves as a ‘mark of identity, guaranteeing their recognition’ as they wandered from one place to another. Anthropological study “*The highlands of central India: Notes on their Forests and Wild tribes, Natural*

History and sports” (1872) examined several forest people communities, and Gonds in particular. The study showcased how women of the communities patterned their limbs with a variety of symmetrical tattoos with insignia of birds, tigers, monkeys and flowers, which had some totemistic connotations. These patterns were made in indigo or gun-powder. The ornamental art was made only among marriageable girls (Forsyth, 1872, 156). Herbert Risley undertook extensive ethnographic survey of India and has given accounts of tattooing, gender of those frequently tattooed and most favoured body part for tattooing. In his opinion, tattoos of various communities have been connected with their religion and mythology, totems, and their traditional avocations (Anderson, 2000, 102).

Also, Verrier Elwin in his study of the central Indian tribe, *The Baiga* (1939), observed that tattooing being an integral part of Baiga women, detailed tattoo-marks (godna) adorning the bodies of Baiga women were common (p.18). Drawing from the work of Charles E. Luard (1905), Elwin argued that apart from tattoos serving as ornamental and decorative devices, or representing totem-marks of religious significance, they also represented form of sexual expression and stimulant. Further, different tattoos had different connotation like status, rank, religion, talismanic, sexual and punitive.

Prosenjit Das Gupta in his book *After Elwin* (2007) revisited and documented in detail different symbols and relevance of Baiga tattoos. He categorized those tattoos in terms of phases of life of woman, different locations of body etc.

William E Marshal, in his work, *Phrenologist amongst the Todas* (1873) also observed that Todas women tattooed portions of their body terming it *Gurtu*. The women were tattooed around arms, chest, legs in a pattern of semi-circular dots, circular line of dots on each leg (p. 47). Marshal did not mention about tattooing practice among men. Yet another ethnographic study by Anthony R Walker (1986) *The Todas of South India: A New Look* suggested that tattooing was significant form of mandatory adornment practice among women. The patterns were in form of rings and dots. The women were tattooed after puberty. He observed that Toda men were not tattooed, instead burn marks were made on wrists of boys, but that practice too was not mandatory (Walker, 1986, 44).

After Santhal rebellion, British colonial officials documented various aspects of nature and culture of the Santhals. On one hand, colonial administrators like William Wilson Hunter’s *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (1875 (1868)), and William George Archer ‘s *The Hill of Flutes: Life, Love and Poetry in Tribal India* (2007 (1974)) and on the other works of Indian scholars Sarat Chandra Roy (1915 and 1918) are significant. According to them, cicatrization (scarring by burning) known as “*Sika*” was practiced on boys and tattooing i.e. “*Khoda*” on girls. These customs were related to Santhal life cycle ceremonies. There was no particular pattern or figure to be tattooed and there was no known relation between the pattern and the girl’s clan. Girls preferred tattoos on the side of the nose, on the cheeks, breast, chin,

arms, legs, and ankles. Arms were engraved like armlets and bangles. Tattoos on the girls' body symbolized the social endorsement of her womanhood. According to Archer, the custom of girl tattooing was followed strictly as women were main means of reproduction.

Sarat Chandra Roy also noted similar customs of marking the body among the Birhors and Oraons of Chota Nagpur (Roy, 1915, 45) where boys underwent cicatrization and girls practiced tattooing. The custom of such marking of the body was both religious as well as social- i.e., to protect collective tribal identity and solidarity by the members.

Similarly, Lars Krutak in his study of tattooing among Naga (2020) suggested that:

“Naga tattooing formed coherent set of belief and meaning that informed the rituals of daily life and was linked to a sacred past that bound the individual to a collective history. Tattooed emblems represented valued ancestral relationships and connections” (2020, 191).

Among Naga communities, Krutak also studied elaborate facial and body tattoos, referred to as *Shahnyu yaha* or ‘Tiger familiar spirit’, that were symbols of bravery among Chen Nagas. It was ancient practice associated with headhunting-bringing head of rival tribal member. Naga Women were tattooed with a variety of designs that showed their familial, clan or tribal affiliations as well as at important life stages their “rites of passage”.

Clare Anderson in her study of ‘*Godna*’, cited that among Banjara (traders) and Gadia Lohar (iron-smiths) communities of Rajasthan specific tattoo-marks on the face was common practice and among the Abor communities of Assam, the presence of a tattoo on the body was essential for marriage (Anderson, 2000, 102). Tattooing/ branding and scarring were also used for curative functions in case of physical ailments/injury and too ward off malevolent forces and evil eye. For example, Bedar people in the Bellary district who had dislocated their shoulders were tattooed with the figure of a Hanuman to relieve the pain (Rao, 1942/1945, 12).

Apart from tribal communities, among caste groups as well, marking the body was said to be a sign of ritual status. Tattoos, believed to endure death, were seen as indication of earthly misery which would be ‘accepted in heaven as penance for sins.’ Particular tattoos were believed to facilitate the identification of family members in both worlds. For some Hindu communities, facial tattoos or tattoos at forehead were also connected with ritual fasting and rites of purification. Vaishnavites, for example were marked on their shoulders. Tattoos also meant status differentiation in terms of rites of passage, caste status as well as gender status. Among castes, tattoos were particularly practiced by women and marks included tattooing on the forehead with ‘sun, moon, crescent designs and star’ (resembling bindi). Other than adornment, tattoos were believed to have therapeutic powers for fertility, pregnancy

and child birth (Anderson, Ibid, 102).

Besides these ornamental and ritual functions of tattooing, facial disfigurement and scarification with godna became prevalent at the 'time of the Muslim invasions to prevent attacks on and enable recognition of abducted Hindu women, as tattooing was taboo amongst Muslims' (Anderson, Ibid, 104).

Notwithstanding, above cultural significance, European criminologists' perception of tattoos was applied to Indian context as well. Similar to Europe, tattoos facilitated in the recognition of Lombroso's so-called criminal man; so, attempts were made in India too to use tattoos to label particular castes and tribes as 'criminal'. Tattooing or Godna prick, to puncture, to mark the skin. The meaning of godna in colonial penal practice accordingly changed to specific branding of prisoners with indelible blue markings. After 1797 in the Bengal Presidency, perjurers, life convicts and forgers had their names, crimes and date of sentence tattooed on the forehead - in the vernacular languages. In 1871, the Criminal Tribes Act consolidated the British position. Henceforth, with the decorative tattoos of adivasi groups, the connection was made with savagery while with others of criminality. Several references to 'branding by godna' were made in 1830s, when thugs were marked in this way in the Territories of Central India. Tattooing thus became associated with colonial practice of control or punishment of Indian subjects and hence acquired pejorative connotations equivalent to social stigma.

Tattoo and gender connect

Although women have always been participant in tattooing practice, tattoo in European and United States have been considered masculine practice suggesting deviance, crudeness etc. It was only after 1970s when body politics were challenged by various movements including feminist movements, which "encouraged the idea of control over ones' own body" that tattoos became popular among women. Slowly, tattoos were popularized as 'decorations' but also represented conscious choice of one's own body altering.

The tribal/native societies however, presented a different scenario. While both men and women did participate in the practice, tattooing was more or less mandatory among women. Other than permanent adornment, tattoos were believed to have talismanic powers for fertility, pregnancy and child birth. The location of specific symbols and insignia on the forehead, waist or breast of Baiga, Munda or Oraon girls were significant for their rites of passage from girlhood to womanhood.

Contemporary tattoo practices

From antiquity to modern times, tattoos have been a cultural constant and as the practice went in and out of favour. social response towards them have also oscillated between celebration, condemnation and censor. Tattooing has transcended cultures,

ethnicity, gender and class, increasing number of individuals communicating meaning through art inscribed in their bodies. Tattoo culture as elsewhere in world has undergone transformation in India as well: from pre-colonial phase where tattoo represented collective cultural convictions, norms, values, tradition, customs and beliefs, to the colonial phase where they were turned into labels of stigma representing savagery and deviance, to the post-colonial contemporary phase of individualised/customised and secularised tattooing. While, many communities like Konyak Nagas Tribe of Nagaland, Rabari women of Kutch, Dhongaria and Kutia Kondhs of Odisha, Mundas of Jharkhand have continued to preserve their sacred practice of ritual tattooing, on the other hand, with commercialisation and consumerism, the tattoos have entered into realm of 'secular' personalised art, though religious motifs, deities and ethnic insignia still catch attention of tattoo-lovers.

As in west tattoos being largely confined among working classes till early twentieth century, tattoo parlours/shops were located in areas of the city characterized by crime and poverty and representation of contra-culture. Though the practice was proliferating, it remained associated with disrepute. Traditional/tribal tattoo artists in India belonged to (often women belonging to tribal/nomadic) families of tattooers. Over the period, the tattoo shops/parlours have been transformed globally into artistic hubs. These parlours foster creativity and acceptability to the art form. Several artists and parlours have assumed the responsibilities to preserve the "disappearing ancestral practice" by re-traditionalization (of the Naga tattoo, for example) (Krutak, 2020, 200-201). While adopting technological advancements like digital design tools and modern innovations they are blending tradition with modernity. In Turner's view, religious, magical and rites of passage functions of tattooing have given way to more secular representations of life like fashion, fandom and form of consumer product that has a role in demarcating social membership of urban tribes (Turner, 1991, 6). Moreover, the acceptance of tattoos across the class and gender lines has been construed as mainstreaming in terms of social and cultural perceptibility.

Conclusion

Tattoos that are engraved on skin often consist of meaningful symbols. Similarly, it is important to consider the significance of the skin as a medium and as a frontier between 'self' and 'other.' Tattoos act as visible dialogue between the self and other, and the skin transforms into a landscape for language. As noted by Terence Turner (2012): "*the surface of the body, the social self, and the psycho-biological individual becomes the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted, and bodily adornment (in all culturally multifarious forms, from bodypainting to clothing and from feather head-dresses to cosmetics) becomes the language through which it is expressed*" (Turner, 2012 486).

Tattooing has survived through ages and evolved in contemporary societies communicating symbolic meanings of socio-cultural and individual significance. Both tattooed and non-tattooed individuals perceive tattoos as visual signifiers and symbols of communication.

Notes

1. *Nuye* is used for tattooing in Japan which has several meanings: “to carve,” “to tattoo,” and “to write.” Tattooing in this context was linked to power, medicinal treatment, magic, cosmic relations to specific deities, and the afterlife.
2. Tattooing of highly decorative designs of heroic and mythic figures covering large portion of body.

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