

'The Skin and the Ink: Tracing the Boundaries of Tattoo Art in India.'

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INTRODUCTION

A walk through the city could perhaps be considered akin to a visit to a museum gallery in that it beckons the senses to a variety of tangible and intangible products of our human existence. They would stand as a heterogeneous group of memorabilia that our generation and others before us have constructed as means of cultural preservation; to remind the inhabitants and the visitors about the civilization's ways of being. Thus the various practices and the artefacts produced under the rubric of art constitute not only a philosophical conduit of Platonic ideals but as a socially constructed, politically potent and culturally reified phenomenon which merit exploration as a subject matter for the social sciences.

Through the ages, there have emerged numerous experimentations with the notion of 'art'. These expressions have taken us from one object to another, from one class or group of audience to another, from one medium to another. The present work is an attempt to explore the relevance of one such practice- tattoo art in its treatment of its medium or object- the human body. It is a contestation of the present work that in as much as material possessions are considered as worthwhile subject of academic explorations, the human body and the way it is displayed, lived, and experienced constitutes an important artefact in the lives of the people in different regions. Disciplines such as Archaeology, (Biological) Anthropology, and (Medical) Sociology have unearthed, traced and observed skeletal remains, body practices for their historical and socio-cultural significances.

Based on a brief fieldwork which was carried out 2011-2012, that involved interviews with tattoo artists and tattoo clients, the present paper ruminates on the aesthetic value of tribal tattoos and argues that contemporary cultural anthropology could benefit from a critical analysis of the cultural history of body practices like tattooing.

The attempt here is to explore the meaning of contemporary tattoo art as a practice that takes the body as a point of dialogue between the individual and the socio-cultural world. The question is about what

meaning does tattoo art constitute in the lives of the participants and those around them. If a cultural practice links to the ways of being, then what does tattoo art imply about the current subjectivities?

I would like to bring your focus on the ways modern practitioners of tattooing draw from the historicity of tattoos as traditional artefact amongst the various tribes and communities, and how the traditional and cultural values associated with certain body practices get transformed in order to turn it into a commodity. Similar instances have been documented in the indigenous communities in Mexico. And such transformations of cultural products of art provides a means of sustenance to the communities. But can this commoditization of tribal and folk cultural products in the case of tattooing be an efficient means of their preservation and circulation? The flipside to this trend is noticed in the transformation of the symbolic meanings and value of such artistic practices since the final 'product' available in the market is encrypted in a different meaning and the relationship between the tattooist and the tattooee (The term tattooee is used in tattoo researches to describe anyone with a tattoo) itself is different in the two cases and the latter exchange has been accorded a special and more valued position within the social norms.

Then, what other techniques of documentation could be availed in the present scenario? In the research, it came about that one of the means of documentation of tattoo art is to bring the focus back on the particular images and motifs themselves instead of reading tattooing tradition merely within the registers of a larger social process. Although, it is not denied that tattoo art is a part of the larger gamut of social and cultural practices that constitute the life of a particular community, but by limiting the focus to tattoo art and other body practices as merely a social means, a lot of academic deliberation has become ignorant to the specific richness of the symbols and the artistic features of the tattoos. In anthropology and history, tattooing is represented as a practice of 'beautification' and social affiliation. In contrast, ethnographic works on contemporary tattoo art focus on its social and cultural significance. However, works on the confluence of history and aesthetics in tattooing are scant.

We'll also look into some of the prevailing challenges to the continuation and preservation of tattoo art as a significant socio-cultural practice within India. (the notion of taboo and stigma of 'backwardness' and class politics associated with tribal and folk tattooing practices) .

A definition of human that would emerge from opening our senses (primarily the visual) to these productions would be about the potential to 'aestheticize' our experiences, to give them an expression in words, sounds, scents and/or images. Theoretically, this would open aesthetics as a practice with

social and historical consequences for anthropology and sociology. Within this realm, distinctions are marked between which practices are socially and culturally appropriate (and worthy of the label of beauty) and which are insolent and therefore a stigma, a taboo. As a theoretical subject, tattoo art and the tattooed body insinuate an analytic landscape wherein one can study the socio-genesis of the notions of 'beauty' and 'taboo' on the same plane since it involves a historical view of the human body and the various practices which are created, ordained, and labelled as socially accepted, beautiful and what is objectionable, a taboo and thus stigmatized. A new wave appears to be emerging in the social sciences wherein the focus is towards understanding how the social order comes to reify and also be constructed by the changes in the cultural notions of 'beauty' and the 'abject' (Kristeva, 1980, 2008). For sociology and visual anthropology in particular, the practices associated with them can hold much ethnographic potential to understand the ways contemporary lives are organised around the discourse of aesthetics.

For instance, Miller (1996) suggests that although tattoos are rich in personal meaning for the wearer, meanings often have a basis in cultural practice and myths. It is expected, therefore, that choice of design, size of the design, colours, and location on the body will all be symbolic of life experiences and identity (*Velliquette, Murray, and Creyer, 1998*).

Visual art has been noted as one of the most frequently mentioned possessions that play a representational role in the service of memories of other people, events and relationships (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). In her book 'Reconstructing the Body' (2009) Historian Anna Carden-Coyne gives an account of the ways in which British, American and Australian men and women sought to rebuild their lives as well as their entire society after the war. The war-wrecked body could be more than merely salvaged: it could be remade into something glorious, even beautiful through a reproduction of classical Greek aesthetics. The classical ideal offered beauty and repose and restoration of individuals and entire communities. It is an ambitious book but she elegantly weaves together the histories of reconstructive surgery, bodily rehabilitation, physical culture, war memorials, health initiatives and art. But what is the

usefulness of a text on cultural history for this study? It is because body art may symbolize group membership, interests, activities, relationships, life transitions, accomplishments, or values (Hoerr 1995; Sanders 1988). For example, Govenar's (1988) research found that, within the Hispanic subculture, tattoos which appear on the hand often symbolize group identity and ethnic pride. The most common symbols chosen by this group are Christian and religious designs (e.g., angels, clouds, crosses, devils, skeletons, and fairies). Thus, translation of the experience from one to the other seems to take place at the level of the body. Perhaps in tattooing, the image and the body tend to become fused such that what gets produced is a new meaning in the form of a 'tattooed body'. The point is that once tattooed, the body is remembered by others around the individual as a tattooed body (Sanders,2008; Pitts, 2003).

What is also striking to note is the variance in the terms used in the popular rhetoric to refer to tattooing. While tattooing for many decades has been referred as 'art', in recent time, it is counted amongst practices which are clubbed under the rubric of 'body modification'¹, or 'body work', 'project', or 'corporeal aesthetics' (Pitts,2003; Sanders,2008; Atkinson, 2003; Siebers, 2000) . This shift from 'art' to 'work' is a crucial development in itself and on an intuitive level it communicates about the changes in the dynamics of tattooing itself as it exists in urban spaces and is tied to the notions of ownership and social position of the tattoo artists and tattooees. What it also opens for scrutiny is the question of contemporary subjectivity in the urban culture for if the image inscribed is indelibly associated with the tattooed person's body, whether the viewership is to be directed towards the artist, the tattooed person, or the image and the existing

¹ Body adornments are by definition temporary. Body modification, on the other hand, refers to the physical alteration of the body through the use of surgery, tattooing, piercing, scarification, branding, genital mutilation, implants, and other practices. Body modifications can be permanent or temporary, although most are permanent.

meaning it communicates -all these positions create a different possibility of socio-cultural living for the individuals involved in tattooing. From an artistic practice essentially build on the identity of the artist, as a body work, tattooing is perhaps fast becoming or has become a practice that brings the focus on the tattoo wearer or the wearer's body, and that one can adopt to modify one's outer body, and this also connects tattooing to other practices such as cosmetic surgeries, body piercings, etc. that have emerged as uber-fashion.

In the present work, the endeavour is to explore how is tattoo art connected to our embodied existence. If art gets inscribed on the corporeal body which individuals, cultures and societies have attempted to understand, to appropriate as either 'private' or collective possessions, then could it be the case that body modifications like tattooing are experiments in the experience(s) of self- those that are involved in our encounters with our socio-cultural world and which are deeply connected to the embodied resonance of oneself while being located on the surface- that is the skin. A strong body of research has emerged which focuses on body modification practices such as tattoo art to tap on the relevance of such artistic practices in the personal and collective lives of the participants.

The wide array of anthropological and a few sociological researches in the area of body modification have shifted from documentation of particular tattoos as cultural artefacts to exploring the significance of the tattoos for each individual wearer. The contemporary trend in research in the given area emphasizes on the need to approach tattooing and other body practices from the perspective of the participants. To this end 'tattoo narratives' (DeMello,2000; Atkinson, 2003; Eason,2007) are collected as means to understand and archive the distinct features and the social and personal relevance of tattooing for the people. Field work in a study of a human practice like tattooing becomes crucial in order to grasp the complexity of the participants as

'real people embedded in a real world' (Geertz, 1993). Even though the requirements of the degree under which the study is pursued ordained limiting the research to a rigorous and in-depth secondary study of the subject, but it was believed that the analysis could benefit from brief observations of some of the tattoo studios in Delhi. Interviews with a few tattoo artists, tattooees and tattoo enthusiasts had helped gain knowledge of the crucial elements involved in the practice of tattooing and the informant's narratives were significant in the theoretical attempt to understand and acknowledge the depths of experiences of the different groups.

Tattooing in India

References to the prevalence of tattooing in India are available in the historical and anthropological accounts of different tribal communities. In my review of the available literature on the practice of tattooing it appeared that tattooing has been discussed as a part of folk and tribal art. In the northern and north-western regions, the tradition of tattooing has been prevalent among the Bhils and Santhals in central India, the Kanbis and Warlis in the Gujarat region, and among the Banjaras of Rajasthan.

The young and old generations of Kanbi and Warli women practice tattooing on the forehead and cheeks (Joshi, 2006). The characteristic symbol that is tattooed is of a tree and its leaves on the forehead. Tattoos are used both as a mark of beautification as well as a totem. Many women bear tattoo marks of the *peepal* tree or acacia tree, which is of religious significance in Hinduism. Men of these communities get tattooed the figure of the Hindu gods Hanuman, Krishna, the motif of 'Om', etc. and their own names.

The Rabaris, a wandering tribe of the Kutch, use tattooing as a practice of beautification of women (Deogaonkar & Deogaonkar). The women of this community wear small motifs on the throat, chin, and entire arms and on their hands.

Amongst the Santhals, tattooing is limited to women. Santhal women wear several small tattoo motifs on their wrists, near the end of their forearm and on the chest (Mukherjee, year unspecified). The characteristic design is of a variety of birds and floral patterns. The sun appears as a popular sign and it is considered to be a representation of the Santhal Supreme Deity, 'Sin Bonga' (Sun God). Tattooing in the Santhal community marks an important rite of passage for girls between the age of 10-11 before their marriage. Cases of post-marriage tattooing have also been noticed. A non-tattooed woman is considered unsuitable for marriage. The tattoo serves as an important totem of the Santhal community and because of its magico-religious significance for the community, tattooing amongst the Santhals is embrocatd into the social and religious order. Their tattoo marks are considered to serve as testaments before 'Bhogban' (God) of their existence in the world and after their death to help extricate them out of the purgatory.

The four prominent tribes namely the Gonds, Pardhans, Kolam, Korku and the nomadic Banjara tribe are the communities in Maharashtra that have been practicing tattooing (Deogaonkar & Deogaonkar). Moving southwards, the Malagasy-Nias-Dravidians of the Malabar Coast have been documented to be using 'medicinal tattoos' as cures for physical ailments (Thurston, 2004). The affected area of the body is believed to be cured by inscribing of a tattoo over it. Medicinal tattoos have been documented to be used in other communities in the world for treatment of

joint-related conditions such as rheumatism (Schiffmacher, 2001).

In the north-east regions, the Apatanis, Wanchos, the Noctes and the Mijis of Arunachal Pradesh (Grewal, 1997) and the Zommi-Chinn tribes and the Meithi clans of the Senapati hills have had an age-old tradition of tattooing.

Each of the seven Meithi clans has traditionally had their own specific tattoo symbol as the community's mark of identity. In the course of my interviews with a tattoo artist, it came about that tattooing was adopted in the 1960s by the members of the Naxalite groups in the region of Manipur who used stars as tattoo marks for their group's identity. Such politicization of tattooing is of relevance in understanding emergence of a group around a symbol represented through a tattoo on the member's bodies. Moreover, since the 1960-80s, tattooing appears to have been associated with the influence of rock and grunge music, and increasing availability of psychotropic substances in the region. Like the West, here too tattooing had come to be considered as a deviant practice adopted by social outcasts, substance abusers, insurgent groups- all of which are associated with real and imagined dangers in the social life of the community.

Among the Apatani women of Arunachal Pradesh, while the modification of the nose using stumps to fill the nostrils has been a more predominant practice of body modification, there are traces of the use of tattooing as well and it occurs as a supplement to nose surgeries. Women carry six small blue lines as tattoo marks on the chin and a broad blue vertical line that begins from the forehead and runs down the nose, splitting the two flattened nostrils and terminating at the cleft between the nose and the upper lip (Furer-Heimendorf, 1982). The tribe used to tattoo

its womenfolk to make them unattractive to rival tribes in neighbouring districts, who might otherwise abduct their prettiest women. A tattoo was a way to protect the identity of various tribes, revealing a rich and eerie intersection of primitive art and violence. The tattoos of the Apatanis were enforced on the young girls of the community.

"Apatani women were often abducted by the neighbouring Nishi tribesmen for their beauty, so to make themselves look unattractive, the community resorted to tattooing their faces and making them wear huge circular nose plugs," (anthropologist S K Baruah as quoted in Times of India, Jan 14, 2011.) However, not many women born in the last three decades have chosen to get their faces inked - the practice was banned by the government in the '70s (TOI, Jan 14, 2011). Elderly Apatani women can still be seen with tattoos.

The tattoos of the Apatani women presents a curious case of the changes in the significance of a practice and its products. While the older generation of Apatani women experience their tattoos as symbols of social skirmishes and shame, the same tattoo is signified with values of cultural pride and honour for the present generation of Apatani women who want to acquire the tattoos of the elder women since for them it constitutes a nostalgic artefact, a symbol of their tribe's heritage.

The history of the tattoos of the Apatani presents a conundrum for a sociological analysis. The same tattoo and the practice of tattooing has witnessed shifts in the meaning of experience of pain involved in tattooing, since for the earlier generation, tattooing appeared to have signified shame and chastity, while for the current generation, undergoing the experience of pain in

tattooing becomes a means to assert their sense of pride in their culture, individuality and empowerment. Although it may be said that 'too much' is being read into the practice, it is believed that a political anthropology of the body needs to move from understanding the people's experience of a body practice like tattooing as they are presented, to scrutinizing the specific behaviours or actions undertaken (Turner, V., 1967) which eventually frame that experience both for the individual and the group involved (Scott, 1994).

The Apatanis used thorns to cut the skin and soot mixed in animal fat for the dark blue colour. The wounds were allowed to get infected so that the tattoos became larger and clearer. Facial tattooing was prevalent among the Noctes and Wanchos of Arunachal as well.

The married women of the Singpho tribe, found both in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, were tattooed on both legs from the ankle to the knee, while the men tattooed their limbs. Unmarried Singpho girls were barred from wearing a tattoo.

Among the group that constitutes what has come to be called the Nagas tribes, tattooing is linked to the identity and honour of the community (Rubin, 1988). Tattooing served as a corollary to the practice of head-hunting amongst the warrior clans. The Konyaks of Nagaland used facial tattoos to commemorate their head-hunting expeditions. However, the Anghami Nagas did not tattoo and amongst them, head-hunting was commemorated by wearing cowries on the kilt. Both women and men were tattooed; the men on their chests, where each warrior kept a record of heads in the shape of the figure of a man roughly tattooed for each head taken, and the women on their legs and breasts. Tattoos amongst the Nagas were 'badges' of their chivalry and manhood.

Presenting the head to the chief or the king of the tribe, the male member got tattooed with the 'ak' or mark of the tribe.

Most of the Naga tribes have been reported to have their faces tattooed with distinctive marks with which one can identify what region of the hills they belong (diary account of Capt. Vetch, 1842 in Elwin, 1969).

However rich and extensive the traditional art of tattooing may seem, there have been some perplexing challenges to the existence of tattooing:

One of the prominent one being the bans sanctioned by the government on some of the social practices which were supplemented with tattooing as symbolic memorials of the community. For instance, with the government prohibitions on the continuation of the practice of head-hunting, one wonders what transformations have transpired in the Naga tattoos. I'm unaware of any recent works that may have documented this. But what emerges as striking in gathering literary documents of the tattoo marks of different communities is how, in the writings, the practice is referred as 'tattooing', and tattoos are seen as 'marks'. This appears in contrast to the use of the concept of 'art', and 'body modification' in the present to define tattooing. Perhaps in the shift in the play of language, one can explore the points of relevance of tattooing for the contemporary lives.

With the modernisation and urbanisation of northeast India over the decades, the tattoo culture has shifted significantly. The traditional patterns may have been replaced by modern motifs, but the meaning behind the pain-inducing practice hasn't changed much - just like today's city bred

youth, Nagas regarded tattoos as a sign of strength, courage, and virility because of the pain associated with it.

Besides its prevalence as a cultural practice, tattooing was also used as a method of torture by the state. In fact the word used for tattooing, 'godna' (to prick, puncture, dot or mark) came to mean the marking of prisoners during the British Raj (Anderson, 2000). The Prisoners' foreheads were tattooed as a method of identification. Criminals were branded or tattooed, often with the word "thug" on their forehead. The tattoo marks led to much social stigma of the convicts on parole, as they were easily identifiable by their tattoo marks in the public.

From 'Melas' to Malls: the Social Convention of Tattooing and Body Aesthetics

A peculiar feature of the state of tattoo art in India is its prevalence within several tribes along with its rejection by a considerable proportion of the urban elite classes. Moreover, the history of tattooing itself makes it a significant practice for depth explorations about embodiment as an experience of the individual.

I grew up hearing from others about seasonal 'melas' (fairs, regional carnivals) where people would go to get tattoos from tattoo craftsmen. In north Indian villages and semi-urban towns, there were vagabond women (often identified as members of the 'Banjara' community) who moved between places and crafted tattoos with pointed metal shards and wooden sticks having sharp edges coated with black and green ink made from gum, soot etc. The images comprised of small floral motifs, simple geometric figures, and dots. (To locate such practitioners in current times seems to be a task in itself, but a task that may nonetheless be significant to pursue for

future studies in order to understand a way of life that perhaps does not figure in urban consciousness). Young women and children were tattooed more frequently. Typographic tattoos bearing god's names, their father, spouse or their caste's name were inscribed on their skin by others to serve as marks of their group identity. This category of tattoos were not very different from branding which was practiced in slave traditions (see for instance, Gilbert, 2000; DeMello, 2007) with the exception of perhaps the individual's own feelings of belonging to the person or the group to whom one was affiliated.

When we move from the village communities to a metropolis like Delhi, in the historical time period of the present, we find tattooing has moved from the state of a temporary, mobile craft in melas to a practice with a permanent presence in the middle of the most populated area- the market. Tattooing in the city is associated with a body modification practice that is dispersing as a fashion amongst the youth; it is linked with global import of practices of body aesthetics. Today, tattooists using old methods can be located on the corners of the street outside Hanuman temple and the Palika subway in Delhi. However, the tattoo studio is fast emerging to uphold a monopoly over providing access to artistic tattoos with minimum hazard. The parallel presence of both a tattooist on the street and a tattooist in a studio is a reflection of the nascence of tattooing as a market phenomenon in India. Moreover, it could also lead one into thinking about the way social acceptance and survival of tattoo art may be linked to a shift towards its presence as a lucrative artistic product in the market economy.

In his ethnography, Clinton Sanders (2008) reflects that the movement of tattooing into the realm of popular culture displays certain features of the contemporary culture industry and reveals how

a fashions and fads are produced and marketed. “Culture producers, beset by the problem of “commercial uncertainty” (that is, what popular cultural products will or will not be successful [see Sanders, 1990]), are constantly on the lookout for new materials” (Sanders, 2008: viii-ix).

Compared to the earlier limited designs, there is now a prolific increase and variety in the designs- tribal motifs, animal figures, pin-up images, typographic tattoos that make a public statement about one’s love affiliations, political and religious ideologies, elaborate images covering the entire bodice in vibrant colours that are less prone to fading, and so on. Unlike tattooing practiced by ‘tattooists’, the place accorded to tattoo ‘art’ is not a corner of street, or a shade of a tree; as ‘artists’, they seek a fixed location in malls and in marketplaces and it is referred as tattoo studio or a parlour. The shift from the street or ‘melas’ to a tattoo parlour in addition to the vibrancy of sophisticated colour images produced by mechanized tattoo needles seem to have contributed to the presence of tattooing as a popular art.

On further reflection, it is sensed that in this historicity of the technology of tattoo art lays also the shifts in the discourses of a tattooed body. While earlier, tattoos were inscribed on a person’s (women and children) body without their consent, in the contemporary cities, tattoo art is a person’s choice which is exercised within the framework of plausible rejection experienced for the tattooed body by the family and society.

This documentation of a history of tattooing is however incomplete and it does not account for the prevalence and significance of tattooing in all the communities of. However, the attempt of presenting this rudimentary history of tattoo art was to invite you all to get a sense of the

presence of the practice of tattooing in human lives and allow it to sink-in enough to question how the present gets constructed on the basis of a past which has become so distant and fleeting in the experience of the contemporary generation. The accounts of British soldiers and surveyors which were employed to explore the prevalence of tattooing in the north-east of India open another issue of pertinence. In the language used by the colonial writers, the first ethnographers in modern India, tattooing is represented as “disfiguration of the body”, “a horrible custom”, and as “hideous” (Dalton, 1872, in Elwin, 1969). Whether these reflect merely one individual’s account is contestable but what can be received from an analysis of a British subject’s negative views regarding tattooing is how the discourse of tattooing being a ‘gruesome’, ‘primitive’ practice may perhaps be inscribed into the present notions about body projects such as tattooing and body piercing.

The notions of ‘dirt’, ‘hygiene’, and dress associated with the body have been a subject of many ethnographies and autobiographical literature which explore how the various forms of transgression associated with the body's surface are drawn up into relations of power and inequality (Morrison, Kincaid; Masquelier, 2005). Therefore, the labelling of body practices of the Third world like tattooing as ‘primitive’ by traditional Anthropology has to be read within the framework of the colonial notions that have shaped body politics and identity in the post-colonial world. They demonstrate imaginatively the ways in which the body surfaces are used in the construction and de-construction of morality in the discourse of appropriate body display in contemporary societies.

As an endnote, it is presented that the attempt of this paper was not only to do a descriptive study of the historicity of tattoo art around the world. Rather, this historical tracing of the practice and the range of meanings ascribed to it by the different communities was used as a means to open the analytic potency of tattoo art for rethinking issues of art, power, dichotomies of the individual and the social within the context of the contemporary global world. As a methodological project, the endeavor was to substantiate how the layers of meanings projected onto the notions of body and aesthetics-- which may be of concern to contemporary cultural anthropology-- can benefit from a study in the cultural history of practices such as tattooing and tattoo art. The effort was to lay out how the prevalence of social norms and cultural practices interpret, constitute and produce the bodies of the individual members and bring them into the ambit of social living.