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INKED NARRATIVES AND SYMBOLIC EXPRESSIONS IN INDIGENOUS TATTOO PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical and contemporary significance of tribal tattooing as a global cultural practice, employing a qualitative, descriptive research methodology grounded in scholarly literature and historical records. The research explores the origin of tribal tattoos, tracing their evolution through archaeological and anthropological evidence, and analyzes their spiritual, social, and cultural functions across diverse indigenous societies. The paper is organized into key sections that first outline the traditional meanings and symbolic functions of tribal tattoos, followed by examination of contemporary adaptations and transformations in tattooing practices. The analysis is framed using multiple theoretical perspectives, including symbolic interactionism, structuration theory, optimal distinctiveness theory, and social identity theory. These frameworks contextualize tribal tattoos as tools of communication, identity formation, health practices, expression of taboos, gender dynamics, and mechanisms of social cohesion. Additionally, the study offers a comprehensive overview of various tattooing techniques and methods employed across different indigenous cultures, highlighting both commonalities and distinctions. The culminating section critically addresses the decline and marginalization of tribal tattoo traditions situating these changes within the broader socio-cultural and global dynamics. The findings emphasize the importance of preserving indigenous tattoo practices as vital cultural heritage amidst increasing global homogenization and cultural commodification.

Keywords: Indigenous Tattoo, Identity Formation, Symbolic Interactionism, Tattooing Techniques, Globalization, Heritage Preservation

1. INTRODUCTION

Tattooing, as an ancient and culturally significant practice, has been an integral component of indigenous societies, serving as a potent medium for conveying social, spiritual, and cultural narratives Ghosh (2020). In India, the tradition of tribal tattooing holds particular significance, especially among indigenous communities where tattoos have historically functioned as markers of identity, social status, and spiritual beliefs. From the upper palaeolithic period to contemporary times, tattooing has evolved from being a sacred and ritualistic practice to a commercialised and often mis-appropriated art form Caplan (2000), DeMello (2000). This paper seeks to critically examine the historical evolution and contemporary significance of tribal tattooing in India, exploring its multifaceted roles and the socio-cultural dynamics contributing to its decline.

The research problem at the core of this study is the erosion and marginalisation of traditional tribal tattooing practices in India, intensified by processes of globalisation, modernisation, and cultural commodification. The intrusion of colonial powers, coupled with recent advent of machine-based tattooing has not only diluted the cultural essence of tribal tattoos but has also threatened the survival of traditional tattooing techniques Gell (1993). Indigenous tattoo artists, once revered as cultural custodians, are now progressively been marginalized, and their practice being over-shadowed by commercially driven, de-contextualised representations of tribal tattoos Kosut (2014), Krutak (2012). The study, therefore, seeks to interrogate the socio-cultural factors that are contributing to decline of tribal tattooing in India within the broader processes of cultural homogenisation, and global commodification of indigenous art forms.

This study highlights the importance of preserving tribal tattooing traditions, which have historically conveyed cultural narratives, spiritual protection, and social roles. The decline of these practices threatens the loss of indigenous motifs and cultural heritage, underscoring the need for its re-vitalization. Employing a multi-theoretical framework, this study utilises symbolic interactionism, structuration theory, optimal distinctiveness theory, and social identity theory to analyse the socio-cultural and communicative functions of tribal tattoos in India. Additionally, the study also addresses the intersection of tattooing with health, spirituality, and gender, drawing attention to the medicinal and protective dimensions of tribal tattoos. Moreover, the paper critically examines the impact of technological shifts on traditional tattooing methods in India, facilitating the commodification of tribal motifs, leading to cultural appropriation and the dilution of indigenous art forms.

In response to these dynamics, the paper seeks to achieve the following objectives: (a) trace the historical origin and evolution of tribal tattooing in India; (b) document the diverse techniques and methods employed in tribal tattoo making; (c) analyze the symbolic functions and socio-cultural meanings of tattoos across different indigenous societies; (d) investigate the factors contributing to decline of traditional tattooing practices; and (e) propose potential strategies for preservation and re-vitalisation of tribal tattooing as a living cultural heritage. By engaging with these objectives, the paper intends not only to contribute to the broader discourse on cultural preservation and heritage management but also offer critical insights into the intersections of identity, gender, and social cohesion as expressed through tribal tattoos.

2. ADOPTED METHODOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study employed a qualitative descriptive research approach to provide a comprehensive and systematic examination of tribal tattooing practices, emphasizing cultural evolution, symbolic meanings, and contemporary shifts. Data collection involved an extensive review of academic literature, including research articles, historical records, scholarly publications, and relevant books. Data sources were meticulously selected to align with the intended research objectives. Historical records were analyzed to trace the origins and cultural trajectory of tattooing practices, while scholarly articles and empirical studies offered theoretical perspectives and evidence on the social and cultural implications of tattoos. Relatively recent publications provided insights into the evolving nature of indigenous tattooing in response to modern influences.

Thematic analysis was employed to systematically code the collected data, identifying themes related to evolution of tattoo art, symbolic representations, identity formation, cultural continuity, and influence of underlying modern forces. The study employed four theoretical frameworks: symbolic interactionism, structuration theory, optimal distinctiveness theory, and social identity theory - to examine the symbolic, social, and identity-related roles of tattoos among indigenous communities. Symbolic interactionism, rooted in the work of George Herbert Mead, provided lens to interpret tattoos as symbolic acts that convey identity, social status, and cultural continuity. Tattoos, in this context, function as visual markers of personal and communal narratives, serving as mediums of cultural transmission. Structuration theory, proposed by Anthony Giddens (1984), emphasized the interplay between individual agency and cultural structures, illustrating how tattooing practices embody both cultural heritage and personal identity. This duality exemplifies how tradition and modernity co-exist, shape and re-shape tattooing practices.

Optimal distinctiveness theory, developed by Brewer, addressed the balance between individuality and group affiliation, portraying tattoos as means of achieving equilibrium between personal uniqueness and cultural conformity, particularly in response to modern influences. Alongside these, the social identity theory, formulated by Tajfel (1979) assisted in comprehending tattoos as markers of group identity, reinforcing in-group cohesion while differentiating from out-groups. The incorporation of these theoretical frameworks provided a multifaceted lens for analyzing tribal tattoos,

encompassing their symbolic, social, and identity-related aspects. Together, these frameworks enabled a deeper exploration of how tattoos function as instruments of cultural preservation, markers of identity negotiation, and expressions of social belonging within indigenous communities.

3. THE TRADITION OF TATTOOING

Tattooing, the practice of permanently inscribing designs and patterns onto the human body, stands as one of the most ancient and culturally universal forms of body modification Deter-Wolf et al. (2016). Archaeological evidence traces its origin to the upper palaeolithic period, suggesting that early humans adorned their bodies contemporaneously with the creation of cave art Gogoi (2022). The discovery of mummified remains and preserved artefacts further indicates the widespread practice of tattooing during the neolithic era signifying a long-standing human engagement with bodily adornment as a mode of expression Gogoi (2022). The etymology of the term "tattoo" is commonly attributed to the Polynesian word ta ("to strike") and the Tahitian word tatau ("to mark"), encapsulating both the symbolic as well as physical dimensions of the practice Goswami, (2019). However, tattooing transcends mere linguistic origins, and emerges as a cultural practice that metaphorically functions as a 'second skin,' embedding belief systems, personal experiences, identities, and social affiliations within the human form Schildkrout (2004).

Across diverse civilisations, the human body has consistently served as a canvas for cultural expression Sawday (2013). Scholarly accounts suggest that rarely any societies have existed without some form of body modification, whether through painting, piercing, re-shaping, or tattooing Chakraborty (2013). Within indigenous societies globally, tattooing assumes the role of a visual lexicon, serving as a graphic art form that communicates social status, cultural affiliation, and personal narratives Yhome (2018), Sen et al. (2023). The patterns carved upon the skin often serve as symbolic markers of memory, identity, rites of passage, and spiritual beliefs, embodying profound socio-cultural and political meanings Sen et al. (2023), Singh and Mishra (2019). Thus, tattooing transcends mere aesthetics, functioning as a medium for expressing solidarity, community, and historical continuity. Ethnographic researches underscore the centrality of tattooing in shaping both individual and collective identities within traditional societies Gillreath-Brown et al. (2019). Several indigenous communities worldwide - including those in China, Borneo, Cambodia, Japan, Mentawai Islands, New Zealand, Australia, Philippines, and Taiwan - continue to uphold tattoo traditions that encapsulate spiritual, cultural, and social values Goswami (2019).

In India, the art of tattooing, locally known as Ulki or Godna, holds profound cultural significance, particularly within tribal communities, where it is regarded as an essential life-cycle ritual Dey et al. (2016). Tattoos function as enduring symbols of identity and spiritual significance, perceived as permanent adornments that transcend death, thereby serving as indelible markers of one's identity and spiritual essence Tamrakar and Banerjee (2019). Tattoo motifs often encapsulate intricate narratives that convey caste, regional affiliations, myths, taboos, and ancestral histories. These bodily inscriptions are frequently perceived as protective talismans, believed to shield individuals from malevolent forces and environmental hazards, particularly in subsistence-based tribal settings Anak et al. (2018).

Within tribal contexts, tattooing is deeply interwoven with ritual, mythology, folklore, and religious practices, functioning as a medium through which cultural values and spiritual beliefs are visually expressed Mohanta and Chadhar, (2002). The practice extends beyond mere ornamentation, encompassing medicinal and magico-religious connotations that align with traditional healing practices and spiritual protections Ghosh (2020). Tattoos further serve as emblems of beauty, courage, social rank, and animistic beliefs, with specific designs functioning as protective symbols for those navigating challenging terrains or engaging in life-cycle transitions Anak et al. (2018). Additionally, tattooing is imbued with spiritual permanence, symbolically accompanying individuals into the afterlife, thus reinforcing a sense of continuity between the living and the deceased Deb and Premi (2016).

Contrastingly, while tattooing has frequently served as a means of signifying achievements, spiritual status, and rites of passage, it has also been employed as a tool for subjugation, branding slaves, criminals, and social outcasts Dwivedi (2024). This dualistic function underscores the complex and multifaceted roles tattoos have assumed across different cultures and historical periods, oscillating between expressions of empowerment and instruments of oppression Singh and Mishra (2019). Thus, in nutshell, tattooing within tribal societies transcends mere bodily adornment - it constitutes a resilient and enduring form of cultural expression that encapsulates collective memory, belief systems, aesthetic sensibilities, and social affiliations. As a time-honoured tradition, tattooing emerges as a vital medium for articulating intricacy and depth of tribal identity, asserting its continued relevance across both historical and contemporary contexts.

4. HISTORICAL ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF TATTOOING

The practice of tattooing is an ancient and culturally significant form of body modification that has evolved independently in various regions around the world. Anthropological research suggests that tattooing did not originate from a singular point of diffusion; rather, it developed through parallel evolution across multiple societies Goswami, (2019). This notion is supported by diverse tattoo types and designs discovered in different cultural contexts. The global antiquity of tattooing is particularly evident through the discovery of preserved human remains bearing tattoo marks, indicating that tattooing is a longstanding and widespread cultural phenomenon Rush (2005).

4.1. GLOBAL ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF TATTOOING

Archaeological evidence provides compelling insights into the antiquity of tattooing. The earliest direct evidence of tattooing is derived from preserved human remains unearthed across diverse geographical locations, including the American Arctic, Greenland, Siberia, Western China, the Philippines, Africa, Europe, Mexico, and the Andes Deter-Wolf et al. (2016). These findings reveal that tattooing practices were widespread and culturally significant, functioning as markers of identity, ritualistic symbols, or therapeutic aids. One of the most significant archaeological discoveries in tattooing history is the naturally mummified body of Ötzi the Iceman, discovered in the Alps and dated to approximately 3250 BCE Nerlich et al. (2020). Ötzi's body bears 61 tattoos, primarily consisting of simple line groups ranging from 1 to 3 mm in thickness and 7 to 40 mm in length Deter-Wolf et al. (2016). The tattoos are concentrated in specific areas such as the lower legs, lower back, and wrist, with 12 distinct sets of lines located on the legs alone. Scholars propose that these markings may have served therapeutic functions, potentially representing a form of early acupuncture intended for pain relief or healing Krutak (2013). The strategic placement of these tattoos near joints and areas of physical strain further suggests their use as rudimentary medical treatments Islam et al. (2016).

Beyond Ötzi, other notable examples of ancient tattooing include the elaborately tattooed mummies of the Scythians, preserved in Siberian permafrost, and female mummies in ancient Egypt dating back to 2000 BCE, where tattoos were associated with fertility and protection DeMello (2000). Similarly, in the Polynesian Islands, tattooing evolved into a sophisticated art form symbolising rank, lineage, and spiritual power. The intricate geometric patterns of Polynesian tattoos conveyed the wearer's genealogy and social standing, reflecting the dual nature of tattooing as both an aesthetic and socio-cultural practice Krutak (2024). Contrastingly, in certain historical contexts, tattoos were utilised as punitive markers. In ancient Greece and Rome, tattoos served as a means of branding slaves and criminals, signifying their inferior social status and enforcing social exclusion. A similar practice emerged in ancient Japan and China, where tattoos were employed as punishments for criminals, marking them as social outcasts and reinforcing their marginalisation within society Yhome (2018). Thus, the global evolution of tattooing reveals its dualistic nature - as a symbol of power, identity, and healing in some cultures, and as a punitive and stigmatising marker in others.

4.2. ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF TATTOOING IN INDIA

The practice of tattooing in India has ancient roots, particularly among tribal communities where it remains a vital aspect of cultural and spiritual expression. Unlike in other regions where tattooing was often associated with punishment or decoration, in India, tattoos primarily served as markers of identity, rites of passage, and protective symbols against evil Yhome (2018). One of the earliest documented forms of tattooing in India is Godna, prevalent among tribal groups in states such as Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Madhya Pradesh. Godna tattoos are characterised by motifs drawn from nature, including plants, animals, and celestial bodies, symbolising the community's connection with their environment Mohanta and Chadhar (2002). These motifs were typically applied during critical life stages such as marriage, childbirth, or reaching adulthood, signifying transitions in social and spiritual status. Additionally, the tattoos functioned as protective symbols, believed to shield the wearer from malevolent forces and ensure safe passage into the afterlife Barron (2017).

Among the Naga tribes of Northeast India, tattoos evolved as significant cultural markers denoting acts of bravery and social identity Yhome (2018). For instance, the Konyak Nagas employed tattoos to commemorate acts of valour, such as head-hunting or tiger slaying, with specific patterns signifying personal achievements Krutak (2024). These tattoos became lifelong emblems of heroism and communal pride, serving as both social identifiers and visual narratives of

personal history. In contrast, among the Ao Nagas, tattoos worn by women symbolised beauty and good fortune. These tattoos are often intricately designed to attract positive energy and reflect social standing, illustrating how tattooing practices could hold gender-specific meanings Yhome (2018). In other regions of India, particularly in Central and Eastern regions, tattooing has been historically perceived as a form of protective magic. Tattoos were inscribed on vulnerable body parts such as hands, feet, and forehead to ward off evil spirits, symbolising spiritual protection Barron (2017). This tradition underscores the dual function of tattooing as both a physical adornment and a metaphysical safeguard, illustrating its role as a cultural and spiritual artefact. Moreover, the motifs in Indian tribal tattooing frequently reflect ecological themes, such as flora and fauna, reinforcing the community's intimate connection with nature Weder et al. (2023). These ecological motifs serve as visual representations of cultural beliefs and environmental affiliations, further emphasising the significance of tattooing as a cultural artefact that transcends mere decoration Mohanta and Chadhar (2002).

Thus, in essence, the historical evolution of tattooing highlights its deep-rooted presence within the cultural, social, and spiritual frameworks of societies across the world. From therapeutic applications to punitive branding and spiritual symbolism, tattooing has served diverse purposes, adapting to various contexts and time periods. Tattoos have functioned as markers of identity, social status, and protection, with valorous tattoos and protective magic motifs reflecting their manifold significance. The incorporation of nature-inspired motifs further illustrates the ecological connections embedded in tattoo practices, reinforcing their cultural and spiritual relevance. Thus, tattooing persists as a powerful medium of personal and communal expression, encapsulating narratives of bravery, spirituality, and cultural continuity, bridging the ancient with the contemporary.

5. INDIGENOUS TECHNIQUES AND METHODS EMPLOYED IN TATTOO MAKING

Tattooing practices across various indigenous cultures exhibit a rich diversity of techniques and methods, each deeply embedded in local customs, resources, and spiritual beliefs Sen et al. (2023). The processes of tattooing, including the selection of tools, preparation of pigments, and application techniques, are intricately linked to cultural traditions and social structures, rendering the act of tattooing a profound cultural and ritualistic practice (Sachdeva and Rani (2023).

In India, tribal communities such as the Bhunjia, Santhals, and Pochury Nagas have developed distinctive tattooing methods that serve as vital expressions of identity, spirituality, and aesthetics. Among the Bhunjia tribe, the practice of Godna is a sacred and gender-specific form of tattooing. This technique involves incising the skin and infusing the wounds with ink, ash, or other natural colouring agents to permanently alter the skin's pigment Deb and Premi (2016). Traditionally, the pigment is prepared from a mixture of soot and plant-based dyes. The Bhunjia method is characterised by the use of a bamboo-handled needle, which is inserted into the skin through repetitive puncturing. The tattooist stretches the skin to maintain tension, ensuring precision in creating intricate patterns. This method is exclusively performed on women and is limited to the winter months, when the risk of infection is perceived to be lower Deb and Premi (2016).

Santhal tattooing practices employ a cluster of fine needles to inject pigments into the skin, typically targeting areas such as the forearms, chest, and face. The ink is composed of carbon soot collected from the underside of cooking utensils, mixed with water or, in some cases, breast milk to create a viscous, black paste. Over time, the pigment often takes on a greenish hue, reflecting the organic composition of the ink. The technique involves a linear puncturing process, wherein the needles are dipped in ink and rhythmically pressed into the skin to form elaborate, culturally significant motifs Ghosh (2020).

Contrastingly, the Pochury Nagas follow a highly ritualistic approach to tattooing, employing hand-made tools and natural pigments. The tattooing process begins with an elder woman sketching the desired pattern using a piece of wood. A specialized tool known as yotsuluzhu, consisting of a wooden adze-like structure tipped with thorns, is used to puncture the skin. This method, termed "hand tapping" involves striking the instrument with a wooden stick, driving the thorns into the skin to deposit ink beneath the epidermis Yhome (2018). Bleeding is managed using a medicinal fluid extracted from the leaves of the winter bean plant (Dolichos lablab), which is also a key ingredient in the pigment preparation. The pigment is derived from the soot collected through controlled burning of resin-rich pine trees. The soot is scraped from the interior of an earthen jar and mixed with winter bean fluid to form a viscous, black ink. This ink is

carefully applied to the punctured skin, embedding the design permanently while also serving as a healing agent Yhome (2018).

Outside India, similar hand-tapping techniques persist in regions such as the South Pacific, where the use of bone-tipped rakes dipped in ink is a prevalent method. In Samoa and Papua New Guinea, tattooists employ a rake-like tool that is struck with a wooden stick to puncture the skin, allowing ink to seep into the dermis Deb and Premi (2016). This technique, though labour-intensive, enables the creation of expansive and intricate patterns, often covering large areas of the body. Despite the cultural emphasis on traditional methods, hygiene remains a critical aspect of tattooing practices across cultures. Tattoo artists typically clean both the skin and tools with natural antiseptics or boiled water to mitigate infection risks Yoon et al. (2025). In some cases, modern sterilisation practices have been integrated, balancing traditional methods with contemporary health standards DeMello (2007).

The diversity of tattooing techniques across indigenous cultures illustrates the profound cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic significance of body art. Whether through hand-tapping, mechanised puncturing, or natural pigment preparation, each method serves as a tangible manifestation of cultural heritage, linking artistry with ritualistic symbolism. While modern influences have introduced mechanisation and hygiene protocols, traditional techniques persist as vital expressions of identity, reinforcing the enduring relevance of tattooing as a deeply embedded cultural practice.

6. CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUNCTIONS OF TATTOOING

6.1. TATTOO AND IDENTITY

Tattooing, across time and geography, serves not only as a form of body modification but also as a powerful marker of identity Schildkrout (2004). Among various indigenous communities, tattoos function as expressions of individual and collective affiliations, social roles, spiritual beliefs, and rites of passage DeMello (2000). In India, tribal tattoos act as distinct symbols of identification that differentiate one group from another. For instance, Oraon women from Surguja and Raigarh districts are identified by three tattooed lines on their foreheads Singh and Mishra (2019). Similarly, the Baiga community uses tattoos to convey a range of meanings, from indicators of social class and rank to expressions of love, bravery, and spiritual beliefs Goswami (2019). These designs also function as protective charms or punishment marks, reflecting the deeply embedded symbolic system within which they operate Sanders and Vail (2008).

The Apatani of Arunachal Pradesh mark their bodies to commemorate successful raids, with each tattoo representing acts of valour Gogoi (2022). Facial tattoos, known as tipe, along with nose plugs (yapin), signify affiliation to the tribe and mark transitions in life Sen et al. (2023). The number and placement of tattoos convey a warrior's achievements, such as the number of enemies defeated Gogoi (2022). Over time, tipe has become inseparable from Apatani identity, serving as a visual language of lineage, maturity, and social belonging. An Apatani without tipe is not fully recognized as part of the community Sen et al. (2023). Other communities in India, like the Wancho and Konyak tribes, also integrate tattooing into their traditions Krutak (2019), Gogoi (2022). Tattoos are systematically placed on various parts of the body, each bearing a specific name, such as thun hu for the face, kha hu for the chest, and dino hu for the neck. Clan-specific tattoo patterns function as internal identifiers within these societies, creating a visible structure of social stratification and inter-clan recognition Gogoi (2022).

Beyond India, tattoos play an equally significant role in identity formation. Among the ancient Egyptians and Nubians, body adornment was often elaborate and reserved for aristocracy, functioning as part of broader aesthetic and social practice Shuaib (2020). In African societies, where climatic conditions allow minimal clothing, body design, including tattooing, serve as primary means of artistic and social expression. For instance, the Turkanas of Kenya and the Baule of Ivory Coast use permanent body designs for purely cosmetic purposes, while the Yoruba, Gobirs, and Kanuris of Nigeria practice facial tattooing and scarring as symbols of ethnic identity, beauty and status. These facial markings, drawn from natural materials, are often named and categorized based on their patterns and placements, functioning as visible markers of social identity and cultural affiliation Shuaib (2020).

Tattooing functions as more than mere decoration; it is intricately woven into the social fabric and often rooted in myths and oral traditions Ghosh (2020). Among the Kalingas of the Philippines, tattoos accompany significant life stages or mark transformative moments Ragragio and Paluga (2023). These marks chronicle personal histories while serving as repositories of collective memory and cultural ethos Sen et al. (2023). Tattoos can be both celebratory and stigmatic,

depending on cultural context Sanders and Vail (2008). They may honour an individual or designate them with shame, reflecting the duality and complexity of tattooed identities Hewitt (1997).

The act of tattooing also represents a deliberate engagement with the body - a ritualistic defiance of the mundane and symbolic gateway into alternate modes of existence. Tattoos thus also acts as a medium through which individuals explore continuous self-formation, transcending traditional social roles to construct new identities Chakraborty (2013). In essence, tattoos operate as multi-layered markers of identity, anchored in heritage, community, belief, and experience. Whether asserting belonging, narrating personal and collective histories, or symbolizing transformation, the tattooed body emerges as a living text, articulating the interwoven narratives of both the individual and the collective.

6.2. TATTOOS IN SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION

Communication extends beyond the confines of spoken and written language, permeating the domain of symbols, signs, and embodied expressions Bonvillain (2019). Within indigenous societies, tattooing is a potent medium of communication, conveying intricate narratives about identity, belief, memory, and social order Singh and Mishra (2019). Unlike conventional verbal communication, tattooing operates as a non-verbal and symbolic language, transmitting complex cultural meanings that transcend words Kosut (2000).

For example, among the Baiga community of central India, tattoos serve as a crucial component of their communicative repertoire Bandhu et al. (2024). Tattooing within Baiga society is more than mere ornamentation; it functions as a visual language that signifies community affiliation, cultural continuity, and inter-generational knowledge transmission. Despite the encroachment of digital modes of communication, Baiga tattoos persist as a tangible marker of identity and heritage, reinforcing communal ties and re-affirming cultural values Singh and Mishra (2019). The tattoos thus act as cultural signifiers, visible modes of recognition that bind individuals to the collective social fabric Bandhu et al. (2024). Likewise, in southern India, the Korathi community practices pachakutharathu, a form of tattooing with profound spiritual undertones. Rooted in the belief in 'life after death', these tattoos symbolically link the living with their deceased ancestors, facilitating a metaphysical dialogue across realms Gogoi (2022). Tattoo inscriptions on the body become conduits through which spiritual messages are communicated, embedding sacred connections into the skin. This form of body marking thereby functions as a medium of continuity, preserving cultural and spiritual legacies beyond the temporal boundaries of life Krutak (2015), Ghosh (2020).

The communicative power of tattoos further extends to matters of protection and sexuality. Among the Dhanuk women of Bihar, tattoos are strategically inscribed as symbolic defence against sexual violence, operating as markers of resilience and resistance. Similarly, the Munda tribe of Jharkhand employs tattoos to chronicle significant life events, transforming the body into a living archive of personal and communal history Gogoi (2022). In Western India, Rabri women tattoo specific parts of their bodies - such as the neck, breasts, and arms - to invoke magical protection, transforming the skin into a canvas for spiritual inscriptions. These tattoos function as visual enactments of faith, inscribing metaphysical beliefs directly onto the body Gogoi (2022). Thus, tattoos can be conceptualized as a form of visual language, encoding layered meanings that articulate social roles, spiritual connections, historical consciousness, and communal boundaries Sen et al. (2023). This visual lexicon enables individuals to participate in a shared cultural narrative while simultaneously asserting personal identity Kosut (2020). In essence, tattooing, as a form of symbolic communication, transcends mere aesthetic appeal, operating as a medium through which cultural memory, spiritual beliefs, and social identities are inscribed, preserved, and transmitted.

6.3. TATTOOING AND HEALTH

Among various indigenous communities, tattooing transcends mere aesthetic or symbolic representation, functioning as an integral component of health practices grounded in traditional knowledge systems Krutak (2025). The practice is imbued with medicinal and protective properties, wherein natural inks derived from locally sourced elements are believed to hold curative powers, thus reinforcing the holistic conception of health prevalent in these societies Goswami, (2019), Ekaterina (2023).

The Baiga community exemplifies the confluence of tattooing and health through its distinctive use of natural inks composed of plant-based and mineral substances Goswami, (2019). These inks, reputed for their antiseptic properties, are applied during tattooing with the intention of preventing infections and promoting healing. In Baiga culture, tattoos are perceived as fortifying the body against climatic variations and digestive disorders Singh and Mishra (2019). Baiga

women, in particular, undergo tattooing not merely as a rite of passage but as a preparatory measure for childbirth. The application of specific motifs is thought to alleviate labour pain, serving as both a spiritual and physical defence mechanism Singh and Mishra (2019). Furthermore, tattoos are believed to mitigate blood-related disorders and arthritis, embodying a holistic approach that intertwines physical health with spiritual protection. The act of tattooing has thus, overtime, emerged as a multi-dimensional practice, blending health intervention with ritualistic significance Bandhu et al. (2024).

In Maharashtra, the practice of Gondan among tribal communities further underscores the therapeutic role of tattooing. Here, tattoos are strategically placed on specific body parts with the belief that they can cure or alleviate particular ailments Bhalerao et al. (2022). The Gonds employ symbolic tattoo imagery that holds profound medicinal significance. One prominent instance involves the depiction of a cobra below a woman's mouth, a tattoo believed to provide protection against the ingestion of poisonous substances Patel and Asawa (2015). The cobra's image, perceived as a guardian symbol, is strategically positioned to act as a preventive measure against toxins. Similarly, the tattoo of Chandi Mata (community goddess), composed of dots and lines, is applied on forehead of women as a protective amulet. This design is specifically linked to the symbolic parting of hair, a region considered vital to life and well-being of their husbands, thus merging personal health with familial and spiritual concerns Mohanta (2013), Mohanta and Chadhar (2002).

Thus, tattooing also embodies a comprehensive health paradigm that integrates physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. The therapeutic aspects of tattooing are not limited to mere physical intervention but extend to psychological and spiritual dimensions, reflecting a culturally embedded understanding of health as an interconnected state. Tattoos function as protective symbols, pain alleviators, and preventive measures against ailments, thereby illustrating the complex relationship between bodily inscriptions and holistic health practices. Overall, tattooing within these cultural frameworks signifies more than ornamental body art; it serves as a repository of indigenous healthcare knowledge, inscribing wellness narratives onto the body, alongside reinforcing communal beliefs about health, protection, and spiritual fortification.

6.4. TATTOOS AND TABOO

The practice of tattooing, while widely recognised as a medium of personal and cultural expression, is often deeply intertwined with taboos that extend beyond mere prohibition to encompass spiritual and ritualistic dimensions Pritchard (2000). In many indigenous societies, tattoos are not mere aesthetic embellishments; they serve as outlets of cultural narratives, spiritual protection, and social identity Hambly (2009). However, the creation and application of tattoos are frequently governed by a complex set of taboos that outlines who can participate in the process, under what conditions, and with what materials. These taboos function as mechanisms for safeguarding the sanctity of the ritual, the purity of the pigment, and the spiritual well-being of the individual Yhome (2018).

For instance, among the Hutsii people, the preparation of tattoo pigments is a ritualistic act shrouded in secrecy. The individual designated to prepare the pigment is believed to hold significant spiritual authority, as the act of preparation itself is considered susceptible to external influences Yhome (2018). The belief that the presence of an individual carrying negative energy can contaminate the pigment exemplifies a worldview in which material and spiritual realms are inextricably linked Galliot (2015). Here, the pigment is not merely a substance but a vessel through which spiritual power is transmitted, necessitating strict adherence to ritual protocols to prevent contamination. Furthermore, the tattooing process is conducted with heightened vigilance, particularly concerning the spiritual state of both the tattooist and the recipient. The act of tattooing is conceptualised as a spiritual passage, rendering the body susceptible to external energies Yhome (2018). It is believed that individuals bearing 'negative vibes' can impede the healing process, prolonging recovery and intensifying pain. Such beliefs underscore the cultural sensitivity around tattooing as a transformative act that transcends mere bodily alteration, positioning the body as a liminal space where spiritual, physical, and emotional realms converge Krutak (2015).

Thus, the concept of taboo in the context of tattooing is, therefore, less about the outright prohibition of the involved practice and more about maintaining the sanctity of the ritual. It functions as a protective measure designed to preserve the spiritual integrity of the act, the material purity of the pigment, and the well-being of the individual undergoing the process Sudbury (2015). In this sense, the marked body becomes a site of vulnerability and transformation, a canvas through which cultural identity is asserted and spiritual protection is invoked. Thus, tattoos emerge not merely as

corporeal inscriptions but as enduring markers of a community's spiritual ethos and cultural continuity, deeply embedded in the interaction between the sacred and the profane.

6.5. TATTOOING AND GENDER

Tattooing, while universally practiced, is also profoundly shaped by gender, reflecting broader cultural narratives about identity, beauty, and social roles Kuwuhara (2020). Among various indigenous communities, tattooing serves as a gendered practice, either in reinforcing or challenging the traditional gender roles.

For example, among the Baiga tribe of central India, tattooing is predominantly a female practice, signifying beauty, maturity, and cultural identity Goswami (2019). Men are traditionally prohibited from observing the tattooing process, underscoring its intimate and sacred nature Goswami (2019). Baiga women receive tattoos throughout their lives, with each design marking a distinct phase of womanhood - from puberty to marriage to motherhood Bandhu et al. (2024). These intricate tattoos, applied by female artists known as badnin, encompass the forehead, arms, legs, and torso, symbolising the completion of a Baiga woman's life cycle. For many Baiga women, the act of tattooing is a deeply personal and communal experience, reinforcing female solidarity and perpetuating the artistic knowledge passed down through generations. The badnin's role as the primary executor of tattoos not only highlights her artistic expertise but also her cultural authority within the Baiga community, where she functions as both a healer and a custodian of tradition Singh and Mishra (2019).

In the Apatani community of Arunachal Pradesh, facial tattoos, known as tippei, serve as powerful markers of ethnic and gender identity Sachdeva and Rani (2023). The tattoo design for women comprises a vertical line running from the forehead to the tip of the nose, accompanied by five parallel lines on the chin Gogoi (2022), Sen et al. (2023). In contrast, men bear simpler T-shaped marks on their chins, indicating the gender-specific nature of tattooing practices within the Apatani. Historically, tippei was applied by female relatives, reinforcing the communal aspect of tattooing and the shared experience of pain and endurance, which symbolised a woman's readiness for marriage and her commitment to her cultural heritage Bharadwaj and Boruah (2020). Despite contemporary decline in tattooing among the Apatani, the residual cultural significance of these tattoos remains embedded in collective memory and artistic expressions of the community Gogoi (2022).

Tattooing among Naga tribes such as the Konyak, Ao, and Pochury reflects distinct gendered rituals, marking critical life events and affirming social roles Konyak and Zhimo (2022). For Pochury women, receiving tattoos before marriage is a mandatory rite of passage. Incomplete tattoos symbolize personal weakness and hinder marital prospects. In this context, tattoos not only serve as aesthetic adornments but also as visible indicators of a woman's physical and emotional endurance Yhome (2018). Similarly, for the Konyak tribe, tattoos function as both gender-specific and status-defining symbols. While men acquire tattoos to commemorate war-time achievements, women receive tattoos to celebrate puberty, marriage, and motherhood, reinforcing gender-specific markers of identity Longchar (2020). Tattoo artists, typically elderly women, hold high cultural status, often being rewarded with food and drink - as gesture that underscores their revered position within the community Yhome (2018).

In the Bhunjia tribe, women select floral motifs such as mandar or bodenda flower, symbolising feminine beauty and fertility Deb and Premi (2016). Unlike other tribes where tattooing is a collective ritual, Bhunjia women personalise their tattoos, choosing specific designs to reflect individual preferences. These tattoos, often adorning the forehead, hands, and legs, act as statements of personal identity, while simultaneously affirming cultural continuity Deb and Premi (2016). In contrast, Gond women imbue their tattoos with protective significance, embedding symbols such as triangles on the soles of their feet to safeguard against injuries, particularly when walking barefoot in forested terrains Mohanta and Chadhar (2002). Here, tattooing serves a dual function - as a cultural practice and as a form of embodied protection, merging gendered identity with spiritual beliefs.

In the Kayan and Kenyah tribes, tattooing is an exclusively female art form, with women receiving intricate designs that span the forearms, feet, calves, and thighs Rahim and Wan (2020). These tattoos, created over several years, are applied by expert female tattooists, whose skills command social respect and artistic recognition Anak et al. (2018). Men, on the other hand, are only permitted to receive tattoos if they have engaged in head-hunting, illustrating a stark gender dichotomy in tattooing customs Rahim and Wan (2020). In certain tribal communities in Maharashtra, women are required to tattoo their husbands' names on their foreheads post-marriage, effectively transforming their bodies into visible markers of marital status. This practice not only establishes the wife's marital identity but also perpetuates

gendered control over the female body, as the tattoo becomes a permanent symbol of ownership and familial allegiance Bandhu et al. (2024).

Thus, tattooing in indigenous communities functions as a significant cultural practice through which women express identity, social standing, and communal affiliation. Beyond mere decoration, tattoos encompass sacred symbols, protective motifs, and artistic expression, each bearing distinct gendered narratives. These culturally specific practices reveal that tattooing operates as a multi-faceted socio-cultural artefact, intertwining themes of femininity, strength, and collective identity, while simultaneously contending with the influences of modernisation and cultural transformation.

7. DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL TATTOOING PRACTICES

The practice of tattooing among indigenous communities, once a deeply symbolic and ritualistic tradition, has experienced a marked decline due to various socio-cultural disruptions, including cultural contact, missionary interventions, colonialism, and the pervasive influence of modernisation Deter-Wolf et al. (2016). Historically, tattoos functioned as a medium of cultural expression, embodying tribal identity, spiritual beliefs, and life-cycle rituals. However, as global exchanges intensified and external values infiltrated indigenous societies, the traditional meanings associated with tattooing practices began to erode Martí (2010).

The generational divide in attitudes towards tattooing is particularly evident in many tribal communities. Younger generations, especially those residing in remote regions, have progressively distanced themselves from traditional tattooing, perceiving the practice as outdated and irrelevant in contemporary times Anak et al. (2018). For instance, Anderson (2016)observes that young women now refrain from being tattooed, citing the physical pain and lack of cultural motivation that previously drove their elders to undergo the practice. The reluctance to engage in traditional tattooing is further worsened by the dwindling number of skilled tattoo artists. Custodians of traditional tattooing knowledge, many of whom have passed away without imparting their expertise, leave behind a cultural void which cannot be filled Anak et al. (2018).

Additionally, the emergence of machine-based tattooing has significantly altered the landscape of tattoo artistry. The proliferation of machines and simplified tattoo devices has diluted the authenticity of traditional methods, such as hand tapping or skin cutting, which are time-intensive and require considerable skill Anak et al. (2018). Modern tattooing techniques, characterised by speed and reduced physical discomfort, have displaced traditional practices. This shift has advanced the preference for abstract patterns, and individualised designs over collective community symbols that once carried profound cultural and spiritual significance Atkinson (2003). Consequently, the visual language of traditional tattooing is increasingly perceived as archaic, further marginalising its cultural relevance Adisa et al. (2024).

The stigmatization of traditional tattoos, reinforced by associating tattoos with criminality or deviance, has also contributed to their decline Yamada (2009). In many indigenous societies, individuals now refrain from traditional tattooing due to the 'social stare', a phenomenon wherein tattooed individuals face social censure or embarrassment Sen et al. (2023). This social pressure to conform to mainstream aesthetics has led to the gradual abandonment of tattoo customs, with many considering them regressive or inappropriate in contemporary settings. Moreover, the decline of traditional tattooing cannot be solely attributed to changing aesthetic preferences Martí (2020). The commodification of tattooing as a fashion trend has further distanced it from its original cultural context, positioning it as a commercial aesthetic rather than a sacred practice Mohanta and Chadhar (2002).

Thus, the decline of traditional tattooing practices among Indigenous communities encapsulates the broader socio-cultural shifts induced by modernisation, cultural assimilation, and globalisation. As ancestral tattooing customs erode, cultural identity is increasingly undermined, and once-sacred rituals are reduced to mere aesthetic expressions devoid of their original spiritual and communal significance. Nevertheless, the adaptation of tattoo art onto textiles and other mediums signifies a reconfiguration of traditional motifs, demonstrating that while the physical form may evolve, the cultural essence of tattooing persists. In this context, traditional tattooing emerges as both a resilient and endangered cultural practice, embodying continuity and transformation amidst the pressures of contemporary society.

8. THE WAY FORWARD FOR PRESERVATION AND RE-VITALIZATION OF INDIGENOUS TATTOOING

Indigenous tattooing practices face a precarious future as they navigate the pressures of modernisation, cultural homogenisation, and evolving societal norms. The erosion of these traditions is not merely a loss of body art but a profound disconnection from the cultural narratives, spiritual beliefs, and collective identities embedded in these markings. To safeguard these living traditions, a multi-faceted approach for its preservation and revitalisation is solicited.

Effective preservation begins with rigorous and culturally sensitive documentation efforts. Ethnographic research, oral histories, photographic archives, and digital repositories can serve as vital tools in capturing the indigenous tattooing practices. This documentation should extend beyond visual patterns to include rituals, meanings, techniques, and socio-cultural contexts associated with each tattoo. Importantly, such initiatives must adopt a collaborative framework, engaging indigenous artists, elders, and community members as co-partners rather than passive subjects. This participatory approach will ensure that knowledge remains embedded within the community and prevents misrepresentation of cultural heritage. Additionally, digital platforms and open-access archives can act as repositories for these collected materials, making them accessible to future generations while preserving them against potential loss.

Preservation efforts should not be confined to static replication of traditional designs. Instead, re-vitalisation must embrace adaptive creativity, allowing traditional tattoo motifs to evolve in response to contemporary contexts. This adaptive approach respects cultural authenticity while enabling indigenous tattoo artists to experiment with modern materials, techniques, and media. For instance, transforming traditional tattoo designs into textile patterns, jewellery, digital art, and murals can provide new avenues for artistic expression while preserving symbolic motifs. Educational workshops and exhibitions can further encourage such creative reinterpretations, positioning traditional tattoo art as a dynamic, living tradition rather than a relic of the past. Moreover, collaborations between indigenous tattoo artists and contemporary designers can facilitate cultural exchange, expanding the visibility of traditional tattoo motifs in global art and fashion spheres. Such initiatives can serve as both economic opportunities for indigenous artists and platforms for cultural education and advocacy.

The decline in traditional tattooing practices is partially attributed to concerns over hygiene and safety, especially in the context of modern healthcare standards. To address these apprehensions without compromising cultural integrity, it is imperative to integrate contemporary safety protocols into traditional tattooing practices. Workshops on sterilisation techniques, safe ink usage, and after-care can be conducted by healthcare professionals in collaboration with traditional tattoo practitioners. This integration shall not only safeguard the health of community members but will also enhance the social acceptability of traditional tattooing in contemporary settings.

Raising awareness about the cultural significance of indigenous tattooing is another crucial step towards combating stigmatization and promoting pride in traditional practices. Interactive workshops and sessions led by tattoo artists and cultural bearers can educate both indigenous and non-indigenous youth about the meanings and histories inscribed in tattoo patterns. Furthermore, partnerships with museums, universities, and cultural organisations can provide platforms for indigenous artists to share their craft, encouraging inter-cultural dialogue and deeper appreciation for these art forms. Institutional support is also essential in sustaining these preservation and revitalisation efforts. Government agencies and cultural heritage organisations must be provided funding for community-led documentation projects, artist training programs, and educational workshops. Moreover, legal frameworks should be developed to protect indigenous tattoo designs from cultural appropriation, ensuring that such symbols are not commodified without consent or proper recognition, enabling indigenous communities to retain control over their cultural assets.

In nutshell, indigenous tattooing practices, though under threat, remain powerful expressions of identity, resilience, and cultural continuity. Preservation efforts must move beyond mere documentation, embracing adaptive revitalisation and community-driven initiatives that keep these traditions relevant in contemporary contexts. By integrating modern health practices, fostering creative reinterpretations, and promoting cultural education, these traditions can not only survive but thrive as living cultural legacies, anchoring indigenous identities amidst the tides of modernization and globalisation.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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