Chapter 9

Tattoos

Plate No.205
History

It is a myth that the modern revival of tattooing stems from Captain James Cook’s three voyages to the South Pacific in the late 1700s. Certainly, Cook’s voyages and the dissemination of the texts and images from them brought more awareness about tattooing (and, imported the word “tattow” into Western languages), but Europeans have gotten tattooed throughout history.

On Cook’s first voyage in 1768, his science officer and expedition botanist, Sir Joseph Banks, as well as artist Sydney Parkinson and many others of the crew, returned to England with tattoos, although many of these men would have had pre-existing tattoos. Banks was a highly regarded member of the English aristocracy and had acquired his position with Cook by putting up what was at the time the princely sum of 278
some ten thousand pounds in the expedition. In turn, Cook brought back with him a tattooed Raiatean man, Omai, whom he presented to King George and the English Court. On subsequent voyages other crew members, from officers, such as American John Ledyard to ordinary seamen, got tattooed.

**Process**

Tattooing involves the placement of pigment into the skin’s dermis, the layer of dermal tissue underlying the epidermis. After initial injection, pigment is dispersed throughout a homogenized damaged layer down through the epidermis and upper dermis, in both of which the presence of foreign material activates the immune system’s phagocytes to engulf the pigment particles.

As healing proceeds, the damaged epidermis flakes away (eliminating surface pigment) while deeper in the skin granulation tissue forms, which is later converted to connective tissue by collagen growth. This mends the upper dermis, where pigment remains trapped within fibroblasts, ultimately concentrating in a layer just below the dermis/epidermis boundary. Its presence there is stable, but in the long term (decades) the pigment tends to migrate deeper into the dermis, accounting for the degraded detail of old tattoos.

Some tribal cultures traditionally created tattoos by cutting designs into the skin and rubbing the resulting wound with ink, ashes or other agents; some cultures continue this practice, which may be an adjunct to scarification. Some
cultures create tattooed marks by hand-tapping the ink into the skin using sharpened sticks or animal bones (made like needles) with clay formed disks or, in modern times, needles.

The most common method of tattooing in modern times is the electric tattoo machine, which inserts ink into the skin via a single needle or a group of needles that are soldered onto a bar, which is attached to an oscillating unit. The unit rapidly and repeatedly drives the needles in and out of the skin, usually 80 to 150 times a second. This modern procedure is ordinarily sanitary.

The needles are single-use needles that come packaged individually. The tattoo artist must wash his or her hands and must also wash the area that will be tattooed. Gloves must be worn at all times and the wound must be wiped frequently with a wet disposable towel of some kind. The equipment must be sterilized in a certified autoclave before and after every use.

**Removal**

While tattoos are considered permanent, it is sometimes possible to remove them, fully or partially, with laser treatments. Typically, black and some colored inks can be removed more completely than inks of other colors. The expense and pain associated with removing tattoos are typically greater than the expense and pain associated with applying them. Pre-laser tattoo removal methods include dermabrasion, salabrasion
(scrubbing the skin with salt), cryosurgery, and excision—which is sometimes still used along with skin grafts for larger tattoos. These older methods, however, have been nearly completely replaced by laser removal treatment options.

**Tottos.**

Tattooing is a common practice among many communities around the world. Tattooing is done as part of the initiation ceremony that marks the maturation stage among boys and girls. Not only as 'rites of passage, but [it] also had the function of demonstrating availability for sexual access and fertility' (2005: 12). The figures that are drawn on the body by tattooing are mostly symbols ‘with profound cultural and social meaning’ in the community.

Tattooing is also found among numerous cultural communities in India such as, Saharia of Rajathan; Buska, Raji of Utaranchal; Kota, Kurumba, Khand of Andhra Pradesh; Abuj maria, Baiga, Hill Korwa, Bharia Saharia of Madhya Pradesh and Chhatisgarh; Asur Bhiror, Korwa, Mal Paharia of Jharkhand; Bondo, Juang, Mankirdia, Saura in Orissa, Lodha Bhiror of West Bengal and tribes of many other states.

So far as the Scheduled Caste communities are concerned, tattooing is predominant in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Pondicherry and Delhi.
Masan Jogi women did not wear any signs or symbols of marriage on their face. Putting a vermilion spot on the forehead was never a practice with them. As ascetics, who dealt with the dead and lived in cemeteries, they had no interest in material world of any sort.

The women informants from the Masan Jogi community told me that the practice of tattooing had become popular among them during the Nizam regime. They said, ‘We had to resort to tattooing in order to counter the perception of the Islamic rulers.’ During the days of the rajya, the Muslim dominion, it was difficult to distinguish the Masan Jogi women from the Muslim women, because neither of these women wore any symbol used by married Hindu women such as vermilion spot on their forehead or the tali around their neck.

Often, if not invariably, people would take Masan Jogi women for Muslim converts and frown at them. When people would see Masan Jogi women in the graveyard, they would take them for the Muslim women and create ruckus, for it was believed that the Muslim women did not enter any graveyard. Villagers would not entertain the Masan Jogi women who came to their doors for begging or selling some homemade ornaments. They were forbidden from making any contacts with the village communities.

It was a great task for the Masan Jogi women to prove their Hindu identity in such a chaotic condition. The
women told me how they had to face the situation every other day and how they resented the falsely ascribed identity and the commotion it caused. Referring to their past experiences, the women said, ‘Tattooing was found to be a good way of solving the problem. The permanent marks on the body helped us to identify ourselves as Hindus.’

The most common locations for tattoo marks were on the face; a spot or three leaves of sacred *Tulasi* (*Ocimum tenuiflorum* plant) at the centre of the forehead and three dots or a design of three tiny buds at the centre of the chin. *Tulasi* is considered sacred in the Hindu tradition. *Tulasi vivaha*, ceremonial marriage of *Tulasi* to *Krishna*, is celebrated on the eleventh day of *Shukla*, the dark nights of lunar month *Kartika*.

This is the end of the four-month-long inauspicious period for weddings and other rituals. The *Tulasi vivaha* inaugurates the annual marriage season. *Tulasi* plant is placed in front of every *Vaishnava* household and is known as *Tulasi vrindavan*. The ritual of lighting of lamp at the plant is performed every evening. Hindu women devoutly carry *Tulsi* plant in a decorated pot on their head all through their walking pilgrimage to Shri *Vitthal* at Pandharpur in Solapur district in *Maharashtra*.

Tattoos of *Tulasi* leaves are engraved on the forehead of some Hindu girls at early age. It helps them later as
widows. After the death of the husband women stop wearing the vermilion spot on the forehead and are considered as *abhaagini*, the unfortunate one. The tattooed Tulasi mark on the forehead releases them from this perception. Furthermore, the followers of Vaishnava sect use the *jap mala* (rosary) made from the roots or stem of the Tulasi plant. Without being aware of its religious significance, the Masan Jogi women tattoo Tulasi leaves on their forehead. Interestingly, though being Shaivites, they use sacred symbols from the Vaishnava tradition.

They hardly know that they are the mediators of two great religious traditions. Pictures 6.1 and 6.2 show the tattooed spots on the forehead and at the centre of the chin of a woman respectively. The young lady in the picture has placed the *bindi*, a specially prepared decorative spot, away from the tattooed Tulasi leaves on her forehead. *Bindi* is commonly used now days in place of *kumkum*, the vermilion spot. It is considered as married woman’s symbol of *soubhaagya*, the life fulfilment.

A married woman wears a bindi or kumkum as long as her husband is alive. In her widowhood the tattooed mark of Tulasi leaves on her forehead signifies her auspiciousness even if she has lost her husband.

‘These [the tattooed marks on forehead and chin] were very important spots for us because they were easily
noticeable’, the informants said. They told me how they perceived that the reactions of the people changed after carefully looking at their faces and seeing the tattooed spots: ‘The Hindus would begin to look at us with some understanding and concern, and that made us feel at ease’, the women said.

With the tattoo, the women felt the absence of the notorious suspicious gazes that discomforted them every time they interacted with village communities. They were happy for reaching ‘the final solution’ by engraving the tattooing marks on the forehead or chin.

A problem arose with the tattoo marks on the face. According to the Hindu etiquette, it is improper (barobar naahi), to look at a woman’s face. ‘Such behaviour is unacceptable in Hindu society. However, certain individuals, if not the goons, did not hesitate to look at our faces.’ The women were not spared of the ordeal even during their begging expedition. Some raised doubt about the genuineness of the tattoo marks. It was very hard for the Masan Jogi women to fight such curious gaze.

The Masan Jogi women were quick to know this time that the troubles were far from over. After a search, the women found another solution. They began tattooing the forearms and the back of the palms. The limbs provided more space for tattooing large sketches, which were easily noticeable. The large marks convinced people and clarified their doubts.
The women felt happy being identified as Hindus and particularly as Masan Jogis.

The tattoo designs on the forearms include goddesses those of Durgamma, Poshamma showcased in their altar or palanquins as well as the sacred Tulasi plant. The tattoos can be put into three categories. In the simple category the tattoos are line drawings of goddesses. A simple box is drawn to show the palanquin of the goddesses. It is decorated with Tulasi leaves depicted by drawing simple lines. The four corners and the tower of the palanquin are shown with bunches of Tulasi leaves.

In the artistic category, the icons of goddesses are drawn artistically, using different shapes, thickness of lines and maintaining curves and corners skilfully. For instance, the actual icons of seven goddesses are nothing but seven round stones coloured with red lead. The tattooed drawing of these goddesses distinctly depicts their heads, hands and legs, etc.; they are shown standing on the ground with lines. Below this, a bunch of Tulasi leaves are drawn making a shape of a circle. In another artistic tattoo, the goddess is depicted with a crown shown on her head; she is seated with folded legs and holding instruments in her hands. All these are shown in curvatures.

The third category of tattoos consists of letters in Devnagari script. These tattoos include the name of Rama Mama and the woman with the name of her husband or brother.
The Masan Jogi women would get the names they intended to engrave on their hand written on a piece of cloth. It was preserved till the time they found a tattooist lady or a man at a festival.

The tattooists were invariably illiterate people; they just copied the names without understanding any letter, as the lines are often crooked. The tattooists were not familiar with the figure of Rama Mama, as the deity was a recent addition to the Masan Jogi pantheon. Therefore, his name is engraved instead. The other names engraved included a male name, either of a brother or husband, together with the woman’s name. It indicated the woman’s natal family and her family of orientation. This helped to identify the woman easily and distinguish her from the Muslim women.

In earlier times, a metal piece with sharp edge and juice of a certain plant were used in engraving tattoos. No one from the community was able to specify the plant or its name. The process was long and painful too. Later, some tattooists began using indigenously made instrument utilising old or discarded car batteries and an iron needle connected by worn out wires.

The size of the machine was huge and was cumbersome to carry. The self-made tattooist sometimes pierced the instrument deep into the flesh causing a wound. The bleeding cut was covered with some medicinal leaves. If bleeding did not stop, the women would apply mud over the tattooed area in order to expedite the process of healing. The whole process of tattooing
was unhygienic. As reported by the informants and from the tattooed marks most commonly observed on women about thirties show that the practice of tattooing was growing among Masan Jogis till recent times.

It almost came to an abrupt end after people learnt that unsterile needle would cause HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) infections leading to AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). Government banned tattooing fearing the high risk of HIV and AIDS. However, with proper care and using modern instruments tattooing is considered safe and it is slowly making a comeback.

Now, not only girls and young women are interested in getting their bodies tattooed, but boys too. The places (face and forearms) and objects (figures of deities and Tulasi leaves, etc.) of tattoos have remained the same for girls. The boys engrave a Christian Cross on their arms or on the back of their right thumb. However, tattoo has not as yet acquired the status of fashion among Masan Jogis.

The properly clothed young Gond and Kolam women now make do with the tattoos of the symbols of their tribes

If reduction in the size of clothes heralded the fashion of tattooing in urban centres, a reverse trend is seen in the agency areas of Adilabad district in recent times.
The growing propensity for better clothing has reduced the scope for tribal people to get their bodies tattooed elaborately, in tune with their tradition. Improved economic conditions and increased access to the outside world has made people from the primitive Gond and Kolam tribes to adopt ‘modernity’. Therefore, semi-clad women are not found in the younger generations in the agency areas anymore.

Traditionally, Gond and Kolam women wore meagre clothes which left a good part of their body exposed to sun.

Much of bare skin used to be covered with tattoos, or ‘kohkana’ in Gondi, which gave the individual a decent look.

“Tattooing on the back, waist, arms and face was done during infancy of the girl child. The practice continues to this day but the size of the tattoo is much smaller,” says Kala Ratna award winner Guruji Ravinder Sharma of Adilabad’s Kala Ashram, who has studied the culture of local primitive tribes.

The properly clothed young Gond and Kolam women now make do with the tattoos of the symbols of their tribes. The symbols — half moon and three spots in a triangle — are tattooed on the forehead and on the chin respectively.

“Tattooing is also considered curative of some illnesses. For examples some tattoos on the temple and forehead
cured the individuals of chronic headaches,” says Mesram Jangu, former chairman of the Nagoba temple committee, Keslapur.

The dwindling inclination for tattooing has also deprived the Thotti primitive tribe of its traditional livelihood. Thottis were masters in the art of tattooing and were medicine men in their own right. The methodology of tattooing has also changed in recent times.

While the Thottis used to puncture the skin with three medicated needles bound together, the present day tattooists use a drill like machine.

While one youngster flaunts an image of a dragon, the other opts to sport a scorpion on his arm. And there are others, who choose spiritual signs, portraits and even names. Yes, tattoo craze is fast catching up with youngsters in the city as an increasing number of them hitting parlours to get inked. With the academic year set to commence soon, the number of students, especially those pursuing engineering and other professional courses, opting to get inked is steadily increasing, say tattoo artists.

For many youngsters, it is more of a style statement while young employees like sales executives get inked for fun.

“Students do it to make a style statement to stand out in the crowd,” says Patanala Raju, a city-based tattoo artist.
Sporting a tattoo is no more a taboo. “Youth, whose parents may sneer at them for sporting tattoos, play safe by getting inked on shoulders, biceps and areas that usually do not get exposed. They keep changing the tattoo designs and post pictures on social networking websites, sharing them with their friends. With football world cup on, the present craze is for football oriented tattoos,” he explains.

“It is for fun. It gives me a different identity and I am enjoying it,” says Madanmohan, a private employee, who got a dragon inked on his arm.

People fraud to Hyderabad, Visakhapatnam and Bangalore to get inked with different designs like celtic designs, tribal arts, oriental fonts and animals,” says K. Jagadish, an employee at a parlour.

Students do it to make a style statement to stand out in the crowd

Patanala Raju
Tattoo artist

**ADILABAD :** Tattoos are a fashion for young people in urban pockets, but they are a part of the culture for tribals in Agency areas. Tribals believe that by getting tattoos on their hands and foreheads, they will not get any diseases, and also save themselves from falling prey to black magic.
Against this background, a group of tattoo artists from Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra arrived in the district recently.

They set up shop on pavements in towns like Adilabad and also visit tribal areas during jataras.

Many college students are getting tattooed in a variety of patterns with names and pictures. It has become a fashion statement for youth. Sterilized needles are used for tattooing and the fee ranges from `30 to `2,000 for simple to intricate designs.

Challawar Sudheer, an intermediate student, says, “It is a fashion these days; all are getting the tattoos.” These colourful tattoos would cost `5,000 in cities, but here the fee is not more than `2,000 during jataras, he said.

Tribal people get images of gods or their own names tattooed on their hands. It is their tradition and the conviction is that tattoos keep diseases and evil forces away. “Whatever the older generation believed, for me it is a way to remember the roots and show my respect towards my parents and grandparents by tattooing their names on my hands,” said Gedam Laxmi, a tribal girl who got tattooed during the recently held Nagoba Jatara in the district. While her parents had to undergo a painful experience to get tattoos, she felt little pain with the latest electric tattoo machine.
Anand Rao, a tattoo artist who came from Vardha in Maharashtra, said fresh needles are used for every customer and care is taken to avoid infection.

“These days, it is very easy to get tattoos. But one should think twice before taking a decision as tattoo removal is possible only through an expensive surgery,” he warned.

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Tattoos

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