Links Through Ink: Tradition and Modernization in Indian Tattoo

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Apatani woman in Arunachal Pradesh.
Photo by Monika Thakur.

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This past weekend, I travelled from Hyderabad to Tirupati to experience this spiritual center of Andhra Pradesh. In the four hour line for the express Darshan to see the Sri Venkateswar idol, at one point I found myself shoulder to shoulder with a small, older woman and her daughter, both dressed in pink and green silk sarees. While she didn't wear much jewellery other than her gold earrings, I saw that this woman had a tattoo at the exact same spot on her forearm as my own first tattoo. Signalling first to mine, then pointing to hers, I told her I thought the circular floral black shapes of her tattoo were beautiful, one of the few words I'm glad to have picked up in Telegu. With a surprised smile, she got what I was saying, and proceeded to show me seven other tattoos decorating her arms, hands, and fingers, each with clearly defined patterns of mazes, mandalas, and dots. Her sharing with me was short-lived, as the line aggressively inched forward, but her daughter made sure to stop me and tell me "my mother--- you, understand, she's seventy three" as if to excuse her mother's behaviour and tattoos. I wondered how these two women, only one small generation apart, could have such different views.

Back in Canada and the US, of course this same generational gap exists, with our parents telling tattooed children that we'll be filled with regret, receive less job offers, and exude criminality, while many of us younger folks see tattoos as a way to communicate identity and raise self-esteem. Since few of our parents, and even fewer of our grandparents have tattoos, in the white west, the fight for tattoo acceptance seems to be rooted in this intergenerational battle.

Here in India, I wasn't all too surprised to experience some similar repulsion from older generations. My host parents noticed my tattoos and, somewhat condescendingly, asked if I knew that tattoos were permanent. After discovering one of my more easily covered tattoos on my collarbone, our house cook and head maid gave me a half-joking, half-absolutely-not-joking slap on the back of the head.

So, after meeting this woman in Tirupati and noticing all the other older tattooed women out and about, I was confused by all these wildly different generational opinions. How is it possible that seventy year old aunties walk around with visible tattoos, with children that don't approve of them?

Of course, the complication grows further as I've also seen the younger generation of Indian youth, like their American counterparts, embracing tattoos, often strongly against the preferences of their parents. In Mumbai, I remember getting dinner in the back room of a bar with some new local friends and comparing tattoos. Theirs included an intricate mermaid in waves on the shoulder of a Goanese 20 year old, a Sanskrit sloka underneath a symbol of a lotus on the wrist of a local college student, a stick and poke alien holding a cat on a young Rajasthani man, a protective crescent moon on the inner ring finger of a quiet 25 year old which she explained was easily concealed from her mother. I also saw some of their multiple pictures of plans for upcoming tattoos including drawings of Krishna with Radha, Kali, a stormcloud, a rose, and a mother's family name. We shared our reasons behind getting tattoos, stories of good studios with strange artists, and our parents' and employers' mixed, sometimes explosive reactions. All in all, it was so similar to conversations with tattooed college friends that I'd had back in the states that I was shocked, comforted, and weirded out all at once.

Such a specific mix of differences and similarities between tattoo culture in India and America sparked my curiosity to do some digging into the social anthropology of tattoo in South Asia. Reading through much of the surprisingly limited information on google, I've started to get some explanations to questions like: What makes tattooing in India so controversial, yet so ancient? Why do our intergenerational conflicts share some of the same rhetorical foundations? Most importantly, what is and who is leading the future of tattoo in India, (and how have I contributed to it)?

Settle in, folks. This is gonna be a long blog post today.

TATTOO MANY TRADITIONS, TATTOO LITTLE DOCUMENTATION

First and foremost, my apologies for the atrocity that is this subtitle. But while I may have pushed the pun, the point still stands.

While India undoubtedly has a long, diverse, and complex history of tattoo traditions all throughout the subcontinent, it has only been formally studied as a meaningful element of Indian society a handful of times, with various degrees in the quality of research. Some of the first European scholars to study South Asian cultures noted that tattoo existed as a practice, but the social function was not seen as particularly valuable to study. However, in the early to mid 20th century, some people began to document the meaning and practices of tattooing, specifically among tribal peoples. While some research finally looked at the presence of tattoo practices in Hindu villages all around the country, at this point in the postcolonial era, most practices had already fallen out of favour, but we'll get to that later. The Sanskrit word for tattoo is *Gudna*, meaning to bury the needle, and while many of the southern dravidian and northeastern languages have their own word for it, most of north and central India still uses this word to denote traditional stick and poke tattoos. [x]

Though the quantity, quality, and chronology of available information is limited, there are still some intriguing finds that have helped me to realize the widespread presence and sheer diversity of tattoo practices in India. Multiple northeastern peoples developed tattoo practices which, depending on the community, could serve to identify tribal membership, mark married women as having superior status, document feats of strength in war, or even to make women look ugly in order to protect them from the gaze of outsiders. In parts of Orissa, Bengal, and Jharkhand, young women were tattooed intricate embroidery-liked patterns to prepare them for the pains of motherhood. In Tamil Nadu, tattoo artists would travel around giving people tattoos of intricate mazes, designed to confuse and trap evil spirits, therefore safeguarding this person's soul. In the western states, like Rajasthan and Gujarat, many tattoos bear religious meanings using Hindu symbols to bless marriages, provide strength to laborers, or allowing souls to recognize the bodies of their ancestors. [x] [x] [x]

Rabari Woman's hand in Jaipur market. Photo by Meena Kadri.

Many of these tattoo themes are not unique to South Asia; global tattoo traditions reflect similar reasons for developing a culture of tattoo. From an anthropologic perspective, the ability to identify one's status, family, and community can increase belonging in a culture while also helping strangers to identify the kin of friends or enemies. As such, tattoos which identify connections of family, religion, or status proved evolutionarily useful for communities seeking structure and survival. Furthermore, such a painful ritual demonstrates an individual's commitment to externally displaying their identity, making the meaning behind their markings trustworthy. [x] [x]

Woman from the Toda tribe of the Nilgiri hills, Tamil Nadu. Photograph by Stella Snead 1967.

Yet as Indian civilization has evolved, so have their tattoo practices, which reflect much more than the simple anthropology of functional community identification. Tattoo also serves as a demonstration of artistic abilities, with intricate designs built to reflect a region's nature. The presence of different styles of the same religious symbols illustrates how regions across the subcontinent have adapted their shared religion to reflect the local culture's priorities. Tattoo artists, like most other professions in traditional indian village economies, formed hereditary endogamous occupational groups, otherwise known as castes, who refined their unique style through generations while providing for their families. [x] [x]

As the religiosity of tattoos grew, so did the rigidity of social stratification. Across the subcontinent, each tattoo tradition has set rules about who can be tattooed with what. Most of these classifications are based on gender, age, and caste. Yet, even as late as the early 19th century, the social status and qualifications of tattooed people was highly variable, as tattoo was still used as a tool for social change. For example, the Ramnani movement saw the tattooing of untouchables (those belonging to the lowest rung of Hindu society) with the name of lord Rama over every possible inch of their bodies, as a means to fight back against Brahmanical violence which branded them as unholy. [x]

Ramnani man. Photo by Yannick Cormier.

Of course, there is no way to possibly generalize India in any cultural form. Many cultures here have never accepted tattoos, and different groups will have opposite reasons behind the same tattoos. Still, I was excited to find so many different ways that tattoo was a large component of the social structure of certain Indian communities.

So what happened to change all that? What brought thousands of years of tattoo traditions to a standstill?

COLONIZATION: PERMANENCE AND IMPERMANENCE

While India experienced many rulers across the centuries, none left such an astounding impact as the British. In order to reap maximum economic benefit from South Asia, the British required the participation of locals in establishing their regime. Since tattoos provided an individual with tangible connection to their community, destroying tattoos allowed for colonizers to isolate the individual from their society, more easily bringing them into British service. Without a visible connection to family, religion, or tradition, the strong bonds which defined much of Indian identity could be severed to the advantage of the colonizers. [x] [x]

Of course, this was not done on such explicit terms. Several narratives were used in order to facilitate the stigmatization of tattoos, along with many other central elements of Indian society. Abrahamic religions, like Christianity, condemned permanently marking the body, as man was made in God's image, already perfect, and to destroy His creation was sinful. Using their knowledge of caste structures and the social significance of purity and pollution, the British travelled through the subcontinent comparing different Indian tattoo practices to each other, highlighting the fact that many tattoos were markings of punishment, impurity, and low caste ranking. [x] [x]

Once the Brits became well established in their reign of the subcontinent, they famously created bureaucratic and institutional systems which spanned across the country. Jobs in the government, railroads, public service, and many other well paying jobs under the British required that workers not have any tattoos. In order to make a living, one couldn't have visible, permanent, non-abrahamically sanctified markings. This may be a reason for why most documentation of south asian tattoo practices, which were gathered in the 20th century during the end of the colonial era, heavily feature tattooed women who stayed within the village community, unlike men who were forced into work in the public sector. Women were more able to carry forth the traditions, as their economic position was significantly less affected than that of their male counterparts.[x]

Finally, the British attached a criminal stigma to tattoos. Prisoners were tattooed for the purposes of punishment and identification. This non-consensual, non-ritualistic tattoo practice became a symbol of shame and ostracization, no longer the symbol of pride and belonging it often used to be. In fact, even after independence, tattoo has been used as a branding of punishment, though it is now illegal, as seen in 1994 when four punjabi women were tattooed by police, who were finally jailed for their crimes in 2016. [x] [x]

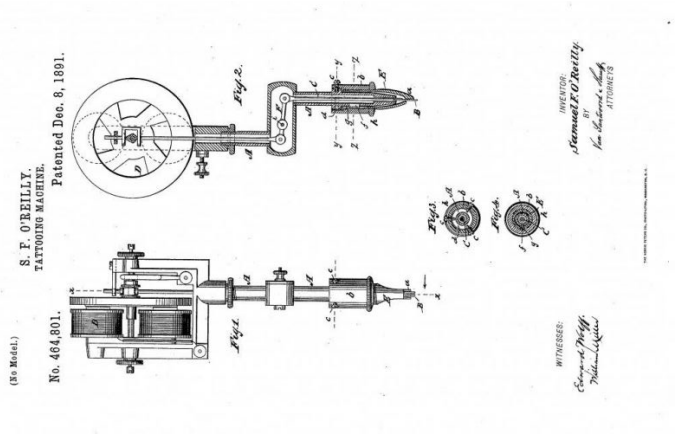
Women with the words 'jebkatri' (Punjabi for pickpocket) tattooed illegally by police, 1993. Photo by TS Bedi for the Hindustan Times.

In 1947, the British left, and India formed its own country. Still, many of these ideas prevailed, as tattoos were a symbol of past India, and had no place in an innovative more forward-thinking country. One prime example of this is the case of Assam in the 1970s, when the national government passed legislation which banned tattoos for the sake of "women's safety", both because of the health risks in the tradition of infecting tattoos to make them larger, and because marking pre-pubescent girls intentionally caused pain to children. However, the traditions still prevailed, with people advocating that their traditional tools and chemical compositions did not pose significant health risks, and that tattooing young women protected them from both evil spirits and male strangers. [x]

DOMINATION, EMULATION, ADAPTATION

Of course, after europeans made everyone get rid of their tattoos in order to survive British rule, we decided we liked them. That's the thing about tattoos, exposure leads to adoptation.

When Americans were exposed to tattoos in Native Americans and Pacific Islanders, it caused a stir in white sailors and travellers, some of whom came back to their families sporting tattoos marking their adventuresome accomplishments. In 1891, the first patent for the electric tattoo machine was filed, allowing for faster, easier, clearer, and medically safer tattoos to take off in the US, diverging from the traditional global practices of stick and poke tattoos. Travelling circus shows picked up and displayed heavily tattooed people, the likes of which white Americans had never seen before. Still, for most of the 20th century, the spread of tattoos remained amongst lower socio-economic class outcasts like circus freaks and criminals. [x] [x] [x]



First patent for the electric tattoo machine, 1891.

However, then came the 1980s. The technological boom of TVs increased widespread access to cheaper and more accessible visual media. Some rock stars, having gotten tattoos from previous experiences in criminal or low class labor circles were hailed for their music and eccentric performativity. White americans began to see people with tattoos whom they admired. The tattoo industry emerged, with new top of the line safe and effective technology for a whole generation of people who saw tattoos as a sign of self-expression, creativity, and pride. Over the past forty years, America has had time to expose more and more people to family and friends with tattoos, across all social classes, creating a rapid, though not yet complete, general social acceptance of tattoos. [x]

America's superpower influence on the globe has begun to include tattoos, which are now on the rise, following the modern technology and artistic influences of western tattoo styles. In India, people my age are getting tattooed and, as evidenced by my new Mumbai friends, our tattoos have similar, if not identical styles and application methods. As a particularly westernized visual media hub, it makes sense that I found so many tattooed young adults in Mumbai, and significantly less here in Hyderabad.

Yet this tattoo revival in India is disconnected from the traditions that first arose here. While modern tattoo artists set themselves up in India's big cities and tourist hubs, traditional artists continue to lose their livelihood. Since the rituals and materials involved in their work are not up to the new western safety and secularism standards of tattooing, their work cannot be easily transitioned into the new wave. Many are refusing to teach their children this intergenerational profession, because while modern tattoos are becoming more innovative, artistic, and acceptable, the distinctly tribal styles, still face discrimination for their "uncivilized" associations. Furthermore, modern tattoos are considerably more expensive than traditional stick and poke tattoos (a three inch

tattoo in a modern studio costing Rs 1500 vs a godna tattoo costing Rs 20). Not to mention that traditional Gudna artists are limited to only black ink, and pre-determined images which can't be as customized as their modern counterparts. As such, the wealthier can show off their access to western tattoo techniques as a sign of financial status. [x] [x]

While economic demands of the modern world often force youth into cities, and away from their village communities, many feel pressured not to associate with their rural origins. Neeraj Hembrom, from Jharkhand, worries that "many older tribals are proud of their gudna traditions, but the younger generation, especially those who go to cities for higher education, feel it marks out their origins, which the unenlightened among their colleagues often label as backward." While older women, like Badki Besra, openly display their tattoos within their home villages, within more western and urban settings, younger generations will often see the same tattoos as sources of shame. It seems to me that this is what happened between the mother and daughter I met in line in Tirupati. [x]

Badki Besra, 40, a Santhal in Rajmahal tattooed by godna artist Sameema Khatun, who belongs to the Julaha community in Sahebganj district in Jharkhand. Photo by Sanjay Pardey.

The disconnect between Indian tradition and western modernization can also be seen distinctly in the demographics of who gets tattooed. Sunny Bhanushali, a tattoo artist in Mumbai, describes his clientele as 70% male, between the ages of 25 and 35, belonging to the “affluent section of the society”. It’s not just that men get tattooed more, but that the industry is particularly male dominated. Searching through instagram for tattoo artists in Hyderabad, I found only one woman artist, and counted about twenty five male artists. In contrast to the tribal tattoos, worn almost exclusively by women, with many rituals requiring that only female tattoo artists perform tattoos other women, this difference in gender representation is significant. [x]

While there are obviously major differences between traditional Indian tattoo practices and the western influenced new wave, certain thematic ideas of Indian traditions have become particularly popular in modern tattoo. The most common tattoos in India are religious symbols, closely followed in popularity by family names, which usually written in one’s mother tongue script. Just like many of the pre-colonial traditions, these new tattoos reiterate a connection to family, community, and faith, all of which are important tools for creating a sense of collective identity. Furthermore, many of these tattoos take advantage of modern tattoo technology to mimic the artistic styles of their regional origins including embroidery, painting, and calligraphy.

In particular, well-known Hindu godheads, village goddesses (Shakti), and depictions of scenes from religious literature like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are popular tattoos amongst Indian youth. Still, these more popular religious tattoos bring up important issues such as cultural homogenization, which has the potential to erase the thousands of local variations on religious symbols.

Furthermore, while some see tattooing one's family name, lineage, or caste as a means to strengthen one's weakened community ties, others see these tattoos as a way to further divide social groups. In the discussion of the Ramnani Dalits, Sarah Hussain says that while "tattooing too has diminished greatly as a marker of one's caste, for the elders of these communities, it remains a very real reminder of the segregation that does exist in Indian society, however veiled it is." [x]

While tattoos depicting uniquely Indian symbols are on the rise in the subcontinent, it's no secret that they're also on the rise in the west. With westerners being "inspired" by Indian tradition, it's not uncommon to see someone of non South Asian origin sporting an Om symbol or a Ganesha. The conflict between the west's appropriation and exoticization of Indian culture through tattoos is seen clearly in instances like those reported by the Indian Times in 2015, when an australian man visiting Bangalore was "harassed by an unruly crowd for having a tattoo of a goddess on his shin". While the people were not opposed to tattooing in general, or tattooing the image of the goddess on a foreigner, it was the offensive placement of such a holy figure on his shin, which was disrespectful and revealed his clear ignorance of real life Indian culture. [x] [x]

Tattoo Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow

It's cases like that of the Australian man in Bangalore that make us think about how tattoo can and should exist in the modern world. What are the ways in which Indians can use both traditional and western tattoo methods to embody their ideal society? What balance can be struck between reclamation and modernization? I'm definitely not the one to answer those questions, but many people already are.

In 2015, Yale University Press published The World Atlas of Tattoo, featuring three currently active Indian tattoo artists. Abhinandan Basu's work is rooted in the style of Bengali folk art, while Mo Naga, from Nagaland in north eastern India, uses his people's traditional tribal style, saying: "I am not trying to bring back the old beliefs and lifestyle. My effort is to tell the stories of our forefathers through art and design". These prominent, globally renowned artists demonstrate a celebrated connection to traditional tattoo origins in India. [x] [x]

Mo Naga's Neo-Naga work. Photo featured on Lars Krutak's feature of the artist.

However, it's not just famous world-travelling tattoo artists who are shaping the future of South Asian tattoo arts. Nilay Das, owner of LizardSkin Tattoo in Kolkata acknowledges that "the modern tattoo has been inspired by gudna... we need to save a fast-disappearing art form before it is too late." Artists like Das question which elements of traditional tattoo must remain in the past, and which elements can be carried forward. For example, the role of women in traditional tattooing is seen by many artists as a source of gender empowerment and pride, therefore apprenticing more women into the industry can be a way to readjust the social ties of the art form.[x]

Women in Jarkhand, 2015. Photo by Sanjay Pandey.

Women South Asian tattoo artists, who once grounded the traditional craft, are beginning to use tattoo to fight the social stigma attached to tattooed women as undesirable, impure, and either westernized or uncivilized. Take for example Heleena Mistry, who says that "reclaiming her pride in her background after decades of rejecting it is integral to her work and is deftly interwoven in her designs. Most are inspired by those she grew up with at home, including Mughal miniature paintings, block print tapestries, and Indian tribal tattoos." Or, consider Nikki Kotecha, who boasts mehendi-like intricate tattoo designs traditionally applied to women's hands. Several women artists like these have discussed in interviews how important it is for clients sharing their racial and gender identities to be tattooed by them, demonstrating the importance of representation in the industry. [x] [x] [x] [x]

Heleena Mistry. Instagram @heleenatattoos.

For artists and tattooed individuals around the world, it's important not just that their tattoo have meaning, but that it also have history and social impact. Going through the pain of a tattoo itself is nothing compared to the work that preceded it, including both one's personal journey, and the sociological factors that led to every step in the process. As such, when my fellow CIEE student and I went in to get inked in a local Hyderabad studio, we had the responsibility of doing the proper research, supporting the right artist, and questioning our own positions in both Indian and global society. We decided to get our tattoos done with Rita Gaur, who owns, operates, and actively tattoos clients in her own tattoo studio. For me, I had decided a few months back that I wanted to tattoo the electric symbol for a recharging battery within a circuit of berry-bearing branches on my collarbone, an idea I'd come up with while recovering from dengue fever. It was meant to commemorate how, no matter where I currently fall on the cycle of chaos and recovery, my time still produces some meaningful fruit.

My friend Caleb, a seasoned Sanskrit scholar, tattooed his second (and third) coloured tattoos on his outer wrists, contrasting with the plethora of blackwork tattoos he has collected elsewhere. While Caleb is not one to come out chatting about his life story, he's documented meaningful moments on his skin for anyone to see, including several Sanskrit words and Hindu symbols. Unlike the Australian man in Bangalore, Caleb has spent years of his life not just studying and translating ancient Hindu texts, but also developing personal connections to many of the religious ideals that, in his practice, remain introspective and non-performative. When we did the pilgrimage and Darshan up Tirumala mountain, I remember every once in a while listening very hard to his whispered recitations of slokas he had memorized for this specific idol. The next day I learned from another friend that he'd also been fasting for the entire day's trek.

My own tattoo process with Rita Gaur, and Caleb's healed tattoos

Caleb's new tattoos, providing an abstract homage to Shiva and Kali, reflect his commitment to those figures, but he still always wears long black sleeves that cover most of his tattoos, knowing that he, as a white man, does not need to constantly flaunt the privilege that allows his tattoos to be more socially acceptable than others. When it comes to tattoos, everyone has a different makeup of privilege, work, intention, and history. It's our responsibility to recognize that tattoos inherently both reflect and affect our position within society. We must therefore remain mindful and diligent about the values we choose to display, and how they will be seen on our own unique skin.

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