

## TATTOO AND TRIBAL IDENTITY:A CASE OF THE BAIGA TRIBE OF CENTRAL INDIA

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Dr. Basanta Kumar Mohanta, Assistant Professor and Head, Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, Adi Keih College of Arts and Social Sciences, Asmara University, Eritrea, North-East Africa. E-mail: drmohantabk@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

*Each tribe has their own cultural identity. The tribal arts, crafts and architectures are one of the most fascinating parts of their culture. The knowledge of this art is a hereditary one which transmits from generation to generation through oral tradition. The art of tattooing or body decoration is widely found among the tribal of India in general and the tribals of Central India in particular, which is treated as an integral part of their life and culture. Baiga is one of the Particularly Venerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of Central India, known for their traditional method of treatment and shifting cultivation. They live in a particular forested area of Dindori district of Madhya Pradesh, identified as “Baigachawk” and its neighbouring area. Both the male and female Baigas are very fond of body decoration. Besides, the female members like to decorate their body with different kinds of tattoos, known as Godna. Each of these tattoos has a specific cultural significance and tattooed at a particular age and a specific location of the body. It is related to their religion, belief system, health care practice, body decoration, social status, wealth etc. In this present paper an emphasis has been given to show the relationship of this tattoo and their culture.*

**Key words:** *Tattoo, Baiga, Central India, Culture, Tribe*

### **Introduction**

India is a developing country and at the present days and both the centre and states are trying for the development, in connection to the education, health, economy and other aspects of life and culture of the people. India has the second largest concentration of tribal population in world which comes next to the African continent. There are over 700 Scheduled Tribes (STs) notified under Article 342 of the Constitution of India, spread over different States and Union Territories of the country. According to 2001 census, the total Scheduled Tribe population in India is 84,326,240 constituting 8.2 % of the total. Because of this, at the time of discussing about the development, the academicians, social scientists, government officials, economist, NGOs, politicians, planners, and social activists are frequently using the word ‘tribe’. These tribes are present in more than one state. The largest numbers of scheduled tribes are in the states of Odisha (*i.e.* 62). Madhya Pradesh is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest state of India. Because of its centrally

location, it is often called as the 'Heart of India'. A number of tribes reside in this state. According to the 1991 census, there are 15,399,034 (19.94%) STs in total were living in this state. At that time the present Chhattisgarh was a part of this state which bifurcated from Madhya Pradesh and become a new state on 1<sup>st</sup> November, 2000. After division of state, a large portion of the Scheduled Tribe people inhabited area went to Chhattisgarh. Because of that, in 2001 census, the tribal population of the present Madhya Pradesh became 12,233,474. The percentage of STs in the state to total state population in 2001 census is 20.3 and is 14.51 to the total STs Population in India.<sup>1</sup>

Before discussing on the present topic, it is important to discuss some basic concepts and definitions of the tribe to know the importance of culture in tribal life. According to Imperial Gazetteers of India, "a tribe is collection of families bearing a common name, speaking a common dialect, occupying or professing to occupy a common territory and is not usually endogamous, though originally it might have been so". Similarly, the Oxford Dictionary defines, "a tribe is a group of people in a primitive or barbarous state of development acknowledging the authority of a chief and usually regarding them as having a common ancestor". Prof. D. N. Majumdar,<sup>2</sup> a noted anthropologist defines tribe as, a tribe is a social group with territorial affiliation, endogamous, with no specialization of functions, ruled by tribal affairs, hereditary or otherwise, united in language or dialect, recognizing social distance with other tribes or castes, without any social obloquy attaching to them, as it does in the caste structure, following tribal traditions, beliefs and customs, illiberal of naturalization of ideas from alien sources, above all conscious of homogeneity of ethnic and territorial integration. From these definitions, it is clear that tribes possess some special characteristic features which differentiate them from others. They are culturally very rich and each tribal group has a specific cultural feature which helps them to identify them from others. The history of expressing their feelings and ideas about themselves, their surrounding environments in various modes of a particular tribe or cultural group is very long, which may trace up to the prehistoric times. The resourceful exercise of the imagination comes in the form of verbal, musical, visual dance and other form of expression. This depiction of feelings and thoughts in any form may be called as art. While defining the meaning of art, Ember *et.al.*<sup>3</sup> have opined "art is clearly an old feature of human culture". This art expresses feelings and ideas; from the view point of the observer or participant, it evokes feelings and ideas. The feelings and ideas on each side may or may not be exactly the same. The study of tribal art is very essential for an anthropologists, because the "anthropologists have found that art reflects the cultural values and concerns of a people. This is especially true of the verbal arts-myths, legends, and tales. From these the anthropologist may learn how a people order their universe, and may discover much about a people's history as well. Also, music and the visual arts, such as sculpture, may provide insights into a people's world view and, through distributional studies, may suggest things about a people's history".<sup>4</sup>

All societies decorate or adorn the body, temporarily or permanently. But there is enormous cultural variation in the parts decorated and how. Body decoration may be used to delineate social position, gender, or occupation. It may also have an erotic significance, as, for example, in drawing attention to erogenous zones of the body.<sup>5</sup> Usually the all kinds of tribal art are related to the myths, rituals, and festivals, magical or magico-religious practices of a particular tribal community. The creative culture in tribal societies is not compartmentalized as the elite arts in civilized societies, but closely integrated to each other. The art of painting, sculpture engraving, singing and dancing are part of performance of rituals, marriages, fairs and festivals etc. No distinction between the artist and craftsman is maintained among these simple societies. Tattoo is one of the important modes of body decoration, profoundly evident among the tribal people of India as well as abroad which is treated as an integral part of their life and culture.

In this paper, an emphasis has been given to highlight how the body decoration of the Baiga tribe is one of the important aspects of their culture which is based on five years staying in a Baigas inhabitant area of central India. The main objectives of the paper is to discuss the importance of tattoo in the tribal life; to analyse the symbols used in tattoo and their significance; to describe the method of tattooing and to show the continuity and change in the process, materials and symbols of tattoo.

### **The People and Area**

Baiga is one of the Particularly Venerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) (earlier PTGs) of Madhya Pradesh, known for their traditional method of treatment and shifting cultivation. Apart from this shifting cultivation, they are also very much depending upon the forest based economy. Although after the imposition of Indian Forest Act and various government pressures they have shifted from shifting cultivation to settled agriculture, but yet now, they are very much dependent upon the local forest for their livelihood. These Baigas are residing in seven blocks of Dindori district (undivided Mandla) of Madhya Pradesh, *i.e.* Dindori, Shahpura, Mehdwani, Amarpur, Samnapur, Karanjia and Bajag. Because of the dominance of Baiga in a particular area of Dindori district, it is known as Baigachak (pocket of the Baigas). This Baigachak consist of 52 villages. According to 2001 census, there are 23,443 Baigas are residing in 202 villages in these above seven blocks. Out of these, 11,753 are male and 11,690 are female. The sex ratio of the Baigas in this district is 995 per thousand. Out of these, about 9,000 Baigas are residing in 52 villages of Baigachak.<sup>6</sup>

In 1980, this area of Baigachak was earmarked by a Forest officer, as an abode for the shifting cultivator. Baiga, who were given freedom to continue with the practice of slash and burn cultivation,. Subsequently, the Baigachak villages were converted into forest villages under Indian Forest Act.

Thereafter, some restrictions were imposed on shifting cultivation in these forest villages and gradually it was banned and the inhabitants were assisted to adopt settled agriculture.

The present paper is a result of continuous field work in different hamlets of village Kharidih which is a forest village located inside the Maikal Range in Karanjia block of Dindori district in Madhya Pradesh. It is located about 28 km from the block headquarters and 08 kms from Gopalpur, the nearest market centre. Although both the tribe and caste people are residing in this village, Baiga is dominant over all. After the introduction of this NGO, the various kind of developmental works have been made in this village, such as the development of irrigation facilities, crop protection, land preparation, increasing of soil fertility, inclined towards animal husbandry, herbal gardening and cottage industry etc.

### **Tattoo and the Baiga Tribe**

From the point view of the tribal concentration, India is second in number and comes next to the African continent. According to the 1991 census, there is about 678 crores tribal people were residing in this country which is 8.08% of the total population. Undivided Madhya Pradesh had the largest proportions of Scheduled Tribe population of 23.27 percent which were divided into 46 tribal groups. Out some are very primitive in nature. The tradition of body decoration is not only restricted among the people of India, but also popular in Arab, Africa, Australia, Polynesia etc. A person having a number of tattoos in his body is believed as a good warrior by the Africans. In India, this body decoration is very much popular among the tribal and non-tribal of both the mainland and islands. It is an integral part of the culture among the central Indian tribes. Apart from the body decoration, this tradition of tattooing is very much associated with the belief system, folklore, social structure, religion, and medicinal value etc of the tribes concerned. Hence, the tradition of tattooing transmits from generation to generation.

As mentioned earlier, Baiga is one of the Particularly Venerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) known for their traditional method of treatment and shifting cultivation. They live in a particular forested area of Dindori district identified as "Baigachawk". Both the male and female Baigas are very fond of body decoration. They like to wear various ornaments, made of gold, silver, plastic, grass and wood etc, in their different body parts. Besides, the female members like to decorate their body with different kinds of tattoos. Each of these tattoos has a specific cultural significance and tattooed at a particular age and a specific location of the body. For example, *Seeta Rasoi*, a tattoo comprising the symbol of a hearth, plate and spoons, is tattooed at the forehead of a Baiga girl when she became an adult.<sup>7</sup> The details of the tattoo marks used by the Baigas are given in table-1. Besides, the tattoo marks are also found in the thighs, back, knee, leg, arm, breast, forearm etc.

**Table-1: Symbol and Location of different types of tattoo in the Baiga**

S. No	Symbol	Local Name	Sex	Age / Time	Parts of body tattooed	Remarks
01	lines of dots	Kajeri	female	after marriage	thighs	-
02	lines of dots	Palani	female	after marriage	thighs	-
03	round like flower	Phulia	female	-	knee	-
04	flies	Mokhi	female	-	back	-
05	fish bones	Machhli ki haddi	female	after marriage	leg	not tatted until marriage
06	steel	Chakmak	female	after marriage	leg	not tatted until marriage
07	Hearth, plates, spoon	Seeta Rasoi	female	after adolescent	Forehead	before marriage
08	the turmeric root	Haldi gath	female	when a girl reaches puberty	arm	-
09	peacock	-	female	when a girl reaches puberty	Breast	Not tattooed until she is adolescent
10	basket	Dauri	female	when a girl reaches puberty	breast	-
11	triangular	-	female	about five years	forehead	-
12	a pattern of any kind	Jhopori	female	at the time of marriage or later	on the back of the hand	-
13	magic chain (?)	Sakri	female	-		-
14	-	Dhanda	female	-		-
15	-	Bai / Ankhi	female	-	Between the Palani	-
16	scorpion	Bichhu	both male & female	-	forearm	-
17	moon	Chandama ma	male	-	back of the hand	-
18	-	-	male	-	affected parts of the body	in order to cure rheumatism

(Source: After Elwin 2007; Mohanta 2013, p. 95)

## Cultural Significances

Although, now-a-days, the body tattooing is became a fashion round the world, but still it has some cultural significance in the tribal world. Body tattooing is very much essential and a community marker for some of the tribal groups of central India. It is related to their religion, belief system, health care practice, body decoration, social status, wealth etc. The tribes of central India usually like to tattoo various symbols related to their totem, god and goddess. It is a common believe among them that, these deities and ancestors protect them from different natural calamities, evil spirits, black magic, enemies, wild animals etc. Tattooing in some specific parts of the body has some medicinal value and it is believed that this tattoo helps them to cure from some typical diseases.

It is a commonly found among most of the central Indian tribes that, a tribal girl should tattoo her body prior to marriage. If she is not tattooed prior to her marriage, then in-laws demand compensation against that, this tattoo is treated as the best dowry which a bride brought with her during marriage. At the time of describing the relevance of the tattoo with social status, Ember *et.al.* have mentioned "...in addition to satisfying aesthetic needs, body decoration or adornment may be used to delineate social position, rank, sex, occupation, local and ethnic identity, or religion within a society. Along with social stratification come visual means of declaring status".<sup>8</sup>

The tattoo is treated as the wealth and ornament of the tribal. The ornaments made of metal, plastic, wood and grass are temporary in nature and can be broke or removed at any stage of time or there is a possibility of theft. Besides, these are costly which is always not possible to afford by a economically poor tribe. On the other hand, the tattoo is not comparatively less costly then the jewellery made of above materials and is permanent in nature which does not left body even after the death. Therefore, the tribal people treat it as a wealth and like to adorn their body with various types of tattoo marks. At the time of analyzing the tattooing in Central India, Luard<sup>9</sup> has stated "...and that is that the wearers of these devices only look upon them as ornamental; and decorative devices, with no deeper significance". Analysing the statement Elwin<sup>10</sup> has mentioned that "if by 'deeper significance' are meant such fancies as that the tattoo-marks represent totem animals portrayed on her body, this is probably true. But for the Baiga the marks have another and much more serious significance. They are a form of sexual expression and a powerful sexual stimulant".

Tattooing is one of the important modes to provoke the sexual desire. The tattooing of body parts for sexual expression has a long history. At the time of describing about the tattooing of different body parts for the said purpose, Ember *et.al.*<sup>11</sup> have mentioned that, "We have only to follow the fashion trends for women of Europe and North America during the past 300 years, with their history of pinched waists, ballooned hips, bustled rumps, exaggerated breasts, painted faces, and exposed bosoms, to realize the

significance of body adornment for sexual provocation. Why some societies emphasize erotic adornment of women and others emphasizes it in men is not yet understood". Further they have mentioned "The erotic significance of somebody decoration is also apparent. Women draw attention to erogenous zones of the body by painting, as one of the lips, and by attaching some object- an earring, a flower behind the ear, a necklace, bracelet, brooch, anklet, or belt. Men draw attention, too, by beards, tattoos, and penis sheaths (in some otherwise naked societies) that point upward".<sup>12</sup> In central India, the Baiga female tattooed an oblong figure just above the buttock representing the gate. Similarly, a symbol of a peacock is tattooed at the breast when a girl reaches puberty. It is strictly not tattooed until she is adolescent. Apart from this symbol, they also tattooed a symbol of basket (dauri) at their breast when a girl reaches puberty. Probably, these tattoos are made to attract the male sexual purpose.

## Conclusion

Till the recent past, tattoo was treated one of the most important aspects of the tribal life and culture. Body tattooing was very much essential for some tribal groups of central India. This tribal group was using their traditional method and handmade colour for this purpose, but now a days, this tradition has been changed. Presently, it does not confine within the people of the tribal and folk communities, it enters in to the life and cultures of the urban people and it became their important fashion which present in their dress and body. Earlier, only a few specialists were practicing this work as their profession which was one of their important sources of earning. But, now a days, this tattooing became very much commercialized and tattooing by using wooden nail or iron needle is replaced with battery operated tattooing machine and local handmade ink is with readymade chemical colour which are easily available in any local market centres. Persons having battery operated tattooing machine are frequently seen in fair and weekly market centres of central India. Because of the modernization and commercialization of tattooing, it is gradually losing its cultural values. The traditional tattoo symbols consisting of different flora, fauna, and flower etc, which was one of the important evidence to shows the man-environment relationship of a particular community; the impact of a particular symbol in the religious and socio-cultural life is decreasing gradually. On the other hand, the tattooing of different names in different scripts is widely found at the present time. This tattoo used by the tribal people is one of the important aspects of the tribal art of India which still bearing the tribal culture and their identity. On the basis of the symbols used in the tattoo and their location one can able to estimate the richness of the tribal art and also able to distinguish the tribal art from other art of the country. In this context based on the above discussion, it may conclude that tattooing is one of the important aspects of art form of the Baiga culture which not only used to decorate their body but also has different cultural significances. This tradition of body

tattooing among the Baiga tribe is a part and parcel of their life and culture which continuing from generation to generation and without describing their tattooing, it is simply impossible to know the cultural heritage of this small and comparatively isolated tribal group of central India.

## References

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