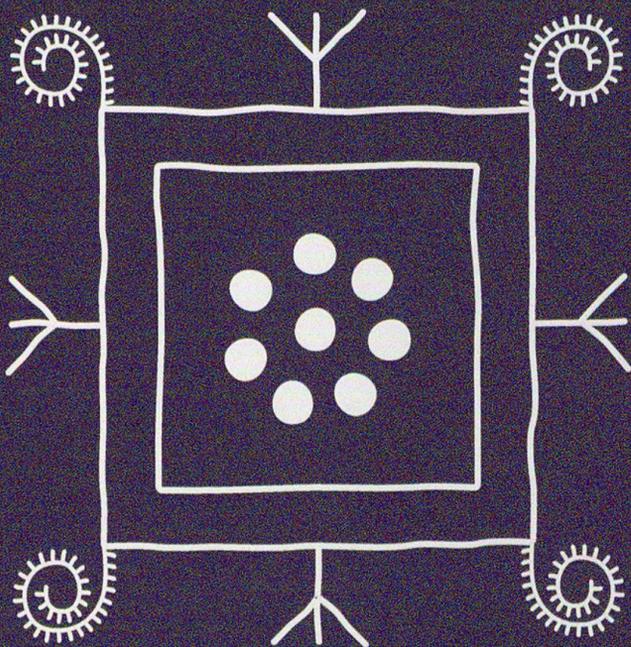


Final Report

PROJECT REPORT

EXPRESSIONS OF IDENTITY

Traditional Practices of Tattoo among Tribal Communities



The report is submitted by the Tribal Fund for Documentation and Conservation, for the project titled-'Expressions of Identity - Traditional Practices of Tattoo among Tribal Communities'. The project was undertaken for the grant received from Sangeet Natak Akademi, Ministry of Culture, under the scheme for Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2015-16.

The Tribal Fund for Documentation and Conservation, is a not for profit organisation. The organisation seeks to sustainably preserve and further the legacy of India's adivasis (tribal communities) with an aim to encourage conservation and to keep a living heritage. Our aim is to strengthen and protect the 'vanishing' culture of these communities by creating awareness with future generations.

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*'Show me a man with a tattoo and I'll
show you a man with interesting past'*

Jack London

Introduction to the Tradition of Tattoos among Tribal Communities

In his works, 'Anthropology of symbols', O P Joshi said, "*tattoos are a permanent mark applied on the body of a person and is neither transferrable nor sellable like other designs.*"

Since ancient times, a large number of communities and thousands of people in India have followed a rich culture and tradition of tattooing, known as *godna*, in Hindi. Each community uses a different word for tattoo, based on their local language. People across borders and geographies had followed the tradition of tattoo. The design and the significance of tattoos in India is diverse. For some it's a 'mark of identity', some people get themselves tattooed to protect themselves against evil spirits, for some it's a symbol of 'religious devotion' and for some it's a 'mark of bravery'.

As per the tribal beliefs, tattoos not only beautify the human body, but it is something which also goes with them afterlife. For them, tattoo transmit a vast body of information – about who they are and where they came from. There are stories and legends attached to the unique tradition of tattoo of each community – which explains the distinctness.

Tattoo motifs reflect nature and surrounding environment and some elements of their occupation. Some communities make motifs related to agriculture.

Levi Strauss, French anthropologist, argued that cultures also have structure and every structure has a function. Like any other aspect of culture, tattoo also has functions. The tradition reflects certain aspects of cultural expression and rites of passage. He believes that the purpose of tattoo is "*not only to imprint a drawing onto the flesh but also to stamp onto the mind all the traditions and philosophy of the group*".

A myth prevalent amongst the Gond community of Madhya Pradesh describes the origin of the tradition of tattooing. *Mahadev, the supreme God, once invited all the gods to a feast. A Gond deity also went with others. The goddesses were sitting in a separate group with Parvati. Later, the Gond god went there to fetch his wife but amongst so many he could not recognise her wife. By mistake he put*

his hand around Parvati's shoulder. Mahadev knew that it was only a mistake and laughed, but Parvati was very angry. She commanded the tribal women to wear specific tattooing marks to distinguish themselves from other castes. Since then tattoo has become an important custom among the tribal communities.

The tribal people believe that every material thing is left here in this world, but the only thing which goes with them to God are their tattoo marks. The indelible tattoo mark is the ornament of the spirit, which goes to *Mahaprabhu*.

In many communities, the tradition is mostly followed by the women folk. There are some communities like the Konyak Nagas of Nagaland, where men folk follow this tradition.

RABARI

Introduction to the Community

The Rabari community resides in the State of Gujarat, with Kutch being the major concentration area. A nomadic community, they were primarily camel herders and shepherders. Over the years, there has been a shift in their traditional livelihood patterns, and today a very small percentage of the population is following the traditional occupation.

According to the local legends, Rabaris were earlier settled in Rajasthan, before they migrated to Gujarat. Though a small percentage of the population can still be found in Rajasthan, but their main area of concentration is Gujarat.

Rabaris are known for their art, and this is also an identifiable feature for the community. The colourful and vibrant embroidery patterns, the mirror work on the mud walls, the jewellery adorned by both men and women and the tattoos of the women folk.

Within the community, there are three sub-groups – the Vagariya Rabari, Debariya Rabari and the Kasi Rabari. The distinctness among all the three groups is primarily made based on their art of embroidery. The style and patterns of all the three groups are distinct from each other – which gives them their identity. Though embroidery is one of the aspect of the identity of the Rabari community, the traditional form and practice of embroidery was stopped 30 years ago. The village headmen and leaders thought that making one piece of embroidery takes a lot of time of a woman, thus delaying her age of marriage. Therefore, they decided to stop the practice for personal use, and only allowed small pieces of embroidery work to be carried out, for the purpose of sale.

The art of body adornment – *trajua* (tattoo) is another major aspect of their culture, which distinguishes them from other communities, in the region.

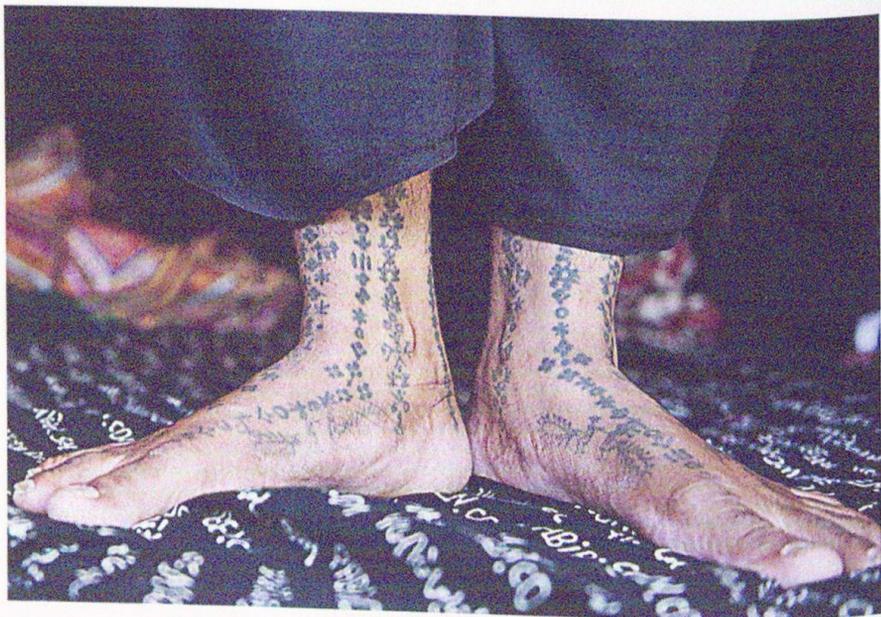
Trajua

Every Rabari women is required to get *trajua* – the traditional tattoo motifs inscribed on her skin around the age of ten years. In earlier times, a girl was looked down by her in-laws if she didn't followed the tradition of tattoo. People of the community believed that if a woman is not tattooed then she is inferior to her husband, and she will not be able to have any control on her husband.

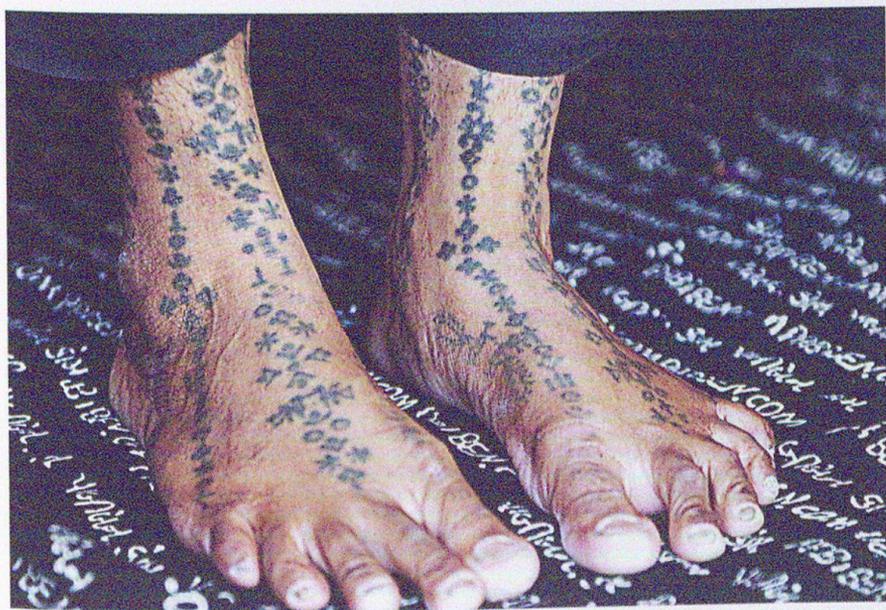
The Rabari women get their neck, hands and legs tattooed. Motifs representing their surrounding environment – elements from nature – shapes of animals and birds, are drawn as part of their tattoo designs. There are different designs for hands, legs and neck. The tattoo patterns on the hands are collectively known as *padsolo*, and the patterns on the neck are known as *nadeeme*.



The motifs of padsolo

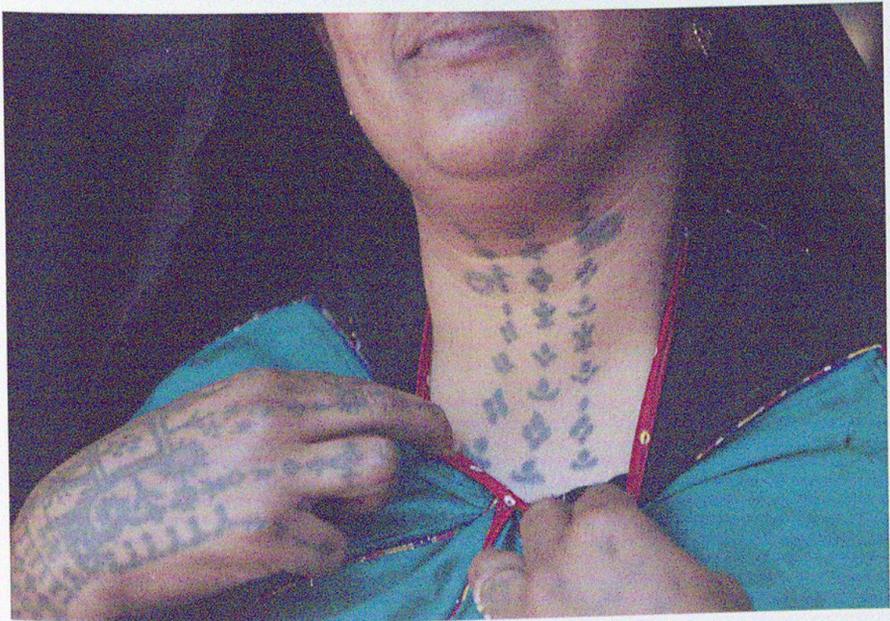


Photos depicting the various motifs drawn on the legs as tattoo marks





Woman showing tattoo marks on her hands



Nadeeme: a group of tattoos drawn on the neck

Details of the Process

The people of the Vaghri community work as tattoo artist for the Rabari people. As *Janmashtami* is one of the main festival for the community – huge fairs are organised during this time. The Janmashtami fair is also the time when these tattoo artist travel from one place to another, to get the people inked with tattoo marks.

Decades ago, the artist used needles as tools for inscribing the patterns, but with modernisation taking place, the traditional tools have been replaced by machines. Today, even women of the middle age group don't know about the traditional process of tattoo making, as they got their tattoos made through a machine.

Changes Taking Place

Over the years, the tradition has lost its significance. With more number of people migrating to cities and towns and increasing level of awareness about other cultures and traditions, people of the community think of themselves as backward. It is because of this that the younger generation is not much interested in carrying forward the tradition.

Women like Pabiben, a resident of Ajnar village, Kutch, also think that tattoo has no use and no significance. For her getting tattoo done on one's body is like, '*paisa de ke, dard lo*' (you have to pay for getting pain). She got her tattoo done at the age of 10 years, but as she grew up, she told other women in her family and village, that tattoo has no significance. Nakiben and Soniben, are two women from the same village who refused to get tattoo done, after being influenced by the words of Pabiben.

ORAON

Introduction to the Community

Also referred to as Kurukh people, the people of Oraon tribe live in Sambalpur and Sundargarh districts of Odisha. The community has its own language, called the Kurukh language, which is a part of the Dravidian language family. In recent years, the people of the community have also adopted the Oriya language, because of their integration with the neighbouring communities. At present, Kurukh language is majorly spoken by the people of middle and older age groups.

Oraon is a culturally rich community. A lot of their customs and traditions, especially related to music, dance and festival are still vividly followed by the community. A wide variety of musical instruments made up of materials like mud, wood, bamboo, brass and animal skin are used during their celebrations. Folk tales, which talk about the moral values are still a part of the community traditions, and these folk tales are narrated by the *pahan* (pujari) to the younger generation.

Every community member is fond of dancing and is also well versed with the folk songs. The folk songs and folktales of the community have not been recorded. They are passed down from one generation to another, orally.

Kodna – The Identity of the Community

Legends tell that tattoos have been incorporated into the tribal customs and traditions with a view to give identity to the people and to the community. The tradition of tattoo among the women folk of the Oraon community shares the same thought. Rupni Oram said "*kodna hamare jaat ka pehchaan hai*" (tattoo is the identity of our community). The community has a tradition of getting elaborate tattoo marks on their hands, neck, legs and forehead. An Oraon woman gets her first tattoo done at the age of 10-12 years. For Oraon women, tattoo is a 'mark of identity'. They share that an outsider can easily identify them by simply looking at their forehead.

According to their social customs, the people of the Oraon community don't accept water from people outside their community. So, when they are out of their village, by looking at the face of a person, they know whether they have to accept water from that person or not.

Oraon people believe in life after death. They believe that it is the tattoo marks which will help them to identify members of their community in heaven, after death. According to an Oraon saying – *“your body, your beauty, your skin – everything will be left here. It is only the kodna which will go with you after death”*. During the study, some women also shared that ‘when we leave our homes after marriage, we leave everything here; but our tattoos are something that we will take with us.’ Oraon women don’t get a share in their father’s property, so for them the tattoos are their belongings.

Patterns and Motifs

The tattoos of the Oraons are more refined and has a systematic layout with symmetry, and repeated in a uniform way. Some motifs represent dots, while some are made with lines and leaf-like patterns.

People from the community shared their knowledge about the tradition of the tattoo – the motifs drawn and their significance. Various facial tattoos of the community consist of a motif on the forehead, a black dot on left side of the chin and left nostril. The facial tattoos are done to beautify the women. The tattoo mark on the forehead is locally known as *paani jahaz* (ship). During the time of marriage, *sindoor* is also applied to the tattoo on the forehead. The tattoos drawn on arms and on the legs, represent same motifs. Oraon women get tattoo only on their left hands, and they believe it is done to ward off the evil spirit.

The various patterns adorned by the women showcase different motifs, but during the study we couldn’t find anyone who could explain the significance and details of these motifs.



Decorative tattoo motifs on the chest of an Oraon woman



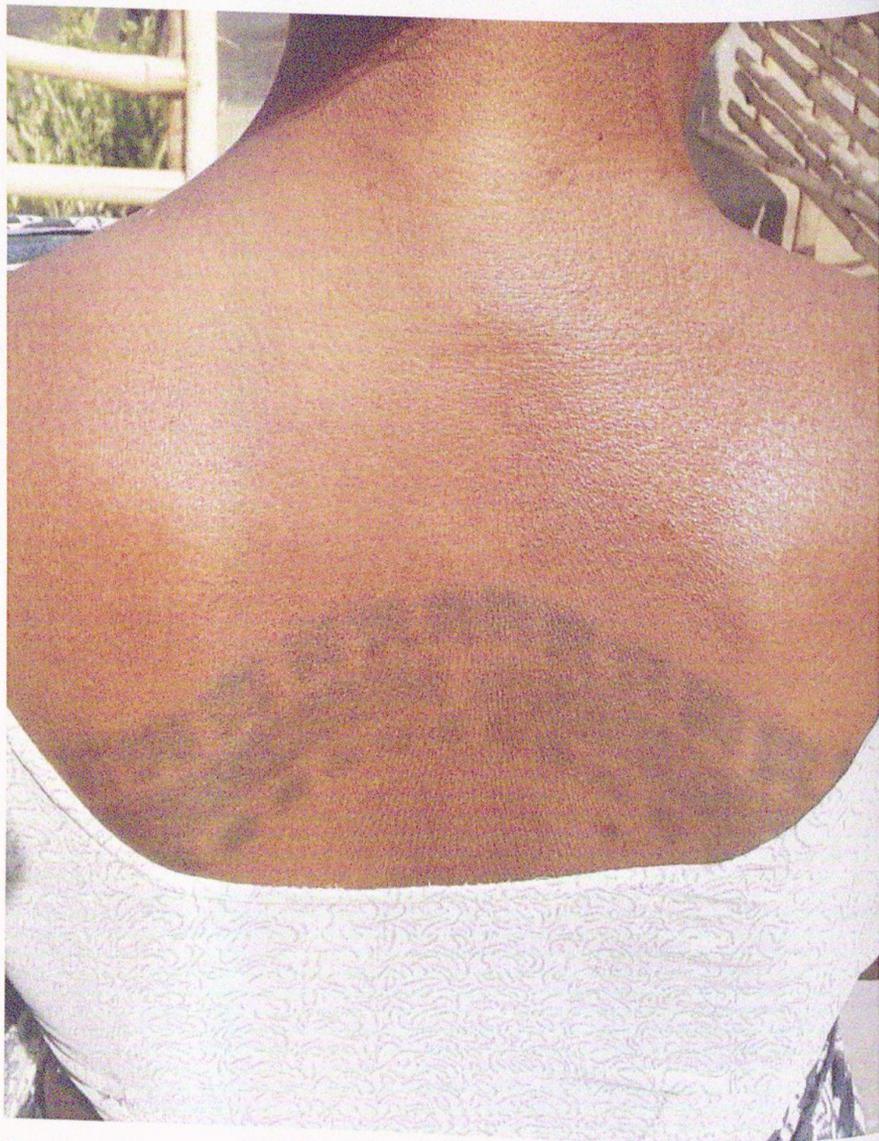
Elaborate tattoo marks on the arms of a woman



An Oraon woman with tattoos on her forehead and left side of the chin and left nostril



Tattoo patterns drawn on the hand



Traditional pattern on the back



Traditional pattern on the chest

Details of the Process

The women of Malhar community, work as tattoo artist for Oraon people. They are a nomadic community, and live in dense forest areas. They travel from one village to another during the time of fairs and festivals in search of Oraon people who want to get the tattoo done. The art is not specifically taught to the next generation, but a young girl learns the art and the process of making tattoo by observing her mother, as she accompanies her during her travels. The Malhar community has been following their ancestral tradition of working as a tattoo artist.

The process of getting a woman inked with traditional tattoo marks involves certain rituals and the use of the traditional tattoo tools. A bunch of needles tied together, a small wooden stick, a black pot containing *kajal* (*kajal* made up by putting a *diya* over a lamp, the soot collected is the *kajal*), and milk of a lactating mother is used during the process. The *kajal* is mixed with the milk and the paste is then used to draw the patterns on the body with the help of the wooden stick. These patterns are then pierced with the help of the needles to give a permanent mark on the skin. The pricking process is done two-three times to give it a permanent mark.

The idea of hygiene and the process of sterilisation of needles is not followed by these groups of communities. They believe that since ancient times similar processes have been followed and the people have never got any skin infections or any other illness.

After the process is completed, turmeric powder is applied to the tattoo marks. Women get swelling on their tattooed body parts which take weeks to heal. Sushila, who got her tattoo done at the age of 12 years, shared that when she got her tattoo done, it was a very painful experience. The tattoo artist came to her home again the next day, carrying a bunch of green grass, with an aim to perform some *jhar-phoonk* along with some *mantras*. She shared, that the artist later made a paste of salt, mustard oil and turmeric, and with the help of green grass applied the paste on the tattooed patterns. With a smile on her face, she said 'after applying that paste, my tattoos got a glittering effect and I felt very happy'.

Earlier there was no fixed amount which the artists asked for making the tattoos. Whatever the artist demanded, the person had to pay that, otherwise she was cursed by the tattoo artist. The community also believes that if the artist gives a curse, then the tattoo marks don't heal and the woman gets an infection.

The tattoo artist used to take a bowl of locally made beer or rice, for making the tattoos. At present, the cost of one tattoo mark starts from Rs.50 and goes higher depending on the patterns to be drawn. If someone don't want to get the tattoo done, then also the artists ask for money, and out of the fear of getting a curse, people pay for it.

During the study, we were not able to meet any of the tattoo artists, as they are nomadic people, residing inside deep forests. Fairs and other major festivals of the community is the only time, when one can find these artists in Oraon villages.

Changes Taking Place

Though the threads of folk culture are still intact in the Oraon community, changes have started taking place in certain traditions and customs. The tradition of tattoo is losing its importance. The younger generation is not much interested in getting these tattoo marks. Years ago, the community considered tattoos as 'mark of identity', whereas the present generation is seeing tattoos as 'a sign of backwardness'. For the young girls of the community, it's a painful process and makes them look ugly. Felix, one of the male member from the community shared his concern regarding the vanishing cultural practices of the community, and said, 'the designs which once added to the beauty of the women are no longer considered important by women of the younger age group.

Migration to cities and towns has also started taking place in Oraon villages. Young girls who are now moving to cities for higher education and in search of jobs, and are getting their tattoos removed. A young girl from the community shared that they are often asked to remove their tattoo marks, when they apply for government jobs.

The Oraon community is also one of the many communities where conversion to Christianity has taken place. The conversion of religion also led to the decline in

traditional cultural practices. The people following Christianity no longer follow the tradition of tattoo. Even if they want to get a tattoo done, the motif is that of a 'cross symbol'.

For women like Nilima Barla, *kodna* is a symbol of her community. According to her, if her husband dies before her, then he will be able to identify her in heaven, because of her tattoo marks. She also shared her concerns and said – 'the younger generation is not understanding the value of culture and heritage. Over the years, the number of girls getting tattoos have declined. For us, *kodna* was ornamental, it made us look more beautiful. Young girls nowadays, find it to be ugly. Instead of girls, boys are now getting tattoos done, the modern designs and patterns they find it to be fashionable, and because of this, we hardly get to see Malhar people now.'

On one hand, the younger generation is not continuing the tradition, and on the other hand the older generation still holds the view that they should not forget their cultural practices. Samari Oram, a 42-year-old woman from Nuagaon shared that the young girls should get at least some tattoo marks, so that they are identified by their forefathers in life after death.

During the study, it was found that the elderly women had very elaborate and complex tattoo patterns on their legs, chest and arms, women in the middle age group had tattoos on their hands and on their face, whereas it was hard to find any young girl with such tattoos marks.

SANTHAL

Introduction to the Community

Belonging to pre-Aryan period, Santhal people are largely found in the regions of Bihar, Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha. The people of the community speak the Santhali language. Though the elder members of the community are more fluent with the Santhali language only, over the years the younger generation has adopted Bengali, Oriya, and Hindi language too.

The forest dependent community also gets involved in fishing and hunting activities. In recent years, migration has taken place in the community, and people have started moving out of their region, to the nearby cities and town, to work in plantations, mines and industries.

The Tradition of *Khodna*

Khodna – the art of tattoo, had been followed by the people of Santhal community since time immemorial. For many women in the community, *khodna* is not just an art, it is a tradition that has been passed down from one generation to another. For all the women interviewed for the study, they are carrying forward the tradition because it's a part of their culture. They believe it is important to preserve what their ancestors have left for them.

A Santhal girl gets her first tattoo done at the age of 9-10 years on her hands and feet. She gets her *khodna* done on her chest after she attains puberty. If a girl doesn't get *khodna* on her chest when she attains puberty, then it is done when she gets married.

The community believes that the pain of tattoo prepares a girl for the pain of becoming a mother and gives her the strength to face various challenges in life. A non-tattooed Santhal woman is considered unsuitable for marriage. Elder women of the community believe – more the number of *khodna* you get done, the stronger you become.

Significance of the Tradition

While questioning about the significance of *khodna*, we came across a couple of stories. For some people *khodna* is something which goes with them after their death. According to local legends, after reaching heaven, people need money to

buy things which are necessary for their survival. As they don't have money, they give away their tattoos in exchange of material things.

Another story tells that during the reign of Rajas in the region, they used to kidnap the Santhal girls and women. The problem kept on increasing and it was becoming difficult for the people of the community to protect their women. To battle against this growing issue and to save their women folk from the atrocities of the Rajas, the community people started getting *khodna* on the body of their women folk, with a view to make them look displeasing.

Some women shared, the practice of getting tattooed is ancient, it goes back to the times of Mughal dynasty. According to the legends shared by them, menfolk of the Santhal community were warriors and worked in the army of Babur. In the absence of men in the house, during the time of war, outside people used to come and misbehave with the women of the community. To make their women strong, they used to get them tattooed in middle childhood years. They believed that the pain of getting tattooed will prepare them to face any pain or difficulty in life.

Patterns & Motifs

The community is dependent upon forest and natural resources for fulfilling their day-to-day needs. Champa Devi of Merudaru village shared that the patterns and motifs drawn as *khodna* represent their environment and surroundings. The tattoo marks include motifs of – sun, moon, stars, *kadam* flower (*Haldina cordifolia*) and the various figures representing flora and fauna.

The sun appears as a popular sign and it is a representation of Santhal supreme deity Sin Bonga (Sun god).

The Tattoo Artist

People of the Malhar community work as tattoo artist for the Santhal people.

Malhar people do not share village space with Santhals. They have their own village settlements. During the month of December-January, they travel to the Santhal villages to give this permanence of art to the women. For Malhar people, it is an art form that their forefathers have been practicing and it has been preserved over the centuries. It's their duty to carry the tradition.



Traditional patterns of khodna



Traditional patterns of khodna



Traditional patterns of khodna



Traditional patterns of khodna

In earlier times, the tattoo artist used to charge some money and a handful of rice and grains for making the tattoos. Nowadays, the cost for getting tattoo done ranges from Rs.300-500. Mayku Devi shared that these days very few tattoo artists can be seen in their region – tattoo making has become a part-time activity for them, as the young Santhal girls do not believe in the practice.

During our visit, we couldn't meet any tattoo artist because nowadays very few people practice this art and those who do, are not easy to locate.

Process

Before every new beginning, the religious Santhal pay homage to their deity, and pray for happiness and prosperity of their family and community. Similarly, during the process of *khodna* also, *gaon devta* (village deity) is worshiped.

The process of making the *khodna* takes place early in the morning and the person getting the *khodna* done is required to be fasting.

When a girl gets her *khodna* done, womenfolk of her family and some elder women from the village join in the process. While the Malhar woman starts the tattoo making process, the Santhal women sing and dance to celebrate the occasion. To encourage the young Santhal girl, who is getting the *khodna* done, the elder women tell stories and share with her the significance of the tradition of tattoo, and their experiences.

Wood-charcoal is mixed with milk to draw the tattoo patterns on the body. These patterns are then punctured with needles to give it a permanent mark. After the process of *khodna* is completed, the tattoo marks are washed before the girl enters her house. The mother of the young Santhal girl smears her tattoo marks with lukewarm water and turmeric paste. Fresh cow dung is then applied to the tattoos – it's a natural cooling agent as well as antiseptic.

Changes Taking Place & Community Concerns

Changes have started taking place in the cultural tradition of the community. The young girls are not following the tradition. They are of the view that getting tattooed is a very painful process, so why to take so much of pain to make yourself look ugly.

On one hand where Sukurni Devi of Chargi village feels it's a part of their heritage and an identity of the community, her daughter is against the tradition. Referring herself as *purana*(old) and the younger generation as *naya*(new), Sukurni Devi said '*naye aur purane log mein bahut antar hai, naya didi ab shikshit ho gai hai, wo in sab reeti-riwaaz mein vishwas nahi rakhte*' (there is a difference between older and younger generation, the younger generation is now getting educated and does not believe in these traditions and cultural practices).

The elder womenfolk of the community shared their concern regarding the prevailing trend with regard to cultural practices. According to them, if the younger generation will stop following these practices, it will lead to vanishing of their traditional art form.

While on one hand, there are women who are concerned about the culture and heritage of their community and want it to be preserved, there are others like Srimati Devi who doesn't want her daughter to get the *khodna* as it's a very painful process.

Savitri Devi from Arjuwa village shared – 'if such transitions continue to take place, an art form from our community will be lost forever, which is not a good sign for our community.'

While talking about the tradition and practice of tattoo, Alomuni Hembrum shared- 'I got my first tattoo done when I was ten years old. No one in my family asked me or forced me to get it done. I got myself tattooed because every woman in my family was tattooed. I found it to be an important part of our culture. Things are changing now – younger generation is no longer interested in this practice. This is affecting our cultural heritage. If this continues, they will lose their cultural identity.'

MURIA

Introduction to the Community

The people of Muria community, who are known for their craft and traditional practice of ghotul – the youth dormitory, inhabit the interior areas of the Bastar district, Chhattisgarh. People shared – within the community, there are two sub-groups – Gond Muria and Raj Muria, and variations can be observed in their customs and practices.

The Raj Muria belong to the Aryan sect, and the Gond Muria to the Dravidian sect. The Raj Murias are said to have dynastical links with the King of Bastar, and they have been working as cluster zamindars. The Gond Murias, who are known as migrants, were brought to the region by the Raj Murias, to work as hunters and gatherers.

Muria is an agriculture dependent community. The main source of livelihood is agriculture, collecting forest produce and non-timber forest produce. Some of them also work as wage labourers.

The community still follows birth & death related age old practices, but a change has been observed in their marriage rituals. With the exposure to and interaction with the outside community, they have adopted the practices of Hindu religion.

The Tradition of Godna

In the Muria community, it's only the women who are tattooed, and the art of tattoo is known as *godna*, locally.

Only a woman with tattoo marks can perform ceremonies and rituals during festivals. Only the tattooed women are also allowed to cook food during the annual passage rites of ancestors.

Muria women get the *godna* done on their hands, legs, forearms and chest. A Gond Muria girl is required to get the *godna* before she attains puberty, near the age of 10 years. While a Raj Muria woman is tattooed after her marriage. The patterns and style of making tattoo is same for both the groups – Gond Muria and Raj Muria, it's only the age at which a girl gets tattooed, that differs.

In the region, women over the age of 30 years are found with tattoo marks on their hands and legs. Women over the age of 50 years are found to be tattooed on the chest and forearms. Young, school going girls are no longer interested in the tradition. Most women with tattoo marks are in their middle age or old age.

Earlier, the tradition was solely followed by the women folk, but now men have also started getting themselves tattooed. The tattoos adorned by men are not traditional in nature. These tattoos are made by the people during community fairs and festivals – like Chitrakut Mela, Chaitra Mela and Dussehra. The tattoo artist visits these fairs. The identity of these artists is not known to the Muria people.

The Tattoo Artist

The woman working as a tattoo artist is known as *godini*, who is also a bangle seller, belonging to a schedule caste community. In earlier days, the *godini* used to travel from one village to another, to sell bangles and to adorn Muria women with traditional tattoo marks. These tattoo artists are no longer found in the region, as the practice of godna has reduced over the years.

Verrier Elwin, in his book, 'The Muria and their Ghotul' (1947) mentioned a local legend about the Muria tattooing tradition. The legend goes like this – *"at the beginning of the world there was no caste distinction among mankind. Mahaprabhu decided to divide men into caste by giving them appropriate presents. A man who was given a net became fisherman; a man who was given a plough became a Gond; a man who was given a pen became a Brahmin. At last, Mahaprabhu found that he had given everything except a drum, and he looked around to see who would take it. A number of men were passing along the road and one of them was lagging behind the others. Mahaprabhu, gave him the drum, telling him, his name was henceforth to be Ojha, and thus the caste began.*

The Ojha, now began to earn his living by wandering from village to village beating his drum, telling stories and begging. One day when he went home in the evening, his food was not ready and he started beating his wife, saying – 'all day I go from place to place earning our living; you stay at home doing nothing and yet you cannot cook my food.' The woman replied, 'I go to the river to get

water, I fetch wood from the forest, I clean the house, I cook the food. What other work am I supposed to do?' She started crying and told herself, she would only eat what she earned. After she had fasted for eight days, Budi Mata's carpet began to shake, and she sent her messenger to find out what was the matter. The messenger took the Ojha woman to the goddess, 'I have no work to do, and so my husband beats me', said the Ojha woman. Budi Mata replied, 'I will give you a special work to, provided you will always worship me'. She took the Ojha woman to the forest and found a sarai tree, she removed some of the gum and put it on an earthen pot, covering it with another pot. Then she smeared both pieces with cow dung and put it on fire. After a little while, she removed the lid and found a black deposit there. She scraped this off and put it in a coconut shell. Into this she added some water, and stirred it well. She then made a bunch of needles, and made the Ojha woman lie down. She then tattooed her. Afterward she washed the tattoo marks with cow dung and applied some oil and turmeric to it. Then she said, 'I have done this for you, but you yourself must do more for yourself. The Ojha woman then started working as a tattoo artist."

The Patterns and Process of Godna

The motifs of the *godna* are made up of four black dots. Each dot representing elements from the surrounding environment which are close to Muria living – soil, water, forest and sky. The number of tattoo vary from one person to another and from one sub-group to another. The number of tattoo is decided based on their *kul* and *gotra*. The reason for and the significance of how it is decided by *kul* and *gotra* was not known to anyone. People have forgotten the stories attached to it. The tattoo artists who would have known the significance were also not found in the villages visited.

In the traditional style of tattoo making, lamp-black, charcoal and pounded incense is mixed with either castor oil/*mahua* oil/sesame oil. The mixture is then put in a broken earthen pot, which is then covered and then put over a fire. The black deposit in the earthen pot is removed and kept separately in a small pot. The tattoo artist then makes a pen of bamboo, which is used to draw the tattoo patterns on the skin. After this a bunch of four-five needles is used to prick the patterns drawn, to give it a permanent mark. Cow dung is then applied all over the tattoo marks, as an antiseptic. For the following next seven days, castor oil is rubbed on the skin to heal them.

Before beginning the process of tattooing, the artist conducts a prayer and recites the name of local deities. Then after the completion of the process the artist accepts rice, turmeric, oil, chillies and salt from the girl's family, and offer it to the deity.

The following pictures showcase, the various patterns by the women within the community, using four black dots as motif.















CONCLUSION

A close interaction with the selected tribal communities and an understanding of their cultural practices highlight the fact that tattoos have served as one of the means of cultural identity for them, irrespective of the geographical differences.

How the practice started hundreds of years ago, and its significance varies for the people in western India to those in eastern India and to the ones in central India, but in present times, each community is fighting the same war. Each community is undergoing transitions – experiencing a cultural loss, and is worried about the future.

Opening of the community to the outer world and their integration with the mainstream society has had its own impact. The rate of migration has increased manifolds. With this has changed the traditional livelihood and occupation systems – leading to changes in the lifestyle patterns. All this also had an impact on the values and belief systems of the communities. The younger generation does not believe in age-old practices and does not seem to be much interested in carrying forward the legacy of their forefathers.

Elders - who are the custodians - are concerned about the future of their community, about the unconscious loss which is taking place. In earlier times, bearing the pain of tattoo made the women stronger and prepared them for facing any difficulty in life. Nowadays, girls don't want to take this pain. They feel that tattoos make them look ugly. They are unaware of the meaning of these traditions, and show little or no concern towards it. Preserving the cultural identity of their community and the idea of following the practice of tattooing is not much appreciated by the younger generation.

None of the selected four communities could clearly define and share the significance of the tradition and its related stories, which tell us that a fragment of history- of their intangible heritage is already lost. The future generations will find it difficult to learn about their community's tradition and history.

The transitions in communities and changes in their cultural practices has not only affected its people, but it had also had an impact on the people associated with them – the artisians who were working for them. Their traditional occupations have been interrupted. Leaving behind their forefather's legacy, they have adopted alternate means of occupation. The change in occupation,

also led them shift to a new geographical location. Local people in the region are unaware of the whereabouts of these artisans.

Loss of traditional knowledge and cultural practices is a growing issue across communities. There is a need to create means for conservation and undertake more such documentation projects – to record and preserve the existing practices. If not recorded, with the passage of time, the existing knowledge and practices will also be lost.

