

The Body as Canvas: Visual Language of Gond Tribal Tattoos in Nagpur District

Nivedita Laxman Thakur¹, Prof. (Dr.) Avadhut Atre²

¹Research Scholar, Faculty of Art and Design, Vishwakarma University, Pune

Email: nivedita.thakur-306@vupune.ac.in

ORCID Id: 0009-0006-7385-8368

²Research Guide, Faculty of Art and Design, Vishwakarma University, Pune

Email: avadhut.atre@vupune.ac.in

ORCID Id: 0000-0001-7006-1974

Abstract:

This study focuses on the cultural and symbolic significance of tattooing tradition among the Gond population of Maharashtra's Nagpur district. Fieldwork, participant observation, and interviews with Gond women, elders, tattoo artists and tattoo researchers form the basis of this ethnographic study. To understand tattooing as a visual language that communicates identity, spirituality, and social affiliation, the research records traditional motifs & its meanings, tattooing techniques, and design placement. According to research, Gond women's tattoos serve as protective, manifestation, and skin-beautification marks that are ingrained in their traditional cosmology. To connect the body to spiritual and cultural continuity, elders highlighted tattoos as bearers of ancestral memory. Younger participants, on the other side, showed hesitation, pointing out that the toppling of traditional tattooing has been influenced by urban migration, modern lifestyles, and societal stigma.

This study presents evidence that tattoos are both a type of body art and a repository of intangible history of the Gond people in Nagpur. Due to downfall of this precious culture, the study emphasizes the significance of recording and conserving Gond tattoo traditions.

Keywords: Cultural identity, Tribal Tattoos, Gond tattoos, symbolism

1. INTRODUCTION

The art of tattooing, which involves the permanent marking by injecting ink pigments into the second layer of skin called as dermis (Dictionary, n.d.), has a long and varied history spanning several cultures and geographical areas. This art style has been adorning human bodies for years, turning skin into living canvases with powerful symbolism and beautiful designs.

Because it comes from the Polynesian word "tattaw," the name "tattoo" alone indicates how widespread this practice is (Saunders, 2021). There are several tribal populations in India that have strong tattooing traditions, such as the Baiga, Ramnami, Gond, Bhil, Apatani, Kondh, Rabari. Traditionally, many tribes have inscribed tattoos on skin by female practitioners. The ink inscription is frequently accompanied by ritualistic chanting, lending the procedure a deeper cultural meaning (Nirgune, 2018).

Cultures across the world have different tattooing customs, this study focuses on the Gond tribe in Maharashtra. This study explores the many facets of tattoos in this cultural group, shedding

light on their symbolic meaning, the customs around their application, and the intriguing interaction between consistency and change in materials, processes across time.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A nation with many different cultural traditions, India is home to a wide variety of tribal people. Each tribe has its own set of customs and forms of artistic expression. Tribal tattoos are one of them which have enthralling stories that are inscribed on the skin and reveal stories of identity, rituals, and ties to the natural world.

Tribal tattoos in India are much more than mere decoration. They serve as potent symbols of cultural identity, belonging, and social status within the community. Several scholars have emphasized this aspect, like Appadurai, who noted that tribal tattoos act as "markers of social difference and group affiliation" (Appadurai).

The intricate designs and motifs found in tribal tattoos often hold deep symbolic meaning, often rooted in nature, mythology, and religious beliefs. Toda people believe that the floral and animal motifs in Toda tattoos connects them to fertility, protection, and ancestral spirits (Omyindian). Similarly, Manisha Thakur explores the symbolic language of Gond tattoos, deciphering their connection to the cosmos and tribal deities (Thakur).

Tabassum emphasizes the autonomy that tribal women use to select patterns and themes that convey unique stories and subvert conventional gender norms (Tabassum).

The methods and tools used for tattooing vary across different tribes. Traditionally, natural pigments derived from plants and minerals were used, and insert into skin with the help of thorns, needles, or sharpened sticks. Manash Goswami gave details about traditional tattoo practices in the Baiga tribe (Goswami). Also describes the tattooing techniques of the Baiga tribe, how the tattoo process takes place.

The rapid pace of modernization and cultural fusion poses challenges to the survival of traditional tattooing practices. Several scholars, like Ghosh, express concerns about the fading knowledge of symbolism and the decline in traditional tattooing techniques among younger generations. This underscores the need for documentation and preservation efforts to safeguard this unique artistic heritage (Ghosh).

Collectively, this literature review indicates that tribal tattoos in India serve as symbols of cultural identity, belonging, and social status. They often hold deep symbolic meaning, often rooted in nature, mythology, and religious beliefs. The methods and tools used vary across tribes, with traditional methods using natural pigments and modern techniques. However, rapid modernization is making challenges to survival of traditional tattooing process.

3. research objective

The objective of this ethnographic study is as follows:

- Discover association of cultural importance of tribal tattoos on Gond people.
- Examine the Gond community's customary tattooing techniques and equipment.

- Document this artistic expressions, motifs & meanings.

4. Materials and Methods

An ethnographic study strategy was used to collect data. With the help of this, tribal Gond tattoos within a particular cultural context might be thoroughly examined.

Data Collection Methods:

A variety of data gathering techniques were used to fully represent the complex nature of tribal tattoos:

- Interviews with experts: Comprehensive interviews were carried out with community tattoo artists, researchers of tribal tattoos. The examination of individual meanings, cultural importance, and historical viewpoints about Gond tattoos was made easier by these interviews.
- General Observation: Participant observation was used to record tattooing rituals and other situations. This method allowed to gain important insights into the ceremonial and social components of Gond tattooing traditions.
- Questionnaire: To collect data from a specific sample of people in the chosen villages, a semi-structured questionnaire was used. The purpose of this questionnaire was to collect quantitative information about the community's tattoo prevalence, preferred designs, and attitudes regarding tattoos.
- Sampling: Purposive sampling was used to make sure the data appropriately reflected the Gond community in the selected area. Nagpur District was chosen as the research site because of its substantial Gond population. Afterwards, to ensure the research could be carried out safely and successfully, four villages inside Nagpur district were selected based on their accessibility and high Gond population density. Gondewadi, Maudi, Mansar, Banjartola were the chosen villages.

5. Tribal Tattoos and Gond Tribe

This study explores the intriguing realm of tribal tattoos with a particular focus on the Gond group living in the Nagpur area of Maharashtra. The goal of the project is to provide information on the cultural relevance and creative expression of permanent markings by examining the traditional tattoo patterns that are common in four representative villages within the area.

After the interviews, general observation in selected area, field visit following are the findings:

Tradition and Transformation: Gond Tattooing in a Changing World: Traditionally, tattooing was the domain of a trained female practitioner called a "Gondanarin" among the Gond people. Travelling across communities, these ladies traditionally have enormous social status for their art. However, modernity has had an influence on this tradition, since newer generations are typically less enthusiastic about getting traditional tattoo designs. However, few of them select smaller tattoos and engrave on skin to maintain a symbolic link and their dedication to cultural continuity.

The traditional technique of getting a traditional Gond tattoo is done step-by-step. The main step is to make tattoo ink. Tattoo ink is made with Ramtila seeds. Further, the kajal is whipped in water to dilute and thicken it. The intended tattoo design is drawn onto the skin before ink is applied. After being dipped in kajal ink, a unique pen made of three to five linked needles is used to etch the design onto the body. After the tattoo is finished, the area is cleaned with a traditional disinfectant made of a solution of turmeric and water. Their cultural identity is forever embodied by these traditional tattoo motifs. Significant changes are taking place in the Gond tattoo traditions. Although the art form has historically been done by Gondanarin, others are becoming more involved in it. In addition, contemporary tattoo machines are more popular in today's world as they have efficiency of creating detailed & cleaner patterns with less pain. This contrasts with the conventional needle-based approach, which is renowned for taking a long time, causing discomfort, and sometimes producing less accurate findings. However, discussions with tattoo artists point to a general decline in Gond women's desire in getting inked, which might endanger the survival of the custom in the future. As a result, tattoo artists now only use tattoos as a secondary source of revenue rather than their main source. (Maravi, 2023)

Body Decoration: Body ornamentation is a major means of expressing cultural identity and personal aesthetics among the Gond culture. Men and women alike work with a variety of materials, including thread, plastic, metal, and other materials, to create ornaments. Interestingly, Gond women have a special passion for tattoos, with each design having its own symbolic meaning. (Ubale, 2024)

Gond tattoo motifs: According to our study, every Gond lady we came across had at least one traditional tattoo on her skin. Some motifs are inspired from nature like pindari phool, jawar daana, kutta, genda phool. Some motifs are meant for manifestation like rajsighasan, dhanda. They often follow Ram-Sita themed tattoos like Ram-Laxman, Sita Chauk.

The older generation women of this community have tattoos on face, wrists, back of the hand, arms and on legs also. (Maravi, 2023)

Younger generation is now selecting conventional designs, self-expression-based tattoo designs to decorate their skin. This suggests a dynamic modification of the activity, combining personal expression with conventional cultural interpretations.

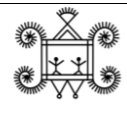
Here are couple of Gond Tattoo Motifs which was found during study:

TABLE

01:

Tattoo Motif Findings

Sr. No.	Symbol Name (Local)	Symbol Name (English)	Pattern	Meaning	Tattoo Location

1.	Katar	Dagger		Reference to protection from evil eye	Wrist, arm
2	Chumul Phool	Chimul Flower		Reference to beautification	Back of the hand, Wrist
3	Suraj	Sun		Reference to beautification	Back of the hand, Wrist
4	Kutta	Black Dog		Reference to protection from witchcraft	Wrist
5	Raj-Sighasan	Royal Throne		Reference to manifestation for power	Arm, Ankle
6	Pothi	Book		Reference to manifestation for Knowledge	Wrist
7	Birchha	Tree		Reference to beautification	Wrist
8	Sita Chauk	-		Inspired from Ram-Sita theme	Back of the hand, Wrist
9	Bhau- Bahin	Siblings		Reference to love between brother & Sister	Wrist
10	Rui phool/pindari	Cotton Bud		Reference to manifestation, fulfils wishes	Wrist, Ankle
11	Gendaphool	Marigold		Reference to beautification	Wrist

12	Bichhu	Scorpion		Reference to protection from scorpion	Wrists
----	--------	----------	---	---------------------------------------	--------

6. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this ethnographic study reveal that Gond tattoos are deeply rooted within the tribe's social and spiritual framework, functioning as both visual art and a medium of belongingness. The study came across three dominant themes for Gond tattoos: protection, manifestation, and beautification. Motifs like katar (dagger) and kutta (black dog) symbolize protection from evil forces, while raj-sighasan (royal throne) and pindari phool (cotton bud) embody wishes for prosperity and fulfilment. Floral patterns such as genda phool and chimul phool serve aesthetic and symbolic purposes, reflecting the tribe's close relationship with nature.

Interviews and observations indicate a generational divide older women regard tattoos as sacred and essential for identity and afterlife recognition, while younger generation often considered them as outdated or rural due to modernization, urban migration. They don't want to look different in social life as well as in professional life.

The transition from natural ink and needle methods to machine-based tattooing also signifies adaptation while risking cultural dilution. Despite the decline, a few younger participants are attracted towards contemporary styles for personal expression. This evolution demonstrates cultural resilience and the potential for revival if supported by documentation, awareness, and inclusion in modern design narratives. Gond tattoos thus remain living symbols of identity, spirituality, and aesthetic legacy.

7. Conclusion

In the past, body art had a great deal of cultural significance within tribal populations in central India. It was not only an artistic endeavour for many tribes; rather, it was a deeply ingrained tradition entwined with their sense of self, worldview, and relationship to the natural world. This was mirrored in the painstaking methods and symbolism used; each elaborate mark represented spiritual protection, ancestry knowledge, and a connection to the natural world. Historically, tattooing was limited to a specific subset of artists who made their own ink and used handmade instruments.

But this ancient habit has changed because of industrialization. The days of handmade needles and natural colors have been replaced by battery-powered machinery and easily accessible chemical inks. This change goes beyond only the equipment; tattooing is no longer only found in tribal and traditional contexts but is now rapidly making its way into metropolitan areas and developing as a form of self-expression. Gond tattoo's traditional cultural importance is in jeopardy due to this commercialization.

The significance of symbolic themes fades over time, providing evidence of their degradation. Intricate patterns with plants, animals, and other components are becoming less relevant in

modern contexts, while formerly being a powerful language for expressing social and environmental links. An alarming increase in tattoos that are only names or inscriptions in different scripts, devoid of the intricate cultural stories narrates into traditional patterns, has taken their place.

Gond tattoos are still an essential part of their cultural identity and creative legacy despite these difficulties. The way the symbols are arranged and used in these patterns is the evidence of the distinct artistic ability and cultural understanding that goes into this work. Knowing the subtleties of Gond tattooing is essential to appreciating this important tribal group and their changing culture landscape.

REFERENCES:

1. Appadurai, A. (1986). *The Social Life of Things- Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.
2. Dictionary. (n.d.). Retrieved from Cambridge dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/tattoo>
3. Ghosh, P. (2020). Tattoo: A Cultural Heritage. *Antrocom Journal of Anthropology*, 295-304.
4. Goswami, M. (n.d.). Tattoo: A Cultural Expression of the Baiga Women(A Study of the Tattoo Culture of The Baiga Women of Madhya Pradesh). *Journal of Tribal, Folk and Sunalter Studies*, 54-64.
5. Maravi, M. B. (2023, July). Gond Tattoo Process & motifs. (N. Chaudhari, Interviewer)
6. Nirgune, V. (2018). विलुप्त होती जनजातीय गुदना प्रथा (मध्य भारत के संदर्भ). Bhopal: Agam Kala Prakashan, Delhi.
7. Omyindian. (2022, May 18). Tales of Tattoos: Story behind Traditional Tattoos of India. Retrieved from medium.com: <https://medium.com/@omyindian123/tales-of-tattoos-story-behind-traditional-tattoos-of-india-2e124a74530c>
8. Saunders, R. (2021, October 02). The Etymology of ‘Tattoo’ in Western Culture: How the Word Became the Badge of an Adventurous Life. Retrieved from Medium.com: <https://medium.com/@itsrosiesanders/the-etymology-of-tattoo-in-western-culture-how-the-word-became-the-badge-of-an-adventurous-life-42aab9ab85>
9. Tabassum, N. J. (2013, November). Tattoo Subculture- Creating a personal identity in the context of social stigma. Retrieved from core.ac.uk: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/211294289.pdf>
10. Thakur, M. (2020). Traditional Tattooing Art among Gond. Social Research Foundation.
11. Ubale, B. (2024, December). Importance of Tattoos in Gond Community. (N. Chaudhari, Interviewer)