

Tattoos as Body Text and Tribal Identity: A Study of Sirawon Tulisen Khating's "Retold by Grandma-Yarla's Tattoos" and Nidhi Dugar Kundalia's "The Godna Artists of Jharkhand"

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ABSTRACT

Tattoos are important markers of tribal cultural identity. As embodied texts, they not only reflect a worldview but also become repositories of historical and ontological memory. As carriers of traditions, customs, and beliefs, they manifest the collective identity of the people and guide and bind them as a community. As such, tattooing or godna acquires a much wider significance than being a mere bodily art. It turns into an aesthetic-narrative entry point into tribal consciousness, cultural worldview, identity and history. In their engagement with their identity, the tribal writers dig deep into their cultural repository to foreground the truth of their being and becoming. In the present paper, an attempt is made to understand the nature of this tribal negotiation of 'tattooing' as a textual metaphorical tradition through a critical study of Sirawon Tulisen Khating's "Retold by Grandma-Yarla's Tattoos" and Nidhi Dugar Kundalia's "The Godna Artists of Jharkhand". The paper uses the insights from Raymond Williams's cultural theory to deconstruct and critically analyse the tribal practice of tattooing and its relational dynamics within the tribal society. Using memory as a trope and the concept of collective theory as a theoretical framework, the paper sets out to see how gender and caste/class notions are upheld during the tattooing process. Looking through the tattoo as a significant cultural practice in the tribal world, the paper also exposes the diverse class and caste hierarchies prevalent among tribals.

Keywords: Body Art; Gender and Caste Traditions; Godna Tradition; Tattoo Culture; Tribal Beliefs

INTRODUCTION

Tattooing, a culture integrated into the beliefs, customs, rituals and institutions of the tribal world, has now become an exotic art form in India, attracting people across the globe. Being an integral aspect of the tribal indigenous life, tattoos vary at the level of gender, community and occupation. Ranging from straight/slant lines to dots, from totem symbols as a base to jewellery symbols, tattoos have symbolic relevance to tribals as a marker for self-identity, community, ethnicity, and traditions. They practice this art of tattoo – *godna* – on the walls of their house, on their body, on their clothes, on their weapons and even on utensils. Tattooing has its own language, which tribals use for communication within and outside this world.

Though many tribal societies practice tattooing to record history and practice cultural norms or religious codes, the profound meaning and significance of the tattoos in one tribe remain independent of the other. The *Knoyaks*¹ in Nagaland get their faces tattooed. Known for their fighting skills, the men of the *Knoyak* tribe would get their enemy's heads severed and get their

faces tattooed to portray the prowess they had shown on the battlefield. For the *Mundas*² in Jharkhand, the body, in general, and the face, in particular, are the sites to record the history of bravery, valour and courage of their tribe and ancestors.

Amit Ajrel, a tattoo artist closely working with tribals of eastern India, in an interview narrates a folktale to reason out the tribal women of eastern India getting their bodies tattooed. Amit, in a personal interaction held on October 19, 2022, tells that once Lord Shiv and his wife Parvati invited the *Gond* community and its chief for a celebration. While going back home, the *Gond* Chief mistook Parvati for his wife. This enraged Parvati as she took the gesture as defiling her honour. To prevent a man from mistaking another woman for his wife, Parvati gifted the *Gond* women a *Gondna Yantra*, suggesting each woman could use this *Yantra* to get herself tattooed and help men avoid this mistake. This also helped the *Gond* women to build their collective consciousness.

To a Santhal woman, tattoos are a marker of pride. It is her real wealth or the only worldly thing that goes with a Santhal woman after her death. A mythical narrative in the Santhal culture binds tattoos and water. The more tattoos one has, the richer one will be in one's afterlife. Santhal women are supposed to exchange their tattoos for water in heaven (Hembram, n.d., para. 6). Even the *Kutia Kondh*³ tribe links tattoos and spirits. *Kutia Kondh* women tattoo their faces in several geometrical shapes. They believe that a tattoo helps people recognise each other in the world of spirits. The belief is that if they did not get their faces tattooed, they would upset *Yama*, the God of death, causing chaos in their society (“*Why did ‘Kutia Kondhs’*”, 2019).

Many tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, such as *Wancho*, *Apatani* and *Nocte*, are firm believers in tattooing. Tattooing endows them with different social positions in the community. For the women of *Gond* or *Korku* tribes, tattooing is not only a customary practice but also a symbol of endurance and patience. A narrative among *Gond* and *Korku* tribes traces back to a mythical story, and all the women show reverence by getting tattooed for many socio-cultural reasons:

In addition to assuring immortality or improving one's chances of enjoying a pleasant afterlife, tattooing in tribal cultures was often believed to ensure the bearers good luck, help them charm members of the opposite sex, protect one from accident, preserve youth, and bring good health.

(Sanders & Vail, 2008, p. 11)

Goswami (2021), during his various research, holds that “tattoos did not originate in one place but developed independently in different locations” (Goswami, p. 108). Though in India, tribal rituals and beliefs vary, tattoos have been common to all tribes with profound meaning and significance (Goswami, p. 108), varying from tribe to tribe. Being an ancient art and tradition of human civilisation, tattoos sneaked into mainstream society as well. On the one hand, tattooing is gaining currency as art and fashion statement in the mainstream. On the other, it is a dwindling /dying art in tribal societies. According to Devi (2010), a tribal activist and writer, “Mainstream society is carrying on a continuous, shrewd and systematic assault on his social system, his culture, his tribal identity and existence” (Devi, p. 150). Here, 'his' refers to all the tribal communities whose identity is at risk. This assault on the tribal world is evident in both the stories undertaken for the present paper. *Retold by Grandma-Yarla's Tattoos* by Sirawon Tulisen Khating (Khating, 2019, pp.37-40) is a story about documenting home through documentation of the tattoo culture. Azao, the narrator's grandmother, mother and the narrator herself have no tattoos on their bodies as “by the time she (Azao) was born, her parents had converted to Christianity” (Khating, 2019, p. 39). Similarly, the story *The Godna Artists of Jharkhand* by Nidhi Dugar Kundalia (Kundalia, 2015, pp.13-22) expresses the same concerns about tattooing as a dying art in tribal communities.

On the one hand, the story is about the careful sequencing of the tattoos on the girl's body with various socio-cultural shades attached to it and on the other hand, it talks about how the tribal students have started avoiding getting tattoos or *godna* or even if they have tattoos they get them removed at tattoo removal clinics (Kundalia, 2015, p. 22). The tattoo narratives undertaken in the paper not only ascertain the tribals' experiences, realities and cultural knowledge system but also see the erasure of tattooing as an erasure of tribals' history. The tattoo is a symbol of retaining and transmitting knowledge, the knowledge that empowers the tribals and their communities.

A thorough literature review is undertaken to arrive at the set objectives of the paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Art has been an integral part of any culture as it represents the social values of people and the community they inhabit. When Coleridge called imagination the living power, he clearly meant the power one could see in the various art forms that get metamorphosed via imagination. Having a discourse of its own, art can be expressed in singing, carving, decorations, paintings, dancing, costumes, stories, weaving myths, etc. Tattooing, or *Godna*, one such artistic mode of body decoration, is an integral culture not only of Indian tribals but also across the world tribal culture (Mohanta & Chadhar, 2013, p.30). Tattooing has its unique social structure, followed by folklore and even holds some medicinal value in the Baiga tribe (Mohanta & Chadhar, 2013, p.31). Similarly, the Ainu women of Japan feel that tattoos provide good health, relief from the severe pains of menstruation and a guarantee of a happy afterlife (Sanders, 1991, pp. 149-150).

Tattoos as signs are carved upon the body, thereby making the body a source of communication (Kosut, 2008, p.79). Considering tattoo as an art form, Kloß (2020) argues that tattoo even transforms the body as well. Tattoos not only facilitate the tattooing process on the body but also influence the body (Kloß, 2020, p.7). For Nikki Sullivan, the tattooed body becomes a site of dominant social fiction (Sullivan, 2001, p. 3). Even Lee Barron (2020) affirms that tattoos were seen as signs of rebellion and deviance in the working-class culture of Western society until the 1960s (Barron, 2020, p.1). Calling it a primal art form in the West, the practice of inscribing tattoos on the body was first confirmed by the discovery of a mummified body named Otzi (dating back to 3250 BCE) found beneath the glacier on the Austrian-Italian border (Barron, 2020, pp. 9-10). The increasing popularity of this ancient art has influenced many celebrities bearing tattoos on their bodies as a fashion statement (Barron, 2020, pp. 36-37). Tattoos, from a collective tradition, became an individual choice through which an individual could express more and more self and personal identity.

The tattoo – a tribal cultural heritage has not been just a design or an art form; rather, it has an emotional, socio-cultural-historical value in their world where a tattoo is associated with different myths and social roles (Ghosh, 2020, p.295).

Clinton R. Sanders (1991) says that tattoos have made a way in many cultures because of their coded meanings in the daily drama of social interactions. The tattoo-like makeup is seen as a medium to express and enhance a woman's individual beauty (Sanders, 1991, p.146). It is women only who are able to sustain this tattoo art to date despite the dwindling trend of tattooing as a culture and tradition (Sanders, 1991, p.149).

European settlers used tattoos as a channel to penetrate the societies of Indigenous communities. For using tattoos to mark bodies, Indigenous people were labelled as 'savages' and 'primitives' (Alvarez, 2020, p.157). In India, tribal communities were depicted as culturally

primitive or belonging to the savage race or uncivilised as they practised tattoos on their bodies (Mallick, 2020, p.179). For the Santhal tribe of India, marking the body has been a socio-religious custom (Mallick, 2020, p.176). Since they had no scripted language of their own, the skin was their canvas or their paper to record events, history, stories, etc., through tattoo signs. But tattoo practice on the body started to fade away as it was clamped down by the British administration and the missionaries.

For many communities, the tattoo was a medium to keep and maintain records (Wright, 2009, p. 101). Wright even compares tattoos to oral histories, which have no written text; whatever is left is left in the memory/mind. The original record of oral history is the oral “telling” of the history or the story rather than the transcription (Wright, 2009, p.105). Traditionally, tattoos as body text are passed on from one generation to another through memory and shared symbolic conventions. In other words, the tattoo as a language is based on collective behaviour or conventions (De Saussure, 1986, p.69).

Krutak (2022a, 2022b) calls the process of tattooing a process of writing or the visual language of the body (Krutak, 2022a, p. 91). Indigenous tattoos are analogous to a visual language comprising conventional iconography, design and social relations that are deployed, translated and experienced to (re)produce and organise world views (Krutak, 2022a, p. 92). The study of tattoos, the tattooing process and the bodies eventually lead to the collective history of an individual and the society as individuals acquire new knowledge of themselves, their surroundings and their positions in their community. That is why, for Krutak, Indigenous tattooing is a form of writing. (Krutak, 2022a, p. 93).

The literature review undertaken clearly shows that many studies on tattoos rest upon the tattoos found in the Western world. The present study takes upon the study of two tribes from India – the Ao-Naga and the Kurukh tribe – from the northeastern and eastern parts of India, respectively.

Tattoo studies discuss tattoos mostly from anthropological and ethnographical perspectives. The present study is a literary study which shows how having a tattoo is a culture within the tribal culture represented through tribal literature. It proposes to give a perspective on tattooing practice from the tribal and the non-tribal points of view. If one story undertaken encodes tattoos, the other story decodes it completely.

The objective of the present study is to study how gender and caste manifest within the tattoo culture. Tribal societies often seem to be egalitarian, but both the stories undertaken for the study highlight the gender and caste/class dynamics prevalent in the tribal societies as well.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper employs the cultural theory by Raymond Williams as its theoretical framework to understand tattoos and the tradition of tattooing in the Ao-Naga and Kurukh tribes. For Williams, culture is “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (Williams, 1983, p. 87). The present paper reads tattoos as cultural artefacts via three broad categories of culture, namely, ideal, documentary and social. John Storey (2018) further extends the meaning of culture, “. . . the texts and practices whose principal function is to signify, to produce or to be the occasion for the production of meaning” (Storey, p. 2). Culture eventually becomes a particular way of life, such as celebrating the *Godna* or the tattooing ceremony that has lived practices. With ‘cultural theory’, the paper also incorporates Maurice Halbwachs’s concept of collective memory. According to Erll, Halbwachs’s collective memory theory propounds that the individual memory

depends on the social structures that create intergenerational memory, finally including cultural transmission and thus creating a tradition (Erll, 2011, pp. 14-15). Both the stories undertaken for the study affect the present-day generations through tattooing as a practice that has faded away in many Indian tribal communities. The memory of the tattooing process even unveils various socio-cultural dynamics of tribal life that were present in the past.

The second section of the paper sees gender and caste/class dynamics in tattoo culture. Judith Butler sees gender as a social and cultural construct which is performed and enforced. The paper also tries to see through the deconstructive lens how the tradition of tattooing is associated mainly with women. Butler (1999) states that it is the culture that helps in the formation of gendered identities: "When the relevant "culture" that "constructs" gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology but culture becomes destiny" (Butler, 1999, p. 12). Through the medium of culture, a sexed body is produced (Butler, 1999, p.11). Similarly, not just the gendered identities are formed within a culture but within a culture, one can also trace the manifestations of caste/class space and hierarchies.

Sirawon Tulisen Khating's *Retold by Grandma-Yarla's Tattoos* discusses the invention of tattooing as a challenge to the upper class, which, with its power of money, tries to bully and tease the lower class. On the one hand, the story poses a challenge, and on the other, it celebrates a woman's creativity, skill and imagination with which she is able to conceive the idea of having tattoos on her body. The story also exalts the tribals' deep-rooted relationship with nature, where they are able to utilise the products of nature creatively.

The Godna Artists of Jharkhand by Nidhi Dugar Kundalia seeks the journey of a non-tribal writer into the thick, dense forest where she witnesses the live *godna* ceremony. Kundalia pens down her experience of the *godna* ceremony by interacting with the tribals who are tattoo artists. The story shows how the art of tattooing is regarded as one of the finest art forms, followed religiously without any deviations.

DISCUSSION

A CULTURE WITHIN CULTURE

Raymond Williams (1960), while trying to define the word culture, states that a culture is "a thing in itself" (p. xiv). Culture is not only limited to "natural growth" or "a process of human training" but "it was concerned, beyond these, with the new kinds of personal and social relationships" (p. xiv-xvi). In understanding culture, one needs to move around celebrations of the festivals, symbols, art or art forms, poetry, songs, etc. This even becomes a part of the lived culture where people come together, form relationships and become a part of a certain culture (Storey, 2018, p. 1-2). Not only limited to this, but culture is also "the structure of feeling" (Williams, 1965, p. 77).

Tattooing, or *Godna*, is one of the finest cultural practices in the tribal world. Tattoos hold a "set of decoded meanings which 'have an effect', influence, entertain, instruct, or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences" (Hall, 2007, p. 479). The narratives understudy – *Retold by Grandma-Yarla's Tattoos* and *The Godna Artists of Jharkhand* by Sirawon Tulisen Khating and Nidhi Dugar Kundalia, respectively, centralise the understanding of *Ao* and *Kurukh* (also known as *Oraon*) tribes through their respective tattoo tradition and its manifestation in the respective tribes. While *Retold by Grandma-*

Yarla's Tattoos talks about what led to the discovery of tattoos and how they finally became a mandate in the Ao community, *The Godna Artists of Jharkhand* deals with the narrator witnessing the tattooing ceremony and diverse customs associated with the process of tattooing in the Kurukh tribe.

Tattooing in the tribal world can be looked at at three levels of culture along the lines of Raymond Williams' three general categories in culture – ideal, documentary and social. This helps establish tattooing as a cultural practice in the community – from ideal, tattoo transforms itself into the documentary and finally culminates into the social category of culture. The first is the ideal category: "culture is a state/process of human perfection, in terms of certain or absolute or universal values" (Williams, 1965, p.57). That is what Azao, the grandmother in the story *Retold by Grandma-Yarla's Tattoos*, explains and says, ". . . tattooing became an art. Everyone was allowed to have tattoos, . . ." (Khating, 2019, p. 39). Tattooing is practised across the globe but in different ways/methods and via different traditions. It generates a value system for generations to live by and integrates into their world. The second category – documentary – documents human thought and experience via the body of intellect and imagination. Marking tattoos in a way is texting them on the bodies that further helps a tattooed person to unite with their ancestors as the grandmother in *The Godna Artists of Jharkhand* states that because of the tattoos, the girl's ". . . reunification with her ancestors. . ." will be possible (Kundalia, 2015, p. 15). The documenting is not limited to just marking the tattoos on the body, but it also refers to the detailing involved in the tattooing process. Dubru, the *Malhar*⁴, talks about this detailing, which requires appropriate skill and art. He says, ". . . I very carefully indent the upper layer of the skin. It requires skill and craft" (Kundalia, 2015, p. 21). From the ideal category, tattooing is thus transformed into the documenting category. The third category is the social one in which ". . . culture is a description of a particular way of life . . ." (Williams, 1965, p.57). Similarly, a tattoo represents the way of life as the tattoo has its own language and individualistic expressions that help mark the stages of life. It gives an identity to the tribal and acts as a tool for resistance, resistance to uphold their value system, and cultural practices and resistance to the dominant mainstream cultures. Nowri, the grandmother, even asserts and affirms how important it is for a tribal girl to get herself tattooed as soon as she turns eight: "Rarely the tattoo is deferred until the early teens, and in any case, it must be accomplished before the girl is married" (Kundalia, 2015, p. 14).

The art/ tradition of tattooing in the form of memory/orality becomes a permanent reference point for the tribal societies that hold a distinct value in their lives, thus becoming ideal by possessing the timeless order. In the second category of the documentary, tattooing emerges as a body of intellectual and creative framework that is stored and memorised in oral traditions and is now recorded via the written text by Sirawon Tulisen Khating. Holding specific meanings and describing the tribals' way of life, tattooing qualifies the third category of culture, which is social. This makes tattooing not just an art form but a culture within the tribal culture.

The story *The Godna Artists of Jharkhand* is a tale spotlighting the grit and perseverance of the tribals, where the process of tattooing becomes a medium for drawing strength and courage. Nowri, the grandmother, emphasises, "The more godna you get done, the stronger you become— both in terms of spirit and physical prowess" (Kundalia, 2015, pp. 16-17). The different transitions of a woman's life are recorded via the process of tattooing, making the woman's body a site of the historical record. A woman must draw strength and sustenance from her tattoos and protect herself not only from sexual predators but from anyone who could harm her physically, emotionally, and mentally, as expressed in the lines of the song – 'crabs nibbling on the body':

Ningan koy Nekka pello kakro parmiya
Ningan pelo ne chhorabao
Ninghai joodi jonkhas koda raji keras,
Ningan pelo ne chhorabao . . . Nekka
'The crab is nibbling on you, dear girl, Nekka,
Who will save you from it?
Your boyfriend has left for foreign lands
Who will save you from it?'

(Kundalia, 2015, pp. 14-15)

Singing and dancing by the tribal women are an intrinsic part of the tattooing ceremony and culture. Another reason for singing and dancing is “remembering needs occasions” (Schmidt, 2008, p. 193) and “performance” (Schmidt, 2008, p. 194) in order to construct the tribal identity. Sung chiefly by tribal women, the songs sung at the tattooing ceremony represent togetherness and celebration and sometimes become a medium to vent their pain, pleasure and anger. Before tattooing the person, the *Korathi*⁵ woman invokes a benediction for the person’s welfare. She starts singing, which helps divert the person’s attention from the pain and makes it a collective celebration. Her singing echoes pride in her handwork and describes the beauty of the woman getting tattooed, diverting her attention from the pain:

Stay, darling, stay – ’tis only for an hour,
And you will be the fairest of the fair,
Your lotus eyes can soothe the savage beast,
Your lips are like the newly blossomed rose,
Your teeth they shine like pearls, but where are they
Before the beauties of the handwork.
... ..
... ..
My work is done, rejoice, for you will be,
The fairest of your sisters in the land,
Rejoice for evermore, among them you,
Will shine as doth Moon among the stars.

(Krutak, 2022b, para. 26)

Songs sung during the tattooing ceremony not only soothe and distract the person’s piercing pain but also tell how these tattoos will ward off all sorts of evil eyes from the woman by becoming one with her body. This permanent mark is the only ‘permanent’ thing that will stay with her. Apart from being the symbols of feminine strength “. . . in terms of spirit and physical prowess” (Kundalia, 2015, p. 16), tattoos are considered the only assets and ornaments that will accompany them when they die.

Besides singing and dancing, memory is yet another characteristic of tattoo culture, and remembrance is through careful sequencing of not only the designs but also of the events. This remembrance comes in the form of collective memory. The process of tattooing is a collective event where the whole community gathers to celebrate the event. According to Halbwachs (1980), "Memory is dependent on social structures" (p. 14) and "every collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in space and time" (p.84). The memory even helps create tradition by transmitting cultural values, symbols, stories, practices and festivals. Tattooing is a tribals' cultural festival that is celebrated in groups. In the story *Retold by Grandma-Yarla's Tattoos*, the narrator “recorded stories retold by Azaa (the grandmother)” (Khating, 2019, p. 27). Retelling is a repeated recall where the living memory is exchanged with the coming generations as the narrator herself declares that “. . . documenting daily life” as she can “pass them on to coming generations”

(Khating, 2019, p. 39). Similarly, *The Godna Artists of Jharkhand* opens with “a gathering of women” who “have formed a circle. . .” (Kundalia, 2015, p. 13). Both stories tell the significance of social groups in celebrations as well as in forming cultural memory. As “Culture rests upon the memory of symbols” (Erll, 2011, p.20), these symbols hold power to trigger memories as by seeing the tattoo of Kanhaiya's *mukut* on his wrist, Dubru, the tattoo artist, remembers his wife (Kundalia, 2015, p. 21).

Focusing on the discovery of tattoos in the Ao tribe, the story titled *Retold by Grandma-Yarla's Tattoos* by Khating is narrated orally by Azaa, the grandmother to the women of the present-day generation. Since the story of tattoos as art and culture is being told and often retold from one generation to another generation, memory and remembrance become a bridge to connect to the culture. “[T]he project of documenting my ‘home’” (Khating, 2019, p. 37) for the writer becomes a trajectory to trace her community via the prism of memory. This cultural manifestation reflects the community's resilience in times of cultural crisis. For instance, how the process of tattooing will be carried out, what step will be followed next, etc. These things reside in the memory. Memory becomes a trope in reconnecting to and resurrecting the past, to the roots and traditions of their community. A similar instance can be traced in the story *The Godna Artists of Jharkhand* by Kundalia, where the grandmother, Nowri, ensures that every single step is followed religiously while creating a tattoo, from applying turmeric to washing the body of the girl properly. Reconstruction of the past and practising it in the present leads to the construction of reality through memory and remembrance (Erll, 2011, p. 17). Memory is not only used as an identity recollection strategy but also as an aesthetic narrative tool. The tribal writers tend to blend the figures and the words to create an audio-visual medium to project a self and connect with the audience. Consequently, memory turns into a cultural narrative that not only historicises their pasts but also represents their present and future.

Exposure to other cultures leads to cultural integration, which further helps the revival of one's culture. Sirawon Tulisen Khating's knowledge of other cultures motivates her and develops an interest in documenting her stories relating to her culture. The narrative in *Retold by Grandma-Yarla's Tattoos* connects all three women characters – Azaa, the grandmother, the mother of Sirawon Tulisen Khating and Sirawon Tulisen herself to their displaced 'home' literally and metaphorically. The women characters in the story belonging to three generations – the grandmother, the writer and the writer's mother show that there exists camaraderie among tribal women and how they are the rich repository and the carriers of their culture strengthened through their memorising it and passing it to the other generations. Not only practising tattooing but also sharing the narratives regarding tattooing keeps their culture alive and creates a space where women come together to share, pass on, and narrate such stories. This makes a tribal woman the bearer and preserver of her culture and unique ethnic identity, thus upholding her history, especially her cultural history.

GENDER-CASTE DYNAMICS

Different regimes of power can produce different forms of identities that can be marked within the boundaries of sex, gender, class and caste (Butler, 1999, p.24). The practice and culture of tattooing also lay bare the seams of the hierarchy between rich and poor, high and low caste within the tribal society as well. The tattoo is a powerful symbol of marking the sexes, and many tribal communities observe several taboos during the tattooing ceremony. Tribal diversity at the socio-economic level is hinted at in the story when the grandmother describes that in the dormitory, girls from diverse

socio-economic backgrounds also came together to learn the requisite domestic skills: “[O]ther girls from well-to-do families wore necklaces, bangles and other jewellery. Nevertheless, Yarla wore only a shell on a string as a necklace. So, the other girls teased and bullied her by calling her “*chepralikla*” (Khating, 2019, p. 38). Bullying the poor by the wealthy becomes a norm and is not even pointed out by the matron of the dormitory. When Noksangmenla finally comes to the rescue of her sister and makes beautiful tattoos on her sister's body, everyone yearns to have the same tattoos. The discovery of the tattoo as an art form came out of necessity and as an act of resistance by the poor section of society, which cannot afford costly jewellery. Creativity, talent and intellectual capability hold the capacity to change the conventions of discrimination (class and caste) in society. Tattoos, thus, become a trope to even out the unevenness in society partially. The ones who used to bully Yarla now admired her tattoo and its designs:

After a few days, when Yarla's sores had healed and she stepped out of her house, the villagers were stunned by the intricate patterns on her skin. She looked so beautiful, and everyone, including the matron and the girls from the dormitory, loved the tattoos and longed for such patterns on themselves.

(Khating, 2019, p. 39)

The story, in total, stands as a testimony to the creativity and artistic ability of the sisters, who created permanent tattoos with the sap of the *Ngupde* tree. Not only does it highlight the organicity of tattoo making, but it also showcases how tribals use their indigenous wisdom and knowledge. Out of a simple *Ngupde* tree, Noksangmenla transforms the sap of the tree into a permanent dye. Using thorns of canes as needles, Noksangmenla creates exquisite tattoo marks on her sister's body. The story *The Godna Artists of Jharkhand* by Kundalia emphasises the same organicity in making the tattoos through the character of the *Malhar*. The *Malhar* collects the soot from the lamp and mixes it with the mother's milk to make ink. He says, “[W]e mix this (soot collected from the lamp) with a mother's milk to make the tattoo ink” (Kundalia, 2015, p. 19).

Nidhi Dugar Kundalia, in *The Godna Artists of Jharkhand*, deliberates on the concerns of tattooing as a dying culture in the tribal world. The narrative around the *godna* artists of the *Kurukh* tribe is a cultural tale of tattoo – its religiosity, its process, the organicity in terms of material, its sacredness, talent, professional skill, its evolution and transformation in the contemporary world. The narrative encircles stories within stories. The tale of tribal culture encircles the tale of the grandmother who emphasises the value of marking the body with tattoos; the tale of the tattooed girl who initially finds tattooing as a scary and painful custom and resists incessantly becomes a tale of simultaneous acceptance and her negotiation with the painful process; the tale of the *Malhar*, a skilled tattoo professional for many years; finally is the tale of the intersectionality of gender and caste discussing tribal beliefs, rites and customs and how the tattoo culture integrates the concept of purity and pollution, evil spirits, and firm belief in the afterlife.

Kundalia's lens to view the tribal world is that of the stereotypical mainstream, seeing tribal and their art forms as exotic. The "rolling hills, black and white and ochre cows grazing on the slopes, an ideal place for a picnic spot" (Kundalia, 2015, p. 13) present the tribal world as unusual and sensational, eclipsing the reality of the tribal world, which is far beyond being exotic or bizarre.

Though viewed from the mainstream lens, the story is still able to hold onto the essence of tattooing and its associated connotation in the tribal culture. The *godna* ceremony is a collective event in which the entire community participates. Several tribal women come together, form a circle and sing and dance to celebrate the tattooing ritual of a tribal girl. It is evident from the narrative that even the tribal world is not free of gender and caste discrimination. Musicians placed outside the circle during the ritual of tattooing implicate the gender and caste dynamics, the

marginalised space, and the utilitarian role of a man: "Two musicians from the village – a drummer and a man plunking at a stringed instrument – sit in a corner outside the circle" (Kundalia, 2015, p. 14). This clearly shows that the space created by tribal women during the *godna* ceremony eschews the space of a man. Both the stories even endorse that the caste system is quite prevalent in tribal societies as well. The sacredness of the ritual of tattooing is not allowed to be polluted. An explicit exclusion based on gender and caste marks the celebration of community events like tattooing/ *godna*. Musicians meant for a specific job only, are not allowed to be a part of the inner circle of women's community rituals – dancing, singing etc. and are simply made to sit outside the sacred circle during such a ritual.

The story problematises tattoos as a culture and an art form. The tattoo tradition in the present is fading out due to multiple factors – the dwindling mental and physical toughness of the younger generation and tattoos as cultural markers of tribals being outsiders in the non-tribal civilised world. This brings them to the dilemma/ confusion of cultural acceptance and cultural displacement. Even the narrative emphasises:

Tribal students also tend to avoid *godna* or get them removed at tattoo-removal clinics due to bullying by urban students or other reasons. Many tribal women also get married to men in villages and cities now, their sensibilities having been altered by years of urban upbringing. The men prefer not to be spotted with wives sporting traditional *godna* and often leave them behind at home for social assemblies.

(Kundalia, 2015, p. 22)

Both stories take up the issue of physical pain through tattooing as if necessary for a tribal woman to become one with her culture. The girl resists tattooing and cries out loud as "[T]ears drip down the face of the child, her shoulders shaking with quiet sobs as her mother whispers . . ."(Kundalia, 2015, p. 14). However, the community festivity around tattooing ignores the piercing pain the girl experiences.

The girl's grandmother emphasises the need for the tribal woman to be strong in physical, mental, emotional, psychological, social, and familial domains. One of the women states the significance of tattooing and how it prepares a woman for life further. According to her, "[T]he road to the Lord is full of obstacles" (Kundalia, 2015, p. 15).

The tale shifts to the tale of the grandmother, who talks about a woman portrayed as an old witch called *Durki*. While the grandmother narrates the story of the importance of tattooing, the girl is looking to trace a witch among women dancing and singing there. In another instance, a story is narrated that a tattooed woman gets a chance to save her husband from death. It is believed that Yamraj, the death god, will be able to identify her only via her tattoos and take her along as a dead person instead of her husband. This story clearly indicates the privileged position endowed to man even in a tribal society, as portrayed in the lines, "When the God of Death, Yamraj, approaches her during her time of death, he will immediately identify her and not confuse her with her husband. In a way, Nekka gets these tattoos to protect her husband from Yamraj" (Kundalia, 2015, p. 17).

One of the common strains that runs through the narratives selected for detailed analysis in this paper is the fact that tattoos as cultural signs are ritualistic in nature. These ritual practices are sacrosanct and do not allow for any deviance. Tattooing is one such practice that expresses their cultural heritage. Tattooing as a sacred art form is glorified throughout the narrative of Kundalia's *The Godna Artists of Jharkhand*, where even Dubru, the *Malhar*, observes the sanctity of the ritual by abstaining from liquor consumption, verifying the importance of tattooing in the tribal community and the space of ceremony as a prime ritual. The sanctity of the tattoo tradition is emphasised when Dubru recalls the process of tattooing a child's body:

I avoided handiya because the ill spirits might be put off by them and cause pain to the child or curse me with a lifelong illness, he says . . . 'And if you or I or the child had interrupted the ritual by running away, this would have been a very bad omen and I would have had to stop right away. The child's family would then have to perform prayers for the spirits.'

(Kundalia, 2015, p. 20)

The story also talks about how tattooing is not limited to designs but is a skill that needs sheer hard work and training as Dubru very carefully indents the upper layer of the skin. He even keeps this art above his parents as the marks of *godna* are permanent. To him, everything else is temporary, indicating the impermanence of life and death as the harsh reality. *Malhars* are not entirely accepted as socially equal in tribal society. An untouchable by caste, *Malhar*, after making tattoos on the bodies, has to follow the purification process. Brahminical oppressive order of caste discrimination is evident when the grandmother is petrified over Dubru using the well and making the water impure. The grandmother even threatens Dubru by saying: “‘Ai you,’ she screams at him, hobbling rheumatically towards him. He is washing his face at a well near her dwelling. ‘Do not go near my well,’ she screams, hurling a few Kurukh curses at him” (Kundalia, 2015, p. 18). Despite his subservient position because of his lower caste, Dubru is knowledgeable, adept at professional tattoo making and respects the ritual’s sacredness. He does not consume liquor during this time as he believes that if he did such a thing, he should be either cursed with a lifelong illness or the child may experience a greater intensity of pain because of the evil spirits. Though Dubru is able to meet his ends with great difficulty, he, unlike city tattoo artists, does not commercialise his indigenous knowledge, primitive art and skill.

Though both the stories discuss the glorification of tattoo art in the tribal world and showcase that women have been the central upholders of the cultural heritage of the tattoo art forms, the stories still weave that the tribal societies, through tattoos, practice gendered norms and class/caste dynamics. On the one hand, men are kept outside the circle of women who are celebrating or performing *Godna* on the child; on the other hand, the grandmother states the significance of tattoos, which are marked on the body so that the death God may take the woman (the wife) rather than taking the husband. The story *Retold by Grandma-Yarla’s Tattoos* even shows that tattoos were invented to beautify the body, as the girls lacked affluent jewellery to showcase.

CONCLUSION

Both the stories undertaken for the present study reflect that tattoo has their own specific historicity in the tribal world. Based on Raymond Williams' cultural theory and Halbwach's concept of collective memory, the study finds out that a tattoo is a socio-historical text ingrained in the body and cultural identity in the minds of the tribals. Azao and Nowri, the grandmothers in the stories, share their tattoo stories with the coming generations to provide the feeling of lived experience. One story gives an insider view of the tattoos, and the other gives an outsider view of the tattoos, but both of them glorify the art of tattooing and its sacredness to the tribal communities. However, the stories also show how the tattoo culture is dying, with its traces left in the mind and on the body.

The reading of tattoos as a culture within a culture represented through these stories makes it evident that tattoo culture practice operates within the gendered and caste/class boundaries. The stories clearly show how tattooing is a culture initiated by women, for women, and to be practised

by women, establishing a link with other women as the cultural carriers of a community. Though practised by women, tattoos establish a relationship between the pain and the body of a woman who has to see the pain in terms of physical, emotional, sexual and psychological throughout her life. The *Godna* tattoos are believed not only to help a woman connect to her ancestors but also to act as a symbol to safeguard her husband's life. The idea of purity and pollution is even discussed in the story *The Godna Artists of Jharkhand* by Kundalia, where 'well' becomes the symbol of discrimination and marginalisation.

Though the tribals in the stories understudy relive this celebratory tattoo cultural tradition through memory lane, thereby indicating a fading tradition, there are a handful of tribes in India who still celebrate the tattooing tradition with their customs and rituals, thus asserting their culture and heritage.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The *Knoyak* tribe, popularly known as headhunters, is a major indigenous tribe in Nagaland. Also known as *Knoyaks* Naga, they can be found in the Mon district of Nagaland.
- ² The *Munda* tribe from the Chota Nagpur region of eastern India belongs to the Austro-Asiatic language family. *Munda* is sometimes also used to designate many tribes together such as *Santhal*, *Ho*, *Munda*, etc., as they share the same language, cultures and beliefs.
- ³ *Kutia Kond* are inhabitants of Kalahandi, Orissa. They are primarily dependent on shifting cultivation for their survival.
- ⁴ *Malhar* is a semi-nomadic *Kolharian* tribe of Odisha. *Malhars* live the life of a hunter and food gatherer as the mainstay of their survival. This tribe is positioned lower in the social hierarchy than many other tribes of Odisha. In the text "The Lost Generation", the tattoo artist is a *Malhar* who is considered to be dirty and lazy, "and the name (Malhar) is often used as an insult" (Kundalia 18). That is why the grandmother asks the tattooed girl to purify herself by rubbing turmeric and taking a bath, as the touch of the man from the lower caste might have polluted the girl.
- ⁵ *Korathi* or *Kuravars* are found in Tamil Nadu. This Adivasi tribe has primarily been the hunters.
- ⁶ *Chepralikla*, in the archaic Ao-Naga language, means the one who wears a shell.

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