

Godna- The Art of Body Ornamentation in Jharkhand

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Abstract

'Godna', is a traditional tattoo art of Jharkhand. The study explores its cultural, social, religious, and medicinal significance in tribal communities. It is based on fieldwork in the Ranchi district and interviews with 'Godna' practising artists. Also, secondary sources have been referred to present comparative studies of Indian and global tattooing traditions. The study demonstrates multiple functions of this art. It functions as an identity, as a ritual, as a way to protect against exploitation, and as a healing practice. Artisans, traditionally older women, inserted pigments from soot and coal dust mixed with mustard oil into the skin with thorns or iron needles, making geometric, floral, and symbolic designs. It is considered as a part of cultural norms embedded in life, nature, and spirituality. Mythologies associated with deities Shiva-Parvati, and Yamaraj, facilitate the incorporation of 'Godna' into the tribal cosmology to function as a cultural text. 'Godna' shows similarities with Māori moko tattoos, Japanese Irezumi, and Amazigh tattoos. It forms a part of ritual, medicinal, and mythological aspects of the region. However, modernization, religious conversion, and changing values are limiting the practice to some elderly women and marginalized artisans. Moreover, their tattooing and craft skills are not recognized sufficiently. There is an urgent need for preservation through documentation, reinterpretation within contemporary art and fashion contexts, and for socio-economic upliftment of artisans to safeguard this intangible cultural heritage and the dignity, identity, and resilience of tribal communities in Jharkhand.

Keywords: indigenous identity, traditional art, preservation, intangible heritage, tribal tattooing

Introduction

India, celebrated for its cultural diversity and adorned with the eternal beauty of tradition and grace, is an original site for cultural customs and rituals. Tribal culture, with its geographic variance, is a model of identity, dignity, caring and camaraderie that anchors social practices and enriches culture [1]. Drawing on their many traditions, tribal communities have been noted, in particular, for their body markings, which represent strength, resilience, ritualistic beliefs, and conformity to social norms. However, these behaviors are fading even in their communities under the growing impact of modernization and newly adopted ways of life. In this context, the body art of 'Godna', which has its rich history described in the abstract, continues to define the authenticity and uniqueness of tribal heritage in India, while recounting hidden chapters of Indian cultural, social, psychological, religious and spiritual life, and enhancing a collective identity [2]. Alas, 'Godna' art is on the verge of extinction and is not even sustaining as a dwindling art. Youth in tribal communities in Jharkhand are now rarely familiar with practicing

'Godna' art, and awareness of its value is now critically limited to sustain continuation. 'Godna' is not only limited to the traditional ritual of body ornamentation, and is also a source of medication, identification, ethical values, mythological contexts and societal identification [3][4].

Methodology

The research work has been done by visiting the fields and from tribal culture concerned books based on Jharkhand. In Ranchi district, different places and local markets were explored and selectively 'Godna' bearers were interviewed to receive proper information about this form of body decoration. Some of the renowned academicians of Tribal Institute of Jharkhand have also helped in collecting the right information and putting it into proper perspective. A comparative study of 'Godna' art with other tattoo arts of India and internationally has been conducted through secondary research.

Findings

'Godna' is traditional tattooing art. It is a crucial part of the culture in tribal groups across Jharkhand. It is not simply a form of artwork, but an important ritual signifying identity, protection, and belonging. Engraving 'Godna' is a time-consuming process. It requires skill and patience. Historically, the process begins with the preparation of pigments that come from natural sources. Soot, from cooking on earthen lamps, or from burning materials derived from plants are mixed with mustard oil or animal fat to create a thick, black pigment. In some geographic regions, crushed leaf or coal dust acts as a stabilizer, keeping the tattoo on the skin better. The implement used to tattoo 'Godna', referred to as a "sui" (needle), is often made from iron, or sharp thorns. The process begins with drawing dotted outlines of the design on skin. The designs take the shape of geometric patterns, floral patterns, and symbolic designs associated with fertility, nature, or deities. After outlining, the tattoo artist pierces the desired location with the needle and rubs the skin with previously prepared pigment. The artists are often elderly women who are traditional specialists and learn this technique from their own grandmother. The designs, locations, and meaning of the tattoos vary by tribe and different purposes within a tribe. For example, Baiga women receive tattoos on their chest, arms, and legs that connote femininity and desirability [2]. In addition for the Santhals and Oraons, tattoos on the forehead, face, or hands serve as identity marks so that a person is not misrecognized after death. The practice itself does cause pain, but the pain is something that is endured to show strength, and resilience, and is considered an important rite of passage. Herbal pastes are then applied to decrease pain, prevent infections, and speed the healing process. Pastes can be made from turmeric, neem, or medicinal plants and leaves. Despite modernization, 'Godna' continues to survive as a more or less popular way to culturally express themselves within the context of their future life stages, and to indicate involvement in festivals, events, or rites of passage, while being means of signifying beauty and spiritual protection [5].

'Godna' has an important significance in the tribal communities of Jharkhand. With a history that goes back nearly to the beginning of time, the 'Godna' tradition had many uses over the ages. Originally, 'Godna' was done on different regions of the body for body decoration, to distinguish between tribal races, a transitional marker for female adolescence, and to increase

sexual desirability. Many tribes still observe these customs today, such as the Baiga, Oraon, and Munda of Jharkhand. For the Baiga, 'Godna' was done especially on female body parts such as the bosom and legs in order to enhance the perceived physical desirability of women by their male counterparts. A common saying among tribal women is, "a woman who can withstand the pain of 'Godna' can withstand the pain of childbirth." In the medieval era, 'Godna' denoted more significance than just body beautifying. In fact, it was sometimes utilized to purposely render women less beautiful. The reasoning behind this was a response to the exploitation we have seen women suffer through the years. Some rulers would take unmarried and married girls, subjecting them to harassment and violence. The alternative was to provide safety for girls and women from polygamy and harem culture and from sexual abuse. This resulted in protective customs that included child marriage, the purdah system, piercing, and tattooing (Godna). In addition to its cultural and social roles, 'Godna' had a medicinal aspect. Indications showed that 'Godna' would provide healing responses for the hepatic artery resistive index (HARI) and nonalcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD), and for hydroceles, joint pains, arthritis, goitre, and abdominal hookworm infection [5].

Researchers have noted that 'Godna' can still be regularly seen amongst old women of the scheduled castes Kurmi and Mahto. Among the Kurmi community, it was traditional to brand their tattoos across their faces and on other parts of their body which are exposed [2]. The thinking was that these marks, by making the woman less appealing, would help reduce the chance of the oppressor violating the dignity of the women oppressed by the tattoo. This reasoning only perpetuated the wider practice of 'Godna' perpetuated during the "dark ages" [6]. In the continuing perpetual years after the reformation abolished oppression, 'Godna' still supported this belief system from the days of oppression. 'Godna' can also find some of its origins in tribal myths. For example, a myth recounted in the Gond tribes revolved around a time when Lord Shiva had invited the gods over for a feast. The gods brought with them one of the Gond deities and his wife. During the festivities, the goddess found a seat in a group with Parvati. When the Gond deity came to retrieve his wife after the meal, he placed his hand on Parvati's shoulder, mistaking her for his wife. Lord Shiva found this humorous, however, Parvati was enraged and instructed the tribal women to carry tattoo marks to explain their own identity and distinguish them from the women of other status castes [7]. As a result, tattooing has been accepted in the tribal communities as a differentiating tradition. Another legend tells how Yamaraj, the Lord of Death, used to have trouble differentiating the gender of people coming to his territory. To solve this problem, he decided to have his daughter-in-law's body marked with black tattooing, which helped him identify her, while also enhancing her beauty. Then, Yamaraj wrote back to his son to outfit them as he had indicated (as Godadhari people), singing and showing tattooed body parts for the villagers to see. Thereafter, 'Godna' transformed into immortal wealth that people carry even after they die. Moreover, a common mythology holds that when a soul arrives before God after death, it is given the puzzle of 'Godna'. If the soul fails to figure out the puzzle, it is then sent back to earth for rebirth and thereby denied salvation [8][9]

The commonly accepted practices differed from one tribe to another of Jharkhand. The women of Jharkhand were systematized under various communities based on the design of 'Godna' in their body parts. It was often observed in the forehead and earlobes of the tribal women. Besides

the forehead, it was inscribed or marked in hand, leg, chest, and on other body parts as a leisure activity and also it had no relation to cultural rituals and melioration. It was an obligation for women of Oraon, Munda, Khadia and many other tribes. Females of Oraon and Khadia tribes had three straight horizontal lines inscribed from the left side, to the right side extending from the left side, over their forehead [9]. In addition, it was inscribed amongst a lot of celebrations during their days of adolescence. In certain tribes, such as the Oraon and Munda, young girls were being 'Godna' or engraved on various parts of their bodies at the age of 5 or 6. The adolescent boys of the Munda tribe referred to the newly engraved members of the community as 'Singa'. For the women of this tribe, it is considered their most significant ornament and they would engrave three to four lines of garland on their chests. As a way of protecting themselves from the brutality of kings and rulers in the past, they would engrave it on their faces and other parts of their bodies to appear unattractive and obnoxious, but in time it became a fad and was viewed as a way of ornamenting the body. The effect of modernization and conversion of tribalism into different faiths and religions has led to the decline of 'Godna' within tribal culture [10]. The sole possible bright spot regarding the resuscitation of this art is young people who are realizing its modern implications within tattooing.

Artistic and cultural endeavors engage our minds and sense of beauty. As we engage in the care of our mental and physical well-being, we also work to present our bodies to look beautiful, shaped, and built. We adorn ourselves with clothes, jewelry, flowers, and tattoos, we aim to beautify our bodies into a surface for tattooing. Adorning our bodies with art is an eternal phenomenon, always passed from generation to generation; the only thing that changes is the process and material. Today, various types of artistic body adornments have firmly established themselves in fashionable modern culture. The art of body adornment and use of make-up amongst literate and economically well-off public of various social backgrounds have come into everyday use, but the age-old, traditional art of body adorning, or 'Godna' in one colour is unfortunately only alive in the tribal and rural context in Jharkhand, which is skipping the generations, and is on the verge of extinction. This practice of 'Godna' has enjoyed the patronage of traders and is well-received amongst scheduled tribes and castes in Jharkhand. Of the other castes, there are an estimated 32 types of scheduled tribes according to census population details which make up about 27.67% of the total population of Jharkhand. There are 32 different types of tribal groups, among which 7 communities which include Santhals, Mundas, Oraons, Hos, etc. constitute an estimated 60.1% to the total tribal population. An authenticated older Census provided the number of Jharkhand tribes which help approximate the current tribal population now. In the case of some tribes the populations are rough and were not indicated with specific numbers such as the Bijhiya, Parhaiya, Khadia and Munda tribes [11].

There are varying beliefs and traditions of the tribe. The santhals believe that if someone does not embody pain associated with 'Godna' on the leg, in the afterlife or heaven, he or she will bear large insects that will sting while in their lap. The Ho tribe hold the belief that 'Godna' is a symbol of purity which is attached to the forehead of women and a mark of welfare for men indicative of a mark on the chest. It is presumed to be associated with the true identity of the soul and anyone who does not accept the indenture of 'Godna' is not accepted as trustworthy amongst tribe members. The Khadia tribe believes that 'I' engraved on a young boy signifies

bravery six whereas the marks on the body associated with 'Godna' indicate a young girl has visualized her society and transitioned into adolescence. The Baiga tribe believes that it is a permanent ornament that stays with the body forever even after death as their eternal property. They have a firm faith that almighty takes away everything but on engraving the design of 'Dhandha' (six dots connected in a line) on the back, almighty himself engraves that special mark on the back of the reincarnating soul. They also believe that tattooing it on the specific ailing body part helps to heal or minimise the agony. The presence of husband or male members of the respective communities is considered inauspicious while engraving it on the female members of the tribes [12]. Traditional female artists of 'Godna' belonging from the Malhar community state that the tribes of Jharkhand majorly inscribe patterns of Boot Jhangri (lentils of green gram), Kadamkali, and earthen flowerpots with flowers and leaves, Sun, crops, etc. as the designs of 'Godna' on their body. People of Munda tribe used to inscribe it on their forehead, lower lips and at the two extreme edge points of the eyes [6][8] .

Tattooing traditions across the world, though varied in technique and form, share deep symbolic and cultural meanings. In Jharkhand, '**Godna**' is practiced mainly among tribal women, with simple geometric dots, lines, and stylized motifs of flowers, leaves, and animals etched onto hands, feet, and sometimes the face.

Table 1. Comparison Of Godna and Other Art Forms of the Region

Art Form	Medium	Materials Used	Motifs & Designs	Purpose / Function
Godna (Tattooing)	Human body (skin)	Soot, coal dust, mustard oil, natural pigments, iron/thorn needles	Geometric shapes, dots, floral patterns, tribal symbols, fertility motifs	Body adornment, tribal identity, protection, medicinal & spiritual significance
Sohrai Painting	Mud walls of houses	Natural colors from soil, leaves, charcoal, rice paste	Animals, plants, fertility symbols, geometric designs	Ritual decoration during harvest festival (Sohrai)
Khovar Painting	Mud walls of marriage chambers	White kaolin clay, black manganese, red/orange earth	Floral patterns, vines, fertility and marital motifs	Ritual art for weddings, fertility, and prosperity
Paitkar Painting	Scrolls (cloth/paper)	Natural dyes, vegetable colors	Epics, myths, folklore, everyday life scenes	Storytelling, oral tradition preservation
Godna Painting (Chhattisgarh)	Cloth, canvas, paper	Natural dyes, acrylic colors	Dots, lines, tattoo-like motifs inspired by tribal symbols	Decorative, cultural preservation, commercial art

'Godna', which functions in Jharkhand as both a body ornament and a reflection of culture, is explicitly different, yet similar, to many indigenous crafts of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, particularly regarding its symbolism, its ritualistic values, and the natural materials used in the process. In Jharkhand, scroll painting (Paitkar painting) of the Paitkar community similarly embodies the narrative framed by 'Godna'. Whereas 'Godna' (tattooing) uses the body as a

canvas, Paitkar uses cloth and paper scrolls to illustrate epics, myths, and social beliefs. Both mediums of storytelling illustrate cultural traditions: 'Godna' tattoos as a permanent mark on the body to symbolize identity and protection in life, and Paitkar, by way of visuals, illustrate the stories and teach cultural knowledge across generations. In much the same way, Sohrai and Khovar art forms, which are practiced by women of the Oraon, Munda, and Kurmi tribes, are also akin to 'Godna'. These mural traditions, not unlike 'Godna', utilize natural materials, pigments from soil, vegetation, and charcoal, to render art. The themes are more or less symbolic-themes such as fertility, animals, vegetation, and geometric patterns. 'Godna' tattoos these symbols permanently on the body, while Sohrai and Khovar draw these upon walls of mud construction temporarily, usually for festival rituals. In Chhattisgarh specifically, 'Godna' does not only refer to tattooing. 'Godna' art form expands beyond this into work of textiles and paintings. For example, 'Godna' painting on a textile in the scope of the Gond and Baiga communities (independent communities) reference tattoo motifs such as dots, lines, and flora and fauna motifs. These textiles are aesthetic and mask a commercial nature, however resemble much the same culture. The Dhokra works of art also intertwine with this concept; both exist to be durable, carry ritual purity, and signify tribal identity by use of metal rather than skin. In this way, though 'Godna' is a unique form of personal adornment and identity, it has affinities with other crafts of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh through its shared visual vocabulary, natural material usage, and effort to contribute to tribal memory and identity. Table- 1 summarises the comparison of 'Godna' and other art forms of the region. Comparable traditions exist elsewhere in India, such as among the Banjaras of Rajasthan or in Odisha and Himachal, where tattoos function as markers of status, marital identity, and ritual significance. Moreover, the Amazigh (Berber) women of North Africa similarly embellish face and hands with dotted and line patterns as indicators of beauty, tribal identity, and spiritual warding and protection. This practice parallels 'Godna' precisely in visual simplicity and symbolic meaning. If that practice is at the extreme of the spectrum of fearlessness, to the other extreme is the Māori moko of New Zealand. Moko are bold curvilinear facial tattoos that bear sacred genealogical meaning. Although location around the chin and face denotes lineage and rank, the markings are undeniably needed within the Māori community and stoicism.



Tribal facial motifs from Jharkhand Traditional facial tattoo from North Africa A sacred chin tattoo from New Zealand Traditional Japanese Irezumi

Figure 1: Representative Photos Comparing Godna with Other Tattooing Traditions

Conversely, in Japanese culture, Irezumi developed as a striking full-body pictorial tradition often denoting mythical beings, but anyone might draw upon waves or heroic stories as pictorial markers, all in resistance to 'Godna' and in evident contrast through their small

making. While the effect is different (hand poking with thorns and needles in Jharkhand, chiselled for Māori, tapped with mallets or fancy combs in Polynesia, machine made markings in Japan), the aesthetic has a conscious responsibility of making cultural memory a permanent onto the skin [5]. Figure 1 shows the 'Godna' art in comparison with other tattooing traditions across the globe. 'Godna' is in declining status among younger generations because of modernization, and experiencing a slow revival through heritage revampings, fashion, and revamped or a new addition onto systematic cultural practices [12]. Table- 2 summarises the comparison of 'Godna' and other tattooing traditions in India and internationally.

Table 2. Comparison of Godna and Other Tattooing Traditions

Tradition / Aspect	Primary social role	Typical technique	Motifs	Coverage	Gender pattern
Godna (Jharkhand)	Beauty, rites, protection	Hand-poked/ tapping	Geometric, stylized nature	Local: hands, feet, face	Mostly women
Other Indian tribal tattoos	Similar (varies by region)	Hand-poked/ tapping	Regional motifs; geometric & pictorial	Local to regional	Mixed, many women centered
Māori / Polynesian	Genealogy, rank, rite	Tapping with combs/ mallet	Curvilinear, symbolic panels	Large body panels, facial	Both (patterns differ)
Japanese (Irezumi)	Mythic, pictorial, later outlaw associations	Hand/ now machine; traditional hand methods used	Large pictorial scenes	Large panels, full back/ chest/ arms	Mostly men (popular perception)
Berber / Amazigh	Beauty & protection	Hand-poked	Dots, crosses	Face/ hands	Mostly women

Analysis and discussion

The lives of these extremely few artisans are very miserable due to their having hardly any form of recreation, worldly wisdom, social acknowledgment and courtesy, and habitation in a sound environment. They say that even after having their antiquated way of life for over 72 years after independence, the Government of India has not recognized the Malhar tribal community. The artisans live in isolated localities, in huts built of mud in the hilly area. To meet their needs and basic survival, they're engaged in rag picking duties. It is very sad to note that these artisans who know how to create such beautiful designs of 'Godna' are not well respected and esteemed within the society which affects them; instead they have to be engaged in rag picking or chiffoniers mostly all of their lives; they are barely able to eat breakfast, lunch and dinner; they have no land of their own. They also work in various homes fixing buckets,

boxes, pipes, etc. In addition to engraving 'Godna', they also have the skills to create bronze casted metal products such as paila, ghungroo, dhokra. Some of them are good at folk songs of their tribal community; some of them from their hamlet even know good work of bamboo weaving, sujini embroidery, stitching, wall painting, terracotta and tribal folk art. Unfortunately, though being so talented, they have no scope to showcase their talent. There is an urgent need of uplifting their societal standards and holding the declining line of 'Godna' to bring its traditional glory back on the map of tribal art and culture.

The 'Godna' practice in Jharkhand reflects the complex entanglement of art, ritual, medicine and social identity in tribal life. While contemporary practice of tattooing privileges aesthetics and individual expression, 'Godna' has had a context of communal belonging, belief in God or Ancestors and community survival. Results from the studies showed not only was 'Godna' decorative, but protective. 'Godna' marks the vulnerable social position of women as a strategy to protect themselves from exploitation at key times in their life, such as with puberty. 'Godna' is also a form of Indigenous therapy to help relieve and heal ailments that she believed to possess. 'Godna' therefore has a multifunctional role in contexts not found in many of the world's tattooing practices which, while deeply symbolic, typically refer only to family and clan, beauty, and spirituality.

Parallels and differences are evidenced in comparisons to Māori moko, Japanese Irezumi, and Amazigh facial tattoos. 'Godna' is like Māori moko in expressing identity and cultural continuity, although its simpler geometric forms are less elaborate than Polynesia's sophisticated curvilinear designs, as seen in Māori moko. As with tattoos on Amazigh women that emphasize beauty and protection, 'Godna' is overlapping with medical and mythological possibilities within a tattoo. This cross-cultural comparison reminds us of the universality of tattooing as a cultural archive, while demonstrating how 'Godna' in Jharkhand creates its own specific synthesis of meanings.

The ongoing decline of 'Godna' exposes the precariousness of intangible cultural heritage under modernization, conversion, and changing aesthetics. The marginality of Malhar artisans, who work in broad areas of skills beyond tattooing, also emphasizes that the decline of cultural practices cannot be divorced from broader socio-economic neglect. Revitalization initiatives must therefore employ a two-pronged method of documenting 'Godna' and reinterpreting 'Godna' designs for today's context (e.g. using the fashion and body art industries). Documentation efforts must also include specificity of socio-economic support for artisans, and a level of commitment that ensures the continuation of practice.

In the end, 'Godna' is more than a waning adornment; it is a cultural text written on the body, imbued with memory, myth, and meaning. Preserving it is not simply protecting a form of tribal art. It is about sustaining the resilience and creativity of the indigenous people of Jharkhand.

Conclusion

The study highlights the cultural, social, and religious significance of 'Godna' art. It is embedded in tribal culture of Jharkhand. 'Godna' has served as an identity marker, a shield against social exploitation, a marker of life milestones, and even as medicinal therapy. Its art, myths, and practices reveal an indigenous epistemological framework in which art, medicine,

and religion intermingle so easily that 'Godna' becomes a very rich window onto the lived experience of Jharkhand's adivasis. Yet the art is facing extinction. Reasons are modernization, religious conversion, and the changing perception of beauty. Socio-economic marginalization has denied its practitioners official recognition and sustainable means of livelihood. Contrary to other world tattooing cultures such as Japanese Irezumi or Māori moko, which are experiencing renaissance, 'Godna' remains confined to elderly women and some artists, with minimum transfer across generations. This threatens not only the sustainability of a unique cultural practice but also the related intangible heritage.

The preservation of 'Godna' needs immediate, multi-faceted approaches. Documentation and academic research can preserve its body of knowledge, while artistic re-imagination of Godna's motifs through contemporary art, fashion, and design can protect cultures. Equally important is the process of empowering practitioners through economics and acknowledging their craft. By preserving 'Godna' the preservation of the dignity, identity, and creativity of indigenous people of Jharkhand will be ensured.

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