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## **THE TATTOOING PRACTICE AMONG INDIAN IMMIGRANTS IN MAURITIUS**

Human body is a microcosm of the universe. It is not a mere body biologically comprised of flesh and bones or simply an organ but many artists, anthropologist, historians and others see the skin more important and it is perceived as a biological map of the history of early human migration patterns or a canvas to be decorated with tattoos and other markings to distinguish from others, convey beauty, or mark the rites of passage (Mayell, 2002). Body art can be an expression of individuality, but it can also be an expression of group identity. Body art is about conformity and rebellion, freedom and authority. Its messages and meanings only make sense in the context of culture, but because it is such a personal art form, it continually challenges cultural assumptions about the ideal, the desirable, and the appropriately presented body. If the physical body serves as a site on which gender, ethnicity and class are symbolically marked (Foucault, 1979) tattoos and the process of inscription itself create the cultural body themselves, thereby creating and maintaining specific social boundaries (Douglas, 1982). Tattoos articulate not only the body but the psyche as well.

This paper addresses the question of how tattoos operate not only to create individual and group identities, but to asset cultural differences, first between same caste and members of different ethnic background; Differences in tattoo forms are important because they are linked to fundamental patterns of social stratification among tattoo wearers (Demello 1993).

The nineteenth century witnessed successive waves of immigration from across India to other destinations to meet the labour supply and the majority of them hailed from the northern India mainly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. They were skilled labourers and they shipped to Surinam, Trinidad, Fiji, Mauritius, and South Africa. These countries are now called diasporic countries or host countries. When they had a choice, many of them preferred to stay in their adopted land because it was too disruptive or traumatic to leave the Diaspora. In many cases a homeland does not actually exist or it was not welcoming to them politically ideologically or socially. Therefore, these

immigrants did not put their culture in a luggage and took along with them. They had to re-invent their rituals, ceremonies, cultural traits, norms, and mores in their host countries. I will never call them 'little India' But nevertheless the skills they took with them were revisited at times and a process of 'creolisation' took place.

This paper deals with one of the skills that were being practiced by the immigrants in all the diasporic countries. It is Tattooing or 'Godna'. The qualitative research methodology was used and 30 women aged 85 years and around 10 men aged 80+ were taken as sampling. They were all from the Hindu community which include Tamoul, Marathi, Telegou and Biharis. The reason behind of having more women was that they were being tattooed more than males. Unstructured interviews were carried, recorded and transcribed. This research draws from primary data. The field work took place in the early 1980's. Actually no study has been carried out on Godna from an anthropological perspective. Hardly the ancient patterns of Godna can be seen as these tattoo wearers are no more and as such the tattooist called Netwain are not alive.

It is worth pointing out that even the African slaves brought by the French were wearing the tattoos. J. Milbert referred to the "Tatouage bizarre par lequel ils s'imaginent décorer certaines parties du corps : ainsi, par exemple, ils se dessinent sur le ventre un large soleil qui les recouvrent tout entier, et ressemble a une espèce de cuirasse (Milbert, 1812).

Even Charles John Boyle (1867) noted 'the market Indian woman ¼ her arms are tattooed and loaded with broad circles of gold or silver crowded together between the shoulder and elbows... ' There had been various patterns of Godna embellishing the body of the immigrants. The patterns which I saw do not exist now. This body art had different meanings in different cultures. In order to have a more comprehensive view on tattooing, a brief history of the native place of the Indian immigrants is imperative.

In 1810, when the British took possession of the island of Mauritius formerly Ile de France under the French colonization they were determined to further develop the sugar industry and thus in September 1834 that the Hunter and Arbutnot Company signed a contract for five years with the M.C. Farlan of the Calcutta police office to recruit 36 coolies and they arrived in Mauritius on 2nd November 1834 (Chazan Gillig and Ramhota, 2009). These people were hill coolies and known as Dhangars in Chota Nagpur adjoining the areas of Bihar and Bengal. The laborers recruited were mainly from the following regions: Bihar: Shahabad, Muzaffarpur, Champaran, Patna, Darbhanga, Monghyr, Gaya and Saran. United Provinces: Balia, Ghazipur, Azamgarh, Faizabad, Basti, Gonda, Gorakhpur, Benaras, Mirzapur and Jaunpur.

Some immigrants hailed from the areas of Lucknow and Allahabad, and Delhi as well as from the Burdwan and Midnapur districts of Bengal

proper and from the United Provinces, district of Orissa. Hence 62% of the labourers were recruited from the United Provinces, 17% and 8% from Central Provinces and Punjab respectively and 6% from Bihar (Tinker: 1974). To cope with the huge demand for the supply of labour, Emigration agencies were also set up in Madras and Bombay. Labourers were also recruited from the over-populated Tamil district of Madras where the condition of the landless people was bad and from where people were most keen to emigrate. Immigrants from Andhra Pradesh (mainly Telegus and Bombay (Marathis) were also indentured (Teeluck, Deerpalsing & Govinden 2001).

Between 1834 and 1838, the percentage of women immigrants was very less than the males. The British realized the gender problems in terms of marriage and to prevent incest taboo or mixed marriages and wanted to prevail endogamy among the Indians, the ratio of female immigrants to male rose from 12 % to 50% by the year 1860. Research on the ships registers has demonstrated that a majority of these women were not migrating alone but came in kin groups which helped in the maintenance of the institutions of the family. Their presence was a source of comfort both socially and morally to their husband which, to a great extent enabled the labourers to retain their customs , language and religion(Ly Tio Fan 1984: 23).

Due to the successive arrival of immigrants under the indenture system, as well as of free passengers and the consolidation of the plantation economy, Mauritius became a culturally plural society. During the years 1834 to 1923, about 450,000 Indian immigrants came to Mauritius( Teeluck,1998) .The Indo-Mauritian population today is a heterogeneous group comprising of several discrete religious , cultural identities which are displayed in their socio-cultural and religious festivals.

These hill coolies practiced the craft of tattoos which became part of the intangible cultural heritage but unfortunately, it had soon died with both the tattoo wearers and the tattooists. It served as a link with ancestors, deities, or spirits. Besides being decorative, tattoos mediated the relationships between people and the supernatural world. The decorated body not only served as a shield to repel evil or as a means of attracting good fortune but also prevent the Muslims to abduct the Indian women. It served as protector. The early Indian immigrants, besides worshipping their pantheon of gods and goddesses, were also ardent believers in various folk deities whom they invoked.

The craft of the tattooing was regarded as a sacred profession. The tattooist was called the Netua or in India they were called godharin. Once the netua , accompanied by his wife ,the Netuain reached a village, his entire day would be devoted to tattooing. They stayed in the village for a couple of days so as the tattooing was done properly.

They moved from house to house calling loudly:

“Godna !..godna! godna godaiba ja maii log, beti log?koi godna godaiti ola  
:ba: he culbuliya:? Awa ja: bahin log.Godna godab, nai dukhai”

(Godna godna ... would you like to have godan done, o mother, o daughter! Is  
any one desirous to have godna,o culbuliya ?come on sisters!..I'll do godan, it  
will not be painful”)

They would then perform some rituals in honor of his Devkul Mother Earth (Dharti Ma) and tutelary god named Di Sayer. It was a great event for girls and womenfolk of the village. Many of them wanted to get tattooed on their arms or other part of the body such the face and the feet. Those girls begged their elders for permission in spite of their advice against its painful procedure. The men folk tattooed their chest and arms. The netua tattooed the males and the females were being tattooed by netuain. However, young women were never left by themselves but were always in accompaniment with the elders.

Those tattoo wearers consciously or unconsciously gave their traditional bodies new meanings. The body art allowed people to reinvent themselves, and experiment with new identities.

### **The Tools for Tattooing**

The pricking instrument consisted of seven english needles ,held size seven, very thin and about 4 cms long , made into a bundle and then bound needle points could be seen to implement punctures the skin thus making an indelible mark, design, or picture on the body.. It resembled a ball pen and these needles were used for broader patterns whereas for thinner or smaller designs only a bundle of three or five needles was used. Odd numbers like 3,5,7 are considered auspicious by the Hindus.

The coloring matter for the Godna was unknown to the informants because the mixture was prepared beforehand by the Netua. It consisted of a thick black liquid and was kept on a small container like an inkpot. The secret of the preparation was never revealed by tattooist from India either. When asked the reason of the secret, one informant stated in Bhojpuri: ‘U des rahal apan dawai u nai batai ta oke nai lahi’ (he was from India, he never disclosed his formula. If he did so, he would not succeed in his craft).

However, in spite of the secrecy of the preparation of the coloring matter by the Netua in Mauritius, it has been reported that the ink was purchased from the market or was brought from India. It resembled India ink, which looked like a round lump of substance-as black as charcoal. A small fragment of it was crushed slowly with the tips of the fingers in a tablespoon of water until the coloring matter dissolved and a black liquid obtained. Sometimes the Netuain would ask for a few drops of milk, from a breast feeding mother who has given birth to a child -preferably a boy -was mixed to the coloring liquid. The milk being thicker than water, they believed that godan

conducted with this mixture helped the patterns come out brightly and would be of a darker texture and to prevent swelling.

### **The social set up for Godna**

Godna was usually carried out inside the house in the presence of all the members of the household who were to be tattooed. Age, sex and caste did not usually constitute a barrier for experiencing the godna as it was guided by one's will. However, the girls in certain families and castes, were tattooed at a very tender age, i.e from the age of two onwards. Godna to them, did not merely have an aesthetic value, indeed it was deemed essential and became customary and hence socially accepted. Among some families, girls could not be tattooed before marriage, just as widows were not permitted to have godna which being a form of ornamentation, represented the beauty of a happy married women. Certain families considered that marriage was impossible if the girls were not tattooed. These families believed that a girl had to be tattooed at her mother's house before marriage, for Godna represented to her the only memoir and remembrance-of the mother and /or father which a girl brings along to her new home after marriage

While often decorative, tattoos send important cultural messages. The "text" on the skin can be read as a commitment to some group, an emblem of a rite of passage, a personal or a fashion statement. Tattoos could also signify bravery and commitment to a long, painful process-as in the case of some girls who endured severed pain and could not bear the pain, the old women would make fun saying that if this is painful then how would bear the sexual relation.!

### **The technique of tattooing**

The Netuain first sketched the outline of the desired pattern on the skin with either a pencil, a matchstick or with the needles and the coloring matter. She then requested that her client, i.e a little girl, clench her fist firmly by making her hold a 6 long round stick or a small bundle of cloth like a ball. This action helped the muscles to contract and facilitates the punctures operation. The Netuain holding the girls wrist with her left hand, dipped the needles in the coloring matter and began pricking, at one go, a series of numerous punctures closes together-with such skillfulness that in a lapse of few minutes, depending on the skin of the motif, the punctures would emerge beautifully as the required design.

During the procedure, the tips of the needles would penetrate deep into the skin and these could be left on the bones. The process was very painful and the girl undergoing the godna could not even shriek loudly as she was constantly being watched by her sister-in-law (bhauji) and the latter would tease her and make fool of her. This is because the relationship between the two has seldom been a cordial one. Although tears rolled down the little girl's

cheeks, she would try to be brave and control herself in order not to give any grounds for ridicule to the bhauji. She would sit quietly while the Netuain performed her job.

Her fear thus begin challenged by the treaty if humiliation, the girl would sit quietly and have the Godna completed. The punctures would bleed or at times a watery substance would come out. The tattooed parts became numb and swollen during the process. After the operation, the Netuain wiped and cleansed the punctures.

### **Folk belief -To cast away the evil eye (Najar)**

The Netuain next proceeded with certain mystic rites in order to obviate the effects of any evil eye “najar” which might have be fallen the client-by the onlookers of the performance. Najar, which means a look may turn into an evil eye: it is eye of envy and a person can unintentionally cast a malignant eye by a simple look. To counteract the dreadful influence of the evil eye, innumerable means such as incantations verbal and ritualistic charms have been invented and used in many societies, People believe that many diseases and disabilities are due to the effect of the evil eye and it is for this reason that mother and grandmother would take particular care to protect her child from it by using charms, amulets and so on .In such case, the Netuain would take a ten cent coin and some grains of rice in her hand, perform a “pass” over the tattooed parts whilst murmuring certain “mantras” (sacred hymns) and then throw the rice behind her back. Or, at times she would take the Godna needles, rotate them seven times over the punctures, repeating some mantras and each time would touch the ground (which is symbolic of Mother earth)with the needles. This act is believed to lessen the burning sensation of the punctures.

However, the most common method of casting away the effect of evil eye was by taking seven pieces of red dry chilies, a pinch of yellow mustard seeds, caraway seeds, a few sprigs of a broom, sand, salt and flakes of garlic and onion. With these sacred hymns, she would throw the ingredients into the burning embers and nobody is supposed to look back to these burning charms. To know whether a person has been affected by evil eye, the burning chilies (and the other ingredients) would not emit any pungent smell. Salt, onion garlic mustard seeds etc are used as a protection against the evil and their pungent gases are dreaded by evil spirits.

### **Traditional Healing**

Hence, if the pain of the new tattoos did not begin to allay then the mother would repeat the above process in the evening with red chilies ,salt and yellow mustard seeds with the following sacred hymns:

The tattooed parts would swell for a few days or more depending on the number of Godna patterns done. During that time, fever accompanied with pain in some cases would develop. It was instructed that the tattooed part is not to be washed for a week. In those days, womenfolk had recourse mostly to traditional medicine was very widespread and deep rooted among these rural folk. Since the Vedic times, the medicinal properties of herbs and leaves have been effectively used to heal wounds and cure diseases. To protect the tattooed parts from any infection “haldi”(raw turmeric)and “dub”(cough grass) which act as purifiers ,were ground into a fine paste, generously applied to the punctures and often tied up with a piece of cloth.. After three days, the paste was removed and coconut oil applied to the punctures.

In terms of payment, the Netuain paid in cash or in kind. She was offered rice, pulses and cooking oil. Having completed her job, and everyone was satisfied with her work, she would go to another village and continue her craft. She was in great demand as stories of the beauty and popularity of her art and skill rapidly spread from one village to another.

### **Common Godna Patterns in Mauritius**

Women had decorative Godna on various parts of their body, especially on the back of one hands, arms forearms, wrists, nose, chin, temples, forehead, feet and chest. The pattern ranged from a single dot to an elaborate design. Each age group had more or leads a particular design. Children, especially young girls, had to be satisfied with a small flower on the wrist, or on the back of the hand between the thumb and the first finger whereas young married women sported some complicated Godna designs. Some of the favorite patterns were:

1. *Pothi*: stands for a book. This wonderful design covers the back of the whole hand starting from the wrist to the finger tips, comprising of semi circular, horizontal and wavy lines with alternate dots and three petals floral motifs. The pothi as reported to me is a modified form of the kadam tree exhibiting a very skillful and aesthetic pattern with scattered branches, leaves and flowers .This design, could be done on both hands and it seemed to be very common among married women. This Pothi was not so popular among youngsters.
2. *Choli*: a close-fittings short bodice, was another popular design among women. It was an exact replica of a bra.
3. *Kadam*: Tree was the most common Godna and was tattooed on the arm below the elbow and it can still be seen on the body of women belonging to different ethnic groups. This design is about 2 inches long and 1 to 1 ½ inches wide. It could be done on both arms

4. *Sanka Chudi*: was another favorite pattern among the womenfolk. It is about 2 to 5 cms wide and still adorns the arms of some elderly women.
5. Small Motifs: Tiny favorite Godna marks like the letter AUM in Devnagari a clove flower a small flower; the carpankhiya -flower with four petals sometimes on the chest also a crescent with a dot on it known as chaud were commonly tattooed on the back of the hand between the thumb and the first finger. A matka on the bone of the left side of the nose and a matki on the chin and a small dot on each temple were thought to be really decorative. This was to be done at a woman's nose before marriage, as motifs which identified one's caste.

One of the most remarkable designs was performed at the cleavage between the breasts. The design ranged from a small flower, a dot or tiny dots forming a circle to a bigger design resembling a round bangle with decorative motifs inside it. A pattern of a scorpion was also tattooed on the back of the hand the length of the thumb. This scorpion is supposed to symbolize human suffering and hence such designs from Parts of the ritual decorations of U.P and Bihar, designed to ward off evil influences.

Figures of goddesses, their names or their symbols were very popular among the men and women of all ethnic groups and whereas Godna practice was common among elderly men folk, it was not as widespread as it was among women Men were tattooed by male common designs on arms were one own name of gods, such as Shiva or Rama in devnagari letters and the letters of AUM. In some cases, the figure of Hanuman or His club was symbolized, or of Krishna or His (flute) bansuri or a small flower were marked on the chest of men or on the shoulder or forearm.

### **Godna among Tamoul, Telegu and Marathi women in Mauritius**

The elderly tamoul, telegu and marathi women had different patterns of Godna on the forehead, arms, chin. Godna or Paccai kuttu as they call it, was performed by a tamoul tattooist who came from South India. Dressed in the traditional Tamil sari, she wandered from house to house with her paccai kuttu gadgets in a bag calling out "paccai kuttleiyo amma mare" (o mother would you like a tattoo). Some prevailing designs among their ancestors for relief of pain or rheumatism were either a flower on the chest, round dots on collar bones down the neck, several dots or a crescent with a round spot on the hand and finger bones or sometimes a round circle with a dot inside it and numerous dots or rows of lines on the thigh. A dot on the chin, another one on the right cheek, were some other tiny patterns. An elaborate design known as Choli was popular among their elder relatives.



Moreover, some Tamoul women bore on their right arm and the mark of Side Mundani and another pattern, the name of which is unknown to them but which, according to them, is analogous to the kolam". On the forehead, between the eye brows, a long vertical line, with or without a round tattooed dot below it, could be seen. This mark differentiated them from other ethnic groups.

Godna known as 'pacca bottu' was also popular among a few telegu women. A vertical line (1cm long) with or without a round spot below it, on the forehead a bicchi (one inch long and half an inch wide) on the outer part of the right thumb or an attractive pattern on the arm which they interpret as Sita's Anchra are but a few beautiful sample of tattoo design seen.

The Marathi women have a very striking and attractive tattooed mark about one and a half cm long in the center of the forehead between the eye bows. It represented a crescent with a spot below which there is either one or two horizontal lines terminating with another spot. Sometimes an alternative pattern such as clove flower, a device resembling a (trident) trishul or a crescent with two leaves below it is marked. A dot on the chin and a small flower on the wrist are to be found as well. Another artistic work known a gowlan embellishes their right arm. According to these womenfolk, this design is symbolic of either one or then seven sisters of the Hindu mythology, or the fairies or even figures of Radha. The design marked on their forehead symbolize the identity of their folk community. The Marathi women were, in a sense, stamped with this mark for fear of their girls being abducted.

To conclude, according to Hilary Mayell (2002), We expose it, cover it, paint it, tattoo it, scar it, and pierce it. Our intimate connection with the world, skin protects us while advertising our health, our identity, and our individuality. Nina Jablonski (2006) in her book *Skin: A Natural History* celebrates the evolution of three unique attributes of human skin: its naked sweatiness, its distinctive sepia rainbow of colors, and its remarkable range of decorations. Jablonski begins with a look at skin's structure and functions and then tours its three-hundred-million-year evolution, delving into such topics as the importance of touch and how the skin reflects and affects emotions. She intelligently examines the modern human obsession with age-related changes in skin, especially wrinkles. She then turns to skin as a canvas for self-expression, exploring our use of cosmetics, body paint, tattooing, and scarification.

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