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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that this report, entitled **“Baiga- Tracing the Tattooing Tradition”**, has been created under my supervision. The sources used to construct this report have been duly and adequately acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

The Baiga Tribe resides in the Baiga-Chak Belt located in the south of Madhya Pradesh, India. Over the history of Indian Tribes, they have been famous for their Tattooing Process. Baiga women receive their tattoos in a chronological order that is based on her age. Most of the tattoos are inscribed on the woman before marriage. Over the course of this research, their traditional tattooing process, the significance of their forms and traditions was studied. The majority of research was conducted using the In-Depth Interviews for the researchers, and Semi-Structured Interviews for the interaction that occurred with the tribe. The field trip involved travelling over the majorly populated areas of the Baiga-Chak Belt over a span of eight days. The findings of the research essentially deal with the Economic and Socio-Cultural factors that were found to be most influential in the tattooing tradition that is still fashioned on the Baiga women. The Baiga Tattoo tradition has lost its longevity in regard to the discipline that was followed by all the women in the tribe. Upon increasing exposure of the rural tribe to the urban environment, the tribe has begun to show signs of adopting and integrating the methods and practices of the urban environment as their own. As this exposure to the urban environment continues to increase, the longevity of the Tattooing tradition is in question.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Student Designations	1
Certificate	2
Acknowledgement	3
Abstract	6
List of Figures and Tables	8
Prologue	9
1. Introduction	10
1.1 The Practice	10
1.2 The Place	11
1.3 The People	12
1.4 Research Question	15
2. Literature Review	16
3. Research Methodology	28
3.1 Pre-field Exploration	28
3.2 On-Field Research	30
3.3 Post-field Analysis	33
3.4 Limitations	34
4. Data Analysis	35
4.1 Significances	35
4.2 Materials And Process	46
4.3 Influence	53
5. Conclusion	61
Glossary	64
Bibliography	66
Appendix	68

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1: District map of Madhya Pradesh

Figure 2: Baiga Tattoo designs on various parts of the body

Figure 3: *Kapal Godna*: The Forehead Tattoo

Figure 4: *Prisht Godna*: The Back Tattoo

Figure 5: *Vaksh Godna*: The Chest Tattoo

Figure 6: Baiga Tattoo designs on the arms

Figure 7: *Jhang Godna*: The Baiga Tattoo Designs on the Legs

Figure 8: Dry Ramteela Seeds

Figure 9: *Suji*: A bundle of needles used in the process of Tattooing

Figure 10: Tattoo ink made out of ramteela seeds

Figure 11: A Godnahari in the Process of Tattoo-making

Figure 12: A *Jhang Godna* in the making

Figure 13: Applying of Antiseptics

Figure 14: A Gond woman with a Forehead tattoo

Table 1: Elwin- Symbol and Location of different Types of Tattoos in the Baiga

Table 2: Payodhi- Symbol and Location of different Types of Tattoos in the Baiga

Table 3: Variations in Costs of Tattoos

PROLOGUE

The rich, nutty scent of black sesame kernels shrouds the modest house. As the seeds smoulder over the vengeful flame, the young woman's heartbeat quickens, and beads of sweat glisten on her palms. While unyielding arms pound the residue to attain a balanced batter from which the prized ink may be extracted, fearful anticipation engulfs the feeble soul. The Godnaharin gently treads towards her visitors, sensing the timid girl's apprehension, and her mother's enthusiasm. Instruments are positioned; parched skin is anointed; a predetermined

design is conceptualized over the space.

An intimidating needle appears in the periphery. Gulp.

Needle draws closer to skin. Gulp.

Needle meets skin – Culture meets Canvas.

1. INTRODUCTION

Expression, a symbolic embodiment of thought, lies at the heart of human nature. From this essentiality, the concept of Art has emerged. “All art is a kind of confession, more or less oblique”, explains James Baldwin¹. From the ancient rock engravings of the Palaeolithic Period, to the prized paintings of the Renaissance days, each artistic conception provides the viewer with an insight into the mind of its creator, and the culture that characterizes it. Once dwelled into, it can reveal the stories of an entire civilisation- stories which trace the identity and evolution of this bounty being. Hidden deep within the timeless tress of Madhya Pradesh, the Baiga, India’s forest-dwelling aboriginals, seek an outlet for expression through their practice of *Godna* - a distinctive form of Tattooing.

1.1 The Practice

Over time and place, the practice of tattooing has prevailed within several communities. The Samoa tribe, inhabiting the Samoan Islands, are identified by the intricate geometrical patterns which adorn their legs; Japan’s Ainu tribe fashion a peculiar version of facial tattoos; contemporary cultures have catalysed the development of the ‘Tattoo Renaissance’². Though evidently widespread, the tattoo tradition has sprouted independently in various regions, and subsequently developed under the influence of several factors. Defined as “a permanent mark or design made on the body by the introduction of pigment

¹ Baldwin, James. The Price Of The Ticket. 1985.

²Velliquette, Anne M, Jeff B Murray and Elizabeth H Creyer. "The Tattoo Renaissance: an Ethnographic Account of Symbolic Consumer Behavior." Advances in Consumer Research (1998): 461-467.

through ruptures in the skin³”, the tattooing practice may be classified as a form of Body Art. The appeal of the art may be derived not only through its aesthetic and expressive qualities, but also through its significance as an indication of socio-cultural arrangements and a reflection of identity. *Godna*, a tradition prevalent amongst certain tribal communities in India such as the Baiga of Madhya Pradesh, is their cultural equivalent of tattooing.

1.2 The Place

Covering an area of 442,841 square kilometres, Madhya Pradesh forms a part of the Central Tribal Belt of India. The state boasts of being not only the largest state in the Indian Republic by area, but also by tribal population. It constitutes 22.27% of the country’s tribal population⁴. According to the 1991 Census records, the 15.4 million tribal people residing in the state are divided into 46 tribes (See Appendix 1)⁵, now termed as the Scheduled Tribes. Seven of these tribes have been further classified as ‘Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups’, owing to their socio-economic backwardness. The state’s 46 tribes, though collectively identified and categorized, do not compose a homogeneous group. Each of the communities may be differentiated, and in some cases associated, by their geographical distribution, socio-economic conditions, dialects, traditions, and practices.

³Gautam, Rajesh K. Baigas: The Hunter Gatherers of Central India. New Delhi: Readworthy, 2011. 36.

⁴Tiwari, S K. Baigas of Central India. New Delhi: Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd., 1997. 9.

⁵Gautam, Rajesh K. Baigas: The Hunter Gatherers of Central India. New Delhi: Readworthy, 2011. 1.



Figure 1: District map of Madhya Pradesh⁶

1.3 The People

'Wild as the forests they live in . . . they are independent, high spirited . . . well behaved, ready to oblige, and deserving every consideration for their orderly manner of life.'

-Colonel Ward (1870)⁷

The Baiga tribe resides in vast areas of the Central Tribal Belt, particularly in the Baiga-Chak area, covering regions of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. According to the Census of India-1991, the population of the Baiga was recorded to be 317,549, which accounts for 2.1% of the Scheduled Tribes located in Madhya Pradesh. This figure establishes the tribe as one of the ten largest tribes of Madhya Pradesh, constituting the 8th largest population in the state⁸.

⁶ www.indiavisitinformation.com. 2000. 12 January 2014.

⁷ Elwin, Verrier. *The Baiga*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007. 1.

⁸ Gautam, Rajesh K. *Baigas: The Hunter Gatherers of Central India*. New Delhi: Readworthy, 2011. 21.

As per the first Provincial Census of 1866, the identified population of 16,000 Baiga people resided in regions of the Satpura hills, located in the Central zone of the state. These areas were abundant in green cover and dense forests. It was the country of the Baiga- the *Baigadesh*.

The tribe has faced its fair share of conflicts with the state, as a consequence of their maladaptive sustenance techniques and technologies. When the British Government banned shifting cultivation in the year of 1867, their unfamiliarity with agricultural practices which characterized a sedentary lifestyle caused them to lose their primary source of livelihood and become victims of starvation, due to a severe dearth of food. However, 23 years later, eight villages of the Mandla district were specifically marked out to form the Baiga Reserve, or *Baiga Chak*, to facilitate the recommencement of the slash and burn method, marking an end to their miseries.

In 1999, a research conducted by Shrivastva indicates that an estimated 43% (which constitutes the majority) of Baiga lived in Shahdol district, 18.5% in Mandla (inclusive of Dindori) district, 17.5% in Sidhi, and the rest of the population was distributed across Bilaspur, Balaghat and Surguja districts (See Appendix 2).

The tribe consists of seven sub-castes: Narotias, Binjhvars, Barotias, Nahars, Rai Bhainas, Kadh Bhainas and Kath Bhainas, who collectively draw association with the mythological characters of the Nanga Baiga (Indian Adam) and the Nangi Baigin (Indian Eve), and consequently claim to be the forerunners of the Indian race- the ‘chosen ones’⁹. The Baiga draw strength from their soil, hence explaining the significance of their name, which

⁹Gangwar, Manish and Pradeep Bose. A Sociological Study of the Livelihoods of the Baigas in the Baiga-Chak Belt of Dindori, India. 2012. 5 February 2014 <<http://www.peoplesoftheworld.org/hosted/Baiga>>.

stands for the 'lords of the soil', according to a certain theory explaining their practice of shifting agriculture¹⁰. However, several communities of the tribe are now moving towards a sedentary lifestyle by permanently settling in certain areas, thus shifting to an agricultural and pastoral mode of subsistence, and also engaging in other occupational practices.

Determined through their literacy rate, population size and growth rate, pre-agricultural economy, and per capita income, the Baiga are classified as one of the 74 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in India, as per the country's 8th five-year plan¹¹. Consequently, several research projects and developmental initiatives have ensued in order to promote a lifestyle of perceived prosperity. As a result, several externalities have been introduced into the lives of the once isolated tribe.

The Baiga tattoo tradition may be traced back many centuries. Various myths and legends have been associated with this practice. Drawing inspiration and rationale from their environments, the tattoo forms and designs, inscribed upon the Baiga by members of a neighbouring tribe, reflect the Baigas' characteristic beliefs and belief systems. Sported chiefly by the women, this artistic armour created over their bodies follows a predefined progression, determined by their sexual maturity and their socio-economic positions. A Baiga woman is identified by the intricate patterns of ink that adorn her forehead, an identifier that she takes pride in. However, the significance and practice of the tradition has been shaped by the changing period, people, and philosophies.

¹⁰Elwin, Verrier. The Baiga. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007. 2.

¹¹Gautam, Rajesh K. Baigas: The Hunter Gatherers of Central India. New Delhi: Readworthy, 2011. 1.

1.4 Research Question

As stated in documentation by aforementioned scholarly sources, the product – their tattoo culture today – has been influenced by the evolving social, cultural, economic and environmental factors. Therefore, along with observing the tattoo making aspects, this research focuses on identifying factors that may influence the practice of tattooing:

Exploring the meanings and methods involved in the practice of *Godna* among the Baiga tribe of Madhya Pradesh, and identifying the factors that may influence this practice.

The significance of the Baiga Body Art may be obtained through its association with factors that characterize the identity of the Baiga tribe: their religion and beliefs, societal structure, gender, routines of subsistence and occupational practices. In order to understand the tradition and its technicalities, and consequently identify the existence and extent of an influence of such factors, this research shall attempt to accomplish the following objectives:

1. To understand the significance of the tattooing tradition to the members of the Baiga community.
2. To examine the forms of tattoos of the Baiga tribe; and to derive their significance.
3. To observe the tools and materials utilized in the process of tattooing.
4. To understand the technique employed in the process of tattooing.
5. To identify the factors that influence the tradition.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Silence settles over the house, interrupted only by sporadic outbursts of anguish. As the screeching grows, an array of adornments materializes over the plane. Jet black blotches of ink are embedded into the epidermis, amalgamating to form a distinct pattern of dots and lines. As these lines dance on the forehead, the Baigan Identity is invested upon the body. Each of the inked inscriptions carries a story- an illustration of Baigan beliefs, values, and practices.

* * *

Tattooing is an age-old practice, often associated with the identity of the person who gets a tattoo ‘drawn’ on oneself. As an art, tattooing is seen in many parts of the world, in multiple contexts – tribal art, urban fashion, etc. Symbolic in nature, they may reflect certain cultural values of a group of people, and may even tell stories of the past. Anthropologists find the study of tribal art essential for this reason¹².

The body art of the Baiga Tribe is a very interesting cultural practice. Of all the tattooing tribes in India, the tattooing tradition of the Baiga is specifically prominent. Both male and female Baiga get tattoos, also known as *Godna*, on their body. Each of these tattoos has designated locations on the body of the Baiga, and is significant to the period of the lifetime during which the tattoo is acquired. “It is related to their religion, belief system, health care practice, body decoration, social status, wealth etc”. In “*Cultural Aspects of The*

¹²Mohanta, Basanta Kumar and Mohan Lal Chadhar. "Cultural Aspects of the Tribal Art in Central India: A Case of the Body Decoration of the Baiga Tribe." Proceedings of the National Seminar on River Valley Civilization of Chhatisgarh& New Research in Indian Archaeology (2013): 6.

Tribal Art in Central India: A Case of The Body Decoration Of The Baiga Tribe” by Basanta Kumar Mohanta and Mohan Lal Chadhar, there are reports on the importance of tattooing in the tribal life; symbols used in the tattoos and their significance; the method of tattooing, and the continuity and change in the process, materials and symbols of the tattoos.”

I. Significance of the Tradition:

On the subject of tattooing, some like Luard¹³ may say that wearers of these devices (such as tattoos) wear them for ornamentation’s sake alone, with no deeper significance in Central India (in general). However, Elwin has opposing views, and says that for the Baiga, these marks bear a “much more serious significance. They are a form of sexual expression and a powerful sexual stimulant.”¹⁴ On the same subject, Mohanta and Chadhar elaborate on the cultural significance of the Baiga tattooing tradition. Apart from being a sexual stimulant, they include significance to¹⁵:

a. Religion and Belief System:

- Tattoos of symbols related to their totem, God and Goddess, that they believe protect them from different natural calamities, evil spirits, black magic, enemies, wild animals etc. For example, an oval shape with a series of dots

¹³ Mohanta, Basanta Kumar and Mohan Lal Chadhar. "Cultural Aspects of the Tribal Art in Central India: A Case of the Body Decoration of the Baiga Tribe." Proceedings of the National Seminar on River Valley Civilization of Chhatisgarh& New Research in Indian Archaeology (2013): 7.

¹⁴Elwin, Verrier. The Baiga. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007. 18.

¹⁵Mohanta, Basanta Kumar and Mohan Lal Chadhar. "Cultural Aspects of the Tribal Art in Central India: A Case of the Body Decoration of the Baiga Tribe." Proceedings of the National Seminar on River Valley Civilization of Chhatisgarh& New Research in Indian Archaeology (2013): 6-8.

(*Padam Sen Deo*, the Foot God) at the sole of the left foot for the sake of protection.

- Another example related to their beliefs is the tattooing of an image of *Chandi Mata* at the forehead to preserve and guard the parting of the hair that is the life of the woman's husband, because the parting can only be worn as long as her husband is alive.

b. Wealth and Ornamentation:

- Girls take pride in spending Rs. 5 on a tattoo, and some boast of their mothers who once spent Rs. 25 on full body tattoos.¹⁶ The tattoos represent wealth and play the role of 'ornaments that can never break'.

"If you buy bangles, my daughter, they will break in a few days; but if you are tattooed, it will last forever" (A.Dadaria)¹⁷.

c. Social Status:

- If a Baiga girl is not tattooed before marriage, her in-laws would demand compensation for not bringing this 'dowry' with her. Ember, Carol R., Melvin Ember and Peter N. Peregrine (2007) have mentioned that "...in addition to satisfying aesthetic needs, body decoration or adornment may be used to delineate social position, rank, sex, occupation, local and ethnic identity, or religion within a society. Along with social stratification come visual means of declaring status" while associating ornamentation to social ranking.

¹⁶Elwin, Verrier. *The Baiga*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007. 92.

¹⁷Elwin, Verrier. *The Baiga*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007. 19.

Different types of tattoos also distinguish different tribes from one another. The Baiga tribe women have a characteristic ‘V’ shaped mark on their foreheads at the centre between the brow bones. There exists a deeper significance related to identity in this regard. Tribe-specific tattooing serves as an important function, providing the members of the particular tribe with security and satisfaction.¹⁸

¹⁸ Gupta, Ruby, “Significance of tattooing amongst the Baigas”, The Tribune, 25 April, 1999.

II. Meanings of the Forms:

Below is a table showing Verrier Elwin's record of Baiga Tattoo marks and their locations, along with his remarks.

Sl. No.	Symbol	Local Name	Sex	Age/Time	Part of body tattooed	Remarks
1	Lines of Dots	Kajeri	Female	After Marriage	Thighs	-
2	Lines of Dots	Palani	Female	After Marriage	Thighs	-
3	Round like Flower	Phulia	Female	-	Knee	-
4	Flies	Mokchi	Female	-	Back	-
5	Fish Bones	Machhli ki Haddi	Female	After Marriage	Leg	Not tattooed until marriage
6	Steel	Chakmak	Female	After Marriage	Leg	Not tattooed until marriage
7	Hearth, Plates, Spoon	Seeta Rasoi	Female	After Adolescence	Forehead	Before Marriage
8	The Turmeric Root	Haldi Gath	Female	When a girl reaches puberty	Arm	-

9	Peacock	-	Female	When a girl reaches puberty	Breast	Not tattooed until she is adolescent
10	Basket	Dauri	Female	When a girl reaches puberty	Breast	-
11	Triangular	-	Female	About 5 years	Forehead	-
12	A Pattern of Any Kind	Jhopori	Female	At the time of marriage or later	On the back of the Hand	-
13	Magic Chain	Sakri	Female	-	-	-
14	-	Dhanda	Female	-	-	-
15	-	Bai/Ankhi	Female	-	Between the Palani	-
16	Scorpion	Bichhu	Male & Female	-	Forearm	-
17	Moon	Chandamama	Male	-	On the back of the Hand	-

18	-	-	Male	-	Affected parts of the body	In order to cure rheumatism
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Table 1: Elwin- Symbol and Location of different Types of Tattoos in the Baiga¹⁹

The records of these tattoos in the less detailed, but more recent, study by Mr. L N Payodhi shows that there are discrepancies with respect to the location of some tattoos, as compared to the records of Verrier Elwin. A table compiled from “Janjatiya Godna Sringar Upchar”, a book by L N Payodhi on tribes of Madhya Pradesh, is given below:

Sl. No.	Form	Name	Meaning and Author's Comments
1	Sun	Surya	Baiga call it ‘diva’. It is a symbol of brightness (luminous). Baiga tattoo it on their knees. They also call it ‘Davri’.
2	Peacock	Mayur	It is considered to be one of the most beautiful birds. The peacock is a symbol of intoxication and lust. Baiga women tattoo this on their backs.
3		Putali	Baiga tattoo it on their <i>Vaksh</i> .
4	Kalash	Kalsa	It is in the form of dots.

¹⁹Mohanta, Basanta Kumar and Mohan Lal Chadhar. "Cultural Aspects of the Tribal Art in Central India: A Case of the Body Decoration of the Baiga Tribe." Proceedings of the National Seminar on River Valley Civilization of Chhatisgarh & New Research in Indian Archaeology (2013): 5-6

5	Tree	Birch a	Baiga tattoo the tree on themselves. It is an important tattoo.
6	Grass	Ghas	Baiga tattoo this on the back and <i>Takhno</i> .
7	Moon	Chan d	The Baiga women tattoo this symbol between their eyebrows. It's a half moon with a dot on the top.

Table 2: Payodhi- Symbol and Location of different Types of Tattoos in the Baiga²⁰

²⁰ Payodhi, Lakshminarayan. Janjatiya Godna Sringar Upchar. Bhopal: TRI, 2012.

The Moon (Chand), according to Elwin, is tattooed on the back of the hand, but according to Mr. Payodhi, is tattooed between the eyebrows. Elwin says that many Baiga men and women tattooed the Scorpion (Bicchu) on the forearm, but according to Mr. Payodhi, the scorpion tattoo is one of the tattoos that the Baiga rarely get tattooed on themselves. Such discrepancies may reflect an existence of variation in the practice, but they may also be attributed to the time during which both researches were conducted. Elwin's ethnography on the Baiga, having been compiled in 1930, may differ from Payodhi's research, which was conducted in 2012, as they both reflect different ages. Consequently, this may evidence an evolution in the practice.

The pictures given below were recorded in Verrier Elwin's book as the markings on "the strapping light-skinned Jitho of the Bohi village", credited to one Mrs. Milward.

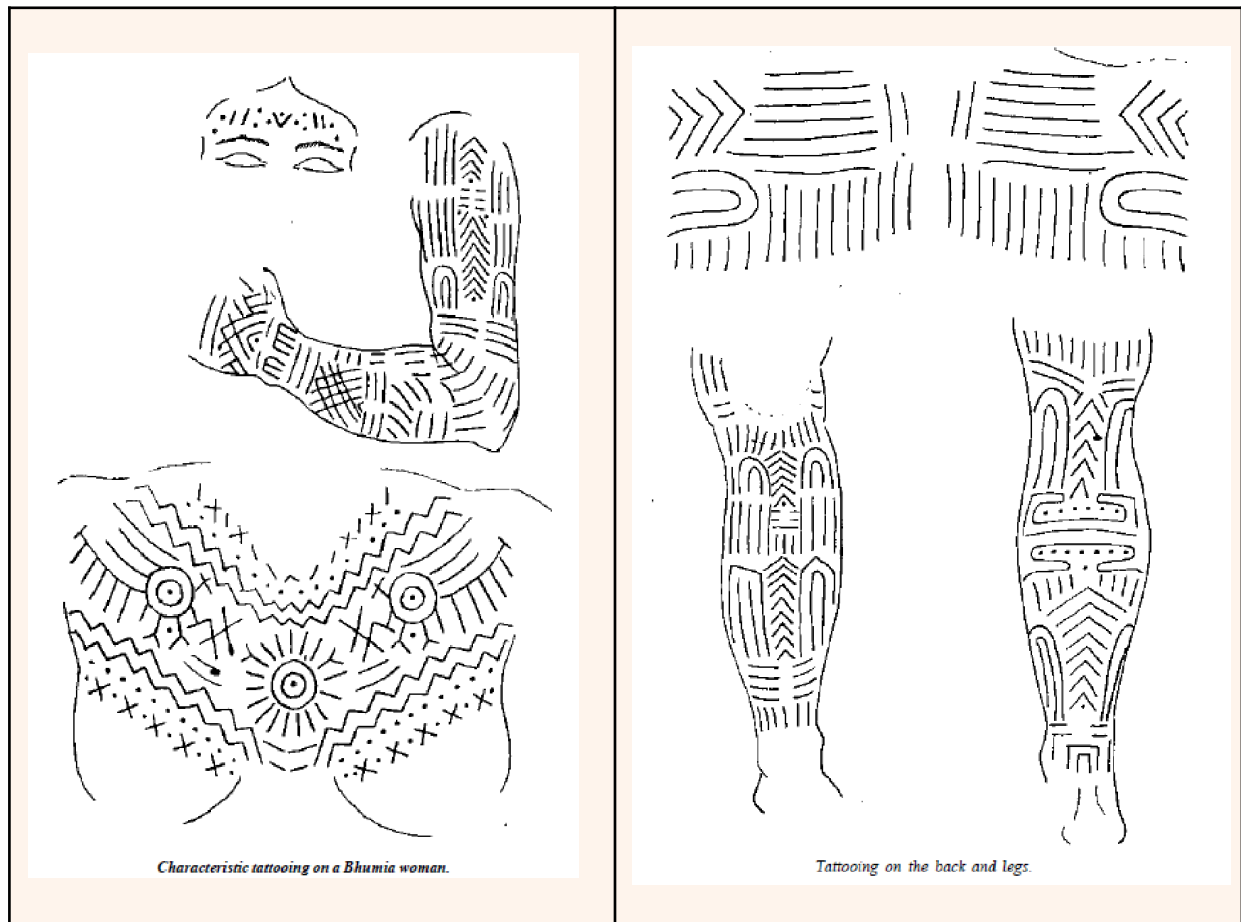


Figure 2: Baiga Tattoo designs on various parts of the body²¹

²¹ Elwin, Verrier. The Baiga. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007. 54.

III. Materials & Process:

The women of the 'Badi' tribe generally do the tattooing on the Baiga women; they are called '*Badnins*'. They are also known as '*Godnaharis*', '*Godharis*' and '*Gudaris*'. The major items needed for tattooing are colours and needles. Other materials are used for preventing the tattooed area from getting infected. It requires different materials for different parts. They only use natural colours for the tattoos. Special attention is paid to the purity of the colours to ensure that their skin is not infected. In order to make *Kajal*, artists from different regions use different colours. Shreemati Premvati Bai Maravi (a tattoo artist from Mandala) states that she uses gum from the garlic tree or the dry skin of the Bija tree. They dig a hole in the ground and keep the dry gum in it, on top of which they burn '*Alav*' which also burns the gum and produces black smoke. The smoke is collected on the back side of a broken pot as soot, thus producing the *Kajal*. They use a bamboo spoon to scoop the *Kajal* off the pot and put it on a mud slab. They extract the juice from the skin of the Bija tree and apply it on the coconut shell and the colour is obtained. For the Baiga tribe, the *Badnin* get the *Kajal* from *Ramteela* or the skin of the malwan tree.

a. Kuchi:

For this process they require *kuchi*; they are thin strips of bamboo covered in cotton. From this *kuchi* they write or make different designs on different body parts. The thickness of the *kuchi* depends on the thickness of the skin of the person getting the tattoo and on the comfort of the artist.

b. Suji:

Shreemati Premvati Bai states that for tattooing they tie three needles with thread and prepare an instrument that she calls *Gudhari Suji*. These needles are dipped in the colour and the necessary medical apparatus before they are poked into the skin. In

some places instead of using the needles they use the thorns of the *Bahu* tree. The parts that are tattooed swell up for 8-10 days. In order to prevent puss from emerging they cover the parts with cow dung and wash it with cold water. Then they make an ointment out of turmeric and *Duub* which are used as an anti-bacterial treatment.

IV. Influencing Factors:

Baiga body art as a tradition is declining in its practice. Articles report of Baiga girls today who no longer want tattoos, and have taken to wearing jeans instead of their traditional clothes, like the **Times Of India** article, **“Baiga tribe youth losing interest in tattoo tradition”, by Prakash Hatvalne²²**. With all the forms and their significances recorded, there is need, now more than ever, to see how the attitude towards this culture is changing within the tribe. The article in question mentions education, film and television as the sources for this change. This coming at a time when the Baiga body art is being recorded and exhibited²³ means the Baiga body art is a cultural practice that has been acknowledged, but is on the verge of decline. There is scope to find out what this culture means to the Baiga youth, to be able to visualize the future of this art, especially when tattooing is a popular fashion even in urban areas.

²² Hatvalne, Prakash. "Baiga tribe youth losing interest in tattoo tradition." 14 April 2013. 28 September 2014
<<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhopal/Baiga-tribe-youth-losing-interest-in-tattoo-tradition/articleshow/19535458.cms>>.

²³ Yadav, Ekta. MP Tribal Museum's exhibition on Baiga tribe, Bhopal. 9 October 2013. 19 December 2014
<<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/events/bhopal/MP-Tribal-Museums-exhibition-Dehraag-on-Baiga-tribe-on-display-in-Bhopal/articleshow/20989777.cms>>.

When speaking of the past research carried out on this tribe, the name that first comes to mind is Verrier Elwin, one of the foremost authorities on the tribe, and the author of 'The Baiga'. He devoted the better part of three decades²⁴ to the study of the tribes in Madhya Pradesh, documenting all that he found during the time that he lived amongst them. From the time that he spent with the Baiga, he looked at the art of *Godna* as just another one of their traditions. The next name that comes to mind is L N Payodhi, the author of '*Janjatiya Godna Sringar Upchar*'. His study is much more recent (as recent as 2012), and details more of the tattooing practice of the Baigas and some other tribes of Madhya Pradesh. The one aspect that is missing from all past research that we came across was that none of them identified any factors that may have been influencing this practice. In this regard, our research also attempts to identify such factors, if any, in addition to documenting the methods and meanings of the tattoo forms and the significance of the tradition as a whole.

²⁴ Ali, A. N. M. Irshad. "Dr. Verrier Elwin and Assam." The NEHU Journal (2011): 15-24.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The body matures, impelling an addition to the canvas. As the needle reconciles with the surface, the lines extend and expand, spilling over to the torso. The plane rotates to reveal a back that is coated in a diversity of designs. Inked imprints of chains and threads meet to construct the interconnected and interdependent filaments of a mesh- a Community. And yet, every line stands distinct and definite, evidencing the minutiae of the method.

* * *

3.1 Pre-field Exploration

- **Preliminary Research:**

The decision to study the tattoo culture of the Baiga Tribe was reached upon after the group encountered an article covered in the **Times of India**²⁵, which expounded on the evidence suggesting that young girls of the Baiga tribe of Madhya Pradesh had begun to move away from the age-old practice of *Godna* or tattooing. With very little knowledge about the tribe and their tradition, the first steps were taken in order to acquire ample background information about the tribe. This was done by going through a variety of electronic sources which included articles, books and pictorial enquiries by institutions like museums. Surprisingly, we did not encounter vast novelty and variety in the type and domain of research that had been performed upon the tribe and their culture. The research that was available was largely descriptive in nature, and studies that had been recently performed dealt with statistical analyses

²⁵Hatvalne, Prakash. "Baiga tribe youth losing interest in tattoo tradition." 14 April 2013. 28 September 2014

<<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhopal/Baiga-tribe-youth-losing-interest-in-tattoo-tradition/articleshow/19535458.cms>>.

regarding factors like occupation, lifestyle, et cetera. Verrier Elwin's "The Baiga", apart from its historically profound means of acquiring information, was useful in providing us with a scholarly and scrutinized insight into the variety and intricacies of the tattoo tradition.

- **Establishing Contacts:**

This electronic information was then succeeded by establishing contacts in the academic field, which would provide us with an updated and present day perspective about where research in academia today was leading. Researchers like Dr. Priyanka Singh at Amarkantak University were of great help in providing basic information regarding what we should expect from the tribe once we went on-field.

- **Roadmap:**

It was decided that an elaborate road-map be created and instilled, such that the group would visit locations based on specific aims, and more importantly, in quest of objective based information gathering. A consensus was also reached in regards to two important determinants:

- a. The number of days on field would be divided between acquiring secondary information from Tribal Research Institutes; and meeting the tribe in various villages.
- b. A mediator or connector of sorts would be required to come along whenever the group meets the tribe, because without that human connect, it would be impossible to achieve the depth of information in the given time.

3.2 On-Field Research

● Interviews:

In-depth interviews were conducted on various academicians and researchers at various places, in order to acquire basic information about the tribe and their culture. The interviews were conducted mainly on academicians because the aim was to gain insight into their experiences while working with the tribe, and to match our expectations in respect to what they had achieved conclusively through the span of their research. Questions asked in the interview were based on elaborating regarding their experiences, followed by questions regarding the basic characteristics and tendencies regarding the practice as whole. In-depth interviews were conducted and focused only on researchers and academicians because the quality and depth of responses expected was of a nature that dealt with experience in working with the tribe – a challenge that we were expecting to face in the relatively short time. We anticipated that the interviews would provide us with a proper background and understanding of the tribe, their practices, and most importantly their openness to outsiders looking to achieve their academic aims.

a. **L.N. Payodhi:** Author of “*Janjatiya Godna Sringar Upchar*” on meaning and descriptions of tattoos, he provided us with data regarding the tribe’s reasons behind the practice, significance of the practice, and general importance of the practice to the tribe. The questions in the interview were addressed in regard to his specialization in the longstanding research he had conducted in various Baiga-Chak villages. The interview also yielded and reinforced the validity of the places we were visiting to perform our research as well.

b. **Ashok Sharma:** Director at the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Dr.

Ashok Sharma's interview dealt largely with what was to be expected when we went into the villages to meet the tribes. We were duly informed that we would not receive smooth and free flowing information, as many before us had been to the villages seeking information of similar types. The continuous exodus of research had led the tribe to strongly believe that there was nothing that was being given back to tribe in return of all that the researchers took from the tribe – something private and specifically unique.

● **Secondary Information:**

Although second on this list, the first stop we made was in Bhopal, with the sole aim of acquiring a plethora of secondary information from a variety of sources. We visited the Tribal Research Institute (TRI), Tribal Research Museum, Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya and the Adivasi Lokkala Academy. We were pre-informed that we would acquire books on the Baiga tribe that were situated in libraries across these museums, which would serve to provide good background on the tribe. As this background was sought after, the trip to Bhopal was scheduled as the first stop.

● **Interacting with the Baiga:**

Following the Bhopal visit, we continued onward to visit specific places in Madhya Pradesh where we found mediators as well as a hefty population of the tribe. This was done in a synchronous manner by finding connections of various researchers, as they had conducted their research with specific villages of the Baiga, all which fell in what is called the **Baiga-Chak Belt**. Following is a list of places visited with people that accompanied the group at each place:

a. **Amarkantak:** Accompanied by Mr. Vikram Dewan - ex-worker with WWF.

b. Garasarai: Accompanied by Dr. Vijay Chaurasia - Freelance Doctor and Researcher on the Tribe.

c. Dindori: Accompanied by Mr. Balwant of National Institute of Woman, Child and Youth Development.

The focus at these places was to meet the tribe and ask the tribe questions regarding the materials, process, meaning and significance of the tattoos that they were known to create for centuries. The tool used over here, again, was the interview method to gain viable and necessary information regarding the practices of the tribe. We performed convenient sampling to acquire subjects that could be interviewed. The only criterion was that they must be residing in the Baiga Village being visited, and must be of Baiga ancestry. We used the interview method once again in order to gain necessary information. However, the design of these interviews differed from the in-depth interviews carried out with the researchers. These interviews were semi-structured and consisted of questions of a more general taste (See Appendix 3 & 4). The overarching and binding themes were decided, and the questions in the interviews were based upon the thematic aspects that were being questioned. The themes such as tattooing, lifestyle, occupation, etc. were important in our study as they provided the basis for conducting factor based studies.

We visited two to three villages at each of the aforementioned locations, and interviewed approximately 10-20 persons per village. Hence, the sample size of the interviews conducted over here was 10-20 persons per village, 40-50 per city, and approximately 100 persons in total. However, these interviews involved questions that were not entirely structured, as we realized that the tribe was not comfortable in really sharing details about their practices to outsiders who were spending short spans of time with them, with singular and uni-directional aims.

3.3 Post-field Analysis

Upon returning from the field trip, the post-field organization was the first step that was taken. The organization took place based on three basic criteria:

- People
- Place
- Tradition
 - Process
 - Form and design
 - Influencing Factors

This was followed by assimilating the data based on these segregations, leading to framing of the findings. Upon analyzing the organized data, it was re-affirmed that majority of the data was qualitative in nature. This was a product of the small sample sizes and the nature of questions that were asked in order to gain perspective and adequate knowledge regarding the practice, apart from the tangible data collected in the form and design of the tattoos. Hence, the findings were successfully supported by qualitative data and visual representations.

3.4 Limitations

In the process of conducting this research, the most impactful limitation was that of language. Even though a large part of Madhya Pradesh speaks Hindi, the tribal belts like the *Baiga-Chak* speak in dialects of Hindi that are difficult to understand and get used to. While this can be deciphered, there is some meaning that is certainly lost in translation. Having anticipated this barrier, we planned our field trip in a way such we always had mediators or connectors who essentially understood the language of the tribe. This bridged the gap to an extent, but we could still feel that we were unable to understand them entirely. The scrutiny of many concepts and terminologies seemed to lose its flavour when translated to English.

Secondly, the entire act of entering the tribal belts to study the tribe seems to come with some scepticism in the eyes of the tribe. We encountered some members of the tribe conveying to us that they were uncomfortable in conversing to us as many like us had come before, and taken similar information, after which the relationship would decay. This scepticism led the interviewees to be hesitant in their responses. Also, when a group of twelve outsiders walks into a desolate and isolated tribal village, there exists a certain sense of discomfort. Hence, a little time was required to establish a comfort zone between the interviewers and the interviewees; the urban and the rural populace making eight days seem shorter in amount of productive time.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Significances

In the abode of the feminine majesty, too, the tradition has marked its presence. Ferocious flowers are etched upon the chest, signifying the construction of a barricading blouse. The flower blooms, dispersing its fibres over the breadth of the body. Rich detail and rationale characterizes every putri inked onto this surface.

* * *

I. TRADITION

The tattoos that the Baiga are famous for are unique and personalized in nature of the tribe (See **Appendix 5 and 6**). While exploring the purpose or significance of indulging in the painfully beautiful tradition, one aspect begs to stand out from any other – identity. The Baiga consider that their identity is entirely based upon their tattoos. This is based on two basic ideas that they consider to be central to their worldview of their community:

- **Ethnic Identification:**

In respect to their immediate environment, one that is essentially governed by the forest and the vast entity of tribes that live in these forests, the Baiga believe that their tattoos that are explicitly visible on their forehead and the rest of their body are those that help tribes distinguish and identify them. Ranging from tribes like the Bhils and the Gonds, the tradition of inscribing various designs on the body transcends those divisions that are expressed today in the form of different tribes. Concurring to the same logic, the Baiga also believe that it is

these tattoos that help other tribes identify the Baiga as a unified entity. Hence, it works as an essential visual identifier.

- **Symbolism and Identification:**

Every individual enters this world bare handed and naked. Every person exits in the same physical way. Jewellery and ornamentation is something that is physically differentiable from the human body; something separable. Consequentially, upon death of an individual, the Baiga individuals are not able to carry this tangible world with them. On the other hand, what they are able to carry is that what is directly inscribed upon their bodies. The Baiga tattoos, according to them, surpass those barriers that life lays upon them. When the gold and silver burns out in the death rituals performed on the body, the tattoos remain, and are carried along with the Baiga to heaven (or the other worlds that they may visit after life). God, as they say, identifies the Baiga with their tattoos. God recognizes the Baiga with their tattoos.

Hence, there exists a strong symbolic connotation to the practice of inscribing tattoos upon Baiga individuals that surpasses the span of their lives; and the connection that generations have established upon this basic belief is what is the making and breaking point of the practice itself. What the Baiga consider vital in preserving their physical and extra-physical identity is exactly what the upcoming Baiga youth considers as opposing. Upon various interviews, we gathered that the upcoming youth is not extremely thrilled with the idea of physical identification in their daily lives. This is so because, in the essence of it, anything that establishes singularity is what can be attacked to discriminate as well. Girls these days are told that they are visibly associated with the poor class when they sport forehead tattoos that relate to any specific central Indian tribe. The idea is not to justify what can be seen as a tasteful and gradual slide away from the practice, but is to elicit how the

positive and negative aspects of one specific practice can emerge from the exactly same root or cause.

Apart from this, the tribe also indulges in undertaking the practice for other reasons. In general, it is considered that the different tattoos, inscribed at different ages, expose the Baiga female to various physical hardships of life. It provides a realistic and painfully raw outlook to what the female must be prepared for in the future. Also, traditionally, a Baiga woman with an entirely tattooed body was considered to be of greater marital eligibility than a woman with a half tattooed body. The tattoos have societal implications where the greater number of tattoos expressed greater financial or economic stability and standing of the family. This was the case essentially because affording the entire elaborate body tattoos over a span of many years was an expression of the ability of the tribal family to expend. This meant that the family was in a better monetary or economic position than another woman who did not possess as many tattoos. The Baiga woman was hence, traditionally, more likely to be married with the vast variety of tattoos inscribed upon her. However, over the passage of time, this criterion of basing marriage upon the vastness of tattoos has dissolved and been lost in time. Over our interviews and study, we found that the Baiga do not consider the tattooed female to be of greater eligibility than non-tattooed females.

In light of the modern interpretation of the practice by researchers and scholars around the world, the tradition has gained a novel significance. Having realized the attraction of the urban populace toward the tattooing process and design, the tribe looks to make it their distinguishing mark. The tattoo artists, whose number has gradually fallen over time, consider the practice of tattooing as their prized possession – a skill that allows them to be part of a niche group that has now resorted to establishing it as a means to earn money. Arguably, their traditional practice, which is presently referred to as their occupation, justifies

their money-minded attitude that signifies the tradition for them in an entirely modern fashion.

II. FORM

Most tattoos are created with an intention of signifying something specific, something that is visually elicited in the tattoo form. Even though there are a large variety of tattoos that are created, the general designs are derived from certain specific tangibles in the environment that are used to depict certain specific information or understanding. These tangibles vary from instruments like the *Chulha* and *Trishul*, to animals like fish and scorpions, to environmental factors such as the sun and the moon. Traditionally, every Baiga girl receives her tattoos in a chronological order that is determined by her age. The segregation of this section follows the same chronological order - the forehead, back, chest, arms, and legs. It must be remembered that the following explanations provided are based on traditional and general information that is considered by researchers as the basis of most of their tattooing forms. However, individual differences in significance may be present.

- **The Forehead:**



Figure 3: Kapal Godna: The Forehead Tattoo

Better known as '*Kapal Godna*' (which essentially translates to tattoos made on the head), the tattoo made on the forehead is considered to be of utmost importance. If the Baiga were to choose the one tattoo that must mandatorily be made on every woman, it would be this. The villages in the Baiga-Chak belt are clustered with women aged 35 and above with these tattoos. The '*Kapal Godna*' is considered to be singularly expressive and representative of Baiga Identity. This is also the first tattoo that is made on a girl, traditionally at around the age of 8-9 years. The central design that resembles the letter V with a single dot above it is what symbolizes the "*Chulha*" or the stove; and the "*Atra*" or what is being cooked on the "*Chulha*". This essentially depicts part of what is the core basis of their subsistence. Apart from this, the dot above the V signifies the "*Agni-Shikha*" or the crest of the fire. This tattoo renders heavy meaning regarding the occurrences of life to the tribe. The Baiga strongly believe that every girl must, in the least, receive this tattoo on their bodies. Furthermore, it also signifies man's relentless energy and power – that charges him through the various jobs he performs during the day.

*"The chulha or stove cooks food – that provides energy to man – which is productively used in various forms – which eventually signifies the agility or energetic nature of work that is performed by the man. The Baiga make this connection between the tattoo and everyday life."*²⁶

The "V and dot" is surrounded by other forms which are essentially interpreted as lines of various types. There are two basic interpretations we encountered in regard to the meaning of these accompanying forms:

- o The Baiga consider nature as their mother or their foremost power responsible for their existence. Slanting lines (*Adha Bhenda*) represent rivers; Straight lines

²⁶ Payodhi, Lakshminarayan. *Janjatiya Godna Sringar Upchar*. Bhopal: TRI, 2012. 34

- (*Khade Bhenda*) represent trees; and the *Tipkas* represent the mountains. Upon tattooing the basic natural elements upon their foreheads, the Baiga overtly express what they strongly believe in – surviving in the lap of nature.
- o The three dots also signify the three worlds; three gods; and three states of the man. Having visited a few areas of the Baiga-Chak belt, the tribe does not seem to conceive these meanings out of the tattoos. Their understanding of the tattoos reaches the objective level of their depictions and ends there. The interpretations made regarding agriculture and nature is what they consider to be the most attributable reason for the making of the forehead tattoos.

The forehead tattoo is, as mentioned earlier, the most important of all tattoos inscribed upon a Baiga woman. Owing to its pertinence, the forehead tattoo inscription receives special importance as family members, villagers and close relatives gather to celebrate the inscription of the forehead tattoo.²⁷

● **The Back:**

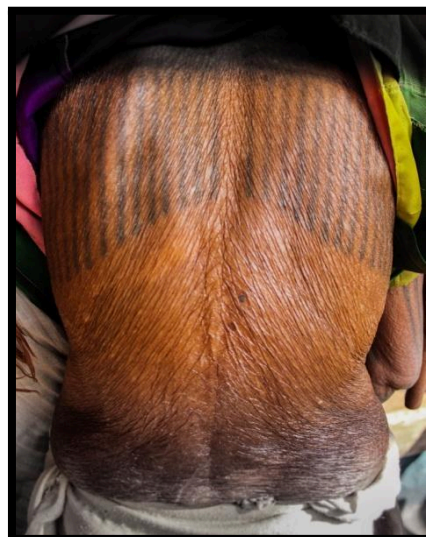


Figure 4: *Prisht Godna*: The Back Tattoo

²⁷ Payodhi, Lakshminarayan. Janjatiya Godna Sringar Upchar. Bhopal: TRI, 2012. 34

After receiving the forehead tattoo, the Baiga girl does not indulge in tattoo inscriptions until the age of 15 or 16. It is believed that the young girl develops a sense of ornamentation that makes them inquisitive about a wider variety of tattoos. This motivates them to inscribe more tattoos upon their bodies by their own will. Varieties of designs are drawn on the back, and the inscriptions have no specific binding characteristic. Women can choose whatever they want to inscribe upon themselves. However, given the size of the back, there are specific inscriptions accompanied by dots and lines that help fill the large surface area of the skin. Firestone or “*Chakmak*” indicates fire; Chains or “*Sankal*” intend to indicate the affirmative nature of love; and the “*Jhela*” indicates the importance of close relatives and cohesive families.²⁸

● **The Chest:**



Figure 5: *Vaksh Godna*: The Chest Tattoo

²⁸ Payodhi, Lakshminarayan. Janjatiya Godna Sringar Upchar. Bhopal: TRI, 2012. 38-39.

The chest tattoo or “*Vaksh-Godna*” is inscribed on the woman’s breast, and the areas situated between either breasts. Usually, the area between either breasts is inscribed with designs like flowers and doll like human figures. The flower is intended to indicate and signify pleasure. The human figures, on the other hand are inscribed to signify the human aspect of the pleasure. Coupled with each other, In fact, women often get the names of their loved ones inscribed in the same area to signify the same. Apart from this, the usual dots and lines may or may not be inscribed upon the breasts.²⁹

● **The Arms:**



Figure 6: Baiga Tattoo designs on the arms

²⁹ Payodhi, Lakshminarayan. Janjatiya Godna Sringar Upchar. Bhopal: TRI, 2012. 39-40.

As we move away from the basic forehead tattoo, there grows a certain amount of freedom of designs and meanings inferred. The necessity of getting specific tattoos inscribed upon their arms and most other body parts does not exist. There are specific marks that are also made, like names and other symbols of occupation or subsistence. Traditionally, the tattoos on the arms are divided into two basic parts – above and below the elbow. The tattoos inscribed above the elbow are usually continuations of the designs made on the back. If not continuations, they tend to correspond to the designs on the back. For example, if there are vertical lines on the back, the upper arm would also have straight lines or vertical dotted lines, etc. Tattoos inscribed on the lower arm extend from the elbow to the knuckles. The lower arm tattoos are called “*Pori Godna*”. The tattoos inscribed upon the arms range from chains, flints or fire stones, to fish hooks and other such instruments used in daily practice. Girls also usually get scorpions inscribed upon their thumbs as a mark of their sexuality.³⁰

It is also often the case that women get the same “V and Dot” design inscribed upon their hands. This is usually accompanied by a variety of line patterns, either extending half the length of the arm or extending the entire length. Tattoos regarding occupation are also made – like fish hooks, sickles, etc. The occupation based tattoos intend to signify the hardships and determined efforts the women put in to earn their livelihood.

³⁰ Payodhi, Lakshminarayan. Janjatiya Godna Sringar Upchar. Bhopal: TRI, 2012. 40-41

- The Legs:

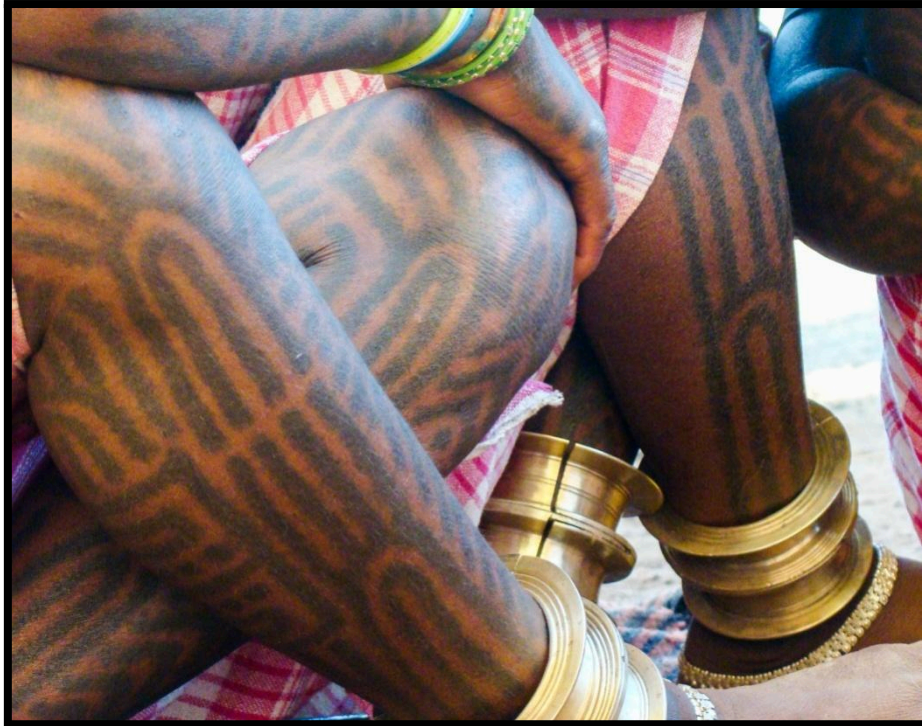


Figure 7: *Jhang Godna*: The Baiga Tattoo Designs on the Legs

The “*Jhang Godna*” is considered to be the most time consuming and cumbersome inscription for the tattoo artist (the *Godnahari*). The tattoo is chronologically inscribed after the tattoos on the back have dried up. Traditionally, the tattoos on the leg were inscribed before marriage, as they were considered to add value unto the woman getting married. However, the presence or absence of leg tattoos does not signify anything in marriages today. The tattoos inscribed on the legs go upwards from the ankle to the pelvis or the upper thigh. The variety of patterns drawn follows a loosely connected series of lines and dots that, in their entirety, represent unity. Both the knees have large circles of black with radiating lines that represent the sun – another natural element. Sometimes women also inscribe “*Porakadi*” upon their legs, a mark of ornamentation. Triangular lines, vertical lines, and dots are also

used to cover up the sheer length of the legs. They may not mean anything specific, but tend to look appealing when viewed as a unified whole.

Baiga women also inscribe tattoos upon the back of their legs. The Baiga are one of the only tribe that inscribes tattoos on either side of their legs. With both sides tattooed, the legs look like two erect pillars filled with unified designs and specific inscriptions running through the length of the legs. Similar tattoos as those on the front run down the back of the leg as well. Traditionally, the Baiga women wear attire that extends till their lower thighs, hence rendering the lower part of the leg tattoos entirely visible at all times.³¹

³¹ Payodhi, Lakshminarayan. Janjatiya Godna Sringar Upchar. Bhopal: TRI, 2012. 45-46

4.2 Materials And Process

The imprints lengthen over the limbs, cloaking them in an abundance of interpretations. While the globules of ink glimmer over the skin, an intricately affixed bundle of needles stealthily approaches. Gently, each needle head meets, nudges, and invades the surface, driving traces of the Ramteela extract into the body. As the designs travel to the ends of the arm, the pain grows tolerable, and the whimpers dull.

* * *

The art of *Godna* practiced by the Baiga is considered to be the “ornament of life”³², with a sense of permanence that no other form of embellishment can provide. With each intricate line and dot carved on the surface of the body comes an equally intricate procedure that is attached to it. From the materials utilized to the technique employed, every detail is adorned with a characteristic sense of tradition and purpose. Before dwelling into the specifics of this art form, it is essential to know where its origins lie. All art forms tend to have an array of variations, as does this one. According to mythology, a tribal lady belonging to the Gond tribe was sitting by a river waiting for the water to flow, and when she was just about to lose hope, a goddess appeared by the river and tattooed a tree on her back.³³ This was the first tattoo ever to be created, and thus forms the significance of tattoos and the connection shared in this aspect between tribes and the Almighty. Another reason that is specific solely to the Baiga is perhaps the fierce reverence that they have for God. They believe that once a Baigin nears the end of her life and is in the presence of God, the only recognition she has are the permanent marking of ink on her body that distinguish her from

³² The Ultimate Ornament of Baiga "Godna". Dir. Mukesh Vishwakarma. 1991.

³³ Payodhi, Lakshminarayan. Janjatiya Godna Sringar Upchar. Bhopal: TRI, 2012. 87-88.

the rest- it is her only mark of recognition. A case of divine retribution is also witnessed in the story that if a Baigin does not get tattooed in this life, when she meets God he will make his associates tattoo her with a shovel to punish her for the sin she has committed.³⁴

The Baiga refrain from tattooing within their own tribe, therefore the tattoo artists are from outside of the Baiga. Traditionally, they belong to the '*Badi*' tribe of Madhya Pradesh, and hence are referred to as '*Badnin*'. They are called '*Godnahari*'. The distinction lies in the fact that the *Badnins* are women of the *Badi* tribe and *Godnaharis* are the tattoo artists.³⁵ The tattoo artist profession, most often than not runs in the family and has come down through the generations. The *Godharis* travel from village to village throughout the year (except for monsoons) for this sole purpose.

The tattoo process in the Baiga community is an inimitable, elaborate procedure involving the use of natural materials that prove to have medicinal values as well. One of the main components of this process is *Ramteela*, an oil yielding seed that a bright yellow flower carries. It is a prominent seed of the land of Madhya Pradesh and is also used for consumption purposes. At times other substances are used instead of *Ramteela*, like according to Shreemati Premvati Bai Maravi, a tattoo artist who hails from Mandala. She says that gum from the garlic tree or dry skin of the *Bija* tree is alternatives. Even skin of the *malwan* tree or snake skin could be burnt.³⁶

³⁴ The Ultimate Ornament of Baiga "Godna". Dir. Mukesh Vishwakarma. 1991.

³⁵ Payodhi, Lakshminarayan. Janjatiya Godna Sringar Upchar. Bhopal: TRI, 2012. 86.

³⁶ Payodhi, Lakshminarayan. Interview. 4 January 2014.



Figure 8: Dry Ramteela Seeds

Among other materials utilized for *Godna*, the needle is of paramount importance. Since a singular needle would be inadequate, a set of needles ranging from 12-25 needles (for a thick bunch); and 4-5 needles (for a thin bunch) are tied together and used for penetrating the skin. These two kinds of needles have different purposes depending on which part of the body is being tattooed and the nature of the tattoo. The thick one is used for creating holes in the skin for the purpose of the ink seeping in, right up to the bone. And the thin needle is used with a balanced hand for the making of finer holes in sensitive parts of the body.³⁷ Sometimes they use thorns of the *Bahu* tree instead of needles.³⁸

³⁷ The Ultimate Ornament of Baiga "Godna". Dir. Mukesh Vishwakarma. 1991.

³⁸ Payodhi, Lakshminarayan. Janjatiya Godna Sringar Upchar. Bhopal: TRI, 2012. 89.



Figure 9: *Suji*: A bundle of needles used in the process of Tattooing³⁹

The making of the ink is an art that the *Godnaharis* have mastered over time as it has travelled down through generations. The methods used to make the ink from the *Ramteela* is that first; the *Ramteela* is burnt in an earthen pot or *mitti ka bartan*. If not a pot, a dug up hole in the soil is used to burn the seeds. Next, the burning of the seed creates a distinctive black smoke of which the vapours are trapped and collected, usually on the backside of a broken pot. This substance that is created is like soot, or *Kajal*. On acquiring this semi-solid *Kajal* material, a liquid can be made out of it as and when required. After this step, a bamboo spoon is used to scoop the *Kajal* on to a mud slab; and the black colour of the ink is obtained by extracting the juice of the seed and is applied onto a coconut shell.⁴⁰

³⁹ The Ultimate Ornament of Baiga "Godna". Dir. Mukesh Vishwakarma. 1991.

⁴⁰ Payodhi, Lakshminarayan. Interview. 4 January 2014.



Figure 10: Tattoo ink made out of ramteela seeds⁴¹

From here on, there exist several variations in the method of administering the ink into the skin by the means of the needles. The two main ways shall be explored in this section. One is the method that L.N Payodhi has authored, which is when the black liquid is spread over the surface of the skin (in the desired region) and only the areas that are required to be tattooed are poked into with the needles. Following which the needle is constantly dipped into the black liquid and then poked into the skin.⁴² The other method is the one implemented by tattoo artists like Shantibai Maravi and Sushilabai who have been *Badnins* for years together, as the profession has been in their families for generations. In this method the ink is illustrated on the receiver of the tattoo's body with a narrow object (like a match stick) once and for all, after which needles are brought out for the penetration. The ink on the skin itself seeps through the holes made by the cluster of needles and goes as deep as the bone.⁴³

⁴¹ The Ultimate Ornament of Baiga "Godna". Dir. Mukesh Vishwakarma. 1991.

⁴² Payodhi, Lakshminarayan. Interview. 4 January 2014.

⁴³ The Ultimate Ornament of Baiga "Godna". Dir. Mukesh Vishwakarma. 1991.



Figure 11: A Godnahari in the Process of Tattoo-making⁴⁴



Figure 12: A *Jhang Godna* in the making⁴⁵

⁴⁴ The Ultimate Ornament of Baiga "Godna". Dir. Mukesh Vishwakarma. 1991.

⁴⁵ The Ultimate Ornament of Baiga "Godna". Dir. Mukesh Vishwakarma. 1991.

The marker of the end of the tattooing process is the application of antiseptics that aid the healing of the wounds and avoid infection and disease. The most commonly used ones are *haldi* or turmeric powder and *gobar* or cow dung. At times a mixture of turmeric powder and *Ramteela* oil is made use of, as is in the following image:



Figure 13: Applying of Antiseptics⁴⁶

⁴⁶ The Ultimate Ornament of Baiga "Godna". Dir. Mukesh Vishwakarma. 1991.

4.3 Influence

Seasons slither; Time trudges. The grand nuptial ceremony lurks around the corner. For the last time, the body seats itself at the feet of the Godnaharin. Thoughts of fulfilment flood the mind while fingers fervently move to the saree, tenderly lifting the fabric to expose inches of trembling skin. Legs are stretched; a deep breath is taken; the practice ensues.

* * *

Several factors were found to influence the practice and prevalence of *Godna* in the villages we visited, and amongst the people we interviewed. While some of these factors were already encountered in the secondary research, their influences were either supported or contradicted through the primary data that was acquired. Given below are the most prominent factors:

- **Socio-Cultural**

Within the Literature Review, it was explained that the Baiga's practice of *Godna* holds various socio-cultural significances and implications. During the Field Research, certain significant socio-cultural factors were identified and understood, in association with the tattooing tradition, and through explicit and implicit observations, their influence upon the tradition was gauged. Through a comparison of the perspectives that we recorded from people belonging to different age groups and socio-cultural positions, it was observed that there has been an evident shift in the tribe's cultural perceptions and philosophies over the generations, thus influencing and moulding their tattooing tradition into what it is today.

While earlier, getting tattooed was a requisite for every female member of the tribe, and those who chose to defy this tradition were looked upon with disapproval and

derision. Today, however, it seems to be a matter of choice and convenience. Most of our interviews with members of the Baiga community led us to understand that if a young girl chose not to go through the tedious, painful, and economically-excruciating practice of *Godna*, her parents would not be insistent and imposing. They would allow the young girl to make her own decision. Though in the earlier generations, it was the parents or grandparents who would make this crucial choice and “force”⁴⁷ the girl into it, the relationships between the elders and the children have evolved in a manner which has rested the reins of this decision in the hands of the young girls. These girls may be informed or uninformed of the significances, implications, and consequences associated with conforming to or resisting their community’s age-old practice. “The young girls are oblivious to the importance of our tattoos; they fail to comprehend the value of the *Kapal Godna* in a Baigin’s life, and how it allows other people to identity us. This may be because either their parents are also unaware of the importance, or their parents, having been influenced by urban fashions, do not enlighten their children”⁴⁸, explains Rambai, the *sarpanch* of ‘Jalda’ village, Garasarai. Contrarily, we were also acquainted with girls who still believed and practiced *Godna* religiously. “I derive pride from it”⁴⁹, young Chhoti passionately proclaimed. The decisions made by these young girls shall ultimately determine the fate of the tradition.

Traditionally, the tattooing followed an age-determined chronology, beginning at puberty and continuing until the young girl was considered to be fit for marriage. The first tattoo was acquired when the girl was young, because the Baiga believed that “the tenderness

⁴⁷Interaction with a member of the Baiga community

⁴⁸Interaction with a member of the Baiga community

⁴⁹Interaction with a member of the Baiga community

of youth allowed one to endure more pain”⁵⁰. And the final tattoo, which covers the legs, would be obtained before a girl would get married. “If you cannot bear *godan* (tattooing), how will you endure *chodan* (intercourse)?”⁵¹, the older female onlookers would proclaim while the young girl would scream in pain. However, today, as a result of the tribe’s evolved cultural beliefs, the age-determined progression of tattooing seems to have lost significance. The age at which a tattoo is acquired, if at all, is now dependent upon choice and convenience. The economic position of a family may also lead a girl to practice *Godna* after marriage, so that the costs may be borne by her husband, as opposed to the traditional practice of being tattooed before the marriage, where all the expenses have to be taken care of by her parents. So although the tattoos adorning the body of a Baigin were the traditional ‘dowry’ that the groom’s family expected, with the loss of the age-determined chronology, and perhaps the shift away from a patriarchal society, as evidenced by the female *sarpanch* in one of the visited villages, the “tattoo as contract”⁵² does not seem to apply anymore.

Furthermore, from amongst the current day practitioners of *Godna*, we came across a lot of women who, although belonging to the Baiga tribe, sported tattoos that were not traditionally associated with the Baiga. Tattoos of flowers or their names adorned their hands, while tattoos that were traditionally associated with other tattooing tribes, such as the Gonds, were also displayed on their skin. When justified by the women, these tattoos were chosen as they were “aesthetically appealing”⁵³. This transformation in the designs of the *Godna* practiced by the Baiga, and the adoption of forms and designs that are traditionally traced to

⁵⁰Interaction with a member of the Baiga community

⁵¹Elwin, Verrier. *The Baiga*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007. 22.

⁵²Interaction with a member of the Baiga community

⁵³Interaction with a member of the Baiga community

other tribes may be attributed to external influences and exposure. Their incorporation into the distinct Baiga tattoos has reformed the tradition, and amended its symbolism and significances. In fact, even the men of the tribe, having adopted urban fashion trends, contrary to tradition, have begun obtaining tattoos. Although the tattoos were once the characteristic identity of the Baiga women alone, and held various socio-cultural implications for them, in this new age, the Baiga tattooing practice has become a matter of aesthetics.



Figure 14: A Gond woman with a Forehead tattoo

As mentioned in the *Times of India* article (referenced in the Literature Review)⁵⁴, Education seems to be one of the sources of the external influence due to the exposure it subjects the students to, thereby affecting the practice of the *Godna* tradition amongst the Baiga, and the tribe's adherence to traditional forms of its practice. Education, as considered here, refers to the school environments, as well as the perpetuation of new cultures and philosophies. During our on-field research, Education being an influential factor was gauged

⁵⁴Hatvalne, Prakash. "Baiga tribe youth losing interest in tattoo tradition." 14 April 2013. 28 September 2014

<<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhopal/Baiga-tribe-youth-losing-interest-in-tattoo-tradition/articleshow/19535458.cms>>.

and assessed through interviews with students and teachers in schools within the villages that were visited.

In Amarkantak, students coming from Baiga and Gond communities studied under the same roof. When the young Baiga girls over here were interviewed, it was observed that although most of the girls were of the age at which, traditionally, *Godna* would have been practiced, these girls did not sport tattoos. When this observation was inquired upon, the girls, though initially reluctant to answer, revealed that sporting a tattoo was an “embarrassment”⁵⁵. These girls studied and interacted with other children of the neighbouring Gond community, whose distinct practice of *Godna* held a different cultural significance which did not necessitate them to get tattooed, especially at this tender age, as the Baigas were traditionally expected to. Consequently, a Baigan girl with a traditional *Kapal Godna* would stand out in such an environment. In order to avoid this, and to conform to the practice of not getting tattooed, as was characteristic of this community of school children, the Baiga girls also chose not to practice *Godna*. So the Baigan pride and identity, acquired from the defining *Kapal Godna*, and the other tattoos obtained later in the years, seemed to be lost at this juncture. It is significant to note that from the group of 15 girls who were interviewed in this school, only one of them showcased the Baigan identity: the *Kapal Godna*. Furthermore, from the 5 Baiga girls who had been tattooed, 4 of them sported tattoos of flowers, which were not traditionally associated with the Baiga tribe. Results from this village were supported by results from the interviews conducted at a school in Dindori. However, it must be noted that since the school in Dindori, located at the heart of a village at *Baiga-Chak*, and hence catering to children only from the Baiga community, the *Godna* practice was significantly more prevalent. Of the 15 girls also interviewed here, 7 girls were tattooed, and

⁵⁵ Interaction with a member of the Baiga community

5 of these displayed traditional Baiga tattoos. This suggests that, due to the absence of an exposure to other tribes within this schooling environment, the practice was preserved to a greater extent in Dindori than in Amarkantak. Yet, in both places, there is clearly evidence of a decline in the practice. This observation was supported through the interviews with elders in the villages and other researchers. When asked why a certain woman was not tattooed, the popular reply would be “because she went to school”⁵⁶. Moreover, in some cases, these interviews also revealed that it was the teachers in the schools who asked the Baiga girls not to get tattooed. Through our interviews with the teachers, we inferred that the reason they discourage this tradition may be because of existing associations of tradition with “primitiveness”⁵⁷, and their efforts to shield the students from unnecessary and negative criticism. Another possible explanation could be that they are simply attempting to create an environment where, in a school with students from different communities – such as the one at Amarkantak –the presence of ethnic barriers can be avoided. Yet, the existence of a pressure to conform to peers or authoritative figures was evident through our observations and interactions within the schooling environment.

Apart from the externality and exposure introduced through education and the educational establishments, another source of influence could be derived from the existence of Non-Governmental Organizations, such as the two which guided our steps into the *Baiga-Chak*, governmental initiatives, and also research groups within the districts inhabited by the Baiga. The influence of such establishments may have shaped the perceptions and philosophies of the Baiga communities in ways which may have either reformed the tradition, propelled it towards a decline, or created variations of its practice.

⁵⁶Interaction with a member of the Baiga community

⁵⁷ Balwant. Interview. 9 January 2014.

● **Economic**

There were quite a few varied answers we got from asking the tribes about the costs of the different tattoos. Below is shown the average percentage change in the prices of the tattoos, the old (2 generations ago) and new prices of the tattoos (again the averages of the information from three different kinds of sources – external researchers, Baiga grandmothers and *Godnaharins*).

Sl. No .	BODY PART	Bhopal: Researcher		% Change	Dindori: Grandmother 1		% Change	Garasarai : Artist		% Change
		Price			Price			Price		
		Old	New		Old	New		Old	New	
1	Kapal	2	150	7400	1	100	9900	5	250	4900
2	Baha	80	400	400	60	400	567	100	500	400
3	Jhang	100	800	700	80	800	900	150	1000	567
4	Prisht	140	1250	793	150	1650	1000	200	2000	900
5	Vaksha	150	-	-	150	1500	900	300	3000	900
TOTAL				2323			2653			1533

Table 3: Variations in Costs of Tattoos

From the above data, it's clearly visible that there has been a sharp hike in the prices of the tattoos in the past few decades! The percentage increase has been 1533.33 times the old price, on an average of all sources' info on the prices on all the tattoos.

Many of the families we spoke to state this as a reason that their girls couldn't get tattoos as much as they would have liked for them. Due to the scarcity of tattoo artists nowadays, the service has become much more expensive, and hence, unaffordable to many Baiga women. Though their change in occupation from pre-agricultural mode to an agricultural mode of subsistence has led to a small increase in income, this increase is disproportionate to the exponential rise of tattoo prices.

5. CONCLUSION

Draped in intricately inked inscriptions, the body finally reveals itself. She stands upright, carrying the weight of her tribe's traditions, stories, and identity.

Canvas and Communication.

Woman and Tattoo.

A sense of completion is exuded from every inch of her body. A role is assumed. The identity is established. The onlookers ceremoniously bow before her, in admiration and empathy.

The Baigin is born.

* * *

“Not all those who wander are lost”⁵⁸. As we meandered into the depths of Madhya Pradesh, encountering a plethora of enthralling practices, places and people, we discovered purpose and passion. Our journey was arduous and challenging, but not without adventure and discovery. Over a span of 10 days, we covered 2600 kilometres, visited 8 cities, and explored 6 Baiga villages. Every step and stride moved us closer to the fulfilment of our objectives.

Though we began this study in apprehension and anxiety, nervous about the nervousness that we anticipated the Baiga to display, our interaction with “them” was relatively comfortable. However, without the help of our mediators, who had already established a rapport with the people through several years of research and development initiatives in the places we had visited, our research would have been extremely difficult to

⁵⁸“All that is gold does not glitter.” Tolkien, J R.R. The Fellowship of the Ring. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993.

carry out owing to the shyness and apprehension of the tribes. As we strived to understand and interpret their stories and perceptions, the divisions between “us” and “them”, which could have tainted our perspectives so far, gradually dissolved, and we were enlightened.

Godna, the tattooing tradition, performed by Badnin on Baiga women, mainly use ramteela to make the ink of the tattoos. However, there are variations in materials used in different places that include, gum from the garlic tree, and the dry skin the Bija tree/Malwan tree. The process is uniform everywhere, involving the two parts – Kuchi (thin strips of bamboo for making the designs) and the Suji (needles).

The Godna tradition of the Baiga tribe is an aspect which sets them apart when looked at in the context of their socio-economic-cultural setup. The once grand and meaningful tradition is now one that is being erased by urbanization. The older Baiga generations still take pride in their tattoos and in the tradition’s legacy, but a majority of the younger Baiga generation is moving away from this tradition. This is due to influences of socio-cultural changes like in their school-environment, relationships with their peers – Baiga or other, relationships with their parents, as well as the influence of their poor financial status. The rise in prices of tattoos have grown exponentially over the years, and the increase in the tribe’s income just cannot match up to these prices. The cost of the tattoos today are the opportunity cost for other, more necessary spending, like on (say) bulls for their agricultural occupation. The Baiga would rather buy two bulls than spend on the full tattoo, as they cost the same today.⁵⁹ It is safe to say this for the majority of the Baiga after having spoken to multiple families in 6 villages across 3 cities, and to the researchers we met.

⁵⁹ Interaction with a member of the Baiga community

Another important reason why most of the Baiga are not keen on preserving this tradition is because the bearers of these tattoos are associated with being ‘primitive’ or poor. The Baiga are not eager to be seen as such. This is also why a number of artists who tattoo the girls have abandoned this profession – because this occupation is looked at as a lower occupation. The number of artists have reduced drastically, leaving only around 2-3 families in this profession. The significance of *Godna* echoes in the voices of the generations of Baiga that have built this legacy of a tradition. Some may hence, ask whether this practice will indeed face its doom in the face of changing times.

Nothing really dies out, but adjusts and adapts in its essence to exhibit itself in a manner that is synchronous to all the intervening factors. As affirmed by one of our foremost interviewees, Mr. Ashok Mishra (one of the directors of the Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum), we must rationally reorganize the outlook we adopt in scrutinizing the various actions and trends of those that are called “primitive tribes”. The urban populace has emerged from the ashes of what we generically label as traditional today. Inevitably, as the exposure of the “primitive tribes” to the urban populace increases, they realize and witness the change, and the outcomes of the change. It is unjust to expect these tribes to preserve their “tradition” at the cost of what is entranced by the gloss and glitter of the urban life, if we underwent the transformation in the past as well. It must be accepted that as the exposure of the tribes to the urban environments increases, the pace of this transformation will be accelerated.

GLOSSARY

- *Adha Bhenda*: Slanting lines
- *Agni-Shikha*: Crest of the Fire
- *Alav*: Bonfire
- *Atra*: The substance which is cooked on the ‘Chulha’
- *Badnin*: Tattoo artists, belonging to the Badi tribe of Madhya Pradesh
- *Baha Godna*: Arm Tattoo
- *Baiga-Chak*: The area in which the population of Baiga communities is concentrated
- *Baigadesh*: Another term referring to the area classified under the Baiga-Chak
- *Baigan*: Relating to, or characteristic of the Baiga Tribe
- *Baigin*: A female member of the Baiga Tribe
- *Chakmak*: Fire
- *Chodan*: Intercourse
- *Chulha*: Stove
- *Gobar*: Cow Dung
- *Godhari*: Another term referring to a Tattoo artist
- *Godna*: The traditional art of Tattooing, practiced by several Indian tribes; is also used to refer to a Tattoo
- *Godan*: A variant of ‘Godna’
- *Godnahari*: A Tattoo artist
- *Gudari*: Another term referring to a Tattoo artist
- *Haldi*: Turmeric powder
- *Jhang Godna*: Leg Tattoo
- *Kajal*: A Black powder

- *Kapal Godna*: The Forehead Tattoo
- *Khade Bhenda*: Straight lines
- *Kuchi*: Thin strips of bamboo covered in cotton
- *Mitti ka Bartan*: Earthen pot
- *Pori Godna*: Lower-arm Tattoo
- *Prisht Godna*: Back Tattoo
- *Ramteela*: An oil-yielding seed that a bright yellow flower carries, which is widely found in Madhya Pradesh
- *Sankal*: Chain
- *Sarpanch*: The head of a village
- *Suji*: A needle, which is an instrument used for tattooing
- *Tipka*: Mountain
- *Trishul*: Trident
- *Vaksha Godna*: Chest Tattoo

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Population of Tribes in Madhya Pradesh

Sl. No.	Tribes	Population	% of ST
1	Agariya	71721	0.5
2	Andh	2044	0
3	Baiga	317549	2.1
4	Bhaina	47833	0.3
5	Bharia Bumia, Bhuinhar Bhumia, etc.	223284	1.4
6	Bhattra	153258	1
7	Bhil, Bhilala, Barela, Patelia	3436743	22.3
8	Bhil Mina	7077	0
9	Bhunja	9141	0.1
10	Biar, Biyar	10105	0.1
11	Bijhwar	105125	0.7
12	Birhul, Birhor	2206	0
13	Damor, Damaria	2883	0
14	Danwar	37223	0.2
15	Gadaba, Gadba	7134	0
16	Gond Arakh, Arrakh, Agaria etc.	6727828	43.7
17	Habla, Habli	274628	1.8
18	Kamar	20565	0.1

19	Karku	4328	
20	Karwar, Kanwar, Kaur, Cherwa, etc.	667244	4.3
21	Keer	15333	0.1
22	Khairwar, Kondar	103459	0.7
23	Kharia	34694	0.2
24	Kondh, Khond, Kandh	9790	0.1
25	Kol	781032	5.1
26	Kolam	4937	0
27	Korku, Bopchi, Mouasi, Nihal etc.	452149	2.9
28	Korwa, Kodaku	85346	0.6
29	Majhi	86346	0.6
30	Majhwar	43910	0.3
31	Mawasi	69861	0.5
32	Mina	2005	0
33	Munda	12639	0.1
34	Nagesia, Nagasia	82461	0.5
35	Oraon, Dhanka, Dhangad	544959	3.5
36	Panika	64169	0.4
37	Pao	47416	0.3
38	Pardhan, Pathari Sarot	101339	0.7
39	Pardhi	3291	0
40	Pardhi Bahelia, Chita Pardhi, etc.	9754	0.1
41	Parja	2410	0

42	Sahariya, Saharia, Seharla, Sehria, etc.	332748	2.2
43	Saonta, Saunta	3411	0
44	Saur	122914	0.8
45	Sawar, Sawara	69949	0.5
46	Sonr	51907	0.3
47	Unclassified	132637	0.9
	All Scheduled Tribes	15399034	100
	All Scheduled Castes	9626679	
	General Population (Grand total including SC and ST)	66181170	

Appendix 2: Population of the Baiga in India

State/ Country	Population	%
Madhya Pradesh	317549	95.8
West Bengal	7624	2.3
Bihar	3930	1.2
Orissa	1556	0.5
Maharashtra	886	0.3
India	331545	100

Appendix 3: Questionnaire I (Interview with Researchers)

The questionnaire bellow consists of the questions asked to different researchers in Bhopal. The theme or focus of each question is mentioned in parentheses:

- What is your field of work?
- What work have you done in relation to the Baiga tribe?
- What should we expect when we meet the Baiga tribe on field?
- Why does the Baiga tribe have tattoos inscribed on their body?
- What is the meaning and significance of the tattoos on the different parts of the female members of the Baiga tribe?
- What is the process of tattoo making and what are the materials used in this process?
- Is the tattoo tradition of the Baiga tribe influenced by any external factor?
- What work has been done to preserve the tattoo tradition of the Baiga tribe?

Appendix 4: Questionnaire II (Interview with Members of the Baiga Community)

Following is a questionnaire that consists of the questions asked to Baiga women individually. The theme or focus of each question is mentioned in parentheses:

- What is your name? What do you do? (Demographic)
- How do you know our mediator? (Background)
- What are the tattoos that you have inscribed on your body? (General)
- What do the specific tattoos mean? (Meaning of Form)
- How did you get the tattoo done? (Process)
- How important is it to get these tattoos done? (Significance of tradition)
- Do you want your daughter to get these tattoos? What is she does not want them?

Appendix 5: Front Profile of *Godna*



Appendix 6: Back Profile of *Godna*

