



Symbolic Manifestation and Visualisation Through Tattooing

PANKAJ UPADHYAY*

Introduction

When I joined the PhD program I was eager to search for a research topic. What should I work on? It was the birthmark on my right hand, and imagining its relevance, which led me to my research topic of tattooing.

According to *Samudrika Shashtra*¹, each mark has its meaning and significance. Birthmarks can indicate the nature and future of a person. Many marks are taken as a sign of good luck, but some others are considered a symbol of bad luck.

This information raised a flurry of questions in my mind and made me curious to know the meaning of such permanent signs and the symbols associated with them. In this way, my topic was discovered and my enthusiasm for tattooing began.

In this photo-essay I am presenting some aspects from my PhD work, that present tattoos in the urban context. Here, urban environment refers to the people who live in cities and live their life with modern concepts and facilities. Those who use modern, innovative sources of information and are part of a culturally complex system.

What is Tattooing?

Tattooing is an art of adorning the body with a design or pattern by using ink, dye, pigments, etc. in the upper layer of the skin. Tattooing is one of the many artistic styles of human expression which is recognised in the society. It includes all the norms, customs, values, traditions, and beliefs of the society. Tattooing is not only an aesthetic reflection but also a cultural representation of the society. In the modern era, with the commodification of various forms of human art, the field of its modelling and performance has also increased. In

* Consultant, Discipline of Anthropology, IGNOU, New Dehi. Email: 2upankaj@gmail.com

the present times, tattooing needs to be looked at and analysed from different perspectives (Kuwahara 2005)

In the present paper, an attempt has been made to present tattooing as an expression of symbolic power.

Methods and Techniques

The basic premise of this paper is the qualitative method, where data observation and focussed in-depth interviews, have been used. Here, the topic selection, validity, purpose, and importance have been kept within the scope of grounded theory² to explore the social and personal factors, to interrogate the dynamics of an individual, with which he/she identifies with these narratives.

During my research, I participated in various tattooing activities for introspection and to better understand the socio-historical aspect of tattooing. I have gained insight into this subject through observation of the process at tattoo parlours, exhibitions, symposia, conferences, etc. The subjects or the tattooed persons studied here were the ones who already had some form of tattoo on their body. Data was also collected at the India International Tattoo Convention held at Gurugram and Pune where tattoo artists as well as those interested in getting various types of tattoo gathered from all over the world.

What is the Need for Tattooing?

Tattooing may appear to be just a behaviour of the culture but it is prevalent as a more explanatory behaviour at the level of the individual. Even if tattooing is understood as the tone of depersonalisation and self-restraint of subcultures, it is the meaning of all desires and creativity at the level of an individual through which he fulfils a linear sequence of self-satisfaction (Kuwahara 2005). Based on the collected tattooing observations and interpretations of the tattooers, it can be said that it explores the diversity of the self, which is also explained through the below diagram. During the collection of data, with the help of field notes, a sketch was prepared by identifying and subsequent coding of some of the areas or reasons for getting tattooed.

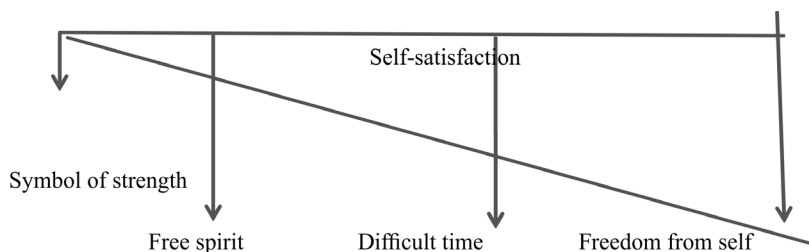


Figure 1: Tattoo as a Representation of Manifestation

In the above diagram, Tattooing has been considered as a source of expression of social behaviour.

Symbolism in Tattoos

Anthropology uses symbols to study the core of human culture. Symbols represent internal and indepth interpretations of the culture. In these forms of interpretations, the association between visual and symbolic forms makes clear the meaning between culture and personality. Tattoos are also a symbol visually, and carry meaning. They refer to the makeup oriented desire of the symbolising human subconscious, through which the tattooers give meaning to the desires, frustrations and fantasies of their subconscious mind. Everyone who gets a tattoo has to feel the physical pain. While tattooing, the strength to withstand the pain comes from their passion.



Figure 2: Symbol of Strength

The above picture shows a mountain, two triangles, and some lines. In the symbolic sense, the tattoo depicts an achievement in the life of the person who got this tattoo. The two inverted triangles symbolise the two low points in his life when he had lost a loved one and also lost his job. Later, he

recovered from the setbacks and achieved a better, well paying job. To establish this he got two mountain symbols in his tattoo as a symbol of achievement, also signifying permanence. The tattoo also shows rays emanating from the mountains depicting the person as now being enlightened with great wisdom. The tattooed person satisfies himself by making these tattoo symbols of self-expression and strength.



Figure 3: Free Spirit

“My life is not made of just one colour. It’s multicoloured like my dreams. These colours tell the true meaning of my soul” (Fieldnote 05/21/11/15). In the symbolic form of tattooing, a liberated soul refers to a particular belief in the tattoo and in oneself, which we can see in terms of ones spiritual intention and the body is only a canvas on which he/she is free to paint his/her attitudes.

The above picture is of an Indonesian girl visiting India who wanted to share her experiences of her beautiful trip to India. This included the loving experiences she had during her tour. She wanted to keep all those memorable places in her memory in the form of tattoos that might symbolise her thoughts during the journey. For this, she carved the lotus flower (a symbol of peace and culture in both countries) in the form of an energy connecting the major cities of her travel from the Indian perspective and gave them meaning. This emblem tattooing symbolises the client’s experiential state becoming more apparent and prompts a display of spiritual spontaneity which places them as

expressions of love beyond national boundaries. This tattoo shows the inner freedom and acceptance of the thought of the recipient.

This type of tattoo symbolism is also a part of Art Tourism which has always been stimulated by the relative immobility of art – that for a variety of reasons it is ‘placed’, where it was created, or where it is collected together, or where it is displayed, where it is traded and where it is embedded in the cultural life of specific cities, civilisations and peoples (Franklin, 2018).



Figure 4: Euphoria after Depression

Another state of tattoo consumption is found as a result of the beneficiary's state of mind, in which the meaning behind tattooing is obtained based on his/her life interpretations. This interpretation gives meaning to a particular time of the tattooed's life, through which the tattooed person gets an awareness of his/her difficult times. This consciousness gives him/her mental strength according to his/her symbol.

The above picture tells the story of euphoria after depression of a female subject. This 31 year old girl had a successful corporate life and achieved material success, though she felt soulless and a vacuum in her life. The picture (tattoo)

depicts exciting memories like global travel, bungee jumping, and paragliding which reminded her of her tough times and the positive enthusiasm.



Figure 5: Freedom from Self

Tattooing besides giving meaning to the expressions of oneself also gives meaning to social relationships. When the tattooed finds his affiliation through the meaning of a particular symbol, he considers some other superior power or the symbol itself as the reason for his own permanence. This affiliation gives the sense of co-existence to his existence and a sense of strength. Symbols with such meaning are mostly religious tattoos which are believed to represent the expressions of the person through an invisible force. Tattooing this meaningful symbol gives more importance to the displayed symbol than to the self-personality of the recipient (Upadhyay 2018).

The above picture is of a young Muslim boxer who believes that his body's strength is derived from his beloved *Ali* (Muslim prophet) for which the tattoo customer has got it tattooed in a semi-displayed form on his right arm. The *Shaan-e-Meherbaan-e Ali* caption places his confidence in his adoration, more than the power of his own body. This tattoo symbolises his performance and gives meaning to his faith.



Figure 6: Expression of Life

In the Figure 6, we can see the tattooed person feeling and attachment to the symbols of Las Vegas city. This includes cars, casinos, fast food, drinks and much more. This tattoo also presents an emotional connection to Las Vegas. Heavy colours represent the lifestyle and liveliness of the city.



Figure 7: Gratitude

In the above tattoo, the outer shape of leaves with *Swastika*³ and the flower is made in Celtic motif. All the Swastikas and other figures are intertwined in the symbol. Swastika is considered a mantra or figure with very auspicious and esoteric meaning in India. This person had strong faith in the symbol of *Swastik* and firmly believed that after getting this tattoo all the thoughts that came in his mind were natural and auspicious.

Conclusion

We can see that tattooing is used as an expression of the individual with its main goal to fulfil the function of self-satisfaction. Tattooers use different meaning symbols to confirm their self according to their purposes.

The type of tattoo design is chosen depending upon individual preferences supporting personl manifestations. These are however, deeply rooted in an individual's belief system, life experiences, emotions, and goals. A tattoo is an avenue of self satisfaction, self-expression rooted in ones cultural identity and inter-cultural exposures. Individuals choose tattoo patterns to demonstrate their inner strength and preceeding struggles in life, to portray their free spirit, to symbolise their inner harmony or euphoria after a period of depression, to show their faith or trust in a higher self, to express their feelings of gratitude, etc., or a simply to portray their attachment to a person or place.

Notes

1. Samudrika Shastra, part of the Vedic tradition, is the study of face reading, aura reading, and whole body analysis. Samudrika Shastra is a Sanskrit term that translates roughly as "knowledge of body features." (Samudrik Shastra 2004).
2. Grounded Theory: A theory for functional process of modeling which employs a systematic methodology, largely used by social scientists for qualitative research.
3. The word Swastika comes from Sanskrit: स्वस्तिक, romanised: svastika, meaning "conducive to well-being". In Hinduism, the right-facing symbol (clockwise) (卐) is called swastika, symbolizing surya ("sun"), prosperity and good luck. Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2019, February 7). swastika. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/swastika>

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