



An exploratory study on cultural and health significance of traditional tattooing practices among tribal community in Chhattisgarh state, India

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Received: October 20, 2015; Revised received: March 17, 2016; Accepted: May 31, 2016

Abstract: This explorative study carried out from four districts of Chhattisgarh state namely Surajpur, Surguja, Balrampur and Jashpur. From each district, four villages were selected and from each village 25 tribal respondents were selected thus 300 respondents were selected for this study. About 65.33 percent of the tribal were between 36 and 50 years of age group, more than one fourth (34.67%) of the farmers were educated up to primary school level, about half (49.00 %) of the respondents were at the income range of Rs. 25,001 to Rs. 75,000 and about 80% of the population of the state is rural and the main livelihood of the villagers is agriculture and agriculture-based small industry. Tattooing is one of the livelihood option for the tribal community in the study area. Tattooing has been practiced across the world since at least Neolithic times (7000 BCE), as confirmed by mummified preserved skin, prehistoric art, literatures, poetry, proverbs and the archaeological records. In Southern India, permanent tattoos are called *pachakutharathu*. In northern India, permanent tattoos are called *Godna*. Tattoos have been used as cultural symbols among many tribal populations, as well as the caste-based Hindu population of India. These tattoos have also been used as integral part of the tribal's lifestyle Chhattisgarh state of India.

Keywords: Cultural significance, *Kothuna*, *Kajal*, Traditional tattooing, and Tribal

INTRODUCTION

"Tribal" is the word used in India to refer to inhabitants known elsewhere as "indigenous". British ethnographers classified tribals as "*animists*". As per the National Census, they are classified as "*aboriginals*" and listed according to the tribe. The Hindi word for tribal is *adivasi*, meaning "ancient inhabitants". India's culture is among the world's oldest and the civilization in India began about 4,500 years ago. India is home to many tribal communities and the population of Chhattisgarh is notable for the high proportion of Scheduled Tribes which constitute 31.8% of the total state populace (CTB, 2013). They are distinctive race with strong traditional knowledge base in different aspects of their culture and livelihood. Tattoos have been used for thousands of years as a symbol for all humanity. Tattooing has been practiced from prehistoric time. It is evident that, in 1991 a five thousand year old tattooed man called *Ötzi* the Iceman, is a well-preserved natural mummy of a man who lived about 3,300 BC. *Ötzi* had several carbon tattoos including groups of short, parallel, vertical lines to both sides of the lumbar spine, a cruciform mark behind the right knee, and various marks around both ankles (Konrad, 1995). It has been speculated that these tattoos may have been related to pain relief treatments similar to acupuncture or acu-

puncture. If so, this is at least 2000 years before their previously known earliest use in China (Dorfer *et al.*, 1999). In Indian context, tattooing has variety of reasons and beliefs. Generally, tattoos are used to keep their indigenous identity among other tribal clan. This tattooing practice begins with the onset of winter and extends up to summer season. During this time the *Godharins* visit different villages to perform their art and earn their livelihood. In Chhattisgarh, the community called *Kothuna* or *Godharins* who makes their livelihood from traditional tattooing practice. They are very knowledgeable about the different types of tattoos preferred by various tribes. The art of tattooing, working procedures, raw materials, techniques and relevant knowledge passed by their mothers generation by generations. Unfortunately, little importance has been given to the essence of such skill due to change in life style and urbanisation. So, in this respect priority should be given to the indigenous traditional knowledge. Documentation and developing the knowledge base of this indigenous traditional knowledge is the need of the hour. Since, the present investigation was conducted to study the cultural and health significance of traditional tattooing practices among tribal community in Chhattisgarh state, India. The documentation of these practices is valuable for future generations and scientific consideration of its wider uses in human

health.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area: Chhattisgarh is a state in central India. It is the 10th largest state in India, with an area of 135,190 km² (52,200 sq mi). Geographically, Chhattisgarh state lies between the latitude of 17° 47' and 24° 06' North and longitude of 80° 15' and 84° 24' East (Forest Survey of India, 2009). With a population of 25.5 million, Chhattisgarh is the 16th most-populated state of the nation. With the exception of the hilly states of the north-east, Chhattisgarh has one of highest shares of Scheduled Tribe (ST) population within a state, accounting for about 10 per cent of the STs in India. Scheduled Castes and STs together constitute more than 50 per cent of the state's population (CTDS, 2013). The tribals of Chhattisgarh are an important part of the population and mainly inhabit the dense forests of Bastar and other districts of south Chhattisgarh. The climate of Chhattisgarh is tropical. It is hot and humid because of its proximity to the Tropic of Cancer and its dependence on the monsoons for rains. The monsoon season commence from late June to October gives the opportunity to tribal people in

fishing activities. There are three agro climatic zones comprising of northern hills, central plains zone and Bastar plateau zone and the northern hills zone were selected for this study. This study was conducted in four districts viz., Balrampur, Surajpur, Surguja, and Jashpur of Chhattisgarh state. These four districts were purposely selected because; these districts have the highest tribal populace in the Northern hills zone. Traditional tattooing practices were documented using a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools, participatory observation, indirect observation, on-site documentation, key informant survey and focused group discussions. The main objectives of the study were to make complete documentation of traditional tattooing practices and techniques with its procedure followed by the tribal community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tribes of Chhattisgarh have unique frame of traditional knowledge in traditional tattooing practices. Their tattooing methods are distinctive according to working procedure, seasonal use, raw material and execution process. The methods, procedure, raw materials used in the traditional tattooing methods were observed dur-



Fig. 1. *Kajal preparation.*



Fig. 2. *Kajal sediments.*



Fig. 3. *Kajal collection.*



Fig. 4. *Kajal mixed with water.*



Fig. 5. *Kajal ink for tattooing.*



Fig. 6. *Predetermined design.*



Fig. 7. *Tattooing process.*



Fig. 8. *Tattooed parts washed with cow dung mix.*



Fig. 9. *Traditional antiseptic solution.*



Fig. 10. *Antiseptic solution applied over the tattooed part.*



Fig. 11. *A fresh tattoo.*



Fig. 12. *A tattooed tribal woman.*

ing the study are discussed below.

Tribal clans in Chhattisgarh: The main tribes in Chhattisgarh are *Gond, Abujmaria, Bisonhorn Maria, Muria, Halba, Bhatra, Parja, Dhurva* from Bastar region, *Muriya, Dandami Mariya or Gond, Dorla, Halba* from Dantewara region, *Kol, Gond, Bhunjia* from Koriya region, *Korwa, Gond, Rajgond, Kawar, Bhaiyana, Binjwar, Dhanwar* from Korba region, *Parghi, Savra, Manji, Bhayna, Gariabandh, Mainpur, Dhura*, from Bilaspur and Raipur region, *Kamar* from Dhamtari region and *Munda* from Surguja and Jashpur region. Each of these has its own rich and distinctive history and culture of music, dance, dress, food and livelihood pattern.

Social structures within the tribal community: The lifestyle of the tribal people is distinctive and imbibed with traditional rituals and superstitions. The chief of the tribe, the *Sarpanch*, acts as the main advisor and mediator in disputes, a role in which he is assisted by a team of five advisors, each called *panch*. The *sarpanch* and five *panchs* are an integral and highly respected part of the village community and live in pretty much

the same manner as the rest of the tribe. There are many types of tribals in India, and Chhattisgarh is home to many of them. In fact, the state has India's oldest tribal communities, and it is safe to assume that the earliest tribal have been living in Bastar region, since the time the Aryans occupied the Indian mainland and the rich plains became war-infested and de-forested for agriculture (CTB, 2013).

Preparation of Kajal: *Kajal* is a black coloured powder used for tattooing as a raw material for colouring. The kerosene lamp used to produce the *kajal*. In this process (Figs. 1-5), after igniting kerosene lamp a flat silver plate placed on the lamp inversely with the help of brick stone to avoid the contraction between silver plate and the flame. After some time, the *kajal* sediment collected from the plate and mixed with water or oil to prepare the ink for tattooing. There are other preparations also available to prepare ink, they are black *til* is roasted in a vessel than hand-pressed and made into horizontal rolls. These rolls are then burnt to obtain the ink. Sometimes *Beja* wood colour or *tehra* colour is also added to the ink to give it a rich colour.

In some parts fluid obtained from the *Malwan* tree is used as ink (Ruby Gupta, 1999).

Traditional tribal tattooing procedure: Before practice the tattooing, the part of the body which is to be tattooed is cleaned and the predetermined design is drawn upon it (Fig. 6) by the *Godharins*. Then, three or four needles are taken and tied together and dipped in the *Kajal* (ink) and the skin is pierced with it (Fig. 7). This piercing is done all over the design. This painful process draws blood often, turmeric powder and *Ramtila* (*Guizotia abyssinica*) oil is applied on that part of the skin from where blood comes out to avoid the skin infections. Tattooing is not practiced in the rainy season to avoid the possible infections. After the entire tattooing is practiced over the predetermined design with the help of needle pierce, the site will be washed with cow dung mix and traditional antiseptic solution applied over it to avoid the infection (Figs. 8-10). After 10-15 days the needle marks will disappear gradually, but the tattoo continues for their entire life period (Figs. 11 and 12).

Beliefs and reasons behind the traditional tribal tattooing: Tribal tattooing has a variety of beliefs. Tattoo is considered as a poor people's ornaments. The tribal community go for such a painful ornamentation process because of its health and other benefits. It is believed that, as a result of tattooing the women never suffer from stomach related problems such as gas trouble, will get strong immune system, and will get resistant to any toxic substances including snake, scorpion and spider bite. It enhances their body system to overcome circulatory system related disorders and also prevents joint disorders because tattooing also practiced in the line of acupressure treatment. It is believed to acts as a protector against paranormal activity. Further, tattooing is a permanent ornamentation that goes along with them even after death. It can neither be stolen, nor can it be taken away from them. Yet another reason for tattoos is if they fail to do so, they would be tattooed with a huge ploughing implement after they die as per their strong beliefs system (Ruby Gupta, 1999). Arunachal Pradesh's *Apatani* tribe was tattooing its womenfolk to make them unattractive to rival tribes in neighbouring districts, who might otherwise abduct their prettiest women (Sanghamitra, 2011).

Kinds of traditional tribal tattoos: The diverse types of tattoos also act as an identification mark that differentiates one tribe from the other tribal clans. For example, the women of the *Oraon* tribe living in Surguja and Raigarh districts get three lines tattooed on their foreheads. The women of *Bison Horn Maria* tribe of Bastar get their forehead and chin tattooed in a traditional manner. The *Bhil* women have a characteristic bird like tattoo at the side angle of both eyes. This gives them a permanent long-lashed look. Incidentally, the bird like decoration and scorpion design is found only amongst the *Bils* tribe. The characteristic tattoo of the women of the *Baiga* tribe is a 'V' shaped mark at the centre of their forehead between the brow bones. There is also a broader significance behind tattooing such as tattooing serves to keep

members of a particular group together. It is very important for people to feel a sense of belonging to a particular group and tribe-specific tattooing serves this important function. This gives them security and satisfaction over several generations (Ruby Gupta, 1999).

Conclusion

The present study concluded that indigenous traditional tattooing knowledge and its practices are changing due to rapid socioeconomic and cultural changes. Therefore, documentation of these practices is valuable for future generations and scientific consideration of its wider uses in human health. Higher potency with low cost and fewer side effects of these traditional tattooing make wider adaptability among tribal community and thus the knowledge of medicinal effect of tattooing has great potential for research and the discovery of new methodologies to cure the human diseases. Moreover, traditional tattooing practice for health and other benefits gives satisfaction at individual level but it requires further scientific validation for generalisation. This study will serve as a basic platform for the new research initiatives in the human health aspects.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors express their sincere thanks to the tribal communities of Surajpur, Surguja, Jashpur and Balrampur districts of Chhattisgarh. Authors also very thankful to the *Godharins* and key informants Mrs. Sagunthala and Mrs. Radha Bhai for their valuable contribution and effective participation in the documentation process. Authors express their special gratitude to Dr. Ruby Gupta for her exhaustive exploration of significance of tattooing amongst the *Baigas* Tradition, which is often referred and suitable contents are discussed in this article for complete information.

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