

**GODNA (BODY TATTOOING) TRADITION OF AWADH-
FROM MYTHOLOGY TO MODERNITY**

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Abstract

Traditional body tattooing is called *Godna* in Awadh. Body tattooing (*Godna*) is believed to be the adaptation of a primitive form of art in India. The art of *godna* is closely related to religion and considered rites of passage in *nondwij* castes of Awadhi region. This art comprises permanent ornamentation of the body with tattoos made by *Godarins* or *Maharins*. The belief says that *godna* marks are the only ornamentation which remains with them after the death and tattooed god, symbol or name will help as supernatural aid in the time of crisis, not in lifetime but even after their death. This was popular among women though some of the men in Awadh also have this art on their body. This art may provide insight into a people world view of this region. According to myth and history *godna* is age old tradition. Female figurines found in Bharahut dated 200 BCE had *godna* in their hand, leg and face¹ⁱ. The record of human history shows that *godna* have served in various functions as rites of passage, marks of status and rank, symbols of religious and spiritual devotion, decorations for bravery etc.

In modern times body tattooing became the symbol of fashion and religious significance is losing its meaning. Leslie White argues change in cultural pattern is because of harness of energy. This paper would explore the history of *godna* in India, its process, technique, motifs, symbolism, incentives of *Godanhari*, palliation and relationship with modern fashion tattoos.

Key Words- Dwij, Rites of Passage, Purity and Pollution, Shiva, Yamdev.

Introduction

Godna tradition was prevalent in the Awadh region and associated with the symbol of purity and pollution. *Godna* is primitive form of body adornment and on the verge of extinction through modern tattooing is still popular. Historical evidence of *godna* have been found in 200 BCE. Female figurines found in Bharahut dated 200 BCE had *godna* in their hand, leg and face. Religious belief and rites of passage is the motivating factor behind the *godna* tradition among non-dwij castes. *Godna* mark can be found among males and females in this region. These days in deep rural areas one can find this culture but in rural areas traditional *godna* culture are being vanished, religious significance is losing its meaning and tattooing is used only for body adornment.

Area and people

The word Awadh is derived from Ayodhya. Ayodhya was the capital of Kosala in 6th century BCE and presently a *Nagar Palika Parishad* (a politico – administrative unit) of Faizabad district of Uttar-Pradesh. In the Sultanate period (1206-1526 CE) Ayodhya was being called Oudh. Awadh is the region in the centre of modern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The modern definition of Awadh geographically includes the districts of Ambedkar Nagar, Bahraich, Balrampur, Barabanki, Faizabad, Gonda, Hardoi,

Lakhimpur Kheri, Lucknow, Pratapgarh, Raebareli, Shravasti, Sitapur, Sultanpur and Unnao from Awadh and Kanpur, Kanpur Dehat, Fatehpur, Kaushambi and Allahabad from Lower Doab. A strip of the northern areas of the region, i.e., parts of Terai area (Inner Terai and Outer Terai), now lies within Nepal (Tulsipur Dang) and main parts of Gorakhpur district. The region is home to a distinct dialect called Awadhi*.

Faizabad (Old British Colonial name: Fyzabad), the old capital of Awadh, is the headquarters of Faizabad District and Faizabad division as well. It is a joint municipal board with Ayodhya in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India, situated on the banks of river Ghaghara locally known as Saryu. The modern definition of Awadh Geographically includes the 17 districts. Data have been collected from Faizabad district As per Census of India; population of Faizabad in 2011 is 167,544; of which male and female are 87,279 and 80,265 respectively. The sex ratio of Faizabad city is 920 per 1000 males. Total literates in Faizabad city are 130,700 of which 70,243 are males while 60,457 are females. Average literacy rate of Faizabad city is 86.52 percent of which male and female literacy was 89.34 and 83.45 percent. Different caste and religious groups live in the city.

Methodology

The district Faizabad has been divided into five subdivisions. Bikapur, Faizabad, Milkipur, Rudauli and Sohawal. Among five sub divisions Milkipur has been chosen for field work.

Purposive sampling has been done in the selection of Milkipur subdivision, because this subdivision totally falls under rural area. Village Kuchera and Bhikhi ka Purwa has been chosen as sample villages by lottery sampling method. Total population of the village is 4594 and 2204 respectively and total No. of households are 833 and 337 according to 2011 census. *Chamar, Pasi, Dhobi, Nai, Lohar, Maurya, Thakur, Kahar, Kumhar, Kumhar, Baniya, Badhai,, Muslim, Pasi, Chamar, Kevat, Patel and Yadavs* are living in the villages. Ethnographic field work has been done in these two villages and trying to explore process, people, cultural symbols, belief, palliation, rites-of-passage and changes in *Godna* tradition of Awadh. Observation, interview and focus group discussion have been used during field work.

Origin of Godna

A myth prevalent in the Gond tribes describes the origin of *Godna*. Mahadev Shiva once invited the Gods to a feast. A Gond God also went with the others. The Goddess was sitting in a separate group with Parvati. Later the Gond God went there to fetch his wife amongst so many he could not recognize her. By mistake he puts his hand around Parvati's shoulder. Shiva knew that it was only a mistake and laughed, but Parvati was very angry. She commanded the tribal women to wear specific tattooing marks to distinguish themselves from other castes. Since then it is believed and tattooing has become an important customs among the tribal's.ⁱⁱ

Another mythical story found in the region is that Yamaraj (God of death) was confused about the sex of the dead when their spirits went to his kingdom. He desired that his daughter-in-law's body should be marked with some black stuff so as to distinguish her from others. This was done and she looked extremely attractive. Yamaraj then ordered his daughter-in-law and son to go to the earth in *Godanhari* attire and roam around the villages singing and showing the tattooed parts of the body to the people. They did as they were commanded and since then *godna* marks are considered to be a wealth of people that they can take with them even after death.

A Myth related to *godna* is that when a spirit of the dead person appears before the God, it has to solve *godna* riddle; but if it fails to solve, the spirit is sent back to the earth for rebirth and could not get salvation.ⁱⁱⁱ

Person

The person either male or female who engraves *godna* on the body called *Godanhari* and belongs to *Dom or Bhangi* caste. This caste is a nondwija caste of central India. *Dom (Mehter, Bhangi, Lalbegi, Hari)* is a caste of sweepers and scavengers. Sweeping and scavenging in the streets and in private houses are the traditional occupation of the caste. In central provinces section of *Ghasia, Mahar and Dom* castes were doing sweeper's work and

therefore amalgamated with the Mehters. They generally confine themselves to their hereditary occupation of scavenging and are rarely met with outside the towns and large villages. They stand at the very bottom of the social ladder of Hinduism. Dom is the only person who can furnish the light for pyre. They also practice the art of making grass, reed and bamboo mats and baskets.^{iv} Godanhari can be female and male. Godanhari kept a sample design in their bag and can be found in local haat or market in particular market days. Other than market days they are roaming one village to another and make a call “come and get a beautiful *Godna* on your body”. Villagers who wanted to engrave Godna called Godanhari and choose design from the samples being carried by the *Godanhari*.

Process

Godanhari first applied mustard oil on the part of body where she is going to make godna, prepares ink by mixing soot with vidali (*Ipomoea Digitala*) oil then symbols are etched out on the skin (Palm, arm forearm, legs, chin, forehead foot, temple, neck and area of body where rheumatism occurs) by pricking with the help of sharp wooden needle or thorn of *Babool* tree (*Arabicum Nilotika*) like acupuncture. When blood comes out godanhari spreads ink on the mark. *Babool* tree (*Arabicum Nilotika*) is working as an astringent, stimulates the healing and controls the scar formation*. This is painful process and girls scream while tattooing. So *Godanhari* and other ladies sing a song to divert her attention. After tattooing *Godanhari* applies turmeric (*haldi*) powder on the motif and gives instruction; not to rub it and sprinkle *haldi* powder twice for a week. After this process symbol becomes inseparable part of the body. As an incentive godanhari receives clothes, jaggery, grains and few rupees.

Function of Godna

Like any other aspect of culture *godna* has functions. *Godna* tradition reflects certain aspects of cultural expression and Rites of passage. Levi-Strauss argued that cultures also have structure and every structure has a function. He considers culture as a system of symbolic communication. *Godna* is considered as rites of passage. Females used to get *godna* mark three times in their life. Firstly at the age of 8-10 or before she attains puberty, secondly after puberty and third time when she got married and get *godna* mark at their husbands house. It is commonly found that girl should tattoo her body prior to marriage. One cannot be considered pure among nondwij castes of Awadhi region without *godna* mark. Body tattooing is related to their belief system health care practice, body decoration, social status, wealth etc. Tattooing in some specific parts of the body has some medicinal value and it is believed that this tattoo helps them to cure from some typical disease.^v According to Elwin tattoos are form of sexual expression and a powerful sexual stimulant.^{vi}

Palliation

Godna songs depict the feeling of a female. These songs are symbol of love, purity, affection and reflect the socio-cultural life as well as easing the severity of pain and divert attention. These songs transmitted orally from one generation to other and now on the verge of extinction. Three folk songs have been collected from the field. That was being sung in Awadhi language. *Godna* songs incorporated the timeless playful stories of *Radha- Krishna*, *Sita –Rama*, patriotism, interpersonal relation and taboos of life.

Folk Song One

Ban kay godanhari Kanha pahuchaye jahan rehti thi Radha,
Gali gali ghumay nand kay lal, kehu gadwaai godanwa,
Kanhaji sunkay, boli Radha, kholi kiwaad,
Aawa godanhaari awwa hamray bhawanwa,
Hum godwaibay godanwa.
Bankay.....
Kanhaji dharay haathwa, Radhaji thonkay mathwaa,
Kahwa kay ahha, tu godanhaari,
Para ho gaarhay mein paranwa
Ban kay godanhari Kanha pahuchaye jahan rehti thi Radha.

As sang by Gopies....

Dressed like a godanhari kanha reaches
Lane to lane, and wanders
Who is interested to get Godna?
Hearing Kanhaji, Radhaji open the door.
Come to our place, come to our place
I will get Godna done on my body.
Dressed li....
Kanhaji started making Godna.
Radhaji was in little difficulty because
Kanhaji has held her hand
Dressed like a godanhari kanha reaches.....
Lane to lane, and wanders
Who is interested to get Godna?

Folk Song Two

Hamari gali tu aana godanhari,

Vaada karo toh karun mein intazaari,

Dekho kahin na bhulana.

Hamari gali.....

Kahti hain gopi mohabbat mein aisay,

Kanha banay hai janana.

Hamari gali.....

Radha duaray pahunchay godanhari

Unkay khushi ka nahi thikaana.

Hamaari gali tu aana godanhari.

Gopies say

Come to our lanes

O! Godanhari promise me, will be waiting

See, you must not forget.....

Come to our lanes

O! Godanharin In this love,

Say the Gopies.....

Kanha is dressed like women,

Come to our lanes.

Godanhari reached Radha's door,

He has no other refuge, other than Radha's door.

Come to our lanes O! Godanhari rejoice the Gopies.

Folk song three

Cangressi godna godwayi de baalma!

Cangressi godna godwayi de,

Mohay bindiya mangwai de,

Mori bindiya mein (ho) Mori bindiya mein,

Jai hind likhwaii de baalma,

Ho likhwaii de balmaa,

Cangressi godna godwayi de baalma!

O! Dear engrave congressi godna.....

O! Dear engrave congressi godna

Fetch Bindi for me

Put a bindi on my forehead

Write 'Jai Hind' instead of bindi

Write 'Jai Hind' on my forehead

O! Dear engrave congressi godna.....

O! Dear engrave congressi godna.....

Folk Song four

Sassu ke daant ray battishi,

Bahu ke bahin godna.

Sasur say bole bahu toh,

Moray nihare godna.

Jauu hum janati kee sasur niharba tu godna-

Sasur nahin ray godaitee –

Aapan baahin godna.^{vii} (Singh,1989: 295)

Sparkling teeth of mother in law,

Tattoo in daughter in law's hand,

Daughter in law told to father in law,

Why you stare at godna mark?

If I know that you would be looking at tattoo,

I could not get tattoo mark on my hand.

Analysis

In our society holding hand of female by the unknown person is taboo and considered undignified (song one). Song two express love of Radha and Krishna. Many Urdu words have been used in this song which shows influence of Mughal reign in the Awadhi region. During freedom struggle congress and freedom became synonyms. Female urged to her husband I would like to engrave congressi tattoo on my forehead; reflects strong desire to be free from British government (song three). Last song throws light on avoidance relationship between father in law and daughter in law. Father in law should not stare at *godna* motif of daughter in law. *Godna* songs raises echoes in the mind, links the past to the present through invisible bridges and often leads to stability in the individual psyche and the social structure. Oral tradition constantly created in their socio- cultural environment by folk society that has shared experiences. This tradition reflects the cultural values and concern of a people and provides insight into people's world view.

Cultural symbols

Homo sapiens are the only animal in animal kingdom capable of symbolic behavior. From upper Paleolithic period people try to control the area of universe that is otherwise beyond their control by symbolic and artistic expressions. *Godna* is the culture of self expression. *Godna* symbols reflect the environment of the people, their flora and fauna they have to live with. Varieties of myths and symbols associated with Hindu mythology and religion. Tradition is often linked to religious motifs and ritual systems. Leslie White argues that culture is learned and transmitted based on symbols. Culture is the only means by which humans adapt to the cosmos^{viii}. Following are few cultural symbols, their meaning and local name-

Sl. No.	Symbol	Meaning	Local Names
1.	Scorpion	Fertility and stimulating sexual desire.	Bichu
2.	Flower pot	Fertility	Gamla
3.	Peacock in pairs	Beauty and prosperity	Mayur
4.	Sun	Try to control nature	Suraj
5.	Moon	Belief in nature	Chandrama
6.	Dots	Save from Evils eye	Chatki-matki
7.	Banana tree	Piousness	
8.	Flower	Beauty	Phuli
9.	Lotus	Symbol of goddess laxmi	Kamal
10.	Trident	Symbol of lord Shiva	Trishul
11.	Hanuman	God Name	----
12.	Shiva- Parvati	God Name	----
13.	Sita- Ram	God Name	Kela
14.	Husbands & Brothers Name	Love, care and identity.	----
15.	Snake	Sexual desire and longevity	Saanp
16.	plus mark	Auspicious	Satiya

17.	Bamboo leaf	Eternity and longevity	Pattii
18.	Fish	Prosperity and good fortune	Machli
19.	Om	Religious belief	Om
20.	Plate and spoon	Purity	Sita rasoi

Continuity and Change

Art is always changing but in the era of globalization acculturation is taking place and had some profound effect on art and tradition. *Godna* is permanent mark on the body while modern tattooing is permanent and temporary both depending upon the choice of person. Person who belongs to any caste or religion can get tattoo marks. *Godna* is always related to religion, identity and body adornment while tattooing is symbol of fashion and related to body adornment. *Godna* motifs have cultural and environmental significance but in tattooing zodiac signs and animal figures are among the most preferred motifs, big and attractive geometrical pattern have been popular. Earlier *Godna* was being used as Indigenous medication of ailments. These days' modern medical facilities are being used. Wooden needle have been replaced by electronic machines. Palliative folk songs have been replaced by Modern pop music. Earlier specific castes were practicing *godna* work as their profession which was one of the sources of livelihood but now a day's tattooing become very much commercialized and any one can do this. Battery operated tattooing machine frequently seen in weekly market and fairs in Awadh. Tattoo studios are becoming the centre of fashion. To make tattoo mark in tattoo studio is quite expensive and sometimes between 30 to 50 thousands or even more. Males are making permanent tattoos more than females. Computerized patterns are in vogue along with traditional designs.

Fisher indicates a correlation between artistic design and social stratification. Repetition of simple elements is found in the art of folk societies, the complex patterns that tend to be found in art of stratified societies seem to reflect the high degree of social stratification. The

presence and absence of enclosures or boundaries in *godna* tradition may indicate the presence or absence of hierarchically imposed rules circumscribing individual behavior. An unclosed design may reflect free access to most property in folk or egalitarian societies, the boundaries or enclosure may reflect the idea of private property^{ix}.

Conclusion

The current era has witnessed widespread technological advancement and globalization leading to increased interaction/transmission of ideas, meanings and values around the world. This ongoing phenomenon of cultural homogenization has a major impact on various cultural realms thereby diminishing their existence.

These days in Awadh *godna* is not considered as rites of passage and parents are not interested to follow this painful process for their kids. According to Leslie White the primary function of culture and the one that determines its level of advancement is its ability to harness and control energy. Social systems are determined by technological systems. Rapid change in cultural pattern is because of harness of energy. Societies where harness of energy is more rate of change would be fast. Everything in the universe may be described in terms of energy^x. Behavior, symbols, whether of man, mule, plant, comet or molecule, may be treated as a manifestation of energy^{xi}. Each tradition incorporates in its fold a mythopoeic religious-ritual element which appeals to the subconscious of the community. Man is the only animal who possesses culture and can keep tradition alive. Before extinction of *godna* tradition it is need of hour to conserve its motifs, meaning, process palliation and cultural relevance.

Notes

Rites of Passage- A passage occurs when an individual leaves one group to enter another; Rites of passage have three phases: separation, liminality, and incorporation^{xii}. Van Gennep described the rites of separation from a previous world, preliminal rites, those executed during the transitional stage liminal (or threshold) rites, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world postliminal rites.

Purity and Pollution- The hierarchy of caste is decided according to the degree of purity and pollution. It plays a very crucial role in maintaining the required distance between different castes. But the pollution distance varies from caste to caste and from place to place. The concept of purity and pollution plays a very crucial role in maintaining the required distance between different castes. But the pollution distance varies from caste to caste and from place to place^{xiii}.

Dwij- The sacred thread ceremony is very significant in the life of a Hindu man. This ceremony initiates the child into an intellectual and spiritual journey. The mother gives birth to the child; this is natural birth. However, when the Guru initiates him by giving Gayatri mantra, this prayer for Buddhi is considered a second birth of the child. This ceremony is known also as Upnayan.

Shiva- Parvati- Shiva (Śiva, meaning "The Auspicious One"), also known as *Mahadeva* ("Great God"), is one of the main deities of Hinduism. He is the supreme god within Shaivism, one of the three most influential denominations in contemporary Hinduism.* Parvati is wife of Shiva.

Yamdev- Yama or Yamarāja is the god of death, belonging to an early stratum of Vedic mythology*.

Web Links

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