



Body as Medium: Exploring Body Images in Urban India (A Study on Hyderabad Tattoo Culture)

Shiva Thrishul P^{1*}, Tejasvi J²

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^{1*} Shiva Thrishul P, Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication, Bhavans Vivekananda College of Science Humanities and Commerce, Hyderabad, Telangana, India.

² Jamjala Tejasvi, Assistant Professor, School of Arts and Humanities, Loyola Academy, Hyderabad, Telangana, India.

Body, as a medium, has been carrying multiple artefacts on its surface ever since its very existence. Despite the emergence of various forms of media that open new possibilities to decipher meanings associated to a text, body has a significant role in being an open medium to imprint messages and actively participate in conferring meanings to the world. Body is not just a matter and substance, but a medium that generates and carries messages; a vehicle to transport information. Tattooing the body to permanently deploy the messages on its surface as an act of marking identity, social status, cultural symbol is a practice since civilization. The reappearance and penetration of the historically stigmatised tattooed bodies into the mainstream from the last quarter of the 20th century reminds to recognize body as a valuable and a preferred medium to communicate a message. Considering urban spaces as super spreaders of the body modification, the phenomenal growth of the tattoo parlours in the past one and half decade in India is an area hardly explored. My paper focuses on how body in producing messages in the form of tattoos. The methodology includes focus group discussions with the tattoo artists and informal interviews with the tattoo consumers.

Keywords: body, tattoos, urban, culture, semiotics

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1. Introduction

The body is a site for various activities to be performed on its surface. It is open for adornment with ornaments, attire, accessories, inking, scarification, cutting and piercing. It acts as a medium to carry the message to its receivers. Despite the presence of various media platforms, the body still holds a significant position in being one of the channels to carry a text on the epidermal layer of the skin. The body is not a static object that we are given, but rather, a flexible and changeable medium that potentially recreate into a more attractive or functional form (Kosut, 2015). Body, as a semiotic object, actively participates in conferring meaning to the world (Violi, 2008). With this body as a medium, the culture of the tattooing has been in practice since long. The history of the tattoo culture across many geographic locations had its own value and meaning, which altered according to their respective changing social systems. The progression of the society towards a global world opened spaces for cultural exchange among various societies which lead to an increase in the tattoo consumers to identify themselves as global citizens. The urban spaces invited the globalizing phenomenon of tattooing by creating a new possibility of global identity with tattooing. Though every region has its own history of tattooing, this global tattoo practice is heading towards a homogenous nature of tattoo consumption.

The tattoo renaissance movement in the second half of the 20th century helped the tattoo practice move from social margins to a mainstream public acceptance. The dilution of boundaries among societies occurred with the advancement of trade and technology across the globe due to liberalization and globalization. The growth of the city spaces led to the demand for new identities among the urban population and with an exposure to the global world, the urbanites attempt to modify their bodies has gradually increased. To refer to Richard Shusterman, "Contemporary culture suffers from attention, over-stimulation and stress" (Shusterman, 2008) and the rise in the number of saloons, beauty parlours, gymnasiums, fitness centres and tattoo parlours are witnesses of the growing consciousness of the people on body modification; as Rosenblatt states "the popularity of tattoos has paralleled a general cultural pre-

Occupation with the body that has led to widespread obsessions with diet, exercise and plastic surgery". A new shape and structure is given to these body modifying industries with commercialization and creation of huge market; in the words of Mary Kosut "tattoos have filtered into mainstream culture through the process of commodification and mediation" (Kosut, 2006a)

2. Body as Medium

Body is an intersection between self and society; it is a meaning through which we negotiate life; and a conveyor of personal and social meanings(Kosut, 2006b)

The human body is replete with signs and continues to generate enormous messages across time, and it is a vehicle that carries multiple artefacts on its surface altering meanings according to the context, location, race and gender. The body is a channel that transmits messages which is open for the audience to interpret according to their socio-cultural locations. Kraidy states that "the body is an indispensable medium, a nexus of discourse and action, linchpin of communication and revolutionary change" (Kraidy, 2013). The physicality of the corporeal entity of the body holds a non-verbal communicative form that opens possibilities for various interpretations. The body is also a basic medium of perception and action, and the research on body have been evolving as a scholarly discourse in the academic disciplines of anthropology, psychology, sociology and art history (Schildkrout, 2004), but the communication scholars hardly focused in looking at body as one of the elements in the communication process (Doss & Ebesu Hubbard, 2009). Foucault looked at body as a text upon which social reality is inscribed and many scholars suggested to look at body as subject and as a material object (Schildkrout, 2004). Levi-Strauss looked at body as a surface waiting for the imprintation of culture (Lévi-Strauss, 1963) and Turner used Bourdieu's concept of "socially informed body" and explored the Kayapo theories about "the nature of human subject, socialized body, and the relation between the two" (Turner, 1980)

The 19th century hygienists tried understanding body as medium to understand its messages and they looked at body as a 'media-machine' for consciousness and perceptions through the means of signs(Sarasin, 2007).

In his text titled 'Body as medium in Digital Age', Kraidy looks at body as an instrument of practice and as an instrument of communication. He looks at the Arab uprising through the prism of human body on how body is used as a political medium, a corporeal dissent, to protest against the systemic power (Kraidy, 2013). Atkinson and Young argued that body can be viewed as a billboard to be displayed socially (Atkinson, 2004).

The body is a medium through which we perceive the world. The thoughts generated in the mind gets materialised through human body. It is the body that has the capacity to give a material form to the thought. The mind receives the information only through sensory modalities and the body transfers the message of the thought through its actions. In the larger body-mind debate, philosophers from Plato through Rene Descartes treated body as secondary to mind and identified it as object in the world of objects. Merleau Ponty clearly classified the body into two major notions - the 'objective body'; based on size, weight etc, and the 'lived body'; through which we touch and feel. To him, the body is an expressive space which contributes to significance of personal actions (Ponty, 1945). The human might fail to perceive the world in the absence of the body, and thus the body plays a bigger role in perceiving and understanding the world. Merleau Ponty says that experiencing the world through the body gives perception a meaning beyond that which is created only by thought (Ponty, 1945).

Looking through the concept of Merleau Ponty's 'body as an expressive space', the inscription of ink i.e. the tattooing on the body is the message that the body carries on its surface. It is generally agreed that the art of body decoration assumes three main forms - body painting, body ornamentation and body modification (Atkinson & Young, 2010). Both body painting and ornamentation are temporary forms unlike body modification which is a permanent change. Tattooing on the body exists till the body gets decayed and the message dies along with the medium. My paper focuses on how body is used as a medium by the urban populace and to explore the motivations and aspirations of tattoo artists and tattoo consumers.

3. Hyderabad: The City in Transition

Manuel Castel says - "city is not a place but a process" (Castells, 1996) and cities play the role of agents of change; political, economical and cultural. Cities across the world are being shaped, structured and re-structured due to the process of globalization policies. Hyderabad, the capital city of Telangana state, is situated in the southern part of India and a primary trade hub of South India. The significant developments to the origins of Hyderabad as city occurred during Qutub Shahi dynasty in early 16th century where Muhammed Quli laid foundation for buildings, civic spaces and roads (Austin, 1992). The city was ruled by the Nizam dynasty under Mughal emperors for almost two centuries from early 18th century to mid 19th century and received worldwide recognition for its wealth and jewellery (Austin, 1992). Hyderabad was integrated in Union of India in 1948 and was made the capital city for the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh state which was formed on the basis of language during states reorganisation in 1956. The city then witnessed a radical change in the social and economic composition where the increasing population led to emergence of complex urban settlements (Narendra, 1995). The rich peasant classes migration expanded the frontiers of the city who entered the business of cinema production and distribution, education and print and electronic media sector – shaping not only the future of the city but also the political landscape of the state (Srinivasulu, 2002).

The beginning of the globalization process in 1990s in India visioned the city of Hyderabad to be destination for technology industries (Das, 2015). In the year 1994, the then chief minister of erstwhile Andhra Pradesh state, Mr. N Chandrababu Naidu, envisaged the city as a centre for Knowledge enclaves and implemented the suggestions of World Bank and McKinsey consultancy under the project of 'Andhra Pradesh vision 2020' (Government of Andhra Pradesh, 1999). In a span of twenty years, the city was transformed to world-class Information Technology hub in India bringing many domestic and international tech giants like Microsoft, Google, Dell, Infosys, Amazon, Wipro. This helped in boosting the economy and changed the political and cultural landscape of the city.

What followed this technological growth is the city-centric infrastructural development of huge shopping malls, multiplexes, gated-residential societies and a larger inflow of people from various parts of the country making the city more diverse in its appearance (Das, 2015). With this modification of the city, people grew interest in the modification of their bodies who were motivated by the increasing number of gyms, fitness centres and tattoo parlours. In the process of exploring new identities through experimentation, a predominant number of people prefer to get tattooed which is a meaningful way to modify bodies that holds a valuable cultural form (Kosut, 2006b).

The mushrooming of the tattoo parlours in the city in the past one decade is a sign of increasing tattoo consumers. The city's heterogeneous nature welcomes the city dwellers to experiment with new styles of body presentation. The probability of public acceptance of new styles of outward appearance in cityscapes lies at a greater level than in non-urban spaces. The city extensively promotes individualization and people tend to build new identities to be unique, different and fashionable. The city keeps its space open for cultural exchange, new presentations of the body, and tolerates new kinds of body behaviours which further encourages the people to assert the identities that are newly built. In the words of Michael Rees, - "globalization processes have taught us to be tolerant of other cultures' meaning systems" (Rees, 2016). Louis Wirth says - "The city is a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of heterogeneous individuals where a large numbers account for individual variability, the relative absence of intimate personal acquaintanceship, the segmentalization of human relations which are largely anonymous, superficial, and transitory" (Wirth, 1938). The city receives people with individual variability and provides the freedom to exhibit the variedness without being stereotyped or judged. Though it may enforce an absence of intimate companionship, it suggests an alternative mode of temporal engagement. The people witness, and are part of the everyday transition of the city by adapting to new styles of living, shaping personalities, changing behaviours, shifting transportation modes, accommodating to new language, participating in the progress either as an observer or as a silent spectator. To some people it teaches a new way of life and to few others,

It is a laboratory to experiment with their own livingness of life. The provision of creating new identities, attempting new fashions, accessing new modes of entertainment hubs etc. by the city motivates the city-zens to reshape their appearances and body behaviours for the public view. In the process of becoming body conscious, the people adjust their hair styles, regularly visit fitness centres, adapt to new trends in clothing, wear new accessories, become diet conscious, tattoo and pierce their skin. As Rosenblatt says - 'The popularity of tattoos has paralleled a general cultural preoccupation with the body that has led to widespread obsessions with diet, exercise, and plastic surgery' (Rosenblatt, 1997). The expansion of top brand saloons (Naturals, Jawed Habib, Lakme, L'oreal, Green Trends), fitness centres, like cult-fit, apparel stores and tattoo parlours help the city people to modify their bodies according to their desires and to fit into the popular notions of 'perfect body'. The heterogeneous characteristic of the city acknowledge the new representations and identities that are offered by the city. Though an initial rejection is witnessed, it gets pushed into the ethos of the society on the name of 'style' and 'fashion'.

Tattoo parlours in the Hyderabad city are not just concentrated in particular geographical areas, but are spread across the city. Though a large cluster of tattoo studios are concentrated in the centre of the city and parts of Secunderabad, there are tattoo makers who are spread in different sectors of the city. During my field visit to various tattoo centres, I found studios in the affluent areas of Banjara hills, Jubilee hills, Hi-Tech city etc and also in non-affluent areas like Abids, RTC X roads, Secunderabad, Paradise etc. Though the entire city is not planned and structured in an organised fashion in all areas and many informal settlements do have tattoo parlours in that localities. This shows the presence of the tattoo centres in the diverse areas and says that Tattoos are not consumed only by particular sections of people of the city.

4. Making Tattoos: Motivation, Challenges and Opportunities

The body is not a static object that we are given, but rather, a flexible and changeable medium that we can rework and potentially recreate into a more attractive and functional forms (Kosut, 2006b)

The earliest tattoo is dated to 6000 BCE (mummified 'Ice-man') and is covered with 57 tattoos (Kosut, 2006b). The practice of tattooing has a long history, various functions and numerous meanings distributed across various locations of the globe. The style, design, tools and ink have been evolved from time to time. Its functions ranged from bringing on fertility, passage to after life, defining personal and social identity, medicinal role, protection from harmful forces, a therapeutic role, attributing magico-religious functions etc. The most known popular tattoo cultures are polynesian tattoos, maori tattoos and kayapo tattoos and an extensive research is conducted on these practices. Alfred Gell says that tattoos are visual documents of a social system where it plays an integral part of an organization (Gell, 1993). Polynesian tattoos were believed to be sign of beauty and individuality, whereas maori tattoos produced sophisticated and elaborate designs. Terrance Turner used the term 'social skin' in explaining how Kayapo culture was constructed and expressed through bodies (Turner, 1980)

Tattooing has a deep history of associating it with tribal culture. But, there is a thick difference that exists between the tattoo practice among tribal cultures and the tattoo practice among urban people. Tattooing among tribal cultures is emblematic of collective consciousness unlike the tattooing in urban places representing individual identity. Jablonski says, "in an increasingly globalized world of look-alike clothing, cosmetics, and hair styles, tattoos are permanent reflections of personality, carefully calculated representations of core beliefs and sentiments that can make a uniquely powerful statement of individuality" (Jablonski, 2006). Urban tattoo closely linked with expression of self as a sign of 'fashion', 'uniqueness', 'different', 'style', 'new' etc.

My research included a series of informal interviews and conversations conducted with the tattoo artists and consumers in the city of Hyderabad. Data was collected over a period of months from tattoo parlours situated in multiple locations of the city. Almost all the tattoo parlours have an image/statue/picture of Buddha. When asked, the tattoo artists replied saying that Buddha represents - 'peace', 'patience', 'meditation'. The walls inside the studios are decorated with various paintings and adorned with artistic and decorative items along with some wall hangings.

Some tattoo parlours were located in the busy streets of commercial complexes whereas some other parlours are located in serene localities in the interiors of residential areas. Almost none of the studio places are owned by the artists, but they were taken on lease, and amount paid on monthly rental terms. The common equipment found in the studios are tattooing machine, needles of various sizes, ink of multiple colours, hydraulic chair, mirror, front office table, music system, a computer & a printer with white pages and synthetic skin. Apart from a proper studio set-up, in-house tattoo parlours are another places of tattooing. These in-house studios are a pre-cursor to start a tattoo an actual studio.

Most of the tattoo artists have a history of passion towards drawing/painting since childhood. Mr. Anil, tattoo artist, Deccan Tattoo Studio, says - 'I used to draw since childhood and when I encountered tattooing in one of my friends place, I decided to draw on the skin'. He says - 'one needs lot of patience and concentration to ink the skin'. Most of the tattoo artists in Hyderabad hardly have higher education. We witness a large number of under graduate college dropouts, intermediate or 10th class failed students among the tattoo artists. While few told that tattooing is passion, some artists mentioned that they are tattooing only for business. To some others, tattooing is an additional counter in a saloon and to some more it is a livelihood. Much of the learning of the art happens through apprenticeship at an already existing tattoo studio. Few tattoo artists are self-taught either by watching YouTube videos or by guidance from a tattoo artist friend. The apprenticeship tenure ranges from three months to one year based on the learning abilities of the learner. No apprentice is allowed to touch the customer's skin till the time the trainer permits or acknowledges the apprentice's potential or artistry. An apprentice draws lot of sketches on paper and practices on a synthetic skin before she/he makes an attempt on the customer. Most of the artists tattoo their first tattoo either on their own skin or on a friend's skin. A certificate is also issued to the apprentice by the trainer undersigned by the tattoo artist. After the apprenticeship, the artists prefer to start their own tattoo studio. An amount ranging from twenty five thousand to one and half lakh is charged based on the experience, popularity, skill of the tattoo artist. Few artists in Hyderabad got trained from Goa, Mumbai, Pune, Delhi and Bangalore.

Mr. Shirish, A.S Tattoos, says - 'I spent three months in Goa to learn tattooing'. The youngest tattoo artist that I encountered during my field work is 20 year old young chap who is a high school drop-out. He set his own small (10x4 ft) studio named as 'touch of tattoo' studio in the shanty streets where he was schooled and brought up. He says - 'all my friends and family members supported me in setting up this studio. The system and printer was gifted by uncle, tattoo machine, needles & ink were donated by friends, deposit amount for the rented place is paid by my mother, the table and hydraulic chair was given by my brother, a bike mechanic. This is not just my studio but everyone's. I have full support and getting settled in life quickly unlike my other mates who are still figuring out what to do in life'.

Apart from tattooists and tattoo parlours with rented closed spaces, Hyderabad also witnesses a good number of street tattoo artists on the road side with no roof over the head. The material used by these artists - ink, machine or needles are 'sub-standard' in comparison to the regular tattoo places, and the pricing differs at a large extent too. Almost all the street tattooists reside in one particular area and move to different parts of the city everyday to open their businesses. When spoke to them, they said that they hail from parts of Rajasthan, a state in the north-western part of India. For these groups, tattooing is a livelihood than a passion for the art. Customer base widely varies between street tattooists to professional tattoo artists.

Temporary tattooing do happen at huge malls, amusement parks, entertainment hubs, outside public parks where an artist sets her/his shop in a makeshift tent. Kids and tattoo enthusiasts get their skin tattooed temporarily at these places. The curiosity of fashioning the body with an art work on its surface is gratified at these spaces. This practice is also a pre-cursor to the permanent tattooing on one's body.

5. Tattoo Consumers and their Motivations behind Getting Tattooed

In conversation with tattoo consumers, most of them told that they got a tattoo on their skin because they 'like it'. They wanted to look 'different' and 'unique' among others.

Some said it as a 'fashion statement' while others considered it as a 'new identity'. Mr. Javed, a 26 year old entrepreneur has a tattoo which says '1L/day' (Rs. One Lakh per day) on his left arm. He got this tattoo in his early 19s to remind himself to earn one Lakh rupees a day. He says that it is his constant motivation that inspires him to stick to his goal without any diversion. Mr. Rajeev, 27, got a tattoo titled 'CA' (Chartered Accountant) at the age of 22. He says that he always wanted to become a Chartered Accountant and to achieve that, as a source of motivation, he got a tattoo with the letters CA. Shravya, 28, got her first tattoo which is a 'baby elephant' on the right hand wrist. She says that Elephants are usually big, kind, brave and cute and they are one of most beautiful animals to her eyes. She mentions big & brave where she wants to be like them, big, brave, bold and kind. Sai Bhavana has seven tattoos on her body. The word "daddy" is tattooed on her left hand followed by six other tattoos. All her tattoos speak about what she has gone through. She loves her father so much and she wanted to ink those words on her hand. She says that tattoo is something that stays with her forever until she die. She says that this is the only way to show how much she loves him. Arun, 24, says that he grew up with fascination for the tattoos and witnessed tattoos of his friends and other boys in the neighbourhood. He says that their tattoos are so good and eventually, he couldn't resist getting one for himself. In 2016, he decided to get a tattoo dedicated to his parents. It was inked on his right arm. He has an intense desire to get a tattoo and join this form of self-expression. Words 'mom and dad' were inked on his hand. He says, "this tattoo is a symbol of my love and respect for my parents, a permanent tribute to the important role they play in my life" - Arun

Likhita says that she developed interest on tattoos from long back. Her dad has two tattoos and it became easy for her to convince him in allowing her to get a tattoo. She worked in a tattoo studio as a social media manager and she wanted to experience the ink on her skin. She got an eye like design on her left forearm which is like 'evil eye' and she got it done in blue colour. It represents a spiritual protection for her. Initially she was very dicey to get a tattoo but she wanted to experience the pain of the needle. The design was entirely of her own, a personal reflection of her beliefs and aesthetics. When her tattoo was finally done, the response was overwhelmingly positive, she says.

"People loved it, often remarking on its beauty and uniqueness. Spiritual tattoos are relatively uncommon, making mine stand out even more". Likhitha adds. To Likhitha, tattoo is also a beauty enhancer that becomes part of her body aesthetics. Madfis & Arford says, "Tattooed people act within a larger cultural context that values the individual expression of identity and the importance of beautifying the human body in order to increase physical attractiveness" (Madfis & Arford, 2013).

6. Conclusion

Tattoo was in practice among different sections of people across gender and age groups. People became curious about making tattoos in the city either as time-pass, initially, or curious of the art and have become tattoo artists. Many people started a career as a passion which has become profession for them eventually. Some people took tattooing because they did not like their previous jobs. With respect to consumers, a good number of people started consuming tattoos due to various interests such as love for the art, influenced by celebrities, peer influence etc.

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