

Hinduism's views on Tattoo's.

Inking with the Celestials (Higher Beings)



We at Dipika firstly and humbly prostrate to seek the Divine blessings of our Divine Supreme Mother Sarasvati in compiling this ground breaking topic on Hinduism's views on Tattoo's. The reason behind compiling this much awaited article is that many youngsters are into tattoo's and there seems to be no stopping this craze hence we pray that this humble rendition will shed more light than confusion on this pertinent topic.

These days Tattoos (Gudnaa - Hindi) have been inked permanently into our so called modern culture. Walk down any busy city street and you'll spot a vast number of tattooers, ranging all the way from the young female professional with a butterfly on her shoulder blade to the wild punk rocker with hardly any space left for his skin to shine. For some reason, having an irremovable image of a two-headed dragon eating its own face sprawled across their chest until their dying breath is an idea that appeals to a lot of people. National Geographic News reported in April 2000 that fifteen per cent of Americans were tattooed. That's around forty million people.

Now, surely you would not expect to see a Guru or a priest among those forty million, right? Wrong. The fact is that many spiritual people sport tattoos, and their number is increasing day by day. Is this a purely whimsical fad, or do our ancient traditions and scriptures hold any foundations for devotional tattooing?

Take a magnifying glass to Indian tribal traditions, and you uncover the first clues. For thousands of years, India (Bharat-Bhoomi) has maintained a rich cultural heritage of tattooing tradition spanning the entire length and breadth of the country. From the dense, rain-soaked mountain jungles of Arunachal Pradesh and the Nagaland in the northeast to the dry deserts of Gujarat on the Pakistan border in the far west, tattoos not only served to beautify the human body but to also carry it into the afterlife. Although the diversity of tattooing cultures in

India is great, the literature on the subject is surprisingly rare outside of obscure university and governmental reports, not to mention early 20th century census pamphlets buried in dusty archives and museum libraries. Aside from these issues of access, the contemporary ethnographic records are relatively weak on the art form itself. This can be attributed to the fact that most of India's tattooed tribes have dwelled in remote hinterlands until recently and have long been suppressed, forgotten, and/or discriminated against for their refusal to discard their tribal practices like tattooing that seemed uncivilized and unimportant in comparison to more urban, modern, and sophisticated cultural lifestyles in the cities.

Also certain tribes believe that Lord Raam's greatest devotee, The greatest superhero this earth ever seen - Shree Hanumanji, can be tattooed on a recurring dislocating shoulder to relieve the pain. The women of the nomadic Ribari tribe of Kutch in North-West India, one of the places the Pandavas visited during their exile, have many profoundly elaborate tattoos. And the Ramnami community, scattered across the Indian states of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, began a painful custom in the nineteenth century: they had the name of Lord Raam in Sanskrit tattooed on practically every inch of skin, even on their tongues and inside their lips. This practice was meant to protect them from bigoted caste-conscious brahmanas they had angered by adopting Brahminical customs, and is still carried on today.

Tattoo-ing in India is considered to be an ancient custom, but just how old it is remains a mystery. One clue to its apparent antiquity may be found in comparing petroglyph (rock engravings) designs of labyrinths to tattoos of similar design. For example, a recently discovered rock art site tentatively dated to 2500 BCE, on a riverbank at Pansaimol, Goa, West India, portrays a labyrinth cut into a stone (Fig. 1). Another labyrinth dated to 1000 BCE inscribed on a dolmen shrine at Padugla in the Nilgiri Hills reveals a similar configuration (Fig. 2). Do note that 2500 BCE already pre-dates major world religions of today like Christianity and Islam by quite a period. But of course we won't get into that now (we shall save that for a future mouth-watering article).



Figure 1



Figure 2

Many South Indian tattoo designs worn around the early 20th century were specifically derived from kolam (magical devices) patterns because they were also believed to be protective in nature (Fig. 3). These complex tattoos were a puzzle, since Lord Yamaraja, the Deity of Death, and the Yamadutas (the servants of Lord Yamaraja) could not harm the tattooed since they could not solve the puzzle that the tattoos presented. Why? Because kolam tattoos were a maze with the idea that demons were drawn into the pattern, then lost, and rendered powerless. At the same time, however, kolam markings were also connected to other aspects of the afterlife. Among so called “lower castes and tribes”, it was considered a necessity for women, and some men, to be tattooed in order to avoid punishment in the land of the dead, because Lord Yamaraja's servants only devoured the unmarked. Kolam tattoos also worked as a kind of map because they were believed to help guide the dead person on their way to the land of the dead (Pitr-loka) so that they would be safely reunited with their deceased ancestors. There is a common belief across India that tattoo marks migrate to Heaven with "the little entire man or woman (soul)" inside the mortal frame. In other words, it's believed that if there is anything that survives after death it's the tattoo marks, because the soul is identified by them.

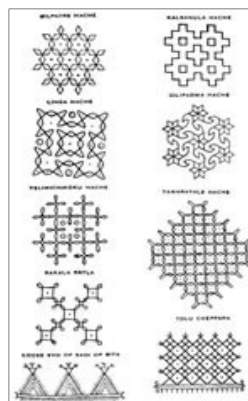


Figure 3

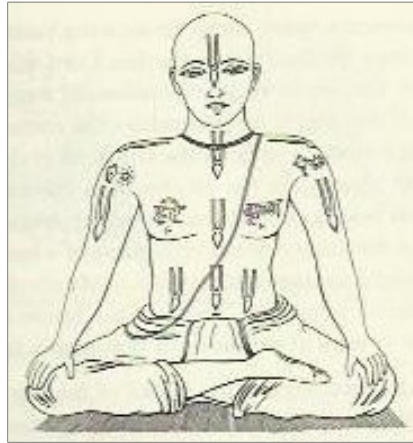
From the warrior tattoos of the Naga, to the magical kolam markings and tattoos of the Hindu pantheon, India's tattoo cultures comprise an incredibly rich tribal mosaic of visual artistry spanning thousands of miles and thousands of years. Here vestiges of indigenous tattooing practices still survive in forms close to their original sources, even though modernity and other influences have set in motion a series of transformations that may perhaps lead to the eternal demise of these ancient traditions.

Many cultures regard tattoos as protective amulets, and such magical applications are closely linked to religious beliefs. The Ainu women in Japan, for instance, tattoo themselves with images of their Goddess, which is able to repel evil spirits and thus protect from disease. The

Iraqis commonly tattoo a dot at the end of a child's nose to guard against illness. The Aborigines in Australia believe tattoos on their arms allow them to dodge boomerangs. The soldiers in Burma tattoo their thighs to be invulnerable in war, and the Cambodian men cover themselves in tattoos to make themselves impervious to harm, even from bullets. The use of tattoos in Cambodia may have come centuries ago from Indian settlers who practised Vedic rituals. Sacred Buddhist texts are a favourite tattoo in Thailand, where they are believed to have magical power. In an initiation rite known as the "Krob Kru," the devotee lights incense and prays in preparation. The tattoo artist uses a special rod to inscribe the sacred text on the chest, back or arms. A shaman then tests the tattoo's potency by giving each tattoo three or four strong swipes of a sword. Tattoo recipients often enter a state of ecstasy or burst into violent trances. Like most of the Pacific Islands, Samoa also has a very rich tattoo tradition. In ancient Samoa, tattooing played an important role in both religious ritual(s) and warfare. The tattoo artist held a hereditary and privileged position. He customarily tattooed young men in groups of six to eight, during a ceremony attended by friends and relatives who participated in special prayers and celebrations associated with the tattooing ritual. The tattoos of Pacific Islands natives made an impact on English explorers - notably those who sailed with Captain Cook late in the 18th century and they returned home with bold new designs and helped resurrect the tattoo art in Europe.

But so far, it's rather tribal and certain serious spiritual practitioners will need more tangible scriptural endorsement before they start injecting ink into their skin.

Of course, the modern incarnation of tattooing wasn't around during or before the birth of Gaudiya Vaishnavism (A path followed by devotees of Lord Vishnu), but there are close parallels. In the Prameya Ratnavali, the 18th century Gaudiya Vaishnava commentator Srila Baladeva Vidyabhushana cites five purificatory processes (panca-samskara) that, along with spiritual initiation, bring one direct perception of Lord Krishna, viz. Austerity, Wearing Tilaka, Performing Sacrifices, Accepting a new name at initiation, and Chanting mantras glorifying the Supreme Lord. Srila Baladeva's elaboration is surprising: "In this verse, the word "austerity" means to accept the branded marks of Lord Vishnu: the disc, lotus, conch, and mace" (depicted in the picture below) — {the very images I have on my body}. Like tattooing, branding is permanent, and yes, very painful.



The drawing above is from the Pancaratra Pradipa Vol One page 41, (Method of Deity Worship) GBC Press - Deity Worship.

A tradition that goes back to at least 1017 C.E., it's still practised today by followers of both Madhvacharya and Ramanujacharya Sampradayas, mainly in the South Indian states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh. What's more, for Sri Vaishnavas and Ramanuja's followers, it's an essential part of the initiation process.

Picture this: It's morning, and the air is cool. As the sun rises behind you and the birds start to twitter, your heart beats fast but you sit quietly, staring at the blazing sacrificial pit in front of you. A married priest performs the Havan (Yajna - fire ceremony). Offering oblations into the fire, he invokes the Ayudha-Devatas, the personified forms of Lord Vishnu's sacred weapons. Metal stamps in the traditional shape of each weapon are then attached to metal poles and held within the dancing flames. After some time, your guru takes them and taps them on a plate. You watch, knowing that this is to make sure no loose pieces of hot charcoal come off on your skin. Finally, he begins to chant the mantra for Sudarshana, Lord Vishnu's discus. It's time. You tense. You feel the red hot brand press against your right shoulder, burning, stinging. Then the Pancajanya mantra is chanted, and the symbol of Vishnu's conch-shell is branded on your left shoulder. You sigh. It's over. You are now ready for the rest of your initiation ceremony. Fortunately for us, Shree Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and the Acharyas in His line have recommended that one use tilaka clay instead of branding to draw Vishnu's symbols on the body. So if you're on the list for spiritual initiation, no need to scream and run—no Gaudiya Vaishnava guru will try to press a red-hot iron pole against your arm during the ceremony.



The Shankha (Conch)

Branding gets its fair amount of exposure in our traditions and scriptures. But it's tilaka that Shree Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's recommended as an alternative, that presents our closest parallel to tattooing. Every Gaudiya Vaishnava is aware of the virtues of wearing tilaka, or sacred clay. The "u-shaped" mark and oval worn on the forehead is one of their most instantly recognizable symbols. But what you may be surprised to learn is that Vaishnava scriptures also contain instructions to write the holy names with tilaka—and even to draw pictures on the body with it. In *Bhakti-rasamrita-sindhu*, which contains the complete science of Bhakti-Yoga, Srila Rupa Goswami Maharaja tells us, "In marking such tilaka, sometimes one may write "Hare Krishna" on the body." And then in the same book, he quotes the Skanda Purana on a benefit of wearing tilaka: "Persons whose bodies are marked with tilaka, symbolizing the conch-shell, chakra, club, and lotus... even seen once, can help the seer be relieved from all sinful activities."

In the *Hari-Bhakti-Vilasa*, compiled by Srila Sanatana Goswami, he states that Lord Vishnu mentions: "I enter within the hearts of those devotees who, in the age of Kali-Yuga, decorate their bodies with drawings of My incarnations, such as Matsya and Kurma... Those who wear the drawings of My incarnations on their bodies are not ordinary human beings—they exist on the same platform as My incarnations." Discussing the subject in great detail, the *Hari-Bhakti-Vilasa* continues to enforce its point for over fifty verses, even going so far as to suggest, "If a fallen brahmana does not decorate his body with tilaka, as well as drawings of a conch shell and disc, then the king should put him on the back of a donkey and drive him out of his kingdom."

Fair enough. But as you're spurring your donkey on into the sunset, you may want to ask, "Is all of this really that important?" Well, the great Vaishnava Acharya Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura certainly had an opinion. In his 1885 essay *Pancha Samskara: The Process of Initiation*, he discusses the five purificatory processes from Prameya Ratnavali mentioned earlier in this article, two of which are tapa (defined by Srila Baladeva Vidyabhushana as branding) and wearing tilaka markings.

Yes, he acknowledges them as prescribed ways to sanctify oneself so that one's true spiritual nature can develop. But far more forcefully, he condemns being concerned only with the external: "Tapa applies not only to the body, but also to the mind and the soul. If it's only physical, in the form of branding or stamping, then tapa has not actually taken place and religious practice becomes hypocritical." He continues emphasizing the hollowness of such an approach: "Externally the student looks good, but internally there is nothing. The symbols of divine conch, disc, and the name of Lord Hari [Lord Krishna] mark the body. The tongue utters the name of Lord Hari, and worship of Shalagrama-Shila (a small black stone that is worshipped as non-different from the Supreme Lord) or the deity with mantra is performed, but the student is addicted to endless sinful practices."

Real devotion in the heart overrides just looking like a devotee and apparently acting like one. Wear tilaka just for show and it'll do little for your progress in spiritual consciousness. The same goes for devotional tattoos. They can become an obsession, a dangerous distraction. Wear them, however, with the right mood, meditation, and intentions, and they become powerful tools in the Supreme Lord's service. We're supposed to do everything to remind us of the Supreme Lord. So if we're getting a tattoo for another reason, then we have to examine our motives carefully. Samosas are delicious, but if you eat one hundred of them, you may get sick of it. So if something material like a tattoo helps you to remember the Supreme Lord, it can be used in the Supreme Lord's service, but if it's used in excess, then it becomes an end in itself.

Tattooing has been an integral part of Indian tribal culture for centuries and no Hindu wedding is complete without the Mehendi ceremony, where the bride's hands and feet are elaborately decorated in non-permanent henna. Religions and tattoos have a long history together. Some people choose religious tattoos to represent their own beliefs. Others choose symbols they like without paying attention to their meanings. Regardless of which type of customer you are, be respectful of the cultural significance of religious tattoos.

The lotus, peacock, fish, triangle, and swastika are signs of good luck, and if tattooed on the left arms they are much more so. The chakra (wheel) and the stars, are protective charms. The practice of tattooing a scorpion, a cobra, a bee or a spider has its origin in sympathetic magic (Fig. below) which is supposed to protect people so marked. The parrot is a love-bird, and has special value as a charm. But the spider deserves special mention, as it's credited with the power of curing leprosy. Other ethnic groups in India also believe in the "medicinal" significance of tattooing. The Mal Paharia women of Jharkhand confirmed that

tattooing kept the bodily organs healthy and helps them to function properly. The Muslim Maler women living in the Punjab were confident that tattoo marks placed on the forehead promotes safe delivery in child-birth.



When getting a tattoo of a religious symbol it's important to be sensitive to its meaning, even if you do not believe in that religion. If you are a religious person, you should give serious thought to whether or not getting a tattoo fits in with your religious values. A tattoo is for life and thus can be a powerful show of religious commitment. It can also be a very long-lasting mistake if you decide later that it is not in keeping with your values.

In addition to singer Rihanna (who also sports another Sanskrit prayer tattoo besides the new misspelled one), actress Jessica Alba, musician Tommy Lee, dancer-singer Kimberly Wyatt (Pussycat Dolls), actress-singer Alyssa Milano, actress Gillian Anderson (The X Files), etc., are some of the celebrities who sport Sanskrit tattoos. Footballer David Beckham also carries a misspelled tattoo on his left forearm of his wife Victoria's name in Deva-nagari script, which is used to write Sanskrit. Organizations representing the tattooing field, in collaboration with Sanskrit scholars/organizations, should draft a basic curriculum meant for tattoo artists introducing them to the Sanskrit language, script, and philosophy behind it. According to surveys, reasons of popularity of Sanskrit tattoos are: antiquity of the language, frequent appearance on celebrities, for protective charm and achieving success, depth of meaning behind the letters/words tattooed, beauty and elegance of the Sanskrit alphabet, etc.

Archaeologists have found instruments in Europe that were probably used for tattooing that date back as far as 40,000 years ago. In 1991, when a German couple hiking near a glacier in the Italian Alps stumbled upon the remains of a 5,300-year-old man, they discovered more than a Neolithic iceman. "Otzi," as scientists dubbed him, was frozen evidence that the practice of tattooing pre-dated earlier tattoo discoveries by more than 1,000 years. Anthropologists speculate that Otzi's tattoos are a cross on the inside of the left knee, six straight lines six inches long above the kidneys and numerous parallel lines on the

ankles must have been personal symbols, not identification marks, since they would have been covered by his clothing. No one can be sure what Otzi's tattoos meant to him. Some scientists have observed the marks found on Otzi correspond to acupuncture points and speculate his tattoos show he had been treated for pain or illness. It's certainly no coincidence that acupuncture involves needles under the skin akin to the practice of tattooing. Anthropologists believe that tattoos have always had a religious and spiritual significance.

I, myself have many tattoos on my body but every one of them was very well thought of & well researched and it wasn't a "spur of the moment" decision... Every one of my tattoos are spiritual and thus remind me of the Lord and His devotees. Some people approach me to ask me what do some of my tattoos, which are visible, mean, because all are in Sanskrit. It's a great excuse to tell them about our Lord and His devotees.

So let's say you've thought getting a tattoo for yourself. Firstly I would humbly advise one to research thoroughly what one plans to ink on one's body and also the credentials of the tattoo artist. When you are really certain and are like "Ok, I am entirely sure that I want to do this" then go ahead. Just remember "Whatever tattoo you are getting, make sure it's something you'll be happy living with, because it's going to stay with your body longer than you will."

Recent times, however, have brought on a new experience. Modern Western tattooing has always had a heavy Asian influence, mainly from the two-hundred-year-old Japanese tradition. But in the past few decades, there's been a huge rush of interest in Indian imagery. Yoga is very popular these days, and students are often influenced to get tattoos of mantras and various symbols like the OM sign. There are more signs of this Vedic tattoo invasion everywhere. Pick up any modern tattoo magazine and you'll find either an image directly related to Lord Krishna, or something from the Vedic paradigm. The female goddesses like Ma Kali, Ma Durga, and Ma Lakshmi flood tattoo parlours. I do advise one to beware of inking Shree Hanumanji. Being the epitome of pureness and a life-long Brahmachari (celibate), I would humbly advise careful thought on inking anything dealing with/akin to Shree Hanumanji.

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Thank you so much for taking the time to read this article. We pray that this article will assist you in some way and we also pray that it helps you to appreciate the beauty and remarkable foresight of our ancient Hindu culture. We wish to educate all readers and demystify the path of Hinduism (Sanatan Dharma). Please feel free to share these articles with friends and family who do not have direct access to our website or articles. If you use the articles in any form including blogs and/or as part of other articles kindly credit our website as a source. We hope that the articles serve as a reference to you and your family when you need clarification of certain topics. Jai Hind... Jai Shree Radha Krsna.



The Lotus Flower

We at Dipika like to thank this awesome website for some of the information that we included in this article.

<http://www.vanishingtattoo.com>

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free information about our beautiful culture
www.dipika.org.za

Compiled (for the upliftment of Sanathan Dharma – the Eternal
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