

Godna and Modern Tattoo: A Transitional Narrative

Mandavi Choudhary

There is only one form of ornamentation even more closely bonded to the body than jewellery, and that is tattooing.

—Wendy Doniger, *The Ring of Truth, Myths of Sex and Jewellery*

At present, body art has become a kind of fashion statement and a lot of people in the Indian metropolitan cities can be seen getting tattoos made on various parts of their body every now and then. However, tattoo-making, which is a special art form, is nothing new to the culture of India. *Godna*, the traditional tattoo art form which a lot of elder women in Mithila like to call “a permanent ornament” has now lost its cultural position in Maithili society. Sukrit Nagraj, who conducted extensive research on *Godna* in Chhattisgarh reports, “The word *Godna* is derived from *gehna* or jewellery, with these tattoos made usually made around body parts where jewellery was worn, in the belief that this jewellery will be adorned till the end of life and beyond.” Tara Devi, a woman in the village, Karjapatti in Darbhanga, Bihar supports the assertion, “This is the only ornament that even widowhood cannot take away from a woman.” What she means is that after the death of the husband, a woman is supposed to take off all her jewellery items, except for *godna* which has been inked permanently on the body.

There are various meanings that are communicated through *godna*. The Munda tribe in Jharkhand, for example, holds high regard for valor and uses *godna* to record historic events. Santhal tribes assign different tattoos for each sex and different parts of the body. Santhal men in Bengal and Jharkhand get tattoos called *sikkas* made on their forearms. The name is derived from the shape, which is that of coins (*sikka*). The Santhals also wear various tattoos which when combined together form an odd number, signifying life and even symbolizing death in Santhal cosmology. The Santhal, as well as Banjaran women in Rajasthan, get floral patterns tattooed on different parts of their bodies, including their faces. In Mithila, there are very few men found with *godna* since *godna*, like most jewellery items, have been perceived as an adornment for women in Maithili cultural realm. The men who do sport a *godna* either get it made out of their personal choices, or get their names tattooed at a tender age for other reasons such as, the fear of being lost when the *godna* can help them get back to the family. Jawahar Shahu, a local resident in the village Karjapatti of Darbhanga in an interview confirms, “Very few men can be found with the *godna*. It was mainly the women in our village in the past to have

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gotten it.” Also, as per observations, the face is one body part that the people of Mithila refrain from getting tattooed. Sukrit Nagraj observes, “Typically tattoos are made around the ankles, toes, fingers, the wrists, palms, thighs and breasts.” Nagraj’s observation on the *godna* of Chhattisgarh has been found true in the context of Mithila as well, where women were found with a *godna* on the mentioned body parts.

The narratives on *godna* that have emerged from Mithila can be divided into three categories:

1. **The older women:** The number of people with the *godna* is very less, and it was mainly the older women in the families that could recall their personal experiences about it and narrate stories. Maximum information could be obtained from this group of interviewees.
2. **The older men:** They were as good at recalling the past through memory and imagination as the older women. They may not have personally experienced the pain and the process of getting the *godna* made but, they are efficient storytellers who could interpret the *godna* story in multiple manners.
3. **The younger generation:** Both men and women under this category had limited knowledge about *godna*, and an extremely low percentage of them actually have it.

Godna, like many jewellery items of Mithila, is dying a slow death. There is not much work available in texts on it, and the only surviving data is that which can be extracted from personal narratives of the folk borrowed from shared folk beliefs and experiences.

Godna Artists in Search of New Identities

With *Godna* slowly losing its cultural relevance, the *godna* artists also called *godnawali* (female) and *godnawala* (male) have started looking for other options for survival. The nomadic community, *Karori* in Mithila as informed by the locals of the village, Karjapatti in Darbhanga, Bihar would walk from one door to the door, singing and encouraging people to get the *godna* made. They could be heard singing and announcing their arrival, “*Godaliyagodna! Godaliya e*” (Get *godna* inked on your body! Listen, get inked.) The *godna* artists are in search of new identities now and have taken to other professions such as hunting, gathering honey and running other errands. There still are a few *Godna* artists that hold on to the past and have not given up on artistic skills that they had inherited from their ancestors. However, locating those few is almost impossible with the shifting nature of their work, which means that they cannot be found at one particular place or spot. Rajender Shahu, a resident

of the village Karjapatti says, “They could be easily found earlier because they would come to the village from time to time and people would feel tempted to get the *Godna* made. Now, they don’t visit us for months and sometimes years because they know that nobody would be interested.” The inability to track down *godna* artists also tells a story that needs no words for narration. The dying art narrates its story of pain screeching under the wraps of oblivion and nostalgia.

Personal experiences and stories

While in the urban spaces of Mithila, it is difficult to find people with *godna*, the villages continue to be inhabited by a small fraction of elder female members in families who have it. Neha, a young teacher in the village of Karjapatti says, “The younger generation barely gets the *godna* made. Even if they do, it’s for the sake of fashion.” Different stories around the *Godna* have emerged from the common people. Jawahar Shahu living in the village Karjapatti could recall diverse stories and on being asked why the *Godna* is made, he answered,

Mithila was under the Mughals for a long time and it was during this time that the women of Mithila did not feel safe. Often, Hindu brides and young women would be abducted and later raped. Once, a young beautiful girl with a *godna* was spared because the Mughals felt disgusted with the black ink on the body. The people of Mithila realized that the *godna* was the best way to deal with the abductions. Thus, *godna* was used as a shield against rapes and sexual assaults. (Shahu)

Mithila was indeed under the Mughals for a long time, and it was Akbar who had appointed a Maithil as the caretaker of Mithila because the people of Mithila who had previously been ruled by other Muslim rulers had little faith in them. There is no textual evidence to validate the story narrated by Jawahar Shahu, but he does strongly believe in its sanctity because this is a story that he and many of his friends grew up listening to. People in the village of Karjapatti have rarely questioned the stories and folk beliefs that were transferred to them orally for over several hundreds of years. In every Maithil Brahmin’s house, for instance, there is a *Kuldevi* that has been installed and she is worshipped and valued like any other Hindu gods. *Kul Devi* is supposed to bring happiness and protect the family against evil and she has been there since time immemorial. While everybody in the village agrees that she brings happiness and must be respected as instructed to them by their ancestors, they fail to answer questions like why was she installed in each house and family to begin with? Like the *Kul Devi* who is perceived as a goddess protecting and providing

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strength to each family, *Brahm Baba* is a male God assigned to each village that takes care of the entire village and provides shelter to the village folk during turbulent days. The *godna* story narrated by Jawahar Shahu and other people in the village is also similarly based on common folk beliefs whose origin cannot be located.

Nicola Barker in her novel, *The Yips* (2012) writes, “The tattoo represents not only a willingness to accept pain – to endure it – but a need to actively embrace it. Because life is painful – beautiful but painful.” A lot of older women in Karjapatti agreed that *godna* is a permanent ornament and also shared reasons that were given to them for getting it done. A lot of times, they would be made to believe that would ensure that they reach heaven post-death. Laxmaniya Devi says, “Pain would be returned with a promise of heaven which was one of the primary reasons why we would feel tempted to get it.” Laxmaniya Devi, Saakhi Devi, Mahalaxmi Devi are some of the women in the village of Karjapatti with a *godna* who had willingly embraced the pain for the exchange of great gifts. For Laxminiya Devi, *godna* means a guaranteed trip to heaven for a better afterlife, while for Saakhi Devi *godna* is a means to let her meet her parents in heaven. For Mahalaxmi Devi, the *godna* has several purposes and one of them like in the case of Saakhi Devi and Laxminiya Devi is the assurance of heaven.

Godna has also been seen as a symbol of purity and identity that differentiates the women with it from the rest. All castes find the *godnashudh* (pure) but the Brahmin women have a different story to share. Sagyani Devi, an elderly woman in Karjapatti showing her *godna* said, “*Brahmin ke chin haieegodna*” (This *godna* that I have is an identity marker for the Brahmin women).



Fig 1. Sagyani Devi revealing her *godna*

Mahalaxmi Devi, an elderly woman in the village of Karjapatti has numerous *godnas* on various body parts. She says, “A special ritual would be organised on the day which included the gathering of women together.” The *godna* ritual would include singing, which was primarily meant to ease the pain. Remembering a song, she sings, “*Godaliyagodna, humro se, hey jaan*” (The *godnawaali* makes a request to the queen to get the *godna* inked). The song is sung from the perspective of the *godnawali* who has come all the way from the western side of the region and is currently sitting under the *chandan* (sandalwood) tree. She sings out aloud to the queen in the nearby palace, whom she requests to come out of her palace and get inked. Announcing her arrival, she repeats, “*Godaliya hum rose.*” Mahalaxmi Devi adds, “The singing would continue throughout so that the pain could be suppressed with one’s attention being diverted to the singing.” Mahalaxmi Devi has several *godnas* on her body, with one on her foot (*paer*) which she explains while laughing, “This one is to ensure that my father is not born as a crow when he is reborn.” The one on her neck (*kanth*) shall allow her to meet her mother when she reaches heaven after her death. On the *tarhatti* (palm), she says that she got the *godna* made so that when she departs from this world, the journey proves to be smooth and trouble-free. Describing her choices of designs, she says, “I picked a *pothi* and *phool* (book and flower) because the two stand for wisdom and beauty.”



Fig 2.

From Mahalaxmi Devi’s narration, it becomes evident that women are convinced that *godna* will be beneficial for them. Like the other women, she too believes that she is destined to reach heaven after death because the *godna* sets that path for her to attain it. While most women could not explain the

reason for their choices of symbols and designs, Mahalaxmi Devi could differentiate between them and explain further. It was found that maximum women in Karjapatti village have flowers or their names inked on the body.

Sunita Devi, another elderly woman in the village of Karjapatti offered an explanation, “We get our names tattooed so that we can be easily located in case we get lost somewhere.” The flower, another important *godna* design glorifies beauty, and can also be understood as a symbol of adulthood and female sexuality, keeping in mind that women who have it only got it made after entering into their adolescent phase. Both married and unmarried women get the *godna* after getting their first period, and this transitional phase connects dots with the flower image. The *godna* here can be seen as a metaphorical transition of a bud that has blossomed into a flower, shadowing a girl’s transformation into a sexual being. The *Godna*, hence, like the most jewellery items worn by women in Mithila (*bichiya, lahthis*) is a symbol of female sexuality.

Wymann argues that tattoo symbolises a medium of communication. The body that has been inked talks to the onlookers as it has a story to tell. In his opinion, tattooing can be understood as i) a product made by tools, materials and procedures; ii) a form of body alteration and iii) a form of social behavior. In the process of tattooing, the body turns into a cultural investment, promoted through an individual’s identity making efforts. The *godna* can also be understood through the three mentioned parameters.

- i) **A product made by tools, materials and procedures:** The most debated question was related to the ingredients used for making the *godna*. Suneeta Devi says, “Ink or coal is mixed with a new mother’s milk and this together gives out a solid and a dark color used.” A few other women during a group interaction had a different story to share, “Milk from *Kaneli* flower is extracted first and then blended with the ash collected from a burning *diya*.” Possibly, there are multiple methods available to make the wanted mixture to be used. On one thing, all women agreed which was that the number of needles used for inking the *godna* is seven, an auspicious number.
- ii) **A form of body alteration:** Atkinson called tattooing “a contextual and negotiated signifier of identity.” Individuals devote a good amount of time and endure pain to obtain tattoos. Pain is a way of earning body alteration for them. Women with *godna* are aware that their bodies are different from that of the other women who do not wear the tattoo on their skin.
- iii) **A form of social behavior:** Most women with the *godna* that fall in the 50 and above age groups agreed that they got the *godna*

made because it was a part of accepted social behaviour. Their body turned into a cultural investment. Tara Devi, an elderly woman with a *godna* on her skin confirms, “It was a nightmare but it was expected out of me and what could I do?”

Godna became popular in villages not only because of its claim to help people reach heaven after death, but also because it is probably the most affordable ornament that could be enjoyed by all castes and economic groups in villages of Mithila. The desire to decorate the body is cultivated within the hearts of all, rich or poor, upper caste and lower caste. *Godna* is one such important ornament that everybody can afford to have. While Gold and silver cost a fortune, *godna* can be used as an ornament with lesser amount of money being spent on maintaining and affording it. Vineeta Mandal, living in Karjapatti says:

Nobody can take this from us. Who can rob it off? It is there, permanently on our skin. Like Brahmins, we cannot afford gold and there are times when buying silver can also be a problem. It is in such circumstances that *godna* comes to our rescue. (Mandal)

The younger generation has shifted away from the past and only one girl named Shilpi in Karjapatti could be found with the *godna*. She confessed, “I got it done out of choice because it makes me feel good.” It is important to note that in contrast to the elder women who had reasons such as assurance of heaven or carrying it as a permanent ornament or had great respect for *godna* which they see as a symbol of purity, Shilpi and people her age do not follow rituals but rather create their paths, away from the old age traditions and folk beliefs. They don’t choose tattoos or *godna* out of compulsion or under the influence of beliefs, but because they wish to reclaim their lives and build their identities.

Is Modern tattoo a replacement?

In a contemporary world, tattoos can function as a ritual and may serve as a physical mark of a life event in some cases. Furthermore, tattoos can also function as identification marks or simply as a mode of decoration. People can be seen getting the name of their children tattooed to celebrate their birth which is a great life event. People also get symbols like the phoenix or semicolon tattooed which represent different meanings (phoenix in certain cases is chosen by feminist groups since phoenix stands for rising post-fall, and semicolon is picked with people battling depression and suicidal thoughts). At present, particularly in the urban spaces, people who are separated from their past and traditions have started turning to modern art forms. Tattoo is one of the modern art forms to have risen to popularity in recent times. In the last two decades, perceptions and attitudes towards tattooing and tattoos have undergone visible changes. Tattooing which was once associated with non-mainstream groups

has now grabbed the attention of the modern consumer. Thus, from the realm of folk culture that celebrated traditional tattoo art; the tattoo has entered into the sphere of popular culture. Tattoo can be described as a kind of writing done on the body, existing as a form of visual and non-verbal communication. Helen Cixous had written in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (2017), “Write yourself, your body must be heard.”

Today, a lot of feminist movements have encouraged tattooing as a form of protest and rebellion in response to patriarchy. A lot of young girls in Indian cities have also started getting tattoos made, and they feel liberated through the act. The modern tattoo has not officially reached Mithila but a lot of families that migrated from Mithila have readily accepted it. It was seen in Karjapatti that the younger girls opt for *godna* out of a personal choice and liking, and not because they are made to believe that pain will get them a guaranteed entry into heaven. As opposed to the *godna*, the modern tattoo is not based on such claims, and rather allows women to decide for themselves. Here, there is a clear shift from the female self-trapped in culture to making a move towards the “I”. In that sense, the modern tattoo can be extremely empowering for some women as it can read as Plath’s famous line from *The Bell Jar* (1963), “I am. I am. I am” (qtd. in Kristy) reminding them of their existence.

Numerous people battling depression also get the tattoos made on their skin to keep them going by filling, cultivating a yearning for life. Depression tattoos have become a trend worldwide and with people acknowledging depression, the way people perceive it has also undergone a transformation. David Klemanski, a professor of applied psychology says, It’s almost like a battle scar in some ways (qtd. in Punjabi). Klemanski is of the view that tattoos allow people in a way to move forward by recognising and accepting the past and integrating it with themselves. The *godna*’s flower design has been replaced today by the trending semicolon tattoo which was born out of a social media initiative with the same name. When Amy Blue lost her father to suicide, she wanted to honour him in a special way and this led to Project semicolon founded by her.

Through the project, she started spreading awareness about mental health-related problems which positively impacted countless people. The main agenda of the project, as mentioned on the website, is to “present hope and love to those struggling with depression, suicide, addiction, and self-injury.” While the *godna* stories echo the want of heaven post-death, the semicolon tattoos and newer forms of modern tattoos seek to celebrate life in the present.

Conclusion

It is true that the traditional body art, *godna*, has lost the position that it had once enjoyed in the context of Mithila. However, it would be wrong to say that modern tattoos have completely replaced *godna*. *Godna* artists exhibit great skills like the modern tattoo artists, and both the art forms are intimately linked to one another. Instead of assuming that the modern tattoos have replaced *godna*, another way of interpreting it would be to assert that modern tattoo is an extension of the former, which is at a growing stage. The reasons for getting inked may vary if located in distinct time frames, yet body art has been a common feature of Indian culture since the beginning, and it shall continue to remain thus in the years to come.

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