Once the basic necessities have been met, human beings always wanted to adorn themselves in various manners so as to look more attractive or to ward off evil eyes or insects. Body painting is one such tradition which men have found to have come down to them over the years bringing along with it a vast collection of designs and motifs. Amongst the youngsters of today, the fashion of having their body painted is the 'in thing'. All such craze notwithstanding, does the man with a tattoo painted across his chest or the woman painted all over, facing the dazzling lights of the camera only to feature in some glossy film magazine, ever ponder over the origin of this rich tradition or its significance? In all probability, they do not, no matter how much relevant the question is. It will, therefore, be important at the outset to deal with the origin of body painting in brief, discuss its significance and the various methods of execution of the same. Thus the point of focus of this exercise will rather be on a broad speculation of body painting as a concept, with some extra emphasis on the body paintings of the Onge, a small Negrito population from the Little Andaman, the southernmost among the Andaman group of islands.

Numerous research studies have been carried out by anthropologists on the Onge and so much manifest was their nature of body paintings that they hardly missed attention of scholars (Plates 1 & 2). In fact tribal life and culture in general is a much talked about issue among anthropologists wherein we do get adequate mention of body paintings, particularly in connection with the ceremonies and rituals they are involved with. Despite such references, the aesthetics of this rich ritual representation of man’s/woman’s creativity has hardly received its due appreciation. Therefore, an attempt is being made through this paper to insist on the study of these paintings not only from a pure anthropological perspective but also from the viewpoint of art appreciation. The question that instantly surfaces out at this stage is, can body painting be considered as a form of art? This question will be duly addressed as we proceed with our discussion and particularly refer to the designs and motifs of such paintings.

Most of the primitive people who remain habitually unclothed by and large adorn their body in some way or the other. Thus body painting may have originated as an adornment or a part of decoration or ornamentation of the self and only at a later date acquired its value-loaded meanings and symbolic attributes, with its gradual attachment with various rites and rituals. Whatever its source of origin may be, body painting as a form of artistic expression can be divided into two broad categories: (i) tattoo and (ii) surfacial application of pigment. In tattoo, the subcutinous application of pigment provides it with permanent character. Often it acts as an identity marker for an individual or represents his/her social status, etc. The other form of painting being the surfacial application of pigments lasts only for a short while. Their requirements are associated with ceremonies, rituals or to ward off insects and evil eyes.

Tattoo as an expression of art deserves some elaboration here. The word as such originates as the anglicised version of the Tahitian word “Tatu” which signifies the practice of permanent ornamentation. In fact tattoo as body adornment lasts a life time and acts as human display indicating, as already stated, social status, sexual prowess, nature of aggressiveness, group allegiance, etc. for the individuals.

Tattooing as an ancient art form had been known to nearly all cultures. It was known to the ancient Aegean and European cultures during the Bronze Age, as proved by excavated finds of instruments for the purpose of tattooing. Tattoos have also been found on Egyptian mummies dating from 2000 B.C. Their use has been mentioned by classical

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Plate 1

Plate 2
texts of the Greeks, Gauls, ancient Germans, and the Britons. In India there are evidences of tattooing from the Sunga period where the female sculptures from Bharhut have tattoo marks carved upon them. Yakshini Chanda has been adorned with motifs like the sun, moon and small flowers on her cheeks and chin (Figure-1).

The application of tattoo is ordinarily carried out in association with certain life-style rituals like initiation, marriage, etc. In fact in Solomon Islands, a girl does not become eligible for marriage until she has undergone tattooing on her face and breast. The Australian aborigines, instead, inflect fearful scars on the backs of the young girls in order to declare her qualified for marriage. Similar practices are also observed among various tribes in Central India. Among the Khonds of Orissa, a girl is required to be tattooed before her marriage. Women from this region are also found tattooing their forearms after marriage. Such tattooing is locally called ‘godhna’. In Nagaland, the Konyak girls are tattooed behind the knees at the time of marriage. Men from this region too found to tattoo an elongated tiger form upon their chest. This symbolises their head-hunting achievement.

Although most of the tattoo motifs and ornamentation of early rural populations are lost today, yet some have come down to us that can be traced back to thousands of years. For instance, a pictorial shorthand that recurs in seals and potteries of Harappan period and later in Indian coins have more or less remained the same even though the messages they carry might have changed from epoch to epoch (Figure-2). Motifs like two commonly in tattoos could be traced back to early rock-paintings (Figures 3 and 4). Besides animal motifs, a geometric form (chauky) is also frequently seen amongst the tattoo motifs which again may be traced back to the rock-paintings (Figure-5). Historians are of the opinion that these forms from the rock paintings were transmitted from one place to another in the form of tattoo marks on the body, a theory that explains dissemination of the motifs throughout the sub-continent.

In modern times there has emerged a new breed of tattoo art, which is seen especially in cities. Here the whole trend is dictated by fashion designers rather than by any social or traditional need. Motifs include nude female figures, flags, and hearts (as were used by soldiers and sailors during the British rule). Popular religious symbols are also quite common, mostly amongst the rural folk. However these artists do not necessarily cater to a particular groups of people. Instead, they have now become commercialised and thus are keeping up with the most popular images of the time wherein the motifs, too, accordingly keep changing. Sporting figures of matinee idols as motifs has of late emerged as a manifest behaviour of a section of the youth.

Let us examine the visual and aesthetic aspects of these motifs, particularly those that we come across in body paintings among the Onge of Little Andaman Island so as to be able to trace out the basic common principles on which most of the tribal art forms are based.

The primitive communities of the Andaman group of islands as surviving today are the Jarawa, the Sentinelese, the Great Andamanese and the Onge. They all belong to the Negrito race having pigmy stature, pepper-corn hair and jet black complexion. Out of them, very little is known about the Sentinelese who inhabit the isolated North Sentinel Island. In fact, the people here are yet to be studied from close proximity. The great Andamanese, who live in Strait Island, themselves constitute a composite population claiming ancestry from 10 different tribes most of whom due to over-exposure to civilisation got into oblivion. Nevertheless, we have fairly good accounts on the Onge of Little Andaman Island. Both the Onge and the Jarawa practise body painting. The Great Andamanese do not do it and we do not know whether they ever did so. Regarding the Sentinelese practice, we do not have any definite knowledge yet.
It may appear curious through a fact that unlike most other primitive people from the mainland, the Onge or any other Negrito tribe do not practice tattooing, even though the tribes from the neighbouring Nicobar group of islands do so by puncturing the skin with tiny slivers of obsidian or quartz. Perhaps because of their very dark skin complexion, the Onge and the Jarawa prefer to paint themselves with red ochre and white clay. Both men and women adorn themselves with paint. Traditionally painting is exclusively a job of the women. It is done either with red ochre or with clay commonly called ‘Alame’ by the Onge. However, red is generally used on sad occasions like death. Painting with white clay, on the other hand, is indicative of rejoicing, love, festivity, and success in hunting expeditions.

V

To begin with, Onge apply paint made out of red ochre or white clay mixed with animal fat to the entire surface of the body or face to be painted. The paint is then scraped out either with finger nails or an indigenous scraping implement called ‘Juge’ at intervals before it totally dries up.

As already stated, it is the woman who generally does the painting. In fact, an Onge woman, immediately after her marriage, usually applies paint on her husband’s body and face with white clay. It is believed that the more the wife loves her husband the more carefully she does the painting. Even after a successful hunt, the women usually apply paint to the body or face of their respective husbands.

One after across the Onge with their face and the rest of the body simply daubed with white clay having no particular design as such. This is usually for the reason that white clay is believed to have medicinal qualities, providing relief against body aches, headaches, or any other pain. As already indicated, it also acts as an insect repellent.

These body paintings, as already mentioned, are mostly carried out during certain ceremonies or rituals. For instance, during initiation ceremony the body of the concerned male is painted with white clay. Similarly during the rite of puberty, i.e., the first menstrual discharge of a girl, she is painted with red ochre by a female relative. During as well as initiation ceremony the body of her husband with designs in white clay and she too gets herself painted by another woman. The relatives around may also get themselves painted on the occasion to take part in a group dance along with the couple in the evening.

Ordinarily the Onge have an elaborate ceremony to observe after the death of a person. Once death occurs, the body is buried under the log bed of the deceased person. The period of mourning continues for at least four to five months, or till such time when they are sure that the flesh of the deceased has completely decomposed. The mandible of the deceased is then exhumed out of the grave and decorated with red ochre. For a few days, it is worn around the neck as a locket by the close kin of the deceased. All the relatives of the deceased abstain from using the red ochre till all the rituals are over. As a mark of completion of the rituals, however, the relatives invariably paint themselves in red ochre. Thus centring around the life-cycle rites, the Onge art forms get expression.

VI

The creative art of painting is, in fact, a ritual too. The painter ordinarily does not begin with a preconceived notion of what he/she is going to paint. It is by and large a spontaneous act. Under such circumstance, form evolves automatically through intuition. Both in tattoo as well as in body painting, on the surface level, one will notice that there is a drive towards simplification which finally leads to abstraction. These abstract forms then act as a schema which are used and reused in various combinations. However, individuality is not at stake since each painter adds his/her own motifs as well as imagination within this scheme. Thus out of their own perception, certain modules are created which pass through a series of changes in order to get into the final outcome. This then certainly manifests itself in the vocabulary of the creative art. Thus the creative art as such not a separate entity but a part of or a way of life. The body paintings of the Onge are no exceptions in this respect.

Styles of art enormously from tribe to tribe due to the existing differences in their socio-economic and environmental conditions. As the tribe can be categorised on the basis of their livelihood pattern, similar categorisation is possible according their styles of art. Nevertheless, in almost all forms of tribal art, the vocabulary of art as such is direct, intuitive and simple. Form, performance, and transformation are the integral parts of their art. According to Haku Shah (1995), “Thus art form becomes a living entity, a part of the tribal self, family, village and, that way, the universe-cosmos”.

Unfortunately, the surface body painting is not as well documented as the tattoo simply because of its impermanence. However, at this stage, in view of their different nature of execution, we need not look at the two separately; instead, we may study the motifs and the basic formal qualities they share.

In tattoos on the one hand we have beautiful images of floral pattern, geometric designs, religious designs and animal forms which are most intricately rendered. The most interesting in terms of form are those of the animals where elephant with riders, scorpions, peacocks are painted in the most simplistic or cryptic manner, yet not losing the essence of the particular animal (Figure-6). The basic preoccupation is towards simplicity which leads to abstraction and stylisation and at places exaggeration of form.
in the interest of expressiveness. Relatively more commercialised motifs are those of flags, hearts, and religious symbols. Nevertheless, the range of treatment differs from motif to motif but simplicity prevails all through. The simplicity in this case is no naïve but originates from a deliberate attempt of the painter himself. As a result, it loses its charm to a considerable extent. As it appears, it merely stands as a display from the tattooed person’s point of view and has no identity of its own. This has been caused more or less solely by commercialisation.

VII

In comparison with commercialised motifs, the body paintings of the Onge are tuned to a different mood altogether. They are most innovative, original and bold. No two designs are exactly similar, yet each one is most wonderfully balanced and creates interesting rhythmic effects. The black complexion of the body and the whiteness of the paint gives rise to a graphic element which is indeed most fascinating. The paintings are highly innovative though definitely not done arbitrarily since each and every stroke is in coordination with the anatomy. Some patterns are also painted like garments where in the neat lines show the design of a full sleeve T-shirts (Plates 3 & 4). Even though the patterns are mostly geometric, they are definitely not monotonous.

Here a mention may be made of The Andaman Islanders edited by D. Taylor Cox wherein the author has this to say: “They (the Onges) have never developed any graphic arts and have only a crude form of body decoration based on geometric designs”. He further adds in the appendix that “the Onge have no idea of symbolic representations. They use only geometric designs. These invariably seen spontaneous, and in my view do not represent a degenerate form of ... more highly evolved art, half forgotten over the centuries; in short, the artists of the Andamans, with no conception of symbolism, are even today less advanced than their Palaeolithic counterparts” (Cox: 1966). These observations are rather harsh as well as extra-simplistic. Even though these paintings may be most spontaneously rendered, but the balance are over-all integrity existing in the whole painting with the body does speak of well-thought-out project. Thus taking all these aspects into consideration, it is justifiable to consider body painting as a form of art and not merely as a ritual. Thus body painting remains as one of the most primitive, age-old art traditions which has come down to us through ages.

VIII

The act of smearing vibhuti (sacred ash) across one’s forehead, a prevalent custom amongst the Vaisnavites and Saivites from down south of the Indian peninsula, may be a close parallel to the art of body painting. Accordingly, one can safely assume that the art of body painting has been gradually developing and adopting with the changing times. Despite all its association with the rituals or ceremonies, body painting can trace its roots from the universal attempt to heighten, emphasise, and harmonise the natural beauty of the body through such paintings. Thus this predilection for simple outlines characterised by a type of line drawing which finally dispenses with additional elements gives rise to a simplicity of considerable beauty. In fact, in order to enhance the beauty of the painted person (tattooed as well as surfacially painted), often a line or band is painted by the Onge around the neck or the girdle. This visually breaks the length of the body emphasise a part of the body. Such repeated bands make us visually aware of the volume and contour and thereby giving a more tactile appeal. Isolated motifs too create a point of immense interest. Such a well-thought-out, programmed piece of art work needs to be given its due acknowledgement.

So far, not much has been or is being done about this fascinating medium which is still practiced in various pockets of the Indian subcontinent. If something is not done soon enough to appropriately record its details, we will lose yet another major item of our rich cultural heritage. It will be really unfortunate if this art form gets wiped out from our culture for ever.

References:


Sources of Plates and Figures


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