

Living Marks: An Overview of Motifs and Symbolism in Baiga Tribal Tattooing

¹Nivedita Laxman Thakur, ²Prof (Dr.) Avadhut Atre

¹Research Scholar, Faculty of Art and Design, Vishwakarma University, Pune.

Email Id: nivedita.thakur-306@vupune.ac.in

ORCID Id: 0009-0006-7385-8368

²Research Guide, Faculty of Art and Design, Vishwakarma University, Pune.

Email Id: avadhut.atre@vupune.ac.in

ORCID Id: 0000-0001-7006-1974

Abstract: Tribal tattoos are called as Godna in most of the parts in India. Godna is the cultural identity of Baiga tribe located in Central India, mainly in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. Apart from body decoration, these tattoos are symbols of belonging, narrate life stages, and give spiritual protection as per their beliefs. This research focuses on Baiga tattoo beliefs, its processes, motifs & its meanings based on secondary sources such as research papers, books, visual archives, and documentaries. These tattoo motifs include geometric shapes, symbols from nature and they all carry specific meaning and significance. These tattoo motifs narrate important life events of women such as puberty, marriage, childbirth. This study also discusses motifs and symbolism. Due to education and modernization young generation is avoiding this stringent tattoo process. This paper throws light on importance of godna as cultural heritage, emphasizing need of documentation of its symbolic meanings, aesthetics for future generations.

Keywords: Cultural identity, Tribal Tattoos, Baiga tattoos

1. INTRODUCTION

Baiga tribe is concentrated in forest land of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Baiga women typically have tattoos on their breasts, neck, back, arms, legs, and forehead for beautification of the skin. These elaborated tattoos are the combination of geometrical designs in combination with motifs inspired by nature. This tattoo culture is so ingrained into Baiga culture that each Baiga family insures to pass down this tradition to future generations and generations thereafter. These tattoos are the visible markers of their identity and life stage. The motifs and its placement simply convey the life stage of the wearer.

But today, godna culture faces decline. Because of modern education, migration, and globalization affected this cultural practice. This research paper investigates motifs and its symbolism through secondary sources like peer-reviewed articles, ethnographic studies, and visual archives.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study is to document and examine the themes and symbols of the Baiga community's tattoo culture, known as Baiga Godna. It looks at how tattoos function as cultural markers of identity and important life transitions including puberty, marriage, and parenthood. Along with the effects of migration, education, and industrialization on this culture, the study also examines the tattooing process.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

P. Mooventhan and co-authors discuss the cultural beliefs connected to tattooing, describing the materials, methods, and even therapeutic uses of the practice (Mooventhan, Kadian, Kumar, Karpagam, & Choudhary, 2016).

Research on Baiga tattooing (Godna) fits within a larger anthropological and art-historical study of indigenous body art in India. Goswami (2015) notes that Baiga women adorn their skin with tattoos inspired by nature and mythology, emphasizing their spiritual and social significance (Goswami, 2015).

Broadening this perspective, Bandhu, Singh, and Sharma (2024) explore the process and meaning of Baiga tattooing, highlighting its role in life-cycle rituals, the preparation of natural inks, and the passing down of skills through generations. (Bandhu, Singh, & Sharma, 2024).

Singh and Mishra (2019) explain that Baiga women choose tattoos not only for body decoration but also because these permanent “ornaments” cannot be stolen and remain with them after death. They are believed to ward off evil, reduce ailments like gastric troubles and arthritis, and help women endure childbirth pain (Singh & Mishra, 2019).

Further insight is provided by Mohanta and Chaudhari (2013), who examine motivations for body decoration in the Baiga tribe, their health-related beliefs, and the ritual traditions that surround tattooing (Mohanta & Chaudhari, 2013).

When taken as a whole, these results show that Baiga tattooing is much more than body art. By combining social acknowledgment, health routines, and spiritual belief, it functions as an enduring symbol of women and tribal ancestry. The literature highlights its therapeutic meanings, ritualistic depth, and resilience in the face of modernization, as well as its importance in cultural preservation.

4. IMPORTANCE OF TATTOOS IN TRIBES IN INDIA

With distinct themes and meanings expressed by each tribe, Indian tribal tattoos offer a rich fusion of heritage, spirituality, and identity. The Gond and Baiga tribes of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh are two of the most well-known. Their designs, which express deep ties to religion and environment, are influenced by geometric shapes, plants, and animals. To signify social identity and spiritual protection, women in the Baiga culture get tattoos at significant life milestones including puberty, marriage, and childbirth.

Rabari women from Gujarat and Rajasthan in western India use religious, animal, and floral emblems to adorn their arms, legs, necks, and occasionally faces (As & DV, 2017). These tattoos, which are typically placed prior to marriage, are symbols of social standing, beauty, and protection.

There are notable instances of identity-based tattooing in the northeast. In the past, the Apatani women of Arunachal Pradesh wore face tattoos as a cultural marking to make themselves less appealing to competing tribes and deter kidnapping (Bharadwaj & Boruah, 2020).

Similarly, as a sign of their valour and warrior accomplishments, the Konyak Nagas of Nagaland were granted tattoos on their faces and chests. These tattoos, which are applied to warriors, princes, and kings, represent a person's social standing (Konyak, 2020).

After reaching puberty, the Kutia Kondh women of Odisha have geometric tattoos on their faces. These elaborate designs are seen to have spiritual meaning and act as a link to their tribal identity and ancestry (BEHERA, 2025). The Toda tribe is well known in Tamil Nadu for its dark blue geometric tattoos, which are created by applying soot beneath the skin (Culture, India, Art Travel, n.d.).

Even though industrialization has led to the decline of many of these traditions, Indian tribal tattoos remain a powerful representation of ancestry, pride, and protection.

5. BAIGA TRIBE

The Baiga Adivasis are an indigenous tribal group from central India that lives in forests. They are frequently acknowledged as the first people to live on Earth in the local mythology of the area. The Baigas, a primordial

Dravidian tribe, are distinguished by their customarily simple lifestyles (RUSSELL, 1916). They lived closely with the natural world, and their daily activities and means of subsistence are still strongly linked to their forest ecologies today. Once nomadic hunter-gatherers who engaged in shifting cultivation, they are also renowned for their profound understanding of the therapeutic and restorative qualities of the many plant and animal species that can be found in central India's jungles. Indeed, the word "Baiga" is thought to have sprung from the Hindi word "Vaidya," which means "the healer." The Baiga tribe is listed by the Indian government as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The Baigas were classified as PVTG in part because of their pre-agricultural habits, which include hunting and gathering, low levels of education, extremely low literacy, poor nutrition, and widespread unemployment (Baiga, 2025).

One distinctive aspect of the Baiga women's cultural identity is the permanent tattoos they have on their body (RUSSELL, 1916). The Baiga woman have a specific meaning for tattoos. In their culture, they are frequently seen as an alternative to decorations and are said to accentuate the beauty of the women. Women enjoy having tattoos since they are permanent in addition to making them more appealing (ELWIN, 1939).

In addition to being well-liked for fun, singing and dancing are rituals and culturally significant to the Baiga people. Without singing and dancing, festivals, fairs, rites and rituals, weddings, and even birth and death ceremonies would not be complete. Karma is the most well-liked of the Baigas' various dance styles. The Karma dance, one of the most well-known dance styles in central India, was created by the Baigas. Tapadi, Sua, Reena, and Saila are more dancing styles. Another significant song and dance style that makes use of the Baigas' poetic language is the dadaria. Rhythmic drumming on the percussion instrument maandar frequently accompanies the Baigas' singing and dancing (Pandey, n.d.).

6. BAIGA TATTOOS:

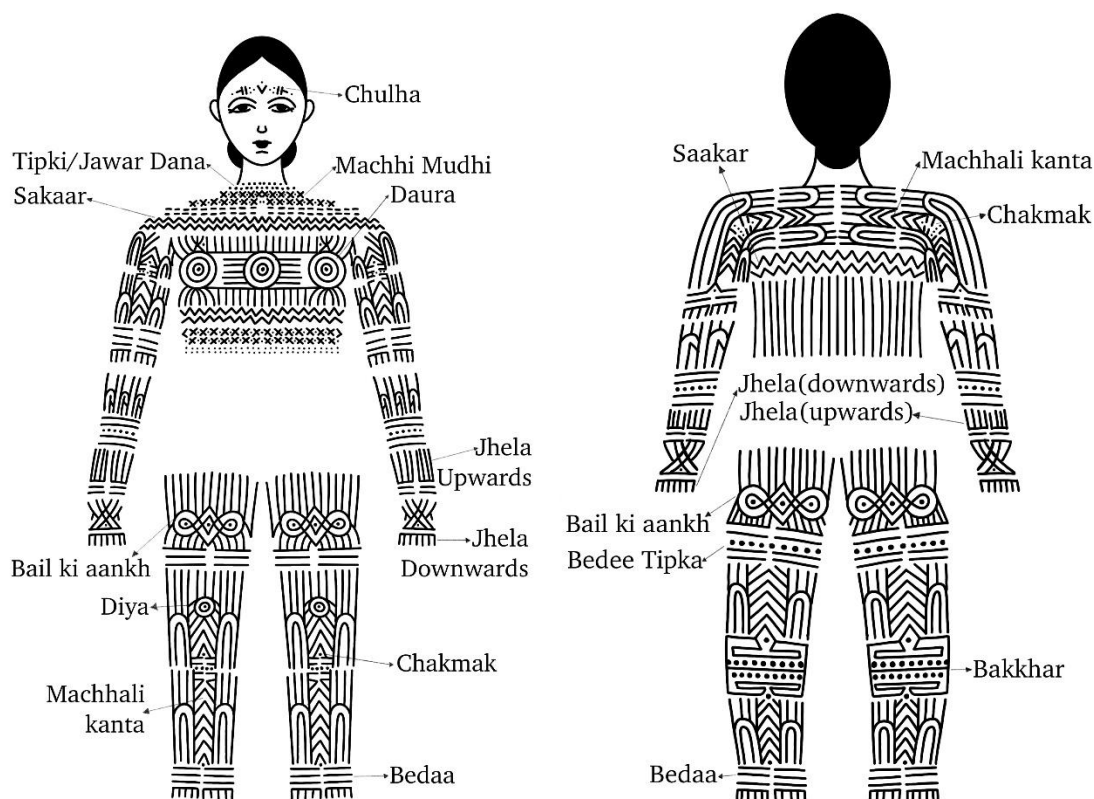
Baiga community is fond of tattoos. They consider this as their ornaments that cannot be broken, stolen or taken away and accompany them even after death. The Baiga women are identified by their rich tattoos all over the body. These tattoos are so ingrained into the Baiga culture that every Baiga family ensures that these tattoos and significance pass to the younger generations, and generations thereafter. Godna is employed not just for beautification but also for social and spiritual reasons. To adorn themselves, Baiga women traditionally have tattoos on their breasts, neck, back, arms, legs, and forehead. These elaborated tattoos are the combination of geometrical designs in combination with motifs inspired by nature (Nirgune, 2018).

6.1. TATTOO MAKING PROCESS:

The women who ink the Baiga's skin are referred to as Badnin or Gondhanarin. Baiga both men and women ink their bodies with tattoos. Making tattoo ink is the first step in the actual tattoo-making process. Amalgamation of ramtila oil and sal gum act as an ink. This ink is inserted in dermis by poking the needles. It's around a bunch of 7 to 12 needles. This bunch called as Fosa. Badnin chants mantras in the beginning of the tattooing process. The procedure hurts a lot. After that, haldi and water are used to clean the wound. Curing takes seven to eight days. The most intriguing aspect is that the husband is not allowed to see the tattooing process (ELWIN, 1939). All the process takes place in the forest or in a private area.

6.2. BAIGA TATTOO MOTIFS

Baiga ladies love to put their traditional tattoo art to their bodies. Apart from genital areas, they cover their skin in tattoo designs. According to the Baigas, the pain a woman (Baigin) experiences while getting a tattoo helps her cope with the agony of giving birth, and finally the tattoo becomes a symbol of what she is. The woman receives respect in her in-law's home when she has godna all over her body. At various phases of life, tattoos are applied to the forehead, wrists, legs, breasts, and back. Except during the monsoon, they do tattoo procedures. (Chamasa, 1991).



This reference image is prepared with the help of references (Chaumasa, 1991) (ELWIN, 1939) (Nirgune, 2018) (India, 2023)

Figure 01: Visual presentation of Baiga tattoos on women's body (own work)

Table No. 01: Tattoo Phases with the list of tattoo motifs (Baiga tattoos on women body)

Tattoo Phase	Age in years	Location	List of inscribed tattoo motifs
1	10	Forehead	Chulha Tipka or Chulha Beda or Chulha Tipka Beda
2	11-12	Back	Chakmak, Machhali Kanta, Jhela (in upword direction, Jhela (in downword direction), Saakar, Bedaa
3	13-14	Arms Front & back	Birchha, Jhela, Bedaa, Machhali Kanta, Jawar Daana
4	15-16	Legs Front & Back	Bailki Ankh, Diya, Bedaa, Machhali Kanta, Chakmak, Bedee Tipka, Bakkhar
5	17-20(only after childbirth)	Breasts	Tipka, Saakar, Daura, Jhela, Machhi-Mudi

This table is prepared with the help of references (Chaumasa, 1991) (ELWIN, 1939) (Nirgune, 2018) (India, 2023)

As per table no. 01, The Baiga tattoos are done on female skin in different stages or age of her life. The Baiga women receives her first tattoo at the age of 10 on forehead. Later, 11-12 years her back is filled with combination of tattoos like Chakmak, Machhali Kanta, Jhela (in upword direction, Jhela (in downword direction), Saakar, Bedaa in a particular pattern. At the age of 13-14, her arms (front & back) are covered with the pattern, which is the combination of multiple tattoos like Birchha, Jhela, Bedaa, Machhali Kanta, Jawar Daana. Entire Legs are covered at the age of 15-16 with the combination like Bailki Ankh, Diya, Bedaa, Machhali Kanta, Chakmak, Bedee Tipka, Bakkhar. At the end the girl gets her final tattoo on breasts only after her childbirth. This pattern consists of Tipka, Saakar, Daura, Jhela, Machhi-Mudi. (India, 2023)

The meanings or symbolism of these tattoos are as follows:

Table No. 02: Baiga tattoo motifs with its symbolism (Baiga tattoos on women body)

Sr. no.	Motif Name in Local Language	Motif name Translated in English	Symbolism
1	Chulha Tipka	Stove & Grain	Entry of girl in the community, it's a community identity mark
2	Chulha Beda	Stove & Gate	
3	Chulha Tipka Beda	Stove, Grain & Gate	
4	Chakmak	Flintstone	Reference to fire in supplying energy & protecting from wild
5	Machhali Kanta	Fish bones	Referenece to fishing as an important part of Baiga Culture and also an important symbol for nourishment and wealth
6	Jhela (in upword direction	Stem	Growth
7	Jhela (in downword direction	Roots	Rooted to culture & Family
8	Saakar	Water waves	An integral part of baiga culture, can be reference to life
9	Bedaa	Barrier, Gate	Gated structure used to secure things, home
10	Birchha	Tree	Reference to forest
11	Jawar Daana	Grains	Reference to food
12	Bailki Ankh	Bull's eye	Reference to animal being important in agricultural chores & day to day baiga culture
13	Diya	Oil lamp, illumination	Reference to the crucial role played by fire in supplying energy and protecting from the wild
14	Bakkhar	Agricultural implement	Reference to agricultural work
15	Tipka	Grain	Food, nutrition, prosperity

16	Daura	Bamboo Basket	Utensil made to separate grains or a fishing equipment made with bamboo
17	Machhi-Mudi	Honey-comb	Reference to nourishment

This table is prepared with the help of references (Chaumasa, 1991) (ELWIN, 1939) (Nirgune, 2018) (India, 2023)

7. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS:

The collected literature and documented motifs clearly show that Baiga tattooing (Godna) is beyond decorative art. It is a living cultural text in the form of visuals where each stage of a woman's life is carved on her body. Tables 01 and 02 show a sequence of placement and symbolism which are placed on the body carefully. Tattoos begin on the forehead around age ten, marking a girl's formal entry into the Baiga community. Following phases-back, arms, legs, and finally the breasts after childbirth- parallel key transitions: teenage, marriage, and motherhood. This chronological layering turns the female body into a narrative of growth, fertility, and social belonging.

The motifs themselves encode their relationship between mother nature and life. Images such as Chakmak (flintstone) and Diya (oil lamp) celebrate fire as energy and protection, while Machhali Kanta (fish bones) and Jawar Daana (grain) shows dependence on fishing and agriculture. Nature and forest life are central, seen in Birchha (tree) and Bailki Ankh (bull's eye). The upward and downward Jhela motifs representing stems and roots which symbolize aspiration, dreams balanced by ancestral grounding.

Gendered aspects are noticeable. Women, not men, carry the most elaborate tattoos all over the body reflect their role as cultural transmitters and custodians of fertility. Pain is interpreted as preparation for childbirth, linking patience with feminine strength. The Badnin's chants during tattooing creates the ritual dimension, reshaping a painful act into sacred practice.

Yet modernization challenges this system. Education, migration, and changing aesthetics have reduced the appeal of permanent, painful markings. Younger Baiga women increasingly view tattoos as outdated or socially limiting. This shift risks severing the intergenerational chain of knowledge in which motif meanings and techniques are orally transmitted.

8. CONCLUSION:

Baiga tattooing (Godna) is more than body decoration; it is a living record of the tribe's history, beliefs, and relationship with nature. Each motif, whether firestone, tree, fish bone, or grain carries layered meanings of protection, fertility, and spiritual connection. The careful sequence of tattooing from childhood to motherhood transforms a woman's body into a timeline of identity, courage, and belonging.

This tradition also highlights women's central role as cultural keepers. Painful procedures are seen as preparation for childbirth, while chants by the tattoo artist turn the act into a sacred rite. Such practices show how art, ritual, and social life merge into a single, embodied tradition.

However, modernization, migration, and changing ideas of beauty have weakened the practice. Younger Baiga women increasingly avoid permanent markings, and with them the oral knowledge of motifs and techniques risks fading.

By bringing together existing studies and visual evidence, this research underlines the urgent need to document and protect Baiga tattooing. Community-led archiving, museum exhibits, and design-based adaptations can help sustain the art without stripping it of meaning. Preserving Godna is not only about saving an art form but also about honoring the Baiga's resilient worldview and the unique stories inscribed on their skin.

REFERENCES:

- [1] As, S., & DV, L. (2017). History and Epidemiology of Tattoo. In Tattoo- The Invaluable Compendium for Dermatologists. The Health Sciences Publisher.
- [2] Baiga. (2025). Retrieved from Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baiga>
- [3] Bandhu, S., Singh, N. K., & Sharma, V. N. (2024). A Study of the Baiga Women's Tradition of Tattoos, Modernization of this Art and Situation of Tattoo Industry in India. International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research.
- [4] BEHERA, G. K. (2025). Exploring Manhood and Masculine Identity in the Kutia Kandha Tribe: Traditions, Roles, and Cultural Perspectives. International Journal of Applied Social Science, 56-61.
- [5] Bharadwaj, S., & Boruah, U. (2020). Inking the Identity: a Study of the Apatani Tradition of Tattooing through Bakhtinian Chronotope. Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities .
- [6] Chaumasa. (1991). Bhopal: Madhya Pradesh Adiwasi Lok Kala Parishad.
- [7] Culture, India, Art Travel. (n.d.). Retrieved from ME MERAKI: https://www.memeraki.com/blogs/posts/tattoos-a-symbolic-link-to-cultural-heritage?srsId=AfmBOoqumiBxQXXDa8KZH_FdKmuTrHie1xs4HMTtrJDB9TE5Zj_fgVmn
- [8] ELWIN, V. (1939). The Baiga. London.
- [9] Goswami, M. (2015). Tattoo: A Cultural Expression of the Baiga Women. Journal of Tribal, Folk And Subaltern Studies, 52-62.
- [10] India, N. G. (Director). (2023). Baiga Tribal tattoos- It happens only in India [Motion Picture].
- [11] Konyak, Z. (2020). Traditional Method Of Preparing Tattoo Pigment by the Konyak Tribe of Mon District In Nagaland, India. . Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR), 900-904.
- [12] Mohanta, D. B., & Chaudhari, D. M. (2013). Culture aspects of the tribal art in Central India: a case of the body decoration of the Baiga tribe. The National Seminar on art and architecture of central India., 28-36.
- [13] Mooventhana, P., Kadian, K. S., Kumar, R. S., Karpagam, C., & Choudhary, B. K. (2016). An Exploratory study on cultural and health significance of traditional practices among tribal community in Chhattisgarh state, India. Journal of Applied and Natural Science 8 (2), 931-934.
- [14] Nirgune, V. (2018). विलुप्त होती जनजातीय गुदना प्रथा (मध्य भारत के संदर्भ). Bhopal: Agam Kala Prakashan, Delhi.
- [15] Pandey, R. (n.d.). Culture of the Baiga People. Retrieved from Sahapedia: <https://www.sahapedia.org/culture-of-the-baiga-people>
- [16] RUSSELL, R. V. (1916). The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India. London: THE CENTRAL PROVINCES ADMINISTRATION.
- [17] Singh, A. K., & Mishra, D. (2019). Tattoo As A Means Of Communication Among Baiga. THINK INDIA JOURNAL, 3468-3477.