

---

# **WHAT DO TATTOOS MEAN? REFLECTIONS FROM TEACHING PEDAGOGY IN FORENSIC SCIENCE AND ANTHROPOLOGY**

**Dr. Indrani Mukherjee**

*Post Doctoral Fellow, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, India*

*Email: isen.78.im@gmail.com*

**Dr. Soumendra Mohan Patnaik**

*Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, India*

*Email: smp\_du@yahoo.com*

---

**Abstract:** During a session on Portrait Parle and the mapping of body markings in a Forensic Science class, it came to light that the students were not necessarily conscious of the social phenomenon of tattoo in their own social surroundings. This was in spite of the fact that some of the students themselves carried tattoos. From here began the quest of first recognizing that tattooing is not an obscure phenomenon restricted to some inconspicuous world but very much a part of our everyday life. With this began an initiative by the M.Sc. Forensic science class, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, to understand the world around them vis a vis tattoos. The assignment gained impetus through a summer internship held during June 2016 with the Indian Anthropological Association at the Delhi Department of Anthropology. The present paper is a reflection on how tattoo can form the inroads into myriad of research areas helping in understanding people in a manner which remains critical to both Anthropology as well as Forensic Science, and the strength of interdisciplinary understandings.

**Keywords:** Tattoo, Teaching pedagogy, Interdisciplinarity, Qualitative Research, Forensic Science.

---

Tattoos are important Body Documents of Identity (Garcia-Merritt, 2014). Its social and individual relevance reflects on the formulation of personhood as well as community bonds. In India, tattoos have played a significant role in tribal rural as well as urban life. They define social status, power, marital status, masculinity and femininity, religious alignment, cosmic power, kith and kin, peer and gang association, emotions and so on, in different socio-cultural contexts. In the context of disciplines of forensic science and criminology, markings on the body have always played a significant role in the identification of criminals, gangs, in-mates and dead bodies. This paper seeks to bring out the significance of tattoos as an integral part of social life and its importance vis-a-vis anthropology well as its implications in forensic science and criminology. Using anthropological methods, the paper dwells on how students of forensic science were not just motivated to observe the social reality around them, but to also explore new areas of research interests seeking insights into qualitative research methods.

The paper brings to the fore, through the case of a summer internship programme, that the methods of personal identification, on the basis of body tattooing, can be enhanced significantly based on insights of various disciplines. Examining the technical uniqueness and the cultural identity which are at play in the stories that these body markings narrate help in the identification of individuals as 'persons' and in continuation their social reality. For example, a number of individuals invested in body building get tattoos on their muscular areas to draw further notice to their bodies. This type of knowledge might help forensic investigations in not just identifying a person of interest through an identification mark, but also inform the necessary authorities on where to investigate and look for information in terms of associated people and social circle. Thus, a combination of anthropology, criminology and forensic science can lend support to a specific area of concern of focus that might lead to greater pragmatic consequences. The same would hold true for other such collaborations. The interdisciplinary approach has been defined by Executive Director of the Association for Integrated Studies William H. Newell and

William Green as “inquiries which critically draw upon two or more disciplines and which lead to an integration of disciplinary insights” (Haynes, 2002). “The interdisciplinary approach is uniquely different from a multidisciplinary approach, which is the teaching of topics from more than one discipline in parallel to the other, nor is it a cross disciplinary approach, where one discipline is crossed with the subject matter of another. Interdisciplinary techniques go beyond these two techniques by allowing students to see different perspectives, work in groups, and make the synthesizing of disciplines the ultimate goal.” (Jones, 2009).

The Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi has been a site for the intellectual traditions for both Anthropology and Forensic Science. It started its certificate course in Forensic Science in the year 1968 and has had many practicing lawyers and police officers attending the course. The department subsequently offered a Master’s course in Forensic Science from 2015. In this the department has always been multidisciplinary in its vision, however it has been equally inclined towards interdisciplinarity and spaces of confluence. In line with this the paper explores a summer internship program planned by the Indian Anthropological Association at the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, in the summer of 2016.

**Methods of Study:** Portrait Parle and the mapping of body markings are a part of the forensic science curriculum. However, students were not necessarily conscious of the social phenomenon of tattooing, this was inspite the fact that some of the students themselves carried tattoos. It started with a small question ‘What do Tattoos mean?’. From here began the quest of first recognizing that tattooing is not an obscure phenomenon restricted to some inconspicuous world but very much a part of everyday life. This began an initiative by the first batch of M.Sc. Forensic science (passing out in 2017) at the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, to understand the world around them vis-a-vis tattoos. Students used ethnographic method to study the social implications of tattooing and the role of culture in the selection of the tattoo figure. The present paper is a reflection on how tattoo can form the inroads into myriad of research areas helping in understanding people in a manner which remains critical to both Anthropology, Forensic Science and Criminology. What started off as a theoretical paper exploring teaching pedagogy and its intersection with a social phenomenon soon turned to a practical experiment involving a more planned curriculum and regular interactions, close monitoring and feedback to boost the student’s efforts in their first attempt into the research process.

After their first training in the process of observation they were asked to communicate with people with tattoos and find out more about the individual’s life with respect to tattoos. A number of individuals with tattoos were requested to share their experience with tattoos, demonstrative interviews were held to acquaint students with case studies and in-depth interview techniques. Students who had tattoos shared their own motivation behind the tattoos with the group. The students were given a group work to explore tattoos based on geographical areas, exploring the question that whether the preferred designs of the tattoo figures can be classified on a regional basis. It was found out that establishing a link between types of tattoos and the territory of its occurrence is not possible with limited sample size and in such a short span of the study. Students were further asked to select their own area of research interests and work on that using the methods that were explained to them.

The students prepared an interview guide containing questions on the perception of that tattoo, and how the society played a significant role in the content of perspective and their reactions towards it. Why, when, where, what and how were the ‘4W1H’ of the interview. Also, they were asked, if there is any hidden message in the tattoo or displaying something which is not easily understood in a first glance. The focus was also the psychology and state of mind of the actor.

The internship was guided by an end result of producing an academic paper by each student at the end of the session. While 20 students joined the internship program 16 have been able to move forward in a successive manner, and eight of these papers have been presented at the 18<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Criminology held at Jindal Global University from 15-19 December 2016.

**Anthropological Relevance of Tattoos:** “Tattoos exist within a geographically varied and extensive history, where time and place have resulted in a rich cultural practice extended over many locations across the world” (Garcia-Merritt, 2014). Unfortunately, this rich history has often been oversimplified. Substantial academic research on the topic of tattoos in developed nations (Lombroso, 2006; Nathanson et al., 2006) has considered tattoos a symbol of criminality, mental illness, and aberrant lifestyle (Lombroso, 2006). People with tattoos upon their skin were considered reprobates and troublemakers, and their tattoos were a symbol of some external manifestation of some form of internal inadequacy (Fenske, 2011). This perception often resulted in policies as well as social practices that weretargeted to alienate, monitor, and control people with tattoos. This also led to relegating body markings to places (both bodily, eg. neck ankle etc. and spatially, eg. place of work/employment) that were not visible to others very easily.

Much of the historical academic literature on tattoos is western centric and looks at tattoos as stigmatized and anti-institution. While researches have continued to explore other areas of relevance, there is still a continuity of text where tattooing is still considered a “risk behavior” and a symbol of personality that errs towards psychopathy and aberrant psychological conditions (Favazza, 1988; Nathanson et al., 2006). For a long time inquires have ignored the use of tattoos as practical or emotional expressions of identity construction, and have primarily focused its negative association with tattooed individuals. “Tattoos act as an important text of one’s life, and are tied to power through mechanisms of display and concealment as a response to acts of surveillance and policies by people and institutions in power” (Garcia-Merritt, 2014). Tattoos have brought along with them methods of control over the bodies of individuals possessing the tattoos, which has in turn created methods and industries of dealing with and subverting such forms of control. Garcia-Merritt points out that while the dominant culture might try to overpower the culture of tattooing it also “function as a form of biopower where the individuals use their tattoos to counter such surveillance and policies, by using tattoos as tools of subversion. By displaying tattoos, tattooed people are using their bodies to challenge existing social conventions of body appearance, by using their very own body appearance as the key to this resistance”. In this one can say that tattooing is both a symbol of power, and also a resistive technique to it. This resonates with Michel Foucault’s (1994) concept of biopower (Heroux et al., 2001). Further, it is a misconception that the motivation behind tattoos have remained unchanging throughout history (Barthel & Sanders, 1990; Atkinson, 2004; Kosut, 2006) and thus not looked at the genealogy of tattoos. In order to understand the roots of these types power and subversion, we must understand the changes in perception and social meaning of tattoos over time.

Anthropologists have often referred to the cultural significance of tattoos in their writings. The diverse Indian culture has often enjoyed the tradition of tattooing through its unique traditional tattooing techniques to present day modern foray into technical expertise and its expression as an art, all of which is a significant part of unique cultural system. It is an area that can be studied for the traditional caste groups responsible for tattooing, tattooing as a rite-de-passage, to gendered spaces, to its connection with afterlife, social hierarchy and many more. It included both personal and cultural choices of people who feel that their tattoos are an integral part of who they are, and not afraid to be known through their tattoos, and people who did not primarily conceive of themselves as tattooed people might feel more apprehension on being known through their tattoos. Casual tattoo seekers do not have the same sort of cultural capital and narrative element of their tattoo differs from each other. With the available perspectives and research on tattoos and a commentary on uniqueness of the Indian social reality, the internship program brought into perspective the pragmatic uses of this information in forensic science.

**Internship Experience:** Through the internship the students became acquainted with, various theoretical and social realities with respect to tattoos. Discussion revolved around, but not restricted to, understanding tattoo as a stigma for criminals, reliability of tattoo as tool for recognition, tattoo as a symbol of hierarchy and power in ancient civilizations, cultural meaning of tattoo in different cultural context, interface between religious cosmology and tattoos, how tattoos are reflected in different communities and professions such as military, beautician, migrant labourer and travellers and its interface with gender and the changing meaning over time.

From the work of the students, we include four representative cases to highlight the diversity and the range of perspectives dealing with the cases of tattoo and its practices.

Ibraheem Khan (2016) attempted to understand tattoos through criminological theories, examined the role of socio-historical forces giving rise to the context within which the act of tattooing surfaces. Tracing the influence of Gustafson and Caplan on the tattoo tradition, the author explains the scientific concurrence of identification through the eyes of Alexander Lacassagne Bertillon, Hans Gross, Faulds and Herschel. Khan questions that why the popularity of inking fell down even after being a part of varied cultures since thousands of years? Identifying the resurgence of tattoo during the contemporary times, the author raises the question that why there is a sudden revival of inking now and what are its implications for the disciplines of criminology and forensic science

Shivani Kapil's (2016) 'Understanding of the idea of masculinity and femininity through body art among the Punjabi's of Delhi' elucidates the cultural and social significance of tattoos over time. Previous research suggests that there is a potential relationship between a person's tattoo choices and their gender identity. It was also reported that getting a tattoo involves at least two basic important decisions; the choice of symbol and to determine where it will be placed on the body. The respondents feel that tattoos are more stigmatizing for women, so the choice to put the tattoo on a concealed area allows women to keep it a secret when meeting strangers. For male, tattoos are mainly the symbol of self-control; hence it is of a more prominent display whereas women tend to have a more personal and private display of the tattoo. The society's views are also quite different for males and females. Males encounter somewhat privileged experience than the females.

Ishaan Khanna (2016) argued that for persons seeking tattoo treats body as a canvas and 'tattoo' an art, a message, a reflection of the mind and soul. It can express different emotions for different people. Respondents experience a different type of pleasure in spite of the pain they endure during the tattooing process. Tattooing is not a new thing in the society, it has its root in the ancient period. But its meaning was different then, mainly being a ritual, identification or a reflection of power. Now, it has come up as a new and modern form of art. The tattooed individuals express a myriad of emotions towards their tattoos, some had depicted their coded message for their loved ones, some see their inspiration in it, while some just showed their attitude towards life. Tattoos were also aligned to general trending fashion. Some fitness freaks, those who love to maintain their social status by showing off their strength and determination to attain anything have tattoos on their body to enhance this image of perseverance and endurance.

Shivani Tyagi (2016) examined the perception of tattoos among North-East students of Delhi-University. She argued that there seems to be a significant shift regarding the use of body art in public life. The skin adored becomes not a prison but a proclamation of one's sociality. It serves as a second skin that connects the individual to the larger social body. However, there remains a difference of opinion, and quite a few individuals also voice their concerns related to social stigma by 'other' students of the university, that has detrimental effect on self-esteem and personhood. Respondents reflected on how the frame of mind of the designer/artist during the inking has a role to play in the final effect that can be achieved through this body art.

The four-case presented bring to light the fact that the students had a foray into qualitative methods for data collection and analysis, which would not only aid a forensic science student into the process of enquiry and communication, but also help them assimilate and accept information which was not necessarily a part of the known parlance. From a point where the students seemed unobservant of the fact that there were tattooed individual around them, the students came to share experiences of how they could not 'not' see tattoos any more. They reflected on the fact that tattoos seemed to be everywhere they went and that their research and the internship had propelled an insistent need to understand the stories/narratives associated with them. Further, conceptual frame work derived from the discipline of anthropology, criminology and forensic science proved very handy and useful in analyzing the social framework of tattoo. The current works also shifted focus from the association of

tattoos with criminality and broadened the horizon of research to other socio-contextual realities. This emphasizes the inter disciplinary framework that is the need of the hour (Patnaik & Mukherjee, 2016).

**Conclusion:** The particular internship that became the base of this paper, brought together students of forensic science as well as research scholars of anthropology, it created a space for across-the-table conversations, discussions on interest areas, formulation of research questions, followed by planning of research methodology and research tools. The group was queued on understanding soft data and gained and strengthen their research techniques and tool through cross administering them and cross pollination of ideas. It also reflected on how personal experiences help in developing research interests and how retrospection and a greater awareness of self as well as other members of the groups helps in the evolution of both the researcher and the researcher. While an interdisciplinary approach was always the objective of the program, the logistics of the program was such that it had student participants from forensic science and research scholars from anthropology. The first batch of Master's course in Forensic Science with its site in the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, the internship program became an active platform for mutual learning. Similar observation has been pointed out by Boyer and Bishop who reported that interdisciplinary teaming not only facilitated the learning process but also had a positive consequence on personal growth. Students learned to collaborate more effectively with their peers, learned to work in a group and the ensuing need for learned tolerance as well as developed leadership skills. The study revealed that the majority of students found the experience beneficial and they "spoke of long-term relationships and of a democratic learning environment that honored their voices and empowered them as learners" (Boyer & Bishop, 2004). Klein (1996) in her work pointed out that while interdisciplinary groups might have their own disadvantages, they do provide benefits such as "wider knowledge base" "wider personality base", and a "wider design, teaching, and assessment methods to draw on and thus more balance in the overall approach".

While this particular paper used four cases to highlight the significance of the multidisciplinary diversity that the internship enjoyed, there were other research efforts that explored issues like how the Indian police maintains the record of criminals bearing tattoos and a comparison of the process in terms of manual vs computerized records, examining case examples of culturally relevant tattoos have played a role in body identification, recognition of tattoo artist based on inking and its relevance in forensic investigation, and so on. A significant achievement of the students was that 8 of the 16 research works that were conducted during the internship program were accepted for a round table presentation on 'Roundtable on Relevance of Tattoos in Identity and Identification' at 18<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Criminology held at Jindal Global University from 15-19 December 2016, while some of the other papers were accepted in various other panels. The roundtable itself was greatly appreciated for the vibrance and scope of work being diligently pursued by the young students. It was a pleasure to witness the confidence gained by the student and the ownership they held for their work on an international forum of repute and academic significance. The experience certainly adds to reflect on the potential of interdisciplinary work that can not only create interesting spaces for teaching and learning but also generate new and varied ideas for research and its impact. We started with the small question 'What do Tattoos mean?' and learnt not only some answers to this reality, but also that interdisciplinary works are the need of the hour.

#### References:

1. Atkinson, M. (2004). Tattooed: The sociogenesis of a body art. *Choice Reviews Online*, 41(07), 41-4123-41-4123. doi:10.5860/choice.41-4123
2. Barthel, D., & Sanders, C. R. (1990). Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing. *Contemporary Sociology*, 19(3), 445. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2072496>
3. Boyer, S. P., & Bishop, P. A. (2004). Young Adolescent Voices: Students' Perceptions of Interdisciplinary Teaming. *Research in Middle Level Education*, 28(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19404476.2004.11658176>
4. Favazza, A. R. (1988). Bodies Under Siege. Self-mutilation in Culture and Psychiatry. *Psychological Medicine*, 18(3), 778. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0033291700008734>

5. Fenske, M. (2007). Tattoos in American Visual Culture. In *Palgrave Macmillan US eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230609709>
6. Garcia-Merritt, G. (2014). *Inked Lives: Tattoos, Identity, and Power*. <https://doi.org/10.31274/etd-180810-4833>
7. Haynes, C. (2002). Innovations in interdisciplinary teaching. In *Oryx Press eBooks*. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA58359072>
8. Heroux, E., Foucault, M., Faubion, J. D., & Hurley, R. W. (2001). Power. Volume 3 of Essential Works of Foucault: 1954 - 1984. *Sub-stance*, 30(3), 143. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3685769>
9. Jones, C. M. (2010). Interdisciplinary Approach - Advantages, Disadvantages, and the Future Benefits of Interdisciplinary Studies. *ESSAI*, 7(1), 26. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/10676926.pdf>
10. Kapil, S. (2016). Understanding the Idea of Masculinity and Femininity through Body Art : A Study of Tattoos amongst Punjabi's of Delhi. presented at 18<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Criminology held at Jindal Global University from 15-19 December 2016
11. Khan, I. (2016) Understanding Tattoos Through Criminological Theories: A Socio-historical Reflection of Contextual Reality. presented at 18<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Criminology held at Jindal Global University from 15-19 December 2016
12. Khanna, I. (2016). Body as a Canvas. presented at 18<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Criminology held at Jindal Global University from 15-19 December 2016
13. Klein, J. T. (1996). *Crossing boundaries: Knowledge, disciplinarity, and interdisciplinarity*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia.
14. Kosut, M. (2006). An Ironic Fad: The Commodification and Consumption of Tattoos. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 39(6), 1035–1048. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2006.00333.x>
15. Lombroso, C. T., & Lombroso, C. T. (2006). Criminal Man. In *Duke University Press eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822387800>
16. Nathanson, C., Paulhus, D. L., & Williams, K. L. (2006). Personality and misconduct correlates of body modification and other cultural deviance markers. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 40(5), 779–802. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2005.09.002>
17. Patnaik, S. M & Mukherjee, I. (2016). Teaching Pedagogy: Broadening Research Horizons. presented at 18<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Criminology held at Jindal Global University from 15-19 December 2016
18. Tyagi, S. (2016). Perception of Tattoos among North-East Students of Delhi University, presented at 18<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Criminology held at Jindal Global University from 15-19 December 2016

\*\*\*