

TATTOOING FOR BETTER KARMA

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espite the intense appreciation and prevalence of

tattooing in the "Hindu belt" of Asia, specifically the countries of Nepal, India and Indonesia, we hardly ever hear or read about the tattoo traditions of these countries. Tattooing is an integral part of the lifestyle, and although the artists are not held in high esteem (like those in Southeast Asia), the tattoos themselves are given incredible importance. They are seen to help determine destiny.

A profoundly idealistic and communal usage of art in this region is what makes it so intriguing. Tattoos are not a personal decision—many things aren't—but one the whole family is concerned with. What is etched into people's skin, in a life lived in close quarters, is seen to help determine the fate of those around them. To them, tattooing is just another condition and result of *dharma*, or the cycle of eternal existence, which is an integral part of the Hindu belief system. It's a practice

woven into their daily lives and one that they believe will help to determine what will happen in the afterlife.

- Like all of the arts there, it is a discipline into which the artists are born and must dedicate their lives, by practicing frequently and making offerings to the appropriate gods. The tattooist is bound by caste, and must do what was predetermined before birth.
- While there are hundreds of castes too complex to go into here, tattoo artists are in a low sub-caste of the artisan class, the third lowest out of the four, not including the casteless Untouchables. In this commonly understood hierarchy, they are "below" warriors, and considered more "worthy" than laborers.

On the Western coast of India at the old Portuguese colony of Goa, I got my first view of Hindu tattooing and its traditions. My friends and I encountered a nomadic group of *Chencha* women, a tribal clan with gypsy ancestry, believed by some social scientists to be direct descendants of one of the lost tribes of

This Balinese man illustrates the changing tattoo traditions of the Hindu Belt. The two oldest tattoos—a traditional lotus symbol and the Hindu scriptures on his left pectoral—he received in his youth. They lie in stark contrast to the Playboy Bunny insignia on his left shoulder.

All photographs by ANDE WANDERER

*Ink
In
The
Hindu
Belt*

by Ande Wanderer