

Israel. We were walking along a deserted beach when they suddenly appeared—ghostlike through the thick monsoon fog. They had thick black hair ornately braided and wrapped around their heads like crowns, and silver piercings through their septums and nostrils. Some of them had bone stretched through their ears. Although we were struck by their beauty and enchanted with their body decorations, we couldn't have felt more different from these women, who live in a rustic world ruled by family and religion. They carried bundles of goods on their heads and didn't

*Safi, a tattooist based in Denpasar, Bali, trained with Austrian inker Bernie Luther.*



hesitate to surround us like a cyclone to play a common gypsy game of "dress-up the foreigners and see what they'll buy". Although the women were hoping to make a big sell on us, when they began to whip jewelry onto us, aggressive but friendly, as they surely had done a million times before with other travelers, we discovered with delight that they had a lot of tattoos. The encounter then steered away from the jewelry fashion show and into a deeper level. I saw that one woman—the grandmother of the otherwise youthful bunch—had tattoos

beautiful, old, faded tattoos I had ever seen.

One of the women understood a little Hindi and another some English, so we managed to communicate a little, although their first language was an obscure dialect not even recognized by the government. When we told them we were from the United States, they didn't believe us, because there's a common misconception in India (as a result of "Dynasty" re-runs on TV) that all people in the US have blond hair, blue eyes and gold rings on every finger. They explained to us that they'd all received the majority of their tattoos when they were children. The oldest woman indicated that she had applied some of the younger women's tattoos herself, many years ago. They asked us if our mothers had applied our tattoos and if we'd received them as children. When they were leaving, they suddenly realized dejectedly that they'd made no money off of us as intended, but they rubbed and kissed our tattoos, exclaiming that they were lucky and beautiful. We left feeling flattered and exclaiming to ourselves that we wished our tattoos were met with such enthusiasm everywhere.

As I traveled around the continent more, I learned it wasn't unusual to get surrounded by people lining up to marvel at and touch my tattoos for good luck. Never once was I asked why I had them, as I so often had in the States. In a land with an entirely different culture, where you constantly find yourself hitting a brick wall of far off stereotypes, tattoos are a key to meeting at a common reality. I would automatically feel close to the people there with whom I shared a love of tattoos, and often they would invite me into their homes for tea and a round of tattoo show and tell. It was infinitely more rewarding to wear tattoos in Asia.

Through these exchanges and my own investigations of the tattooing traditions in India and Nepal I began to piece together the incredibly large history of its usage. I learned that women (like the ones in Goa) were predominantly in charge of developing and maintaining the art. Although the region is extremely large and the home to many different cultural groups (like the *Chenchus*), this is one generalization I found to be universally true among all of them. Since women are the ones typically in the cultural role of being concerned with beautification and spiritual matters (which tattooing is considered an integral part of) they are the portion of the population whose job it is to wear the motifs and to tattoo babies while they are still weeks old.

The commonly-pictured Indian symbol representing "OM," made up of Sanskrit characters is the most commonly seen tattoo on the Hindu subcontinent. If a mother performs the decreasingly common practice of tattooing her child during its infancy, this is one symbol she'll surely apply. It can often be spotted between the thumb and forefinger on the hands of people from



*Dee-Dee shows off her only machine-done tattoo. It's supposed to be Krishna, although the inclusion of wings suggests Christian symbolism was influential in this portrayal.*

all sectors of the population. The hard-working peasants believe the symbol helps to keep away evil spirits and reminds their children throughout life to praise the gods. The superstitious hope is that this praying will bring luck to their impoverished life (or at least the next one).

This is not the only tattoo seen there, though. Many symbols, including the lotus flower and insignias representing certain Hindu gods, are all popular tattoo subjects. Hindu scriptures are tattooed also, and people who never learned how to read may find themselves living their life, including childhood, with such a scripture permanently etched on their arm.

Rural mothers, in addition to tattooing these symbols on their children, will sometimes tattoo their children's names and birth dates on them, in order to better keep track of these facts, in a life passed without the commodities of paper and calendars. Since Hindus believe in a life cycle of many reincarnations—and because tattoos are not considered taboo—this is not looked at as a big deal and it's never questioned. It's just a part of this life, actually just a fleeting moment, within the continual millions of others, past and forthcoming.

For comparison with our way of thinking though, imagine how many questions you would face in mainstream America if you had your name and birth date tattooed in faded scrawl on your forearm. In the countryside of India and Nepal this is perfectly normal. Surprisingly enough, most of the

recipients don't mind having been tattooed involuntarily in infancy. The devout majority believe that the religiously significant tattoos have power to allot them a better place in the next life—only if worn with complete faith inside and out.

The tattoos generally fade into their skin quite quickly under the hot tropical sun, and for this reason, they always appear

ancient—even on children—as if they could actually be left over from another life. The people find it unusual, but are delighted, when you comment on them.

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A woman I knew in Nepal, a gardener and the mother of several children, had a few randomly placed tattoos on her hands and feet, as women in that country often do. Among all the others, she had one machine-done tattoo on her forearm of *Krishna*, the infamous lover of Hindu mythology. She didn't receive it at an official shop, but rather at a small-time circus bazaar that passed through her Katmandu neighborhood. The first time she showed it to me she insisted on a quick spit shine before displaying it. She was proud of this piece, and she was probably the first woman in her village to have a machine-

made tat. It was crude by our standards, but over the time I knew her I saw that, for her, it was a symbol representing her faith in a better life the next time around, in the next incarnation. She explained to me that she was forced to sell, in desperation, her gold jewelry, which was part of her dowry from when she was married, in order for

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