

# **APATANI FACIAL TATTOOS, NOSE PLUGS; ADORNMENT OR DEFACEMENT? HAD FACTS BEEN MISREPORTED?**

**Dr Pura Duri MBBS, MS, MCh, FMAS, CICO**

**(Senior Consultant Plastic Surgeon, Tomo Riba Institute of Health and Medical Sciences, Naharlagun, Arunachal Pradesh)**

Contact number: 8731997009

Email id: [poulinga@gmail.com](mailto:poulinga@gmail.com)

Corresponding address: Room number 101, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor

Block -2

TRIHMS, Naharlagun, ICR

Arunachal Pradesh- 791111

## **About Author**

**Author is the first super specialist from Apatani and presently working as senior consultant Plastic Surgeon in TRIHMS, Naharlagun. He is also active practitioner of minimally access laparoscopic surgery and undergone certification course in obesity care. Beside professional expertise he has composed lyrics for few apatani songs, cultural and traditional enthusiastic whose field of interest is to understanding archaic Apatani vocabularies notably uses in shamanic ritual chants.**

This piece of opinion is being place before public after obtaining first hand interviews from phasing out generation of Apatani who are still carrying their last ray of endangered Apatani culture. Whenever question arises about the purpose of Apatani women facial tattoos and nose plugs, these very sentences comes into picture before any miniature reasonable explanation starts to act upon; Apatani Facial Tattooes (Tiipey/Twpey) and Nose plugs (Yaping Hulo); Adornment or Defacement? Has facts been misreported? If facts had been misreported and are being misreported, then by whom, why, how? Just recently there was a viral blog from a Facebook fan page of History cited “*Welcome to the official Asia fan page of HISTORY™, the leading destination for entertaining hit series and cinematic drama events*” with 45 Million subscribers has written 11 lines passage sic “The Apatani people in Arunachal Pradesh, India used to believe that wearing nose plugs and facial

tattoos would protect their women from being abducted”. In the very beginning of the passage and concluded with last sic “Suggest another defensive tactic to avoid tribal raiders”. This facebook fan page has 45 million subscribers has attracted 17000 likes and 268 shares for simple passage written about Apatani facial tattoos and nose plugs with picture of sublime old Apatani woman having facial tattoos and nose plug in the blog<sup>1</sup>. The magnitude of message and information disseminated by this unsophisticated facebook status having millions of followers would be inconceivable. There are several cited articles<sup>2</sup> in indexed journals, research works published, media articles, words of mouth referring Apatani facial tattoos and nose plug as disfiguring to protect them from abduction. Nevertheless all this extensively disseminated information are nowhere related to the oral citation carried forward by Apatani people who enjoyed being facial tattooed and nose pierced as tradition of adornment. Oral citation has been the central feature of carrying forward tribal literature, heritages, cultural and traditional practices. And it is very relevant as of present period of digital databases. It is worth mentioning with underscore that majority of oral citation by scholarly Apatani elders states that very sole purpose of Apatani facial tattooing and nose plugging were beautification in contrast to widely circulated articles and blogs. Resentfully these articles, news, information carrying Apatani facial tattooing nose plugging as acts of defacement have overshadowed against traditional oral citations that stood for beautification to pitch black darkness.

Here I am deliberately keeping the sacred anecdote about origin of Apatani women facial tattoos and nose plug unrevealed in order to generate curiosity among few remnant fellows, if any, who have true desire to find out the real purpose of tattooing and nose plugging instead of following widely promulgated materials. Precisely author has left verse in Apatani language that may help the reader to find out way to the origin of sacred anecdote of Apatani women facial tattoos and nose plug.

The following verse of Ami Niido is from Yorda Ayu chant during Murung festival. Yorda Ayu is considered as a sacred ritual chant which originated during the ancient periods of Upyo limbyañ and Miido limba:

**Kui kuli mi bije senyo la,  
Kui kupe mi tiipe lenyo la,  
Kui kuting mi rutiñ hugila,  
Kuji pu mi byigo kuji pa,  
Kusang pu mi pingang kussañ pa,  
Popi popa mi dimañ dimpa pa,  
Byundo Tabyuñ mi nyindiñ pa,**

**Rado tiira mi map pa hempo la,  
Talu myopu mi pyunyo la,  
Talo myokha mi khenyo la.  
Mudo Amyo poro ho,  
Jindo Tajing mi pamung murii do, heta terii do<sup>3</sup>.**

Now the real question is that how these early visiting researchers did had acquired information (most probably misinformation) regarding the purpose of facial tattooing and nose plugging is disfiguring the beautiful face of Apatani women to protect from abduction? As in general norms of retrospective observation studies, there would be a few mode of collecting data as per the author's understanding: firstly the data might have collected through oral citation given by local Apatani people while researchers staying in Apatani native place. But there seems to have been significant pitfalls in this method; since it would be very likely that researchers had stayed in Apatani valley for a short period and hence accessing the scholarly people might have been limited, thus narration might be taken from few ordinary people hastily led to omitting facts and committing errors. In addition to the above drawback, there would have been communication bottlenecks between the researchers and the native population, which affected or mostly compelled the researchers to acquire misinformation. There could be a possibility that information was gathered from outsider companions of the researchers who played role as tour guides and interpreters, it is understandable that how much data accuracy can be expected because of the communication gap. Because of all the possibilities, misinterpretation of the results cannot be ruled out. There is significant probability of erroneous data input by early researchers because of geographic inaccessibility of the Apatani valley, which might have compelled them to manipulate data. This factor too need to taken into consideration. The reason for justifying the possibility of misinformation regarding Apatani women tattooing and nose plugging as defacement is that significant majority of older generation Apatani people stand firmly that the purpose facial tattoos and nose plugs as deed of beautification. Whereas large portions of published articles including news and blogs are considerably dictates that it had a purpose of defacement. It seems the statements in favour of beautification have significant weightage in compared to the circulating information suggesting disfigurement. These enormous facts that have been buried since onset about tattoos and nose plugs cannot be overlooked. Learned scholars and general population shall not overlook this profound hidden information. The author has a view point that newer research scholars should reconstruct the research framework by studying the mode of data collections done

by early researchers, revisiting through alternative scientific modality with objective to discover that facts. Meta analysis of various modalities of previous data collections done in existing related articles may through more light into the factual evidences. This field has a huge area of scientific studies. Let us visualize the impact of information ripples by articles and blogs to newer generation of Apatani. It is quite apparent that prevailing modern mode of information is way far superior to traditional oral recitation. Hence resultant is that newer generation would obvious to learn that it was for the disfigurement. We are observing the impact and outcomes.

There was significant cultural movement during 70s in form of mass banning of facial tattooing and nose plugging, that movement was led by the Apatani Youth Association. The author does not have clear cut information regarding the primary objective of that movement. But it had significant impact on the existence of facial tattoos and nose plugs. As per oral narration given by the then youth leader, general public of that generation, publications in several articles, newspapers; it is found that the purpose of tattoo banning movement was to avoid discrimination against Apatani people with facial tattoos in the other part of the India at that time. There is a circulating news article that had a firsthand interview with the then youth leader, elderly Apatani woman who narrated in favour of beautification and few young Apatani residing in metropolis adduced against<sup>4</sup>. In Author's opinion, it would be impossible to impose forceful ban upon dresses, costumes including facial tattoos and nose plug in this generation when people are aware about their rights and duties. That is quite relieving indeed. However facial tattoos and nose plug might have undergone gradually, even if cultural movement did not happened due to some reason or stiff opposition.

Concerning the survival of Apatani women facial tattoos and nose plug remnant, even though it had its own luminous past glory as art craft of adornment, from a cultural perspective the cultural expropriation had fossilized these marvelous art craft. Moreover, the influence of existing articles, news etc accentuated by individuals who have withholding perception against this lost marvelous art craft and considered by some as comical is building falter among cultural enthusiastic to showcase the past civilization of Apatani. The author feels that nobody will disagree that showcasing "who we were?" Our past, displaying the knowledge of a lost civilization through cultural exhibitions in every opportunity will bring the society closer to discover their true identity. Apatani have a rich heritage of culture, costume and tradition. Among all these ostentatiously inherited culture, facial tattoos and nose plug were the crown and jewel, because of its uniqueness, universality among women and affordability in comparison to the exorbitant cost of costumes due to scarcity of textile, since Apatani did not have an indigenous production of raw material for textile

and fabric. Besides, facial tattoos and nose plug were unique cultural identity of Apatani when comparing with neighboring communities. That uniqueness was the reason for its own annihilation.

Now the cultural uniqueness of facial tattoos and nose plug that had been fossilized for long is calling for remembrance and obituary. Modernity forced the humanity to abandon numerous ways of life, but this same modernity has enlightened the generation to accept the bygone and re-narrate fascinating hi(story). Amidst Cultural Revolution against facial tattoos and nose plug in the bygone era, few have survived including author's mother and perhaps majority mothers of the author's generation and earlier. They are the last generation to carry the cultural uniqueness of facial tattoos and nose plugs that have been the epitome of Apatani identity. Sadly only few of them are left with abound of facial wrinkles. If any one may try to identify modern Apatani individual without facial tattoo and nose plug, it is pertinent that the person may not be very much distinguishable from other East Asians. Absence of facial tattoos makes the Apatani people easier to amalgamate with the modernity, but the Apatani have simultaneously lost their ability to stand distinct in the crowd. Apatani may celebrate their victory of abrogating facial tattoos and nose plug to flow with modernity. Meanwhile Apatani have obligation to appreciate their lost culture in the form of facial tattoos and nose plug that is still very much relevant in paving identity of the society. Apatani women with youthful distinct facial features that could make any person to identify their uniqueness because of the artistic marvels that have long been extinct. The extinct were for good fate or adversary that is no more relevant in present context. It had its own circumstances to go extinct like many others due to a cultural revolution. Although like any other extinct cultural practice, facial tattoo and nose plug deserve reminiscence. It is undeniably impossible to reintroduce permanent facial tattoos and nose plug for the sake of simply preserving culture. However, universal efforts by people of Apatani in unanimity to demonstrate and display unique culture like facial tattoos and nose plug through artistic recreation as much as realistic presentation by temporary make up in various events and platforms wherever opportunity arises would be justifiable to rejuvenate Apatani's fading identity.

Various communities worldwide who had abandoned their tattoo artistry like the Maori indigenous people of New Zealand are putting efforts to revive their body tattoos in more intricate way<sup>5</sup>. Since onset various culturally enthusiastic ensembles are putting their endeavors through different traditional and folk dances to display Apatani tattoos and nose plug by applying temporary dye over the nose and chin. These cultural showcase attracted massive positive responses from audiences, yet in some occasion it has been observed that facial tattoos and nose plug did not received positive reviews from certain audiences. The possible reason behind the unacceptance of

temporary make up could be due to certain misapprehension created by some section of the society, perhaps due to the reasons that author has quoted numerous times in this article as well as it has been observed that the audiences discussing about unrealistic and dissimilarity to original artworks of facial tattoos might be another factor. Therefore the author has reserved opinions that since facial tattoos were intricate art craft using standardized technique that manifested in specific greenish colour in the nose and chin. The technique of the Apatani tattoo art craft is beyond the scope of this article. However it is in the author's view that since there are numerous high resolution pictures of Apatani women having original facial tattoo circulating in websites. Therefore, it may be pertinent to give emphasis to recreate temporary tattoo arts as close to the realistic by taking references from those original photos from any available sources. Hereby putting this undoubtedly easy task, stupendous facial tattoo artistry that is considered as obsolete may regain its bygone glory of the Apatani culture.

In conclusion, the driving force behind the inspiring traditional artists who will carry forward the legacy of this civilization are the general populace of Apatani, more precisely the higher echelons of the society whose words have ability to push the society toward dark side or bright side. If legacy are not respected, then legacy will no longer be legacy anymore; **rejection of legacy is rejection of ancestors**. Luminosity of ancestor never fades, it is the offspring that either cover or uncover the source of light and knowledge.

### **Conflict of Interest**

This article is not an institutional affiliated scientific research paper. This is an author's interpretation based on information gathering over period of times through various sources,

1. History (2019, July 15) The Apatani people in Arunachal Pradesh, India used to believe that wearing nose plugs and facial tattoos would protect their women from being abducted. Facebook, Retrieved 15 may 2023.
2. 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 Humanitie.
3. Dani Tasser (2021, February 4); Why did Apatanis practiced Tattooing and Nose-Plugs (Tiipey-Yaping)? Let us save Tanii/ Apatani culture
4. Chanda, Aishik (2017, October 1) "Arunachal's Apatani tribe won't get inked: Dropping traditions in fear of discrimination" The New India Express.

5. Tess Mclure (2022, June 10) Maori moko facial tattoos revived by a new generation with designs on the future. The Guardian.