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FROM LOST TO FOUND TRAVEL: BODY ART AND ADORNMENT IN INDIA



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“The aim of art is not to represent the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.”—ARISTOTLE

If you were at this year’s APP Conference, you may have noticed—and even spoken to—a young woman set up in the front corner of the exposition floor. Surrounded by images and art, rather than body jewelry, you may have walked right past her without realizing it—or you may have been one of many who decided to stop, take a look, and explore further.

I was first contacted by Allison Rulon-Miller several weeks prior to Conference to talk about her tour group, From Lost to Found Travel. It is a company that specializes in “special interest tours to the Indian subcontinent,” including their newest: tours about body art and adornment in India. My interest piqued; I responded to Allison’s email and set up a meeting. Only when I arrived at her office—and home—and spoke to her over a cup of freshly ground and brewed Indian coffee did I realize the story she had to tell.

As we talked, I thought, “How do you

write about a tour you’ve never been on, a country you’ve never been to?” I cannot tell a story of the tours themselves; I cannot tell you what I saw, or did, or even what I felt, since these experiences are not my own. I can only tell you the story I came to hear: Allison’s story, a story about the India I have come to know from halfway around the world, from a conversation over a cup of coffee.

As Allison explained, body art in India consists of both permanent modifications and temporary, decorative, ritualistic adornment (think henna, certain types of saris, large beaded necklaces, and bangles and bracelets of silver and brass.) “I look at this tour concept more as body adornment rather than body modification, the latter being viewed by me as anything permanent—ritualistic or not. Body adornment, as I use it as a tour theme, includes not only tattooing and piercing-related jewelry—earrings/nose rings—but armllets/anklets/talismans/astrological rings, clothing—traditional and tribal versus high-fashion—headwear, cosmetics/sindur, hair styles, body painting, and mehndi, among many other aspects of personal appearance,”

she said. “The art of getting dressed [there] is highly ritualistic and deliberate.”

Allison has traveled to India many times over the last twenty years, and as a woman she has found herself in a strange yet fortunate position: In India, it is a cultural taboo for men to speak directly to women; the same is true for taking photographs. They must obtain the permission of the husband, father, or brother of the woman, and even with this permission, the men often expect something in exchange. But Allison is granted a certain amount of leeway, allowing her to ask the questions no one does—and get the incredible amount of photos she does. She says no one there questions body adornment: their reasons, rituals, and meanings. To those living in India, body art and adornment is simply a part of who they are. It is a cultural norm. Allison, like most Westerners, wanted to know more. While it was easier for her to ask the questions few are allowed to ask, it did not help her receive truer answers.

She observed body art and adornment to be more prevalent with Indian women than men. This is not to say that men do not have





their own specific modifications, apparel, and jewelry, but it seems to be a more integral part of the lives and milestones of females: from henna to bangles and bracelets to tattooing. As you can see from the accompanying pictures on the preceding pages, traditional Indian tattoo designs are relatively sparse to Western eyes. They are far less intricate than, say, Japanese-style tattoos—and are devoid of color. As Allison went from village to village, she saw all sorts of tattoos—mostly on women—and while the designs varied, there were repeated motifs from one community to another. (For example, tattoos on women, much like the one on the previous page, represent everything from a woman's caste to marital status, while many other markings represent luck or, in the case of a black dot on a woman's forehead or chin, protection, specifically from the "evil eye." The same symbols appeared over and over, on women young to old.

Certain piercings hold particular meanings, often representing the various stages of one's life. And, as you can imagine, the jewelry chosen was just as deliberate. (The woman—above—wears gold rings through her nostrils, symbolic of an amorous ornamentation often connected with female sexuality, while her ears

are adorned by several silver hoops.) Whether it be the numbers, colors, and materials of bangles and bracelets, or the jewelry one wears through a nostril, in rural India everything is done deliberately and traditionally—though, predictably, many Indian cities have abandoned the old adornments in their shift toward modernity.

While my only true taste of India was a single cup of coffee, and the only tangible items I experienced were a few brass hair pins and assorted jewelry, I felt transported. Looking through pictures of places I've never been, into the faces of people I will probably never know, one particular image stuck with me: it shows the face of a young child, a year or two old, covered in nothing but bangles of green and gold, a simple beaded necklace of yellow and brown, and adorned with double nostrils—one on each side—and a septum piercing (see above). She stares up at something out of the picture's frame, yet in her eyes there is a reflection; I can see the faint outline of a village, her village, and the sun. And as I look at this one image, I keep wondering: What is the story told by these men and women, told by this one child, told through their jewelry, their tattoos, their decorations and dress? **P**

ABOUT THE TOUR

At this time, there are two separate body-adornment-based trips scheduled. The first, "Body Art and Adornment of Western India," has two scheduled departures: one in September 2011—during the Ramdevra festival—and one from February to March 2012. The second is a one-time trip titled, "Body Art and Adornment in Orissa," and is also in February of 2012. Each of the tours is twelve to thirteen days in length, and while each has a unique itinerary, travelers will get to experience various "rural communities where the traditional dress, body jewelry, and symbolic tattoos are still worn....visits to urban mehendiwalas, jewelry and gem markets, apparel boutiques, and tattoo parlors...temples, mosques, and shrines to see how body decoration merges with devotion."

These tours promise to "blend cultural touring with insights into traditional and contemporary body adornment in India." While they tend to be "geared toward a moderate-to-upscale clientele"—with moderate-to-upscale costs—they are able to design custom tours to fit any budget.

For more information about From Lost to Found Travel and their upcoming tours, go to fromlosttofoundtravel.com. You may also contact Allison Rulon-Miller by calling 215-731-9553 or sending an email to info@fromlosttofoundtravel.com