

# Handcrafted Indian Jewellery



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## **1. Introduction**

The story of handcrafted Indian jewellery is long and absorbing. Inspired by nature, fuelled by beauty and belief, it is an eternal process of artistic imagination and fine craftsmanship. From prehistoric ages to the present day, the crafts of precious Indian jewellery are one of its kinds in beauty and quality.

### **1.1. History**

The art of making beautiful ornaments, with delicacy and acumen, has been developed throughout the historical times. In early India, people handcrafted jewellery out of natural materials found in abundance all over the country. Seeds, feathers, leaves, berries, fruits, flowers, animal bones, claws and teeth – everything from nature was affectionately gathered and artistically transformed into fine body jewellery. Even today such jewellery is used by the different tribal societies. Excavations at Mohenjo-Daro and other sites of the Indus Valley civilization have unearthed a wealth of handmade ornaments. It appears that both men and women of that time wore jewellery made of gold, silver, copper, ivory and precious and semi-precious stones. Rulers and feudal gave patronage to art and artists, and vied with each other to possess the most exquisite and the most magnificent pieces of jewellery. By the third century B.C., India was the leading exporter of gemstones, particularly diamonds. Gold was usually imported into the country, a practice prevalent even during the Mughal period.

## **2. Regions of Production**

Jewellery design is so versatile in India that it varies from state to state. Different regions of India boast of jewellery making styles unique to them.

1. Meenakari or enamelling - Jaipur, Lucknow, Hyderabad, Kangra, Kachchh, Kashmir. Formerly, the best Indian enamels were manufactured in Lahore by Muslim families of the Miyan group, who also made glass for bangles. The art was introduced to Rajasthan artisans by Raja Mansingh of Amer. He invited Lahore-based skilled artisans to his kingdom, and their intermingling with the local craftsmen resulted in an amalgam, which came to be known as meenakari.
2. Kundan jewellery – Jaipur, Varanasi. During Mughal period, the art of kundan work reached Rajasthan from Delhi. Later on, craftsmen from the different parts of the country migrated to the place and made Rajasthan a hub of Kundankari. Today kundan can be purchased readymade from gold suppliers in Surat and Gujarat.
3. Pachchikam Jewellery - In comparison with Kundan work, Pachchikam has crude look and is pretty fragile. Major USP of Pachchikam is that instead of using gold for jewelry making, it makes use of silver and is thus, quite affordable. The art is still kept in by families in Kutch and Gujarat, where it has been handed down from generations.
4. Filigree work – Filigree work was a speciality of Dhaka, now in Bangladesh, Cuttack in Orissa and Karimnagar in Andhra Pradesh.

5. Bead Jewellery – Khambhat in Gujarat has a history of hardstone bead making industry. Nagas used to import the handmade hardstone beads for use in necklaces and earrings. Papanaidupetta, Andhra Pradesh is known for making glass seed beads. Wound-glass lamp-worked beads are made in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh and Purdalpur, Uttar Pradesh. Karnal city in Haryana is known for hollow beads made out of silver.
6. Patu'a – West Bengal, Rajasthan
7. Thewa – Partabgarh, Rajasthan. According to the craftsmen in Partabgarh, who call themselves Raj Sonis, this unique technique, practiced only by the men of a related family, originated approximately seven generations ago with Nathuni Sonewalla, a goldsmith relative of the present extended family of craftsmen who still practice thewa work. He is said to have created this style of work in 1767, during the reign of the Maharawat Samant Singh of Partabgarh, who employed him.
8. Gold and Silver jewellery – Solid gold jewellery is predominant in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The designs are mainly inspired by nature where the common motifs range from the paisley motif, cobra's hood to cucumber seeds. Silver jewellery is found all over India especially in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh.
9. Lac Jewellery – Rajasthan, Hyderabad, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Maharastra. A unique, dazzling kind of bangle, produced in Hyderabad, uses a glass bangle core that is covered with lac, and then decorated with glass beads and glass stones.
10. Conch-Shell Jewellery – A speciality of West Bengal and, formerly, also of the area around Dacca in Bangladesh.
11. Ivory Jewellery – Most of the ivory used in India, however in ancient trade between India and Africa, has always come from whole tusks from killed African elephants. Today the import of African ivory to India has been severely curtailed and the use of Indian ivory in India has been banned. Pali, a small town near Jodhpur in Rajasthan has for several centuries been a major centre for the manufacture of ivory bangles which are also made at Barmer and Merta in Rajasthan. Ahmadabad in Gujarat and other places in northern India.
12. Glass Bangle Jewellery – Firozabad, U.P.
13. Tribal Jewellery – Tribal jewelry is made of the products that are available locally. Each tribe has its own indigenous jewelry craft:
  - a) **Banjara**

This nomadic tribe of Rajasthan is known for its colorful heavy jewelry. Beautiful ornaments and belts that are embellished with shells, metal-mesh, coins, beads, and chains are major jewelry art work by this tribe. This tribe provides huge collection of earrings, bracelets, bangles, amulets, anklets, hairpins and necklaces.

b) **Bastar**

The tribes of Bastar (Madhya Pradesh) make jewelry out of grass, beads and cane. Traditional ornaments made of silver, wood, glass, peacock feathers, copper and wild flowers are also popular. Necklaces made of one-rupee coins are also worn by the Bastar women.

c) **Arunachal Pradesh**

The tribes in Arunachal Pradesh make jewelry from cane and bamboo. They also adorn metal coin necklaces and waistbands of leather, studded with stones. These tribes use brass, bone, ivory, silver and gold in their jewelry too. In addition, colorful beads, blue feathers of birds, green wings of beetles are used to make ornaments. Karka Gallong women wear heavy iron rings that are coiled several times, while Wanchos make earrings of glass beads, wild seeds, cane, bamboo and reed.

d) **Khasi, Jaintia and Garo**

The people of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo tribes have typical sense of jewelry art. Thick red coral bead necklaces of the Khasis and Jaintias and thin fluted stems of glass, strung by fine thread, of the Garo tribe are interesting jewelry items.

e) **Bhutia**

The Bhutia tribe of Sikkim has also been known for making beautiful jewelry. The people of this tribe usually make use of gold, silver, coral, turquoise and zee stone.

### 3. Producer Communities

Traditionally, Indian goldsmiths are usually men and are referred to by a variety of names depending on the region - *sonar*, *swarnakara*, *panchallar*, or *thattan*. In the Vedic period, goldsmiths had a much higher standing than most other artisans, perhaps because they worked with a precious metal. The goldsmiths had royal patrons. Historical records show that Indian jewellers mastered quite early the various skills required to make fine jewelry-mixing alloys, moulding, drawing fine wires, setting stones, inlay work, relief, drawing gold and silver into thin wires, plating and gilding.

In smaller places, the goldsmith may perform all the processes involved in producing a finished piece. In cities, the different operations are undertaken by separate people - the designer (*naqash*, *chitera*), the goldsmith (*sonar*, *swarnakar*), the engraver (*qalamkar*, *khodnakar*, *gharaiwala*), the enamellist (*minakar*), the polisher (*ghotnawala*, *chiknanawala*), the stone setter (*jadia*, *murasakkar*, *kundansaaz*) and the stringer (*patu'a*).

The engravers engaged in meenakari are mainly hindus, formerly of the *khati*, or carpenter caste who took to engraving. The lac bangle-makers are predominantly hindu, belonging to the hereditary lac workers caste, variously called Laheri or Lakhera living mainly in Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. In Rajasthan and Hyderabad-deccan, they are Muslims who call themselves Manohars. The hindu *patu'a* craftsmen is usually of

the Patvegar caste while his muslim counterpart is the *ilaqaband* who generally produces articles that require greater refinement and are more expensive. Almost all filigree craftsmen in Cuttack are hindus, mainly of the Brahman, Bania and Karan caste. The karimnagar filigree craftsmen belonged to the telugu-hindu traditional Kamsali gold and silver smith community. In the seventeenth century, Aurangzeb augmented the Muslim bangle making community in northern India by his forceful conversion to Muhammadanism of Hindu bangle makers of the Maniar caste. In the south, bangle makers generally remained Hindu.

#### 4. Raw Material

- a. Gold and Silver – the first, according to Hindu belief, a sacred metal symbolic of the warm sun, the other suggesting the cool moon – are quintessential metals of Indian jewellery. In jewellery trade, the basic form in which gold and silver are available is the ingot. The alloys of gold used for Indian jewellery contain silver or copper or both. Most of the silver used for jewellery is alloyed with copper or zinc or both to improve its mechanical strength and resistance to wear and tarnish.
- b. Precious and semi precious stones – Here it is important to bring forth the importance of Navratna jewellery where nine auspicious stones are used in a single ornament. In India, Navratna jewelry has been given major importance, because of its astrological significance as well as its innate charm. The nine stones used in the jewelry are diamond, ruby, emerald, coral, pearl, sapphire, garnet, topaz, and cat's eye.
- c. Tribal jewellery makes use of shells, feathers, wild flowers, wood, cane bamboo, wings of beetles, bone, clay, crude metal and other natural material found in abundance.

#### 5. Tools Used

<u>English</u>	<u>Hindi</u>
Workbench	kam kimez
Bench vise	hathkal
Leather apron	chamra ka tukra
Light source	batti
Goldsmith's scale	kanti
Weights	tolne ke bat
Ruler	mistar / salaka
Compass	parkar
Ingot	kandla
Tongs	chimti / chimta
Furnace	bhatthi
Hand fan	pankha
Scissors	kaimchi
Chisel	chheni
File	reti

Tool-sharpening stone	jilla kisan
Wooden mallet	lakrika hathaura
Hammer	hathaura
Round-ended punch	tona
Other punches	tukilna

## 6. Process

### 6.1. Meenakari

In Meenakari jewellery, precious stones are set and then enameled with gold. The piece of metal on which the work is to be done, is fixed on a lac stick. Designs of flowers, birds, fish etc are engraved on it. This leads to the creation of walls or grooves, to hold color. Enamel dust, of required color, is then poured into the grooves and each color is fired individually. The heat of the furnace melts the color and the colored liquid gets spread equally into the groove. This process is repeated with each color. Subsequently, each color is individually fired. Colors, which are most heat resistant, are applied first, as they are re-fired with each additional color. Once the last color has been fired, the object is cooled and burnished or polished with agate. The depth of the grooves, filled with different colors, determines the play of light. Silver and gold are used for the base of Meenakari. Choice of colors, in case of silver, has to be green, yellow or blue, as these are the colors which stick with it. As for gold, all the colors can be applied to it and this is also the reason why the metal is preferred for Meenakari jewellery.

### 6.2. Kundan jewellery

The indigenous process of setting gemstones by the use of pure, soft gold strips (kundan), is known as kundani setting. To achieve gold of near purity (24 karat) it must be processed by annealing it several times, each time hammering it flatter and larger and immersing it in a special acid solution that dissolves into solution any other metals it may contain, such as copper or silver. The process of beating, flattening and acid submersion is repeated until a flat piece of virtually pure gold leaf (*sona ka warak*) results. This is folded lengthwise several times to form a narrow strip (*sona ke patta*). When surrounding a gemstone with kundani, the unit is fixed in the top flat disc of the handled shellac stick (*hundi; bini*) whose surface has been spread with a layer of shellac or resin softened over a charcoal fire, into which the warmed unit is pressed. Upon cooling it solidifies and holds the unit firmly in place for working.

### 6.3. Pachchikam Jewellery

In this case, the stone is inserted in a silver case, the edge of which is pressed onto the stone with the finger and then grooves are filed on it. Uncut semi-precious stones and glasswork are significant products used in making of Pachchikam jewellery. The major hindrance in the growth of Pachchikam is that it cannot be produced on a mass scale. The craftsmen are highly conservative, not willing to change according to the needs and demands of time. They are not open to change in technical developments and are not experimenting with new trends and patterns.

This regressive attitude, despite the fact that it has huge potential, is harming the overall growth of Pachchikam jewellery art and industry.

#### **6.4. Filigree work**

Filigree work is called by the Persian term *tarkashikam* (tar, wire; tarkash, a wiredrawer). Jewellery is made entirely from gold or silver wire of high standard. To make wire, pure silver is repeatedly passed through a wire drawing machine with a series of holes in diminishing diameter sizes, till the desired gauge is achieved. Three types of wire are needed in filigree work. First is the outer frame wire (14 gauges) that outlines the basic design and supports everything within it. The second (18-20 gauge) wire defines the main lines of the design subject such as the flower, leaf or creeper pattern. The third wire is made up of two strands of 36-gauge round wire spiralled together, then either flattened by hammering or passed through the rollers of a rolling mill. All the joints are soldered. The flux used in soldering to assist in metal flow under heat is borax.

#### **6.5. Bead Jewellery**

The material out of which beads are to be made is first chiselled to obtain a desired shape and size. Thereafter, a hole is drilled into the material, so that a string passes through it, facilitating the stringing of a number of beads together.

#### **6.6. Patu'a**

A Patu'a makes objects from thread, yarn and cord. He manipulates yarns primarily by twisting, braiding or plaiting, wrapping, knotting, netting and tassel making. Cotton is the most common yarn material used. Wool yarn is often used on silver necklaces of heavy units with large thread openings, such as those worn by rural people who lead more physically active lives than urban people. Silk yarn is generally reserved for use with gold ornaments. Rayon, commonly called 'art silk' in India is popular as an inexpensive silk substitute because of its shine. Metallic gold or silver yarns (zari) can be incorporated with silk or synthetic yarns to create a more elegant effect.

#### **6.7. Thewa**

It can be described as the fusion-appliqué of a pierced-work-patterned sheet of gold foil onto transparent colored glass to create a unit that is then mounted with a separate foil backing into a bezel in jewellery or an object. Each unit consists of a flat piece of transparent red, green, or blue glass, the colours intentionally suggesting ruby, emerald and sapphire. The patterned metal sheet is pure, 24 karat gold.

#### **6.8. Lac Jewellery**

Lac is produced by a unique scale insect indigenous to Indian forests. The collected resin is crushed and washed clean of impurities. Then it is dried and converted into shellac. Almost all lac bangles have an inner core made of grayish-brown refuse lac, which is covered by a relatively thin layer of better quality coloured lac. To further strengthen the core lac, filler such as white clay is added. Core lac and covering lac are heated separately, then each rolled into a cylinder. The core lac is shaped into a bluntly tapered cone form. The coloured lac is spread onto its apex and worked

toward the handle end with a spatula until it completely and evenly covers the core lac. Series of measured bangle lengths are cut from the rod. Further, a tool (flat-shaped) is used to roll the bangle across the flat surface, which gives it a proper thickness. The shaping is done by suppressing the length of lac into grooves (colored) on every side of the mould. The lac takes the shape of the groove into which it is forced.

## **7. Uses of Jewellery**

In India jewellery is made for practically every part of the body. Such a variety of jewellery bears the testimony to the excellent skills of the jewellers in India. The range of jewellery in India varies from religious one to purely aesthetic one. Jewellery was handcrafted not just for humans but also for the gods, ceremonial elephants and horses. The craft of jewellery was given a royal patronage right from the ancient times because in India jewellery is much more than just a tool of aesthetic appeal; rather it is the symbol of divine abundance and material blessings. Jewellery holds a place of utmost significance for the Indian woman. In Hindu, Jain and Sikh communities where women do not inherit landed property, jewellery was a major component of the streedhana (gifts given to a woman at the time of her marriage). Women are also gifted jewellery in different phases of life such as, at birth, at coming of age, etc. Certain ornaments, such as mangalsutra, nath(nose ring) and toe rings, are quintessential for married Indian women. Jewellery, because of its easy convertibility into cash, was thus regarded as security and investment. Jewellery as investment and identity marker is evident in the plethora of ornaments worn by people from nomadic and migrant tribal communities.

## **8. Miscellaneous**

In India, jewellery is designed to match with the attire. The theme of its design as well as the colour of the jewellery is taken into consideration while adorning. To make the jewellery more attractive, it is topped by diamonds and various types of gems. Traditionally, Indian jewellery has been made of heavy and voluminous gold pieces, but recently jewellery made of silver, platinum, and other metals has become quite popular among people. Needless to mention, these days the market is flooded with imitation jewellery that is light weight, economical and readily available.

## **9. Appendix**

- [www.craftsinindia.com](http://www.craftsinindia.com)
- [www.culturalindia.net](http://www.culturalindia.net)
- Handcrafted Jewellery of India, Oppi Untracht