



# livelihoods

*today and tomorrow*

July 2018

**‘Sukshetram’**

**Goldsmiths**

Our country is a land of various cults and communities; where every individual has his or her own way of living and practicing profession. Goldsmithing is one of these professions! Goldsmiths have thrived since very early ages of Indus valley civilization, and the presence of this class is evident in many folklores, stories, mythological books, archaeological remains at various sites, and texts of history. Jewellery is much more than just a tool of aesthetic appeal for Indians; rather it is considered to be the symbol of divine abundance and material blessings. Historically, jewellery-making has been an unbroken chain of tradition for over 5,000 years.



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unbroken chain of tradition for over 5,000 years. Traditionally, Indian goldsmith workers (goldsmiths), a Hindu caste in our country and Nepal, are a community who are referred to by a variety of names depending on the region - Sonar, Sunar, Swarnkar, Panchallar or Thattan. This community's people worked (and still work) as goldsmiths, and in early India, they handcrafted jewellery out of natural materials found in abundance all over the country.

The range of jewellery made in India varies from religious ones to purely aesthetic one. Various kinds of jewellery made by goldsmiths bear the testimony to the excellent skills of the jewellers in India. Goldsmiths in the past not only handcrafted jewellery for humans, but also for Gods, ceremonial elephants and horses. Going back in time, during the Vedic period, goldsmiths had a much higher social standing than most other artisans, perhaps because they worked with precious metals. The goldsmiths had royal patrons. Historical records show that Indian jewellers mastered various skills required to make fine jewellery quite early; mixing alloys, moulding, drawing fine wires, setting stones, inlay work, relief, drawing gold and silver into thin wires, plating and gilding. Different regions of India have their own distinctive jewellery making styles that are unique to the area. For instance, fine filigree work in silver from Odisha and Andhra Pradesh; the art of enameling or meenakari from Jaipur; temple jewellery from Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu; and kundan or the setting of semi-precious or precious stones in gold from Delhi.

In filigree work, patterns of leaves, flowers, butterflies, birds and geometrical shapes are made with silver wires of varying thickness. The skilled jewellers draw out fine wires of silver mixed with a little bit of lead and make an outline of the pattern in thick wire. Fine wires are then collected inside the framework to create a delicate lace-like appearance. Meenakari and kundan are the styles of jewellery making influenced by the Mughals and are usually used in combination to make jewellery that can be worn on both sides such as chokers and necklaces. The temple jewellery of Nagercoil consists of traditional gold ornaments studded with red and green semi-precious stones, and are used as offerings to the Gods and hence the name! In Nagaland, gold is used to craft imitations of human head and long funnel shaped beads, which are used in combination with shells, animal claws and teeth and precious and semi-precious stones. The designs in solid gold jewellery of Tamil Nadu and Kerala are inspired by nature. In Ladakh, silver charm boxes and head-dresses called perak with rows of turquoises, cornelians, corals and agates stitched onto it are quite common.

Though goldsmiths have been an integral part of Indian society for ages, the high skills of goldsmiths, who handcrafted jewellery out of natural materials, are fading into oblivion. One of the causative factors is that the community is at crossroads, due to drastic changes in jewellery making and the economy surrounding it. In present times, there are a huge number of active goldsmiths who have declined considerably and many workshops have shut their shops, and the trends are continuing as youth from this community are shunning the trade. Machine-cut jewellery has proven to be the nail in the coffin for the traditional craftsmen. Moreover, traditional goldsmiths have

lost out to leading brands, who have taken over the markets with eye-catching advertisements and huge showrooms. For instance, at one point, there were 25,000 goldsmiths in Trichy alone, and today, we have approximately 1,500 of them. Low or non-remunerative wages have affected the trade, as there is demand for high quality work at the minimum cost possible. The typical job of a goldsmith involves cutting, polishing, soldering, forging and placing of stone studs. Traditionally, these skills had been passed down from one generation to another, and all goldsmiths used the services of specialist craftsmen.

Nowadays, with huge demand for machine-made jewellery, it is the designs that are attracting the customer-base. We have been hearing of farmers committing suicide, but what we have not been hearing are the cases of suicide by several goldsmiths in Tamil Nadu, who took the drastic step due to un-repayable debts. Now, their families are plunging deeper into poverty. In recent decades, the death knell for traditional goldsmiths has become common, as these communities have been badly hit by mechanization in jewellery making. Changes began in late 1990s, with the advent of imported jewel-making machines. Prior to that, the goldsmith communities led comfortable lives making jewels by taking orders from established retail outlets, and also from families during weddings and other functions. These communities got orders almost round the year. With the slow mechanization of jewellery making industry, customers began to flock to showrooms instead of placing orders with traditional goldsmith communities. The shift towards mechanization left many of the goldsmith communities in states of debt; thus, pushing them into abject poverty and forcing them to give up their traditional skills.

Mechanization had reduced work opportunities for goldsmiths, and slowly, their wages have fallen over the years, and conditions worsened. Low wages and non-availability of work has forced many to look for alternative livelihoods, and in places like Trichy, many of them are working in vegetable markets and doing petty jobs such as unloading vegetables from lorries, while a few of them are running vegetable carts, or selling vadas and tea. With advancement of technology, many of the goldsmiths were not able to keep up the pace with it, and thereby, got lost in transition. Most of the goldsmith communities have lost their distinct identity, glory and importance and are struggling to eke out their living. The profession, which once made exquisite gold jewellery for people who would pay handsome money to buy it and show-it-off with pride, has lost its sparkle and things have undergone a turnaround. Many of the traditional goldsmiths have deserted this profession and are working as labourers in the construction industry and in sand mining industry.

For instance, in Rajamahendravaram, a branded cultural capital of Andhra Pradesh, many of the traditional goldsmiths have lost their lustre and social standing, as they are struggling to make ends meet. Their decline can be traced to early nineties, when workers from West Bengal (WB) started arriving in the city and began making gold ornaments on order. Adding to the local goldsmith's misery, many shops sprung up at that time selling branded gold and local jewellery. Further, these shops started supporting the workers from WB. This impacted local traditional goldsmiths, with most of them being pushed into a debt trap due to insurmountable problems. More than 3000 WB workers and 2000 goldsmiths migrated to the city and began making local ornaments by mixing non-local designs and giving them on schedule; hence, many people began to prefer to get their work done on specific orders. The other reason behind the plight of goldsmiths can be attributed to the flood of readymade ornaments in latest designs coming from Mumbai, Coimbatore and Ahmedabad. Sadly, the earnings of many of the traditional goldsmiths have come down drastically.

Skills and knowledge-sets of traditional goldsmiths continue to be old, which are acting as hindrances to their growth as they are continuing to use traditional (and often outdated) technology, and is one of the main causes of their back-foot performance. There are many more reasons for their problems, a few are lack of adequate skills, poor exposure to information and technology, lack of formal training, unable to thrive under competition, and adaptation to new technology, dynamic instability in market trends on daily basis, frequent disputes with customers regarding return value of jewellery, excessive government regulations and departmental verification usually

Problems Faced by Goldsmiths: High Pricing, Financial Deficiency, Local Market Linkage Failure, Poor Access to New Marketing Skills, Family Oriented Business with nil Updation of Traditional Skills, Availability of Raw Materials through Unofficial Channels.

interrupting the business activity, scarcity of daily wagers/labourers in high demand seasons, excessive fluctuations and changes in employment patterns on daily basis, problem of employing professional labourers by the need of orders, poor educational qualifications (as they have to join the profession early and dropout of school) etc. On the health front, goldsmiths are highly affected with improper body posture, eye problems and workload. Due to poorly designed workstations, many of the goldsmiths have to twist, bend and overreach, forcing them into non-neutral positions that increase their overall discomfort and pain at the lower back, neck and shoulders. Eyes too are strained due to lack of proper illumination at work site, which exert additional adverse effects on health of goldsmiths.

Professionals and daily wagers are exposed to seasonal variation. They also face price fluctuations, as gold prices move every minute and make the market much more inconsistent. One of the major problems impacting the whole community is duty hike on gold

The Sunar caste is one of the oldest communities in goldsmithing in India, whose superb gold artworks were displayed at The Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. In India, 'Vishwakarmas' are the goldsmith caste.

and jewellery to reduce metal imports bill. To bring the shine back to the community and make them regain the former glory of their livelihoods, the government has to improve employment prospects of the learned/skilled

A goldsmith is a metalworker who specializes in working with gold and other precious metals. Historically, goldsmiths also have made silverware, platters, goblets, decorative and serviceable utensils, ceremonial or religious items, and rarely using Kintsugi, but the rising prices of precious metals have curtailed the making of such items to a large degree. Goldsmiths must be skilled in forming metal through filing, soldering, sawing, forging, casting, and polishing metal. The trade has very often included jewellery-making skills, as well as the very similar skills of the silversmith. Traditionally, these skills had been passed along through apprenticeships, however, more recently jewellery arts schools specializing solely in teaching goldsmithing and a multitude of skills falling under the jewellery arts umbrella are available. Many universities and junior colleges also offer goldsmithing, silversmithing, and metal arts fabrication as a part of their fine arts curriculum.

disciples. The local development bodies need to take initiatives to increase traditional goldsmiths' market awareness, marketing & communication skills by ways of actively organizing workshop programmes. The challenge of traditional way of grafting and changing fashion is creating the gap, while financial problems and pricing issues too are adding to the woes. The issues of high cost of raw materials, wastage, labour charges are other problems; thus, there is a need to address and meticulously plan for determining raw materials, wastage, labour charges in production space. Traditional goldsmith communities are becoming victims of changing fashion as old designs are sold to the broker at half rate of production cost, which is impacting small merchants. The other areas which call for immediate redressal is competition in local market. The industry is filled with untrained and unskilled labour as finding efficient and skilled labour is a serious area of concern.

Swarnkar (alternately Sunar, Soni, Suniar (eh) and Sonar) is a Hindu caste in India and Nepal referring to the community of people who work as goldsmiths.<sup>[1]</sup> Though the community is primarily Hindu, some members in the states of Haryana and Punjab are Sikh. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swarnkar>

Imparting trainings in which labourers require lots of practical know how is necessary! The traditional goldsmiths have to be equipped with availability raw materials, knowledge of new designs, trends, customer satisfaction, computerization etc. for improving quality of their products. They have to be trained in hallmarking, and in

producing and issuing invoice bills to the customers. The other problems which require immediate solutions are import policy, widening local market consumptions, pricing criteria of gold and silver. Financial support needs to be given as per banking regulations, as non-availability of finance at a nominal rate of interest is difficult, as these traditional goldsmiths require working capital for day to day requirements, and additionally, new technology, mechanization and renovation of establishments require more investment.

The traditional goldsmiths are victims of globalization and liberalization unlike any other community. They are facing stiff competition from mechanization; changing fashion has become a norm today, with increase in cost of production and wastages. The Government has provided the traditional goldsmiths community with skill development trainings under the Pradhan Mantri Kausal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), and this community is being trained to produce value-added products with BIS Hallmark and KDM with pure quality gold. Goldsmiths had earlier enjoyed traditional customary rights of preparation of toe rings and sacred thread, but due to big jewellery shops taking over the market through latest designs, goldsmiths have lost their traditional rights. The labour oriented gold industry needs appropriate training facilities; they require easy access to finance; capital on day to day basis to regain footing in their traditional livelihood activity. Today, we have many traditional goldsmith communities in North India, who have diversified their livelihoods into landowning, cultivation, entrepreneurship. ❖