

The Gold that Binds: The Ritualistic Use of Jewelry in A Hindu Wedding

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Gold jewelry is deeply woven into the social, cultural and religious fabric of Indian Hindu ("Hindu") life. In most Hindu communities, gold forms an indispensable part of the jewelry that bedecks a bride (Shukla 2000) as she undergoes the rituals that will incorporate her into her groom's family. Since weddings are the major cultural performance of every Hindu family (Kolenda 1984), we examined the ritualistic use of gold jewelry in weddings to develop insights into the Hindu perspective of possession meaning. We synthesized the relevant literature with data from fifteen depth interviews before, during, and after participant-observation of the Hindu wedding of "Lisa" (WF22) to "Sanjay" (IM22). The longitudinal nature of the data collection engendered a temporal perspective of Lisa's journey into a Hindu extended family.

We found that gold jewelry carries functional meaning for Hindu consumers, as a store of wealth and as a way to conform to social norms of respectability (Gell 1986). It can also function as a private and public display of status within and without the extended family (Minturn 1993). A second source of meaning is indexical meaning, wherein it serves as a link to extended family (Mehta and Belk 1991). Both these categories of meaning resonate with the Western perspective of jewelry. However, Hindu culture differs from Western culture in the shared importance placed on the spiritual values that permeate Hindu life and imbue symbolic meaning into objects (Venkatesh 1995). Gold jewelry carries spiritual meaning that underlies its use as a ritual artifact as the bride crosses the threshold of the extended family. As jewelry is lent or given to each new bride that enters the extended family, the jewelry grows heavier with nuanced meaning that becomes part of the legacy of the jewelry.

We explored the nuances of meaning inherent in the purity of the gold used, in the value and nature of the gold given, and in the differences between "pure" (an emic term for 22 carat gold which has 91.7% gold content) and "heavy" gold jewelry (an emic term describing traditionally-styled, inherited jewelry). Since cultural perspectives of corporeal boundaries are affected by social structure (Douglas 1966), it seems plausible to suggest that relationships with meaningful possessions such as jewelry are also affected by the social order. While the popular perception of caste is that it embodies a set of hereditary hierarchical occupational groups, what truly underlies caste is a continuum of pure and polluted states (Douglas 1966). Just as a member of an intermediate caste is less pure than one from a higher order caste, but purer than one from a lower order caste, there can be intermediate states between sacred and profane (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). For example, we found that jewelry of made of less than 22 carat gold was profane, "pure" gold was quite sacred, and "heavy" gold was extremely sacred.

Furthermore, we found evidence to support the contention that cultural categories of purity and auspiciousness (Das 1982) clarify how rituals protect extended family from the dangers of liminality (Turner 1967). Traditionally, an unmarried Hindu woman was viewed as liminal, and hence dangerous to patrilineal, patrilocal kinship system which characterizes most Hindu communities (Kolenda 1984). In this view, she remains liminal until she completely transcends the boundary into an extended family, usually upon the birth of a son (Minturn 1981). Gifted and borrowed jewelry plays an indispensable role in the ritual purification and

transformation of the bride from an 'other', commoditized, female into part of the bridegroom's extended self and subsequent incorporation into the sacred domain of the extended family. The gold jewelry worn by the bride has sacred meanings based in notions of auspiciousness that persist, even if a negative, indexical meaning profanes the possession. However, Hindu consumers seem comfortable with the temporal co-existence of sacred and profane meanings.

The polysemous meanings of the gold jewelry reflect cross-cultural differences in the sacred and the profane. The sources (functional, indexical and spiritual) and loci of meaning (private and public) of the jewelry used co-create subtle shades of sacred meanings. This indicates that, contrary to classical Durkheimian perspective, sacred and profane are not dichotomous categories for Hindu consumers. We also found that some meanings (e.g. functional meanings) could be profane, while other meanings (e.g. spiritual meanings) could be sacred. In contrast to the prevalent dialectical perspective of sacred and profane, sacred and profane meanings in Hindu culture are not antithetical: sacred and profane meanings can and do co-exist temporally in possessions.

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