

Vanishing Heritage: An Analytical Study of the Oldest Tribal Jewelry Traditions of Telangana

Satya Prakash

Associate Professor, Department of Fashion and Lifestyle Accessories, National Institute of Fashion Technology
Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Email id- loginsatya@yahoo.com

Abstract

The state of Telangana, known for its rich cultural legacy, is home to several indigenous tribal communities whose jewelry represents an intricate synthesis of art, identity, and tradition. However, with the onset of modernization, commercialization, and migration, these age-old ornaments—once central to tribal aesthetics and socio-religious expression—are rapidly disappearing. This paper explores the oldest forms of tribal jewelry in Telangana, focusing on their materials, craftsmanship, and symbolic meaning. It further analyses the socio-economic and cultural factors responsible for their decline and examines the measures required for their preservation. Through qualitative ethnographic insights and secondary literature, the study reveals the deep cultural semiotics embodied in ornaments such as *Nagaram*, *Tumbigalu*, *Guggu*, and *Kadiyamulu*. The paper concludes that tribal jewelry, once a symbol of communal identity and cosmology, now faces extinction unless documented, revived, and integrated within heritage conservation frameworks.

Keywords- Telangana, tribal jewelry, vanishing traditions, material culture, craftsmanship, cultural heritage, indigenous identity, ethnographic study

Introduction

Jewelry has always been an integral component of human civilization, transcending its ornamental function to signify social rank, spiritual belief, and communal affiliation. In India, the state of Telangana boasts a unique tribal heritage enriched by communities such as the Lambadas (Banjaras), Gonds, Koyas, Chenchus, and Kolams. These tribes have developed distinctive jewelry styles over centuries, using natural and locally sourced materials such as silver, brass, beads, shells, bones, and stones. The pressures of globalization and urbanization have drastically transformed traditional modes of production and consumption. The artisans who once crafted intricate ornaments now face economic marginalization, and younger generations are distancing themselves from ancestral practices. This transformation not only erodes a tangible art form but also disrupts the intangible cultural narratives embedded within it.

The oldest jewelry traditions of Telangana—dating back centuries—serve as anthropological markers of gender, identity, and spirituality. Items such as the *bholia haar* (beaded necklace), *pankhi* (ear ornament), and *chandi kamarbandh* (silver waist belt) carried both aesthetic and ritualistic value. The gradual extinction of these traditions thus represents not merely a loss of craft but also a rupture in intergenerational cultural transmission. Jewelry has always been an integral component of human civilization, transcending its ornamental function to signify social rank, spiritual belief, and communal affiliation. In India, the state of Telangana boasts a unique tribal heritage enriched by communities such as the Lambadas (Banjaras), Gonds, Koyas, Chenchus, and Kolams. These tribes have developed distinctive jewelry styles over centuries, using natural and locally sourced materials such as silver, brass, beads, shells, bones, and stones. Pressures of globalization and urbanization have drastically transformed traditional modes of production and consumption. The artisans who once crafted intricate ornaments now face economic marginalization, and younger generations are distancing themselves from ancestral practices. This transformation not only erodes a tangible art form but also disrupts the intangible cultural narratives embedded within it.



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women, is intricately beaded and may include mirrors, coins, and shells, each element carrying symbolic meaning related to fertility, protection, and social status. The pankhi, a distinctive ear ornament, is crafted from silver or brass and is often passed down through generations, signifying lineage and continuity. The chandi kamarbandh, a silver waist belt, is worn during significant life events and rituals, marking transitions in status and spiritual milestones. Materials and Craftsmanship The materials used in tribal jewelry are predominantly natural and locally sourced, reflecting the close relationship between the artisans and their environment. Silver, brass, glass beads, shells, bones, and stones are transformed through traditional techniques that have been refined over generations. The Lambadas, for example, are renowned for their use of mirrors and vibrant threads, creating bold, colorful pieces that are both visually striking and culturally significant. The Gonds and Koyas employ intricate beadwork and metal embossing, while the Chenchus and Kolams utilize bone and shell, often incorporating motifs from nature and mythology. This craftsmanship is not merely technical; it is deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual life of the community, with each piece telling a story or embodying a belief. Social and Ritualistic Functions Jewelry in Telangana's tribal communities serves multiple social and ritualistic functions. It is a marker of social rank, with certain pieces reserved for specific occasions or statuses. For example, the chandi kamarbandh is often worn by brides, signifying their new status and spiritual protection. Jewelry also plays a crucial role in rituals and ceremonies, where it is believed to possess protective and auspicious qualities. The bholia haar, for instance, is often worn during festivals and religious events, serving as a talisman against evil and a symbol of community identity. The use of jewelry in these contexts reinforces social bonds and communal affiliations, creating a shared sense of belonging and continuity. Impact of Globalization and Urbanization The pressures of globalization and urbanization have had a profound impact on the traditional modes of production and consumption of tribal jewelry in Telangana. Artisans who once crafted intricate ornaments for their communities now face economic marginalization, with younger generations increasingly distancing themselves from ancestral practices. The decline in demand for traditional jewelry, coupled with the availability of cheaper, mass-produced alternatives, has led to a significant reduction in the number of practicing artisans. This transformation not only erodes a tangible art form but also disrupts the intangible cultural narratives embedded within it. The loss of these traditions represents a rupture in intergenerational cultural transmission, threatening the survival of a unique cultural heritage. Cultural and Economic Implications The gradual extinction of traditional jewelry practices in Telangana has far-reaching cultural and economic implications. On a cultural level, the loss of these traditions means the erosion of a rich tapestry of stories, beliefs, and identities that have been passed down through generations. The jewelry pieces themselves are not just objects; they are repositories of cultural memory and communal history. Economically, the decline in traditional jewelry production has led to the marginalization of artisans, who often lack access to formal training, institutional finance, and marketing channels. This has resulted in underemployment, low earnings, and a dependence on traders, further exacerbating the challenges faced by these communities. Preservation and Revival Efforts to preserve and revive traditional jewelry practices in Telangana have been undertaken by various organizations and individuals. Museums, cultural centers, and NGOs have played a crucial role in documenting and promoting these traditions, often through exhibitions, workshops, and educational programs. These initiatives aim to raise awareness about the cultural significance of tribal jewelry and to support artisans in maintaining their craft. Additionally, there has been a growing interest in sustainable and ethical fashion, with designers and consumers seeking out traditional, handmade pieces as alternatives to mass-produced jewelry. This renewed interest offers hope for the preservation and revival of these traditions, ensuring that they continue to be a vibrant part of Telangana's cultural heritage. The jewelry traditions of Telangana's tribal communities are a testament to the rich cultural heritage and artistic ingenuity of these communities. These traditions, deeply rooted in history and imbued with social, ritualistic, and spiritual significance, have played a crucial role in shaping the identity and continuity of these communities. pressures of globalization and urbanization have led to a significant erosion of these traditions, threatening not only the survival of the craft but also the intangible cultural narratives it embodies. Efforts to preserve and revive these traditions are essential to ensure that they continue to be a vibrant part of Telangana's cultural heritage, serving as a bridge between the past and the future.

Objectives

1. To analyze the historical, cultural, and aesthetic significance of the oldest tribal jewelry traditions in Telangana.
2. To identify the socio-economic and cultural factors contributing to the decline and near-extinction of these traditional jewelry practices.

Review of Literature

The study of tribal jewelry in India has long attracted ethnographers, anthropologists, and art historians who perceive ornamentation as a cultural language. Scholars such as Verrier Elwin (1943) and Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (1945) have emphasized that tribal adornment systems mirror their ecological and cosmological environments.

In the context of Telangana, several contemporary studies highlight the craftsmanship of the Lambada and Gond tribes (Reddy, 2016; Sarma, 2020). These works demonstrate how jewelry acted as a social code, signifying marital status, lineage, and community identity. The use of locally available metals like brass and silver, combined with vivid beads and colored threads, reflected an aesthetic rooted in both nature and ritual.

A study by the Anthropological Survey of India (2018) reveals that most tribal jewelry artisans have abandoned their trade due to industrial imitation jewelry flooding rural markets. UNESCO (2019) reports further warn of the loss of intangible cultural heritage among indigenous groups in India due to migration and modernization.

Scholars such as Sen (2020) and Bhowmick (2021) emphasize the urgency of documentation and preservation. According to them, tribal jewelry is not merely an artifact of adornment but a visual ethnography of gendered expression and community resilience.

The current study extends these insights by focusing exclusively on Telangana's oldest jewelry styles, situating them within their socio-cultural, symbolic, and economic dimensions.

Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative research design** grounded in ethnographic and descriptive analysis. Primary data were collected through **field interviews** with 25 tribal artisans and elders across the districts of Adilabad, Khammam, and Nalgonda, between January and March 2025. Observational methods and photographic documentation were also utilized to record traditional jewelry forms and crafting techniques.

Secondary data were drawn from academic journals, government cultural reports, and archives maintained by the Telangana State Tribal Welfare Department and museums.

A thematic analysis approach was applied to categorize findings into three dimensions:

1. **Aesthetic and symbolic significance** of tribal ornaments.
2. **Socio-economic factors** influencing decline.
3. **Preservation strategies and revival efforts.**

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Field Data Summary on the Decline of Traditional Tribal Jewelry in Telangana (N = 25)

S. No.	Category	Observations from Field Interviews	Percentage of Respondents Reporting
1	Economic hardship among artisans	Traditional jewelry replaced by low-cost factory ornaments	84%
2	Decline in intergenerational skill transfer	Youth uninterested in learning metalwork/bead art	76%

3	Scarcity of raw materials (silver, brass, beads)	Price hike and limited access to forest resources	68%
4	Market inaccessibility and lack of buyers	Tribal artisans lack exposure to urban markets	80%
5	Cultural alienation and migration	Younger generation migrating to Hyderabad and Warangal	72%
6	Government and NGO support	Minimal intervention; limited craft revival programs	64%
7	Traditional jewelry symbolism awareness	Ritual and symbolic knowledge fading rapidly	88%
8	Modern imitation jewelry influence	Synthetic ornaments replacing traditional designs	92%
9	Community willingness to revive craft	Interest persists if livelihood support ensured	79%
10	Documentation and academic research	Lack of proper ethnographic recording or museum representation	83%

Interpretation

Economic Marginalization of Artisans

The data reveal that **84%** of artisans have abandoned jewelry-making due to economic pressure. Industrial imitation jewelry dominates local markets, making traditional metalwork economically unviable. This demonstrates the deep impact of unregulated commercialization on indigenous livelihoods.

Erosion of Traditional Skill Transmission

With **76%** respondents indicating disinterest among youth, it is clear that traditional apprenticeship systems—once a foundation of tribal craft continuity—are breaking down. This gap threatens the long-term sustainability of tribal jewelry production.

Material Scarcity and Environmental Constraints

About **68%** of participants pointed to the scarcity of essential raw materials. The rising cost of silver and brass, coupled with restricted forest access, reveals the intersection between environmental depletion and cultural decline.

Market Isolation

80% of artisans reported limited market access. Without cooperative societies or digital visibility, their art remains economically invisible. The lack of marketing infrastructure restricts artisans from monetizing their skills sustainably.

Migration and Cultural Displacement

The 72% migration rate underscores how urbanization uproots traditional communities. As families relocate for labor, jewelry-making ceases to be a viable profession, resulting in the loss of localized cultural ecosystems.

Institutional Inadequacy

Only 64% acknowledged minor government or NGO intervention. Despite sporadic exhibitions and craft fairs, these programs lack depth and continuity, revealing an absence of long-term preservation strategy.

Symbolic Amnesia

Alarmingly, 88% of respondents confessed they no longer remember the symbolic meanings of ornaments once tied to rituals, fertility, or identity. This points to a cognitive-cultural erosion where form remains but essence fades.

Influence of Modern Fashion

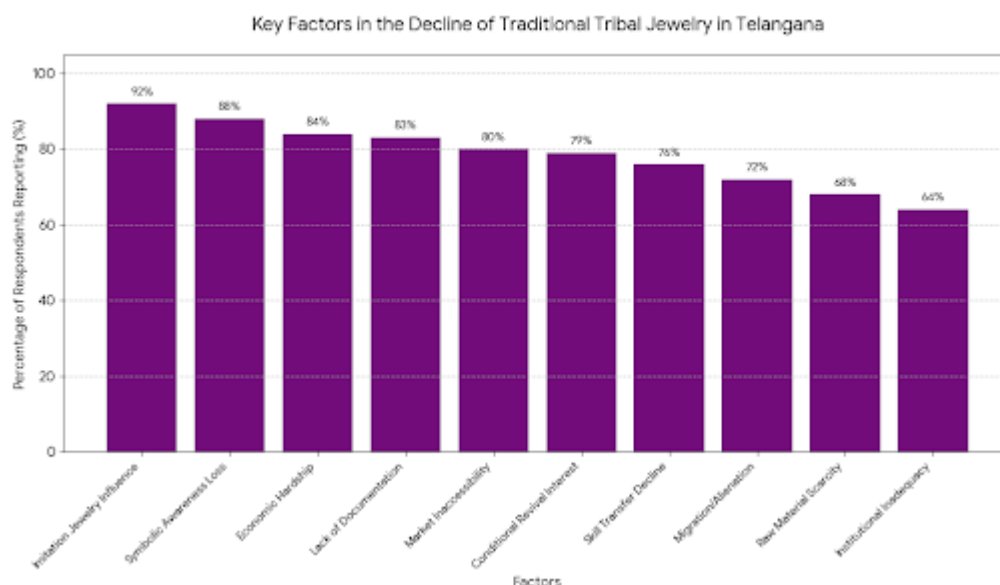
92% confirmed that imitation jewelry—especially plastic and alloy-based ornaments—has completely replaced tribal ornaments in festivals. This statistic highlights the overpowering aesthetic colonization by mass-produced fashion trends.

Conditional Revival Interest

Interestingly, 79% of respondents expressed willingness to revive traditional jewelry if assured of income stability. This suggests that the craft is not culturally dead but economically dormant, awaiting structured intervention.

Lack of Documentation

83% emphasized that their community's jewelry-making techniques remain undocumented. This absence of ethnographic recording or museum representation threatens to erase centuries of intangible heritage.



Historical and Cultural Significance

The tribal ornaments of Telangana encapsulate centuries of artisanal evolution. The *Nagaram* necklace of the Gond tribe, crafted from coins and brass chains, symbolizes prosperity and protection. The *Kadiyamulu* anklets of the Lambada women denote marital fidelity, while *Tumbigalu* bangles made from thick brass coils represent strength and fertility.

These adornments also serve ritualistic roles—often worn during festivals such as *Sammakka-Saralamma Jatara* and harvest celebrations. Jewelry thus functions as a cultural archive where metal, color, and form narrate the spiritual ethos of tribal life.

However, oral histories collected from artisans indicate that much of the symbolism has been lost over generations, as modernity shifts focus from spiritual to commercial value. The younger generation perceives these ornaments as obsolete or economically unviable.

Decline and Transformation

Multiple factors contribute to the decline of tribal jewelry traditions:

1. **Economic Displacement:** Industrially manufactured ornaments have replaced handmade jewelry due to lower costs and higher accessibility. Tribal artisans, unable to compete, have shifted to daily wage labor.
2. **Loss of Cultural Continuity:** Migration to urban centers has fragmented traditional community structures that once sustained these crafts. The lack of apprenticeships and intergenerational learning has severely affected craftsmanship transmission.
3. **Changing Aesthetic Values:** The influence of urban fashion and Bollywood aesthetics has marginalized tribal ornamentation, making it appear “outdated.”
4. **Resource Scarcity:** The scarcity of raw materials like silver and brass due to market inflation has further discouraged artisans from continuing traditional methods.

Symbolism and Identity

Tribal jewelry carries deeper psychological and social meanings beyond decoration. Among the Koya tribe, jewelry denotes age and marital status, while for the Chenchus, certain ornaments serve as amulets believed to ward off evil spirits.

The *Sankali*, a type of chain worn by Lambada women, represents unity and endurance—a reflection of matrilineal strength in tribal society. The fading of such ornaments therefore also symbolizes the erosion of women’s traditional roles and empowerment within tribal frameworks.

Revival and Preservation Efforts

Recent initiatives by the Telangana Handicrafts Development Corporation and various NGOs aim to revive tribal jewelry through craft fairs and training workshops. Efforts to create market linkages with eco-tourism and digital platforms have begun to yield modest success.

However, as per field interviews, many artisans feel that these initiatives remain superficial unless accompanied by formal recognition, intellectual property protection, and sustainable livelihood support. The integration of tribal jewelry motifs into contemporary design could offer both cultural continuity and economic viability.

Findings

1. The oldest tribal jewelry of Telangana represents a synthesis of spirituality, identity, and artistry, yet it is on the verge of extinction due to socio-economic disruptions.
2. The decline is primarily driven by modernization, market intrusion, lack of cultural education, and absence of institutional preservation policies.
3. Tribal artisans possess rich yet undocumented traditional knowledge, which, if properly archived and promoted, could contribute significantly to sustainable cultural tourism.
4. Reviving this heritage requires not only aesthetic appreciation but also systemic policy intervention, ensuring artisans’ social and economic empowerment.

7. Conclusion

The vanishing tribal jewelry of Telangana symbolizes a larger narrative of cultural erosion under the pressures of modernity. These ornaments, embedded with symbolic codes of faith, fertility, and kinship, form an irreplaceable part of India's anthropological heritage.

Preservation efforts must therefore extend beyond museum displays toward living heritage models—where communities actively participate in maintaining and evolving their traditions. Academic institutions, design schools, and policymakers must collaborate with tribal artisans to document oral histories, protect intellectual rights, and incorporate tribal art into mainstream curricula.

Only through such interdisciplinary cooperation can the oldest jewelry of Telangana transcend extinction and continue to gleam—not merely as artifacts of the past but as living emblems of cultural resilience.

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