



RESEARCH PAPER

Exploring the Symbolic Representation of the Social, Religious and Ritualistic Aspects of South Asia through Glass Bangles

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DOI

[http://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2022\(6-II\)93](http://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2022(6-II)93)

PAPER INFO

ABSTRACT

Received:

March 23, 2022

Accepted:

June 19, 2022

Online:

June 21, 2022

Keywords:

Bangles,
Culture,
Ornaments,
Rituals,
South Asia

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South Asian cultures are conspicuous for their preference for the use of ornaments, especially for the representation of feminine beauty. Glass bangles have been one very common ornament used by women in South Asia. This study attempts to analyse the symbolic significance associated with bangles across different regions of South Asia. Qualitative approach with a focus on content analysis was used to explore the social, religious and ritualistic interpretation of the use of bangles in these regions. The study concluded that bangles are not only a tool of embellishment but also carry symbolic meaning which encompass the social, religious and ritualistic aspects of their life in regard to their marital status, matrimonial bliss, as well as good and bad luck. The study may provide useful insights as far understanding of the nature and use of ornaments with their symbolic connotations is concerned. It may also be useful for other researchers in so far that they can further explore the topic empirically. The researcher proposes a comparative study of other ornamental objects to see the similarities and differences between them in regard to their symbolic significance

Introduction

Ornaments are a common feature of every culture. These are mainly used by women, men and children for embellishment. However, apart from being a tool of embellishment, ornaments have symbolic interpretation which acts as a "powerful communicative tool of culture" thereby lending the ornament one of its "most important and most characteristic of its features" (Nikolenko, 2013 p.444). Ornaments have been recognized to facilitate not only the process of cultural identification and intercultural communication but also help in the generation and individualization of an action and experience (Gla˘veanu, 2014). The bangles or bracelets are used as a common ornament all over the world. In South Asia, Indian, Nepali, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women wear glass bangles as a traditional ornament. Bangles are considered traditional bracelets which are usually made from glass, metal, wood, or plastic. Despite a good quality of research on the socio-cultural significance of ornaments in other parts of the world such as Central Asia and Europe, there is dearth of scholarly work in the subject area in South Asia, especially the sub-continent. This scholarly vacuum persuaded the researcher to investigate what symbolic connotations have been ascribed to bangles as a tool of adornment.

Literature Review

The word bangle comes from the Hindi/ Bengali word *bangri* which literally means a ring for the arm or coloured glass bracelet or anklet (Collins English Dictionary online, 2016). Bangles are also known as *chura* in Nepali, *churi* in Bengali, *choodi* in Hindi, and *churiyan* in Urdu. Bangles are also known as *chudi*, *kangan*, *bangdi*, *Valaya*, *Kada*, *Gajulu*, and *Choodla*.

Bangles are considered basic ornaments worn by South Asian women. Bangles carry traditional value and bare arms are considered a bad omen for a married woman. Young to adult women wear bangles of different styles. Usually, gold and silver bangles are preferred for toddlers but in the lower class the toddlers also wear glass bangles on special occasions. Modern-day women, however, wear bangles only on special occasions such as celebrations or festivals.

Historical Background

The earliest bangles date to the Neolithic period (7000 B.C.E) at the site of *Mehrgarh* Pakistan. These were made from circlets of shell or composite made from beads, stone and shell. During the Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1900 B.C.E) dramatic increase was observed in the styles of bangles, and variety of materials were used to produce bangles. The range of material included shell, terra cotta, stone ware, and faience. From the mound of *Bhir* many articles of glass were excavated. They are dated to the seventh and the sixth centuries B.C. A large number of glass articles were excavated from *Sirkap* consisting of bangles, bottles, flasks tiles, beads etc. From the relative density of glass used in these articles it is evident that the Indian manufactures of glass articles had mastered the chemical aspect of the technique of glass making (Om, 2005, p. 379). In Harappa, the female figurines and some males do appear to have worn bangles in burials. Three to four bangles were often placed on the wrist and two or more bangles above the elbow usually with equal numbers of bangles worn on both arms. The bangles were found in the cemetery excavations at Harappa, and it can be inferred that such ornaments may have been removed or broken at death, a practice that is common in later Hinduism. Glazed faience bangles were made in a variety of styles (Mark, 1998, p. 146). It is significant that the earliest known glass objects made in the subcontinent were beads and glass bangles, both of which do not require glass-blowing technology. At sites such as Hastinapura (1100-800 B.C.) and Taxila (700-300 B.C.) fragments of true glass bangles have been found. The Mauryan Stratum II at Taxila (700-300 B.C.) produced composite- coloured glass-bangle fragments with green, yellow, blue and white. By the eighth or ninth century A.D. - known as the early Subcontinent medieval period - glass bangles were virtually in universal use. Glass bangles from the twelfth and thirteenth century A.D were excavated at Sirpur, Andhra Pradesh and exhibit advanced decoration technology. The Muslim invaders reached India in the twelfth century. Mughal rulers lavishly patronized all the arts, and their style and high standard of excellence had profound impact on the cultural life of the subcontinent. The reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan were especially conducive to cultural developments. They encouraged the immigration of foreign craftsmen with special skills - such as glassmakers and enamellists from Persia - to work at the royal workshops (Oppi, 1997, p.182).

In South Asia the castes have been formed from occupation, *Kachera* caste made glass bangles. *Kachera*, *Kachara* (from *Kanch*, glass) – the functional caste of the makers of glass bangles, *churigar*. A *Gauri Parvati* was to be married to *Mahadeo*, but she refused to wear the bangles made by someone else. So Mahadeo constructed a *vedi* or furnace, and from this sprang the first Hindu *Kachera*, who was employed to make bangles for *Parvati*. His descendants followed the profession and thus came to be known as *kachera* (Russal, 2009).

Representation of Bangles in South Asian Culture

Bangles have a different interpretation in every culture. Hindu married girls have to wear bangles, because it is believed that bare arms symbolize widowhood. The *Kashmiris* have the most elegant painted *paper mache* bangles. A Punjabi bride is traditionally given slender *lac* and plastic *choodas* (bangles) in white and red (Figure 1a,b,c,d).



(Figure 1a,b,c,d) Different Types of Bangles *churiyan*, *Kashmiri Paper Mache*, *lac* and *Plastic Choodas*

The rural tribes - Ahirs of Rajasthan and Rabaris of Gujarat prefer wearing fully-armed bone-made plain bangles. However, there is a pattern of use: those who are not married use them up to the elbow only; whereas, the married have to start from the elbow and carry them to the underarm. In Bengal, bangles dubbed as the iron *kada* also known as *lohas* (Figure 2a,b,c) stand for marital status, and thereby worn by married women only

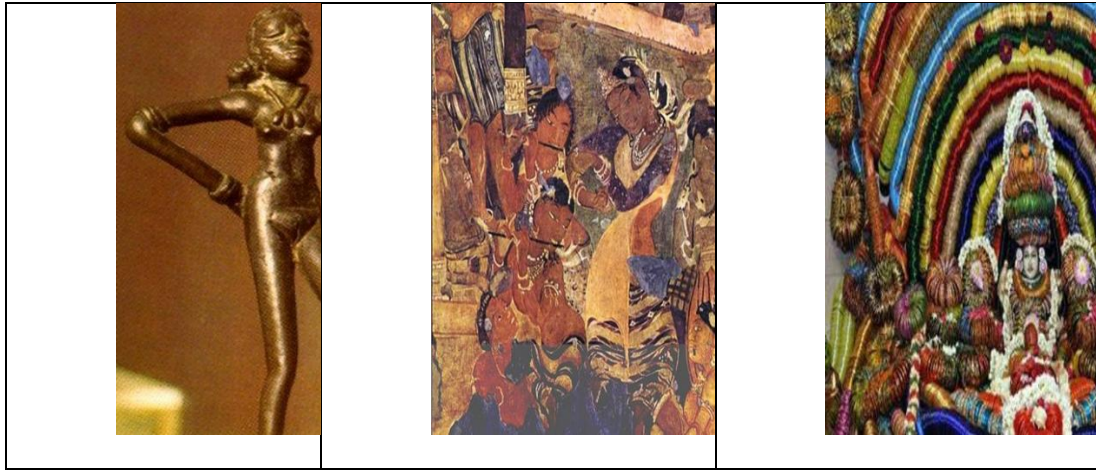


(Figure 2a,b,c) Types of Bangles in different Materials Bones, *Loha* and *Kada*

A few communities of Madhya Pradesh prepare bangles from coconut shell. The *Gurung* women wear gold necklaces to reflect their husband's wealth, while the *Limbu* girls are adorned with silver, gold or glass bangles. Bangles are also worn by men for functional as well as symbolic purposes. Among Sikh communities the man's iron bangle is worn as both a religious symbol as well as a protection of the wrist in the course of battle. Holy men in Hinduism also used specific types of bangles to identify their religious order or status. These bangles were made from gold or silver, glass, shell and metal etc. Bangles are prepared in the diverse techniques in South Asian countries. In Kashmir bangles are made from wood. In Assam the rhino horn bangles are very famous and in Rajasthan *lac* is a favourite material. There is apparently an endless diversity in bangles such as in metals, plastics, silk threads etc.

In *Maharashtrians* green coloured glass bangles indicate the pregnancy of a woman and is considered fortunate for a woman (Maharashtrian Wedding & Ceremony, 2016). Usually before the marriage the ladies perform a ritual *chuda* for the bride and her friends to celebrate the exciting moments of wearing green bangles. A bangle seller is called at the bride's home to help women choose a design of their own. Design (the *chuda*) and communal identity are synonymous for every tribe in *Maharashtra*, and these designs are generally referred to as *Pichchodis*, *Patlis*, *Gotes*, *Bangdi*, *Phul Bangdi*, *Tode* etc. The unmarried girls are allowed to wear multi-coloured glass bangles that suit with their costumes.

In South Asia, wearing bangles has a significant historical background starting from the Indus Valley Civilization (2300-1000 B.C.) as is visible in the "Dancing Girl" sculpture found in *Mohenjo-Daro*. Her arms are covered with bangles. In *Ajanta* and *Ellora* caves, paintings are also depicted in the tradition of wearing bangles (Bangles and Indian Women, 2011). During the excavation, bangles were common artifact in all major Indus Valley settlements. In many Indus burials sites of *Harppa*, *Kalibangan* and *Lothal* the thin shell bangles were also found which were attached with dead bodies. In South India, a *Devi* (goddess) is presented glass bangles in different colours with diverse symbolic meanings and in *Maharashtra*, *Devi* is presented green and in *Calcutta Devi* is offered red bangles (Figure 3a,b,c).



(Figure 3a,b,c) *Dancing Girl from Mohenjo Daro, Figures display bangles in the cave paintings of the Ajanta and Ellora, In the South India a Devi (goddess) is offered Glass Bangles*

In the northern India, red glass bangles suggest promising for the married women. After the wedding, the woman have to wear her bangles as an amulet of protection and good luck for her husband.

The Process of Making Glass Bangles

The winter months in South Asia bring two valuable gifts - cooler air and weddings. In wedding season, the demand for glass bangles increases. About forty kilometers east of the Taj Mahal and the city of *Agra* along National high way, there is a glass bangles capital of India - *Firozabad*. The glass industry here began during the sixteenth century under the Mughal ruler and has flourished ever since. Wedding-related glass items are among the most popular in *Firozabad*, so much so that the nick-name for *Firozabad* is *Suhag Nagari* or the city of married woman (Kara, 2014). Similarly, *Hyderabad* (India) also boasts a very old bangle market called *Laad Bazaar*. In *Pakistan*, glass bangles are mostly produced in *Hyderabad* (*Sindh, Pakistan*). After partition, the bangle masters from *Ferozabad* moved to *Hyderabad* in *Pakistan* and established bangle-making business whose growth is on the continuum ever since. It employs mostly women who work from home.

There are 28 stages of production before the bangle finally reach the market (Muhammad, 2012). The main body of production is completed in home-based workshops where the raw material is prepared, shaped, designed and coloured. There are two types of bangles - jointed and joint-less bangles. Joint-less bangles were made by an old technique and now this technique is rarely used today (Oppi,1997, p.183). Glass is primarily different from a glaze in that it is made without an underlying body of quartz or terracotta. Other differences between glazes and glass are apparent in their overall physical structure and chemical composition. The preparation of good quality glass requires the preparation of a frit (semivitrified silica) mixed with colourants followed by the cooling and regrinding of the frit to homogenize the mixture and finally, the melting of the powdered frit to produce a molten glass. In antiquity, the glass was more opaque due to many tiny bubbles and impurities; however, modern glass contains lead and other additives to create clear and uniform colours. Using metal tongs, hook, blow pipes, the molten glass can be made into beads, glass bangles, vessels, flat sheets or mirrors. After forming the glass

must be annealed and cooled slowly to relieve stresses and avoid cracking. More valuable beads and bangles are coated with gold or mercury to produce brilliant gold and silver ornaments (Claus, Diamond & Mills, 2003) (Figure 4a,b,c).



(Figure 4a,b,c) Glass bangles Making Process

Material and Methods

The researcher adopted qualitative methods applying extrinsic and intrinsic approaches of data interpretation. More specifically, following Voitiuk (2019), comparative, formal and structural (semiotic-hermeneutic) analyses were used. The data was collected from secondary sources such as books, art reviews and reports. In the process of data collection, the books and online resources were the main source of information. All the local terms were explained in the glossary. The images were collected from online resources.

Results and Discussion

The data analysis revealed that glass bangles do not merely contain ornamental value; in fact, they symbolize various facets of the socio-religious activity in contemporary South Asian communities, and are worn to mark important festivals or special social events. The styles of bangles not only signifies native identity but can also be related with occupation and social status. In traditional communities the wide, heavy bangles which are not easily broken are generally worn by women who are involved in heavy labour work, while thin, delicate bangles are worn by the elite class. In contrast to this, relatively cheap and glass-made bangles are worn by women of all classes. Different colours associate different meanings to glass bangles. In some areas, it is the indigenous custom that defines the specificity of the bangles which is mostly conveyed through a colour code. The symbolic notions of energy, wisdom and independence are communicated through red, blue and purple bangles respectively. Similarly, matrimonial bliss is represented by green and general happiness by yellow bangles. In addition, orange bangles suggest victory, white refer to new openings, black indicate power, silver symbolize strength, and gold stands for luck. In order to ensure security, marital unity, and good fortune of their husbands, an Indian woman is expected to use region specific colours such as the green or red. Unanticipated cracking of glass bangles is marked for bad luck signifying an untoward occurrence for the husband.

In the Hindu traditions women wear bangles to identify their marital status and call them *Subhagya*. *Subhaga* is considered a favourite wife beloved by her husband and the honored mother of a family. *Subhagi* is an adjective meaning “lucky” (Oppi, 1997, p.185). Bangles hold sentimental value also. Glass bangles are often broken intentionally to show anger and sorrow (Claus, et al, 2003)

The death of a woman before her husband is interpreted as a reward for her goodness. When a woman’s married life ends with her husband’s death, she enters the sad condition of widowhood and called her *vidhava*. A widow would *break* the bangles from her own hands. It is described in local Hindi/ Urdu language as *chūri thandi hona*. This custom was already common during the Mughal period, as confirmed by the statements in the writings of contemporary European travelers in India. For instance, John Huyghen van Linschoten - a Dutchman in the subcontinent in 1588 - recorded in his journal that when a husband dies, a Brahman wife breaks all her jewels (bangles).

Glass bangles are commonly considered the symbol of marriage in Hinduism and described as *churi pehnan* in local language. It is customary to find a woman with glass bangles on marriage ceremony when the culmination of honeymoon is signified by the breaking of the last bangle. In hindi and urdu proverb *Chūri pahnaāna* means to marry a widow. *Dewar pae chūriyān pehn liye* means to marry husband’s younger brother after husband’s death. It is usually said to show coward expression of a man or if a man is behaving like female as *chūriyān pehn rakhain hain*. To show anger and want to hurt anyone, this proverb is used in subcontinent *Moi sutan ki chūriyān torun*.

All rituals in an Indian wedding have special significance, so is the *chooda* ceremony, which is an essential feature of Punjabi wedding. The small family ceremony happens on the morning of the wedding day or sometimes the previous evening. The bride’s maternal uncle and aunt bring 21 bangles in red that the bride will wear. The number of bangles varies in different communities or as per the bride’s choice. Traditionally *poja* or *havan* is conductive as the part of ceremony and *chooda* is cleansed in milk. The bride is not allowed to see *chooda* until the marriage ceremony and wrist is covered with cloth. The *chooda* is considered auspicious for couple relationship. The women believed that *chooda* complete the *solah singhar* of a bride. The red colour *chooda* symbolizes fertility and prosperity, and bangles are worn for a year or minimum of 40 days after the wedding. By the end of 40 days, the bride is settled in a new house and ready to take the responsibility of kitchen and other household works. A small ritual ceremony is also held at home at time to remove bangles (Haute Brides & Honeymoons, 2015).

A bride is gifted ivory bangles by her mother in Gujarat and Rajasthan which are mandatory for the couple to complete the *saptapati*. An interesting feature of an Indian wedding is the attempt by a bride to wear the smallest sized bangles by lubricating her arms by perfumed oil. Successful wearing of these bangles ensures both ravishing honeymoon and matrimonial bliss.

Bangles also symbolize certain pregnancy related rituals in Hindu society. For instance, the seventh month of a woman’s pregnancy is marked by a ritual known as *Valaikaapu*. The family celebrations involve crowding the woman’s arms with bangles of various colours and designs. These ritual is based on the premise that by doing so

evil spirits will stay away from the expecting mother. In certain areas, green bangles are also used as a sign of good omen for childbirth.

Moreover, bangles are associated with religious sentiment. In a Hindu goddess temple, hundreds of all-coloured glass bangles hang on a long strings along one wall in front of the deity chamber, *garbagraha*. Hindu world has been made and remade through exchange. Hindus not only have connected intimately to deities but have articulated polity, social order and self. Hindu worship begins and ends with exchanges. The return of the deity gift is called *Parsada*. *Darsana*, act of seeing and being seen by the deity (Mittal, 2009, p.139)

Glass Bangles as a source of energy for females in Hindism

Bangles are also conspicuous for their symbolic representation of energy in women. The word *Shakti* which means strength is materialized by wearing bangles known as *Kankan*. Hindu mythology ascribes spiritual energy to bangles which manifests itself in the form of waves carried by a *Devi*. These waves are activated more strongly by green and red colour than by the others. The waves are received by the wrists and transmitted to the hand. Negative energies are obstructed by the *sattvik* which produces a security circle around the wrists and fingers. Glass bangles, especially the green coloured have been reported to be more conducive to capturing the the *Sattva* attribute as well as ward off nagative forces. Plastic bangles, on the other hand, create *Raja-Tama* waves which cause fatigue on the body and head of the women.

The unanticipated breaking of the bangles also has symbolic meaning. Strong negative energies from the fourth level of *Patal* (hell) which are violently impactful are transmitted through *Mantriks* (sorcerers). Close proximity between the sound and the bangle causes the crack which, according to Hindu mythology, signifies the conflict between the negative forces and the bangles (Spreadspirituality, 2016).

The Role of Odd Numbers in Wearing Glass Bangles

In Hindu *Dharma*, the use of bangles is a significant *Achar* (Conduct). Generally, between eight and twelve glass bangles are worn on each wrist. Bangles are also sold in twelve, eighteen and twenty-four in two matching sets, but no rigid rules about numbers exist (Oppi, 1997, p.180). The smaller size bangles are symbol of soft and delicate hands which is considered a sign of feminine beauty. Some regions typically recommend the use of glass bangles in odd numbers which must be different for both hands such as 7 in one and 9 in the other and so on. Each number has a specific effect or power i.e. *Shakti*. As a matter of fact, numbers such as 3, 6, 8 and 12 create waves of different intensity which in Hindu mythology are referred to as *Tarak*, *Tarak-Marak*, *Marak-Tarak* and *Marak* respectively. For further illustration, the case of *Marak* (Destroyer) waves can be observed. These waves are produced when glass bangles are worn in large quantity which help the woman stay safe against the evil eye and negative forces.

The use of bangles by women as prescribed by Hindu *Dharma* is an activity that facilitates them to derive positive energy as well as safet from the negative ones. South Asian societies have drawn great inspiration and influences from glass bangles and, thereby, established an extrinsic as well as intrinsic association with them -

culturally, ritualistically and religiously. Even Mahatma Gandhi went on to explain the philosophy of life with the reference of glass bangles: “This earth existence of ours is more brittle than the glass bangles that ladies wear”.

Conclusion

Glass bangles have been the mainstay of ornamental diversity from the pre-historic to the contemporary times in South Asia. Historical background, process, and origin of glass bangles have been discussed in this paper. As the analysis revealed, their wearing not only indicates female inspiration for beauty but also symbolize multifaceted diversity veiled in the socio cultural, religious and mythical context of the region. Women derived social status, matrimonial bliss, physical and spiritual strength, and much more through the use of bangles. As such, bangles have been an integral feature of female life which encompass different aspects of their physical and spiritual existence.

Glossary

<i>Achār</i>	Action
<i>bangdi,</i>	Bangle
<i>bangrī,</i>	Bangle
<i>Choodla.</i>	Bangle
<i>Chooḍha</i>	Bangle
<i>Chūdi</i>	Bangle
<i>Chūri thandi hona</i>	Hindi/ Urdu Proverb describes the death of a husband
<i>Chūrigar</i>	Bangles Makers
<i>Chūri pahnaṅa</i>	Hindi / Urdu Proverb describe to marry with a widow
<i>Chūri pahṅana</i>	Hindi/ Urdu Proverb describe to marry
<i>Darsana,</i>	Sanskrit word, means seeing, understanding
<i>Dewar</i>	Husband’s younger brother
<i>Devi</i>	goddess
<i>Gajulu,</i>	Bangle
<i>Havan</i>	Sanskrit word, which refers to offer, sacrifice
<i>Lohas</i>	Iron

<i>Mantriks</i>	In Hinduism this word is used for magician
<i>Kāḍa</i>	A kind of bracelet that is widely popular in Sikhism
<i>kangan,</i>	Bangle
<i>Kankan</i>	Bangle
<i>Paper mache</i>	<u>French</u> word used for "chewed paper", is a <u>composite material</u> consisting of <u>paper</u> pieces or pulp with an adhesive, such as <u>glue</u> , starch
<i>Parsad</i>	In Hinduism a devotional offering made to a a god, typically consisting of food that is later shared among devotees.
<i>Pūjā</i>	In Hinduism this word means to worship
<i>Pataḷ</i>	Hell
<i>Shakti</i>	Energy
<i>Rabari:</i> society. <i>Saptapati</i>	Outsiders primary occupation and status in Indain The <i>saptapati</i> is the seven steps that are taken around the fire without which no Hindu marriage is considered complete
<i>Solah singhār</i>	Which literally means "sixteen embellishments."
<i>Subhagya</i>	Good luck
<i>Suhag Nagari</i>	The place where wedding items are being sold
<i>Valaya</i>	Bangle
<i>Vidhava</i>	In Hinduism this word means widow

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