

Evolving Significance of Ornaments as Streedhan in Indian Society: A Journey between Dominance and Freedom

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Abstract

In the Indian subcontinent, there are prehistoric evidences of people wearing ornaments regardless of gender. But over time, ornaments became more associated with women. Heterosexual patriarchy, like many other cultural norms, used the relationship of women and ornaments in order to maintain its own hegemony. The patriarchy, for its own sake, constructed the concept of '*Streedhan*'. Patriarchy sometimes presented women with independent right over their *Streedhan*, and also controlled and seized the right when needed. The ancient Brahminical law-cods worked as the protector of the hegemony of the Heterosexual Patriarchy. That's why these scriptures contain a large number of regulations related to *Streedhan*. This was the initial construction of the significance of ornaments as *Streedhan*. But with the change of time and circumstances, when Indian women have enlightened by the light of education and have stepped into the outer world beyond the domestic world, the relationship of women and their ornaments gained new relevance. The enlightened women sometimes clung to the *Streedhan* as the source of their own economic support and the weapon of building their own identity, and sometimes women made their own contribution to the wider world using their *Streedhan*. Just as many women directly participated in the freedom movement of India, many also played an indirect role in strengthening the movement by donating their ornaments to the fund. These roles are very important from the perspective of gender history. Because, by this, using their ornaments women were able to break the chain of the domestic world and advanced their role in the larger sphere of national politics.

Keywords: sreedhan, ornaments, heterosexual patriarchy, freedom struggle, women's role

Introduction

Ornaments originated when individuals began decorating their own bodies with any natural element. Common people made their ornaments or accessories better and prettier with their own choice, labour, artistry and creativity. Elements for ornaments they found sometimes in the womb of a mine, sometimes on the surface of the earth, sometimes from seas and trees.¹ For the economic needs of human, jewelleryes made of precious metals and gems became one of the prominent kinds of wealth to them. In the tendency to determine the social position by the measure of wealth, they became a symbol of status. In the flow of history, when gender and

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sexual identity developed as the cause of inequality, dominant identity tried to suppress the 'second sex'² and 'others'³ by various tactics, then these pieces of adorns became chains of subjugation for the oppressed. As dressing is inextricably linked to personal choice, it should be a matter of individual freedom. However, given the different forms of prejudice and domination in society, it is not always simple to decorate one's own body how one wishes without being evaluated, controlled, and manipulated by the powerful segment. That is why ornament represents people's history of culture, sentiments, and struggles. Aside from the economic importance and artistic beauty of ornament, its relationship with human makes it a significant centre of ideas. People wear ornaments on their bodies, and in turn, ornaments preserve people's history on their figures.

Preliminary Probe

Regarding the innovation of ornaments, it's not possible to find any single and universally accepted statement. Many writers like Chitra Deb believes in a theory that inspiring by nature, people started to decorate themselves. According to them, people learnt beauty from the earth. The different colours of flowers, fruits, leaves, the various forms of the sky at dawn and dusk, the beautiful eyes of deer, the colourful peepul of the peacock made the ancient people think that the creator of the world loves beauty. So, first, to be beautiful like the earth and its creatures, and next to be pretty in the eyes of other people, individual concentrated to decorate their own body.⁴ Their favourite ornaments used in this objective were initially made of natural materials. When people made jewellery with metal like copper, bronze, iron, silver and gold, then also motifs of flower, fruits, leaves and bird's feather remained dominant in their design. In contrast, jewellery is considered as a symbol of women's bondage and oppression also. According to Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, one of the pioneers of women's awakening in India, ornaments are "Badge of Slavery".⁵ Following Rokeya's thinking, many historical and social thinkers believe that after creation of heterosexual patriarchal society, men started to keep women captive using chains and handcuffs. These things have turned into women's ornaments in the path of evolution.

Whatever may be the background, History finds that from the ancient period people used ornaments regardless of gender identity or any special purpose. From the Neolithic settlement of Mehargarh excavation revealed evidences of wearing ornaments made of bones by men and women. Ornaments from Mehargarh include bangles, pendants, chockers and amulets made of seashells, limestone, turquoise, lapis lazuli, sandstone and terracotta. The chalcolithic people also were fond of ornaments and decoration. They wore ornaments of shell and bone, and carried finely worked comb in their hair. The proto-historic settlement of Indus valley civilization yielded a lot of instances of ornaments and make up kits. Excavations proved that both men and women kept long hairs and used hair pins of copper, silver and even gold. Women used various toilets and cosmetics to beautify themselves. They used different face powders, lipsticks, eye-ointments, face-paints. Ivory combs and bronze mirrors were also used by them. Necklaces, armlets and finger rings, earrings were widely adorned by men and women while anklets were especially for the women. Bead making factories or workshops have been identified in various sites of Harappan civilization. The IVC site of Chanhudaro, a site excavated by N.G. Majumdar, showed evidence of makeup products. Specifically,

archaeologists found a lipstick and a face paint container, along with traces of cinnabar at the site of Chanhudaro. While no explicit evidence points to men specifically wearing lipstick, the presence of cosmetics like lipstick, inkpots, and collyrium in a very huge number at Chanhudaro suggests a broader use of cosmetics by the people of the IVC, regardless of gender.⁶

Feminizing Ornaments as Streedhan

However, there is no denying that over time, ornament has become more associated with women than men. The main reason for this lies in the rise of heterosexual patriarchy. Friedrich Engels showed that the division of labour leads to the creation of private property, and women became economically dependent on men. In his discussion of the *Origin of Family, Private Property, and State*, Engels stated that when patriarchy started to arise, women could not join the workforce outside the home. Men made women the instruments of giving birth and child rearing. Men's ownership of property got established. To ensure the inheritance of the pure blood of that ownership, control was imposed on the woman to maintain her monogamy. As a result, a woman's life became limited inside households. On the other hand, men's rights were established in all work outside the home.⁷ So, we can assume that because of this busyness, lack of time for grooming, and the need to work comfortably, use of ornaments decreased in men. Since the men of the aristocracy and ruling class were free from the compulsion of physical labour, the popularity of using ornaments was prevalent among them. From the ancient monarchical society, through the medieval age of Sultanate and Mughal rule, we got many evidences of ornaments used by rulers and other men of upper sections of the society.⁸

Jewellery made of precious metal, especially gold, was considered as *Streedhan* in the ancient society. The idea of *Streedhan* developed by the ancient law books of India, like *Manusamhita*. It is important to look at the development of the concept of *Streedhan* through ancient Indian lawbooks. However, *Streedhan* is not all about jewellery. This include both cash or jewellery owned by women. In ancient India, the concept of *Streedhan* was clearly discussed in the *Manusamhita*. It is said that in marriage, the wife's gifts from her family, husband or spouse family are considered as *Streedhan*.⁹ The wealth that came from this gift became all that a woman could have, because since the division of labour between women and men, women had no right to the wealth that was produced. From this, it can be said that as the women could not own any other property, so they clung to the *Streedhan* to ensure her minimum economic security. Evidences of women's rights over *Streedhan* are found in the ancient Smritishastras. According to *Manusamhita*, what is given to a woman at the time of marriage in front of the fire (*adhyagni*), which is given to her on the way to her husband's house (*adhyavanik*), which is given to her by her brother or parents out of love (*apare*), are all types of *Streedhan*. The *Manusamhita* also states that if, for any reason, the husband cannot fulfil his promise to gift the wife her *Streedhan* during his lifetime, then it is the responsibility of the sons to give the promised wealth to the mother.¹⁰ Yajnavalka reinforced Manu's statement about *Streedhan*. He instructed the husband, the son, the brother, and even the father has no right to take away a woman's *Streedhan*, which were mainly jewelleryes.¹¹

According to Apastambha and Baudhayana, the inheritance of ornaments will be passed from mother to daughter.¹² Parashkar in his *Grihyasutra*, says that ornaments can go to the son after

the death of the mother only if there is no daughter.¹³ Vasistha also said that after the death of the mother, the *Streedhan* of the mother should be divided among the daughters.¹⁴ In his *Arthashastra*, Kautilya also asserted the right of women to their ornaments should be independent and untouched by their husbands.¹⁵ Later, Narada, Brihaspati, Katyayana, and others, have dealt more extensively with the subject of *Streedhan*. Apart from *Adhyagni*, *Adhyayanika* and others, Katyayana mentions several other divisions of them. Those are 'Shulka', 'Soudayik', 'Anwadeya' etc. Katyayan has confirmed that only women will have the right to exchange or sell their jewellery. Following Yajnavalkya, Narada says that the inheritance of a *Streedhan* will pass from mother to daughter. Again, Brihaspati says that unmarried girls will get her mother's ornaments. Married women will get some money with them.¹⁶

But the fact that the ancient Indian law-givers became so conscious of protecting this economic support of women is not an expression of good will. Rather, there was a patriarchal interest in it. This tendency is clearly marked in the verses of the *Manusamhita*. It is said that if a woman is not adorned with clothes and ornaments, her husband is not attracted to her. If a man does not love his wife, he cannot have children. It is also said that if the husband has no interest in the wife, then the wife can commit adultery.¹⁷ Thus, it is clear that the woman is seen as the object owned by her husband and the instrument of producing children. It is said to keep the woman adorned with ornaments so that the husband is attracted to her and their union is possible. With this union, on the one hand, it will be possible to produce children who will be the true heir of man's property, on the other hand, if the woman is satisfied with her husband, her monogamy will also be maintained. It is also said in *Manusamhita* that in a family where women are worshipped with clothes and ornaments, God is pleased. Therefore, it will be beneficial for the family if you can please the wife with clothes and ornaments on the occasion of various festive. Again, Yajnavalkya says that if a woman's husband marries for the second time, the wealth that he gives to the first wife as a consolation is also included in *Streedhan*.¹⁸ The woman will serve her husband and his family with her passion and labour, bearing and rearing children. The child will inherit the family's work and earnings. A man can marry for second time and live with another woman. But a wife is bound to her husband forever. In order to ensure that a woman accept these inequities as a normal norm of the family and society, it was necessary to pay some wealth as a bribe. Therefore, the role of ornament is important in satisfying and comforting women. Because women are not just objects. She has feelings. That aspect also needs to be controlled by patriarchy. So, ornament got more and more associated with women's feelings by the hand of Heterosexual Patriarchy. The ancient texts which confirmed the right of women over *Streedhan*, also gave the control of male power over this right. Apararka writes that a wicked, bad charactered and extravagant wife can lose her right to a her *Streedhan*. So, it is clear that a man can take away his wife's ornaments at any time by slandering her. Because what is the sign of a woman's bad character and what is the sign of her good character is also determined by Patriarchy. Sukumari Bhattacharya states, "This becomes clearer when we consider that a wife has no right to control her husband if he squanders his property in gambling, alcoholism and indiscriminate expenditure".¹⁹ Therefore, it is clear that the patriarchal society has defined the rights of women over *Streedhan* to fulfil its own interest and has also handed over the control of those rights to men for its own sake.

While precious ornaments are considered as a type of wealth, broadly ornaments are associated with the concept of beauty, as we discussed earlier. But the irony is, while Brahminical Heterosexual Patriarchy emerged in Indian society, the concept of beauty was also genderised. E. V. Ramasamy, commonly known as Periyar showed the Patriarchy of Indian society also used the emotions of women to rule. He showed that there is no inherent difference between the qualities of men and women. Rather, feelings of anger, envy, courage, pride, desire to be admired are universal across gender lines. The hegemonic Brahminical heterosexual patriarchy has used these feelings of women to keep its machinery of oppression running. Periyar explains that systematically, patriarchy has been able to link the concepts of beauty, chastity and motherhood with the emotions of women. The mother, especially the mother of the son, has been filled with social respect. Similarly, the concept of chastity has been constructed and the so-called 'Sati' woman has been placed almost on the place of the Goddess. Heterosexual patriarchy has also set an ideal beauty standard for women. If she can touch that scale, the society fills the woman with praise. In the desire to be admired, women follow this ideal of beauty, chastity and motherhood set by patriarchy.²⁰ Ornaments are immensely connected to this idea of beauty. Using ornaments women can achieve beauty. Ornament is a material that helps to achieve one of these three goals set for women. This is also why ornament is important to a woman, her favourite thing.

But men's ornaments are always considered otherwise. Ornaments used by men are always reflection of their independent choice, aesthetic values, social prestige and wealth. While the relationship of the ornament and woman was constructed and controlled by the patriarchal system, man's grooming is always related to his individuality.²¹ This is the initial stage of gendering ornament in Indian Society.

Role of Streedhan Beyond the Threshold

With women's autonomous rights on the one hand and patriarchal control and decision on the other, the significance of ornaments as *Streedhan* has long existed in Indian society. Some family and social customs and traditions have nurtured it among women as well. Further, when women got enlightened in education, they became more aware of the rights of her own jewellery. When these educated women wanted to play their role in the larger political and social sphere of the country beyond the threshold of the house, the relationship between women and her ornament gained new relevance.

Indian women were enlightened by the light of reason and knowledge that the renaissance of the 19th century had lit. Western philosophy and modern thinking permeated a layer of Indian society through the thread of Western education. It is this idea that gives birth to the thinking of women's independence and individuality. As a result, in the world of literature and culture at that time, the issues of ordinary people, the everyday life of women, began to emerge on a large scale. Since ornaments are associated with the everyday life of people, there is a lot of discussion about ornaments in the literature of this period. In particular, the writings of educated women reveal their own ideas about *Streedhan*. The women of the enlightened upper-class families of this period became aware of their rights. Kailasavasini Devi's diary shows women freely exchanging ornaments among themselves, giving mortgages and even buying

and selling. The male family members were not aware of this.²² For these women, jewellery is an independent economic sphere of their own.

Again, on the day of a sudden financial problem, the woman would hand over her *Streedhan* to the family guardians. This significance of jewellery was also mentioned in the ancient law-codes. The *Yajnavalkya Samhita* states that in certain cases a wife can give up her right to her ornaments. For example, in the case of famine, a particularly effective religious ceremony, or illness of husband and any family member. But it's not just for families.²³ Many times, women have donated their jewellery for the greater interest of the society and the country. In the history of ancient India, we have seen women like Vishakha or Amrapali donating their ornaments to Buddhist Sanghas.²⁴ The tradition of taking the place of women in the larger world using their jewellery has been seen in our country since ancient times. The 20th century saw the practice of this tradition in a new form in the wake of the Indian freedom struggle.

Streedhan in Indian Freedom Struggle

From the beginning of the 20th century, India's nationalist movement began to gain strength. From the anti-partition movement to the various stages of India's freedom struggle, ordinary women have donated their gold ornaments to the fund of the movement. All the women of India could not directly fight for the freedom of the country. But they strengthened the struggle by donating their *Streedhan* to the fund of the movement. Many women gave ornaments to the non-cooperation and civil disobedience movement of India. Mahatma Gandhi wanted to unite the people of the country on the platform of national freedom struggle. At meetings and assemblies, Gandhiji appealed to women to donate their *Streedhan* to the fund of the freedom movement. Women from different parts of the country came forward to donate their ornaments. When the 'Tilak Swaraj Fund' was formed in the memory of Bal Gangadhar Tilak during the non-cooperation movement, many women across the country donated their jewellery to this fund and also joined in this fund collection. Bina Das, a memorable revolutionary, also donated ornaments to this fund in her childhood.²⁵ Along with collecting money from house to house, Renuka Roy used to collect ornaments from women. She wrote that sometimes women stood hidden in the alley next to their house and came to them to say that they can donate their ornaments when their husband would be outside the home.²⁶ Many people gave away their jewellery to the fund as they did not have cash. At a public meeting in Bangalore during the Harijan movement, Gandhiji appealed to women to donate him their ornaments. As a result, a total of Rs 90,000 worth of ornaments were collected in just one day. Rajamma, Subamma and Gowamma of Mysore guided women all over the country by giving all their ornaments.²⁷ At another gathering in 1934, Kaumudi, a sixteen years old girl from Malabar, donated all the ornaments she had saved for her wedding to Gandhiji. When Gandhiji asked how she will get married without jewellery, she replied, "I will wait for the man who will marry me, not my jewellery." Gandhiji told the girl, "Your sacrifice is your true ornament."²⁸

Jewellery also played an important role in funding the freedom struggle of the armed revolutionary stream. It is known from the memoirs of Ananta Singha that during the Chittagong Uprising under the leadership of Masterda Surya Sen, many women of Chittagong handed over their ornaments to the revolutionaries.²⁹ Despite the difference in Gandhiji's views and ways with Subhas Chandra Bose, who believed in armed struggle, Netaji was respectful of

the awakening that Gandhiji brought about among common people and women across the country. Many women donated their money and ornaments to the fund of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, who led the Azad Hind Bahini and to the fund of the Azad Hind Government formed by Netaji. The Rani Jhansi Brigade, led by Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan, included women of many religions and races from Southeast Asia. Many of them have never been to India. Nevertheless, they were ready to give their all for the freedom of India.³⁰ A unique incident of jumping into the country's freedom movement by giving up the right to jewellery is known from S. Gianni's memoir. He said a teenage Muslim girl had come to join the force. Her parents came to take her back home, but she refused. Her parents then threatened her that if she did not return home, all her ornaments would have to be returned to her parents. The girl removed all the ornaments one by one without a single word. Seeing the little girl's daring attitude, her elder sister said in a stern voice, "With your jewellery and clothes, we will complete your funeral." The girl replied, "No problem! I'm dead to you now. I have reborn here. From today I will start my new life with the aim of serving my motherland".³¹

Conclusion

It is true that the ancient scriptural society of India constructed the concept of *Streedhan* and controlled the relationship of women and ornaments to serve the heterosexual patriarchal interests. But with the flow of time, when women started to break the chain of patriarchy and stepped into the arena of the wider world, ornaments became an important tool for empowering, building and expressing their self-identity. While on the one hand, the donation of ornaments by women at different stages of the freedom movement and in different streams has energized the country's liberation struggle, on the other hand, by these acts the women of India have left their footprint on the larger political spectrum of the country.

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