Women and Jewelry: The Spiritual Dimensions of Ornamentation

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The people of India have expended limitless energy and creativity in the invention of ornaments that celebrate the human body. Adorning the visible, material body, they feel, satisfies a universal longing for the embellishment of its intangible counterpart, namely the human spirit.

Indeed rarely is a traditional Indian ornament simply decorative and devoid of inherent meaning or symbolic value. Symbols found in Indian jewelry act as a metaphorical language communicated from the wearer to the viewer. Such a jewelry is created from an infinite reserve of symbolically significant forms and images, some obvious, some subtle, and some whose meaning is forgotten.

Complementary to such thought is the conventional view where the graceful form of a woman is said to epitomize the ideal beauty and mystery inherent in nature. Thus befittingly each and every part of the feminine physique including the head, torso, limbs, and between the appended parts - have consistently been used to support ornaments, often in ingenious ways. The Indian idea being that only things covered with ornaments are beautiful. Poetry must overflow with rhetorical ornaments (alamkara), metaphors, alliterations, and other musical effects. The verb alam-kara, "to adorn, to decorate," means literally "to make enough": for the simple appearance without ornament is "not enough"; it is poor, disgraceful, shocking, except in the case of an ascetic. Hence the stress on adornment of the women, who are but the poetry of nature.

Ornamentation not only serves to please the eyes of the beholder but also fulfils an auspicious purpose. The impulse to adorn stems from a deep rooted sensibility to mark every occasion of life with auspicious symbols, designs and figures to obtain good fortune and protection from evil. Thus a fully bedecked woman evokes in the viewer a deep and ingratiating feeling of tranquil contentment, springing from an intuitive realization that evolving before him is an image of perfect beauty, symbolically conveying the richness and completeness which is but natural to nature.
The ancients who translated the abstract nuances of Indian philosophy into images of everyday reality went even further and canonized the adornment of the female form into sixteen different ornaments (solah shringar), covering her entire being from the head to toe. The choice of the number sixteen too is not without significance. It is a significant number among the Hindus, and corresponds to the sixteen phases of the life of the moon, which in turn is connected with a woman's menstrual cycle. This is another pointer to the feminine physiognomy being a microcosm of the rhythms of natural processes. Further a woman of sixteen is considered at the peak of physical perfection in her life. At this stage of her life the aspect of delight is most pronounced. Her nature is to play, seek new experiences, and to charm others to her. Her innocence attracts to her all that is true and good. Indeed it is common for deities to be described as eternally sixteen years old, which is considered the most beautiful and vigorous human age. In fact an important goddess is named after the Sanskrit name for sixteen (Shodashi), and is visualized as having all the above mentioned qualities.

The sixteen ornaments said to make up the standard repertoire of feminine adornment are:

**Bindi**

The bindi is a small ornamental dot placed at the center of the forehead, between the eyes.

The word itself is derived from the Sanskrit bindu, meaning dot. Metaphysically speaking, it is the dimensionless point of infinite potential from which has originated all manifested existence. It is further said to signify the mystical third eye, an invisible organ of spiritual perception and second sight, traditionally said to be situated at a point little above the place where the eyebrows meet. It is regarded as the channel of supreme wisdom and sublime intuition, and is said to confer divine knowledge. Here it is relevant to note that the two eyes are often likened to the sun and moon. The third symbolic eye is then said to represent fire. The two eyes are capable of seeing only the past and the present, but the third eye gives a potency to the perceptive powers making them see the future also.
Interestingly at some places men too adorn their foreheads with this ‘third eye’, but predominantly it remains a feminine trait.

**Sindoor (Vermilion)**

Sindoor is a deep, rich blood-red powder applied in the parting between the hair. Exclusively used by married women it represents their marital status. Significantly this same powder is an essential ingredient in Hindu rituals (puja). In relation to women the notable characteristic is the color of this powder. A vital red it is symbolic of fertility and the regenerative power inherent in women. At a practical level (especially in India where marriages are said to be made in heaven), it proclaims in loud terms the status of a woman committed irrevocably, and as passionately as the color of her sindoor, to a single individual, and thus being out of bounds for any other.

**Tika**

The tika is a composite ornament composed of a chain with a hook at one end and a pendant at the other.

It too like the sindoor is worn in the parting of the hair.

The hook holds the tika at the hair end, while the pendant falls on the exact center of the forehead. This place is believed to house the ‘ajna’ chakra. This chakra stands for preservation. Thus by adorning herself with this mark, a woman reiterates her status as the preservator of the order of the human race. Significantly this chakra is visualized as having two petals, and its presiding deity is Ardhanarishvara, the half-male, half-female androgyne. This
represents the ultimate union where no dualities exist. In Tantric terms this signifies the union of the male and female elements in nature, at all levels, including the physical. Hence this ornament is specifically associated with women about to undertake the vows of matrimony, uniting with her mate, and holding within herself the potential to perpetuate the genealogy of the new clan she is thus becoming a part of.

Anjana (Kohl)

"The eye could never have beheld the beautiful had it not been made beautiful first"
--- Plotinus

Ordinarily the eye is a comparatively neutral and receptive organ, but when intent is added to the look it can charge the glance with irresistible power. Every feeling of the heart is transmitted through the eye. The eye can communicate feelings of reverence and sympathy, or love and lust.

The Indian poet usually longed to sink "in the depths below depths of the eyes of his beloved." Most poetic similes about eyes in Indian poetry are drawn from nature. Eyes are like the narcissus, the almond, the lily, or "like fishes with their long, flashing glide."

A morning bath is a popular habit in India, and sprinkling the eyes with cold water is a necessity on account of the tropical climate. But there exists a popular powder kohl (technically the sulfide of antimony), also known as kajal, which has been used from time immemorial both to brighten and strengthen the eyes, and to darken the eyelashes.

A silver or ivory pencil, or a fine camel's hair brush is dipped in the kohl and passed along the borders of the lids with a light and gentle hand, taking care to carry the line of shading a trifle beyond the angle of the eyes. This will cleanse the eyes and give them a large, almond shape, delightful to look at.

"A fair maiden's transformation into lovely womanhood, when she comes of age, is indicated by the transfer of restlessness of her feet to her eyes, the orbs whereof keep always on the move," says an Indian sage. "When the slow music of time begins to sing a sad song into a woman's ears towards her prime, the flashing of the eyes is then a very good exercise, winking an excellent one."

Thus the highlighting of the eye is an acknowledgement of the maturing of a young girl in all her aspects, though the symbolism remains primary physical. Often a poet would address a heroine's eyes 'as deep as the sea'. Outlining with kajal establishes two discernable banks to these fathomless oceanic streams.

The erotic sentiment dominates the adorning of the eye. Large eyelashes, it is believed, make large eyes.

Therefore the Indian artist drew long spears of hair for the eyelashes he painted.
Also kohl, freely applied, will make each lash not only dark and bright but also so long that it is seen in full even when the face is turned aside.

The eyes' size is increased by drawing a short, fine pencil mark outwards from the corner of the lids where they join. Thus is created that sharpness in the glance that can let an Indian poetess say with pride to her lover:

"My eyes are not eyes, beloved, but arrows of light; My eyebrows are not eyebrows, but swords for your Destruction."

The easiest way of preparing kohl at home is by burning a cotton wick soaked in mustard oil and then collecting the smoke that arises in a silver spoon. A silver pencil is then dipped into it and passed along the eyelids. This is said to blacken the eyes and preserve them against the sun and air. The eyes change to moonstones, brilliant, glinting and flashing fire, as, in the words of Kalidasa, "they are weighted over by the eyelids and half closed under the deeps of their palaces."
Nath (Nose Ring)

The nose was once believed to be exclusively concerned with smell, but is now established to be connected with emotional responsivity also. In fact occultists go further, believing it to be the 'seat' of the sixth sense.

Further there is known to be a close connection between the nose and the sexual reflexes. It is a medically established fact that swelling of the nasal spongy tissues and congestion of the nose occur during sexual excitement in human beings. The nasal passages of women swell, and occasionally bleed, during menstruation. Indeed Wilhelm Fliess (d. 1928), friend and associate of Sigmund Freud, found a relationship between the nose and the female sexual apparatus, and held that certain gynecological complaints could be cured by cauterizing the appropriate parts of the nose.

In males there is believed to be an affinity between the nose and the virile member, and from ancient times it was thought that a large nose was a sign of a large male sexual organ. Similarly, a woman with a little nose is believed to have a small sexual apparatus. In a parallel custom, in a number of north European countries, and in England under the law of Canute (d. 1035), the punishment for adultery for both men and women was amputation of the nose, not only to cause disfigurement and loss of physical attractiveness, but also to symbolize punishment for the offending genitals. In India, the deflowering of a virgin is symbolically referred to as the removal of the 'nath' or nose ornament.

Thus the Indian aesthetic befittingly adorns the female nose with an inspired ornament, which highlights its amorous connotations. Indeed amongst the many jewels with which the Indian woman adorns herself, the nose ornament (nath) is the perhaps the most seductive. Ornaments for the nose take on a variety of shapes ranging from tiny jeweled studs resting on the curve of the nostril, to large gold hoops that encircle the cheek with graceful pendant pearls dangling provocatively just above the upper lip.

One can imagine the ornament making a very soft, sighing sound, like breeze moving over pipal leaves, as the head moves.

The length and position of nose ornaments often came in the way of comfortable eating, prompting the Abbe Dubois, a Christian missionary who lived in south India in the 19th century, to observe in amazement: "The right nostril and the division between the two nostrils are
Sometimes weighted with an ornament that hangs down as far as the under lip. When the wearers are at meals, they are obliged to hold up this pendant with one hand, while feeding themselves with the other. At first this strange ornament, which varies with different castes, has a hideous effect in the eyes of Europeans, but after a time, when one becomes accustomed to it, gradually seem less unbecoming, and at last one ends by thinking it quite an ornament to the face."

An integral part of traditional bridal jewelry, many aristocratic families have a special nath brought out at weddings to be worn by the bride. This is now perhaps the only occasion on which today's urban woman wears the nath, evoking its powerful seductive charm.

**Necklace (Haar)**

The neck is an important occult center. Because necklaces are often worn near the heart, they can be used to work on emotions, or to attract or strengthen love. By wearing a necklace of stones for example, it is believed that we are binding ourselves with their powers. From earliest times protective pendants, necklaces and strings of beads, as well as elaborate ornamental collars, were worn around the neck to bring good luck and avert the evil eye.

Indeed among all the kinds of jewelry, necklaces have had the maximum number of magical properties assigned to them. In some cases, they were designed as amulets or charms to insure good health or wealth to the wearer. Such necklaces could be very simple, with a gem or carving carrying the burden of the charm, or they could be very elaborate, glittering with gold and gems.

In all probability the form of the necklace was visualized with the explicit purpose of distracting the eyes of the viewer from the wearer's face and eyes - and thus protecting the wearer from the dangers of the mysterious Wicked Eye. The necklace hence also served as a protection against any attempt at hypnotizing, since such an effort would have had to start with a concentrated gaze at the wearer's face, an attempt which the necklace effectively undermined. A necklace in this manner acted as a powerful restraint against undesirable gentlemen trying out their charms on virtuous maidens.

Most likely, the predecessor of the necklace in India was a fresh flower garland, to which there are a number of references in literature. One of the more important designs of the necklace is known as champakali, i.e. 'buds of the champa (Michelia champaca) flower'. Many others derive inspiration from the jasmine flower, the fragrance of which has strong erotic connotations.

Even today, despite the emergence of paper and plastic flower garlands, the custom of offering fresh flower garlands has retained its charm.
Karn Phool (The Ear Flower)

From earliest times long ear lobes have been regarded as a sign of spiritual development and superior status. Among the distinguishing marks of the Buddha, and a sign of his greatness, were his large ear lobes. Homer (d.c. 800 BC) and Aristotle (d. 322 BC) reputedly also had the same characteristic.

There is believed to be a close connection between the ears and the sexual reflexes. The fleshy ear lobes, absent in all other primates, are not, as they appear to be, useless appendages, but erogenous zones which in sexual excitement become swollen and hypersensitive. In ancient times severed ears were offered to the Mother Goddess as a substitute for the male organs. In Egypt devotees offered their ears to the goddess Isis, and till the early decades of the Christian era, sculpted ears were offered at the shrine of the Great Mother in other parts of the Middle East.

The boring of ear lobes has been widely practiced in all parts of the world from early times. The purpose of this operation is not only to facilitate the wearing of earrings for beauty, but to protect the wearer from evil influences, the adornments serving as talismans. The practice was also thought to have some therapeutic value. In certain places, ear piercing was believed to be good for the eyes; it also sharpened the mind and drew off 'bad humors'.

One historian attributes the piercing to the desire to punish the ears for overhearing what they should not hear. The earrings, in turn, were the consolation for the pain and suffering. It was believed that the more decorative and expensive the earrings, the greater the consolation.

Early sculptures demonstrate that ear ornaments were an important constituent of Indian female attire. To the married woman, the ear ornament was (and is) auspicious. Additionally a woman's wealth was conspicuously visible and the ear ornament became a statement of her status and power; elongated ear lobes were considered a sign of beauty and wealth - the longer the lobe, the greater the woman's wealth. By appending ornaments to almost every part of the ear, the woman also ensured a continuous state of mental and physical well being. Indeed recent studies have identified the ear as a microcosm of the entire body - "the point of vision in acupuncture is situated in the center of the lobe."

The Indian woman's bejeweled ear offers a sight that prompted the exclamation: "European ladies are content with one appendage to each ear, while the females of Hindustan think it impossible to have too many."
Ancient Prakrit and Sanskrit literature describe girls wearing fresh flowers in their ears. A range of floral earrings of gold, silver or precious stones that have been popular over the centuries in India suggest that the forms of flowers were, almost literally, translated into precious jewelry. Most ear ornaments are virtually bunches (jhumka) of fruits and flowers. A particular type, known as the karnphul, i.e. 'ear-flowers' is considered particularly auspicious. These are an important, universal, large, round metal flower-form earring, with a central stud at the back being the equivalent of a flower stem.

The choice of the flower as the inspiring shape behind this conception is not without significance. Flowers in addition to being natural erotic stimulants, by virtue of their association with Kama, the god of love, are also essentially a concise symbol of nature, condensing into a brief span of time the cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth. In addition it also reflects gentleness, youth, spiritual perfection and artless innocence, qualities which are but the fundamental attributes of feminine character.

Often they are so heavy that the ear lobe dilates to the extent that the long-hanging earrings worn in the widened orifices touch the shoulder.

Foreign travelers were fascinated by the sight of elongated ear lobes and have recorded their astonishment. Travelling in Kerala, Edward Terry commented on this practice among 'gentile' women: "The flaps or nether part of their ears are bored, when they are young, which hole daily stretched and made wider by things kept in it for that purpose, at last becomes so large, that it will hold a Ring (I dare boldly say, as a large as a little saucer) made hollow on the sides for the flesh to rest in." Amusing stories of ear holes the size of large eggs and plates, through which many a bold individual attempted to pass his arms abound.
Henna (Mehndi)

'When she puts henna on her hands
and dives in the river
One would think one saw fire twisting
and Running in the water.'
-- Dilsoz, 18th century AD

Unlike real tattoo, which is permanent, some decorative patterns created on the skin with stain or dye are not immediately removable but, depending on the dye strength, can last for three or four weeks. Mehndi, the Hindi term for "henna," is one such temporary tattoo.

Men agree that mehndi patterns on a woman evoke thrilling, erotic sensations, perhaps because they associate mehndi with a maiden's initiation into mature womanhood.

The custom of applying elaborate mehndi patterns to the hands and feet is a symbol of satisfaction and happiness in marriage among the Hindus. This belief derives partly from the dye's red color, universally considered to be auspicious; and which is also the color of a bride's dress. Mehndi is commonly applied to propitiate Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, son of Shiva, who overcomes obstacles and is always invoked to attend a Hindu marriage ceremony. It is also considered very dear to Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and fortune. Indeed if ever there was a plant associated with luck and prosperity, it is the henna bush.

Mehndi has a great significance in all Eastern wedding traditions, and no wedding is complete without the decoration of the bride's hands and feet - in many cultures on both the front and back of the hands right up to the elbow, and on the bottom half of the legs.

Mehndi is carried out on a bride's hands and feet the night before the marriage celebrations begin, often known as the 'mehndi ki raat' or night of henna, raat meaning night. A party of the bride's women relatives spend several hours at this joyful task, during which they sing appropriate songs, teasing her about her future:

"Oh, how sleep is hard to come by, once her hands have been adorned with the mehndi of her beloved."
"Oh, friends, come and decorate my hands with mehndi, write my beloved's name. Just see how auspicious this occasion is."
"Everyone's fate is held within the lines on our palms, it is on these palms that mehndi paints such beautiful pictures."

The mehndi night is something like a hen night in the West, with all the bride's female friends and relatives getting together to celebrate.

For the bride, the process is therapeutic in calming and preparing her for the event.

Mehndi signifies the strength of love in a marriage. The darker the mehndi, the stronger the love. The color of henna specifically has symbolic significance because red is the color of power and fertility. Many brides believe that the deeper the color of the mehndi, the more passionate the marriage. The design itself is important, too. Sometimes the groom's name is incorporated into the bride's complex mehndi tattoos, and it is a delightful task to try finding it - often taking up hours to accomplish.
After marriage, mehndi may be applied to a woman on any auspicious occasion, such as the birth or naming of a child.

Mehndi designs are an aspect of folk art requiring a well-developed decorative sense. Though the community perpetuates old patterns, innovative designs may also be introduced, which gradually enter the communal design repertoire. But an interesting aspect is that whatever be the innovation or tradition, only vegetative motifs are used. Thus henna is an attempt to symbolically link women with the vegetative and organic nature of Nature, along with its associated concepts of birth, nourishment, growth, regeneration etc.

Additionally, the purpose of tattooing is mainly apotropaic: to it is credited an evil-averting, magical function. Especially in animist societies, the tattoo acts to repel the forces of evil believed to be constantly active and attempting to gain advantage over the unwary, unprotected individual, causing misfortune, illness, or even death. In India, it is believed that an auspicious occasion like a marriage requires an extra protection against evil forces. This is because such occasions are celebrated with much pomp and show, amidst a high profile, making the probability of their being noticed by negative forces very high. The application of henna is thus an attempted safeguard against any such dark influences.

As well as being a lavishly colorful cosmetic, Mehndi is also supposed to have many healing qualities, many herbal doctors still recommend the use of Mehndi for some ailments, such as dry skin and to hasten the healing of cuts and scratches. It also acts a hair conditioner when applied on the head and is also said to stop hair loss by strengthening the roots of the hair.

According to Loretta Roome, a henna expert, in societies where mehndi is traditionally practiced, marriages are often scheduled to coincide with ovulation. "That's part of the intention," she said. "It's a fertility rite. The henna is the color of blood, representing the breaking of the hymen. In fact, Muslims call mehndi 'love juice.'"

**Bangles (Wrist Ornament)**

"Bangle-sellers are we who bear
Our shining loads to the temple fair.
Who will buy these delicate,
bright Rainbow-tinted circles of light?
Lustrous tokens of radiant lives
For happy daughters and happy wives."
-- Sarojini Naidu

One of the oldest art objects in India, the bronze statuette of a dancing girl excavated at Mohenjo Daro epitomizes the antiquity and the universality of wrist ornaments in India. She stands in the nude with one arm at her hip, the other arm completely weighed down with a collection of bangles. From then on the variety and shape of wrist ornaments spanned the gamut of nature’s materials and human creativity.
Indeed more than any other single jewelry form in India, the bangle has been crafted from the widest variety of materials. Ancient fragments testify that bangles were made from terracotta, stone, shell, copper, bronze, gold, silver and almost any material that lent itself to craftsmanship. Lac and glass bangles in a plethora of colors are a common sight in India even today. From simple plain circlets of metal, to ones decorated with etched and repousse designs, to fabulous examples with bird and animal-head terminals and studded with gems, these circlets symbolize the potent energy of the sun.

The sheer variety of wristlets of India is matchless anywhere in the world. Besides being a mark of a married woman, these have enormous romantic and amorous connotations. Often the Indian poet would indicate a woman pining for union with her husband or lover by bracelets slipping from her wrist due to her becoming thin in the agony of separation from him. The tinkling sound of women's bangles is full of significant messages expressing her presence, her wish for attention, her anger or desire to exchange glances.

An important concept associated with this feminine ornament has been responsible for its continuing popularity. It is a universally accepted idea that bangles identify the wearer as a married woman, reiterating her status as the beloved of her husband and the honored mother of a family. To the Indian woman, ornaments for the wrist have always been significant emblems of marriage. Even when changing bangles, a woman never allows her arm to be completely bare. A simple string or even the end of her sari is wrapped around the arm, until the new set is worn. Undoubtedly, the most popular bangles are those made of glass, worn by women of all classes of society, rich and poor. Girls may also wear them, but, for a married woman, their symbolism makes them a necessity. Generally between eight and twelve glass bangles are worn on each wrist, twenty-four in two matching sets.

**Armbands (Baajuband)**

The upper arm is the place where amulets strung on a black or red thread are often tied to keep the evil eye away.

It is also the spot where richly decorated armlets are worn. Unlike wristlets, the armlets need to be shaped in such a way that they remain in position through pressure. For this structural requirement, most armlets are made by suspending one or more talismanic pendants on a string or attaching to a strap which can be tightened and knotted as per the wearer's requirement.
Depending upon her community and her marital status a woman could wear a single piece of ornament, or cover the entire upper arm, from the elbow to the shoulder, with armlets made up of a variety of materials including gold, silver, ivory or shellac.

The use of the armlet is consistent with the Indian aesthetic which believes that anything beautiful must be adorned, or in other words anything unadorned is devoid of beauty. In this view point, the physical form of the female by virtue of being one of nature's most spectacular creations is an ideal playing ground for ornamentation and adornment. Thus the region between the elbow and the shoulder is given a highlighted consequence, making it an important part of the whole which is composed of a fully bedecked woman, according to the canons of the solah shringar. A perfect example of a complete, flawless beauty, if there ever existed one.

**Arsi (Thumb Ring with Mirror)**

The simple ring was not ignored in the vast array of larger ornament forms. Fingers are believed to function as a medium between the physical body and the spiritual body. Rings thus are an important part of the physio-metaphysical value of jewelry.

The thumb is the king of the palmar kingdom. According to anthropologists, the development of the thumb marked an important step forward in the anatomical and cultural evolution of the human race. In Chinese palmistry the thumb is considered so important, that often the whole character, state of health and future are read from the thumb alone. In Western Classical world the thumb was regarded as sacred to Venus and in hand-gestures it still has a phallic significance. This special ring with a round format has set in its center a small, usually round but sometimes heart-shaped mirror. The ring part, meant to fit snugly round a thumb, is broad so as to bear the weight of the rest of the piece.
Among all the rings worn on the hand, the arsi occupies a special place in a woman's heart, not only because of its impressive size, but because of the function it performs. With the mirror set into it, the young maiden wearing it (most often a bride), can look and check, by just turning the thumb, if all that was adorning her head, or her hair, was in place. Thus this unique piece of jewelry acts as a sentinel over the other ornaments contributing their efforts towards the embellishment of both a woman's physique and psyche. Much delight is associated with this ornament. Understandably, therefore, it features in songs and proverbs; and one comes across it in paintings too.

Hair Style (Keshapasharachna)

Hair is regarded in occultism as one of the most extraordinary parts of the body. It belongs to the element of earth as it is solid and tangible; to the element of water since it is free and flowing; to the element of fire since it fed from the furnace of the brain; and to the element of air since it is light and can be blown by the wind. Hair is both living, since it grows, and dead since it is without sensibility. It has its own life, grows more rapidly than anything else, and continues to grow after the death of the body. As such it constitutes a link between this world and the next.

Hair is a source of vital strength and magic power. It forms a crown encircling the head, the most sacred part of the body and is full of personal mana. It was a substitute for the whole body, and its sacrifice to the deities was an acceptable surrogate for a human victim. In Byblos in Phoenicia women had the alternative of sacrificing their virginity to strangers in honor of the goddess Ashtart, or shaving the head and offering her their hair.

The hair of women differs from that of men and was supposed to have great attractive power over men and nature. It was a temptation to the male and women were enjoined to visit temples with their hair covered so as not to distract the devout men present in the same place. Indeed witches knew the power that lay in their hair, and tossed their loosened tresses in ritual dances as a love charm, or bent down and shook their hair while uttering a curse! In many places in Europe the bride used to go to her wedding with her hair hanging freely down, but after the ceremony it was either cut a little, to signify the curtailment of her power and independence, or was bound up to symbolize her new
responsibility. Letting one's hair down still implies behaving in a free and unrestrained manner.

Elaborate coiffures have been the hallmark of women through every era in Indian history. The ritual of weekly oil bath and the preference for long black tresses still survives in India.

Oiled, combed and plaited, the hair is adorned with garlands of jasmine buds that bloom in the hair, radiating their heady perfume in a mesmeric spell of seduction.

Arranging the hair in three strands is considered the most auspicious. According to mythology, these three strands of a woman's plait are intended to symbolize the confluence of India's three most venerated rivers - the Ganga, the Yamuna, and the Saraswati - or the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Yet another legend states that one strand represents the father's house, one, the in-laws', and the third is the woman herself who unites the two.

Classical literature is replete with analogies of the swinging, lithe, snake-like form of a long plait. Chandi Dasa, the poet, describes Radha's hair:

"Like stilled lightning fair face
I saw her by the river.
Her hair dressed with jasmine,
Plaited like a coiled snake."

Often the ornamentation is a simplification of the elaborate crown worn by the deities, a further reiteration of a divine association.

Head ornaments are a category of Indian jewels that are fast vanishing. The first to fall prey to the goldsmith's melting crucible, they are now popular largely as part of bridal attire and the traditional ornamentation of classical dancers.
Kamarband (Ornament That Binds the Waist)

'So tender is her slender waist
It bends when a girdle of flowers is placed'
-- Tirrukural (South India)

The English word 'cummerbund' and the German 'Kummerband' for waist-band are derived from the Persian kamar, waist, and bandi, a band. The word is prevalent in most northern Indian languages. The immense popularity of waist ornaments is evidenced by a large number of temple sculptures, frescoes and miniature paintings ranging from the Indus valley civilization till today, in an unbroken tradition.

Indians have always found the middle region or midriff of the female sensational tantalizing. The quintessential garment of the Indian female the sari is designed so as to give a scandalous view of the midriff while preventing from the vision any other significant part of the anatomy.

Thus befittingly there exists an impulse to adorn it with an ornament exquisite enough to highlight its seductive allure. Hence came about the waist belt, a graceful extension of the girdle, which serves a dual purpose; it restrains the lower garment in place and is yet another embellishment to the feminine form.

Designed to be held on the hip, it holds together the folds of the sari, especially in situations where women engage themselves in heavy movements like dancing. Its presence is evident in almost every female image throughout Indian history.

The waist ornament is always made up in a manner so as to conveniently hold a bunch of keys. These signify the keys to a fresh bride's new home, and her assumption of a new position of authority, in a domain where her writ runs large. Often it is handed over by the mother in law to the daughter in law, symbolically delivering over the reins to the new generation.
Anklet (Payal) and Toe Rings

"Hail to that foot of the lusty beloved which hits the head of the lover, that foot which is adorned with red paste and jingling anklets is the banner of love and which is worthy of adoration by inclining one's head."
-- From the 5th century drama, Padataditakam (Hit by the Foot)

Feet are the support of the entire body and therefore accorded great significance. Indeed the foot is the human pedestal, in direct contact with Mother Earth, absorbing vigor from her powerful emanations.

Paradoxically in the Indian tradition, the feet are considered the humblest, most impure, and polluting part of the body, and therefore command respect by those who surrender their ego to the venerable. Humbling oneself by touching the feet of one's elders or prostrating oneself before them or worshipping the feet or sandals of a deity or a holy man are expressions of respect.

It is mentioned in the Ramayana that when Lakshmana was asked if he recognized the jewels recovered in the forest as belonging to his brother's wife Sita, he replied that he recognized neither the armlets nor the earrings. Only the anklets were familiar to him, since his gaze with reverence appropriate to the times, never strayed above Sita's feet.

By the same token of expression of submissiveness, a lover is often portrayed in art or described in literature as falling at his beloved's feet or admiring them with gentle caresses:

"The hair of the lover, who has fallen at the feet of his beloved, are entangled in her anklets, which indicates that he has given up his pride."
-- Prakrit Pushkarini

The feet of a nayika, worthy of a lover's affection, are abundantly adorned with anklets. He admires her feet by caressing them as a demonstration of his ultimate devotion to her.

It was in this context that Indian painting, drama, and poetry referred to men treasuring the touch of the foot of their beloved, and women lavishing great cosmetic attention to their feet and adorning them with as much care as they would take to beautify their face. The tender foot then becomes the symbol of affection and sensual desire, and plays an effective role in love-play.
In Sanskrit, the anklet is known as 'nupura,' etymologically the word nupura is connected to antah pura, the female apartments in a palace, which in the ancient times was a mysterious place, holding within itself the promise of a thousand pleasures. Indeed poets imagined that with her every step, the heroine's tinkling anklets beckoned her lover.

In a charming aside, it is worthwhile mentioning here that women in some tribes are given foot bells, chains, and tinkling anklets, not only to frighten snakes away when they move outside at night, but in order that their husbands may know where they are when they cannot be seen!

The charm of the heroine's rhythmic swinging of her body and wavy skirt is enhanced by the jingling sounds of the anklets (small tinkling bells are almost always attached to anklets). These sounds inspired Indian poets to describe the motion of a nayika, the heroine in romantic Indian literature, as bewitching and seductive. The association is that she has bedecked herself with the most wonderful jewelry in anticipation of a rendezvous with her lover in a secluded grove.

Classical Indian dance too is not untouched by the allure of the anklet. In most Indian dances, rhythmic footwork is one of the most important elements, in combination with gestures of the arms, hands, and eye movements. The various classical texts on dance, such as the Natyashastra, provide elaborate details on the positioning of the foot and its contact with the ground, the toe and ball of the foot touching the ground or only the heels or big toe doing so. The rhythmic stamping of the foot in its various positions generates forth a rich variety of charming harmonies from the anklet, contributing not a little to the overall dance performance, suggesting subtle erotic undertones. 'Music of the ankle bells' is often how the ancients described it.

On a practical level, Amongst tribal women, long tubular bands of brass encircle the ankle all the way up to the calf to protect them against snake bites while walking through long grass.
Strictly speaking, golden anklets are forbidden. This is because gold symbolizes Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth, and it is considered sacrilegious to wear it on one's feet.

Finally on the feet are worn toe rings. Often these may be attached to the payal itself, with chains linking them.

Perfume (Itra)

"Refine your soul,
Refresh your thoughts,
Recharge your emotions."

The legendary reputation of Indian perfumes is upheld if we contemplate the variety of scents manufactured and used throughout the country. All scents are ascribed to divine origin, and it is fairly certain that perfume was prepared in India, as early as the 15th century BC.

Traditionally perfumes made from flowers were preferred, their fragrance complimenting and accentuating the characteristic, sensuous body odor emanating naturally from the female persona. Through the developing centuries, the use of perfume has been raised to a fine art. There are perfumes for different hours of a day, perfumes to suit each dress, fragrances to reflect the personality of different types of women according to their color, build, character, age, and even the sexual drive. The use of certain fragrances is also supposed to heighten the spirit of certain seasons, thus reflecting the moods of nature. For example, there is the haunting, heavy scent which reproduces the smell of the earth after rain; a fecund, earthy, fleshy and carnal essence, confirming the identification of women with Mother Earth. Another known as kasturi is subtly conducive to rest in the tense, heavy Indian summer. It is believed to go with yellow and orange robes, and evokes the proper mood of love for a newly wedded couple. Similarly the scent of saffron (kesar) is intoxicating in the extreme and evokes an ecstatic response like that produced by the heady influence of wine.

The Indian woman applies her perfume discreetly and cunningly, to her clothes, the lobes of her ears, her eyebrows, the palms of her hands, and other parts of her body with an artful expedience. This exercise requiring ingenuity is one which gives expression to her true character.
The Bridal Dress

'When in your floating robe,
Woven with red silk and golden,
In your floating robe
Held around your hips
By a broidered belt,
Showing all curves
Of your reckless body
You pass me by,
I feel come to me
A wild and mad desire.'
- - From the Burmese of Asmapur, 19th century, AD.

The ancient sculptures of Sanchi, Amravati, and Khajuraho show the Indian woman's robe to be light and falling in beautiful free folds from the hips, to below the knees. There are no unhealthy, restrictive collars, and nothing to impede the free circulation of blood. The dress facilitates free body movement. This dressing tradition continues to the present day.

The bridal dress has a quasi-sacred status. It is nearly always of a deep red color.

Red is considered auspicious because it has several emotional, sexual and fertility-related qualities, making it a suitable color for brides. It also signifies the virginal status of the bride. Indeed in some traditions, the nuptial bed is inspected after the first night for traces of blood, which confirm that the lady in question was a virgin before marriage. In India it is stressed that virginity should be a gift from a wife to her husband on their first night together.

Further highlighting its import is the weighty embroidery embellished with various motifs and metaphors all emphasizing the fertility symbolism and vegetative associations, linked to creation and growth.
Sometimes minutely ornamented all over, the view of a new, bedecked bride draped in this garment, colored the color of passion, is a breathtaking one.

The bridal garment is without exception extremely rich in all aspects, reiterating the significance of this momentous event in the life of an individual.

**Conclusion**

Of a richly sensuous disposition, the ancient people of India insisted that their sensuality be refined with thought:

'In restless brow and twinkle of the eye,
In smiling modesty and gentle tones,
In graceful gait and posture, woman owns
A beauty parlor and an armory'
- - Bhartihari (c. 600 AD)

Indeed woman is beauty at its active and sportive best. The ancients found in a woman's walk the same majestic yet lithe and graceful rhythm as in the steps of a peacock. In the playfulness of a young maiden was discovered the charm of a deer leaping across a jungle stream. An alert woman, with her necklaces resting on her full breasts, was compared to a sloping hill with a sunlit cascade coursing down its sides.

It was believed that just a woman beautifies her home so should she her body. Such a combination was supposed to invite blessings and prosperity from the gods.

If it is true for humans that to beautify the mind is to beautify the body, the converse is equally true: to beautify the body is to beautify the soul. Creative Indian psychology nurtured a positive attitude. The desire to cultivate physical beauty was not considered shameful and superficial. The philosophers of love, like Vatsyayana in the Kama Sutra, advise that the art of makeup be practiced as a ritual. Even the 'plainest' woman adorns herself, she does not resign herself to her fate that either one is beautiful or not, and there is the end to it.
The essential significance of the above exegesis can be summed up in the fact that in the canons of Indian art, whenever a lady was represented in the nude, i.e. without any trace of clothing, her glorified physical form always carried the same weight of jewelry which she would have worn, when fully clothed.

Thus rightly said A.K. Coomarswamy, noted authority on Oriental Art:

"One needs to be an Indian woman, born and bred in the great tradition, to realize the sense of power that such jewels as earrings and anklets lend their wearers; she knows the full delight of swinging jewels touching her cheek at every step, and the fascination of the tinkling bells upon her anklets"

It is reassuring and pleasurable to observe that these traditional values are still held valuable in the India of today.

References and Further Reading

- Alamkara (5000 years of Indian Art); Published by National Heritage Board, Singapore, in association with Mapin Publishing, India, 1994.

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