

The Social Life of Great Mughal's Jewelry and Gemstones

Abstract

This article proposes that Mughal jewelry and gemstones had a social life. The way royal karkhana manufactured and emperors and royal family members circulated, controlled and gifted, determined the value of jewelry. The social and economic value was not inherited in jewelry, rather how it was understood and judged by people and how jewelry resisted the desire of people to possess them. The process of manufacturing involved a specialized knowledge employed in royal karkhana. The control over this knowledge also made the jewelry rare in medieval Indian society.

Keywords: Mughals; Jewelry; Gemstones; Karkhana; craftpersons

Introduction

Luxury items, especially jewelry, have their own social life or social biography. Arjun Appadurai proposes that objects, just like humans, also have their own social biographies.¹ And that the value of things is created by their circulation, either through gift exchange or through imposing restrictions on their circulation by the use of power, which is also regarded as politics of value. By borrowing this idea, we suggest that Mughal jewelry also had their own social lives and the Mughals used their power to create a value of certain jewelry items either by patronizing the jewelry making industry or by restricting the sales of precious gemstones in the local market through court nobles or members of the royal family. Considering the importance of jewelry in the Mughal Empire, we have all the more reasons to explore the social life of things in medieval India.²

German Sociologist, Georg Simmel, proposes that value is never an inherent property of objects but it is created by judgment of people.³ A thing attains value when it resists our desire to own it.⁴ This idea fittingly explains how the Mughals created the value of jewelry items during their rule. To make the Mughal jewelry valuable, Mughal emperors patronized the jewelry industry and set up their own royal *karkhanas* and hired skillful workers to create expensive ornaments. For instance, in the reign of Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar (r.1542-1605),⁵ out of twelve treasurers, three were responsible for managing the royal gemstones, gold and jewelry items.⁶ One treasurer, who was solely responsible for jewelry items, had a whole establishment comprising assistants and craftpersons.⁷ The Mughal emperors took keen interest in jewelry manufactured in the royal *karkhana*, where skilled craft persons were hired. In one of his letters written to a French writer in 1663, Francois Bernier, a European traveler and personal physician of Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of Shah Jahan (r.1628-1658)⁸ during his stay in India between 1656 and 1668 records his fascination about the royal *karkhana* for manufacturing jewelry and day-long hard-work of skilled craftpersons.⁹

Specialised Knowledge of gemstones and jewelry

The specialised knowledge of gemstone and jewelry from the selection of raw material to polishing and manufacturing of the final product, distinguished the royal *karkhana* from the other goldsmiths.¹⁰ The Mughals ensured to hire any and all skilled craftpersons for the royal *karkhana*. The specialised knowledge of jewels particularly involved their selection and storage according to size and type. Abul Fazal (1551-1602), the grand wazir of Mughal Emperor Akbar, gives details in *Ain-e-Akbari* about gemstones which included rubies,¹¹ diamonds,¹² and pearls.¹³

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Craftspersons in the royal *karkhana* employed various techniques, such as *meenakari* and *kundan* jewelry, which were not easy to emulate by the ordinary goldsmiths.¹⁴ The Mughals adopted *meenakari* as their dynastic identity marker. The word *meenakari* is derived from a Persian word *mina* or *minoo* which means “Heaven”. *Meenakari* was a tedious technique and it introduced many floral patterns on the jewelry items.¹⁵ Similarly, the Mughals also popularized the *kundan* jewelry items. The word *kundan* means pure gold. Abul Fazl explains: “In other countries jewels are placed in tiny sockets on the ornament. But in Hindustan, the jewels are affected with *kundan* which is a pure gold. This gold is so ductile that it can very easily be molded by jeweler.”¹⁶ The royal craftspersons had their specialities for manufacturing jewelry of particular kinds, such as *zarnishan*,¹⁷ *koftgar*,¹⁸ *meenakar*,¹⁹ *sadahkar*,²⁰ *shabakahkar*,²¹ *Munabbat-kar*,²² *charmkar*,²³ *simbaf*,²⁴ *sawadkar*²⁵ and *zar-kob*.²⁶

The Mughal administration paid differently to the skilled artisans. Abul Fazl informs us about the payments during Akbar’s reign.²⁷ The Mughal nobility also hired skilled craftsmen on higher salaries to ensure that they got beautifully designed, unique jewelry not available to any other. There is also some evidence that many times craftsmen were reluctant to work in major cities because of exploitation by the royalty and the nobility.²⁸

Circulation of Jewelry, Pearls and Gemstones

According to Arjun Appadurai the value of a thing is created by circulation of things through commodity exchange.²⁹ Marcel Mauss proposes in *The Gift* that a noticeable contemporary tendency is to designate “the world of things inert and mute” and only known by names or words inscribed by the people.³⁰ Appadurai also states that the meanings of things are “inscribed in their forms, uses and their trajectories”. Things, when in circulation, highlight their human and social contexts.³¹ It was not the Mughal jewelry itself, rather its ownership and limited circulation made those items valuable. Contemporary sources suggest that the circulation and the mode of display of jewelry in Mughal India changed over time. Initially, the Mughal emperors were less interested in jewelry items, thus it had not much value. It was during the reign of Akbar, when the male royal family members began taking special interest in jewelry. New *karkhana* were established and craftspersons experimented with different designs and styles under the royal patronage. Thus, the jewelry became more valuable.

One of the many examples of limited circulation of gold was enameled gold used in silk turbans of the Mughal emperors. These turbans were ornamented gold, feather, and precious pearls and gemstones. Emperor Zahir- u-din Muhammad Babur (r. 1526-1530) wore his turban with a heron feather which were either attached at the center of the turban or at its side. While Humayun (r. 1530-1540, 1555-1556), the second Mughal emperor’s turban was also similar in design but it was decorated with a white ostrich feather.³² There was very little use of jewelry by these early emperors. The Mughal Emperor Akbar initiated it. He wore turban adorned with jeweled cords of pearls with floral ornament or sometimes with a feather of the black heron.³³ A French traveler, Jean de Thévenot, who visited India in 1666 witnessed that Emperor Jahangir wore even more gems and jewels than his father did. He also wore rings on every finger.³⁴ William Hawkins who came to India in 1608 as an envoy of the East India Company to negotiate with Jahangir to set up a factory in India, was amazed to see such turbans: “the gold set with stones brooches (*sarpech*) for their heads where they had put feathers in them, were very expensive and about two thousand in number.”³⁵ Shah Jahan was a gem lover. His turban was adorned with rubies, pearls and emeralds. While Aurangzeb, being rather unpretentious, preferred his turban with simple ornaments. His turban was usually adorned with a single or double chain of pearls along with expensive gemstones like rubies and emeralds.³⁶

Mughal emperors were fond of expensive necklaces and chains of pearls, gemstones, and rare beads. Necklaces of pearls usually consisted of simple layers of pearls with colorful pendants and heavy necklaces with sparkling gemstones. The jewelry made of these precious gemstones and rare beads gave the wearer a rich look and showed his high status.

Circulation of things creates their value. The first and foremost method of circulation in the medieval period was gift exchange. Initially, during the Mughal rule, jewelry items were not so valuable because their use as gift was not in fashion. However, as Akbar’s reign began, it became fashionable to give jewelry as gift or reward which made the Mughal jewelry valuable. For instance, in the memoirs of Babur we can see a trend of gold and silver buttons and waist belts and rewards were given in the form of money not jewelry: “On one occasion of a feast, a dagger was bestowed on Mir Muhammad, the raftsmen who had made an excellent bridge over the river Ganga, and also a dagger was bestowed on the matchlockmen champion (Pahlwan). Babur also presented the jackets having buttons

and silk dresses of honour to the servants of Babur's daughter Masuma and his son Hindal. He also gave presents of jackets and silk dresses of honour, of gold and silver, of planishing and various goods to those people who came from Andijan and to those who had come from Sukh and Hushir. Gifts of same kind were given to the servants of Qurban and shaikhi and peasants of kahmard."³⁷ Here, money is more important gift than gold or jewelry.

In most of the cases, the context of awarding jewelry, gold and gemstones, made them important. Take an example of gifts which Babur gave on the birthday celebration of his grandson and wedding ceremony of Kamran: "In congratulation on the birth of Humayun's son and Kamran's marriage, Mulla Tabrizi and Mirza Beg Taghai were sent with gifts (*sachaq*) to each Mirza of 10,000 *shahrukhis*, a coat I had worn, and a belt with clasps. Through Mulla Bihishti were sent to Hindal an inlaid dagger with belt, an inlaid ink-stand, a stool worked in mother-o'-pearl, a tunic and a girdle, together with alphabet of the Baburi script and fragments (*qitalaar*) written in the script...."³⁸ Here, one coat, which Babur had worn, was used as gift. The value of this gift was not intrinsic. It was the context and usage by an emperor which made this gift precious.

Initially, the Mughals did not use jewelry as royal gift exchange. Gulbadan Begum, a sister of Humayun, while giving details about the marriage of Mirza Hindal,³⁹ in *Humayunnama*, She does not mention the use of jewelry by men on the occasion. However, she writes about the bride being adorned with gold and precious ornaments. "Mirza Hindal's bride was adorned with nine jackets (*nimtana*) with garniture of jeweled balls, one of ruby, one of cornelian, one emerald, one of turquoise, one of topaz and one of cat's eye. She wore nine necklaces and one embroidered collar and bordering and four short jackets with ball trimming (*tumkadar*) and one pair of ruby earrings and another of pearls."⁴⁰

Gemstones, gold and silver jewelry acquired significance when royals began to give them as gifts in Akbar's reign. It was a period when men began wearing jewelry frequently. Abul Fazl gives a detailed description about the men's jewelry: "A man was adorned with twelve things: trimming his beard; ablution of his body; drawing the sectorial marks of caste; anointing with perfumes and oil; wearing gold earrings; wearing the *jama* fastened on the left side; bearing the *mukuta* which is a golden tiara worn on the turban; wearing the sword; wearing a ring on the finger; eating betel; wearing sandals or shoes; carrying a dagger."⁴¹

Thomas Roe (1581-1644), who was an envoy of England in the Mughal court of Jahangir, gives details about the emperor's appearance on his birthday celebration: "His [Jahangir's] turban was plumed with heron's feather; on one side was a ruby as big as walnut; on the other side was a large diamond; in the centre was a large emerald, shaped like a heart. His sash was wreathed with a chain of pearls, rubies and diamonds. His neck chain consisted of three double strings of pearls. He wore armlets set with diamonds on his elbows; he had three rows of diamonds on his wrists; he had rings on nearly every finger."⁴²

In *Tuzk-e-Jahangiri*, Jahangir mentions that "he was so blessed with Allah's blessings that his son presented him a very delicate and elegant ruby in Ajmer on his victory. The cost of ruby was about 60000 rupees (of those times). Jahangir struck with an idea to make a *bazoband* from it. But for that, he needed two elegant and rare pearls in equal weight and volume. One such pearl was presented to him from Maqarab Khan on Nauroz. Now, he wanted the other pearl. Meantime, his son Khurram found a similar pearl from the house of Jewelry of his forefathers, so the pearl was extracted and Jahangir ordered for making amulet which he later on wore on his arm and thanked to Allah for His mercy and joy."⁴³

Mughal emperors were fond of rings which were made of beautiful rubies, diamonds, emeralds and other precious gemstones. Thumb rings were very common in Mughal fashion. These thumb rings were worn on the right thumb to assist drawing the strings of a bow. Mughals usually used thumb rings often made of nephrite and also agate, carnelian, rock crystal and even emerald. Sometimes, thumb rings had an oval mirror in the center for seeing their reflection. Such thumb rings were known as *arsi* rings.

Seventeenth-century Mughal sources suggest that men used earrings or studs as a token of thanks. Jahangir mentions in his memoirs: "On Thursday in the month of Rajab, he [Jahangir] pierced his ears and wore earrings, with one pearl, in each because he had vowed during his illness that on recovery, he would wear earrings to show his devotion physically for Khawaja Moin-ud-din Ajmairi as he felt that his life was because of his miracles. Moreover, when the courtiers, servants, who were in service, and other *umerah* and servants, who were appointed on the

borders, saw him, they also started to wear earrings with ruby and pearls, which were given to them from imperial jewelry house. His imitation of that furry went beyond the *mansabdar* and *umerah* to the local people.”⁴⁴

Mughals associated various meanings with jewelry. For instance, Jahangir took particular pleasure in thumb rings made from Walrus tusk, as the grained walrus horn was unusual and extremely difficult to come by, and also because it was regarded as an antidote to poison and was supposed to have healing power. Shah Jahan possessed a few particularly valuable thumb rings which were enameled on the inside and in some cases had his title *Sahib Qiran-i-Thani* inlaid in the inner surface of the ring in flawless calligraphy with minute rubies. Thumb rings were often regarded as ornaments and status symbol. Sometimes decorative strands of pearls are seen hanging from the belt of noblemen and were probably a standard accessory to a particular type of robe. Among the arm ornaments *bazoband* or armlet were frequently used by Mughals. Mughal emperors also wore amulets around their shoulders to ward off evil eyes. These *bazoband* and amulets were fully laced with diamonds, rubies and pearls.

Value of a thing can be created by a control over its production, sale and purchase through a politically mediated process—the creation of a value. Kopytoff gives a concept of “enclaved commodities”. According to him, the enclaved commodities are the commodities which are controlled by the royal power and kings by imposing restrictions on their circulation.⁴⁵ Those in power deliberately control or freeze the flow of commodities by setting up laws and regulations for their circulation. This method of controlling circulation acts as a Trojan horse of value shifts.⁴⁶ In the same way, the Mughal administration also controlled the production of royal *karkhana* which in turn helped to increase the value of Mughal jewelry.

To ensure that whatever the Mughals wore would not be available in the market, they purchased the pearls of high quality by paying their high prices. Tavernier, a French jeweler merchant who visited India in the sixteenth century, surprises the readers by telling that pearls were transported from Europe to the East because the Mughal kings and nobles, since could not get good-sized pearls in the oriental fisheries, paid higher prices for them than the Europeans did. They paid high prices not only for the pearls but also for all the other precious stones.⁴⁷ According to Tavernier: “All the Orientals are very much of our taste in matters of whiteness and I have always remarked that they prefer the whitest pearls, the whitest diamonds....”⁴⁸

Similarly, the Mughal emperors changed their necklaces regularly. Their jewelry and gemstones were unique. William Hawkins claimed that Jahangir had a vast number of diamonds to wear and changed his diamond jewelry every day and never repeated any jewelry. All his jewelry items were divided into good proportions to be worn every day. He used to wear chains of pearls and emeralds and ballast rubies. The Mughal King also wore a jewel mounted on his turban which, in turn, was ornamented with fair diamonds and rubies.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The Mughals attributed various meanings to jewelry and gemstones. These meanings were derived from their belief system, process of manufacturing and the ways of circulation. The Mughals hired skilled craftspersons for royal *karkhana*. These craftpersons had specialized knowledge of treating gold and gemstones. Social and cultural processes of circulation determined the value of jewelry items and gemstones. The Mughal royal family and *umerah* limited the circulation of jewelry and gemstones in the market by regularly changing the jewelry they wore; purchasing gemstones and pearls from European traders; patronising rare and new techniques for making jewelry such as *meenakari* and *kundan* jewelry which became the identity marker of the dynasty.

References and Endnotes

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- ⁴ Ibid., 67.
- ⁵ Andre Wink, *Akbar* (New York: One world Publications, 2012).
- ⁶ Abul Fazl, *Ain-e-Akbari* (Calcutta: Baptist mission press, 1873), 14. Nafisa Ali Sayed, *Mughal Jewellery: A Sneak Peek of Jewellery Under Mughals* (New Delhi: Partridge Publishing, 2015).
- ⁷ Abul Fazl, *Ain-e-Akbari*, 15.
- ⁸ Fergus Nicoll, *Shah Jahan* (London: Haus, 2009).
- ⁹ Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Moghul Empire* (London: oxford university press, 1914), 258.
- ¹⁰ Michael Bycroft & Sven Dupre, eds., *Gems in the Early Modern World: Materials, Knowledge and Global Trade, 1450–1800* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
- ¹¹ Rubies: 1st class rubies, not less than 1000 muhrs in value, 2nd class from 999 to 500 muhrs ; 3rd class from 499 to 300; 4th class from 299 to 200 ; 5th class from 199 to 100; 6th class from 99 to 60; 7th class from 59-40 ; 8th class from 39-30; 9th class from 29 to 10; tenth class from 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 5 ; 11th class from 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 muhr ; 12th class from $\frac{3}{4}$ muhr to $\frac{1}{4}$ rupee. They made no account of rubies of less value.
- ¹² Diamonds, emeralds and red and blue yaquts were classified as follows: 1st class from 30 muhrs upwards; 2nd class from 29 $\frac{3}{4}$ th from 15 muhrs ; 3rd class from 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 12 ; 4th class from 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ th to 10 ; 5th class from 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ th to 7; 6th class from 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 5 ; 7th class from 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 3; 8th class from 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 2; 9th class from 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 muhrs; 10th class from 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ rupees to 5 rupees; 11th class from 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 2 rupees ; 12th class from 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ rupee.
- ¹³ The pearls were divided in sixteen classes and strings. “The first string contained twenty pearls each of a value of 30 muhrs and upwards ; 2nd class pearls varied from 29 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 15 muhrs ; 3rd class from 14th to 12 ; 4th class from 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 10 ; 5th class from 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 7; 6th class from 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 5; 7th class from 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 3 ; 8th class from 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 2 ; 9th class from 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1; 10th class less than a muhr down to 5 rupees; 11th class less than 5 to 2 rupees; 12th class less than 2 rupees to 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ rupees ; 13th class less than 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ rupees to 30 dams; 14th class less than 30 dams to 20 dams ; 15th class less than 20 dams to 10 dams ; 16th class less than 10 dams to 5 dams. The pearls are strung upon a number of strings indicating their class, so that those of the 16th class are strung upon 16 strings. At the end of each bundle of strings, the imperial seal is affixed to avoid losses arising from unsorting whilst a description is attached to each pearl to prevent confusion”. Abul Fazl, *Ain-e-Akbari*, 15-16.
- ¹⁴ Shimul Mehta Vyas, *When Jewellery Speaks: Celebrating the Tradition of Kundan Minakari* (Jaipur: Diamond world, 2012).
- ¹⁵ “The skillful artisan firstly they make out a wire eight fingers in length and one finger in breadth from one masha gold. Then the wire is coated with the mixture of cow dung and salt. Then it is wrapped with a coarse cloth and enclosed with clay. Then it is subjected to fire of cow dung and then it is left to be cooled. This procedure is followed by three times in order to remove any impurity. Then it is washed and treated with lime juice and any other acid. Then it is cleaned and wound around a cane and used when it is needed. Firstly, the ornament is painted plain and leaves the sockets for setting of precious gemstones. These sockets are filled with lac and little bit gold and then jewel is pressed on it. Finally the lac is covered with Kundan and polished it with fine needle.” Abul Fazl, *Ain-e-Akbari*, 345.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 345.
- ¹⁷ The Zarnishan or gold inlayer is a work man who cuts silver agate, crystal and other gems in various ways and sets them on gold. He inlays silver and steel with the lines of gold and embellishes agates and other stones by engraving and cutting them.
- ¹⁸ The Koftgar or gold beater inlays on steel and other metals, markings more delicate than the teeth of a file, and damascenes with gold and silver wire.
- ¹⁹ The Minakar or enameller works on cups, flagons, rings and other articles with gold and silver. He polishes his delicate enamels separately on various colours, sets them in their suitable places and puts them on fire. This is done several times.
- ²⁰ The sadahkar, a palin goldsmith, fashions gold work and other articles (187) of gold and silver.
- ²¹ From the Arabic Shabakat, a fishing net, a lattice: i.e. any reticulated work. The shabakahkar executes pierced work in ornaments and vessels.

- ²² The Munabbat-kar works plain figures or impressions on a gold ground, so that they appear in relief.
- ²³ Charm signifies leather and the granulated kind of it called kimukht or shagreen (from the pers. Saghari) would represent the style of work which the text refers to. The granulation of the Shagreen is produced by embedding in the leather when it is soft, the seeds of a kind of chenopodium and afterwards shaving down the surface. The green colour is produced by the action of salammoniac on copper filings. The charmkar incrusts granulations of gold and silver like poppy seeds on ornaments and vessels.
- ²⁴ The simbaf or plaiter of silver draws out gold and silver wire and plaits them into belts for swords, daggers and the like.
- ²⁵ The sawadkar grinds a black composition (sawad) and lays it smoothly over tracteries of gold and then polishes the ground evenly with file. The Sawad consists of gold, silver, copper, lead and sulphur mixed together in certain proportions. The work is of several kinds. The finest is on gold.
- ²⁶“ The zar-kob or gold beater makes gold and silver leaf. Lapidaries, metal casters and other artificers produce designs which excite astonishment, but this exposition is already sufficiently protracted. Artists of all kinds are constantly employed at the imperial court where their work is subjected to test of criticism.” Abul Fazl, *Ain-e-Akbari*, 345.
- ²⁷ A *meenakar* charged sixteen dams for each tolah of gold and seven for tolah of silver. While *sadahkar* charged five and a half dams on every tolah of gold and two for every tolah of silver. *Shabakahkar* who had done the piercing work on gold ornaments charged double that of *sadahkar*. The *charmkar* who used granulation technique to make granules like poppy seeds on gold and silver, they earned for every tolah of gold one rupee and half of this for silver. *Ibid.*, 345.
- ²⁸ Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Moghul Empire: A.D.1656-1668* (London: Oxford University Press, 1914), 256.
- ²⁹ Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 4.
- ³⁰ Marcel Mauss, and W. D. Halls, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).
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- ³² Muhammad Ahsan Bilal and Sonia Nasir Khan, “Mughal Men’s Head Ornaments with an Emphasize on Turban ornaments and their connection with European Aigrette,” *Perennial Journal of History* 2, no.1 (2021):1-15.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*,4.
- ³⁵ William Foster, *Early Travels in India* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1921), 96.
- ³⁶ Bilal and Khan, “Mughal Men’s Head Ornaments”, 4.
- ³⁷ Babur, *Tuzuk- Baburi*, 633.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 642.
- ³⁹ Abu-l-Nasir Muhammad, better known by the sobriquet Hindal means taker of India in Chagatai language, was a Mughal prince and the youngest son of Emperor Babur.
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- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 57.
- ⁴⁷ Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, trans. V. Ball, Vol II (London: Macmillan and Co. 1889), 113.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 115. Also see an excellent study of Mika Natif, *Mughal Occidentalism: Artistic Encounters between Europe and Asia at the Courts of India, 1580-1630* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 48-55.
- ⁴⁹ William Foster, *Early Travels in India* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1921), 112.