



Indian Tribal Jewellery as an Indigenous Cultural Practice: Preserving Community Knowledge

Nagma Shamim

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Art Education,
Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, India
Email: nagmashamim8@gmail.com

Prof. Mohd Tahir Siddique

Department of Art Education,
Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, India

Abstract

The Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) acknowledge that knowledge is created, sustained and transmitted not only through textual traditions but also through lived practices, craftsmanship, oral traditions and material culture. One such indigenous cultural practice is Indian tribal jewellery which represents generations of cultural knowledge, artistic skills, social values and cultural continuity. Tribal jewellery is a form of personal ornamentation but it also embodies traditional craftsmanship, material knowledge learned in local contexts, customary practices, collective memory and is an integral part of India's living cultural heritage. However, the existing scholarship on tribal jewellery has been largely been approached from anthropological, ethnographic and craft perspective with relatively lesser focus on the significance of tribal jewellery as a medium of preservation of indigenous knowledge of the community in the larger context of Indian Knowledge Systems. This paper explores Indian tribal jewellery as an indigenous cultural practice that sustains and transmits community knowledge across generations. It adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, drawing on scholarly literature, material culture studies, policy documents, and primary field observations conducted among the Paroja community in Koraput district, Odisha. The study examines how tribal jewellery embodies inherited knowledge through craftsmanship, material selection, ritual associations, customary practices, and intergenerational transmission. It argues that the processes of designing, making, preserving, and wearing jewellery are not only artistic or decorative practices but important cultural processes through which indigenous communities preserve their knowledge, identity, and traditions. The paper further highlights the significance of tribal jewellery as a part of intangible cultural heritage that aids the survival of indigenous knowledge in the modern society. The study situates tribal jewellery within the discourse of Indian Knowledge Systems and expands the understanding of traditional arts and crafts as dynamic carriers of knowledge rather than cultural object. It also emphasizes the need for systematic documentation, preservation, and deeper scholarly engagement with these living traditions to support their continuity amid ongoing social and cultural change.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS); Indian Tribal Jewellery; Indigenous Cultural Practices; Community Knowledge; Intangible Cultural Heritage.



1. Introduction

India's tribal communities represent an integral part of the country's cultural heritage, preserving diverse traditions through oral practices, craftsmanship, rituals, and material culture. Among these traditions, tribal jewellery occupies a distinctive place as an expression of indigenous knowledge, reflecting the relationship between communities, their environment, and their cultural values. Beyond its decorative function, tribal jewellery embodies knowledge of locally available materials, traditional craftsmanship, symbolic meanings, social identity, and ritual practices, making it an important medium for preserving traditional knowledge across generations (Untracht, 1997).

The discourse on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) has broadened the concept of knowledge from textual form to oral tradition, indigenous crafts and community practices. The **National Education Policy 2020** recognises the importance of preserving India's traditional knowledge systems and encourages their integration into education and research (Ministry of Education, 2020). Within this perspective, material culture is understood as a source of social and cultural knowledge, as objects reflect the beliefs, values, technologies, and experiences of the communities that create and use them (Prown, 1982; Miller, 2005).

Although Indian tribal jewellery has been studied for its craftsmanship, regional diversity, symbolism, and ethnographic importance (Untracht, 1997; Chattopadhyay, 1975), less attention has been given to understanding it as an indigenous cultural practice that preserves and passes on community knowledge within the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems. Most studies focus on tribal jewellery as an art form or cultural object, while its role in preserving traditional knowledge, cultural values, and community identity has not been explored in depth. This study attempts to address this gap by examining tribal jewellery as a living tradition through which knowledge is preserved and transmitted across generations.

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach, drawing on scholarly literature, museum publications, policy documents, and material culture studies. In addition to these secondary sources, it incorporates primary evidence from field observations carried out among the Paroja community in Koraput district, Odisha. These observations were documented during the author's fieldwork for the Postgraduate Diploma in Tribal Culture of India at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA).

The significance of this study goes beyond documenting traditional tribal ornaments. In a time of rapid modernization, industrial production, changing lifestyles, and the gradual decline of traditional occupations, many indigenous cultural practices are facing new challenges. Against this backdrop, tribal

jewellery offers valuable insights into how communities continue to preserve their knowledge, cultural values, and traditions through material culture. By understanding tribal jewellery as an indigenous cultural practice, this study contributes to the discourse on Indian Knowledge Systems while also highlighting its relevance to intangible cultural heritage, cultural sustainability, community-based preservation, and the continued importance of traditional knowledge in contemporary society.



Figure 1. Traditional jewellery worn by a member of the Paroja community, Koraput district, Odisha, Photograph by the author (2023).

2. Indian Knowledge Systems, Indigenous Knowledge and Material Culture

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) encompass diverse forms of knowledge that have evolved through centuries of observation, experience, and community practice. Unlike knowledge confined to written texts, Indian Knowledge Systems includes oral traditions, craftsmanship, rituals, ecological practices, and material culture that are transmitted across generations through participation and lived experience (Ministry of Education, 2020; Mahadevan et al., 2022). Within this framework, indigenous knowledge reflects a community's accumulated understanding of its environment, natural resources, technologies, and social institutions, enabling sustainable ways of living and cultural continuity (Berkes, 2012).

Material culture provides an important lens for understanding indigenous knowledge because objects embody the values, beliefs, skills, and historical experiences of the communities that create and use them. Prown (1982) argues that material objects serve as evidence of cultural behaviour, while Miller (2005) emphasises that objects actively shape social relationships and cultural identities rather than merely reflecting them. Consequently, traditional artefacts should be understood not only for their functional or artistic qualities but also for the knowledge systems they represent.

Beyond material and technical aspects, tribal jewellery also embodies symbolic and cultural meanings. Decorative motifs often represent local cosmologies, beliefs, fertility, protection, ancestry, natural forces, sacred landscapes, or social values specific to particular communities. Certain ornaments are



associated with rites of passage, marriage ceremonies, harvest festivals, healing practices, or other ceremonial occasions, thereby reinforcing cultural continuity through repeated social practice. In this manner, jewellery serves as a medium through which communities preserve and communicate their collective memory, values, and worldview across generations.

Within this context, Indian tribal jewellery constitutes a significant form of material culture. The selection of locally available materials including silver, brass, copper, beads, shells, seeds, and natural fibres, demonstrates generations of ecological knowledge and resource adaptation (Untracht, 1997). Similarly, traditional techniques such as casting, engraving, beadwork, and metal fabrication preserve specialised craft knowledge that is transmitted through observation, apprenticeship, and community participation rather than formal education. Beyond technical expertise, tribal jewellery communicates social identity, ritual significance, cultural values, and collective memory, making it an enduring expression of indigenous knowledge. This understanding provides the conceptual foundation for interpreting tribal jewellery as an important medium for preserving community knowledge in contemporary India (Ministry of Education, 2020).

3. Indian Tribal Jewellery as an Indigenous Cultural Practice

Indian tribal jewellery is an important expression of indigenous cultural practice, reflecting the close relationship between communities, their environment, and their cultural traditions. More than an ornament, it embodies social identity, traditional craftsmanship, collective memory, and values that have evolved through generations of lived experience, making it an integral part of community life (Untracht, 1997).

The craft techniques, including metal casting, engraving, metal working, beading, and jewellery making, are generally learned within families and artisan communities, ensuring the continuity of both traditional craftsmanship and cultural practices. The use of locally available materials reflects indigenous knowledge of natural resources and their sustainable use, demonstrating the close relationship between craftsmanship and the surrounding environment (Berkes, 2012; Chattopadhyay, 1975).

Tribal jewellery is also deeply embedded in the social and cultural life of indigenous communities. It accompanies important occasions such as festivals, marriages, initiation ceremonies, and other life-cycle events, where ornaments become symbols of participation, belonging, and cultural continuity. Their continued use during these occasions reflects the close association between jewellery and community traditions, reinforcing values that are shared and collectively understood.

Beyond craftsmanship, tribal jewellery serves as a visual expression of cultural identity. The design, materials, and manner of wearing ornaments often communicate information related to age, gender, marital status, kinship, social roles, and ritual responsibilities. These visual elements are widely understood within the community and reinforced through everyday practices, festivals, and life-cycle ceremonies, enabling jewellery to function as an important medium of cultural communication (Prown, 1982).

Alongside expressing social identity, tribal jewellery also conveys symbolic meanings that reflect indigenous worldviews. Decorative motifs frequently represent elements of nature, sacred animals, celestial bodies, fertility, prosperity, protection, and local cosmological beliefs. Rather than serving as mere decorative patterns, these motifs embody inherited beliefs, cultural values, and shared experiences that have evolved over generations. Their continued use helps preserve collective memory and strengthens the relationship between communities, their environment, and their cultural traditions. Taken together, the materials, craftsmanship, symbolism, ritual associations, and social meanings embedded in tribal jewellery demonstrate that these ornaments are not simply decorative objects but important expressions of indigenous cultural practice.



Figure 2 . Traditional jewellery worn by women of the Paroja community during everyday market activities, illustrating the continued use of indigenous adornment in daily life. Photograph by the author (2023).

4. Knowledge Embedded in Tribal Jewellery

Tribal jewellery therefore represents a convergence of material knowledge, technological expertise, symbolic communication, ritual traditions, ecological adaptation, and social organisation.

4.1 Material Knowledge: Ecology, Resources and Indigenous Technologies

The selection of materials used in tribal jewellery reflects generations of accumulated ecological knowledge. Indigenous communities have traditionally relied on locally available natural resources, carefully choosing materials according to their physical properties, cultural significance, availability, durability, and symbolic associations. Metals such as silver, brass, copper, and iron are commonly employed, while numerous communities also incorporate beads, shells, seeds, bamboo, bone, wood, animal horn, fibre, and semi-precious stones into their ornaments.



The use of these materials demonstrates a deep understanding of local ecosystems and sustainable resource utilisation. Communities possess detailed knowledge regarding where specific materials may be obtained, how they should be processed, their durability under different environmental conditions, and their suitability for particular forms of ornamentation. Such knowledge is neither accidental nor purely technical; it has developed through centuries of observation, experimentation, and adaptation to local ecological conditions.

For example, among the **Bonda** community of Odisha, heavy aluminium ornaments have become a distinctive feature of women's adornment. Their widespread use reflects both historical patterns of material availability and locally developed metal-working traditions. Likewise, **Konyak** communities of Nagaland have historically incorporated brass, beads, shells, and animal-derived materials into ornaments that communicate cultural identity and ceremonial status. In western India, **Bhil** communities employ silver ornaments whose widespread use reflects both aesthetic preferences and inherited metallurgical traditions. These examples demonstrate that the choice of materials is inseparable from ecological knowledge, regional history, and community practice.

Material selection therefore constitutes an important component of indigenous knowledge systems. The ornament itself becomes evidence of a community's long-term engagement with its natural environment and illustrates how ecological understanding is preserved through material culture.

4.2 Craftsmanship and Indigenous Knowledge

Equally significant is the knowledge embodied in the processes of making tribal jewellery. Traditional jewellery production involves specialised techniques that are transmitted through prolonged observation, practical engagement, and apprenticeship rather than through formal institutional education. Such learning represents tacit knowledge, which cannot be fully communicated through written instructions but must be acquired through sustained practice.

The making of tribal ornaments requires mastery of numerous techniques including casting, forging, hammering, repoussé work, engraving, wire twisting, bead stringing, riveting, polishing, and surface finishing. These techniques often vary across regions and communities, reflecting locally developed technological traditions. Artisans gradually acquire these skills by assisting senior craftspeople, observing complex procedures, practising individual techniques, and eventually producing complete ornaments independently.

This traditional mode of learning reflects an experiential process in which technical skills are closely connected with cultural understanding. Young artisans do not merely learn how to fabricate ornaments; they simultaneously acquire knowledge concerning appropriate materials, symbolic meanings, ritual contexts, customary rules, and community expectations associated with each object. Consequently, craftsmanship functions as both technical education and cultural education.

The continuity of these artisanal practices illustrates that indigenous technologies remain important repositories of community knowledge. Every handcrafted ornament represents not only artistic skill but



also generations of accumulated experience preserved through family traditions and community participation.

4.3 Symbolism and Indigenous Worldviews

The visual language of tribal jewellery communicates meanings that extend far beyond decorative embellishment. Motifs, forms, colours, and compositional arrangements frequently embody indigenous understandings of nature, spirituality, ancestry, fertility, protection, prosperity, and collective identity. These symbolic elements function as visual expressions of cultural knowledge that are collectively recognised within particular communities.

Animal motifs may represent strength, courage, protection, or clan identity, while floral and vegetal forms often symbolise fertility, regeneration, and harmonious relationships with nature. Geometric patterns may indicate social organisation, cosmological beliefs, or inherited artistic conventions specific to individual communities. Celestial symbols referring to the sun, moon, or stars similarly reflect indigenous understandings of time, seasonal cycles, and the relationship between human existence and the natural world.

Importantly, these symbolic meanings are culturally situated. Their interpretation depends upon community knowledge transmitted through oral narratives, ritual participation, and everyday social interaction. The ornament therefore operates as a visual text whose meanings are learned through cultural participation rather than formal instruction.

Viewed from this perspective, tribal jewellery becomes an important medium through which indigenous communities preserve philosophical ideas, historical memories, and shared worldviews. Symbolism transforms ornaments into repositories of cultural knowledge that remain meaningful across successive generations.

4.4 Ritual Practices and Cultural Continuity

Ritual constitutes another significant context within which tribal jewellery functions as an Indigenous Knowledge System. Across numerous tribal communities, particular ornaments are associated with specific ceremonies, life-cycle events, agricultural festivals, initiation rites, healing practices, and religious observances. Their use is governed by customary knowledge regarding who may wear particular ornaments, under what circumstances, and with what ritual significance.

Marriage ceremonies frequently involve ornaments that signify social transition and community recognition of new familial relationships. During harvest festivals, ceremonial ornaments reinforce collective participation and cultural solidarity. Certain ornaments are worn exclusively during initiation ceremonies, marking an individual's transition into new social responsibilities. In some communities, protective ornaments are believed to safeguard individuals from illness, misfortune, or harmful spiritual influences.



Participation in these ceremonies enables younger generations to internalise cultural knowledge through observation and practice. Ritual knowledge is therefore reproduced not through written manuals but through repeated participation in community life. Jewellery becomes both an object of ritual significance and an educational medium through which cultural traditions are continually renewed.

4.5 Jewellery as Community Identity and Collective Memory

One of the most significant functions of tribal jewellery is its capacity to communicate identity. Ornaments frequently indicate age, gender, marital status, clan affiliation, social position, occupation, or regional belonging. Members of the community are able to interpret these visual indicators because they share a common system of cultural knowledge.

Beyond individual identity, jewellery also contributes to the construction of collective memory. Family heirlooms, inherited ornaments, and ceremonial jewellery preserve memories of ancestors, important life events, and community history. The continued use and transmission of these ornaments reinforce cultural continuity by linking present generations with their historical past.

This relationship between jewellery and collective memory demonstrates that ornaments function simultaneously as tangible objects and as repositories of intangible heritage. Their significance lies not solely in their physical form but in the stories, values, practices, and memories they embody. As long as these objects continue to be made, worn, interpreted, and inherited within their cultural contexts, they remain active participants in the preservation of indigenous knowledge.

Taken together, material knowledge, craftsmanship, symbolism, ritual practice, and community identity reveal that tribal jewellery constitutes a multidimensional knowledge tradition. It is through the interaction of these interconnected dimensions that jewellery functions as a living expression of Indian Knowledge Systems, sustaining cultural continuity while preserving the accumulated wisdom of indigenous communities.

Table 1. Components of Indian Tribal Jewellery and Their Role in Preserving Community Knowledge

Aspect	Role in Preserving Community Knowledge
Materials	Reflect ecological knowledge and sustainable resource use
Craftsmanship	Preserves traditional skills through practice
Symbolism	Communicates cultural meanings and beliefs
Identity	Expresses shared knowledge and social roles
Knowledge Transmission	Supports the continuity of traditional knowledge across generations

Note. Developed by the author based on Berkes (2012), Chattopadhyay (1975), Prown (1982), Untracht (1997), and Ministry of Education (2020).



Conclusion

Indian tribal jewellery represents a living cultural practice that extends beyond its decorative function to embody the knowledge, values, skills, and traditions of indigenous communities. By examining it through the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems, this study shifts the focus from viewing tribal ornaments merely as objects of art or ethnographic interest to recognising them as meaningful expressions of cultural community preserved through everyday cultural practices. This perspective highlights the close relationship between material culture, indigenous knowledge, and cultural continuity.

The study demonstrates that the significance of tribal jewellery lies not only in the finished ornament but also in the cultural processes associated with its creation, use, and preservation. The field observations among the Paroja community in Koraput district, Odisha, reinforce this understanding by illustrating that traditional jewellery continues to play an active role in expressing identity, maintaining cultural values, and strengthening community belonging. These observations support the broader argument that indigenous material culture should be understood as a dynamic and living source of knowledge rather than as a static heritage object.

Recognising tribal jewellery as an indigenous cultural practice contributes to wider discussions on Indian Knowledge Systems, material culture, and cultural sustainability. It also highlights the importance of documenting and supporting living traditions that continue to preserve community knowledge in contemporary society. By bringing together scholarly literature and field-based observations, this study offers a broader perspective on the cultural significance of Indian tribal jewellery and encourages further research on indigenous material culture as an important source of knowledge, identity, and cultural resilience.

References

- Berkes, F. (2012). *Sacred ecology* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Chattopadhyay, K. (1975). *Indian handicrafts*. Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.
- Elwin, V. (1951). *The tribal art of Middle India: A personal record*. Oxford University Press.
- Ingold, T. (2013). *Making: Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture*. Routledge.
- Mahadevan, B., Bhat, V., & Pavana, M. N. (2022). *Introduction to Indian Knowledge System: Concepts and applications*. PHI Learning.
- Miller, D. (Ed.). (2005). *Materiality*. Duke University Press.
- Ministry of Education. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Government of India.



Prown, J. D. (1982). Mind in matter: An introduction to material culture theory and method. *Winterthur Portfolio*, 17(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1086/496065>

Singh, K. S. (Ed.). (1992). *People of India: An introduction*. Oxford University Press.

UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. UNESCO.

Untracht, O. (1997). *Traditional jewelry of India*. Thames & Hudson.

Vatsyayan, K. (1989). *Traditional Indian folk arts*. Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts.

Vidyarthi, L. P., & Rai, B. K. (1976). *The tribal culture of India*. Concept Publishing Company.