

NOTE ON TEMPLE JEWELLERY OF NAGERCOIL, KANYAKUMARI
DISTRICT, TAMIL NADU

Vadassery, an old hamlet, is now a part of Nagercoil town, the Head Quarters of Kanyakumari District. Of the total population in the village, 50% work on hand looms being their permanent livelihood and rest of them go for agriculture and other occupations. About 400 artisans are engaged in the manufacture of temple jewellery. These are traditional craftsmen engaged in the production of Temple Jewellery.

As the craft technique is a father-to-son Passover the exact origin is not recorded. However, according to craftsmen, the origin of this craft could be traced to the early 17th century or even before when the small Kings and Chieftains from Chettinad (now in Ramanathapuram District) came to Nagercoil and purchased the ornaments originally made in gold set with real diamonds for offering to the temple in Chettinad – must for them specially during temple festival and marriages. These jewels designed in large patterns could also be seen in nearby Suchindram Temple and Srirangam Temple at Trichy. Even now some pieces like coronets are being made for temples. Thus the jewellery came to be known as temple jewels.

The Design to be made is drawn on a paper. Silver sheet is cut to the shape of a pendent. Then the silver tape is curled and vertically welded on the surface of the precut silver sheet so as to make a floral design forming cavities for fixing stones. The vertically placed silver tape is soldered to the Sheet by heat. The wax is filled in the cavities, the sides and back portion of the ornament is electroplated in gold in order to achieve a glittering uniform gold look. Then the stones are set on these cavities. Now the stone studded jewel is ready for applying gold leaf. The fine leaf is fixed on the exposed wax in between the silver lines and the stones so that the entire exposed wax is sealed with gold leaf. The gold leaf is fixed on the wax with the use of a small pre-heated “kathir” (a small chisel like tool curved at the tip). The gold leaf firmly fixes on the surface and now the stones are seen in a particular design on the surface.

At present ornaments like necklaces, ear rings, ear hangings, Vanki (armlet) Kanganam (Bracelets), bangles, Pendent, Nose rings etc. set with red, blue, green and white synthetic stones are popular jewels made for Bharatanatyam & dramatics are a speciality in this craft. A complete set of jewels like head set, Jada Villai, Rakkodi, Nose ring, Bangles, Ottyanam etc. is known as Bharatanatyam set. The popular designs in the pendants are Makari, Naga, Yali, Swan, Parrot etc. Crowns for temple deities are also made here on orders.

Temple Jewellery is at present essentially an item for consumption in the internal market. Most of the orders are either for domestic consumption for Bharatanatyam dances and dramatics. Marketing is also done through private emporia and Government undertakings like Central Cottage Industries Corporation, Poompuhar, Kaveri, Lepakshi etc. After setting up of the Handicrafts Marketing & Service Extension centre in Nagercoil, the craftsmen were helped to visit cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Calcutta, Chennai, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Jaipur, Chandigarh, Gwalior etc. alongwith their products. This created a big boost in selling their jewellery direct to the customers. Necessary steps were already taken for forming groups for co-operative production and marketing.