



# THE SACRED ORNAMENTS

## TEMPLE JEWELLERY OF SOUTH INDIA, STATEWISE

**Prasad Bidapa shares a comprehensive and engaging article on Temple Jewellery of South India, presented state-wise, exploring its history, symbolism, techniques, and contemporary relevance**

Temple jewellery of South India is not merely adornment—it is devotion carved in gold, a sacred expression of faith, artistry, and heritage. These timeless ornaments were first created to embellish temple deities, dancers, and royalty, often crafted in gold and encrusted with rubies, emeralds, and pearls. Each South Indian state developed its own distinctive style, rich with cultural and spiritual symbolism.

Let's journey across Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana to uncover the hidden stories behind these divine creations.

### TAMIL NADU: The Cradle of Temple Jewellery

#### History & Legacy:

Tamil Nadu is the birthplace of classical temple jewellery, dating back to the Chola and Pandya dynasties (9th–13th centuries). Goldsmiths were commissioned to create ornate pieces for temples like Chidambaram, Thanjavur, and Madurai. These jewels adorned the idols of gods and goddesses, especially Shiva, Parvati, and Meenakshi.

#### Design & Technique:

Crafted from pure gold using the repoussé and granulation techniques, Tamil temple jewellery is distinguished by its grandeur and symmetry. Motifs include makara (mythical sea-creature), yali (lion-dragon), kirtimukha (demon face), peacocks, and lotuses.



Courtesy: Abaran, Bangalore



**Signature Pieces:**

- Kaasu Malai (coin necklace)
- Oddiyanam (waist belt)
- Jimikki/Kundalam (bell-shaped earrings)
- Maang Tikka and Nethi Chutti (forehead pieces)
- Chandran-Suryan (moon-sun clips worn on either side of the head)

**Symbolism:**

Each ornament holds spiritual meaning—the sun and moon denote cosmic balance, while the serpent represents Kundalini energy.

**In Bharatanatyam:**

Temple jewellery became synonymous with Bharatanatyam dancers, who wear antique-finished versions to resemble deities themselves.

**KERALA: The Divine Simplicity of Gold****Historical Context:**

Kerala's temple jewellery is deeply influenced by the state's matrilineal traditions and Namboothiri Brahmin customs. While simpler than its Tamil counterpart, the elegance lies in its purity and repetition of forms.

**Materials & Methods:**

Kerala's ornaments are typically 22-karat gold, often left unpolished to maintain a soft matte glow. The casting technique is common, but traditional methods like nakshi (hand-etching) are also used.

**Signature Ornaments:**

- Mulla Mottu Mala (jasmine bud necklace)
- Palakka Mala (leaf-shaped emerald necklace)
- Kaasu Mala (coin chain)
- Elakkathali (choker)
- Nagapadam Mala (serpent hood pendants)

**Cultural Role:**

Such jewellery is worn by Mohiniyattam and Kathakali dancers, and forms a core part of Onam and wedding trousseaux.

**Symbolism:**

The Nagapadam represents fertility and protection, while jasmine buds symbolize purity and femininity.

**KARNATAKA: The Regal Jewellery of Hoysala and Vijayanagara Eras****Royal Heritage:**

Karnataka's temple jewellery evolved during the Hoysala (11th–14th centuries) and Vijayanagara (14th–16th centuries) periods, influenced by both Dravidian and Deccan aesthetics. Temples like Belur, Halebid, and Hampi depict intricate jewellery on stone carvings.



Courtesy: Abaran, Bangalore



Courtesy: Abaran, Bangalore

**Techniques:**

Karnataka is renowned for filigree, kundan, and nakshi work, especially in regions like Mysore, Hubli, and Udupi. Artisans often use lac-filled hollow gold, embedded with rubies, garnets, and uncut diamonds.

**Signature Pieces:**

- Vanki (armband shaped like a “V”)
- Netti Sutra (Mysore-style maang tikka)
- Lakshmi Haras with coins bearing goddess Lakshmi
- Temple Bangles featuring lion or elephant motifs

**Distinctiveness:**

Goddess Chamundeshwari of Mysore and Yellamma of North Karnataka are adorned with specific regional ornaments, often replicated for classical dancers and brides.

## ANDHRA PRADESH & TELANGANA: The Splendor of Satavahana to Qutb Shahi

**Ancient Origins:**

Temple jewellery in Andhra and Telangana traces its roots to the Satavahana period (2nd century BCE), with later influences from the Kakatiyas, Vijayanagara rulers, and Hyderabad Nawabs. A unique fusion of Dravidian and Persian styles emerges here.

**Techniques & Materials:**

Famed for bidri, kundan, and lacquer work, artisans use both gold and silver alloys. The Karigars of Hyderabad and Warangal excel in miniature repousse and stone inlay.

**Signature Pieces:**

- Buttalu (jhumka-style earrings with multiple chains)
- Addigai (tight choker)
- Sutralu (long layered chains)
- Lakshmi Kasula Haram (coin necklaces)
- Bajuband with temple miniatures

**Dancer's Adornment:** Kuchipudi and Andhra Natyam



Courtesy: Abaran, Bangalore

performers wear a distinct set that includes multi-strand necklaces, armbands, and waistband—often stylized with peacocks and Gajalakshmi (elephant-flanked Lakshmi).

**Symbolism:**

Jewellery in this region often carries blessings—Lakshmi for wealth, elephants for power, and lotus for rebirth.

**THE SPIRITUAL HEART OF TEMPLE JEWELLERY**

Temple jewellery is inseparable from Bhakti—devotional expression. Originally created to adorn the gods, it was later mirrored by devadasis (temple dancers) and now by classical artists, brides, and connoisseurs. These jewels are not just wearable heritage—they are sacred architecture in miniature, bearing the iconography of gods, stories of puranas, and whispers of dynasties long past.

**GUEST EDITOR**

**PRASAD BIDAPA** is a trailblazer in the Indian fashion industry, with a remarkable career spanning over four decades. Renowned as the iconic fashion guru of India, he has witnessed the industry's evolution from its nascent stages. A distinguished alumnus of NID Ahmedabad, Bidapa has conceptualized and curated numerous high-profile events, including

- India Men's Fashion Week
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- The LUXO Show
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A regular columnist for various publications, Bidapa is currently collaborating with state governments to develop handloom revival projects across India. He works closely with national and international designers to showcase India's exquisite handmade textiles and products in handloomed cotton, wool, silk, and Khadi, promoting the country's rich cultural heritage.

