



INDIA
GOLD POLICY
CENTRE

Good as gold: Ornaments in circulation and the making of moral personhood in South India

Nithya Joseph
French Institute Pondicherry (IFP)

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Gold and culture in policy debates in India

- ‘Gold and silver run like twin threads in India's economic destiny’ (Deshmukh 1997).
- ‘Ruinous love for a barbaric relic’ incorrectly quote Keynes.
- Traditional doesn’t mean backward, irrational, undesirable (YV Reddy; Kannan and Dhal; Chandravarkar; IG Patel)
- Important to Indian culture, society, historically.
- Gendered assets, inheritance, gifting, sacredness.



Culture and significance

Culture “way in which actors create and produce beliefs, values, and other means of social life” (Fabian1983).

Society people engaged in co-producing beliefs, values, objectives and sharing a vocabulary for interpreting the meaning of thoughts and action (Graeber 2001).

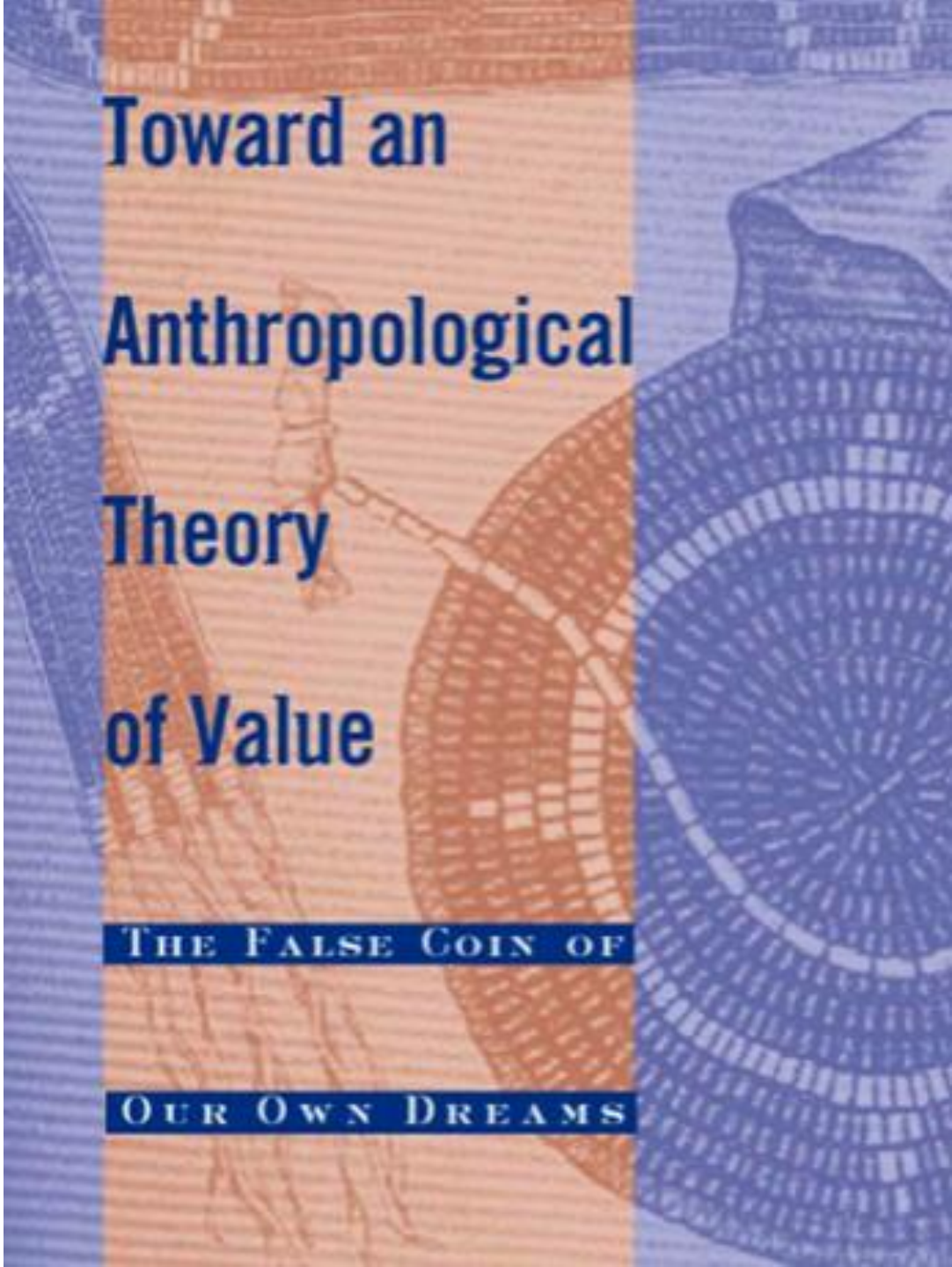
Value what people consider moral, powerful, respectable, constantly shaped by dialectic meaning making (Munn 1986).

Signs semantics of meaning making; symbols, index, icon and the semiotic commons (Elyachar 2010).

Schema signs come together to make schema, patterns, templates for society (Munn 1986).

Institutions patterns in thought and action (Guyer 2004).

Knowledge historically produced through sedimentation (Shaw 2002).



Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value

THE FALSE COIN OF

OUR OWN DREAMS

Significance of gold as ornaments in India

- **Cosmological:** symbolising auspiciousness, prosperity and purity (Ibid).
- **Cosmopolitan:** translating value across national boundaries (Truitt 2018).
- **Speculative:** uncertainty, volatility in price, calculations, anticipation about changing power to act (Ferry 2020).
- **Hierarchical:** representative of status (Minturn 1993).
- **Sentimental:** embodied with the relationships of those exchanging it, events and ceremonies (Veer and Fernandez 2004).
- **Sacred:** marked with religious iconography (Venkatesh 1995).
- **Indexical:** designed as a marker of religious, caste, other social identity (Belk and Mehta 1991).
- **Aesthetic:** perceived as beautiful and defining body and person (Appadurai 1987).



Research context

- Adi Dravidar 'colonies' in north eastern Tamil Nadu
- Segregation, some changes in discriminatory practices, others remain
- Phone and in-person interviews 2020-2022
- Sugarcane cutting, brick making and urban migration
- Local agriculture and masonry
- Covid-19 related disruptions



Suresh and Pooja

- Suresh's in-laws mortgaged the chain given to him at the time of his marriage in the bank to buy a Tata Ace for their brick transport work.
- He had lent other ornaments to his relatives whom he stayed with when he worked in the city.
- Pawned Pooja's chain to pay EMIs during the pandemic.
- Had to gift gold in October 2020 for his father's sister's son's wedding. A gold savings scheme matured, used that to buy ornaments. Released and repledged gold in bank for a higher amount.
- When he had no other choice he asked his relatives for some money, less than the value of his ornaments.





Loans of gold and communnality

- Lending of ornaments to kin, 'nambikai'.
- Conflict is over ornaments not returned is very common.
- How are the arguments to lend, to demand return, to justify delaying return constructed?
- Individual, collective interest.
- Obligation, negotiation, resistance.
- Social ties, ruptures.

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ஸ்ரீ சங்காளம்மன் துணை

ANo. 5326
(Form F Section 7 and Rule 8)

NEW PAWN TICKET

தேதி: 14.9.2020
கடை: 08/2015-16

ஸ்ரீ மஹாலக்ஷ்மி நகை அடகு கடை
அடகு ரோடு. ஆனத்தூர்
உணந்தூர்பேட்டை தாலுக்கா
செல்:.....

The following article articles are pawned with me
Name of Pawner.....
Address.....

Amount of the Principal loan is Rs. 450
Rupees in words.....

Rate of interest charged twelve percent per annum

Full and detailed description of the articles and value

Particulars of Pledge	Present Value Rs. பொன்-வெள்ளி	Gross Weight	
		Gms.	Mg.
ப... ச... செய்யும் செய்யும்			

My Monthly income Rs. 3 மாதத்திற்கு ஒரு முறை வட்டி கட்ட வேண்டும்.

Signature of the Pawn Broker or his Agent

Signature or Thumb impression of the Pawners

Ceremonial gifts, savings, and kinship

Mozhi ceremonies are held, cash and gold called back

- Gold is owed to others because it had been gifted in the past
- Accounting system

Giftng as reciprocal savings and debt.

Gifts are always debt and at the same time there's the *Hau* or spirit of the gift, creation of ties.

Phatic labour: the symbolic meaning of acts of circulation is understood and exchange produces sociality (Elyachar 2010).

Gold gifted as a way of hedging – against future rises in the price of gold?



Marriage exchange and gender

- To ask about the gender of the gift, then, is to ask about the situation of gift exchange in relation to the form that domination takes in these societies (Strathern 1988).
- Gifts from natal to marital home of bride.
- Seeru, later gifts of gold from marital to natal home.
- Claims made on gifted gold i.e. from marital to natal home.



Brother-sister relationships

Mother's brother responsible to organize wedding celebrations give a bride gold.

'We were born together, weren't we, so they have to do it. And they do it. Even if it is difficult they will find a way.'

Cross-cousin marriages, so she might enter their family but not always.

Have these practices changed?



The meaning of marriage

- Marriage as a precarious bond, many possibilities for loss
- Talisman to ward away dangers
- Gold 'tali'
- Always worn but hidden
- "When my tali fell off then my husband took another wife".
- "I used to have gold from here to here. But now I don't even have it here."



Gold and moral personhood

- How is the circulation of gold ornaments shaped by, and how does it in turn shape, what is valued and what is moral in (Dalit and Muslim) societies in South India?
- What value or valued qualities are being transferred through exchanges of ornaments – when they are purchased, lent to one and other, given to marital kin, gifted to the hosts of life cycle events, or mortgaged for cash?
- What is the symbolic significance of the acts that constitute the circulation of gold (and their various interactions with each other) and how do they come together to comprise cultural meaning in this context?
- How does one's identity become defined by objects they give and receive, by the acts of giving and receiving, and by the recognition they receive as a result of these acts?

Ornaments, power, and imagination

Measures of value (their presence or absence being significant, allowing ranking, comparison of absolute and relative quantities and qualities (Gregory 2005)

Media of circulation having and moving between physical forms.

Objects of desire, coming to represent value in themselves.

The power of money as an 'effect of a gigantic system of coordination of human activity in which objects.

'Pivots between imagination and reality' bring into being what they represent and that the faith that people place in it has the power to bring a new social order into being.

Narrative as a repertoire of conventions, observing and listening to identify the semantics of circulation, to understand the different scales on which gold is valued, and the hooks between them.

Decision making about capital, finances one aspect of many interconnected calculations in the making of a valued person.



