



INDIA
GOLD POLICY
CENTRE

Recrafting Livelihoods: Phenomenological Insights into the Changing World of Indian Goldsmiths – A Study in Madurai, India

Dr. Bala Subramanian R
Dr. Rahul Lexman,
Rajagiri Business School, Kochi

**Presented at the 9th IGPC-IIMA Annual Gold & Gold Markets Conference 2026,
organized by
India Gold Policy Centre at IIM Ahmedabad
May 21-22, 2026
Venue: Bharat Mandapam, Pragati Maidan, New Delhi**

Introduction

- The gold business was traditionally dominated by local entrepreneurs and artisans in India. They were carried out by particular caste groups.
- In Tamil Nadu, Gold is traded by the Chettiyaar community. There are mainly four Chettiayar communities that are carrying out this business.
- Gold jewelry-makers (goldsmiths) belong to the Viswakarma caste (Maruthur, 2014).
- As long as the gold market was dominated by local, traditional entrepreneurs, the native community was involved in gold jewelry making.
- Traditional goldsmithing has long served as both a livelihood and a cultural identity, sustained across generations within entrepreneurial communities across Southern India.
- However, economic liberalization, market restructuring, and institutional reforms have transformed the organization of work and local market structures, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of artisanal livelihoods.
- This study explores how these macro-level transformations are interpreted and experienced by traditional goldsmiths and local jewellery shop owners in Madurai, India.

Problem statement

- Until the liberalization of the Indian economy, these networks dominated the jewellery trade, operating largely within informal, trust-based systems.
- Post-globalization, the sector witnessed many changes
- The free market in the 1990s, accompanied by changing consumer preferences, the organized retailer showrooms, as well as the growth of existing family-owned businesses (Kanungo & Chakrabarti, 2021).
- This has affected the livelihood of the native gold-making community.
- The number of traditional jewellery shops may be the same as 30 years back, but the number of customers/volume of business has come down heavily.
- This also affected the goldsmiths, who rely on these local traders for their business and survival

Traditional business model

Customers

Traders delivers to the customers

Traders receive the order – pass it to goldsmiths

Gold smiths makes and give back to traders

Emerging business model

Businessmen contacts showroom

Show room gets commissions / pay back

Showroom display models

Customers buy

Research methodology

- Employing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework, the study adopted a two-stage data collection design.
- In Phase 1, engaged local jewellery shop proprietors (n=15) to provide insights into evolving market expectations, consumer preferences, and employment relationships.
- Phase 2 exploratory interviews were conducted to complement the insights with practising artisans (n = 35) to capture their lived experiences of change in skill transmission, work autonomy, and identity continuity.
- We have also interviewed the gold-buying consumers.
- The two-phase design allowed for triangulation of perspectives—linking entrepreneurial narratives of market restructuring with artisans' lived accounts of changing work practices.
- Together, these insights offered an integrated phenomenological understanding of how corporatization and branding reshape artisanal entrepreneurship, identity, and skill sustainability in Madurai's traditional jewellery ecosystem.

Analysis

- Data were analysed thematically using an IPA-guided interpretive coding process
- leading to an integrated thematic structure that captures the intersection of artisanal and entrepreneurial perspectives.

Findings (study 1)

- Generational Transition and Decline of Interest
- Technological and Operational Challenges
- Value of Personalized Service and Trust

- Competitive Pressures
- Financial Constraints and Limited Investment Capacity
- Regulatory and Market Adaptation



REGAL JEWELLERS
MANUFACTURER & WHOLESALERS

Grand Inauguration
Marathahalli
Friday, 26th Sep 2025

Grand Inaugural Offers
Sep 26th - Oct 26th

FREE GOLD COIN
For Every 10 Grams Of Gold Purchase*

FREE GOLD COIN
For Every ₹ 1,00,000 Of Diamond Purchase

FLAT 50% OFF
On Making Charges
For All Gold Ornaments

₹1,000 ADDITIONAL
On Old Gold Exchange*

₹20,000 OFF
Per Carat On
Diamond Jewellery

Offer Valid At
Marathahalli, Malleshwaram & Kammanahalli Stores

MARATHAHALLI | MALLESHWARAM | KAMMANAHALLI

*T&C Apply

Findings (study 2)

- Decline of Traditional Craft and Displacement / Mechanization
- Influx of Migrant Labour
- Erosion of Intergenerational Continuity, Skill Transmission, and change of profession



Findings (Study 1 & 2) - Integrated Thematic Structure

- Market Pressures and Economic Precarity
- Erosion of Intergenerational Continuity and Identity Dislocation
- Changing Consumer Values and Trust Dynamics
- Unequal Access to Technology and Modernization



Findings from the interview of the consumers

- Organized showrooms are preferred
- hallmark ensures gold purity
- Less scope for price manipulation /wastages / making charges - not dependent on the bargaining power of the buyer
- Huge number of displays / new models - The 'feel good factors' in the showrooms;
- Select immediately and complete the buying process.
- Occasionally, customers buy directly from the known goldsmiths/traders.



Conclusion

- This study explored how branded / corporate jewellery showrooms have reshaped the traditional gold ecosystem in Madurai, impacting both small-scale entrepreneurs and goldsmiths.
- The study revealed the lived realities of declining work orders, shifting customer expectations, and erosion of intergenerational continuity.
- While shop owners confront reduced margins and heightened competition, artisans face existential uncertainty marked by technological displacement and income precarity.
- Some entrepreneurs have managed to adapt through selective modernization, whereas many artisans are still seeking viable means of revival.
- The findings suggest that without institutional and collective mechanisms, artisanal professions risk extinction within a decade.
- The State Gold Council recommended that the goldsmiths bring their female family members to the business.
- GoI announced a loan for the 'Vishvakarma' community - They have got the loan form - some are undecided about what to do with the money



Our sincere gratitude

- The study acknowledges the time devoted by the jewelry shop owners and artisans

