

## From Recognition to Reality: Challenges in Protecting Assamese Jewellery Post-GI

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The study provides deep insights into the challenges faced by the artisans of Traditional Assamese Jewellery sector in light of the recent grant of Geographical Indication (GI) status to this traditional handicraft. Known for its intricate artistry and deep cultural significance, Traditional Assamese Jewellery embodies an important intangible heritage. Though GI status represents a significant milestone, market saturation, volatility in raw material prices, and the proliferation of counterfeit products are some of the persistent challenges that are threatening sustainability of this industry. This study explores the potential of GI as a tool for safeguarding cultural heritage, facilitating economic development, and enhancing its recognition in global market. Visit to traditional workshops or ‘*Shaals*’ of Rantholi, a prominent hub for production of Traditional Assamese Jewellery in Nagoan district, Assam, unveiled many lesser-known facets of the industry that can be attributed to gradual disinterest among the artisans. Through qualitative analysis, the paper evaluates whether GI protection alone will be sufficient to ensure the craft’s authenticity, integrity, and economic sustainability.

**Keywords:** Geographical Indications, Traditional Cultural Expression, Traditional Jewellery, Assam

For centuries, jewellery has been an essential part of human culture representing self-expression and a reflection of cultural identity. From ancient times, jewellery has been playing a key role in connecting us through shared human experiences. Traditional Jewellery, in particular, has been representing the heterogeneity of cultures, with each civilization contributing unique craftsmanship. From intricate gold jewellery of ancient Egypt to the silver and turquoise creations of Native American tribes, these epitomise generations of artistry.<sup>1</sup> Traditional jewellery holds deep cultural meanings, often representing identity, status, and spirituality.

Traditional Jewellery are Traditional Cultural Expressions, which evolved over time. In a world so homogenized due to global connectivity, Traditional Jewellery as a craft plays a vital role in preserving distinctive cultural identities. Threats to these industries due to various market forces can destabilize the economies of the communities surviving on it. However, creating a supportive ecosystem can provide numerous opportunities for the skilled artisans to earn a sustainable living and pass their knowledge down through generations. Safeguarding these traditions also ensure preservation

of centuries-old practices and prevent their unauthorized use.<sup>2</sup>

Traditional Assamese Jewellery, or *Axomiya Gohona*, are native to Assam whose design inspirations come from nature, celestial bodies, musical instruments, and agricultural artifacts. Despite its rich cultural symbolism and aesthetic intricacy, survival of this craft faces serious threat. The sector, represented largely by small businesses and artisans, is facing challenges posed by mass-produced imitation jewellery, often made from brass or copper, that lack craftsmanship and cultural depth of genuine handmade pieces.

The machine-made replicas are widely sold on e-commerce platforms at lower prices. Visual distinctions are apparent to local communities, but non-local consumers are often misled by imitations, leading to dilution of the cultural identity and a gradual erosion of its heritage. Easy availability of counterfeit products not only jeopardize the reputation of the traditional craft but also adversely impact livelihoods of artisans, thereby threatening sustainability of their communities and traditional knowledge systems. Currently, about 1,000 artisans of Traditional Assamese Jewellery are practicing the craft in the state of Assam, who are concentrated largely in the areas of Jorhat, Nagaon and Barpeta, the major hubs of production.

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GI recognises the distinct qualities, reputation, and cultural significance of products originating from a specific geographic region. The recent grant of GI status to *Axomiya Gohona* is anticipated to help preserve the authenticity of this traditional craft, provide a thrust to its global appeal, and support the growth of peripheral employment opportunities in hubs of production like tourism and exports. However, low awareness levels among artisans about GI protection, difficulties in enforcing GI rights, and competition from counterfeit or unregistered products shall remain some of the immediate challenges to be countered.

To have deeper insights into various dynamic forces affecting the industry, a detailed field investigation was undertaken in Rontholi, Nagoan, Assam. The study also investigated the primary obstacles to sustainability of this craft as a GI-recognized product and possibilities of how GI status can contribute to protecting the authenticity, integrity, and long-term economic viability of this heritage craft in a highly competitive market. The study utilized both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data was generated through ground level research at Rontholi village while secondary data was obtained from e-commerce platforms, webpages of renowned Traditional Assamese Jewellery outlets, and websites of government bodies etc.

Through qualitative methodological framework, the study explored the current challenges to this traditional craftsmanship and gathered information about the general level of awareness about GI among jewellery artisans. Semi-structured interviews, field observations, and focus group discussions (FGDs) were the main modes of data collection for the purposive sampling performed for 35 experienced artisans with 10 to 15 years of practice. Interviews provided insights into artisanal techniques, traditional motifs, and personal experiences, while observations captured the tools, production processes, and workshop environments. Issues like market access, skill transmission, and GI awareness were discussed during FGDs. Thematic analysis enabled the identification of recurring patterns with observational data enriching the findings. This approach helped in gathering a holistic view of Traditional Assamese Jewellery-making within the context of GI recognition.

The craft of Traditional Assamese Jewellery is becoming increasingly vulnerable to challenges posed

by globalization, imitation, and limited awareness. Despite its cultural and historical significance, scholarly inquiry into its preservation—particularly in relation to the role of GI protection—remains limited. This study aims to address this gap by critically examining the effectiveness of GI status in promoting and preserving the craft and assessing whether its conferment alone will ensure long-term sustainability.

### **Jewellery as Traditional Cultural Expression of a Community**

Jewellery as such are more than just decorative pieces, often symbolizes social status, played vital roles in rituals, and served as a powerful form of personal and cultural expression. Traditional Jewellery on the other hand reflects national and regional heritage, with indigenous cultures creating unique jewellery pieces that connect deeply to nature and ancestral history. These pieces incorporate symbols and motifs specific to each culture, celebrating their stories and customs.<sup>3</sup> Through the selection of materials, designs, and craftsmanship, Traditional Jewellery conveys social, religious, and political messages, acting as a visual language that communicates the cultural identity of both the wearer and their community.

With globalization, cross-cultural exchanges have led to an exciting fusion of designs from contemporary designers, blending elements from various cultures. This has created innovative jewellery that resonates with global audiences. However, the rise of globalization also presents challenges, including cultural homogenization and the widespread availability of imitation or distorted copies of traditional jewellery on e-commerce platforms. These imitations have threatened the cultural integrity of age-old handicrafts. Traditional artisans continue to protect and preserve cultural heritage, even in the face of machine-made replicas. As traditional industries evolve, questions around the commodification of traditional knowledge arise, making it essential to safeguard the authenticity and cultural roots of traditional jewellery.

### **Jewellery Making Tradition of Assam**

In ancient Assam, referred to as Kamarupa, gold was plentiful, and gold washing along with jewelry making were two major industries. The state's rivers, flowing from the Himalayas, were rich in gold, which was extracted from the sands. The Sonowal Kachari

tribe specialized in gold washing in these rivers. During the reign of the Ahom kings, this process was carried out on a large scale, generating substantial income for the state through taxes on gold washing. The gold produced was used to create *Axomiya Gohona* or Traditional Assamese Jewellery by the *Sonaris* (traditional jewelers) particularly for the kings.<sup>4</sup> By the twelfth century, Assamese jewellery had gained considerable recognition, establishing the region as a prominent center for gold and silver craftsmanship.

Traditional Assamese Jewellery, though occasionally regarded as rough or unfinished, possesses a unique charm, featuring intricate designs made from gold and silver. These pieces often incorporate enameling techniques using inorganic materials such as salt and sulfur.<sup>5</sup> Primary raw material for making Traditional Assamese Jewellery is Gold due to its primary requirement of the golden appearance, and some Silver in moderation. The distinct features of *Axomiya Gohona* lie in its handmade craftsmanship and the use of high-purity gold (22 carat or above) and silver (92.5% or above purity). Other raw materials include solid silver blocks or wires, Zircon stones, locally crafted stones, beads, Enamels in red, blue, green, black, and white, as well as Lac for stone setting and filling, and Lurex yarn for beading and securing necklaces.

The creativity of the jewelers is showcased through unique color combinations, precise designs, and the use of traditional tools. This jewellery is considered an heirloom, passed down through generations within families, and is highly valued and cherished. The techniques for making *Axomiya Gohona* are exclusively taught within families. Renowned jewellery families such as the Bordolois in Jorhat, Bonias in Nagaon, and Das in Barpeta have been practicing this craft for over five generations.

The designs in *Axomiya Gohona* or Traditional Assamese Jewellery are inspired by nature, with motifs named after local flora and fauna, such as *Doog-Doogi*, *Lokaparo*, *Jethipota* etc shown in Fig. 1. Other designs are inspired by musical instruments, celestial bodies, or agricultural artifacts, like *Dhol-Biri* (traditional drum inspired design), *Junbiri* (moon-inspired design), *Japi* (farmer's hat inspired design) etc. as shown in Fig. 2. The unique motifs of Assamese Jewellery have drawn the interest of diverse audiences, yet preserving the authenticity and ethnic identity of this craft poses a significant challenge.

Currently, the Traditional Assamese Jewellery sector is highly competitive, with small businesses and entrepreneurs striving for innovation and effective marketing. However, a growing challenge comes from imitation jewellery, particularly machine-made replicas made from materials like brass or copper. These imitations are being sold on the e-commerce platforms as Traditional Assamese Jewellery at significantly lower prices than the authentic hand-made pieces. These machine-made imitations on e-commerce platforms have compromised the Traditional Cultural Expression of Assamese Traditional Jewellery in every aspect, especially in terms of aesthetics (Fig. 1 (b, c, e, f, h, i, k, l)).

Unlike many other jewellery styles, Traditional Assamese Jewellery pieces tend to be heavier and sturdier, with a more substantial feel. The designs often feature bold and rugged aesthetics. Jewellery pieces such as the *Dhol Biri* (traditional drum inspired design) and *Japi* (farmer's hat inspired design) are heavy, large, and striking, symbolizing strength and resilience (Fig. 2(a and c)). These pieces are inspired by the natural environment and cultural elements of Assam, reflecting the rugged beauty of the landscape and the spirit of its people (Fig. 1 (a, d, g, j) & 2 (a, c, e)).

These also feature delicate craftsmanship and a personal touch that speaks of the skills of artisans who have inherited these techniques over generations. In contrast, machine-made imitations are cheaper, but lack depth, texture, and fine details that are characteristic of authentic Assamese Traditional Jewellery (Fig. 1(b, c, e, f, h, i, k, l)). The designs are often mass-produced and lack the nuances and symbolism that traditional jewellery carry (Fig. 2 (b, d, f)). Furthermore, machine-made imitations tend to prioritize uniformity and simplicity over the complexity and rich cultural narrative that true Assamese Traditional Jewellery pieces embody.

### From Registration to Implementation: Insights into GI Protection of Assamese Jewellery

GI grant to the traditional crafts ensures recognition and respect within and outside the community. Legal protection provided under the provisions of GI also safeguards against misuse or exploitation. GI plays a vital role in strengthening the livelihoods and cultures of knowledge-based communities.<sup>6</sup> Currently, India do not have a specific law for protecting Traditional Cultural Expressions



Fig. 1 — Assamese traditional jewellery inspired by flora and faun represented in original (a, d, g, h) and lookalike expressions (b, c, e, f, h, i, k, l)

(TCEs), leaving the custodians of these crafts to choose between options like Certification Trademarks (CTM) or GI for protection—or both. Copyright laws are often viewed as unsuitable for protecting TCEs because it relies on concepts such as single authorship, originality, and a fixed date of creation. In contrast, GIs become more a befitting option owing to collective ownership and unlimited protection term.

However, all forms of TCEs do not comply with protection under GI laws. GIs effectively protect tangible cultural assets like handicrafts but fall short in covering intangible traditional cultural expressions (TCEs) such as dance or folklore. A study undertaken on Indian and Indonesian GI laws highlights this gap, urging reforms to extend protection to intangible

cultural heritage.<sup>7</sup> Another study in South America suggests that GIs and Collective Marks can also indirectly preserve Traditional Knowledge (TK) and Traditional Cultural Expressions (TCEs) through promotion of local identity, support to rural economies, and the encouragement to traditional production practices.<sup>8</sup>

In India, a unique handicraft product is eligible for protection under the provisions of Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act 1999. GI status increases the value of traditional products as it asserts superior product quality and associated reputation due to the geographical origin. By expanding visibility in market, GI protection helps these communities attract wider range of consumers



Traditional Japi or Farmer's Hat inspired design



A cheaper variant of the traditional Japi design



Traditional Dhol Biri inspired design



A cheaper variant of the traditional Dhol Biri design



Traditional Junbiri or moon inspired design



A cheaper variant of the traditional Junbiri design

Fig. 2 — Assamese traditional jewellery inspired by nature and cultural artifacts represented in original (a, c, e) and lookalike expressions (b, d, f)

and reduce dependency on middlemen. Additionally, GIs attract informed buyers, a major proportion of which transcend domestic markets, boosting both export opportunities and global tourism.<sup>9</sup>

Many times, lack of awareness among artisans about advantages and difficulty in enforcing GI rights remain some of the important constraints that prevent the custodians of the traditional crafts from fully

utilizing the potential of GI status. To convince an entrepreneur to use the GI tag over their finished goods, the traders must feel confident about the potential of GI to enhance the value of their products. A study in this regard was taken up in Chanthaburi Province, Thailand with entrepreneurs dealing with gems and jewellery. The results showed that entrepreneurs recognized GI's potential in marketing,

pricing, and product differentiation despite limited awareness.<sup>10</sup>

Another study conducted in Indonesia, investigated suitability of GI to protect a heritage craft i.e. Kotagede Silver and enhance its market value. The distinctive motifs and specific local know-how, particular to the local inhabitants of Kotagede, created a distinct link between the product and the territory. It was also realized that inherent skills and local know-how influenced the quality and contributed towards formation of common quality standards. The study concluded that Kotagede Silver as a craft qualifies the requirements for filing GI protection and subsequent the grant may provide solutions to the problems faced by silver artisans.<sup>11</sup>

Initially, the key challenges in registering a handicraft product under the provisions of Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999 in India included high registration costs, complex and time-consuming procedures, and the need for legal assistance, which small producers often found difficult to afford. There was limited awareness among artisans and farmers about GI benefits, leading to underutilization. Additionally, disputes over rightful ownership, lack of proper monitoring, and inadequate post-registration support — like branding and market access — hindered the effectiveness of GIs. Government bodies often dominate registrations, raising concerns about whether they truly represent producers' interests, leaving many local communities without fair recognition or economic advantage from their traditional products.<sup>12</sup>

Looking into all the above limitations, several amendments have been introduced to the original act regularly. In 2024, the Indian government drafted the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) (Amendment) Rules, 2023 introducing various measures to simplify the registration process for GIs and their authorized users. These amendments aim to encourage wider participation in the GI registration system, especially among small-scale and rural producers, by making the process more accessible and less burdensome.<sup>13</sup>

Registering a GI for unique traditional crafts often requires a clear connection between the product and their place of origin. However, this connection is not always clear in the GI applications filed in India concerning Traditional Jewellery. For instance, the Silver Filigree of Karimnagar was registered as a GI in 2006, yet the application mentions that filigree is a specialty of both Karimnagar (Andhra Pradesh) and

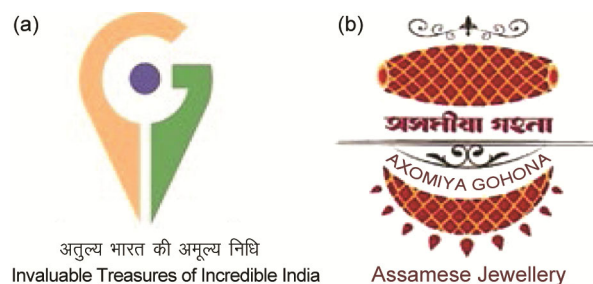


Fig. 3 — (a) Logos for registered Geographical Indications of India, and (b) Traditional Assamese Jewellery as a registered Geographical Indication Product

Cuttack (Orissa), which can cause ambiguity regarding its geographical linkage. Similarly, the Thewa Craft from Pratapgarh (Rajasthan), granted GI status in 2014, is not specifically tied to a geographical characteristic but becomes jewellery only when applied to jewellery items. The Temple Jewellery of Nagercoil was GI registered in 2007. It also lacks a direct reference to unique characteristics due to geographical features, as most raw materials are sourced from Chennai, and the properties of the local stone used in production are not specified.<sup>14</sup>

Under Article 22 of TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights), GIs are defined as indicators that identify a product's origin and its quality, reputation, or other characteristics attributable to that origin. GI protection for traditional jewellery is particularly important because it helps prevent unauthorized commercial use of GI tag by those outside the designated region. Interestingly, Government of India has launched a logo and tagline for Indian products registered as GIs on 1st August 2018 (Fig. 3 (a)). The GI Logo will act as a certifying mark that can be used to identify all Indian products registered as GIs, irrespective of the categories, which makes it convenient for the consumers to recognize authentic GI products and thereby protect the interests of genuine GI producers.<sup>15</sup>

One of the substantial challenges in registering GIs for traditional jewellery lies in the fact that raw materials, such as gold, silver, and gemstones, are often sourced from outside the geographical area. Despite this, the GI Act of 1999 permits GI protection for products made within a specific area if significant production steps, particularly those involving traditional techniques passed down through generations are carried out within that region. This reflects the understanding that the craftsmanship and human factor in creating these jewellery pieces are crucial, even if the raw materials come from other locations.

However, GI protection alone is not enough to revive a dying craft. A study conducted on Uttar Pradesh's handicraft industry emphasizes the potential of GI to revitalize while highlighting existing challenges. Despite GI registration offering socioeconomic benefits such as rural employment and economic growth, artisans struggle with poor awareness, market limitations, and intermediary exploitation. It was felt that government intervention is crucial in enforcing GI regulations, raising awareness, and facilitating effective marketing strategies, including partnerships and price regulations. Additionally, encouraging collaboration, technology adoption, and branding initiatives can strengthen market positioning.<sup>16</sup> In another study based on the Banarasi Sari industry in Uttar Pradesh, India revealed that GIs alone cannot effectively improve artisans' incomes. A broader approach is needed that integrates better trade policies, affordable raw materials, improved infrastructure, and collective institutions for maintaining Banaras' rich weaving heritage in a competitive market.<sup>17</sup>

Traditional Assamese Jewellery was applied for GI protection in 2022 by Gems and Jewellery Promotion Council of Assam (GJPCA) with the name "*Axomiya Gohona*" meaning Assamese Jewellery and has been granted the GI status on 27 March 2025. A logo is also registered with the GI which should be featured with each authentic piece of Traditional Assamese Jewellery as shown in Fig. 3(b). Till date 444 artisans have been identified as the potential 'Authorised Users' in the submitted Producers List for the GI *Axomiya Gohona*.

Only the registered 'Authorised Users' of the granted GI can feature the GI logo on their finished product if the product is made as per the requirements of the GI specification. Anyone falsifying and falsely applying GI as per Section 38 and 39 of GI Act are liable for punishment with imprisonment for a term not less than 6 months which may extend up to 3 years and a fine of ₹ 50,000 which may extend up to ₹2 lakhs.<sup>18</sup> Reluctance to Register as Authorised User due to misinformation, lengthy formal requirements and lack of awareness about the qualitative norms to use the GI logo are generally found to be the immediate hurdles for realizing the actual market potential of the GI status by the producers.

The three primary hubs of Traditional Assamese Jewellery production exhibit distinctive production methods and design elements, which are reflected in

their final products. Collectively, these regional variations highlight the rich diversity and cultural depth of this traditional craft. As per the manufacturing standards prescribed in the application, the Traditional Assamese Jewellery is categorized into three Types- A, B and C.<sup>4</sup>

**Type A:** The jewellery is made of gold frames, filled with lac and gold foil is used over the frames. They are mostly crafted in Sonari gaon in the district of Jorhat, Assam.

**Type B:** The jewellery is made of silver frames, filled with lac and gold foil is used over the frames. They are mostly crafted in Rontholi village in the Nagaon district of Assam.

**Type C:** The jewellery is made of gold or silver with gold electroplating without using a lac filing or gold foil. They are mostly crafted in Barpeta district of Assam

### Insights from Field Observations

To evaluate the effectiveness of GI protection in safeguarding the authenticity, integrity, and economic sustainability of Traditional Assamese Jewellery, ground level research was undertaken at Rontholi, Nagaon - identified in the GI application as a key production site for the Type B variety. The visit enabled a comprehensive understanding of indigenous artisanal techniques, traditional design motifs, and the working conditions within local jewellery-making units.

Through direct engagement with the artisan community, the study identified structural limitations in the production process, understood the work ethics and captured their perceptions regarding the role of GI in preserving cultural heritage and enhancing market visibility. Sections 5.1 through 5.4 detail the empirical observations from the field and highlight key insights derived from interviews with practitioners in the region.

### Rontholi: A Hub of Traditional Assamese Jewellery Production

Rontholi is a small village located in Nagaon subdivision of Nagaon District in Assam, India. It is situated around 8 km away south from Nagaon town. The total geographical area of the village is 291.54 hectares. The total population of Rontholi is 2,032 out of which 1,051 are males and 981 are females. Thus, the Average Sex Ratio of Rontholi is 933. As per the Census 2011, the literacy rate of Rontholi is 92.2%. Rontholi village has a higher

literacy rate compared to 60.6% of Nagaon district. The male literacy rate is 94.62% and the female literacy rate is 89.66% in Rontholi.<sup>19</sup> Rontholi being one of the three hubs of traditional jewellery making craft in Assam, the village is largely inhabited by Traditional Jewellery artisans or *Karigarhs* who are expert in the craft. Most of the villagers have inherited the craft from their forefathers as passing tradition, while a small number of artisans, hailing from the nearby villages, have learnt the craft for livelihood. A total number of 35 artisans were interviewed during this study.

### **Crafting Techniques of Traditional Assamese Jewellery**

The craft is practiced in the traditional workshops in the vicinity of their home, called “*Shaals*” and largely dominated by men in terms of workforce and ownership. The traditional jewellery made in Rontholi comprises mostly of silver casing with lac filling that is crafted further with 24 carat pure gold leaf covering and semiprecious or precious gemstones. At times, a gold casing is also crafted for the frame based on the customer's choice. The process of crafting Traditional Assamese Jewellery can be largely divided in two stages:

- (i) making the case (consisting of shaping the hollow frame and filling the hollow with Lac), and
- (ii) ornamenting the case with the gemstones (putting the gold foil on various motif, polishing and beading)

The production of *Axomiya Gohona* begins with melting gold or silver in a crucible made from graphite, clay, wood, or bamboo. The molten metal is then poured into an iron mold to cast it into a bar. Once the bar cools, it is cleaned by dipping it into a solution of sulfuric acid and water. The bars are then cut into the desired sizes, wrapped in white paper, and gently hammered to form smooth and fine plates or sheets. Gold or silver wires are also crafted at this stage. With the required design in mind, the plates or sheets are cut into strips, which are then shaped into various forms using a doming block and other tools, creating different components of the frame Fig. 4(a).

Making silver wire manually is very time consuming. Thus, ‘Taar Machine’ is often used to make silver taar (wire) to fetch for bulk orders as shown in Fig. 4(b). After curation of silver sheets and wires for the framing, the structure of the frame is

made ready. At times, two or more frames are welded together using a soldering torch to create a secondary frame with a more intricate structure for the motif as seen in Fig. 4(c). Thereafter, the frame is filled with lac as shown in Fig. 4(d). Once lac is filled in the frame, the artisans start setting the gemstones as seen in Fig. 4(e). Lac is basically used for giving volume to the design, besides providing base for setting the gemstones.

After intrinsic setting of the stones, Gold Leaf (*Kesaxun*) is manually placed all over the silver frame and around the stones as seen Fig. 4(f - g). This is the final step where each piece of motif is given a finishing touch (Fig. 4(h)). Finally, the chain of the motifs is adorned with beads or tassels according to the customer's preference as shown in Fig. 4 (i).

### **“Shaals’ or Traditional Jewellery Workshops in the village**

The artisans working under the Shaal owners are not always engaged formally. Majority of them are engaged informally with a commitment via word of mouth. The men are largely engaged in the crafting of the jewellery in silver or gold (Fig. 5 (a)), while a small number of the women extend support by ornamenting with gemstones and polishing. The wage systems across the Shaals are also not consistent as some provide daily wages while others work on incentive over each piece of jewellery. The constrained work environment (Fig. 5(b)), traditional tools (Fig. 5 (c)), together with hot and humid weather conditions make working in Shaals challenging for the craftsmen during summers.

Shrinking domestic market has led the Shaals supply to major showroom owners rather than trading themselves directly, door to door, as was largely prevalent in last few decades. Established showrooms in the city have market visibility and a consistent clientele, making it convenient to the craftsmen to sell under their brand name rather than selling themselves. In spite of the above-mentioned limitations, there are many positive aspects to this age-old tradition of Jewellery making craft. There is visible rise in demand of the Traditional Assamese Jewellery Designs due to new-found inclination of young women towards the Assamese Traditional Jewellery. This could be largely due to impressive advertising and marketing by jewellery showroom owners through word of mouth, social media and other advertising platforms. The rising trend became more



Fig. 4 — Various stages of making Traditional Assamese Jewellery

visible during the last few years when all the selling and buying went online through social media platforms due to Covid- 19 pandemic.

Artisan's children are actively engaged in learning and contribute to their parents' craft, assisting them in various stages of the jewellery making process. College dropouts often became formal workers at the Shaals, earning to support their families. In this way,

the Shaals acted as a supportive platform, offering a temporary refuge for educated but unemployed youth until they found a suitable professional path.

Another positive aspect of engagement in these Shaals is the flexibility of workspaces i.e. 'working from home' which accommodates craftsman to work from the small set-ups at home (Fig. 6(a)). Freedom of working from their familiar environment and

Fig. 5 — Traditional jewellery workshops or *Shaals* in Rontholi

Fig. 6 — Flexibility of work spaces in the traditional workshops

taking care of the family simultaneously encourage numerous craftsmen to join the Shaals, especially those with dependent family members. This also aids in increasing the workforce without making major expansion to the basic infrastructure (Fig. 6(b)) and allow the Shaal owners to recruit more workers under their unit. This facility has helped in expansion of the unit, catering to bulk orders, and making most out of the available resources. Working from home also helped in protecting trade secrets.

There was an evident willingness of artisans to form cooperatives and formalize the Shaals. Many Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are registered among the

villagers that aid and manage microfinances within themselves. A Cooperative named “Rontholi Swarnoxilpi Udhyog Xomobai Samittee Limited” was formed in 2019. Around 30 Shaals are registered in the village with names and registration numbers.

Rontholi village stands out as a remarkable example of grassroots entrepreneurship, where traditional knowledge and community effort have been seamlessly integrated into a thriving local economy. Jewellery-making is not just a profession here; it is a deeply rooted cultural practice, often involving entire families across generations. From design conceptualization to the final crafting of

exquisite pieces, every stage of the process is carried out within the village, showcasing its self-sufficiency and high level of artisanal expertise. The only external dependence lies in sourcing raw materials such as gold, silver, and gemstones.

Interestingly, the practice of selling jewellery directly to customers, often through door-to-door visits, reflects a strong entrepreneurial spirit and direct engagement with markets. This might also explain the prevalence of the surname “Bania” among the villagers, traditionally associated with trading communities. Thus, Rontholi exemplifies how cultural heritage and entrepreneurship can coexist to sustain livelihoods and preserve traditional crafts.

### **Assamese Jewellery Making as a Sustainable Livelihood Option for Rural Artisans**

The Traditional Assamese Jewellery making industry is an informal sector. There are many challenges like affordability and accessibility of raw materials, testing of quality or purity of jewellery products, designing, working conditions etc. When artisans were interviewed about the potential of GI status for Traditional Assamese Jewellery, both Shaal owners and craftsmen expressed a strong sense of urgency regarding the need for GI protection. They were deeply concerned about the rise of counterfeit jewellery in the market and the unfair competition it created. However, they were uncertain about the methods to prevent these mis-representations across various marketing platforms.

Artisans emphasized that jewellery is viewed as a luxury item, and as such, consumers often sought certification to confirm its value for money. They frequently requested quality assurance through certification. Assamese Traditional Jewellery, known as Kesaxun and crafted in Rontholi, is usually made from silver covered with a gold foil, along with the use of stones and lac. Artisans have noted that while jewellery made entirely of pure gold can be Hallmark certified, other forms of Traditional Jewellery do not meet the criteria for such certification. As a result, they felt the need for an alternative method of certification for silver-based, gold foil-plated products.

Additionally, they believed that having a certification system, especially for pure gold items, would help formalize the industry and enhance its trustworthiness. Furthermore, artisans believed that offering subsidized rates for raw materials could

address many issues, as the fluctuating prices of materials often lead to instability in the cost of finished products. The craftsmen suggested that establishing government-authorized shops to provide raw materials like silver and gold at controlled prices could greatly benefit many of the *Shaals*.

Most of the artisans relied heavily on orders from showrooms and bulk orders during wedding seasons, but the consistency of these orders varies throughout the year. As a result, many artisans in Rontholi have diversified their income by engaging in activities like animal husbandry and running grocery or vegetable shops (Fig. 6(c)), in addition to maintaining small-scale agricultural farms.

Interestingly, there has been an increase in the number of visitors, including students and tourists, coming to observe the jewellery-making process. This has created promising future employment opportunities in Rontholi's tourism sector. To meet the growing interest from visitors, a building is dedicated to house a Museum and a Library that will preserve resources on Traditional Assamese Jewellery making from Rontholi. Once the museum is opened for the visitors, it is expected to create allied business opportunities, such as tour guides, homestays, eateries etc. offering new employment avenues, particularly for women. The museum will not only showcase Rontholi's rich culture and heritage but also serve as a hub for interaction and discussion with visitors.

The most significant transformation anticipated to bring a major shift in the jewellery-making industry is the recent grant of GI status to the products. This recognition is expected to enable premium pricing and increase visibility in both domestic and international markets. As informed buyers often seek such certification as proof of authenticity, they are willing to pay higher prices for the assurance it provides. Additionally, craftsmen registered as Authorized Users for the GI will be able to sell their products through various platforms without struggling to prove their authenticity or falling victim to price negotiations. This change is also likely to lead to higher wages, as artisans will be less reliant on intermediaries, and the profits from premium pricing will trickle down to the workers.

Currently, wages are only sufficient to sustain a family in the village, prompting many educated youths to seek alternative employment. The responses gathered from 35 artisans reflect their perceptions of the current state of Traditional Assamese Jewellery as

an industry and an employment avenue (Fig. 7). The survey conducted on jewellery artisans revealed significant insights into their current practices and challenges. A striking 89% of artisans reported that jewellery making is their sole occupation, and the majority (80%) also indicated that the craft is an inherited skill passed down through generations. This highlights the deep-rooted nature of the craft within the community.

The craft of Assamese jewellery is predominantly guarded within families, with knowledge and techniques being passed down through generations. However, male members of the extended family too contribute to the workforce from nearby villages. Apprenticeship exists in the Shaals where young boys learn the intricacies of the craft and earn additional income. The workshops run with collective effort from all members of a family that help sustain and enrich the tradition, converging familial knowledge with fresh enthusiasm and skill.

Adaptation to shifting market demands was evident from responses indicating 57% of artisans now remaining solely focused on the traditional designs. This also indicated a higher level of flexibility adopted by the artisan to survive market competition. This shift may be attributed to the growing popularity of fusion designs, which blend traditional craftsmanship with contemporary styles. As a result, many artisans are incorporating modern elements into their creations to cater to a wider audience, balancing cultural heritage with evolving tastes and trends. It

was evident that all artisans perceive duplicity, or the rise of counterfeit products as a major threat to their livelihoods, underscoring the importance of protecting the authenticity of their work.

The interview responses reflected a sense of urgency to protect their craft through formal recognition with 57% seeing GI status as a critical guarantor of authenticity. Upon discussion they realized GI can also be a major product differentiator in the market and thus a remarkable 97% expressed willingness to become Authorized Users of GI. Close interaction revealed that despite their commitment to carry forward the craft, artisans were not confident about economic stability of their children if they adopt jewellery making as their primary profession in future. Most of the artisans want their children to pursue higher education and explore alternative livelihood opportunities. Low wages, long working hours, and physical strain associated with the profession might have made 'Traditional Jewellery making' a less attractive career alternative for the younger generation of the village. These findings highlight the artisans' struggles, but also their hopes for a more secure and prosperous future for both the craft and their families.

### Major Challenges for the Traditional Jewellery Sector

The study highlighted several challenges faced by jewellery artisans in Rontholi, shedding light on their economic difficulties, lack of professional

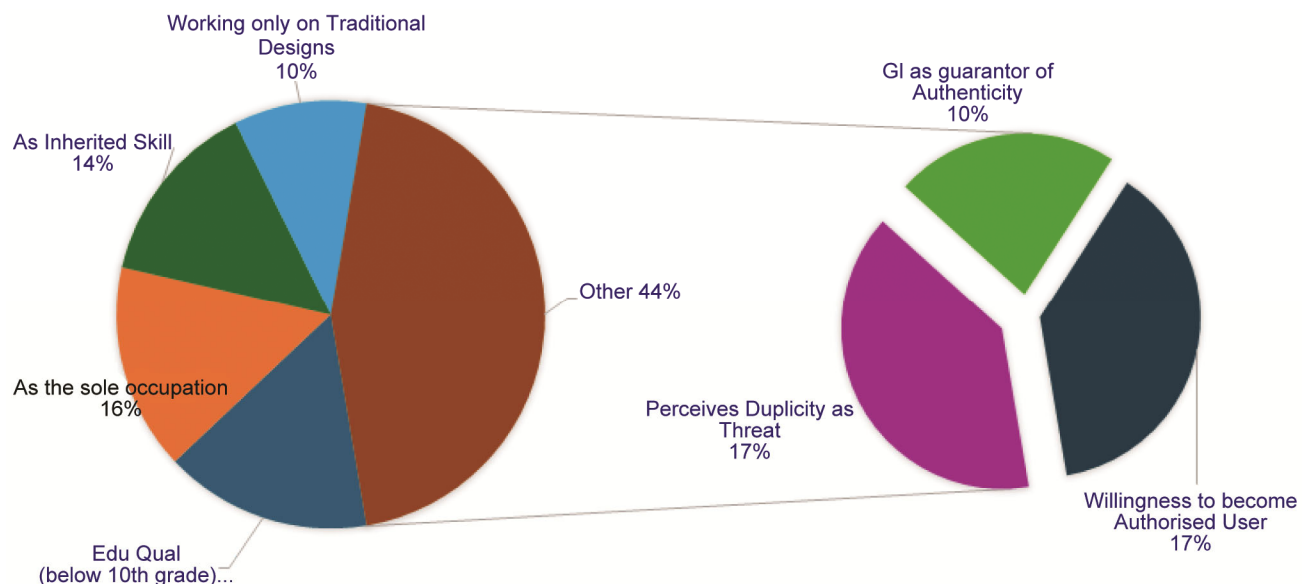


Fig. 7 — Survey response showing the work ethics and the IPR awareness levels among the artisans

commitment, and the volatile nature of raw material prices. One of the primary bottlenecks identified was the economic strain artisans experience while procuring machinery needed for extracting thin wires and sheets from raw materials like silver and gold, especially for bulk orders. While the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) offers schemes to support the purchase of machinery, the benefits are not evenly distributed due to power imbalances among community beneficiaries, leaving many artisans at a disadvantage.

Moreover, the raw material supply chain is largely monopolized by one or two private traders, which results in price manipulation and inconsistent supply, further affecting the artisans' ability to maintain a steady income. The daily fluctuations in the prices of gold and silver also pose significant challenges, as *Shaal* owners and artisans often suffer losses due to customers' preference for fixed prices.

The study also examined past government interventions aimed at addressing these issues. The Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship (IIE) and MSME introduced cluster formation in 2012, which aimed to bring economic sustainability through technology, skill development, and market linkages.<sup>20</sup> However, artisans suggested that further government intervention was necessary, particularly in providing subsidized raw materials within these community clusters. The fluctuating prices of gold and silver, exacerbated by the actions of traders, remain a significant obstacle to profitability, and many artisans continue to struggle with the high costs of raw materials.

In addition to economic challenges, artisans also face issues related to the scalability and quality control of their handmade products. The handmade nature of Assamese Traditional Jewellery limits the ability to scale production compared to machine-made alternatives. Furthermore, the lack of professional commitment from artisans, coupled with a demotivating wage system, hampers productivity. Wages are often based on design complexity, hours worked, and the number of items produced, leading to an informal and inconsistent pay structure. The low rewards for the labour-intensive work, combined with long working hours and limited facilities, further discourage artisans from fully committing to the craft. *Shaal* owners also struggle with maintaining motivation and professional commitment among workers, which presents challenges in accepting bulk orders and increasing production.

The expected increase in the average monthly income of artisans, in post GI grant scenario, could be a motivator for putting better effort for the traditional products.<sup>21</sup> To address these challenges, artisans expressed a strong desire for certification mechanisms that could assure customers of the quality of their products. GI protection would not only guarantee the authenticity of the products but also serve as a form of regional branding that could increase visibility in both domestic and international markets.<sup>22</sup>

For many granted GIs in India, the facilitation required for gaining the 'Authorised User' status is either inadequate or totally absent. Besides that, awareness needs to be generated among the villagers regarding the requirements for maintaining the quality standards by the "Authorized User" and the scrutiny they may face from the 'inspection body'. Once the maintenance of quality standards is normalized among the producers, it will be easier for the sellers to assert superiority while marketing the products. Also, the producers may consider E-commerce seriously and introduce new innovations in peripheral areas like the packaging and jewellery accessories like beads, stings and tassels associated with the main ornamental pieces to attract wider clientele in online platforms. Lots of producers are not equipped with online platforms for trading and often surrender to traders. The villagers may consider direct marketing through an authorised website operated under the banner of registered association of artisans.

The study highlighted a range of issues faced by artisans, from economic challenges and market volatility to issues of scalability and professional commitment. While government interventions and the recently granted GI status offer some hope for addressing these problems, artisans need greater support, resources, and awareness to thrive in a competitive market. By improving the structure of their industry and embracing new marketing avenues, they can ensure the preservation and growth of Traditional Assamese Jewellery. Even after GI grant, numerous challenges remain to disrupt effective implementation of GI regime for the Assamese Traditional Jewellery. However, a very constructive approach while addressing these will ensure enhanced artisans' earnings, sustained traditional craftsmanship, and greater consumer demand in both national and international markets.

## Conclusion

Jewellery is recognized as powerful symbol of cultural identity, reflecting traditions, beliefs, and values across communities. However, modern market forces like imitation jewellery and easy availability of counterfeited products on online platforms, are threatening the survival of traditional crafts. While online marketing initially provided broader visibility, attracted global buyers, but later it has also led to the huge proliferation of counterfeit products, undermining the authenticity of Traditional Jewellery. It is hoped that recently granted GI status to Traditional Assamese Jewellery will surely prevent misrepresentation and provide protection from cheap counterfeits.

GI protection alone, may not guarantee economic success to artisans. To fully capitalize on GI recognition, effective marketing strategies may be required that includes strong presence in national and international exhibitions and trade fairs for asserting uniqueness to the jewellery buyers, widespread awareness campaign about the granted GI status through social media platforms and other sources of mass communication to create informed customers and opening dedicated government outlets for Traditional Jewellery with online shopping options. Such initiatives can increase exposure, elevate demand, and connect artisans to larger, more profitable markets. For better management of resources, accessing markets, and negotiating better prices, formalization of artisans into 'producer groups' or 'aggregators' can help. It also allows for shared support like skill training, credit access, and technology upgrades, leading to higher productivity and improved product quality.

Preserving authenticity within Traditional Jewellery will require a good collaboration between producers and consumers. With globalization, innovation in Jewellery sector is inevitable to survive in market, but it must be practiced with caution so that innovative or fusion Jewellery do not overshadow the handcrafted traditional products. By ensuring authenticity through certifications, the Traditional Jewellery Enthusiast can be guaranteed value for money and a dedicated clientele can be created who can appreciate premium pricing for good quality products. Also, by improving the working conditions in the *Shaals* and better wage systems, the uncompromised quality of the Traditional Assamese Jewellery can be ensured. Thus, a concerted effort

from all stakeholders will be crucial for ensuring optimum use of the GI potential, ensuring sustainable growth and preserving cultural heritage for future generations.

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