

Indian Religions in the Global Emerald Trade: A Photo Essay

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The Indian emerald trade has traditionally been controlled by members of the Jain religious community. Jain emerald traders are deeply pious and ascetic. The emerald business as it is practiced outside of India is rife with violence, lying, cheating, sexual exuberance, and a deep attachment to shiny green stones. There seemed to be a contradiction between the model of personal piety envisioned by Jainism and their participation in such an impious economy. Jain traders and philosophers explained that there was no contradiction at all. Hindus and Muslims join their Jain counterparts in Jaipur's Johari Bazaar, or Jewelers' Market. Together, these three religious communities have created a moment of peaceful, profitable, and predictable exchange in the global gemstone economy. Photography has long been an integral part of the gemstone business. Rarely, however, do we catch a glimpse into the lives of the men who mine, manufacture, and distribute these stones around the world. This photo essay locates these people in their social, economic, and especially religious contexts. The emerald trade follows the contours of religious communities. While it is not possible to convey the content of a religious ethic in a photograph, it is possible to show people living out those ethics. [asceticism, emeralds, international trade, Jainism, photography, religion]

Introduction

Jaipur, Rajasthan, in Northwest India is the hub of the global trade in low-grade emeralds. No emeralds are mined in India itself. Indian traders import their stones from Zambia and Brazil. The stones are brought in rough and they are cut, faceted, and polished in thousands of workshops around the city.

The Indian emerald trade has traditionally been controlled by members of the Jain religious community (Babb 1996; Laidlaw 1996). Many of those who ply the emerald trade today are direct descendants of a group of Marwari Jains who were brought to Jaipur by the Maharajah Jai Singh II (Lane 2010). They served the Maharajah as his court jewelers in the early 18th century. A small group of Svetambar Jains of the Murti Puja denomination still wields extraordinary influence in the international commerce in colored gemstones (Babb 1996).

The five vows enjoined of lay Jains are *Ahimsa*, or nonviolence, *Satya*, or truthfulness, *Asetya*, not stealing or cheating in business, *Brahmacharaya*, or chastity, and *Aparigraha*, or non-attachment to things of the world. But the emerald business as it is practiced outside

of India is rife with violence, lying, cheating, sexual exuberance, and a deep attachment to shiny green stones. There seemed to be a contradiction between the model of personal piety envisioned by Jainism and their participation in such an impious economy.

Jain philosophers and emerald traders explained to me that this was no contradiction at all. They do no violence in importing and exporting rough and cut gemstones. If violence occurs in the mining areas, this is not their concern. They are trying to purge their souls of the Karma that would come from committing violent acts. They are not trying to rid the entire world of violence. By the same token, if there is deception, cheating, and thievery among other emerald traders, this need not impinge on their business practice (Babb 2004).

Their success hinges on their ability to mobilize large amounts of credit through their personal networks. Their access to credit depends on their reputation for honesty and personal piety. Gemstone jewelry may represent attachment to the things of the world, to those who wear it, but most of Jaipur's Jain gem traders are modest in their dress, adornment, and lifestyle. Their radically transcendent divinities, the *Trthankara*,

demand virtue of their followers, but offer them very little earthly assistance. Their strict Karmic theodicy makes salvation hinge on renunciation. Jaipur's Jains are renowned for their personal asceticism. This asceticism has allowed them to succeed in a trade that is elsewhere characterized by lust, greed, and vanity.

The Jains are not alone in Jaipur's emerald business. A series of extraordinary events precipitated by the extraordinary Mr. S. S. Gupta broke their religious cartel and transformed the emerald trade forever. Hindus from a variety of castes participate in the global commerce in gemstones alongside Jains in Jaipur's Johari Bazaar, or Jewelers' Market. Furthermore, members of the Rajasthan's Muslim community were once restricted to performing the artisanal labor of cutting and polishing the tons of gemstones that move through the city every year. Many still do. But today, an ever-growing number of Muslims have joined the ranks of international traders. They leverage their own personal and religious networks of trust and credit to get the merchandise and the capital they need to succeed in international emerald commerce.

Together, these three religious communities have created a moment of peaceful, profitable, and predictable exchange in the global gemstone economy. Their success derives from their religious ethics and the religious communities to which they belong. In the emerald mining areas of Zambia and Brazil, where very different religious ethics hold sway, peace and prosperity are much more difficult to come by.

Photography has long been an integral part of the gemstone business. We are accustomed to seeing lush studio images of gems and jewelry and of models arrayed in their finery. Photographs of gemstones tend to focus on the stones themselves or on the women who wear them. Rarely do we catch a glimpse into the lives of the men who mine, manufacture, and distribute these stones around the world. When we do see gemstone miners and cutters, they are often rendered anonymous. We see their hands but not their faces. They are depicted as subjects of an exploitative industry and little more.

But emeralds are not like diamonds, gold, or coal. No company or cartel controls the production, distribution, or sale to the consumers of jewelry. No market sets their price. Negotiations are characterized by a heady mixture of trust and mistrust, charisma and deceit. Those who ply the emerald trade do so by choice. In an atmosphere of

individualism, the ties that bind traders to one another are those of religion and religious kinship.

Most of the photographs that follow are portraits. They were taken by the author in the course of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Jaipur in 2010. They focus on the men who ply the emerald trade in India, rather than on the European and North American women who will eventually wear the stones that they sell. They focus on the people rather than the stones. They try to locate these people in their social, economic, and especially religious contexts. The emerald trade follows the contours of religious communities. It would be impossible to deal in stones without the trust and credit of one's co-religionists. But emeralds also cross the boundaries of communities that are often held to be antagonistic to one another. Emeralds bring people together into webs of economic interdependence, even when their religious ethics might divide them.

It is not possible to convey the content of a religious ethic in a photograph. It is possible to show people living out those ethics. We can see the equanimity and the self-imposed suffering mandated by Jain philosophy in the faces of the traders depicted here. We can read the religious diversity of the Indian emerald trade from the sartorial and decorative cues given by traders and cutters in their offices and workshops. We gain a palpable sense of the cordial mistrust among these communities from photographs of the never-ending process of sorting, grading, and weighing emeralds. This is at best a leaky bulwark against the tide of pilferage that washes over the trade in rough emeralds everywhere.

It is perhaps salutary to remember that religious ethics do not exist outside of their realizations in concrete, interpersonal interactions, like the ones captured here. Photographs freeze fractions of seconds from the flux of everyday life. But ethics can and must change in the vicissitudes of history and in the ever-changing world of global gemstone commerce. A fundamental principle of Jainism is the nonuniversality of truth (Bothra 2009). Even the tradition's most hallowed principles must be continually reexamined and reevaluated by its educated and thoughtful practitioners in order to ensure that their virtues are adapted to their contemporary contexts.

These photographs depict the confrontations between religious principle and commercial practice

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where those reevaluations take place. A group of deeply religious and severely ascetic businessmen has grown rich in a trade devoted to the titillation of vanity. Their faith teaches them to disdain the wealth that they earn, even as they use it to reap ever-greater profits. They are detached merchants of attachment to possessions. They are compelled to earn money in order to give it away and thereby cleanse their souls of the stains left by earthly life. These photographs show worldly lives structured by an otherworldly theology and a soteriology of ascetic equipoise.

The traders depicted recognize the delicate nature of the balance between success in this life and the successful progress of their eternal souls toward liberation. The photographs capture moments where ethical abstractions are refracted through the material realities of the emerald trade. Jains aspire to annihilate their individuality and merge into an ether of liberated souls at the edge of the cosmos. But they must live an individualistic life like buying, selling, sorting, and cutting emeralds on earth in order to achieve it. Ethical and monetary values are both at stake in a religious life lived in trade. Photos from Jaipur offer a glimpse into the relationship between profit and principle in the emerald business.

These images were created using available light and fast lenses of normal focal lengths (Figures 1–18).



FIGURE 1. The Johari Bazaar. The Johari Bazaar, or Jewelers' Market, was designated as a gem trading district by Maharajah Jai Singh II when he planned his new capital of Jaipur in 1727. It remains the center of the global trade in uncut colored gemstones to this day. It is one of the busiest and noisiest streets in the Pink City. Although the Johari Bazaar is lined with jewelry stores, most of the emerald trading takes place in traditional *Havelis*, homes built around courtyards that house multigenerational gem trading families.



FIGURE 2. Rajendra Bothra. Rajendra is a jeweler and a Jain. His father was a *Yogi*, an ascetic religious leader. His brother is a philosopher and translator of Jain scriptures from Hindi to English. Rajendra strives to live out the religious virtues instilled in him by his father, through his life in trade. He also strives to instill them in the many young men whom he takes as apprentices. But he acknowledges candidly that you cannot be both a businessman and a philosopher and that the path of virtue only leads to riches very slowly. Rajendra is a photographer himself and is shown here under the lights that he had set up to photograph jewelry for an international client.



FIGURE 3. Mortification. Jyoti Kothari had his luxuriant beard ripped out in a ritual of self-mortification. The point of this ascetic practice is not to induce pain but to bring about detachment from the body and the things of the world. The practice of such severe forms of renunciation is usually restricted to full-time ascetic *Sadhus*, but Jyoti is an active and successful businessman in the emerald trade. His success has always rested on his reputation for extraordinary piety. Now that his life in trade has brought prosperity to himself, his family, and his many apprentices, he prepares to remove himself from the quotidian world and devote his life to religious contemplation and teaching. Jyoti invited me to photograph him in his home when he underwent this ritual of austerity for the first time. Since then, it has become a regular part of his personal devotion, and he performs this ceremony every few months.



FIGURE 4. Parshvanath the Trthankar. The Trthankara of Jainism are not gods per se. They have achieved enlightenment and omniscience by ridding their souls of attachment to the world. As such, they are radically transcendent and offer no material aid to their devotees. Instead of granting boons or heeding prayers, the Trthankara provide an example of ascetic virtue that can serve as a bridge to enlightenment. Emulating the virtues of the Trthankara can lead lay Jains to great success on earth as well. Cobras saved Parshvanath from drowning while he meditated. He remains the most well-known and popular of the Jain Trthankara. This image of him sits in the Panchyatri Mandir in the Johari Bazaar.



FIGURE 5. The Jewelers' Apprentice. The economic value of Jain virtues is not lost on the members of Jaipur's other religious communities. Young Hindu men, like Anil, apprentice themselves to traders like Jyoti and mediate their transactions with buyers and sellers around Jaipur's Pink City. Once they have developed a reputation for honesty and forthrightness, they can begin to trade on their own. Without the faith and credit of an established jeweler to back them up, it would be nearly impossible to enter into Jaipur's centenarian emerald economy. Now that Jyoti Kothari has retired, Anil has become a fully fledged trader in his own right. Here he displays a string of emerald beads from Colombia.



FIGURE 6. Nagin the Sorter. Jains do not cut their own emeralds. They hire *karigars*, who are generally Muslims, to perform this task, which requires both skill and precision. However, there is a degree of mistrust between the two communities. Pilferage and the swapping of high-grade stones for lower ones are both rampant and accepted as necessary costs of doing business. In order to lessen the amount of workers' pilferage, Jain manufacturers employ people like this man to sort and resort their stones by size and color. He knows what the *karigars* are receiving and closely examines the cut stones they return to him.



FIGURE 7. Sorter II. Sorters are also charged with weighing the stones and paying the workmen according to their production. Most karigars are paid on a piecework basis rather than earning a regular wage. The karigars in this workshop are perhaps slightly better off than their fellows because they shape stones so tiny that they can only be cut on hand-operated grinding wheels.



FIGURE 8. Karigars. The atmosphere in the workshops where emeralds are cut is very different from that of the offices where they are bought and sold. Electric motors whir. Saws scream as they bite into stone. The intent concentration of the craftsman replaces the showmanship of the professional negotiator. Muslim men sit on the floor. Their sparing conversations are conducted in Urdu rather than Hindi or Marwari. The walls are adorned with pictures of Mecca and verses from the Koran. It is here that emeralds are transformed from rocks into gems.



FIGURE 9. Karigar II. The stones are cut and polished in several steps. First, they are sawed on a spinning blade to separate the workable material from the uncolored beryl and the schist matrix.



FIGURE 10. Pre-shaping. The smallest and finest stones are pre-shaped on a hand-operated wheel. This gives the karigars the greatest degree of control over the placement of the table and the shape of the drop of the emerald. Emeralds reveal their true colors upon pre-shaping, and this all-important task is the most closely supervised aspect of the cutting process. Workers and their bosses prefer that this task be performed under natural light. Workshops either open onto the street or feature a wall of east-facing windows.



FIGURE 11. Faceting and Polishing. While pre-shaping is done by hand, faceting and polishing are more automated. Hindu and Muslim workers in Jain employ machines imported from Israel, the other global center of emerald cutting. The men who operate these machines are not afforded the same degree of respect as those who shape the stones by hand.



FIGURE 12. Children of the Gem Trade. Manufacturers of the lowest grades of emeralds do not operate workshops of their own. They give their stones to poor families to cut on a piecework basis. Many of these families employ their children to polish gemstones on inexpensive machines in their homes. Some see this as the exploitation of child labor. Others see it as an apprenticeship to a lucrative career. One thing is sure: if not for the work of these children, many families would struggle to afford shelter and sustenance.



FIGURE 13. The Silversmith. While the vast majority of Jaipur's gemstones are exported abroad, there is also a significant local economy in finished jewelry. This silversmith casts a ring in his street corner workshop. It will hold a large but cheap emerald. His client was advised by an astrologer to wear the stone in order to focus the light of the stars onto his hand. These stars control his destiny and the ring may improve it.



FIGURE 14. The Bourse. Small-time traders congregate around the gates of a temple on the Johari Bazaar hawking emeralds folded into squares of cream-colored tissue paper. They call this area the bourse, or stock market, and anyone can trade stones there. These Brazilian emeralds are of the lowest quality, and this middleman will be lucky to turn a tiny profit. Bigger deals for better stones are conducted in private offices by trusted middlemen.



FIGURE 15. The Emerald King. Mr. S. S. Gupta changed the emerald trade forever. A Hindu from a caste of food-hawkers, Gupta managed to amass enough wealth and credit to purchase the entire production of the Carnaiba mines, the site of Brazil's first major emerald strike. He extended credit without conditions to his Hindu co-religionists, bringing them into the business and establishing himself as the Emerald King. Where before a few hundred Jain families had dominated the emerald trade, now more than 300,000 people from all of Jaipur's religious communities deal in gemstones. But even Gupta's massive fortune has not withstood the vicissitudes of time and temptation, and his family has been victim to violent tragedy.



FIGURE 16. Jajoo. Gupta opened the gate for Hindus to trade in emeralds. They followed him to the Brazilian mines in great numbers. Mr. Jajoo has been traveling to Brazil and bringing back emeralds for decades. He and his son have established themselves as wealthy and respected Hindu businessmen.



FIGURE 17. An Islamic Life in Trade. Muslim families were long confined to the role of *karigar*, workmen in the emerald trade. They were perceived as dishonest and unfit for anything but manual, artisanal labor. Although prejudices against Indian Muslims persist, many have managed to defy the stereotypes and succeed in international emerald trading. Families like this one import, cut, and export their own stones.

Conclusion

Emerald moves in religious circles. Catholics in Zambia and Brazil wrench the stones from their schist matrices in underground tunnels or open pits far below the surface of the earth. West African Muslims and Brazilian Neo-Pentecostal Christians bring them to their Indian buyers. When the stones are brought back to Jaipur, they are traded within communities constituted in temples and mosques. The money generated by trading in emeralds is put toward religious ends. Emeralds have built temples and hospitals. They have sustained Jain *Saddhus* and funded Muslim sermons.

The material qualities of the emeralds themselves may help us understand why these stones circulate in restricted religious communities rather than joining the global capital flows as one more universally fungible mineral commodity. Unlike gold, oil, or diamonds, emeralds have no fixed price. There is no universal system by which they can be classified, compared, and evaluated. Their value depends on a series of negotiations, and their price can fluctuate wildly as they move from hand to hand. In the absence of any determinate price, personal relationships come to the fore in emerald transactions. Trust and credit are of the essence. The qualities of the trader become as important as the qualities of his merchandise.

The qualities that make someone desirable as an emerald trading partner can be instilled through reli-



FIGURE 18. Scene in the Pahar Ganj. The Pahar Ganj is a Muslim district in Jaipur. It was once a street full of workshops where Muslims did piecework for Jains. Today it is a thriving trading district. This small proprietor sorts the Brazilian emeralds that he has cut into lots destined for the export market.

gious devotion and personal piety. In this licit, but not always entirely legal economy, tens, even hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of stones and money change hands without contracts, or even handshakes. Emeralds are rarely sold for cash on the spot. A vast web of credit relationships unites importers, manufacturers, and exporters. Religious ethics become the ethics of business. Religious communities become the loci of commodity transactions. Religious principles like the Jain doctrine of *Dan*, or the Gift, and Muslim *Zakat*, the obligation to give alms, can help sacralize the profits made in the emerald trade.

In the emerald trade, the material and the ideal come together as one. The stones cannot be isolated from the social and religious settings within which they are transacted. Their material qualities only become

meaningful within these religious frames. Neither can religious principle be abstracted from the economic contexts in which principles become practices. Economic success hinges on religious reputation, and religious reputation depends, among other things, on forthrightness in business transactions.

Photography reminds us that the categories created by scholars are inseparable from their enactment in the lives of the people we study. The same is true of the religious ideals that structure the economic lives of these traders and workers. These photographs are not intended to be momentary examples of eternal principles. They are images of negotiation between principle and practice. Negotiations in the emerald business are fraught because the stones are supposed to materialize qualities that are ineffable. These pictures attempt to make tangible some equally ineffable ethical axioms.

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