

## ABSTRACT

### **Between text and context: Therapeutic use of gems and precious metals in Tamil Nadu**

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Gemstones are very commonly used in India as a remedy to control the influence of navagraha, the nine planetary deities of Hindu astrology. Precious stones and metals are deemed to be powerful substances having an impact on the body and on the life of individuals and families. These expensive remedies are nowadays especially popular among educated, "modern", middle to upper-middle class families. Most jewellery shops in Indian cities hire astrologers or other kinds of specialists in order to advise the clients about the appropriate gemstones or jewels to wear. Magazines, TV programs and internet websites advertise the therapeutic properties of gems and metals in order to sell their products.

The use of gemstones and metals for therapeutic ends is a multifaceted phenomenon that can't be reduced to a folk, magical or superstitious belief. Like many other Indian therapeutic practices, gem-therapy is both a system of knowledge codified in Sanskrit and vernacular ancient literature, and a contemporary, globalised phenomenon where economic and ideological trans-national flows meet. This project intends to study gem-therapy in its two dimensions of a traditionally codified knowledge and a cosmopolitan, "modern" and commercial phenomenon. This research aims at analyzing how these two dimensions interact at a local level and contribute to the shaping of contemporary therapeutic practices. The textual theory codified in gemmological and astrological treatises will be compared to the applied knowledge and savoir-faire of astrologers, jewellers, traditional goldsmiths, ayurvedic and siddha practitioners using gemstones and metals for their professional activities. Fieldwork will be conducted both in urban centres such as Chennai, Madurai and Thanjavore, and in rural areas. I shall also investigate the way national and trans-national networks, New Age movements and Indian diaspora affect the diffusion and popularity of gemmology in contemporary India.