

Star LIFE Style

The changing story of SHANKHA-POLA

Years ago, while speaking with an elderly artisan in Shankhari Bazar, Tahmina Shaily, owner of jewellery brand Shoilee, heard a description of the neighbourhood that stayed with her. The narrow stretch now lined with shops, residences, and storage spaces, once looked very different. According to the artisan, many of the buildings had open verandas where craftspeople sat cutting conch shells with specialised saws to make shankha.



Photo Courtesy: Shoilee
Special Thanks to Lora Khan, 6 Yards Story and Tahmina Shaily, Shoilee for the interview

"The shankher korat, which was used to cut the conch shell, could be seen on every veranda," recalls Shaily. "Today, the rear spaces have become factories, residences or warehouses, but the craft continues, although much less visibly."

That image captures much of the story of shankha-pola today. The craft has not vanished, but it has moved out of sight. At the same time, the jewellery itself is appearing in more places than ever.

Once read primarily as a marker of marriage among Bengali Hindu women, shankha-pola is now also being worn as a fashion accessory, a statement of Bengali identity and an element of contemporary styling.

During Durga Puja, when red and white return to the centre of festive dressing, this transformation becomes especially visible.

MORE THAN AN ORNAMENT

For Shaily, shankha-pola cannot be understood simply as pieces of jewellery.

"To me, shankha-pola carries profound emotional stories, exchanges and sharing," she explains, adding, "A glass bangle is a glass bangle, and a jhumka is a jhumka. However, when you see shankha-pola, you do not only think that it looks beautiful. You immediately associate it with a story, a culture, a relationship, a certain kind of Bengali identity."

Traditionally, shankha refers to the white bangle carved from conch shell, while pola refers to the red bangle associated with coral. Among Bengali Hindu women, particularly married women, the pairing has long carried ritual and marital significance.

That recognition often travels across borders. According to Shaily, seeing someone wearing the pair of bangles abroad can immediately suggest a connection to Bengali culture. Perhaps that is one reason the form has survived for generations. Its appeal is not built only on design. It is tied to memory, relationships and identity.

A WIDER DESIGN VOCABULARY

Lora Khan, owner of 6 Yards Story, sees more room for variation. For her, the limited range of conventional shankha-pola designs created an opportunity.

"Very limited designs were available before," she says. "I saw that I actually had a lot of scope to work in this area. I thought, why not offer a different kind of design so that more people would like it? And people actually did."

Today, versions inspired by pola appear in black, green, pink and other colours, especially when made from fibre or acrylic.

Khan is careful, however, to distinguish these from traditional materials.

"Even I have caught myself saying 'black pola', but it is actually a black fibre bangle," she explains.

The distinction matters.

Contemporary fibre and acrylic bangles borrow the shape and visual vocabulary, but are not identical to the traditional object. This also explains their popularity. Modern versions are easier to produce, affordable, and simpler to experiment with.

"Real shankha is expensive, so many people do not wear it regularly," Khan clarifies. "Pola, especially the more affordable versions, is easier on the wallet. People can change designs, buy more than one and wear them more often."



FROM MARITAL MARKER TO STATEMENT PIECE

Perhaps the biggest change is not colour or material, but who feels comfortable wearing it.

"It is not like only married women wear it anymore," Khan says. "Many people look at it as a statement piece now."

That does not erase the traditional meaning for women who wear it as part of marriage and religious practice. Instead, another way of wearing it has developed alongside that meaning.

Tahmina Shaily has noticed this shift particularly among younger women.

She recalls a time when festive dressing often meant a complete transformation. Today, festive identity can be expressed through smaller additions.

Someone may spend the day at work in a simple shalwar-kameez, then add bangles, a colourful dupatta, kajal and a teep before heading out in the evening. A student in jeans and a T-shirt may stack red bangles on both wrists. A daughter may borrow jewellery from her mother even if their outfits look entirely different.

PUJA DRESSING, REWORKED

For Lora Khan, Durga Puja is an ideal moment to experiment with this flexibility.

She suggests treating each day of the festival differently. A wearer may choose red and white for Dashami, while opting for another pola-inspired colour on a different day to complement the outfit.

The styling can be as elaborate or as restrained as the wearer prefers.

This reflects a larger change in festive dressing. People no longer necessarily feel they must choose between dressing traditionally from head to toe or not dressing festively at all. A single accessory can do enough.

That is where shankha-pola becomes especially useful. It can be part of a saree look, but it can also sit comfortably beside silver bangles, a kurta, denim or a more contemporary silhouette.

WHEN THE LOOK SURVIVES BUT THE CRAFT STRUGGLES

At Shankhari Bazar, the traditional practice of carving conch has become less visible, and Tahmina Shaily believes fewer artisans are working in the field. The concern is simple: an aesthetic can survive even after the craft behind it weakens.

She believes designers and consumers both have a role to play.

"When demand increases, artisans will thrive, and the practice will flourish," she says. "Designers can play a role, and buyers



can consciously prioritise local jewellery that is connected to our culture, memories and emotions."

That may be the more important conversation this Puja. Wearing shankha-pola more often can certainly keep the form visible, but visibility alone is not enough. Understanding what is handmade, what is inspired by tradition and what materials are being used also matters.

If shankha-pola is to remain more than a festive trend, the goal should not simply be to wear it more often. It should also be to know what we are wearing, who made it, and what part of Bengali cultural history we are carrying on the wrist.

By Ayman Anika