

Evolution of Gupta Coinage Significance in Indian Ancient History

¹Neeraj Kumar & ²Dr. Yatish Sachidanand

¹Research Scholar, OPJS University Churu, Rajasthan (India)

²Associate Professor, OPJS University Churu, Rajasthan (India)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 20 February 2019

Keywords

Evolution, Gupta Coinage Significance, Indian Ancient, Gupta society.

ABSTRACT

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a coin as a piece of metal (gold, silver, copper, etc.) of definite weight and value, usually a circular disc, made into money by being stamped with an officially authorized device. Coinage is the one of the main sources of history of most ancient empires in the world and in case of Indian history it becomes one of the chief sources of information for the Kushana and Gupta empires. Since the hoard of coins found for the Gupta emperors is larger than any other, it becomes easier to reconstruct their social, political and economic history based on the study of their iconography. Also, the Gupta coins give an insight into the religious beliefs of the emperors of this era as well as the religious changes that took place in the Gupta society. This essay studies four such coins and attempts to explain what is represented by way of their inscriptions and iconography as well as what purpose these coins may have served other than medium of exchange and measure for value.

1. Introduction

The Heberden Coin Room of the Ashmolean Museum has coins from the Gupta Empire, which ruled over much of the Indian subcontinent from 320 AD to roughly 550 AD (Higham 82). They have been used as an important source of information for the political, economic and social history of India under the Gupta Emperors ever since the first hoard was discovered in 1783 at Kalighat, ten miles from Calcutta, by Nab Kishen, who presented about 200 of them to Warren Hastings, the then Governor General of East India Company (Brown 38). Hastings sent them to London and a roll of twenty four coins each went to the British Museum, the Museum of Mr Hunter, the Ashmolean Museum and the Public Library at Cambridge, while the rest of them were molten down (Allan xi). This essay studies four of them and attempts to explain what is represented by their inscription and iconography, and the purpose they may have served other than that of a medium of exchange and measure for value.

2. Gupta Period and its Coinage

V.A. Smith refers to the Gupta Age as the Golden Age of Indian History (Smith 289). It is also believed to be the period of Indian Renaissance that saw significant development in science, metallurgy, language, literature, art and culture (Thapar 280). The Gupta Dynasty was founded in eastern Uttar Pradesh, in North India by Sri Gupta in 240 AD with Prayaga as its political centre (Narain 17). However, Sri Gupta was probably a small chieftain and so, the real beginning of the Gupta Era was marked by the accession of his grandson, Chandra Gupta I in 320 AD and it reached its pinnacle under his son, Samudra Gupta, who became the emperor in 335 AD (Raychaudhary 489). Coinage is one of the main sources of the history of this period. It is highly debatable whether the coins were first issued by Chandra Gupta I or Samudra Gupta, because they were mostly struck in the latter's name. However, there is a single type, called the King and Queen type, which

depicts the marriage of Chandra Gupta I with the Lichchavi princess, Kumaradevi, and while it was initially argued that this was the first Gupta coin to be struck (Altekar 26), recent studies by the Numismatic Society of India state that it was probably issued by Samudra Gupta to honour his parents (Bajpai 120). However, due to absence of evidence, nothing can be said with certainty and it is generally accepted that Indian coinage developed significantly under Samudra Gupta's reign, based on the number and types found bearing his name. It was during and after his reign that the coins began to commemorate dynastic successions and various socio-political events like marriages, alliances, ritual practices as well as artistic and personal accomplishments of the Emperors, which were usually depicted on the obverse, while an Indian deity was depicted on the reverse (Allan xiii). The gold coins were called *dinara* or *suvarna* while the silver ones were called *rupakas* and bore legends, usually in Brahmi Script, (Daniels and Bright 373) which was probably the lingua franca at that time although, a few coins bear inscriptions in Sanskrit as well (Allan xiii). This essay studies four different coins of four different Gupta Emperors and tries to analyse the differences in their iconography.

3. The Initial Studies and Early Hoards

The Gupta coins were first studied by R. Payne Knight, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, with the aim of deciphering the inscriptions and he interpreted them as imitations of Greek symbols and script (Burns 148). These were successfully deciphered in 1823 by William Marsden, who read the name Chandra in one of the coins, and pointed out their Indian origin, concluding that they probably belonged to the fourth century AD (Marsden, 726). At the same time, H.H. Wilson and James Prinsep studied these coins for Coin Museum of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and concluded, in 1835, that although the Gupta coins followed the pattern of the 'Indo-Scythian' coinage, they were purely Indian in execution (Smith, 5). In the later half of the nineteenth century

and early twentieth, these studies became more extensive due to discovery of more hoards in North Eastern India, especially near Bengal (Smith 6). So far, 17 hoards of Gupta coins have been found, the largest of them being the Banyana Hoard, found in 1946, from which 1821 coins were retrieved (Goyal 131). Other important hoards include the Bharsar Hoard (1851), the Allahabad Hoard (1864), the Hugli Hoard (1883) and the Mithathal Hoard (1945) (Goyal 131).

4. Sources of Metals and Technique of Minting

Metallurgy began in India as early as second millennium BC with the use of copper and bronze in the Himalayan area (Arnold 100-101). Gold and silver first came into use in the south around 1500 BC (South Indian Iron Age)¹ (Arnold, 101). The oldest gold mines found in India date back to this period and can be found in Maski in Karnataka in the South (Ghosh 282). Since there is depiction of Deccan campaigns in the coins of Samudra Gupta and there is evidence of his southern conquests (Smith 291), it is possible that gold was obtained from the south. The oldest silver mines were discovered in the North-West and it is possible that silver was obtained from this area in the Gupta Age as well (Ghosh 283). The coins were struck using die-striking technique, in which, either the required amount of molten metal was mixed with the alloying materials and was cast into sheets of required thickness which were cut into pieces of the required size, or molten metal was poured into sockets of required size and thickness (Oleson 772). The sheet of metal was then struck with the obverse die embedded in the anvil and the reverse die above, while engravings were made by hammering or striking, as a result of which, the coins were not exactly circular in shape (Oleson 772). Repoussé method has been used on a number of coins to create reliefs. According to A.S. Altekar, the metrology of the Gupta coins was influenced by the Kushana coins and weighed 120 grains (Altekar 295). However, the study of different coins reveal that it varies from one metal to another and is different for different rulers. Coins weighed 120 grains in the reign of Samudra Gupta, however, three standards of 121, 124 and 127 grains can be found for gold coins alone, in the reigns of Chandra Gupta II and Kumara Gupta, while gold coins of 130, 132 and 144 grains are found in case of Skanda Gupta (Goya 16-17). However, the percentage of alloy is also different for them. The early Gupta coins contain an alloy of 10%, with a coin of 125 grains containing 113 grains of pure gold, while coins of Skanda Gupta and his successors contain an alloy of 25%, with a coin of 150 grains containing 113 grains of pure gold (Cunningham 87). The metrology of silver coins was slightly more standardised and throughout the Gupta Era, they weighed between 27 to 34 grains while there was indefinite weight standard for copper currency and their metrology varies from 18 to 87 grains, making it impossible to deduce any scheme in their weight system (Goyal 19).

5. The Coin of Samudra Gupta

Coinage under Samudra Gupta can be categorised into six main types—Standard, Archer, Battle-axe, Ashvamedha, Tiger-slayer and Lyrist (Altekar 39). Of these, the Ashvamedha type was probably struck around 355-375 AD to commemorate the horse sacrifice ritual he probably performed to celebrate his victories in the Northern and Southern India (Altekar 61). This

coin (Image 1) is made of gold, weighs 7.47 g with a diameter of 21 mm and is a struck coin (Harle and Topsfield 20).



Image 1: Coin of Samudra Gupta

The obverse side shows a sacrificial horse standing before a sacrificial post or yupa, with pennon flying over it from the top of the post (Cunningham 87). The reverse shows the queen standing on a pearl bordered mat, carrying a fly-whisk or chouri, and a needle (Cunningham 87). It also bears a legend, Ashvamedha Parikramah, which means “the one powerful enough to perform the horse sacrifice” in Brahmi (Bajpai 124). Since the king acquired the title of Maharajadhiraj or supreme ruler of the state after the performance of this ritual, which could only be performed by the king (Keith 615), it is quite possible that a large number of these coins were struck to commemorate Samudra Gupta's horse sacrifice and his subsequent adoption of the title of “Emperor” or Maharajadhiraj. The chief queen was equally instrumental in the performance of this sacrifice and so, the woman on the reverse of the coin has been identified as Dattadevi, Samudra Gupta's chief consort (Bajpai 124). The Ashvamedha yagna, along with Rajasuyayagna, 46 which is another form of horse sacrifice in which, at the end of the military campaign, the king receives tribute from the vanquished king or kings and in their presence, performs a horse sacrifice, indicated the might of an emperor, and the performance of one of these sacrifices by Samudra Gupta indicates the power of Gupta Empire.

6. The Coin of Chandra Gupta II

The iconography and metals used for making coins changed significantly under Chandra Gupta II (also referred to as Vikramaditya) who succeeded Samudra Gupta and ruled between 375-415 AD (Smith 290). The metals used, now also included silver and copper, indicating a progress in metallurgy, and the types could now be categorised as Standard, Archer, Lion-slayer, Horsemen, Chattra, Couch, King and Queen on the couch and Chakravikrama (Altekar 90). Of these, the Lion-slayer type is the most common specimen and was struck in different sizes and three different classes—the lion-combatant, the lion-trampler and the lion-retreating (Altekar, 105). This coin (Image 2) is the lion-combatant type, weighs 7.87g, is

made of gold and has a diameter of 18 mm (Harle and Topsfield, 20). It depicts the emperor holding a bow to kill a lion on the obverse side, with the legend, NarendrachandrahprathitrnorenejayatyajeyobhuviSimhavikramah, which means, "The moon among the kings who is famous for his warfare, who is invincible, and who is valorous like a lion, victorious on the battlefield" (Allan 20). On the reverse, a goddess, probably Durga, is depicted seated on a lion with a noose in the outstretched right hand and a lotus, along with the inscription, Simhavikramah or "Vikram, the lion" in Brahmi (Allan 44). Durga is the goddess of power in the Hindu Mythology and a symbol of invincibility, who is depicted to be seated on a lion or a tiger (Agarwala 123).



Image 2: Coin of Chandra Gupta II

This coin was probably used to depict either the hunting skill or the invincibility and fierceness of the emperor as well as show that he was probably a follower of the deity. Also, depiction of Goddess Durga illustrates the cult of goddess worship and its development in Hinduism in that period. Goddess worship, though existent in Hinduism, was not very prominent or widespread in India before this period (Erndl 12). It supposedly reached "its full flower" in the Gupta Age, and was later incorporated into religious scriptures, most of which were rewritten at this time in order to incorporate new deities, including various forms of Mother Goddess, Durga being one of them (Keay 147). So, the iconography of the coin also illustrates the religious and cultural mores of the time as well as changes in religion.

7. The Coin of Kumara Gupta I

Apart from gold, silver and copper coins, electrolytic plating (Dufour ix.1) of copper coins with silver also started in the reign of Kumara Gupta I, also known as Mahendradya, who succeeded Chandra Gupta II in 414 AD and ruled until 455 AD (Smith 299). Under him, in addition to the Archer, Lion-slayer and Lyrist type, twelve others emerged, namely, Horseman, Swordsman, Elephant rider, Elephant rider-lion slayer, Chattra, Apratigha, Rhinoceros-slayer, Ashvamedha, Kartikeya, King and Queen, and Garuda with outstretched

wings (Altekar 195). This coin (Image 3) is the Elephant rider-lion slayer type, is struck in gold, weighs 7.95g with a diameter of 18.5mm (Harle and Topsfield 20).



Image 3: Coin of Kumara Gupta

It depicts the emperor holding a dagger and seated on an elephant which is trampling on a lion, and a dwarf can be seen behind the emperor, holding an umbrella over his head (Altekar 196). The reverse shows a goddess or a female attendant dressed in a sari and wearing earrings, bangles, armlets and a necklace with her hair tied in a knot and an arm outstretched towards a peacock which she seems to be feeding, which was identified as the imitation of the Roman Goddess, Juno feeding peacocks (Smith, 18). The coin bears the legend, SimhanihantMahendragajah, which means "the elephant of Mahendra killing a lion" (Altekar 196). This coin depicts an incident rather than a personal talent or some important social accomplishment, a religious belief or the power and influence of the emperor. Also, an obvious change can be seen in the iconography as the image of a deity or the queen is replaced by that of a woman with no apparent authority or relation to the emperor. This can also be seen in another coin (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, AN HCR 6580) of the same ruler, which is also in the museum, in which another hunting scene is depicted with a female attendant holding an umbrella on the reverse. The umbrella signifies the political landscape of the chakravartin ruler, which is the Pali term for a universal ruler, who is benevolent and who rules in accordance with ethics (Keay 147). It is possible that the depiction actually alludes to an unidentified goddess in both the cases but there is no evidence to prove its significance or whether it is an imitation of Greek motifs. The variety in the types of coins show that Kumara Gupta probably had a peaceful reign.

8. The Coin of Skanda Gupta

The Gupta coinage declined with the reign of Skanda Gupta, who ruled from 455 to 475 AD because of a number

wars and military campaigns (Smith 300). The coins were now struck in gold and silver only and the types were narrowed down to four—Archer, King and Lakshmi, Chattrra, and Horseman while two new types—Bull and Altar, were introduced for silver coinage (Altekar 249). The Horseman type coin of Skanda Gupta (Image 4), which weighs 9.1g, is struck in gold and has a diameter of 20mm (Harle and Topsfield 20). It depicts the emperor on the obverse side, seated bare-headed on a horse and without any weapons with his sash flowing behind, and a circular illegible and blurred legend can be seen on the coin (Altekar 249).



Image 4: Coin of Skanda Gupta

On the reverse, a goddess, identified as Lakshmi by John Allan, is depicted seated on a wicker stool, facing the left and holding a noose in her right hand and a lotus with a long stem in her left (Allan 177). A blurred symbol can be seen on the left and a blurred legend with the words 'Kramaditya' can be discerned on the right (Allan 177). The coin lacks the detailed designs of those issued by the early Gupta Emperors and it is clear that interest in variety in coinage had declined by this time.

9. Comparison of the Coins

The four coins of the four rulers of the Gupta Dynasty show not only a change in the iconography and the themes, but also show that coinage was used as a social message. It conveyed the political power of the rulers and served as a medium for the rulers to assert their identity and individuality from their predecessors. This is obvious in all the samples studied in the essay. Even if some of the types of coins were

common for all the emperors (like the Archer type, the Lyryst type etc.) the coins were essentially different in their designs and detailing, which makes it clear that coins were, first of all, a way to assert individuality while maintaining a link with the family. Another obvious use of coins was to highlight the personal accomplishments and talents of the ruler. The coin issued by Chandra Gupta II is one such example, as are a few others which depict him and some other Gupta emperors as archers, hunters, lyrists, warriors etc. Apart from this, episodes from the life of the emperor, scenes of war, marriages, political and social alliances were also depicted, making them an important source for studying the material and domestic life of the royalty. Some coins serve the purpose of conveying pictographic messages which are open to interpretations and may stand for fierceness, splendour and magnanimity of the ruler. On the other hand, importance of cultural and artistic development of the Gupta Age can be gauged through their coins. Depictions of emperors playing lyres, writing and reading, (as seen in the coins of Samudra Gupta) show that learning, art and education had a special place in the Gupta society. The coins themselves have high artistic merit and display detailed iconography with discernible postures, the garments and jewellery worn, and features of animals, although they sometimes lack physiognomical details. Coinage, therefore, also served as an indicator of social life.

10. Conclusion

There is a difference of opinion among different scholars regarding the influence that governed the iconography of the Gupta coins. According to V.A. Smith, the coins borrowed a number of symbols from Roman mythology including the horseman and the lion-slayer depictions. He has identified the garuda as the Eagle of Roman aurei (Reece 126) and the woman feeding the peacocks as Juno from the coin of Julia Augusta (also known as Livia), the wife of the Roman emperor Augustus. However, A.S. Altekar connects them to Vaishnavism 4 and insists they are related to Vishnu, the garuda being his vehicle and the peacock referring to the mount of Lord Kartikey, after whom Kumara Gupta and Skanda Gupta were named. He believes that the coins were more influenced by the Kushana coinage than the Roman coinage because the Gupta emperors have been depicted in the Kushana attire. He also interprets the depiction of the goddess on a stool or a lion as the Kushana motif of Ardoksho4 with cornucopia in her hand which was later replaced by Durga and Lakshmi. The real theme or purpose behind the depictions in these coins is debatable, however, it can be concluded that coinage was a significant part of the Gupta Period that has played an instrumental role in creating the impression of the Gupta Age being the Golden Age of Ancient India as they serve as a source to interpret the social, cultural, religious, political and economic mores of the Indian society at this time.

References

1. Bajpai, K.D., Indian Numismatic Studies, Delhi, 2004.
2. Brown, C.J., The Coins of India, New Delhi, 2005 38.
3. Arnold, David, The New Cambridge History of India: Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India, Cambridge, 2004 100-101.
4. Cook, Andrew S., 'Marsden, William (1754–1836)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, edited by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison. Oxford University Press, 2004 online edition edited by Lawrence Goldman, 2004.

5. Courtright, Paul B. 'Wilson, Horace Hayman (1786–1860)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, edited by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison. Oxford University Press, 2004 online edition edited by Lawrence Goldman, May 2004.
6. Daniélou, Alain, The Myths and Gods of India: The Classic Work on Hindu Polytheism from the Princeton Bollingen Series, New York, 1991, 297.
7. Daniels, P.T. and Bright, W.O., The World's Writing Systems, Oxford, 1996, 373
8. Dufour, Jim, An Introduction to Metallurgy, Dublin, 2006, ix.1
9. Erndl, Kathleen M., Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol, New York, 1992, 12.
10. Galinsky, Karl, Augustus: Introduction to the Life of an Emperor, Cambridge, 2012, 300.
11. Ghosh, A., An Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology, New Delhi, 1990, 282.
12. Goyal, S.R., An Introduction to Gupta Numismatics, Jodhpur, 1994.
13. Goyal, S.R., Coins of the Gupta Dynasty, Jodhpur, 1995.
14. Higham, Charles E.W., Encyclopedia of Ancient Asian Civilizations, New York, 2004, 82.
15. "Juno," Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition, 2013.
16. Keay, John, "Gupta Gold," in India A History: From the Earliest Civilisations to the Boom of the Twenty First Century, London, 2010, 129-154.