

## A GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST NUMISMATICS: CULTURAL HERITAGE OF INCREDIBLE INDIA

**Dr. Preeti Singh,**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of Anthropology,  
National P.G. College.  
An Autonomous college of Lucknow  
University.  
NAAC –“A” Accredited and CPE  
E mail: - preetisinghtomar@yahoo.com

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### ABSTRACT

Cultural heritage of any country reveals to a great extent, how it use to flourish in past, such that in prehistoric (Indus valley civilization, Maya civilization etc.) and historic times. A lot can be deciphered with the usage of coins in those days. Coins are remarkable pieces of elements, in the form of metals used as money, have a certain assigned value and legal tender. Numismatics is a scientific study which deals with coins, paper money etc. Coins have immense potential, ability and insight to deliver about prehistory and history, and India is not an exemption. India has witnessed diverse cultures, traditions in the form of kingdoms and rulers and their currencies. Every coin of a kingdom or ruler is unique, designed for specific purposes and has umpteen information about that era to share.

**Key Words:** Cultural heritage, Numismatics, Coins, Kingdoms and Rulers.

### THE JOURNEY

**“Cultural heritage is the essence of any country and its journey. Thus, maintaining one’s own culture, values and traditions is beyond price.”**

The quest for truth has been innate in human mind since time immemorial. This led to the systematic study of the past human’s life and their cultural backgrounds. It included excavations, recovery and

examinations of materials, artifacts, graves, tools, pottery and coins of the remote past.

Coins have always played a pivotal role in defining and creating history, be it of any kingdom, state or a country’s economy.

It is well said notion that travel machines, are fictional concepts which can make you travel to past, but to be lost and get teleported in the world of historic coins of India is mesmerizing and incredible. Study of coins is Numismatics.



Figure 1: - Exchange of Goods, Barter System (Image Courtesy:-State Museum, Lucknow)



Figure 2:-Minting of Coins, in Ancient times. (Image Courtesy:-State Museum, Lucknow)

## METHODOLOGY

The present paper highlights the origin, historical charm associated with, diversified and distinct other aspects of our incredible heritage of Indian culture – the art of coins. As the paper is based on concepts, facts and is descriptive in nature, therefore secondary sources of data have been used in the study. Further most of the details and elements have been explained with the help of illustrations, from different sources.

## INTRODUCTION

It is a scientific analysis and study of money and the manner in which people, since the past have used it historically. Furthermore, the collection of coins, currency, token, paper money and their related objects with minted legal tender are also incorporated in it. Importance of Numismatics lies in the fact that a coin can tell us a lot about history and especially ancient history of any civilization, region or a country. It confirms, modifies and even amplifies it.

To a great extent a coinage of any country help us to build and reconstruct, the political and economic history.

Further with the help of coins one can easily corroborate or reject these findings. Last but not the least many findings connected with administration, historical, geographical and religious history of ancient India are related to coinage.

A coin, generally is a piece of metal, of a legal tender, usually stamped with an official design or inscription issued by ruling authority, having certain value assigned to them. During ancient times exchange of goods and commodities, buying and selling of things began with Cowrie (कौड़ी), shells and beads, as these were used as money. This type of exchange paved way for the barter system. Coins came into existence due to a very practical problem, which amalgamated with the barter system.



Figure 4 Janapadas & Mahajanapadas Coins.

The word coin has been derived from a Latin word 'Cuneus' and it is believed that the first recorded use of coins was done in China and Greece, at around 700 B.C., In Indian context, it is 6th century B.C. from which the earliest reference of coins could be found in our Vedas and Upanishads. Apart from this a term Nishka was used for the coins made up of metals.

The history of seals and coins conserved in various Museums of India begin from the ancient prehistoric and proto-historic sites of Harappan Civilization. The evidences prior to that are not known. The coins and seals excavated from various sites, decipher long and varied tales related to this civilization even outside India. It is so because of the fact that seals and coins of Maya civilization have been found in India, while Harappan seals outside India. Simultaneously other kingdoms, dynasties with their specific identities also got their coins made. These coins were not merely figurative of dynasties but they even narrated, as to how economies of these dynasties were controlled.



Figure 3:-Earthen Moulds & Metallic Die Used in Minting Coins (Courtesy:-State Museum, Lucknow)

It is not known as to when minting of coins began and came into existence but to some scholars, it is 5th century B.C. Ancient Indian coins were also known by the names of Dharan, Maasak, Suvarn, Shatmaan, Padan, Dinar, Damri Mehrabi, Rupaya, Paisa and a lot many more. The earliest known coins to exist belong to Punch Marked Coins category being issued in Silver and Copper. They bore the symbolic depiction of nature, animals and plants. There are four ways in which Indian coins have been minted overtime. These include

- Punch Mark Technique
- Cast Technique
- Die-Streak Technique
- Repousses Technique

The punch marked coins had one to five symbols punched on one of their side. Even in Panini's Ashtadhyay one also gets references of punch marked coins, in which these metallic pieces were stamped with symbols, where each unit was called 'Ratti' weighing 0.11 grams.

Punch marked coins known as Puranas, Karshapanas or Panas, were made by various other kingdoms of Indo-Gangetic Plains. These coins were not of definite shapes, but have standard weight, usually of silver, with certain specific marking on them. For example like Saurashtra has a humped bull, Dakshin Panchala has a Swastika and, Magadha has generally five symbols. Illustrations of these coins are also seen in Manusmriti and Buddhist Jataka Kathas.

Descriptions of punched marked coins are also witnessed in Mauryan Period (322-185 BC). The coins in those times were then minted from silver, gold, copper and lead.



Figure 5:- Kushan Dynasty Coin



Figure 6 - Diademed, helmeted bust of king left, bead and reel border around Zeus enthroned three-quarters right,



The detailed description has been mentioned in Arthashastra treatise. Mahajanpadas kingdoms- Anguttara Nikaya governance at Gandhara, Kuntala, Shakya etc., also contribute to blossoming time period of the Indian history. Old coins of India from this era were different in shapes and design than those of Greeks. This suggests that coins were in commercial use even much before Alexander’s Rule. The Indo-Greeks or Kushan ruler introduced the Greek custom of engraving portrait heads on the coins, Kushan coins were adorned with helmeted but of the king on one side (obverse) and king’s favorite deity on the reverse. The coins issued by Kanishka employed only Greek characters. The Greek gods and goddesses commonly shown on the indo- Greek coins were Zeus, Hercules, Apollo and Pallas Athen. The initial series of coins shows Greek deities, but later on the coins also had images of Indian deities. It was during Kushan emperor that large number of tribes, dynasties and kingdoms started using or issuing their own sets of coins. The entire history of Indo-Greek rule was discovered and Constructed with the help of their coins.

The Gupta period also referred to as Golden Age of ancient Indian history. The period saw a sudden upliftment in creative and radical thinking. The coinage of this period is truly a splendor, and is regarded as high point of classical Indian Art. This was a period between 4-6th century A.D.



Figure 7:- Left : Ashvamedha Horse Sacrifice Type; Right: The Chief Queen



Figure 8- 2 AV. Cast Wim Kadphises (,85 A.D.) courtesy State Musseum Lucknow

The kingdom struck mainly gold coins, although silver and copper pieces were also found. Their coins bear king’s figure and names in Brahmi Script on one side and figure of goddess Laxmi is generally found on the reverse.



Figure 9:- Chandragupta II, gold dinar, c. 375-414 ; King standing left, holding an Indian long bow in his left hand and an arrow in his right Garuda standard at left, Bramhi legend under arm: Chandra circular Brahmi legend around/ Lakshmi enthroned facing, holding cornucopia in left arm, with right hand in Varadamudra dispensing coins, Brahmi legend at right: sri vikramab

The Gupta coins with their many varieties and inscriptions in Sanskrit, are among the finest, India has produced.



Figure 10: - Samudra Gupta Ancient Coin. ( Buddhist Art Origins )

The Commencement of the Mughal Empire from 1526 AD brought forth a unified and consolidated monetary system for the entire empire, from Babar, Akbar, Jahangir upto Aurangzeb.



Figure 11:- Mughal Emperor Jahangir's Mohur

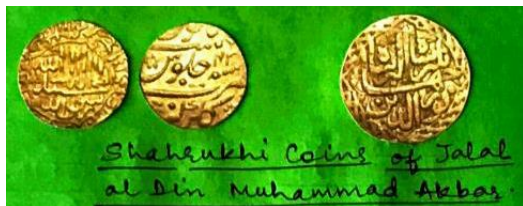


Figure 12:- Mughal Emperor Akbar Coins

But the movement in the evolution of rupee occurred when, after defeating Humayun, SherShah Suri set up a new civil and military administration. He used a coin of silver, weighing 178 grains, this was termed as Rupaya and was divided into 40 copper piece or paisa. The silver coin remained in use during the remaining Mughal period.

SherShah Suri's silver coin (Rupaya) was a popular slandered currency of the country even during the British East India Company in 1600 AD. The popularity of the rupaia grew to an extent, that it was also exported as a currency to other British Colonies.

In 1717 AD, the British gold coins were termed as Carolina, the silver coins Angelina, he copper coins cupperoon and tin coins tinny.

Paper money was just first issued in British India in 18 th century. The Bank of Hindustan, General bank in Bengal and the Bengal Bank, where the first banks in India to issue paper currency. The oldest surviving bank note in India was issued by Bank of Bengal: - a two hundred and fifty sicca

Rupee note dated September 3, 1812. After the 1857 Revolt, the British made the rupee the official currency of colonial India, with the head of King George VI replacing native designs on banknotes and coins. The first paper currency issued by RBI was a 5 Rupee note bearing King George VI portrait in January 1938.



Figure 13- British India Coins

After India became independent in 1947 its monetary system remained unchanged for a while, with 1 Rupee consisting of 64 piece. The first bank note printed by independent India was a 1 Rupee note. In order to aid the blind in the country, each coin had a distinctly different shape - the round 1 naya paisa, scalloped edge naya paisa and soon.

## ARTISTIC & ASTHETIC QUALITY IN ANCIENT COINS

Art is a diverse form of human activities in creating visual, performing artifacts, expressing the imaginative and conceptual ideas of workmanship, technical skill, intended to be appreciated for their beauty or emotional power.

The coins of ancient India are a form of art work within themselves. Which were used to spread word about the greatness of emperors and religion? Some illustrations include:-

- Mauryan axes, faces of Satvahana kings, lion from Alexander's army, tell us lots of

stories regarding war, peace, power and disappointment.

- Coins during ancient times were the only mass produced public art form, and the designs were used to spread messages and exert authoritarian ship.
- The earliest punch marked coins show symbols of flowers, nature etc., and one rarely finds full devices. These coins reflected the local art idioms of that period.
- In the early phase of Indian art, it is the nature and natural objects that predominate, but with advancement of time, nature took a back seat and other ideas of depiction came forth.
- With each passing era the coinage became more prominent, and showed high artistic merits. As the use of natural symbols took a back seat, it were the portrait of the rulers or head or bust that came into forefront, and were depicted on the observe and favorite deity on the reverse. Thus the nature receded to the background
- In the traditional Indian plastic art, the sizes of the figure depicted are determined by their relative importance in the scene. For example in the scene of the Return of Buddha to Kapilavastu, the portraiture of Buddha is taller than the multi-stored gateway.
- On that man type-the size of the king does not correspond to the size of his mount.
- At time Horror Vacui Psychology (fear of empty space) was also depicted on coins. It means filling of spaces with detailed art work.
- Significance of art can also be visualized in Vishnu Dharmotra-Puran.
- The depictions of portraiture were more realistic in the coins of Athens and Greeks, whereas in Indian coins mostly one finds

the use of mental images for the execution of work of art.

- It can also be noticed that portraitures of old age or their depiction is very rare in the Indian art, and also the depiction of architecture is rare too. It is so because depiction of life at its best and fullest was considered auspicious.

## CONCLUSION

The history of Indian currency not only spans centuries, but also boosts quite a fascinating past. The rupee in our pocket holds a mysterious past. Behind Mahatma Gandhi's smiling face lies a long history of struggle, exploration and wealth that can be traced back to the ancient India of 6th century B.C.

Ancient Indian were earliest issues of coins in the world along with Chinese and Lydians, as India is one of the oldest civilization and at least 5000 years of its history is available in fragmentary forms. Money, exchange and rudimentary the books written around 1000 B.C. this means it is one the earliest countries to evolve a metal based financial system.

At least about 31 of the Indo-Greek kings and queens have been known mainly through coins alone. History of Kushanas and Salakas, Palahas also comes to us through coins. The study of Kharoshti and Brahmi languages and their associated texts were actually deciphered with the help of coinage of Kushan Era.

Each coin was developed for a special purpose, during specific era, and served as a great revelation over centuries. It is observed that nearly every Ruler tried and tries to have their unique lineage of coins, which when deciphered properly gives umpteen information about that period. Coins help us apprehend the socio-political, cultural and administrative aspects of the kingdoms and rulers. They also further relive the religious and sentimental beliefs during those days. Thus from the above it can be concluded that the history of Indian coinage is

both exciting yet complicated , apart from being immensely vast.

Ancient, money, gold, silver and copper were not just valuable in themselves, but also for the inscriptions and designs on them. Lost but not the least.

“Today our pockets jingle with brass and stainless steel discs, though not a monetary loss, but an artistic one.”

- Director, RBI Museum

## SUGGESTED READINGS

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