

Gupta Coins and Cultural History of Ancient India

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Abstract

Coins of the Gupta Empire were found from many places in India in forms of sporadic instances or large coin-hoards. These coins are not inferior to their predecessors and are fine specimens of artistic style prevalent in Gupta period. Both their sides bear royal images or divine icons along with legends and marks. These symbols are reliable source to know about various aspects of history of India during the fourth, fifth and the sixth centuries AD. This paper examines how Gupta coinage helps us in reconstruction of the cultural history of their times.

Key Words: Classical Age, Samudragupta, Lichchhavi, Garuda, Gupta coin-types

Period of the Gupta Empire is termed as the Classical Age of Indian history. It was a period of political stability, peace, and prosperity in all spheres – for a society, and for an individual. The Guptas had humble origins but succeeded in acquiring the Indian Empire which they continued to hold for next two centuries. They established an efficient system of administration resulting in a ‘wonderful outburst of intellectual activity’. To rebuild their past, historians have plenty of source material in forms of literature, epigraphs, coins and seals, sculptures, etc. With the help of numismatics we will examine the cultural aspect of the ‘Periclean Age of India’.

The coinage of the Gupta rulers was influenced by the Kushan coins, particularly the gold coins, which themselves were inspired by the Hellenistic tradition of Roman-Bactrian empire. But the prolonged Gupta period provided the opportunity to the mints to minimise the Hellenistic influence over these coins – the headdress was replaced by an Indian version; Indian deities Durga and Laxmi, with their respective carriers, found place on reverse; Indian symbols like lotus flower replaced cornucopia; depiction of king. The coin-types issued by Samudragupta – veena and asvamedha types; by Chandragupta II – loin slayer and chakra-vikrama types; and by Kumaragupta I – sword and loin slayer types; are Indian in their complete form and artistic style.

The Gupta rulers adopted Vedic rituals and symbolism as their official faith. But the rule, in general, was tolerant to all other faiths living and thriving within the limits of the empire. Their coins help us

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to understand the religious preferences of the emperors and their likings for particular sects. Their iconography also help to decipher the relationship between Vedic sacrificial and Pauranik and Smarta traditions.

We do not have any coin-types issued by first two of the royal lineage – Sri Gupta and Ghatotkacha. Chandra Gupta I is represented on coins with his queen Kumardevi, who belonged to the prestigious clan of the Lichchhavis. This coin-type was either a joint issue of Chandragupta I and his queen, or was issued later in memory of his parents by Samudragupta:

Obverse: Au, Rd.

Chandragupta – standing to left; wearing trousers, head-dress, and a coat; wearing ornaments in ears, arms and neck; holding a crescent topped standard in left hand; offering something to Kumardevi with his right hand; Kumardevi stands facing to king; wearing traditional dress and ornaments; coin legend: Chandra and Kumardevi.

Reverse:

Goddess seated on lion facing; wearing Indian dress and ornaments; holding a noose in right hand and a cornucopia in left; legend: Lichchhavayah

The Lichchhavis were not an accepted clan to the orthodox Brahmanism. Still, alliance with them had a very positive effect upon the Gupta fortunes and therefore, in spite of all the Vedic symbolism used, they chose to mention the name of this clan proudly on this type of coins. If Samudragupta issued this coin-type, it shows his leanings towards the clan.

Samudragupta himself was the one who expanded and strengthened the Gupta Empire quite similarly as the Maurya emperor Chandragupta did in past. In Allahabad Pillar Eulogy, he is described as the one who is equal to Gods. He adopted Garuda, the carrier of Lord Vishnu, as royal emblem. He also restored ashvamedh ritual. His loyalty towards Brahmanism reflects in epigraphic evidence as well. But he was tolerant towards other faiths. He appointed a Buddhist teacher for his son and allowed Sri Lankan king Meghavahana to build a vihara at Gaya.

Chandragupta II used the epithet of *parambhagvata* and also continued depiction of Goddess Laxmi and Garuda on his coins. The coin legends were essentially Vaishnava in nature. Epigraphic evidence show his contributions to Shaiva sects and Buddhist monks as well. After him, Kumaragupta I issued many new coin-types. Depiction of Goddess Laxmi and Garuda standard continued on his coins. One of his coin-type depicts Kartikeya riding a peacock. On his silver coins, Garuda is replaced by peacock. Epigraphical evidence, along with numismatics, show he supported non-Brahmanical activities as well. The tradition of Vishnu worship continued in the time of Skandagupta as well. The depiction of Goddess Laxmi continued along with the Garuda standard.

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Among later Guptas, Purugupta was a Vaishnava, using images of Goddess Laxmi and Garuda standard on his coins. Kumaragupta II issued similar coins. His epigraphs refer to him as parambhagvata. This trend continues with the next king – Buddhgupta, who uses title parambhagvata in the Nalanda seal. He, as in the case of Kumaragupta I and Skandagupta, also uses peacock on his silver coins.

Narsimhagupta uses the epithet parambhagvata in his Nalanda seal inscription and also continues depiction of Goddess Laxmi and Garuda. Literary sources mention that he was a patron of the Buddhist university at Nalanda. On the coins of Vinayagupta, a bull is added to the usual figures of Goddess Laxmi and the Garuda symbol.

Apart from these common icons present on the Gupta coins, we find depiction of river Ganges as a divine figure. The mounts depicted, Garuda and Lion being the most common, included makara for Ganga river and bull for Lord Shiva. Some scholars believe that Laxmi is depicted riding lion on the Chandragupta-Kumaradevi coin-type and Lion slayer coin-type of Chandragupta II, which is quite unusual.

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Figure: Chandragupta-Kumaradevi type coin



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