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COINS AS A SOURCE OF INDIAN HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

Numismatics is the study of coins. Coins occupy a prominent place among datable antiquities. Many coins can be dated to particular period on the basis of the identification of the striker, of paleographic character of the script occurring on it, of literary or epigraphic evidence or of their contemporaneity with an associated object of determined date. And in a closely observed archaeological excavation if the coin can be dated all associated objects – those found in the particular stratum, can also be placed in the same chronological horizon.

KEYWORDS: *Coins, jatakas, Maurya dynasty, Rigvedic Age, Kausambi*

DISCUSSION

Among one of the chief sources of the study of Indian history are the coins. In fact, the coinage of any country is the reflection of its culture and at once highlights the politics or rise and fall of empires, the system of administration, trade art, beliefs etc. The Indian history in this context starts with the *Rigvedic Age* when *niska* has been identified as a gold pinda for transactions. The *samhitas* mentions *purana* and *dharana* as coins. In the *jatakas* (700 B.C), *Satamana* was 100 *rattis*, *suvarna* 80 *rattis*, copper “*karsorpana*” 32 *rattis*. When Alexander attacked India in 327 B.C, *Ambhi*, the ruler of *Taxila*, presented him silver coins.

The *Indus* sites, as is well known, have yielded seals with a series of depictions. Learned scholars have made a contention that such seals were even used in trade and commerce, since the famous site of *Lothal*, which house the port, has also yielded the seals. But not just this, these discoveries also throw light on the system of transaction and also the political

organization of the times. However, the more appropriate use of coins in Indian history starts with the *Mauryan Age*, when the *Punch Marked* coins were popular. The role of the punch marked coins on the *Mauryan* history is remarkable. The *Mauryas* took charge of the minting of coins from the *srenis* which used to issue their own coins. Thus a separate state department came into existence which was fully responsible for the coinage. *Kautilya* also classifies two types of coins viz. the *Kosapravesya* and *vyavaharika*. The former were supposed to be designated as *lakshanadhyaksha* and *rupadarshaka*. The state’s privilege of issuing the coins the *Sumeru* which was the royal symbol of the *Maurya*. Introduction of a full-fledged department in the administrative set up and the types of coins brings forth an important aspect of the *Mauryan* history. It shows that the supremacy of the *Maurya* dynasty spread almost throughout the Indian subcontinent and the flourishing status of trade and commerce. It is quite possible that the *KosaPravesya*

was used in bigger deals whereas the vyavaharika was used in day to day purchasing.

The next phase of the Indian history is marked by the rise of *Janpadas* in the various parts of India. The coins are the most useful material for constructing the post Maurya or janapada history. The janapada coins prove that the Indian history passed from the paramount rule of Mauryas to the Ganatantrik system of rule. The coins of the Janapadas portray a powerful political status that they gained. Some of the janapadas were *Ujjaini, Vidisha, Mahismati* etc... The coins of *yaudheyas, Kuminda* and *Arjunayana* mark another phase of history in which the two systems of rule were going on in parallel. These were the democratic and the monarchical systems. These coins bear the name of the janapada, the ruler's name and the name of the *nagar or nigama*. Kausambi was one of the most important Janapadas and the coins bearing the name of this Janapada prove that between 2nd century B.C – 2nd century A.D. two different dynasties ruled here. Similarly the history of Malwa Janapada as known from coins establishes that this Janapada was responsible for a unified economy in large areas. This is because of availability of coins from a large area which bear same symbol. Therefore, not just the political history of this Janapada is known from its coins but also its hold on the economy.

The *Satvahanas* were a prominent dynasty that ruled for 300 years in the south. The coins of this dynasty had made possible, the list of Satvahana rulers since many of the rules are mentioned in the coins only because any supportive epigraphic evidence are not found. The Satvahana coins reveal the political history as well as the economic history of this dynasty. They established firm trade relations with China and Indo – China Sumatra & Java. The coins portray a diligent effort of the Satvahana rulers of issuing the coins on the lines of the newly acquired territory. It is for this reason the Satvahana coins vary in typology in different areas which they politically headed. Probably this was also the reason why this dynasty did not establish their own coinage system. The symbol on the coin stated its area, for example those coins which were issued in the Malwa region had Ujjaini symbol. Not only this, but decentralised political system was adopted since the Satvahanas allowed their *samantasto* issue their own coins. Examples are the coins issued by the Samanta rulers of Chutu family from Bhanvasi. The history of Gautami Putra Satkarni and Pulamavi is based on their coins. These rulers issued coins in variety which shown that they maintained a large empire. Like the coins of Kshatrapas, Satvahana coins have Sumeru and Bodhi tree on the obverse and Bow – arrow and Nandipada on the reverse.

The Indian history passed through the Kshatrapa system of administration under the influence of the Sakas and Parthians. The coins of these rulers throw

considerable light on the history of this phase since they furnish us evidences of the Indianisation of these foreigners. The inclusion of Greek legends was new in the Indian coinage and so was the depiction of Greek gods and goddesses. The Indian influence is seen in the form of symbols of Nandi and Trisula. Some of the Greek gods and goddesses were *Moa, Nike, and Hercules* etc... The oldest of the Parthian coins are those of *Moa*. He issued two types of silver and fourteen types of copper coins. On one of the silver coins is depicted Jupiter with a royal stick and Greek legend “*Becilios Bacilion*” on the obverse. It also bears the name of the king. The reverse has the goddess Nike. The copper coins are square and depict Indian birds and animals, instead of the Greek divinities.

Our history once again witnessed the rule of foreign kings when the Kusanas established their rule. The coins of these rulers help us understand that after a long gap the Kusanas were the most important rulers to make India a unified nation. Their coins bring forth the fact that the practice of taking up pompous titles by the king entered the Indian history. One such example is the title of Vimakadphises “*Maharajas Rajatirajasa sarvaloga isvaraya Mahesvarasya Vima Kadphises*. Even the Iranian influence was brought into India through coins. Kaniska took the Iranian title “*Shahanushani*” and his depict the king as dressed in the Iranian way.

During the 2nd century A.D another dynasty rose to power in the Vidisha- Gwalior region, called Nagas. The History of this dynasty is fully constructed on the basis of coins since none of their epigraphs have been found. Taking coins as the basis, scholars believed that the Nagas originated at Vidisha and later moved to Padmavati, Kantipuri and Mathura. Almost all these places were good trade centres and the discovery of coins from these places highlights the ancient Indian urban history. Padmavati and Vidisha were on the royal route which was also show a change in the language of legends. Now, the use of Sanskrit for inscribing the legends on coins entered in the Indian History. Few examples of their coins could be stated here. Vrsnaga was the founder of the dynasty and his coins bear, on the obverse “*Maharaja Vrsanagasya*” in Brahmi while the reverse have Nandi. Among the next rulers ie. Bhima, Skanda and Vasunaga, their coins bear Mayur which was given up in by Brhaspatinaga. With the coming up of the Gupta dynasty on the historical scenario, the utility of coins as source material for the study of this dynasty expands. It is so because, a large variety of coins were issued by the Gupta rulers and their rule expanded for almost 250-300 years. The Gupta coins are a concrete material for the various branches of the contemporary history such as their political status, the minting technology, economy, religion, their relationship with their contemporary rulers etc.

The coins of Chandragupta I are enough to understand the history of Lichhivis who were an important vamsa and it was a proud act to have a relationship with this family. The "*Chandragupta Kumardevi*" coins are the proof. Some scholars believe that the Gupta age was also the revival of Sanskrit literature. The coins do throw light on this aspect of our history. The coins for the first time in Indian history bear poetic legends and are notable for the popularity of various chhandas like upaniti, prthvi upajati etc. The most famous coin type of this ruler is the "*Raja Rani*" types. On the obverse, these coins have the king offering some gift to the queen, probably a ring in some a sindur pot, and a group of dots, the reverse has a Simhavahini with different posture in some other specimen. The reverse also has the name of clan which the Guptas were related i.e., "*Lichhavayah*".

The digvijaya done by samudragupta is known from the Allahabad pillar inscription. But the coins issued to commemorate that digvijaya and the performance of the Asvamedhayajna and the collective testimony of Allahabad inscription are the only sources which make the history of this chakravarti ruler. Incidentally the only sources which make the history of this chakravarti ruler. Incidentally the Asvamedha coins of samudragupta open up another fact of history that of the performance of the Asvamedha sacrifice which took place after Pusymitra Sunga who ruled in the 150 B.C. In many ways the Gupta coinage has established norms for the history to follow. The Asvamedha classes of coins of the ruler under discussion have a horse and queen beautifully modelled, the letter 'si' which is probably denoting siddham and a yupa. The reverse has the Rajamahisi and a circular legend "*Rajadhirajah Prthavima vijitya divam jayatahyatvajimedha*" in Brahmi. In the Gupta genealogy there is no mention of Kachagupta and Ramagupta. We know of Kacha only from his gold coins. Similarly copper coins of Ramagupta were found in Airan (sagar) Vidisha and Talbehat (Jhansi). His existence is confirmed by Devichandraguptam, sringarapakasa, Kavyanumansa etc.

The fall of the Gupta Empire gave rise to many small states all over India. The history of those principalities can be well understood with the help of coins issued by them. The lack of abundant gold coins is enough to show a disturbed political history since the later Guptas and the Maukharis entered into regular conflict. The discovery of coins in a limited geographical area even shows the small territory enjoyed by them. The availability of silver coins throws light on the poor economy of minting and the inactiveness that crept up in the Indian history of the age under consideration. The Pala coins are the best examples to stress above point since they are crude and have been executed in mixed metal (alloy) instead of pure gold. Even Harsha, who was a paramount ruler of

India, did not make much experimentation in coinage and issued coins in silver.

On the basis of coins it is now proved that the Hindushahi rulers were the first to issue coins of Nandi and the mounted king types. The south Indian coinage is distinct in Indian history as compared to the North Indian coinage. The sudden paucity of the punch marked coins in the south of India marks a change in the Indian history also. This change was brought about by the Satvahanas. We may here begin with the later history from the Satvahanas. The discovery of Roman gold coins from south India are the evidence of flourishing trade between India and Rome during 3rd century A.D. Such a prosperous condition that the south India history experienced is known from the gold coins that developed on their own lines i.e., not being influenced by the popular coin types in northern India. The advent of Europeans in the Indian sub-continent is known from the use of the term "*Pagoda*" which they applied to the Chalukyan coins. The next dynasty, i.e., Hoysalas, followed Kannada script.

The history of Pandayas can be confirmed by coins. They remained in battles with their contemporary Cholas. Being defeated by Cholas, the Pandeyes, ruled as subordinate rulers. Hence they could not reveal, they even defeated the powerful Cholas. Their coins show the legend in Tamil "*Victors of Cholas*" and "*chiefs of the world*". In 10th century once again the Cholas became powerful since their of this phase became popular even in the Lanka. The coin finding with the date in Arabic script marks a change in our history. It was Haider Ali who reached upto south and was responsible to establish the foreign rule in that area. The Mughal penetration of the south in India history comes to light in the form of coins issued by the rulers of southern plateau. The subordinate political status of the Indian rulers of south is evident from the two Mughal rulers Muhammad Shah and Alamgir II in Persian. The name of Kashmir in Arabic is enough to say it for itself that the sultans had their control over Kashmir.

The transformation of the Hindu history into the Sultanate history is pictured well in the coins of the sultans. Some of the Sultans continued to depict the Hindu symbols such as Muhammad Shah whose coins bear Lakshmi and legend in Arabic. The Ajmer conquest of Iltutmish and expansion of Delhi Sultanate was commemorated by coins bearing the names of Iltutmish and Jahadudeve, the ruler of Ajmer. The expansion of Delhi Sultanate in south was made by Alauddin Khilji. On this occasion he issued coins with the epithet of "*Sikander II*". Thus, coins of Alauddin Khilji help in formulating the history of south India during 12th -13th century A.D. Not just this, but the coins of this Khilji ruler are important in understanding the minting activities in Sultanate age. We obtain the name of Devagiri mint.

The religious policy of Qutubddin, son of Alauddin, who acquired the Delhi throne, is gleaned from his coins. He gave new names to Delhi such as Hazrat Darulkhilafa, Darumulk and Darulislam etc. The royal mint was founded at Warangal in the times of Gayassudin Tughlaq. This was further extension of Delhi Sultanata. Feroz shah Tughlaq was the last of Tughlaq and his coins bear the names of his sons. This probably was the demand of the history of his times that in order to maintain a large empire he took help of his sons. These sons, in their respective territories ruled on the name of their father. Thus such coins show a decentralised form of administration adopted by Ferozshah. The “*Bahalol Lodhi*” types of coins remained in use for 70 years. These coins were in alloy. Gold and silver coins of Lodhi dynasty are not known.

The need for new coins came up during the Suri dynasty. This may be due to the works of construction that Shershah Suri undertook. He even made reforms in the tax department. He established new mints which added to the mints founded by other rulers. The coins that were minted in these mints bore the name of their respective mints. Thus, coins of Shershah Suri are the portrayal of his policies and the history of his time.

The break up of a central power brought about the independent sultans in Malwa, Gujarat, Jaunpur and Kulbarga. Mandu, once acted as a mint is found from the coins of Malwa Sultans. First, the change in name i.e., the use of the word “Tanka” for coins and the change in the system of marking the mint name. Now, instead of the name of the state mint each mint was known by its particular symbol. Hence, the history of Malwa speaks through its coins in the above manner. It is known from the coins that the Bahamanis shifted their capital from Gulbarga to Bidar. The medieval names of these two capitals, which were also the state mints, are known from coins. The former was called Ahasanabad while the latter as Muhammadabad founded by Ahmed Shah I. The name of “Kashmir” in Arabic is enough to say it for itself that the sultans had their control over Kashmir. The hold of Islam in Bengal is reflected from the coins of Sultan rulers of Bengal. Such an attempt in the religious history of Bengal was brought about in the times of Jalaluddin Muhammad. His coins are inscribed with the verses of Quran.

The Mughal coins open up new vistas of the study of history of Mughal India. Their coins are examples of their economic policy since they issued coins of gold, silver and copper for the firm footing of a unified economy. Akbar's coins of “Ilahi” type are useful in studying his religious ideology in Indian history. These coins bear a legend, on the obverse, from Quran and the glory of God while on the reverse the Ilahi year is inscribed. Therefore the history of his Din-i-ilahi and also the mention of Ilahi era are

significant in constructing the Indian history of Akbar's phase. The impact of his policy towards all world religious and Din-i-ilahi was so much that the Ilahi coins continued up to the end of his reign.

Once again Indian history entered a phase where king was given the supreme rank through coins. This took in Jahangir's time since his coins portray the reversion of the policy initiated by Akbar. The end of Ilahi coins and the popularity of coins with the legends showing the greatness of the king are examples of the above reversion. Indian history witnessed a liberal religious stand in the form of Din-i-ilahi of Akbar and a strict attitude when Aurangzeb started his rule. Despite this the coins of Aurangzeb do not indicate a conservative outlook. His coins depict the same tradition that was founded by others i.e., the name of the king's title along with the Hijra era. The identity of region was maintained in the Mughal history since their coins had a particular sign for a particular place. Such as the coins of Akbar and Jahangir, Asirgarh was identified by a falcon in the history of Akbar's period while Agra was identified by a duck. Introduction of the norms of coins in Indian history. His coins issued from Agra are known to have the 12 signs of the zodiac. This was a unique event in the history of Indian coinage.

CONCLUSION

Numismatics helps to study the ancient scripts and languages and their evolution. It has played a prominent role in deciphering ancient scripts like Brahmi and Kharoshthi, as the coins of the first dynasties have bilingual legends. The detailed study of coins also help to find out social and cultural life of the people of the period like social hierarchy, dress and ornaments, entertainments and weapons

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