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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE GOLDEN AGE OF GUPTA COINS: GUPTA  
NUMISMATIC ART – A STUDY**

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**Abstract**

Numismatics is the study of coins. This English word owes its origin to Latin numisma which means currency. The history of coins may go back to 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. both in the East and West. In many cultures people used to bury coins for safety. These treasure troves, excavated by archaeologists today, yield considerable amount of information about the past: i) the extent of the golden age of Coins: Gupta Numismatic Art a kingdom, ii) the commercial contacts, iii) the level of culture, iv) the economic prosperity (based upon the metal of the coin), v) chronological analysis, and so on. Thus coins are sources for the study of commercial, economic, and cultural history as well as the historical geography of the past. It is right to say that Numismatics confirms, modifies and even amplifies history. The importance of coins as a source of history is better felt in countries where regular historical chronicles of the early period are very meagre.

**Key words:** Numismatics, Coins, Chronology, Guptas, Gold Coins

**Introduction**

In India, which did not produce in early times a Herodotus or Thucydides, a Livy or Tacitus, coins play an important part in culling out historical data. The certain periods of ancient Indian history coins alone give the names of kings or institutions that are not known from any other sources like epigraphy or literature. Thus our knowledge of the Indo-Bactrian Greeks, the Indo – Scythians, the Indo-Parthians and

many of the Kushan kings is based on their coins only. The Roman coins are frequently unearthed from different sites in India. Their frequency corroborated Plini's reference to the tremendous drain on Roman gold to pay Indian luxuries. The portraits on coins give us a glimpse of its issuing kings, their head dress etc. The figures of gods on the coins of Indo-Bactrian kings and the Kushanas throw valuable light on the prevailing religion as well as the history of iconography of these deities.

## **The Evaluation of Coinage**

In tribal societies wants were limited and the goods changed hands by barter. At that stage of economic development there was no need for a medium of exchange. But as economic conditions became more and more complex, man began to realize the need for a common medium exchange. In the early period, often the cow seems to have been regarded as a unit of wealth, and a commodity could be purchased in exchange for a cow. But it was difficult to buy a small article which would cost much less than a cow. So as an alternative to cow, articles like cowrieshells and other objects which were used as ornaments in early human societies became the media exchange. Cowrie - shells were used as medium of exchange in China, India and Africa. When these were adopted as a measure of value, they became money. In course of time these were supplemented by metallic pieces.

These ultimately paved the way for the introduction of coins, as they satisfied the basic conditions of coinage – they were durable, portable, homogeneous and easily separable. The introduction of coins is certainly landmark in the history of civilization. It acted as a spur for trade and commerce and thus led to cultural expansion and contacts. Almost all metals have at sometime other been used as material for coinage. The class of coins which find frequent mention in ancient Indian epigraphic and literacy sources is the Karshapana (Karsha= the weight of the coins equal to 80 Ratis or 146.4 grains) made of gold or silver or copper. The golden Karshapana was called Nishka, the silver one was Purana and the copper one was very popular and called Pana. Though Nishka is frequently referred to in early literature, very few coins of this class have so far been discovered in India. The silver Purana was in circulation throughout India. Vedic literature and Panini refer to gold and silver Satamana weighing 100 Ratis and a coin called ‘Ardha-Satamana’ of 50 Ratis.

## **The Golden Age of Coins: Gupta Numismatic Art**

The advent of the Common Era brought the rule of the illustrious Kushan and the Gupta empires. When the mighty Kushan Empire crumbled, many small kingdoms acquired territories. One such was the Gupta

dynasty. Starting from a small kingdom in Magadha in the late 3rd century CE, the Guptas gradually extended their rule over a large part of south Asia. Under the able and strong leadership of many rulers this dynasty grew and became deeply rooted in the Indian subcontinent. The empire at its paramount included all of northern India from the Indus in west to the Brahmaputra in east and in south it extended along the eastern coast of the Indian peninsula. The Gupta period is considered as the "Golden Age" of classical India. This was a time when great universities flourished in Nalanda and Taxila, India made contributions in all sectors like mathematics, science, astronomy, religion etc. The famous story tales of Panchatantra, the very popular Kama Sutra, the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata were composed during the Gupta Era. Gupta art is regarded as the high point of classical Indian art, and their coinage as among the most beautiful of ancient India. A general atmosphere of peace and prosperity helped create a civilization conducive to cultural advent and social growth. The flourishing state of economy was ascertained by the large number of gold coins circulated by different Gupta rulers. Famous for their gold coins, the Gupta numismatic art has abundance of coins in variety of designs.

They also issued silver coins. However, coins made of copper, bronze or any other alloy metals are scarce. This abundance of gold coins from the Gupta era has led some scholars to regard their reign as the ‘rain of gold’. Let's explore this Gupta Numismatic Art through their noteworthy accomplishments and downfall.

## **The Gupta Coins (c.300-500A.D)**

After the fall of the Mauryas many principalities like Sungas, Kanvas, Satavahanas issued their coins mostly in copper and rarely in silver. States like Gandhara Vatsa, Ujjain, Pushkalavati etc. and many tribal republics issued their coins. Though interesting in their own right, they are too many and varied to be described here. With the rise of the Guptas inc.319 A.D. A new chapter in the history of Indian coins can be seen.

## **Gold Coins**

The coins of the Guptas are chiefly in gold. These coins seem to be the direct descendants of the gold coins of the later Kushanas. The coins of these Kushanas have the obverse the king standing at an altar, and on the reverse Ardoksho (an Iranian goddess of prosperity; a counterpart of Indian Lakshmi) seated on a throne. In the early Gupta coins the standing king at the altar is very much the same in pose and posture as the king on the Kushana coins – he is holding a trident in his left hand, wearing the Kushana tunic (long coat) and trousers, but without the Kushana cap. In the later coins the trousers are replaced by the Indian dhoti. Either the form of the coat is changed or the king is bare bodied. Instead of a trident, the king holds a spear or a bow or a sword or a flag. On the right field there is the garuda – headed flag, which is the royal insignia of the Guptas. On the left field the name of the king is inscribed perpendicularly, in Chinese fashion. There is a circular Brahmi inscription around the king. Goddess Ardoksho (holding a cornucopia and seated on a throne) found on the reverse of the early Coins, was replaced in the later coins by Lakshmi with a lotus in her hand. First she was seated on a throne, like Ardoksho. Later she made to sit on a lotus. Here, the epithet of the issuing king replaced the name of the deity that is seen on the Kushan Coins. Though the Gupta Coins were modelled after the Kushan coins they are far superior in their execution to their prototypes. Besides the type mentioned above, the guptas issued coins of sixteen other types. They are all appreciated by critics and scholars for their high artistic excellence and originality of their contents.

In one type both the king and queen are portrayed as standing face to face. Chandragupta I issued coins only of this type and they are of high artistic quality. These coins bear the names both of Chandra Gupta and his consort Kumara Devi. Kumara Gupta I and Skanda Gupta also issued similar coins, but without the names of their queens. In another type the king is seated cross – legged on a couch playing the Vina. Samudra Gupta and Kumara – Gupta I issued such coins. A few other types show the royal interest in riding and hunting. Samudra Gupta's coins show him hunting tigers, Chandra Gupta's coins show him hunting a tiger or a lion or a rhinoceros. Samudra Gupta and Kumara Gupta I issued the famous Asvamedha coins portraying a horse standing before the sacrificial

post. Generally the reverse. Generally the reverse of the Gupta coins show a goddess; either Lakshmi, or Durga on the back of a iron, or Ganga standing on a makara. Usually these gold coins have an inscription in Sanskrit verse glorifying the issuing king.

### **General coin specifications:**

The Gupta gold coins are known as Dinars and they are the most extraordinary examples of numismatic and artistic excellence. The coins in general depicted the ruling monarch on the obverse and carried legends while the reverse depicted the figure of a goddess. Gupta coinage started out imitating that of the mighty Kushans, but very soon had their own identify which in turn became a forerunner for the dynasties and kingdoms to come thereafter! Gupta coinage reached the height of metallurgy and iconography. After Indo-Greek and Kushan coins, Gupta coinage made a huge come back with a true Indian taste in it. Being indigenous, they portrayed the king, queen, and deities with Indian attire and with lots of grace. Now let's see the famous Gupta kings and their contribution to the acclaimed Gupta numismatic art.

### **Samudra Gupta:**

Samudra gupta, a legendary king by the virtue of his military prowess and administrative efficiency, was an important ruler of the Gupta Empire. His competent ruling produced some high quality of gold coins and laid the foundation of the Golden Age of India. He is credited to have issued only gold coins (Dinar) during his reign in seven different types ('Lichhaviya' type included). The coins of Samudragupta give us a lot of information on the start of the mighty empire of Gupta, and its economy. Samudragupta's coins according to their design and variety are known in numismatic terms as:

- **Standard types** are numerous and common. This type of coins show the king carrying a Garuda Dhvaja in his left hand and is shown wearing a cap. The reverse side of the coin portrays the goddess Laxmi.
- **The Archer types**, introduced for the first time in the Indian Numismatic, are rare and they portray Samudra Gupta holding the bow.

- **Battle Axe type**, Samudragupta's coins featured weapons such as battle axe, bow, arrow and swords. His battle axe type has the legend "Kritantparashuh" on them.
- Lichchavi type<sup>3</sup> **The Licchaviya issue** bears the image of King Chandragupta-I with his queen Kumaradevi of Lichchavi family. Though the legend is specific to Chandragupta I, it was issued by Samudragupta in memory of his father<sup>3</sup>
- **Kacha type**<sup>3</sup> coin bears the legend "Kacha, having conquered the earth, wins heaven by the highest works", while the reverse shown the legend "Exterminator of all the kings".
- **The tiger type** coins of the king show him trampling a tiger as while shooting it with a bow. The obverse legend reads "Vyagraparakramah".
- **The Lyrist type** has the king in a high backed couch, playing Veena which rests on his knees. The legend "Maharajadhiraja - Sri Samudragupta" decorates the obverse.
- **Asvamedha types** are unique, we find a horse standing before a yupa or a sacrificial post with legend around that decorates the King as the conqueror of heaven, earth, and the oceans. All of his coin designs with their illustrious legends are indicative of the conquests of Samudragupta and his attainment of paramount power. Samudragupta's coinage features a distinct Indian touch to it in reference to the depiction of the dresses, weapons, goddesses, etc. as compared to the earlier Kushan coinage.
- **Archer Type**: Interestingly, where his father issued a lot of Standard Type coins, Chandragupta II issued Archer type in abundance. The archer type contains the legend "Deva Sri Maharajadhiraja Sri Chandraguptah".
- **Couch Type**, are the rarest of Chandragupta's coins with only two known varieties in the museum. Both of them differ in many details but have the legends "roopkrti" and "Vikrama".
- **The Chhatra type** carried the image of an attendant holding a royal parasol over Chandragupta.
- **Lion Slayer type** which show the king standing and shooting a lion with the bow contained the legend "Simhavikrama"
- **Horse Man Type** coin design was introduced by Chandragupta II and depicts the King riding a horse.
- **The Standard Type**, are similar in design with that of Samudragupta.
- **Chakarvikrama Type**, these extremely rare variety features a Chakra or the wheel on obverse with the legend "Chakravikramah".
- **Kalasha Type**, yet another extremely rare variety of Chandragupta II which depicts a Kalasha or a water pot. It is said that in the later part of his reign, Chandragupta II started issuing silver and copper currency to be circulated in the regions of Gujarat and Kathiawar. However, the amount of gold coins he issued was vast and the imperial mints were active throughout his reign.

## Chandragupta-II

Chandragupta-II inherited the Gupta throne at its peak. He contributed to the vastness of the empire by adding the few territories left off by his father Samudragupta. He extended great support to the arts and his reign saw the Golden Age of India developing and contributing to various fields under his royal patronage. He is known to have issued a total of eight types of gold coins (Dinars). Known through his coins as "Vikramaditya", Chandragupta II also issued silver (Denaree) and copper (Daler) coins, probably to be circulated in the region that was conquered from the Western Kshatrapas. Let's have a look at his coin types:

## Kumaragupta-I

Kumaragupta-I, often inscribed on coins as "Mahendraditya", issued a good 14 different types of gold (Dinar) and silver (Denaree) coins. His coinage itself is enough to speak about the vastness and prosperity of his empire. His long reign saw both, the epitome and the decline of the empire as the Hun invasions during the later period of his rule shook the Gupta Empire. The financial crunch led Kumaragupta to issue silver-plated copper coins (Daler). Mostly continuing the coin types of his predecessors, he introduced a few new varieties. Let's have a look at his coins:



- **Archer type** depicts the King standing in left, holding arrow in right hand and bow in left.
- **Swordsman**, King is seen with a sword in left hand with Brahmi legend "Gama - vajitya - sucharitaihi - kumaragupto - Divam - jayati"
- **Asvamedha Type** was issued to commemorate the performance of Horse Sacrifice. The legend on the obverse reads "Jayati Divam Kumarah" and the reverse reads "Sri Asvamedha Mahendrah".
- **Horseman**, King on horse with legends around that decorates his strength and victory on obverse and "Ajitamahendrah" legend on the reverse.
- **Lion Slayer**, depicts the king slaying a lion with the legend "shrimahendrasimha" or simhamahendrarah" on reverse.
- **Tiger Slayer**, similar to the lion slayer type, this coin variety shows the king slaying the tiger with the legend "Srimam vyaghrabalaparakramah" on the obverse.
- **Peacock or the Kartikeya type**: Is probably the most beautiful of his coins which shows the King offering a bunch of grapes to a Peacock with his right hand.
- **Pratapa Type** is an extremely rare variety which depicts the king with two attendants holding the Garuda Standard on both of his sides. The reverse reads the legend "Shri Pratapah".
- **Elephant Rider Type** is only known from one unique specimen. Though the inscriptions are illegible, this variety is attributed to Kumargupta I for its similarity in coin design and make. The coin feature King with an attendant riding an elephant.
- **Ashavamedha Types** of Kumargupta are similar to that of Samudragupta and depict the horse tied to a Yupa or the sacrificial post on the obverse. The reverse has the Brahmi Legend "Shri - Asvamedha - Mahendra".
- Kumargupta revived the **Lyrical Type** and **King-Queen Type** coins of the previous rulers.
- His **Elephant-Rider-and-Lion-Slaying Type** showcases his sportive and hunting capacities.
- His **Rhino-Slayer Type** variety is unique and features a rhino for the first time in Indian numismatic art! Kumargupta I issued silver and copper coins for circulation in West of India but they were of a debased type. They generally depicted the bust of the king to the obverse and a

peacock or a garuda (eagle) on the reverse. Though he issued a vast variety of coins, his coinage lacked an artistic excellence and consistency.

## Skanda Gupta

The gold coins of this king lack the variety of type. The illustrious Gupta Period began to decline during the reign of Skandagupta. Inscribed on coins as "Kramaditya", Skandagupta issued four types of gold dinars and three types of silver denarees. The Gupta gold coins, once an ultimate example of numismatic art, now began to lose their lustre and the political strain became evident in coin designs and its execution. Let's have a look at his coin types:

- The regular **Archer type** which depicts the King with a bow, arrow and a legend in Brahmi "kramadityah"
- **King and Lakshmi Type**: This type depicts the King with the goddess on the obverse and Brahmi Legend 'Sri Skandaguptah' in the reverse.
- **Horse Man type** has the king riding the horse.
- **Chattra Type** has the King with an attendant offering at a fire altar
- His silver coins have three varieties with the King's bust on the obverse with **Bull** or **Fire Altar** or a **Peacock** on the reverse. His successors Purugupta, Kumargupta-II issued only one type of gold coins namely Archer type. Budha Gupta's coins followed his predecessor's type but the artistic degree declined greatly. Lack of consistency in the same coin design shows symptoms of a steady decline of the once mighty empire.

## Conclusion

Gupta Period that was once distinguished for its creativity in art, literature and architecture began to decline during the reign of Skandagupta. This period was riddled with the invasions of the Pushyamitras and the Hunas which accompanied with the intra-territorial upheavals led to a substantial loss of their imperial authority. The rulers that came after Skandagupta struggled to handle the vast empire which was fast crumbling. The expenses incurred from the constant wars drained the royal treasury and affected the general

trade and commerce of the empire. Naturally, the disintegration of their political and financial prowess reflected on their art and culture. This decline is most prominently observed on the quality of their coins. The Gupta gold coins now began to lose their lustre and were increasingly struck in base metals with very little gold or silver content.

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