

THE TYPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF SYMBOLS AS REVEALED FROM THE GOLD COINS OF THE EARLY IMPERIAL GUPTAS.

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Abstract:

Gupta Empire ruled over the greater part of north India from the fourth to the beginning of the sixth centuries CE. They were the first Indian royals to issue an extensive regular currency mainly in gold. These gold coins generally bear on the obverse the full figure of the issuing emperor often with a legend and on the reverse, the image of some favourite divinity along with a significant epithet of the issuer and an ornamental symbol. Such symbols and legends have contributed in constructing the political, economical, cultural or social history of the Gupta period. The scope of the numismatic study is very wide. It covers not only the materials of which coins are made but also takes within its ambit the sources of such materials. It includes the forms which coins take from the point of view of weight, design and technique of manufacture including such questions: as the size and frequency of issues and the monetary and the metallic values attached to each type of coin. In this paper, among the many expressive communicative media references is made solely to the various artistic typological features of symbols on early Gupta emperor's gold coins to highlight their importance and to suggest that the study of the economic representation of any era should not be limited to listening to the words and texts of the coins but should also be open to the discovery of meanings and significance communicated through symbols.

Keywords: Early Gupta period, Gold Coins, Typological Analysis, Significance of Symbols.

Introduction:

India is a large country with a long history. The evolution of coinage in India is almost contemporaneous with its recorded history going back almost to the period of Buddha. Historical events resulting at times in the fragmentation of territories ruled over by different kings and dynasties belonging to the different social, cultural and religious background, trade and commercial relations with neighbouring and even distant countries alien inroads, ideas and technical developments had such an impact on Indian coinage that the variety and enormity witnessed here is rarely met with elsewhere. India may be called a treasure house for the numismatics. Now and then new coins sometimes in hoards continue to be discovered from various parts of this vast country.

The Gupta period gained significance in contemporary historical discourses in the numismatic field as this period is one of the prominent periods in the Indian numismatic history because of the discovery of various gold coins hoards. The gold coins of the Gupta emperors are found in large number. They were issued by all the rulers of the dynasty from Chandragupta I to the last ruler Vishnu Gupta. They were known as Dinara, a term derived from the Roman Denarius.

Among them, the most highlighted one was of Bayana hoard (Gupta Gold Coinage in the Bayana Hoard; Coinage of the Gupta Empire, 1954: 310). This hoard is known mainly for its discovery of a large number of gold coins. It was discovered in 1946 in a field lying to the east of the village of Nagla Chella in the former Bharatpur State, 129 miles south of Delhi (Altekar, 1954: i). A number of 1821 coins were found from this hoard out of which 10 belong to the Chandragupta I, 183 belong to the Samudragupta, 16 belong to the Kacha, 983 belong to the Chandragupta II, 628 belong to the Kumaragupta I and 1 belong to the Skandagupta. Apart from Bayana hoard, there were many earlier known hoards of Gupta gold coins which were found at Kalighat, Bharsar, Jessore, Allahabad, Hugli, Tanda, Kotwa, Basti, Hajipur, Tekri Debra, Kasarva, Mithathal, Jaunpur, Gopalpur, Jhusi and others (Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1852: 390-400; British Museum Catalogue, Gupta Dynasty: cxxvi-vii; Gupta Gold Coinage in the Bayana Hoard: v; Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report, 1926-27: 233-34; 306). The discovered hoards furnish us with a great deal of information by which we may come to some vitally important conclusions about the political, economic and cultural condition of the period. Through these coins, we also get a good glimpse into the personal traits of the various Gupta monarchs.

Methodology:

The historical and analytical method is used in the present study. The entire study is mainly based on the primary source of information. Secondary data and tertiary data are also used to supplement the primary information.

Discussion:

Symbols are just art for some while it is an important piece of evidence for others. Having a historical point of view, we should go with the second instinct. Symbols are just not art or some engravings but it is also an important piece of information which can be used for interpreting our past. It indirectly throws light on the money economy of ancient India. It is our responsibility to analyse such a hidden piece of information. Early Imperial Guptas had issued several types, varieties and sub-varieties of gold coins. Chandragupta's coins have symbols like four prolonged symbols 𑀘, 𑀙, 𑀚 with new artistic variations. The original four-prolonged symbol 𑀛 was seen in the coins of Kushanas. He also introduced new and original symbols 𑀜, 𑀝, 𑀞. Samudragupta introduced three prolonged symbol 𑀟. This symbol was continued in all subsequent reigns. The number of symbols on the coinage of Samudragupta is much more numerous than that on the coins of his father and the same is the case with the coinage of Chandragupta II. However, it may be noted that diversity of symbols disappears with the diversity of types in the case of the coinage of the successors of Kumaragupta I. The desire for numismatic variety comes to an end with the accession of Skandagupta. The coins of Skandagupta have only two symbols 𑀟 and 𑀛, the latter occurring only once. His successors confined themselves to one type mostly (Prakash Saravasti, S.S, and Rajendra Singh, 1968: 178). It has been rightly said that Gupta gold coins are works of art rather than mere coins used for monetary transactions. All important Gupta emperors minted splendid gold coins, which have evolved widespread administration for their technical and sculptural finesse (Balasubramaniam, R and N. Mahajan, 2003: 331).

It seems the symbols make their first appearance on the coins of the Indo-Bactrians. With the advent of the Kushanas, the symbols change their character. They cease to be combinations of Greek or Kharoshthi letters and appear to resemble decorative motifs or symbols. The Gupta coins though closely related to the Indo-Scythian mintages are not in any respect blind imitations of them and are characterised by much originality of design nor are the Gupta symbols inferior in mechanical execution to the Indo-Scythian from which they differ in variety and intentions. The Gupta and Indo-Scythian die-cutters certainly meant to express substantially the same ideas by their symbols but one did not copy from the other. However, the general similarity between the Indo-Scythian and Gupta symbols are obvious and it is incredible that marks nearly alike should be used

to indicate Indo-Scythian mints in Punjab and also mints in Bihar and the adjoining provinces where the Gupta gold coins appear to have been struck (The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, New Series, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Jan., 1889): 32-33).

Writers like V. A. Smith used the term monogram to denote this drawing as according to him it resembles the monogram occurring on the coins of Indo-Greek and Indo-Scythian coins where there was a combination of Kharoshti or Greek letters. However, it seems very hard to interpret any symbol on the Gupta coins as a combination of Gupta letters (Altekar, 1957: 287). We have to look to the foreign currencies of the North-West in order to understand the origin of these symbols. These symbols do not occur on earlier series of indigenous coinage (The Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana Hoard: cxxxix). In the earlier reigns, however, symbols usually exercised a great fascination over the Gupta artists who introduced several varieties of them. In the later reigns, the diversity of symbols disappears with the diversity of types.

Typological Analysis:

Symbols generally occur on the reverse of the Gupta gold coins over the right shoulder of the goddess and usually there is only one symbol per coin of the early Gupta emperors. Smith has observed, however, one certain instance where a symbol is found on both the obverse and the reverse of the coin. A coin of the Javelin type of Samudra Gupta has monograms on both the reverse and the obverse. The obverse emblem looks as if it had been twice struck. However, we do not find any symbols on the Lyrist type, Asvamedha type of Samudragupta and on several coins of the Horseman type of Chandragupta II (PL. VIII 3-5) (The Coinage of the Gupta Empire and its Imitation: 287-288). The most common form of symbols which we encountered often on the gold coins of Gupta emperors mainly consists of a horizontal line or two parallel horizontal lines surmounted by either three or four dots or short prongs and having a square or lozenge attached below by one corner. Sometimes, the square or lozenge is replaced by a cross and by other devices and occasionally the prongs or dots above the horizontal line are lacking. Symbols do not occur either on the silver or copper coins (V.A. Smith: 30-31).

Out of 1821 coins found from the Bayana hoard, 10 were credited to Chandragupta I. According to Altekar, symbols occur on all the coins of Chandragupta I in the Bayana hoard. On the reverse of coins, usually, there is only one symbol in the upper left quadrant, but an additional Δ symbol can be seen on the right side of coin no. 1 of Chandragupta I. ☞ is the most common symbol found on coins no.s 4, 6, 7 and 8. On coin no.2, the parallelogram symbol is replaced by a circle and the dots above the horizontal line are joined to it by short vertical lines. This symbol occurs on the coin no. 3 but it is incomplete. The symbol ☞ on the coin no. 1 is the most complicated one on the coins of Chandragupta I.

Samudragupta issued various types of gold coins in his reign. His 183 coins got identified from the Bayana hoard. The source of inspiration for Samudragupta's coins was the Kushanas coins. The standard type is the most numerous types of Samudragupta coins and it shows a variety of symbols. The coin has all the symbols of Chandragupta I except ☞ . The coins have only one symbol on the left in the upper quadrant in most cases as mentioned above but 30 out of 143 coins of Samudragupta have an additional symbol on the right which is usually smaller in size and simpler in composition. Among the symbols in this type, the symbol ☞ and its variations ☞ , ☞ , ☞ are most common. They occur on about 36 coins. The symbol ☞ and its variation ☞ , ☞ , ☞ occur about 20 times. The symbol ☞ is slightly less frequent. The three coins of the Archer type have three different symbols ☞ , ☞ , ☞ (The Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana Hoard: cxl-cxli). Further, if we examine closely, we might encounter some incomplete symbols also on the reverse of the Gold coins as revealed by Balasubramaniam and Mahajan (Balasubramaniam, R. and N. Mahajan: 340).

Kacha is one controversial king of the Gupta period. Some identify him with Samudragupta and some recognised him as an independent king. Smith thinks that Kacha was a title or second name of Samudragupta (V.A. Smith: 21). Chhanda Mukherjee also identified Kacha as Samudragupta (Chhanda Mukherjee, 1991: 19). Altekar, on the other hand, sees him as an independent King and attributed a total of 16 coins in his name from the Bayana hoard. He has used five different symbols on his coins. Of these  and its minor variations occur six times and  occurs only on a particular variety of coin. Both these symbols had occurred on the coins of Chandragupta I and Samudragupta. Some symbols are new and they are remarkable for their complexity and gracefulness. The symbol  occurs on eight coins and symbol  occurs on one coin only. One interesting fact pointed out by Altekar about Kacha's coins is that the symbol is engraved not in the upper left quadrant, a usual place for other coins, but in the centre of the left side. The reason given was that the flower in the hand of the goddess, facing left, usurps the usual place of the symbol and so its place is shifted to the centre.

Chandragupta II was among the Gupta emperors which issued large no. of coins. 983 coins from Bayana hoard have belonged to him alone. In class I of the Archer type of Chandragupta II, the symbol with its  different variations occur 15 times, the symbol  occurs seven times. The three-pronged symbols ,  are a little less frequent. The most artistic symbol in this type is  which occurs about eight times. Class II of the Archer type with lotus reverse has 757 coins and shows a large variety of symbols. Out of these nearly fifty per cent or 298 have the symbol . Its variety  occurs 32 times. In fact symbols with three prongs or dots at the top are more common on this type than the symbols with four prongs or four dots. Mention can be made of symbols like , ,  which occur 139, 36 and 24 times respectively. Symbols like , ,  which occur 24, 16, and 11 times respectively with minor variations are also found. Among the rarer artistic varieties  symbol may be mentioned which occurs three times and  which occurs only once. Symbols with four prongs or dots are less common.  is the most common here and occurs 16 times. The Chhatra type of the coins have symbols with four constituents at the top, symbols like , , , , ,  can be seen. The symbol  occurs twelve times,  occurs twice and the symbol  once. In Horseman type, symbols like , , occur nine times each and symbols  occurs seven times. The artistic symbols occur  only once. Symbols like , , , , occurs only once or twice. The couch type variety A has no symbols but in varieties B and C, the same symbol can be found (The Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana Hoard: iv-ix, cxlii-cxlv). Javelin type of coins has no symbol. Lion slayer type has rather an unusual variety of symbols. But in some coins of this variety sometimes the symbols are absent (V.A. Smith: 31). Altekar encountered one unusual symbol on pl. XVII 13 which appears to be . It is however likely that the symbol is incomplete. The three dotted symbol is most common. Not only unusual but also interesting symbols with the shapes like , , , are also found.

Next to Chandragupta II, Kumaragupta I has 628 coins in his name in Bayana hoard. In his Archer coin type of class I, the symbols occurring in this class are not many. The three symbols show two varieties.  is most common which occurs 10 times. Its variation  is rare and occurs once only. The symbol  is very common and occurs 34 times. Its variation  is rare and occurs in four-headed symbols.  is the only four-headed symbol occurring in this variety and it occurs only once. In Class II, symbol like  is most common. It occurs 23 times. Symbols  and  occur three and five times respectively. Symbols with ambiguous nature , ,  are seen also. Whether it is due to the carelessness of the engraver or deliberate variations one could not able to decide. Class III has only two symbols and . Even Lion slayer have few symbols , , which occurred only once or twice. Horseman type coins of class I, varieties A, B, C, D have no symbols. In the swordsman type, a common symbol is usually figured in the usual place. Chhatra and Apratigha types have the common symbol . The Rhinoceros-slayer type shows the same symbol on all its specimens. Tiger slayer type only has two symbols occur on this type, the three-pronged and four-

pronged one . Here, it can also be noted that several types of Kumaragupta coins have no symbols. They are the King and Queen and Elephant- Rider types, Asvamedha type, Kartikeya type (The Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana Hoard: cxlvi-cxlix).

Skandagupta's period is synonymous with the end of creativity of designs and engravings. Symbols on the coins during this period become few and monotonous. Only one symbol  is seen to occur on the king and Lakshmi type and the Archer type of Skandagupta.

Given below are the main symbols available on the coins of different early Gupta emperors (John Allan: 1967).

Kings	Symbols					
Chandragupta I						
Samudragupta						
						
						
Kacha						
Chandragupta II						
						
						
Kumaragupta I						
						
Skandagupta						

Significance of Symbols:

The symbol is a kind of indication about a particular thing and has its own merits and significance. Symbols on Gupta coins, however, do not seem to possess any demanding significance. After making a close and exhaustive study of the published work about symbols, Altekar has concluded that the symbols do not appear to have possessed any particular significance. According to him, the problem of the significance of symbols occurring in the upper left quadrant of gold coins is difficult to solve. This view is somewhat contradictory to Smith's observation. According to Smith, Gupta coins do possess significance. He argued that the symbols had some religious significance. He thinks that the symbols occurring on the Gupta gold coins are in harmony with the rest of the design and have a religious or mythological significance (V. A. Smith: 33). However, his attempt to give religious significance to the symbols is quite vague and it needs thorough re-examination. Altekar countered his claim and opposed it. According to Altekar, for instance, the goddesses which appeared on the coins of Chandragupta II are most probably Durga and Lakshmi respectively, but they have no Saiva and Vaishnava symbols associated with them which could prove the religious significance (The Coinage of the Gupta Empire and its Imitation: 289). Chhanda Mukherjee on the other hand thinks that the Standard type coins of Chandragupta II and the Archer type coins of

Samudragupta might have religious significance. In the first case, he argued that the fillet-bound standard surmounted by a Garuda in the left hand of the royal personage is a clear insignia and for the second case, he gives the evidence of the Garuda standard depicted on the coin which demonstrates the special inclination of the Gupta monarchs for Vaishnavism (Chhanda Mukherjee, 1991: 16). But he contradicts his views regarding significance in the later part of his book. He concluded by saying that the symbols on the Gupta coinage possibly do not appear to have possessed any particular significance.

Symbols recognised in Indian numismatics as dynastic emblems and religious or auspicious motifs were generally derived from the ancient collection of signs denoting fertility and prosperity. Regarding the auspicious symbols on the Gupta coins, Altekar has opined that the auspicious symbols like svastika, lotus or conch do not occur on the coins along with other symbols (The Coinage of the Gupta Empire and its Imitation: 290).

The early Gupta emperors have a very large number of symbols and many of them are continued by their successors. This renders the theory of symbols being associated with particular mint-master. Symbols like  persist through several reigns but relating this trend with mint-master is not convincing. According to Altekar, the artistic variety was in the very lifeblood of the votaries of fine arts of the Gupta period and it would have been a wonder if the Gupta mint-masters had confined themselves to the few symbols which were found on the earlier coins (The Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana Hoard: cxxxii). Smith has also been convinced by the fact that the Gupta symbols do not indicate the mint-cities (Smith: 31-32). He believed that no mint master could have lived so long. These are certainly not the marks of individual mint-masters or other functionaries, because the same symbol runs on from reign to reign through a period exceeding a century in duration. The Kushana gold coins show only a few symbols . It appears that most probably, the early Gupta mint masters regarded the symbols on their prototype as merely decorative elements which they were free to diversify in any artistic way they liked (The Coinage of the Gupta Empire and its Imitation: 290). Chhanda Mukherjee also has the view that the Gupta mint-master might have lavishly imitated Kushana gold coinage symbols for their coinage and regarded them as merely decorative elements. They were given the free hand to diversify the existing symbols of their precursors in their own way (Chhanda Mukherjee, 1991: 71). For instance, Chandragupta I issued coins probably for a short period and yet there are eight symbols on his coins. On the coins of Samudragupta as many as 25 different symbols are to be seen. On those of Chandragupta II, their number increases to about 40 (The Coinage of the Gupta Empire and its Imitation: 289- 291). It is, however, possible that some rare symbols like  which appear on solidarity or rare coins, maybe the choice of particular artisan and so, it is hard to decode them.

Conclusion:

Given the above discussions, we can conclude that the symbols on the Gupta gold coins show different types and varieties and its numbers also increases in course of time but with limited innovations. We found many symbols in Samudragupta and Chandragupta II coins as compared to their predecessors but with little or less innovative designs. For instance, the Archer type of Samudra Gupta represented in the Bayana hoard and the British Museum show two dissimilar symbols  and . The coins of the Couch type of Chandragupta II are few. They show three distinctive varieties, yet two of them which alone have symbols and show the same common  symbol. In the early Gupta period, symbols were probably not connected with particular types or varieties. Nor was any symbol characteristic of any particular type. This diversity in symbols on the coins of the same type can only be explained on the assumption that the die-cutters had more or less a free choice to accept an old symbol or to invent a new one according to their individual artistic fancy. Probably, the symbols were accepted by mint authorities on the Gupta gold coins as a decorative element from the Kushana prototype. On the Kushana coins, however, the symbols were

very few, each king usually having only one or two. The Gupta mint masters might have swayed by the creative vein and decided to introduce as many artistic variations as possible. Each die-cutter was given full freedom to exercise his own ingenuity and as a consequence, we have more than 90 different symbols on the Gupta coinage as against six or seven figures on the Kushana coinage.

Coming to the significance of the symbols, it appears that the engraver of the symbols does not have particular or distinctive aims or intentions behind marking it on the coins. It cannot be affiliated to religious importance as revealed from the above-mentioned sources. The symbols claimed to have religious importance by Smith and Mukherjee were few and could not be counted in the bigger picture. It cannot also be linked with some auspicious importance as auspicious symbols were absent from the Gupta coins and none of them is known as such either to tradition or to literature. Svastika, lotus or conch which are considered to be auspicious do not occur among Gupta symbols. So, Symbols cannot be linked only with the religious belief or affiliated to any religion, it has also neither any social or political or economical values attached to it probably as evidence were not found from the relevant sources. Nor can also regard the symbols as giving the date of issue by some conventional numbers. Dates of issue when given on the silver coins use the well-known Gupta numerals and not any symbols. According to Sitholey, the symbols may denote the total number of coins of a particular type issued in a particular mint operation by conventional signs (JNSI, XI: 111 ff). But there is no evidence for this assumption. If it were true, the Archer type of Chandragupta II, issued in mass quantity should have had the most complex symbols, but such is not the case.

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