



RELIGIOUS LEANINGS OF THE IMPERIAL GUPTAS: A NUMISMATIC STUDY

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Abstract

The coins of the Imperial Guptas has a significant place in ancient India as a source of history, because of their originality, portraying of the figures, artistic techniques, uniformity in weight and size etc. Coins are considered as the prime material apart from the other sources to know the political, economic, and religious history of the particular period. The depiction of various symbols, deities, figures and legends inscribed on the Gupta coins not only bring out the contemporary faiths which were prevalent but also throw valuable light on the religious practices and worship which continued through the ages. In this paper an endeavor has been made to make an analysis and significance of various Vaishnava symbols and legends found on the coinage of the Guptas, as they throw important light on the religious affiliation of the rulers. As the Gupta monarchs were the upholders of Vaishnavism, most of their coins depict the various Vaishnavite symbols like Garuda (the vehicle of Vishnu), chakra (wheel that represents the discus of Vishnu), Shankha (conch) and other deities. The numismatic sources of the concerned period would be utilized to know the different deities and their attributes for the study of religion particularly the Vaishnavism.

Keywords: Imperial Guptas, coins, deities, religion, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Garuda, Chakra.

The coins from the ancient times played an important role in the realm of power and politics. The issue of coins or a series of coins was undoubtedly an economic measure, but at the same time, these coins expressed the political rhetoric or imperial aspirations as well. They convey it through the legends, symbols, artistic designs, figures, and motifs inscribed on them. Coinage was largely a state controlled production. The shape, design, symbols, or aesthetic decoration on the coins was not only meant for their beautification and

embellishment but they also carried the objective and ideology of the state as well. Almost all types of coins of the concerned period (Gupta period) carried various geometrical designs, motifs, images, and legends, etc., which represent the symbolic language or symbolism, which has the capacity to express simultaneously a number of meanings. The chief purpose the coinage served during the period of our study was not only its use as a medium of exchange but it also acted as medium of communication to the subjects as well. Coins spoke to the people in two ways- through the language of inscription as well as through the language of art. As most of the symbols depicted on the coins seem to be religious, their spread across such a wide expanse assumes immense significance from the viewpoint of understanding religion especially Vaishnavism in Gupta period.

With the establishment of the Gupta Empire, the cult of *Bhagavatism* (synonymous now with Vaishnavism) seems to have been a well established and a popular religious cult in the various corners of the India.¹ Undoubtedly, the royal Gupta rulers adopted and promoted the Vaishnava faith from the first half of the fourth century onwards. This is evident from various inscriptional and numismatic records distinctly representing the Vaishnava tendencies. The Gupta rulers greatly extended their royal patronage to Vaishnavism and were responsible for its spread in the remotest corners of their empire.²

The coins of the Gupta period occupy an important place in the domain of Indian numismatics. They throw a valuable light on the political, economic, and cultural conditions of the period. The depiction of various symbols, deities, figures, and various legends inscribed on them are significant. Coins also throw a valuable light on the religious affiliation of the monarchs and their attitude towards it. Gupta rulers were the upholders of Vaishnavism and this prompted them to represent Vishnu in his anthropomorphic or his theriomorphic forms. The Gupta monarchs issued the coins extensively in gold, silver, and copper. They functioned as a more effective medium of royal communication and propaganda than ever before, and their reach was greater than that of the royal *prashastis* (eulogies).

There is little information about the personal religious leanings of the first three Gupta kings. Sri Gupta, the first Gupta king is known from the Chinese account that he built a temple for the Chinese pilgrimages and endowed it with the revenue of twenty villages.³ On account of the absence of any positive information regarding his religious affiliation it could be speculated that he either was a Buddhist or a Vaishnava like his successors. Nothing is known about his son and successor Ghatotkacha. The records of the Chandragupta I, also sheds scanty light on his personal religious leanings.⁴ Samudragupta, son and successor

¹ H. C. Raychaudhuri, *Materials for the Study of the Early History of Vaishnava Sect*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 2nd ed., 1936, p. 168.

² Swati Chakraborty, *Socio-Religious and Cultural Study of the Ancient Indian Coins*, B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1986, p. 94.

³ Samuel Beal, *The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, London, 1911, pp. xxxvi-xxxvii.

⁴ Priya Darshini, 'Religion and Policy of Toleration in the Gupta Period: Numismatic and Epigraphical Facts', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 66 (2005-2006), pp. 167-172.

of Chandragupta I, on the other hand was ardent devotee of Vishnu. His association with Vaishnavism is evident from the representation of various titles and epithets applied to him on his coins and inscriptions.

Garuda on Gupta Coins

The most common type of coin of Samudragupta's period is the 'standard type', which contains a religious or mythological allusion. The obverse side of the coin depicts the Garuda while goddess Sri Lakshmi dominates the reverse side of the coin.⁵ The Garuda standard introduced by Samudragupta, became a regular feature on the coinage of the later Gupta kings. The reason behind the Garuda's popularity, in addition to being the vehicle of Vishnu, was that it served as the family emblem of the Gupta kings.⁶ S. R. Goyal, believes that Samudragupta chooses Garuda, the *vahana* (vehicle) of Vishnu and the mythical enemy of the *Nagas*, as the emblem of the family as his attitude towards *Nagas* was influenced by his *Bhagavata* influence.⁷ The figure of Garuda occurs on a large number of the gold, silver, and copper coins of the Gupta period in different forms. The various types of coins issued by the Gupta rulers like, the Archer type of coins of all Gupta rulers, Kacha type of coins,⁸ Silver coins⁹ of Chandragupta II, replaced the three peaked hill symbol (possibly a Shaiva symbol) with the figure of Garuda insignia of Gupta dynasty, on Swordsman type¹⁰ of Kumaragupta I, *Apratigha* type¹¹ of Kumaragupta I, Silver¹² and copper coins¹³ of Kumaragupta I, Garuda is shown in the form of a full-fledged bird with out-stretched wings generally called *Garudadhvaja*. The King and Lakshmi type,¹⁴ Silver coin¹⁵ of Skandagupta and the Archer type of coins of later Gupta rulers also bear the *Garudadhvaja*. The Copper coins (variety A, type II) of Chandragupta II show Garuda with human arms and bracelets but with bird's body having out-stretched wings.¹⁶ Variety B, type II-IV of this type represents Garuda without human arms with out-stretched wings.¹⁷ Type V-VII shows the Garuda nimbate, outspread wings, holding snake in mouth.¹⁸ This peculiar iconic feature represents the hybrid nature of Garuda, where he is half-human and half-bird.

⁵ A. S. Altekar, *Catalogue of the Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana Hoard*, The Numismatic Society of India, Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay, 1954, Pl. I. 15-Pl. III. 15.

⁶ J. F. Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum; Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and their Successors*, Vol. III, No. 1; Plate I, Superintendent of Government Printing India, Calcutta, 1888, p. 14.

⁷ S. R. Goyal, *A History of Imperial Guptas*, Central Book Depot, Allahabad, 1967, pp. 39-40.

⁸ A. S. Altekar, *Catalogue of the Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana Hoard*, Pl. VII. 11.

⁹ John Allan, *Catalogue of the Coins of the Gupta Dynasties and of Sasanka, King of Gauda*, Trustees of the British Museum, London, 1914, Pl. X. 14-21.

¹⁰ A. S. Altekar, *Catalogue of the Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana hoard*, Pl. XXI. 6-15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Pl. XXX. 6-13.

¹² John Allan, *Catalogue of the Coins of the Gupta Dynasties and of Sasanka, King of Gauda*, Pl. XVI. 1-30-XVIII. 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, XVIII. 25-26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Pl. XIX. 6-9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Pl. XX. 3-XX. 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Pl. XI. 2-XI. 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Pl. XI. 4-XI. 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Pl. XI. 11-20.

The representation of Garuda on the coins of the Gupta rulers has a religious significance. It attests their inclination towards Vaishnava faith. The interesting feature about the representation of the Garuda standard is that sometimes it has been depicted as a normal bird, while in some other cases he has been delineated as half-human and half-bird. This testifies his hybrid nature. The depiction of the Garuda on the Gupta coins led V. A. Smith to opine that the figure has been from the eagle of the Roman *aurei*, which was probably re-struck as Gupta *dinaras*.¹⁹ However, A. S. Altekar contested the view of V. A. Smith. He remarked that *Garudadhvaja* was common object of India. The Besnagar inscription of Heliodorus refers to the erection of the *Garudadhvaja* in second century B. C. This testifies the fact that the Vaishnavas employed the *Garudadhvaja* much earlier than the Romans.²⁰

Legends on Gupta Coins

From the beginning, Gupta rulers engraved legends on their coins. These legends consist of various titles and epithets. A study of the legends found on the coins of this period is no less fruitful from the point of view of Vaishnavism. Coins often illustrate the religious inclination of the issuing authority and like the epigraphs are of great value in understanding the cultural developments and the attitude of rulers towards the Vaishnava faith. The Archer type coins of Samudragupta,²¹ bears the legend *Apratiratha vijitya kshitim sucaritairdivam jayati* (the matchless warrior, having conquered the world, wins heaven by his meritorious deeds) on the obverse side. The reverse side carries the legend *Apratirathah* (a matchless warrior). *Apratiratha* is one of the names included in the list of thousand names of Vishnu.²² Samudragupta was proud of this epithet, as we also find it in his Allahabad inscription.²³ The epithet of *Paramabhagavata-maharajadhiraja-sri-Chandragupta* (Chandragupta, the overlord of kings and a devout worshipper of Vishnu) first appears on the Horseman type,²⁴ followed by his Couch type (variety A)²⁵ and silver coins.²⁶ Kumaragupta I on his Silver coins also adopted the epithet of *Paramabhagavata*.²⁷ In similar manner Skandagupta on the Silver coins,²⁸ Bull type,²⁹ and Altar type,³⁰ also adopted the epithet of *Paramabhagavata*. From the above-mentioned legends, it becomes clear that they were the devout worshipers of Vasudeva. The Lion-Trampler type³¹ coins of

¹⁹ V. A. Smith, 'The Coinage of the Early or Imperial Gupta Dynasty of Northern India', *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, New Series, Vol. 21, Issue 01, Cambridge University Press, January 1889, pp. 23-24.

²⁰ A. S. Altekar, *Coinage of the Gupta Empire and its Imitations*, Numismatic Society of India, Banaras Hindu University, 1957, p. 14.

²¹ A. S. Altekar, *Catalogue of the Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana Hoard*, Pl. V. 15-Pl. VI. 2.

²² B. Ch. Chhabra, 'Coin Legends of Gupta Emperors and Vishnusahasranama', *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, Vol. IX, Part II, The Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay, December 1947, p. 137-145.

²³ Fleet, *CII*, III, No. 1; Plate I, L-24, p. 8.

²⁴ A. S. Altekar, *Catalogue of the Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana Hoard*, Pl. XIII. 6-Pl. XV. 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Pl. XVIII. 11.

²⁶ John Allan, *Catalogue of the Coins of the Gupta Dynasties and of Sasanka, King of Gauda*, Pl. X. 14-20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Pl. XVI-XVIII.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Pl. XX. 3-XXI. 8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Pl. XX. 9-12.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Pl. XX. 13-29- XXI. 12.

³¹ A. S. Altekar, *Catalogue of the Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana Hoard*, Pl. XXVIII. 14-Pl. XXIX. 15.

Kumaragupt I carries the legend *Sakshadiva narasimhah simhamahendro jayatyanisam* (Narasimha as it were incarnate, (the king) Mahendra (as it were) among the lions, is ever victorious).³² The exaltation of the king as an incarnation of the god Narasimha (incarnation of Vishnu) is brought to the forefront.³³ The depiction of various legends on coins testifies their faith in Vaishnavism.

Chakra on Gupta Coins

The coins carrying the name of Kacha have been marked as *Chakradhvaja*. The identity of Kacha, who issued this type of coins, is still a matter of controversy among the scholars. V. A. Smith,³⁴ John Allan,³⁵ attributes the Kacha type of coins to Samudragupta. However, A. S Altekar identified him with Ramagupta, predecessor of Chandragupta II.³⁶ This type of coins closely resembles the standard type of Samudragupta. There is no *Garudadhvaja* inscribed on the variety A. whereas, variety B carries the *Garudadhvaja*. Instead of *Garudadhvaja*, the king is seen holding a *Chakradhvaja* (wheel standard) on the obverse. The reverse side of the coin represents the goddess Lakshmi holding a lotus flower, which demonstrates the faith of Kacha in Vaishnavism.³⁷

The *Chakravikrama* type³⁸ is unique type of gold coins issued by Chandragupta II. The obverse side of the coin shows god Vishnu holding a mace in his left hand. By the right hand he is offering three round objects to the nimbate personage (king) standing before him. The three circular objects of the divine *prasada* (favor) are obviously symbolic. They may refer to the three worlds being gifted to the king, or may more probably refer to the *prabhushakti*, *mantrashakti* and *utsahashakti*, which together contribute to the might of a ruler.³⁹ The depiction of Vishnu on the obverse side of the coin further substantiates the fact that Chandragupta II was a great devotee of lord Vishnu. This is the only type of coins on which Vishnu is represented in anthropomorphic form, whereas on other types of coins, he is represented in theriomorphic forms.

Lakshmi on Gupta Coins

Almost all the known coins of the Gupta period depict the figure of divinities on the reverse side with different attitudes and attributes. Sri Lakshmi, a goddess symbolizes fortune, fertility, and sovereignty. Her presence on different coins shows that she was quite popular in the Gupta period. The goddess Lakshmi

³² John Allan, *Catalogue of the Coins of the Gupta Dynasties and of Sasanka, King of Gauda*, p. cxviii.

³³ Suvira Jaiswal, *The Origin and Development of Vaisnavism (Vaisnavism From 200 B.C. to A.D. 500)*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1967, p. 160.

³⁴ V. A. Smith, 'The Coinage of the Early or Imperial Gupta Dynasty of Northern India', p. 21.

³⁵ John. Allan, *Catalogue of the Coins of the Gupta Dynasties and of Sasanka, King of Gauda*, pp. xxxiii-xxxiv.

³⁶ A. S. Altekar, 'Identity of Kachagupta', *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, Vol. IX, Part II, December, 1947, pp. 131-136.

³⁷ A. S. Altekar, *Catalogue of the Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana Hoard*, Pl. VI. 11-Pl. VII. 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Pl. XVIII. 14.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. xcii.

became the regular feature of the Gupta coins since the period of Samudragupta. The standard type⁴⁰ coins of Samudragupta, depict the goddess identified as Lakshmi generally as nimbate, seated on throne holding cornucopiae and a noose. The various other types of coins of his period such as Archer type,⁴¹ Battle-axe type,⁴² also portray the goddess Lakshmi seated on the throne. His successors also depicted the same type of female figure on the reverse side of their coins. The Archer type (class I),⁴³ and Couch type coins of Chandragupta II,⁴⁴ also depict the goddess nimbate, seated on throne holding lotus by her left hand and noose by right. The coins, which show the goddess Lakshmi on wicker stool are the Lyrist type⁴⁵ coins of Samudragupta, Horseman type coins of Chandragupta II,⁴⁶ and Horseman type⁴⁷ coins of Kumaragupta I. The coins representing the goddess Lakshmi seated on lotus are the Archer type (class II) of Chandragupta II,⁴⁸ Archer type,⁴⁹ Swordsman type,⁵⁰ *Apratigha* type⁵¹ coins of Kumaragupta I, and Archer type⁵² of Skandagupta. The King and Lakshmi type of Skandagupta⁵³ is unique among the coinage of Gupta rulers. It represents the king holding a bow (suggestive of Vishnu) and standing next to goddess Lakshmi with Garuda standard on the obverse side. Whereas, the reverse side shows the goddess Lakshmi with nimbate seated on lotus. In this type Lakshmi, is holding an uncertain object and is offering it to king. The king and Lakshmi type resembles much with the King and Queen Type of Chandragupta I and Kumaragupta I. On the basis of this resemblance, some numismatists argued that the female figure on the obverse side of the coin is not Lakshmi, but Skandagupta's Queen. They called it as the King and Queen type.⁵⁴ However, Altekar, identifies the female figure with Lakshmi. He relates it with Bhitari pillar inscription, where Lakshmi voluntarily accepted Skandagupta as her lord.⁵⁵ Moreover, Skandagupta always emphasizes being chosen by Lakshmi as king.⁵⁶ The Archer type of Coins of later Gupta rulers also depict the goddess Lakshmi as seated on a lotus. The *Chhatra* type coins of Chandragupta II,⁵⁷ represent the goddess Lakshmi generally standing on lotus and

⁴⁰ Ibid., Pl. I. 15-Pl. III. 15.

⁴¹ Ibid., Pl. V. 15-Pl. VI. 1-2.

⁴² Ibid., Pl. V. 6-1.

⁴³ Ibid., Pl. VII. 12-Pl. IX. 5.

⁴⁴ Ibid., Pl. XVIII. 11-13.

⁴⁵ Ibid., Pl. VI. 3-8.

⁴⁶ Ibid., Pl. XIII. 6-Pl. XV. 3.

⁴⁷ Ibid., Pl. XXII. 1-XXV. 15.

⁴⁸ Ibid., Pl. IX. 6-Pl. XIII. 5.

⁴⁹ Ibid., Pl. XIX. 1-Pl. XXI. 5.

⁵⁰ Ibid., Pl. XXI. 6-15.

⁵¹ Ibid., Pl. XXXI. 6-13.

⁵² John Allan, *Catalogue of the Coins of the Gupta Dynasties and of Sasanka, King of Gauda*, Pl. XIX. 1-5.

⁵³ Ibid., Pl. XIX. 6-9.

⁵⁴ Jagan Nath, 'An Interesting Type of Skandagupta's Coins', *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, Vol. VIII, Part I, June 1946, pp. 48-50.

⁵⁵ A. S. Altekar, *Catalogue of the Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana Hoard*, pp. cxv-cxvi.

⁵⁶ (and) whom the goddess of fortune and splendor of her own accord selected as her husband, having in succession (and) with judgment skillfully taken into consideration and thought over all the causes of virtues and faults, (and) having discarded all (the other) sons of the kings (as not coming up-to her standard). (Fleet, *CII*, III, No. 14; Plate VIII, p. 62).

⁵⁷ A. S. Altekar, *Catalogue of the Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana Hoard*, Pl. XV. 4-Pl. XVI. 7.

mat. *Chakravikrama* type,⁵⁸ coins of Chandragupta II represent the goddess standing on a lotus. Chhatra type,⁵⁹ Elephant-rider type⁶⁰ coins of Kumaragupta I, show goddess Lakshmi standing on lotus. The Lyrist type of Kumaragupta I⁶¹ shows goddess Lakshmi seated on Couch.

The figure of the goddess Lakshmi has been depicted in different styles on the coinage of the Gupta period. The goddess is seen either as seated on throne or as seated on a lotus, sometimes on a wicker stool and sometimes standing. The earlier coin types like the Standard and Archer type of Samudragupta and Archer type of Chandragupta II depict the goddess Lakshmi holding Cornucopiae. These coins reveal goddess Lakshmi as a replica of Ardoxsho type of the Kushana coins. However, gradually it disappears and seems to hold a lotus instead. Originally, Lakshmi was an independent goddess. However, during the Puranic period she was transformed as the consort of Vishnu.⁶² In Gupta period goddess Lakshmi attained her full-fledged form and was primarily associated with Vishnu. The depiction of Lakshmi on the Gupta coins reveals that the cult of Lakshmi was merged with the cult of Vishnu. H. C Raychaudhuri is of the opinion that the merger of the sects happened under the influence of the Samkhya doctrine of *Purusha-Prakti*, which later on gave rise to the neo-Vaishnavism.⁶³

To conclude it may be said that the representation of the various deities, figures, symbols etc., on the coins of the Imperial Guptas bears the strong Vaishnavite influence. It clearly testifies that the cult of Vaishnava was a very popular and had gained a very wide following in the Gupta Empire. The deities and other symbols depicted on the coins reveal the importance of the state religion for the emperors. In some coins of the period, we find the change in iconography, which can either be observed as a source for change in religious belief of a particular emperor or can be attributed to the broad religious outlook of the Gupta rulers. As for example, the depiction of Durga and Lakshmi on the coins of Chandragupta II shows his inclination towards the Shaktism sect of Hinduism while the depiction of the Garuda, conch, Chakra, on the coins of the other Gupta rulers shows their inclination towards the Vaishnava sect. From the depiction of the deities, iconography, symbols etc., on the coin devices makes clear the attitude of the Gupta monarchs towards religion, especially towards the Vaishnava sect as it served to establish and legitimize their power.

⁵⁸ Ibid., Pl. XVIII. 14.

⁵⁹ Ibid., Pl. XXVI. 14-15

⁶⁰ Ibid., Pl. XXXI. 1-3.

⁶¹ Ibid., Pl. XXXI. 4-5.

⁶² Kanad Sinha, 'Puranic Vaishnavism and the Guptas; A Study of Kingship, Legitimacy, and Religion', in: Kunal Chakrabarti and Kanad Sinha, (ed.), *State, Power and Legitimacy; The Gupta kingdom*, Primus Books, Delhi, 2019, p. 688.

⁶³ H. C. Raychaudhuri, *Materials for the Study of the Early History of the Vaishnava Sect*, p. 177.