

Introduction

Historical analysis involves careful examination of the available sources of information searching for fresh evidence and devising creative, innovative ways of interpreting historical data. It involves asking new questions and searching for new answers to old ones. Debate and disagreement are an important part of the growth of all forms of knowledge and history is no exception. All historical interpretation ultimately based on two categories of sources- literary and archaeological. From a historical point of view, literary sources include all texts and on the other hand archeological sources include all tangible material remains like inscription, coins and inscribed images. Among these archeological sources coins have a unique place in the reconstruction of the old events. It is right to be state that coins have enormous power for initiating an unending dialogue between the past and the present. ¹ A.H.M. Jones pointed out the value of numismatic evidence with the following words - 'Numismatic is a science in its own right. Coins deserve study both from the technical and artistic point of view and must be classified typographically and chronologically'. ²

A coin technically speaking is a piece of metal of prescribed weight, embellished with designs or legends and produced under the direction of a public or private authority for its use as a medium of exchange. ³ Every coin has two sides, Obverse and Reverse. Obverse is also called head. It is the main side of a coin carrying the portrait head of the ruler or a symbol and name of the country. Reverse is the back side of a coin and is called tail. It depicts the denomination or issue price of the coin with year and mint mark underneath. ⁴ It is to be noted that the term *Numismatic* is derived from the Latin word '*numisma*' (i.e. currency) which signifies, 'the study of coins'. ⁵ Numismatics or the study of coins include the analysis of the material out of which coins were made; the identification of the sources of the metal; the classification and study of the form of the coins on the basis of their fabric

(size, shape, thickness, design, workmanship), metrology (weight), design, metallic composition, techniques of manufacture and message content.

Besides this technical side, the study of coins gives an insight into many aspects of the culture of a region. At first glance, coins may appear to carry little historical information but they provide ample light on several important historical process. Their very existence and in particular the denominations and number of pieces issued sheds lights on the economic and social structure of the country. The issuing authority sheds light on the political history. The quality of production indicates technological developments. The metal content indicates either minting activity, if the metal was mined locally or trading links if the metal was imported. The choice of design and inscription often shows the religious preferences of the issuing authority and the quality of execution sheds light on religious iconography and artistic development. ⁶ In fact, coins are datable contemporary documents of a rather special nature and as such they can be of great value to the historians.

II

Before entering to the analysis of the evolution of the money economy we must have a clear idea about the mode of transaction before the advent of currency. Prior to the invention of coins other forms of exchange were conceived in the service of commerce. It is generally believed that the method of exchange of the primitive people was usually confined to barter ⁷ which arose initially from the practice of mutual propitiation of gifts. ⁸ But the barter system involved several difficulties such as - absence of common measure of value, necessity of double co-incidence of wants, difficulty in division of certain goods, settlement of debts, absence of good store of wealth and value, lack of standard weight and measure and ignorance of quality etc. These disadvantages of the barter system were soon realized and a new method was evolved. A common commodity was fixed to serve as an intermediary in all transactions. In course of time certain commodities got preference over others and a higher value was attached to them. They assumed the character of a medium of exchange and

attained a standard by which the value of other things was estimated. Thus emerged the notion of the unit of value, the first step towards the evolution of coinage.⁹

To trace the origin of a standardized medium of exchange we must have to look back to the remote past. The history of coins can be a little murky, because so many coins have been found across the globe.¹⁰ Traditional opinion names the Chinese as the first to widely use cast coins, beginning around the 11th century B.C. The history of coins primarily as currency in the western world usually begins by mentioning Lydia, the Neo-Hittite civilization that arose in the 12th century B.C.¹¹ This is clear from the statement of Herodotus who mentions that the Lydians were the first nation to introduce the use of gold and silver coins. Coins dating back to around 643 B.C. in that region were found made of electrum, a natural alloy of gold and silver. These coins are generally considered as the first real use of metal for money because they were guaranteed by the Lydian rulers and were manufactured consistently. Since then, coins have held the attention of the major civilizations of the world and been traded for goods and services throughout the world.

In India the origin and antiquity of coinage are shrouded in considerable obscurity. The Stone Age people had neither currency nor coinage and conducted exchange through barter. Chalcolithic cultures too conducted trade without the use of coins.¹² The Harappans, for instance had a very extensive trade network based on barter. But some scholars also hold the view that perhaps Harappans used agricultural products as a medium of exchange as early as the third millennium B.C. Archeologists believe that the huge granaries that have been found in the cities of Harappa and Mahen-jo-daro were replenished by a system of state tribute and they fulfilled in the state economy the function of a modern bank or treasury.¹³ Besides this, during Harappan period inscribed seals discovered with pictographic script were perhaps used for monetary transaction. As the script has not been deciphered its nature cannot be ascertained.

The *Rig Veda* mentions words such as *nishka* and *nishka-griva* (gold ornaments) and *hiranya-pinda* (gold globules), but these cannot be understood as coins¹⁴ because they were not guaranteed by

any recognized authority and they were not used for ordinary transactions. As the metal was limited, Reg-Vedic people generally used cow as the medium of exchange in ordinary transactions. Later Vedic texts, viz., the *Brahmanas* and the *Upanishads* which are placed in c. 800 B.C. refer to golden metallic pieces such as *niska*, *suvarna*, *ahatamana* and *pada*. These may have been metal pieces of definite weight, not necessarily full-fledged coins and they have been mentioned only in connection with the gifts.

The *Janapada* or the tribal coins also arose in this time in the Indian subcontinent.¹⁵ The tribal coins began their appearances after the disintegration of the Maurya Empire. Most of the tribes such as Yaudheyas, Ksudrakas, Kunindas, Audumbaras and Kulutas were located in the Punjab and they issued die-struck coins. Copper was the prime issue of all these republics but it is difficult to generalize about the weight of these coins. The copper coins found in large number were meant for ordinary transactions. Besides these tribal principalities the monarchical states such as Surasena, Pancala, Vasta and Kosala also issued a large number of copper coins. So without any prejudice or reservation it can safely be opined that a regular system of coinage or currency was probably in vogue during the 6th-5th century B.C. in a context of the emergence of states, urbanization and expanding trade.

Money economy seems to have made considerable headway during the Maurya period. The Mauryan coins were punch marked with the royal standard to ascertain their authenticity. Kautilya in his 33rd chapter of *Arthashastra* mentions specifically that coins made of copper are classified in accordance with their value and these are like *mashaka*, *ardha-mashaka*, *pada-madhaka* (*kakani*), *ashtan-bhaga-masha* (*ardhakakni*).¹⁶ Kautilya also mentions that the violation of the imperial Maurya standards by private enterprises may have been as an offense. Kautilya also seemed to advocate a theory of bi-metallism for coinage, which involved the use of two metals, copper and silver under one government. There was state control over monetary system during the Mauryan period because officers used to regulate the currency for medium of exchange. State had to issue the debased coins

because of the deficiency of silver. This tends us to presume that coins and currency system in India was well known to the people of this period.

The disintegration of the Mauryan Empire in the second century B.C. considerably influenced the money economy of India. The rule of the foreigners such as Indo-Bactrians, Indo-Scythians, Indo-Perthians and Indo-Kusanas in the North West India must have closed the minting of Maurya coins and started to mint their own coins. In north India, there arose a large number of small states both monarchical and republican and they issued large number of coins, mostly in copper. Besides during this period city *nigamas*, *srenis* or corporations also issued their coins generally in copper.

In south India after the disintegration of the Mauryan Empire the local governors and feudatories called *Maharathis* established their own kingdoms in many parts of the Deccan. They began to issue die-struck coins. After the *Maharathis*, Anandas ruled and their coins are also available. The Satavahanas ruled for a considerable time and over wide territory. Their coins were the richest in the Deccan both in variety and quantity. The money economy of the Satavahanas was regional. It was indigenous and it played dominant role in the development of coinage of south India. In south India the punched-marked coins seem to had been issued and remained in circulation for three or four centuries longer than in the north. Roman coins and their imitation were in circulation in the market for a long time.

The imperial Gupta kings issued well-executed die-struck gold coins with metrical legends in Sanskrit known as *dinaras*, these coins have been mostly found in north India. The obverse depicts the reigning king in various poses usually material ones, but there are interesting instances of the coins of Samudragupta and Kumargupta-I, showing them playing the *Vina* (a stringed instrument). The reverse of the Gupta coins have religious symbols indicating the king's religious affiliation. There was a decline in the metallic purity of gold in the later part of Skandagupta's reign. The Guptas issued gold coins of Roman Standard because of their trade with Byzantine Empire. Gradually there was an attempt towards Indianization of Gupta coins in style, metrology and fabric.

The numismatic history of early medieval period is a matter of continuing debate. Historians described this period of Indian History as marked by feudal tendencies in view of the decline of coinage along with the other characteristics of feudal society such as decline of trade and urbanization. Gold coins were rare, silver were few and copper not many in number during the post-Gupta period. Though the money economy of northern India declined considerably during the post-Gupta period but there was a revival of money economy on a wide scale in western and central India, R.S. Sharma traces this revival from the eleventh century.¹⁷ Though there was a decline in the metallic value but the ruling dynasties of this time issued bullion coins, in which a mixture of copper and silver was used among the powers who issued coins in this time were the Senas of Bengal, Kalachuries, the Chndellas, the Gahadavals, the Chahamanas, the Sahis etc.

In the Sultani period the Sultans were not devoid of the practice of minting coins. In fact in Islam inscribing the ruler's name on the coins was invested with special importance. This privilege of inscribing the ruler's name in the *khutba* (public prayer) implied the definite assumption of legal power. This prerogative of the Muslim rulers led them to issue coins on each important occasion such as conquering a country or kingdom or even a fort or a town. The rulers of the five major dynasties that were the Ilabari Turkis, the Khaljis, the Tughlaqs, the Sayiad and the Lodies were the major issuer of sultanate coinage.¹⁸ Besides this the various regional Muslim states of north and south India issued coins in their name. In the later stage of the Sultani period various ambitious and powerful governors of the provinces which were under the Delhi Sultanate took advantage of weakened control of the power became independent and issued their own coins.

The system of coinage was one of a glorious chapter in the Mughal administration. The Mughal coinage was remarkable for its richness, for its great variety, for the standard which it almost consistently maintained and for its wonderful gold issues called *Muhars*. The Mughals had three types of coins vis. gold, silver and copper. The specialty of the Mughal coins was their unanimity in purity, character and in weight. All the Mughal rulers issued coins in their reigns.¹⁹ The coinage bloomed

exuberantly under Akbar, maintaining its vigor in the succeeding reigns as well. Besides the Mughals numerous Hindu states of north and south India issued coins the most important of them were Kangra, Mewar, Mithila, Assam, Koch, etc.

III

Now we will concentrate our attention towards the coinage of the princely states of the Indian subcontinent prior and after the Muslim rule. The emergence of the princely states in India can be traced back to the Muslim rule. We must have keep it in mind that from the time immemorial India was mostly predominated by the Hindu religion and its followers, so when the Muslims assumed the power in India, the Hindu population did not took that align culture whole heartedly and a sense of discontent always prevailed in their mind and it was reflected in the form of revolts in various occasions in the Muslim period. The situation became worse in the later phase of Mughal period due to the political, economic and administrative failure.²⁰ In that time various principalities assumed power in various parts of India and they took the Mughal tradition of administration in their personal domain.

Likewise the other part of India, North East India also witnessed the growth of regional states. This large predominantly tribal area saw the rise of tribal kingship in different parts of the medieval period. *Tipras* in Tripura, *Ahom* in Assam, the *Koch* in Cooch Behar, *Kachari-Dimasas* in upper Assam and later Kachar, *Jaintia* in Meghalaya and Jayantipur and *Manipuri* in Manipur emerged to power and authority during 13th to 18th centuries. Some of these Kingdoms in course of time became fairly powerful and came to control extensive land areas. Of these medieval powers the Ahoms, the Koch, the Tripura and the Manipuries were the most powerful. All these powers are known to have issued their coins. Oldest and strongest series of coins were struck by the Tripura, who struck their initial coins in 1464, the Koch in 1555, and the Ahoms in 1648, coins of Kacharies, Jaintia and

Manipuris were likewise struck in 1559, 1563 and 1709 respectively or somewhat earlier in each case.

21

In the field of coinage they also copied the Muslim style. Though these rising states assumed the right of striking coins for themselves but for economic, political and other reasons they issued coins in prevailing imperial Muslim type relating the emperor's name.²² The coinage of the Hindu states of North East India also derived their inspiration from the silver coinage of the Sultans of Bengal. The weight standard and fabric of the coins were initially derived from those used in Bengal and even the types used were sometimes based on Islamic prototype. They only added to them a characteristic ornament or monogram which distinguished them from the Mughal issues.

Among these regional powers the Koch²³ of northern part of sub-Himalayan Bengal holds a very distinguished place in the annals of numismatic heritage of North East India and in India as well. The origin and establishment of the Koch state can be traced back as early as to the sixteenth century. Koch kingdom was a small principality situated just south of the Himalayas.²⁴ The state was founded about in 1496,²⁵ in the vacuum created after the collapse of the Hindu kingdom Kamrup and Kamta. There is a great deal of obscurity leading to some academic controversy about the way it was established and more so about the ancestry of its original founder. In spite of a very modest beginning as a small principality in the early years of the sixteenth century the Koch state was unique for its long existence, remote antiquity, sustained continuity and survival down the centuries. As because the history of Koch kingdom needs several pages to discuss so we will switch over to our main center of attention that is the coinage of the Koch kingdom.

Coinage can shade light on many aspects of the history and culture of a country and Koch kingdom is no exception, particularly as coins are among the earliest historical documents that survive from the region. The dates on Koch coins give a firm chronological framework for the early kings. Though there is a controversy regarding the date of accession of Visvasimha but there is also

unanimity among the scholars that Visvasimha was the first historical ruler of Koch kingdom and he ruled up to 1533. Some scholars have suggested that Visvasimha may have struck coins²⁶ but due to the paucity of information we cannot say it definitely. Surely it was the credit of his son Nara Narayan who first struck coins. The currency was familiar as '*Narayani Mudra*' as '*Narayan*' was family title of the Koch Kings.²⁷ With the increase of his territory Narayani currency was also reached over a vast area of North East India. Though Koch kings struck coins on gold, silver and brass but the gold and brass coins are very rare, silver was the main metal of coining money.²⁸ After Nara Narayan the most important names of the Kings who struck coins are Lakshmi Narayan (1587-1627), Vira Narayan (1627-1633), Prana Narayan (1633-1665), Moda Narayan (1665-1680), Vasudeva Narayan (1680-1682), Mahendra Naryan (1682-1693) and others.²⁹ This continuation of minting coins was hampered due to the invasion of Bhutan in the late 18th century. The Koch King took help of the English East India Company to defend the Bhutanese attack and made an agreement with the British in 1773.³⁰ By this agreement Koch kingdom became a tributary state and it lost the authority of issuing coins but in spite of that coins were struck ceremonially up to the reign of Jagaddipendra Narayan, the last king and the transaction of Narayani currency was in vogue up to the first half of the 19th century.

IV

Over the last few decades we certainly see that the study of numismatic history is gathering attention to the scholars especially in the fields of economic history all over India and abroad. Coming to the Koch coinage although some research have been done in recent years and the research articles are spread over a wide range of different journal but the study of the Koch coinage on a comprehensive scale is yet to be done. We cannot deny that we still have much to learn about many aspects of Koch kingdom and most writers are not interested in using the numismatic data and have ignored the numismatic signals through which a better perspective into Koch history can be gained.

Keeping in mind the above background of numismatic research on Koch coinage, the work is intended to present a thorough study of Koch coinage by exploring the different frontiers of numismatic achievements like, political, economic and socio-religious as well as cultural perspective and thus tries to establish a correlation between the Koch coinage and coinage tradition of India. Not only that the study will also help to re-write the politico-economic and cultural history of North Bengal by scrutinizing the numismatic evidences found in this region.

On the basis of available source materials and keeping in mind the basic notion of research, the whole theme has been divided into six chapters. The main theme of the first chapter is the origin and development of the Koch dynasty. In this Chapter the political history of the Koch kingdom is discussed. Careful examinations are made here about the ups and downs of Koch Empire.

Economic perspective of the Koch Kingdom is the basic theme of the second chapter. This chapter includes the economic viability of the Koch kingdom. To ventilate the core issues of the Koch economics careful study is made here about the kingdom's geographical settings, administrative machinery, production system, land revenue settlement and collection, trade and market networks and so on. The use of currency in trade and transaction in Koch Kingdom and also in several parts of North East India are also discussed here to understand the role of currency in day do day transactions.

The beginning of the Koch coinage is the main theme of the third chapter. Here the economic condition and the mode of transaction before the establishment of the Koch kingdom are discussed. The economic condition of the kingdom during the reign of Nara Narayan and the main causes which compelled him to establish a regularized currency system is the main emphasis of the chapter. Koch coinage from its inception up to the Anglo-Koch treaty (1773) is discussed here because up to 1773 Koch kingdom was an independent kingdom but after this treaty it lost its sovereign character. So coinage from 1773 to the last ruler Jagaddipendra Narayan is discussed in a separate chapter.

The fourth chapter thoroughly deals with the Koch coinage from Anglo-Koch treaty to Jagaddipendra Narayan. Careful re-examination has been made here about the ups and downs of Koch numismatic due to the British monopolistic attitude towards the Koch kingdom. The colonial masters always intended to carve the power and position of the Koch kingdom. So how the British policy towards the Koch currency hampered the circulation of this currency and ultimately paved the way of its debasement have been analyzed in this chapter.

Art and iconographic designs on the Koch coins is the primary subject matter of fifth chapter. This chapter highlights on different symbols, various designs, engraved words on the Koch coins and their practical and spiritual causes.

In chapter six the coinage of various other North Eastern kingdoms like Ahom, Tripura, Kachar, Manipur, Bhutan have been discussed to gather a comprehensive idea about the transaction system in North East India and to establish the co-relation of these coinages with the coinage of Koch kingdom. Lastly there is an observation of the overall theme in the form of conclusion derived from the discussion of the above mentioned chapters.

For the purpose of this research I have used both primary and secondary materials. For the first hand data, the study is basically based upon source materials like archeological evidences including inscriptions, archeological remains and archeological findings in North Bengal and North East India. Numerous coins of the Koch and other North Eastern states, literary products under the patronage of the Koch and other North East Kings like *Charitas*, *Vamsavalies*, *Burunjis* have been scrutinized with great care. English translation of some Persian books which contain information about Koch and other North East kingdoms are also discussed. Besides this foreign traveler's account, diplomatic and official records, reports, private letters are the other literary sources. Additional data have been collected by the visitation of different museums, personal collections, state archives of North East India and India in general. In addition to this, field survey is also undertaken to utilize the yet unidentified and unrecorded numismatic specimens of the Koch and other North East coinage.

Based on the above mentioned primary and secondary data on Koch coinage and also based on early stated characterization there are certain questions as to the present work aimed at and the following hypothesis are presented for the same.

- King Nara Narayan was aware about the fact that without proper system of coinage the economic progress of the kingdom would not possible, so that he took the initiative to promote a well organized monetary system in his kingdom and thus the *Narayani* currency came into existence.
- The well organized system of coinage had a huge contribution to the development of the economic condition of the Kingdom and also for North East India in respect of its wide circulation and acceptability.
- The coinage of Koch Kingdom had a close relation with the coinage of Ahom, Tripura, Jaintia, Kachar and the Bengal Sultan's currency and probably all this coinages were inspired by each other and there was a steady competition among them in view of their acceptability towards the people of this region.
- In view of the purity of metal content, weight standard, its royal heritage and wide circulation the *Narayani* currency had played an important role in the immense popularity of the Koch kingdom not only in eastern India but also in India in general and abroad.
- The Bhutanese aggression in Cooch Behar State in the late 18th century badly affected the economy of Koch kingdom and it was the direct cause of the decline of the *Narayani* currency, although the British intervention in the kingdom and subsequently in the coinage was its immediate result.
- Although the Treaty of 1773 between the English East India Company and Cooch Behar State was the immediate cause for the elimination of the *Narayani* currency but the underlying factor was the monopolistic policy of the British Government to impose a single currency system in the company's domain in India.

Notes and References

1. E.H. Carr, *What is History ?* Harmondsworth, 1964.
2. A.H.M. Jones, *Numismatic and History: Essays in Roman Coinage*, edited by R.A.G. Carson and C.H.V. Sutherland, Oxford, 1956.
3. Pranabananda Jash, *Coins and Culture of Early North India*, New Delhi, 2008, p. 5.
4. Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*, New Delhi, 2009, p. 51.
5. Pranabananda Jash, *op.cit.*, p. 5.
6. Nicholas Rhodes, *The Coinage of North East India*, (unpublished manuscript), Kent, 1994, p.1.
7. R.S. Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalism*, Hyderabad, 2001.
8. Pranabananda Jash, *op.cit.*, p. 5.
9. Parmeshwari Lal Gupta, *Coins*, New Delhi, 1969, pp.1-2.
10. A. Cunningham, *Coins of Ancient India from Earliest Times Down To The Seventh Century A.D.*, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 7-16.
11. *ibid.*, p.19.
12. Upinder Singh, *op.cit.*, p. 51.
13. Parmeshwari Lal Gupta, *op.cit.*, p. 2.
14. Upinder Singh, *op.cit.*, p. 51.
15. K.D. Bajpai, *Indian Numismatic Studies*, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 9-13.
16. Pranabananda Jash, *op.cit.*, p. 6.
17. R.S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, New Delhi, 1980, p. 269.
18. Charles J. Rojers, *Coin Collecting in Northern India*, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 64- 80.
19. *ibid.*, pp. 99-119.
20. Satish Chandra, *History of Medieval India*, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 162-181.
21. J.P. Singh, *Coinage and Economy of North East India*, *JNSI, Vol. LXVII*, Varanasi, 2005, pp. 143-147.

22. Parmeshwari Lal Gupta, *op.cit.*, p. 220.
23. Rup Kumar Barman, *From Tribalism to State*, New Delhi, 2007, p. 42.
24. Nicholas Rhodes and S.K. Bose, *The Coinage of Cooch Behar*, Dhubri, 1999, p. 1.
25. Munshi Joyanath Ghosh, *Rajapakhayan*, (Bengali), Cooch Behar, 1938, p. 14.
26. P.K. Bhattachaeyya, 'The Coins of Visasimha and Suhunmun.' *JNSI*, Vol. XXXII, Pt. I, Varanasi, 1970, pp. 42-45.
27. Khan Chowdhuri Amanatulla Ahmed., *Cooch Beharer Itihas*, (Bengali), Cooch Behar, 1936, p. 281.
28. Nicholas Rhodes and S.K. Bose, *op.cit.*, p. 60.
29. *ibid.*, pp. 4-24.
30. Khan Chowdhuri Amanatulla Ahmed, *op.cit.*, pp. 373-376.