

Chapter V

Koch Coins in Cultural Perspective

History is the study of the past visualized by a historian. Besides the direct sources which purposely record contemporary facts in the form of a written text or an epigraph, the historian searches for information in various indirect sources. These indirect sources are objects belonging to the past but they are never intended by the authors or creators to record contemporary information. Among these indirect sources of history, coins occupy a distinct place of importance as they throw a welcome light on the peculiarities of cultural development of an area. The inscriptions on the coins highlight the cultural identity of the monarch and of the state. Presence of name or some time pictures of the Gods and Goddesses on the coins help us to determine the evolution of the religious sects. The study of varied types of coins belonging to different age exhibit an embodiment of culture in a miniature form. An in-depth study of the coin symbols from the historical perspective can provide an idea to the solution of the problem emerging out of the diversity of races or ethnic groups professing divergent religious faith. The present chapter will focus on the decorative art motifs and symbols present on the Koch coins and also scrutinize the historical as well as aesthetic reasons behind the insertion of each and every decorative ornament present in Koch coins and thus try to correlate its decorative aspect with the other contemporary currencies in vogue. But before entering into the core issue we will try to understand the numismatic art and briefly survey the various art motifs present in Indian coins from time immemorial.

Basically the coin is an object of utility. It is a small piece made of metal has prescribed weight is embellished with designs and inscriptions and is manufactured on orders from an authority for its

use as a currency, the medium of exchange. The artistic quality of an individual coin depends upon various factors like the creative skill of the artist-engraver, the mode of fabrication, quality of the metal and nature of alloy used etc. The use of well-designed dies result in device in fairly high relief and this give the device a bold effect on some coins, the relief is quite low and there are even a few specimens on which just bare outline of figures are visible. The ancient mint masters did not know the use of shape controlling collars to contain the shape of the semi-molten metallic blank at the time of the striking. As a result, perfectly round or square or rectangular shapes are almost unknown in ancient coinage, the heated metal unhampered by any collar assuming under the strokes of the hammer forms rather like some unpredictable living organism. It is also likely that when engraving dies for coins of precious metals like gold and silver, the artist-die-cutter would have put in more care in this work treating it with a reverence that such precious metals deserve than while engraving dies for coins of relatively baser metals like copper, bronze, lead and potin. The discussion of the coin-legend and the formation of its letters to an extent affect the artistic quality of a coin. When the letters are well-executed and the legends are arranged symmetrically this add to the artistic merit of the coin and vice versa.

The primary purpose of a coin is to facilitate economic transaction. But apart from their economic importance coins throw valuable light on various aspects of culture. This includes social and religious aspects, scripts, language and fine arts. For instance, the culture reflected on the early indigenous coins of India were essentially primitive in character but skilled artist were engaged to prepare dies and casts for manufacturing coins and some of their creations can be classed as object *d'art*. Not only this, the existence of common storehouse of symbols may be traced in the gradual evolution of religious beliefs from the stage of savagery through the age of barbarism to that of civilization.¹

Coins may be utilized for the reconstruction of the culture. It is a truism, as Arnold Hauser observes that all art has been reflecting the contemporary life.² A Study of our ancient coinage show

that the numismatic art is also no exception to it. Looking at Indian art we find a large number of symbols occupying a preeminent position in its fabric right from the time of the Harappa culture and a few of them have come down even to our times passing through, *inter alia*, the area of Indian coins for this reason of cultural continuity at least symbols of Indian coins deserve a thorough study. But before entering into the core issue that is the cultural aspects of coins it is necessary to clarify the term 'culture'. The term culture has been defined in hundreds of ways over the years. Each of these definitions highlight different aspects of culture and some of these definitions even conflict with each other. The word is such a diverse and fluid concept that each one has a rough idea of what is meant by culture. It is usually applied to a particular stage of advancement in civilization, although it is of wide significance. It covers the entire scenario of human activity, intellectual, aesthetic, moral, ethical, spiritual, social, political so on and so forth. In fact this comprehensive term incorporates man's relation to the beauty and glamour of nature, the creativeness of art, intrinsic and subtle values of human life, the zest of knowledge, the lure of power, peace, progress, prosperity and others that civilized people value in mundane life it is, as defined by some, not just an ornament; it is the expression of a nation's character and at the same time it is a powerful instrument of shaping character.³

Coming to the devices on ancient Indian coins a most remarkable feature of early Indian indigenous coins of the pre-Gupta period right from the time of the punch-marked coins are the occurrence of them of numerous symbols - natural, geographical, geometrical, auspicious motifs etc.⁴ 'Symbols represent the earliest record of man's urge for self-expression'.⁵ They manifest the invisible through the visible form⁶ and act as necessary and helpful intermediary between the inadequate capacities of the mind.⁷ No wonder, the list of symbols on early Indian coins are virtually endless- tree, animals, insects, reptiles, fish, the sun, the moon, constellations and stars, hill, river, circle, semi-circle, dotted circle, square, rectangular, triangle, divided square, straight line, curved line, dotted line, star, *chaitya*, temple, steelyard, bow-and-arrow, quiver, trident, battle-axe, *svastika*,

nandipada, srivastsa, Indradhvasampat, lingam, turbine symbol, triskeles, hollow cross, etc. ⁸ Of these some symbols like the hollow cross, the svastika, the triskeles, the hill symbol, wheel, etc. also occur in the ancient art of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece and other ancient civilizations and it has often been suggested that either the Indians borrowed these symbols from earlier or contemporary civilizations with whom they came into contact, or *vice versa*. A.K. Coomerswami observes that ‘all that belongs to this phase of art is equally the common inheritance of Europe and Asia and its various forms as they occur in India or elsewhere at various period up to the present day are to be regarded as cognates rather than as borrowings.’ ⁹ Such symbols as from the common heritage of all mankind may be designated as universal symbol.

II

Likewise the ancient Indian currency the *Narayani Mudra* ¹⁰ of Koch kingdom is full of artistic vigor and sensibilities. The *Narayani Mudra* holds a very distinguished place in the annals of numismatic art heritage of North East India. These coins are beautifully stuck which may be termed as masterpieces of contemporary numismatic art. Looking at art on Koch coins we find a large number of symbols occupying a preeminent position from the time of Nara Narayan come down to its last ruler Jagaddipendra Narayan. ¹¹ Though the art motifs on the Koch coins are essentially primitive in character but some of their creations can be classed as art object. In the following we will focus on the decorative art motifs and symbols present in the Koch coins and also scrutinize the historical as well as aesthetic reasons behind the insertion of each and every decorative ornament present in Koch coins and thus try to co-relate its decorative aspect with the other contemporary currencies in vogue.

Before going into the analysis of the decorative symbols of the Koch coinage it is important to throw some light on the perspectives of such decorative signs. A careful study of the legends show that these coins have invocation to Gods and Goddesses of two separate cults of Hinduism prevailing at that time in Eastern India the *Sivism* and *Vaishnavism*. While examining the volume of availability

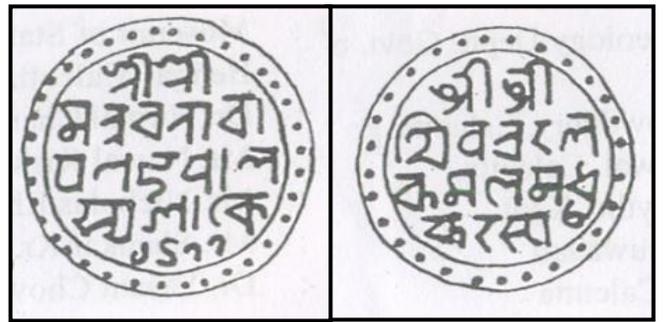
of the Koch coins it is seen that generally the coins with invocation to *Siva* are plentiful while those invoked to *Vishnu* are rare. As in medieval period pictorial representation was gradually replaced by legends so in Koch coins we do not find any pictorial representation of the king or the deity worshiped. Instead of that we find in obverse, the name of the king along with the date of accession and the reverse side devoted to the God. In most of the reverse side of Koch coins the legend '*Sri Sri Siva Charana Kamala-madhuka rasya*' and '*Sri Sri Hara Gouri Charana Kamala-madhu Karasya*' can be found to show the strong *Sivait* affiliation, while in some coins the epithet '*Sri Sri Krishna Charana Kamala-madhu Karasya*' was engraved to show the *Vaishnavite* association of the ruler.¹²

But it was not only the religious factor that influenced the ornamentation on Koch coins but there were some other reasons behind it, which compelled the Koch rulers to choose certain kind of decorative ornamentations. Among these, the other contemporary coins and their religious affiliation was a determining factor behind the execution of Koch numismatic art. The Muslim currency both from Bengal and Delhi was in vogue in the territories of Koch kingdom¹³ before the establishment of the state and the use of such coins probably influenced the artistic execution of Koch coinage. So when Nara Narayan planned to introduce his own currency, he was stylistically very much influenced by the Muslim currencies and copied their style. He issued coins in the prevailing imperial Muslim types. The weight standard and fabric of his coins were initially derived from Hussain Shah's Sultani *Tanka*.¹⁴ But it was not only the Muslim coins that influenced Nara Narayan but also the glorious series of ancient Hindu coinages of different dynasties might have profound impact behind his artistic execution of coins. Because Nara Narayan was at Varanasi in his childhood to pursue *Sanskritite* education and as Varanasi was a place dominated by the Hindu kings mostly from time immemorial, so Nara Narayan might have come into touch of ancient Hindu coinages and the artistic excellence of ancient Indian coins shaped his artistic mind. The coins of the Koch rulers were basically die-struck and round in shape and made by silver generally but occasionally made in gold and contain legend in both sides. Koch coins have a good number of decorative signs. Though there is a controversy among

the scholars regarding the inclusion of different signs on coins but certainly these signs enhanced the decorative nature of the Koch coins greatly. Now in the following we will discuss the most prominent decorative features of the Koch coins and try to establish their historicity.

Koch coins, mostly those of the early rulers were stylistically decorated. The engraved legend on coins are quite clear. A dotted circular outer border and a circle within the dotted border run along the edge of each face of these types of coins. This dotted line gives a bold look of the coins. This superb artistic specimen is a masterpiece of beautiful new design and varieties experimented by Nara

Narayan. Besides Nara Narayan the full rupee of Lakshmi Narayan, Raghudeva Narayan, Vira Narayan's coins have this particular characteristic. As the dotted circular line is the most prominent decorative feature of this type of



coins, so let us throw some light on this. If we judge the historicity of this dotted line design then we can easily trace that the dotted circular line design is a very common feature in ancient as well as medieval Indian coins. Many dynasties of Ancient India used this particular dotted line design in their coinage. For example we can trace this dotted design in the coins of Huvishka and Kaniskha I, the two most prominent rulers of Saka dynasty.¹⁵ Again, the Gupta kings like Chandragupta I, Samudragupta also used this design in few of their coins. Not only in the ancient period but also in medieval times the design was in vogue. The coins of Jahangir and Aurangzeb also have the outer dotted line design. So we can say it easily that the dotted line designs in the Koch coins was not an innovation by the Koch rulers it was probably borrowed from the surviving coins of India.

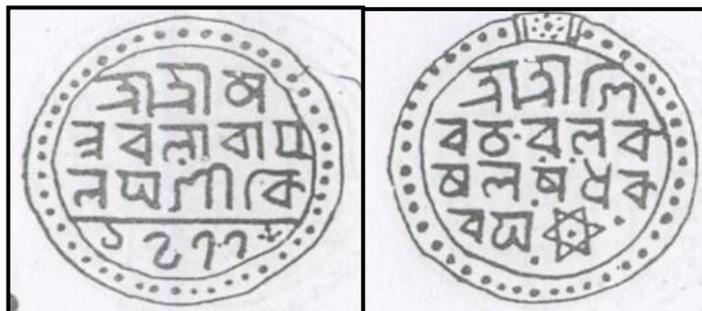
In some coins of Nara Narayan an ornamental outer line outside of a circular line runs along the edge of each face of the coins. These types of coins are very much rare. None other than Nara Narayan issued this type of coins. The ornamental outer line increased the artistic quality a lot. But it is not presumable for why this type of decorative feature was added on the Koch coins. We cannot

trace this type of design in any coins from both ancient and medieval India. The most probable cause may it be to exterminate the monotonous dotted design. As most of the coins of Nara Narayan bears the dotted lines so it might have been struck to give a different look to the



Nara Narayan's coins. However the artistic execution of the ornamental outer line was unique and it was a new addition by Nara Narayan on numismatic art in contemporary times.

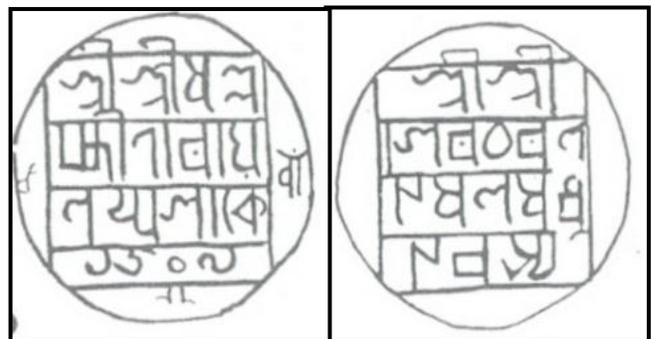
Some Koch coins of Nara Narayan have large hexagonal *Star of David* ¹⁶ on the reverse side. This hexagram definitely has some religious significance. The first known occurrence of the *Star of David* is found in Mesopotamian writings dating from 3000 B.C. In many cultures of the world this sign is treated as sacred sign and the Hindu culture is no exception to that. In Hinduism the



shape is generally understood by consisting of two triangles - one points up signifying *Purusa* and the other down signifying *Prakrti*. - locked in harmonious embrace. The downward triangle symbolizes *Shakti*, the sacred embodiment of femininity, and the upward triangle symbolizes *Siva*, representing the focused aspects of masculinity. The mystical union of the two triangles represents creation, occurring through the divine union of male and female. This symbol has deep significance in Hindu ritual worship and history. ¹⁷ Likewise Hinduism, the six pointed star have also been found in

cosmological diagrams in Muslim culture and the star can be found in mosques and on other Islamic artifacts also. ¹⁸ As the symbol was engraved on the reverse side of Nara Narayan's coins, so the intention might be purely religious. It was acted as double edged weapon. By engraving the hexagonal diagram on his coins Nara Narayan might have tried to imbed the Hindu and Muslim believes in a same platform. As the *Narayani Mudra* was devoted to Hindu deity so it was necessary for Nara Narayan to keep some Islamic elements on his coins to catch the attention of Muslim population of his kingdom. From this point of view the hexagonal diagram was the best option for him because it was treated as sacred sign both by the Hindus and the Muslims. Besides this hexagonal sign a decorated band was also enclosed on the top of the reverse side of the coin to give it a different look. This type of decorated band is not present in any other Nara Narayan's or any other Koch coins. Most probably this band has also some special significance.

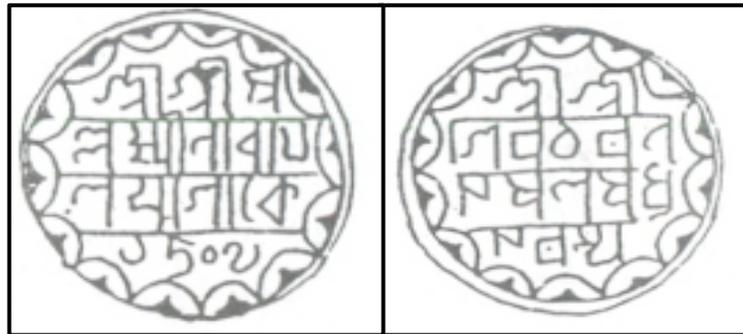
In some of the coins of Lakshmi Narayan we see the legends are written in both sides with in a square box. This particular coin is also very unique because neither of Lakshmi Narayan's other issues nor any other Koch King's coins has this type of engraving. But why Lakshmi Narayan minted this type of coin is a matter of



enquiry. The most probably Lakshmi Narayan was influenced by the Manikya coins of Tripura, where the style of writing legends in a square box was very much popular and so many Manikya kings minted their coins in this style. ¹⁹ Besides this there may be some political reasons behind it. As in the time of Lakshmi Narayan the state was going through a chaotic situation due to the succession debate with Raghu Deva, so instead of minting earlier type of coins Lakshmi Narayan issued this new type of coins. ²⁰ Because Raghu Deva, son of Sukladhaja and king of Eastern Koch kingdom started minting of coins in his name and stylistically his coins were so similar to the Nara Narayan's coins. So probably Lakshmi Narayan consciously took the new style to distinguish between Koch Kingdom's

coins to those of the Eastern Koch Kingdom's coins. Stylistically these types of coins have little significance because there is no artistic decoration on the coins instead of the square box.

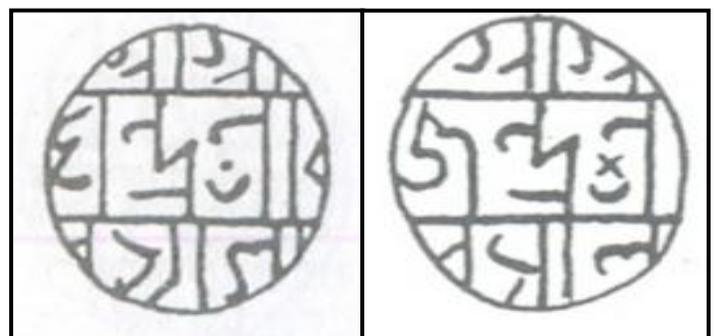
Again in some of Lakshmi Narayan's coins an ornamental border of arches can be found. None other than Lakshmi Narayan issued these types of coins. As it is hinted earlier that the initial years of



Lakshmi Narayan was marked by internal dissention so he brought some changes in his coins. The reason of issuing this type of coins may be traced from the internal dissention. As Raghu deva started minting coins with dotted lines which is familiar to Nara Narayan's coins, so Lakshmi Narayan had opt this sign for his coins. The circular ornamental border contains fourteen cusped curves. Besides this, twelve and thirteen cusped coins are also noticed.

Crescent is one of a most common symbol on the later issues of Koch coins. The crescent and star symbol is one of the most ancient designs.²¹ It appears on pictographs and seals of the first civilization in Sumer. This symbol was adopted by the Greeks also. It is not surprising that this

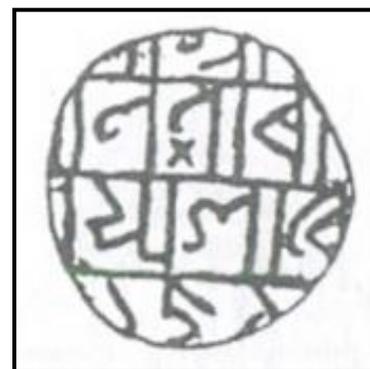
symbol found its way into Indian coins. In Koch coins, Prana Narayan first used this crescent symbol with small dot.²² After Prana Narayan, kings up to Dharyendra Narayan used this sign in their coins. But the



sign was little bit changed in the reign of Rajendra Narayan. Instead of the small dot Rajendra Narayan used a small cross over the crescent. This crescent with small cross symbol is familiar with

the Muslim coins.²³ As the Koch kingdom was annexed by the Muslim rulers several times so this symbol might be borrowed from the Muslim coinage or it might also be possible that the Muslim rulers forced the Koch kings to introduce this symbol in their coin which is a sacred symbol in Islam. It may also be described in the way that the Koch rulers consciously included this sign in their coin to catch the sentiment of the Muslim population of their kingdom.

Cross is one of a common symbol on Koch coins. A cross is a geometrical figure consisting of two lines or bars perpendicular to each other, dividing one or two of the lines in half. The lines usually run vertically and horizontally, if they run obliquely, the design is technically termed a saltire, although the arms of a saltire need not meet at right angles. The symbol of cross can be traced in Ancient Indian coins. Numismatist often depicts cross symbol as a phallic representation of the symbiotic relation between Siva and Parvati.²⁴



The coins of Prana Narayan of Koch kingdom have the symbol of cross in almost of all his coins. Instead of Prana Narayan no other Koch rulers have issued this cross sign on their coins. But the sign was used by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb when he annexed Koch kingdom in 1661 and issued coins in his name. In style these coins were similar to the half rupee coins of Prana Narayan. It had cross sign in its obverse side.²⁵

In the coins of Nripendra Narayan a crude version of the epithet on the reverse side is engraved within a square box. The square box is placed in the center of the coin. Outside of the box the remaining parts of the coin is decorated with beautiful figure of flower and arabesques. The outer border on both sides of the coins were engraved with dotted line. The ornamentation of arabesques is unique in this type of coins. This is the first example in the whole series of coins where a secular ornamentation like



flower is being used. Probably the style was borrowed from the imperial currencies which were prevalent in India and after the withdrawal of the Koch coinage the English East India Company introduced them in the territories of Cooch Behar. As these type of coins were issued during the infancy of Nripendra Narayan, when the state was governed by the British authorities²⁶ so this type of coins were minted with close resemblance to the imperial currencies in vogue. However the stylistic ornamentation was unique and graceful.

In the late years of the Koch rule the kingdom used a symbol as the emblem of the state. This emblem was used in the governmental documents of the kingdom. This symbol was engraved on the coins of Raj Rajendra Narayan, Jitendra Narayan and Jagaddipendra Narayan. It appears to us that the royal symbol of the Koch kingdom is engraved in the center of the coin. On the upper portion of the symbol a picture of monkey sitting on a globe and having crown on its head and a club in either hand is engraved. As *Hanuman* was identified as a sacred figure by the Koch so the '*Hanuman Danda*' or monkey-scepters was considered as an important royal insignia. Moreover *Hanuman* was identified as a tribal and aboriginal figure and the Koch had a tribal connection so there might be an affinity of *Hanuman* with the Koch. Below this



monkey picture a flag is engraved and on this flag there are two swords can be seen in cross section, these two swords might be the reflection of the military capacity of the kingdom. A scale of balance is hanged on the top of these two swords which may be the reflection of equality and justice. On the two sides of the flag, the pictures of two animals appear. The picture of a lion and an elephant is engraved on the left and right sides of the flag respectively. As because the lion is regarded as the king of all animals and a symbol of bravery and elephant as the symbol of mass power so these two pictures ultimately were made to signify that the power of the Koch Kingdom was enormous. Under the flag, the picture of two corn-stalk of paddy can be seen. It signifies that paddy was the major crop of Cooch Behar and the kingdom was fertile and well cultivated. Under this royal symbol a Sanskrit

word, “*Yato-dharma Stato Jayah*” is engraved. The meaning of this word is “where is virtue there is victory” and this ultimately reflects the moral character of the Koch kingdom. ²⁷ So the emblem engraved on the coins of the later rulers of the kingdom was stylistically well decorated and very significant.

The style of writing legends on Koch coins is very important part of its decorative ornamentation. The legends on the Koch coins are written in *Devanagari* language with the use of Bengali script. But the Bengali alphabets are found in crude form and it reflects the evolution of Bengali alphabet in miniature form. The artistic quality of coin legends depend upon the die cutters. In the time of Nara Narayan when the size of coins were big, the legend could be prominently seen but in the later phase when size of the coin became lesser the legend was written tightly and some cases it was quite difficult to read the legends properly. Besides this, as the technology of dies making was primitive so all the characters of the legend could not be presented in coins of the later issues. Besides this the initial issues of the Koch coins contained four lines but in the case of later issues, the upper two lines were not properly executed by the die-cutters and virtually it came down to three lines and thus the artistic quality hampered. But coins which are minted after the reign of Narendra Narayan, the script and alphabets can properly be read.

Though the appearance of the above mentioned signs on the Koch coins can be established in strong historical footing but there is a debate over the significance of these signs. Some numismatist say that the symbols on Koch coins are mere mint marks. ²⁸ In support of their view they say that the Koch coins were minted in different mints across North East India, because when Nara Narayan subjugated any king of North East India, he compelled the local king to mint coins in the name of Nara Narayan and to differentiate the coins from Koch royal mint and with that of the other territorial mints, separate symbols were assigned in the new coins. In support of this view few numismatist cited the reference of Assamese *Buranjis*, where it is clearly stated that the symbols were used to identify

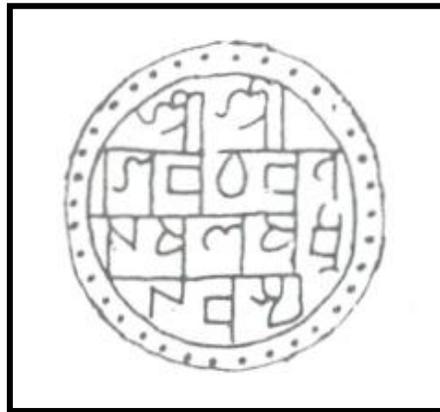
the mints of the subordinate states to which the coins were related. They pointed the Khyrim and Jayantia coins in support of their view. After defeated by the Nara Narayan both Khyrim and Jayantia kings were compelled to withdraw their names from their own coins and instead of that the name of the kingdom was permitted to engrave in one side and in another side the name of Nara Narayan was ordered for engraving. But it can hardly believeable that these symbols were mere mint marks. Because each and every symbol used by the Koch rulers or their subordinate kingdoms had strong historical background. If the signs were incorporated only to identify a particular mint so why they chose the particular symbol which had historical importance. They might choose any insignificant symbol. But all the symbols are very significant in terms of historical interpretation. So the Koch kings probably engraved different symbols consciously to cope up with contemporary need. For example the crescent symbol, star symbol, and most importantly the royal insignia were carefully executed in the coins. Probably with the growing influence of the Islamic religion in the kingdom the Koch kings were compelled to keep some Islamic symbols on their coins like crescent, star etc. So we can argue that the different symbols on coins have proper historical values. They may act as mint mark but it does not mean that they only signifies a particular mint, they have multifarious significance.

Religious invocation on Koch Coins and their Historical Significance:

Indian cultural heritage is basically imbedded in vast religious activities and coins are no exception of that. If we look back deep into the Indian coinage it can be seen how the same is influenced by religion. In numerous types of coins one can find pictures of idol and legends symbolizing the religious path followed by the rulers. Judging from this angle the particular issuer's religious incitement can be assessed. Among the Hindu Gods and Goddesses Siva, Parvati, Vishnu and Lakshmi are the most popular according to number of appearances on coins all over India.²⁹ In medieval period pictorial representation was gradually replaced by legends as a result of Muslim influence. Such legends were able to convey more messages than the pictorial representation.

The Koch kings also adopted the style of engraving religious legends in their coins. The specialty of Koch coinage is that unlike coins of other contemporary era, no iconography has been found except tiny symbols at the bottom or in between the lines and letters. Both side of the coin contains legends. The obverse shows the dedicative inscriptions and the ruler's name, epithet, year of issue. The legends are found to be in details in full unit coins while fractional unit coins show shorter forms. A careful study of the obverse legends show that these coins have invocation to Gods and Goddesses of two separate cults of Hinduism prevailing at that time in Eastern India, these are *Shivism* and *Vaishnavism*. While examining the volume of availability of the Koch kingdom coins it is seen that generally the coins with invocation to Siva are plentiful while those invoked to *Vishnu* are rare.³⁰

The worship of Siva in the Phallic and iconographic representations prevailed in the Koch Kingdom from a most remote past. It was the popular form of religion among the aboriginals and the Aryanised people. Siva was recognized as the guardian deity of the land. Rai Gunabhiram Barua in



his *Assam Buranji* states that the worship of Siva was first involved in early Assam by Jalpaswara who was the king of present North Bengal.³¹ The worship of Siva seems to have been represented to its position as the important form of religion at the time of accession of Visvasimha the founder of Koch kingdom. It was believed that the religion sprang from God Siva who having taken the form of one of their ancestor visited the queen who was herself none other than an incarnation of his divine spouse *Parvati*.³² The Sivait religion remained popular among some of the subsequent Koch kings.

Darrang Rajvamsavali informs us that Nara Narayan son of Visvasimha offered worship of Siva according to accepted ceremonial rites on the eve of his expeditions against the Ahoms.³³ The numismatic evidence of the period also holds the same view in connection with the popularity of Siva worship. The coins of Nara Narayan those are known as *Narayani Mudra* exhibit deep respect of him towards lord Siva as most of the coins bear the phrase ‘*Sri Sri Siva Chara (na) Kamala ma(dhuka) rasya*’ on the reverse literally means ‘of bee at the lotus like feet of Siva’.³⁴ This phrase is engraved in most of the coins of the Koch dynasty. As hinted earlier, Visvasimha though described as the son of a mortal father named Haridasa, was allegedly begotten by Siva and his wife Hira. This referred to in the official records of Koch Bihar like the *Rajopakhyana*, the *Darrang Rajvamsavali* and the *Sankaracharita* of Ramacharan Thakur as well as in the *Akbarnamah*. It points to the emergence of the concept of the divine origin of kingship in Koch kingdom. Use of the honorific *Sri Sri* both before the name of the God as well as the king is also a pointer to the divine theory of the Koch kingship. The coins of the Koch kingdom were not only known as *Narayani Mudra* after the title ‘*Narayan*’ assumed by the rulers, but also known as *Siva-Tanka*.³⁵ The relationship of the Koch kings with Siva is repeatedly pronounced probably because of the fact that as the association of Siva with the people of the kingdom was very deep-rooted and old an account of his association here with the fertility of soil and cultivation, the Koch kings consciously tried to project themselves as descended from the deity at least partially for political purposes. The Koch rulers since the time of Nara Narayan had taken refuge to Sankaradeva’s Neo-Vaisnavism but it could not penetrate deep into the heart of the people. The kings therefore could not but build and repair the shrines of Siva and Sakti to honor the sentiment of the subject. This ultimately led to the decline of Neo-Vaisnavism in the kingdom of Koch Behar.

The history of the worship of Vishnu may be traced in Koch Kingdom from early times. The Vaisnavism was developed in a large extent by the Vaishnava sects during the early centuries of the Christian era. The basic trait of the doctrine of Bhakti was the love in one God. In Koch Kingdom the Bhakti movement was launched by Sankaradeva.³⁶ The Vishnava religion obtained a strong footing

in the country during the latter part of the reign of Lakshmi Narayan the father of Vira Narayan. Madhavadeva (the disciple of Sankardeva) and Damodardeva, the two Vaishnava reformers, left their native country because of the oppression of the Ahom king and reached the kingdom of Kamta.³⁷

Lakshmi Narayan received them with favor and offered them shelter. Prince Vira Narayan and many ladies of the royal family were charmed by his qualities and became attached to Madhavadeva. The

religion preached by Madhavadeva was considered as the royal religion. Vaishnavism received official recognition when Lakshmi Narayan enrolled himself as the disciple of Damodardeva, who became the royal *Guru*. The numismatic evidence of the period also holds the same view in connection with the popularity of Vishnu worship. The epithets inscribed on



the reverse of all the coins of the Cooch Behar rulers, described them as either *Sri Sri Siva Charana Kamala-madhu Karasya* or *Sri Sri Hara Gouri Charana Kamala-madhu Karasya*.³⁸ But an exceptional example is the epithet on the coin of Vira Narayan, who described himself as *Sri Sri Krishna Charana Kamala-madhu Karasya*. These coins are unique in the series having an invocation to Krishna, rather than to Siva and Parvati (Hara Gauri). But there is a good deal of controversy among the scholars regarding the coins of Vira Narayan centering on the legend and the date of the issue of these coins. On the issue of greater importance of Vaishnavism some scholars argue that the coins of Vira Narayan were not actually coins but medallions issued in honor of Lord Krishna during the life-time of Lakshmi Narayan.³⁹ This explains also the paucity of this type of issues which were naturally not minted in large number.

Impact of contemporary numismatic art on Koch Coinage:

The Koch kingdom was a medieval kingdom which emerged in the northern part of the Bengal side by side of the growing Muslim intervention in the peripheral parts of India. With the spread of Muslim rule the Muslim cultural trend was also spread. So it is quite natural that the numismatic

issues of the Hindu Kingdoms were also influenced by the Muslim cultural traditions. The study of the numismatic legends and devices on the numismatic issues of mediaeval Hindu kingdoms can show a gradual waning of Hindu element on their coins. Muslim coinage bears the largest stamp of their cultural influence in language, script and also legends. Minting of coinage was a customary practice in the time of accession in medieval India. Especially in medieval times the accession of a ruler was incomplete unless he minted coins in the name of the *Kalifa*.⁴⁰ The numismatic issues thus illuminate the exercise of the political power and acted as the instrument of legitimization of authority and *vis-a-vis* symbolism of power.

In course of time the Muslim influence in terms of political domination established in the Koch kingdom. We have noticed that the Koch rulers especially rulers during the internal dissensions applied the Muslim authority in Bengal to provide support. This internal dissention gave the Muslim rulers an opportunity to interfere in the Koch affairs. With this intervention the Muslim coinage came into the contact of the Koch rulers and also to the general people.⁴¹ Taking inspiration from the Muslim coinage the rulers of the Koch Kingdom initiated a currency of their own. The rulers of the kingdom introduced currency with a motive of legitimization of power. Not only the currency legitimized the political authority of the Koch rulers but also it had wide stretching cultural significance. The Islamic currency indirectly advocated the Muslim religion as it was the usual practice among the Muslims to devote their coins to *Allah*. In this backdrop being a Hindu Kingdom the Koch Kings introduced their currency which was devoted to a Hindu God Siva. It worked as two edged weapon. As God Siva was very much popular in the region so by engraving the name of Siva the Koch kings tried to catch the religious attention of the people as well as tried to make the cultural unification of the kingdom.

Besides this psychosomatic influence of the Islamic numismatic over the Koch coins there are some other material influences of Islamic traditions on Koch Coins. In contrary to the coinage tradition of India, being a Hindu state the Koch rulers did not engrave their picture or the pictorial

representing of their deity on the coins. But ancient Indian coinage from the very earliest time contains pictorial representation of the king or the deity worshipped. This non-appearance of the pictographs may be an influence of the Islamic numismatic tradition on Koch coins. As we know that in Islamic tradition pictorial representation of the *Allah* is prohibited. So the kings did not inscribe their own picture on their coins. Instead of that they only inscribed legends which advocate Islam. Taking inspiration from this, the Koch kings also did not inscribe any pictorial representation of the God or the king in the coins. Instead of picture they only inscribed legend on the reverse which advocates the Shaivism and Vaishnavism and in obverse they inscribed the name of the issuer with year. Besides this we find various symbols on Koch coins, some of which are familiar with the Islamic symbols found in Muslim coins. For example the crescent is a most common symbol found in the Koch coins. This crescent symbol is a sacred symbol of Islam and mostly used in the numismatic issues of the Muslim ruler and other religious activities. So it may very possible that the crescent on Koch coins is the Islamic cultural contribution. Another symbol on Koch coins which deserves our attention is the symbol of star. It is also treated as a sacred sign in Islamic tradition and it is reflected in the numismatic issues. So the star symbol is also an influence of Islamic numismatic tradition on Koch coins.

The coinage of the Koch Kingdom added a new chapter in the numismatic heritage of India in terms of its artistic qualities. It is very surprising to us that how in those days in spite of technological underdevelopment such kind of artistic marvels were made. The decorative ornamentation on Koch coins are very significant in terms of enriching its artistic quality and it not only gives a very prominent look to the coins but also has multifarious implications. When Nara Narayan introduced the currency there were so many currencies in circulation in the territories of the Koch kingdom and the preliminary artistic inspiration might have come from these coins but the style of engraving legends, selection of signs, and other ornamental insertions on the coins were made very carefully to enhance the artistic quality. Though due to the technological backwardness the execution of

ornamentation sometimes hampered but considering the time and technology these coins are not inferior comparing to those of the contemporary currencies. By a minute study of the decorative ornamentation on the Koch coins we can learn about so many aspects of Koch as well as North East Indian culture. As they are not much affected by outside influence they often proceed along their own line and thus can have significance for people trying to determine general patterns of cultural development. The close study of the legends and symbols suggest the continuity of Indian cultural heritage in the region. So finally we can say the Koch coins are the masterpiece of contemporary art and the signs of Koch king's artistic sensibilities.

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