

Coinage in Early Bengal and Pragjyotish-Kamarupa: A Peep into Comparative Study

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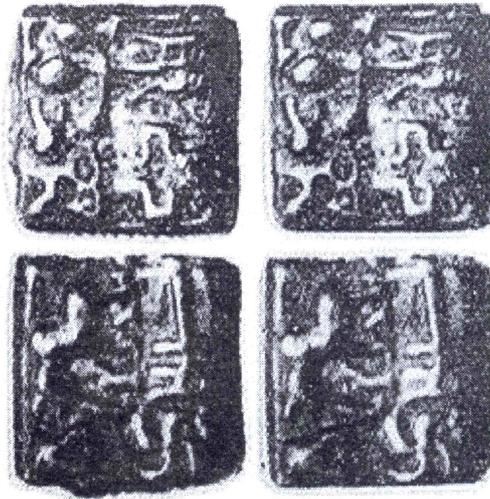
Of all antiquities that seem to be imperishable coins are the most important, since they bring to our own age the culture and customs of the forgotten generations when they were in current usages.¹ They provide a peep into the personalities of the potentates through the busts which are sometimes represented on them or give a glimpse of their proclivities through the devices and legends depicted on them. They make the past come alive. The importance of coins as a source of ancient history of India can hardly be undermined where genuine historical chronicles comparable to those of the west is not only rare but almost unavailable.² Although coins don't adequately compensate with literary sources but coins are an important source of history- political, economic, religious and cultural.³

The monetary system of an area is an index to its economic activities, hence for understanding properly the economic history of a given region and period we must know the relevant media of exchange. This particularly is true in the case of early Bengal and *Pragjyotish-Kamarupa's* (modern Assam) perspective. Money played a major role in the socio-economic and cultural life of the people of these two regions. The degree of monetization of trade was quite high though it was not carried on exclusively and in several areas even mainly or marginally with coins. The present write-up is an in-depth study of the system of coinage in Bengal and *Pragjyotish Kamarupa* prior to the advent of the Muslims in this region and it also intended to show the historicity of the system of currency in these two zones.

I

The territory known for centuries as Bengal is linguistically and to a great extent culturally a fairly homogenous unit.⁴ The area in question actually consisted of four principal sub-regions, viz *Pundravardhana*⁵ (mainly north Bengal), *Radha*⁶ (present districts of Purulia, Bankura, Birbhum, Burdwan and parts of Howrah and Hughli), *Vanga*⁷ (Dhaka-Vikramapura-Faridpur regions of Bangladesh) and *Samatata Harikela*⁸ (Noakhali, Comilla, Chittagong areas in Bangladesh). Though intersected by rivers Bengal's major regions were linked in ancient period by political as well as cultural and commercial ties. Hence the territory concerned can be considered as a unit for study. Outstanding discoveries during the last few decades have established the numismatic history of Bengal as familiar with the coins and other forms of money in the early (upto. A.D 750) and early medieval (upto A.D. 1200) periods. These discoveries have increased our knowledge for the economic history of eastern India.

The use of minted metallic coins as the medium of exchange marks a big forward step in civilization especially in its economic aspects but how and when metallic coins were first introduced in Bengal is shrouded in mystery. But it is a proven fact that they were known and used several centuries before the commencement of the Christian era⁹. This is proved by some concurrent pieces of evidence. Firstly, the *Mahasthanagarh* fragmentary stone plaque inscription,¹⁰ discovered from ancient *Pundravardhana* on the bank of *Karatoya* in Bagura now in Bangladesh is the earliest inscription (c. 3rd



century B.C) of the undivided Bengal, contains reference to two types of prevailing currencies (a) *Gandakas* and (b) *Kakanikas* though their size and weights are unknown to us. In the early literature and later inscriptions the coins were generally known as *Karsapana* and when it was made of gold was known as '*Suvarna*' or '*Niska*'. Silver made *Karsapana* known as '*Purana*' or '*Dharana*'. While copper made named as '*Pana*'.

Secondly, the '*Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*' records that a gold coin known as '*Caltis*' was in vogue in the market town of *Ganga (Tamralipti)* at about the first century A.D¹¹. But by far the most valuable evidence in this regard is furnished by the discovery of a large number of silver and copper punch-marked¹² and cast coin most of them dating back to the pre Christian epoch. These have been found sometime in large number in various localities of the province especially in the neighborhood of Bera Champa (24 parganas, near Manda, Dist. Rajshi),¹³ and Wari-Bateswar (Dacca).¹⁴ Of these two places Wari-Bateswar hoard is extraordinary for its unique coins. So far six earthen pots containing punch-marked coins had been found in the Wari-Bateswar region. Some of the coins were unique as they bear the design of fish, boat, plants and animals depicted in typical Bengal style. Unlike the Maurya and pre Maurya punch-marked coins these pieces uniformly had only four marks. The weight of the coins indicates that these are half *Karshapanas*. In comparison with the Mauryan punched-marked coins these pieces are comparatively larger and thinner and are of somewhat inferior in their metal content and in the production of impression of dies on them.¹⁵ The fairly high number of coins found in Wari-Bateswar area and semi specious beads of outside origin unearthed here mark the locality as a trading zone. However there are good reasons to think that these punch-marked pieces¹⁶ present the earliest coinage of Bengal. The symbol punched on these coins¹⁷ are often similar to those found in the other parts of India a fact which shows that from very early times Bengal followed the main currents of general Indian economic life.

The Kushanas brought new ideas in the coinage of India and a few coins of the Kushana kings have been discovered in Bengal but there is nothing to show that they were used as medium of exchange within the province. They might have come by the way of

trade along with pilgrims or in the trail of an invading army¹⁸. So far the most important Kushana coins unearthed in Bengal are three coins bearing 'standard king :Nanaia', 'standard king; four-armed Siva' and 'standing king : indistinct' types of gold specie of the Kushana monarch Kaniska I have been found respectively at Mahasthangarh, Pandu Rajar Dhibi and Tamluk. One gold coin of Huvishka has been unearthed at Dewanati and another has been reported from Farakka. Besides these the finds of Kushana copper coins are much more numerous. Copper issues of Vima,



Kaniska I, Huviska, Vasudeva are reported from 24 parganas, Bardwan, Midnapore and Hooghly districts.¹⁹

With the establishment of the Gupta Empire, Bengal shared in the currency system introduced and maintained by the Gupta rulers. The coinage of the Gupta monarchs was based essentially on gold and silver, though copper was not unknown. The discovery of a large number of Gupta coins both of gold and silver in almost every part of Bengal shows that they come into fairly wide circulation within the province, though for ordinary transactions the cowries- shells continued.²⁰ Some of the most important sites where Gupta coins were found are the king and Queen type gold coins of Chandragupta I have been unearthed in the districts of 24 parganas and Badwan. Among the gold coins of Samudragupta found in Bengal are pieces belonging to the standard type (unearthed in the districts of Bardwan, Hooghly, 24 Parganas and Midnapore and a locality now in Bangladesh), Archer type (found in the 24Parganas) and *Aswamedha* type (discovered in Comilla districts). Of the gold coins Chandragupta II several pieces of the Archer type have been reported from Kalighat (in Kolkata) and districts of Hooghly, Bardwan and 24 Parganas and the districts of Faridpur, Bogra, Jessore and Comilla of Bangladesh. Kumargupta I is represented so far in Bengal by the gold pieces belonging to the Archer type (found in the Hooghly districts), Elephant rider type (discovered in the Hooghly districts), Horseman type (unearthed in the Midnapore and Hooghly districts), Lion slayer type (Hooghly, and Bardwan districts) and *Kartikeya* type (noticed in the Bardwan districts). A king and *Lakshmi* type gold pieces of Skandagupta was found in Midnapore district. Besides this, different localities of Bengal namely Kalighat, Ranaghat, Bardwan, Hooghly have yielded the Archer type of Kumargupta II, Vainya Gupta, Narasaimha Gupta, Kumargupta III and Vishnugupta's coin in various times.²¹ Extent specimens prove that the earlier gold coins of the dynasty followed the standard of their Kusana prototypes weighing about 122 grains, but from the time of Skandagupta onwards a deliberate attempt seems to have been made to revert to the old Hindu *Suvarna* standard of 146.4 grains.²² The silver coins of the Gupta monarchs show considered variations in weight but those circulating in the central and eastern provinces of the empire appear to have approximated the standard weight of silver Karshapana, i.e. 36 grains.²³

With the political disintegration of the Gupta empire a number of small independent kingdoms emerged in Bengal in the post Gupta period. The availability of the numismatic and epigraphic data relating to the coins and currency system of this age now provides enough scope for fresh study of the exchange system of this period. The successive dynasties like the *Khadgas*, *Devas*, and *Rathas* issued coins to facilitate the mercantile community. The immediate successor of the Gupta monarchs in Bengal followed the Gupta style of minting coins at the time of minting their own currencies. Thus coins however, although conforming to the weight of the later Gupta gold coins are in most cases debased in metal content and inferior in style and execution in those of their prototypes. Among the dynasties of this period Sasanka of Gauda undoubtedly established the supremacy over the deltaic region of undivided Bengal. The discovery of a number of gold coins of Sasanka from south eastern part of Bangladesh has been noticed recently. Sasanka is credited to have issued coins mainly made of gold, but a few silver coins of Sasanka have been discovered from a recent exploration in lower deltic region of West Bengal²⁴. Besides the coins of Sasanka a few coins of Samachardeva has been discovered. In the Ghugrahati copper plate inscription of Samachardeva proves his rule in *Varakamandala*. His coins have been recovered from various hoards unearthed at Muhammadpur and at Hasnan in the Hooghly districts.²⁵

Numismatic scenario of Bengal from c 750 to 1200 AD perhaps offers maximum complexities and has generated immense scholarly controversies. The political situation is certainly dominated by the Palas (c 750-1075) and the Senas (c 1096-1205) who however did not control all the four major sub-regions of early Bengal. While these two were the major regional powers of Bengal during the early medieval period but the *Samatata* and *Vanga* areas were ruled by the *Chandras* (c 900-1055), the *Varmans* (c 1055-1145) and the later *Devas* (last quarter of the 12th century to c 1290). What strikes us is the total absence of gold currency of any ruler of Bengal from c 750-1200. No less important is the fact that despite being the outstanding powers of eastern India, the Pala and the Sena kings are not known to have minted any metallic pieces as medium of exchange. Stray discovery of a coin called *Sri Vighraha* have been recovered from a few sites. No other information has been gathered yet. But on the other hand inscriptions of the Palas and the Senas often refer to coin-terms like *Purana*, *Dharana* and *Dramma*²⁶ all of which stood for silver coins of the *Karsapana* weight standard (32 ratis or 57.6 grains). In some records of the Senas and a few other rulers the term *Churni* has been used as a medium of exchange. The inscriptions of the Senas and those of more or less contemporary powers occasionally speak of the use of *Kaparddaka-Puranas*²⁷ as a currency. The term *kaparddaka* stands for cowry shell. The image of the circulation of cowries as a currency in early-medieval Bengal gains ground from the availability of cowries from the excavations at Paharpur (Bangladesh) and Colgong (near Bhagalpur).

The absence of coins of precious metals in the Pala-Sena domains and the regular use of cowrie shells has led some scholars to infer that Bengal suffered from 'monetary anaemia'. The monetary anemia is thought to have been a consequence of languishing trade in Bengal and the onset of the self-sufficient, enclosed, rural, feudal economy. Later on scholars like R.S. Sharma described this as an example of the growth of feudalism on Indian soil since

the post Gupta period.²⁸ Although cowries are perceived as a poor substitute for metallic money as a medium of exchange and these at the most were used in small-scale and local-level exchanges. The perception that cowries were restrictive of long distance trade does not stand scrutiny as cowries were not native of Bengal and were themselves brought to Bengal from far away Maldives by sea trade.²⁹

Though the Pala-Sena realms did not yield any coins of Bengal, the south-eastern most part of Bengal presents a significant contrast to this. Harikela is noted for its uninterrupted silver coins of excellent metallic purity and content from the 7th to the 13th centuries.³⁰ Harikela which included initially the region of Chittagong and later also the areas of Comilla, Noakhali and Sylhet and parts of Tripura witness the circulation of a series of highly pure silver coins. These coins bear a recumbent bull and a legend referring to Harikela on one side and a tripartite symbol on the other. The intended shape of these coins is round. Their size varies from about 2.6 X 2.8 cms to 3.7 X 3.12 cms. The weight generally varies from about 5 to 7.5 gms, though pieces of lesser weight are also known. Besides this on the ground of paleographic features of different coins, another series of coins were known in Harikela. These coins are known in two denominations, the weight of the higher ranging from 2.3800 to 3.3660 gms and that of the lower from 0.8392 to 1.9912 gms. The weight standard was changed in the second series of coins of Harikela in order to relate it to the well known *Purana* weight standard of 32 ratis (i.e. 57.6 grains or 3.7314 gms). Stylistically, typologically and metrologically the silver coins of Harikela must be related to the silver coins of the 'Chandra' dynasty of Arakan (Burma).³¹ The dynasty ruled from about the middle or the third quarter of the fourth century to some time of the 8th century A.D with a possible interregnum in the 6th -7th century.³² This was not possible since the Chittagong districts region of Harikela was contiguous to Arakan where the *Chandra* coins were in circulation.

II

The territory included in *Pragjyotish Kamarupa* in the early centuries of this millennium was almost the whole of the present north-east India. This part of India was never included totally by the mainstream ruling dynasties of India before the advent of Muslims. Before the advent of the Ahoms in thirteenth century the territory was ruled by various small dynasties like Naraka, Varmana, Salastambha and Bhouma-Naraka dynasties. These dynasties were small and till now no numismatic specimen is yet to be found. Though the Mahasthangarh inscription³³ partially suggest that the ancient kingdom of *Pragjyotish-Kamarupa* was a part of the Maurya Empire but one can not ignore the significant fact that we have not discovered in Assam any punch-marked coin yet, which was the regular currency of the Mauryas, although such coins have been found in considerable numbers in Bengal. Surprisingly it is the fact that we have not found in Assam any of the abundant issues of the Gupta even, though we know that the province of *Pundrovardhana* or North Bengal formed a part of the Gupta empire from the fourth to sixth century A.D. and the ancient Assam or the *Pragjyotis Kamarupa* country was separated from the *Pundravardhana* territory in the west only by the river *Karatoya*.³⁴ In the same context we have to remember that

Pushyavarman of Assam and his successor appear to have had political relation with the Gupta emperor probably as subordinate allies of the latter and that it is difficult to accept complete lack of trade between Assam and Gupta Bengal especially when the spread of Gupta influence in Assam is evidenced by the use of Gupta years 510 (829A.D) in the Tezpur inscription of Harjaravarman.³⁵

But a number of gold coins of the imperial Gupta type were found by the laborers while digging the earth near a temple at Paglatek on the south bank of Brahmaputra about fifteen kilometers west of Goalpara in Assam. This coins believed to be the oldest discovery of coins in Assam.³⁶ To comment on these coins D.C Sircar suggested that 'considering the practical lack of numismatic tradition in early Assam and the identity of the Paglatek coins in type and weight with that of similar gold coins found in considerable number in Bangladesh and Tripura, the Paglatek coins would appear to have gone there from the adjoining eastern regions of Bangladesh where such coins were being issued for a few centuries after Sasanka's death in the first half of the seventh century A.D.'³⁷ Recently after re-examining the coins of Paglatek hoard at the Dhubri state museum Mr. S.K. Bose have been deciphered as *Sri Kumara*. In *Sy-Yu-Ki*, Hiuen Tsang mentioned Bhaskarvarman as '*Sri Kumara*'. From literary and other sources we find that coins were in use in Kamarupa during Bhaskaravarman's time but none such has yet been found. It is claimed that the coins bearing legend '*Sri Kumara*' may be issued by the great ruler Bhaskarvarman of Pushyavarman dynasty of Kamarupa.³⁸ If the claim is accepted the existence of coinage in Assam may be pushed back to the middle of the seventh century. It may be mentioned that '*Kumara*' is the name of another ruler of Salastambha's house who ruled in Kamarupa during eight century. Much information about the '*Kumara*' is not available whose tenure was not as long as Bhaskaravarman allies Sri Kumara.³⁹

In the first half of the seventh century A.D., the great king Bhaskaravarman of Assam had very close relation with Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh not only as an enemy of Sasanka and a friend of Harshavardhana but also as a visitor of Karnasuvarna, Kajangala, Prayaga and Kanyakubja and must have seen the gold coins of Sasanka and the silver issues of Harsha. Still we have not discovered even a single coin of Bhaskaravarmana. The explanation must be that the bankers and traders men of seventh century Assam did not feel any necessity of coins because they could manage with barter and such media of exchange as cowrie shells and others.⁴⁰ Thus even if Bhaskaravarmana issued any coins they were meant for use at particular occasions and were minted in small numbers. We know that this is the reason why specimens of even late medieval coins with known literary mention have not been discovered.

The next numismatic development of significance which have undoubtedly proved the existence of metallic coin in Assam as back as in ninth century A.D., are coins from two other hoards, both are from tea gardens. The first lot of thirty three coins was unearthed in seventies at Dhulapadung tea estate near Tezpur. D.C.Sircar then opined that 'these finds.....seems to suggest that these coins were issued on a particular occasions and limited number'⁴¹. But subsequent discovery of 2089 coins, recently in a hoard at Tulip tea estate

near Dhakiajuli and some more Nakuchi Bargaon in modern Kamarupa district has proved beyond doubt that coins were in use as money in Assam much earlier than what have been believed so long.⁴² These coins are roughly round shape and their weight varies between 1.94 and 15.87 grams and their diameter between 2.5 and 3.1 centimeters.⁴³ The chief interest of the hoard is that the thirty three coins bear a blank reverse and show a single letter obverse legend which is *Ha* on some specimens and *Va* on other. The letter *Ha*, which may be assigned to the ninth century A.D., on paleographical grounds, would suggest that the coins may be ascribed to the same century. These types, bearing *Ha*, *Va* and *Ta* in Brahmi script have so far been identified and linked with Harjavarmana, Balavarmana or Valavarmana and Tyagasimha all of the Mlechcha dynasty of Salasthambha who ruled in 9th century in this region.⁴⁴ No other similar coins are known in this region or in any neighboring region before or after the period so they represent a unique numismatic phenomenon. The simple design of a single letter implies that there are no religious dimensions to the issue. The choice of copper and the fact that no examples have been found outside Kamarupa itself implies that internal use was intended. The fact that they have only been found in a few places rather than widely spread seems to indicate that they were used to facilitate trade in few markets rather than used as a wider store of wealth. Numismatist N.G. Rhodes has some different clarifications regarding this copper coins. According to him trade seems the most likely reason. The Nan Jiao kingdom in south western China was growing in importance at this period and it was keen to acquire cowrie shells which formed the main currency of this region. Kamarupa may have identified a trading opportunity in the export of shells to China and the copper coins may have been issued to ensure that market traders at home were not inconvenienced by the consequent scarcity of cowrie shells available for local use.⁴⁵

Thus from the above study we may come to the point that though the system of coinage in Ancient Bengal and in *Prajyotish-Kamarupa* was not well defined but the concept of a common media of exchange prevailed in these two regions. With the political ups and downs in various times the strength of the monetary system also hampered. As such there was no powerful dynastic rule in both these two regions the central authority that means the ruling dynasty of the central Gangetic valley controlled the mode of monetary operations. If we consider these two regions as a common unit of study then we can find so much similarity in analyzing the facts. From the time of the Mauryas this part of the country became incorporated though partially in the mainstream Indian politics. As the Mauryan political grip over the two regions was not so much powerful so we can not find a regularized monetary system here which can be noticed other regions especially in the upper Gangetic valley. In the post Mauryan period also faced the same problem. As the foreign inroads in India during the 2nd century B.C. to 2nd century AD. mainly came from the north-western front so the major ruling dynasties of this period namely Sakas, Kusanas, Indo-Bactrian and others confined their rule in the western part of India and they introduced a well organized system of currency in their respective territories but as eastern India remained out of reach of their direct political control so it was impossible for them to establish a well established currency system in eastern India. In the time of the Guptas first a large portion of land came under the

direct political control as the *Pundravardhana* or modern North Bengal formed a part of the Gupta Empire, though other parts remained outside of the Gupta control. From Gupta onwards trade and commerce flourished in this part of India and side by side of this commercial development, the necessity of a universal unit of exchange developed. Though the volume of issuing coinage was very limited but it helped a lot in future especially in the period of the Muslim rule in eastern India to establish a powerful monetary system.

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