



International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)

A Peer-Reviewed Monthly Research Journal

ISSN: 2394-7969 (Online), ISSN: 2394-7950 (Print)

Volume-I, Issue-XII, January 2016, Page No. 44-51

Published by: Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.irjims.com>

Coinage of Bengal

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Abstract

Coins played an important role in Bengal's economy in early Medieval India. A huge number of coins are found in South-Eastern part of Bengal. Though some historians comment that agriculture was main stay of economic life and trade and commerce deteriorated at that time in North India, but such coins prove that Bengal had brisk trade with the foreign countries.

Key words: Trade, coins, south-east Bengal, cowries, Guptas

The significance of the study of coins for the reconstruction of the history of ancient India is well known to the Indologists. A large number of kings of the country are known only from their coins. Many historical facts are known from coins. In addition to political history, a series of information on social, religious and economic life as also the polity and administration, palaeography and language, fine arts and geography are also known by coins.¹

The introduction of minted metallic coins is an important step towards the progress of civilization. Controversy arises as to the first introduction of minted metallic coin in Bengal. The system of barter and also some kind of commodity money could have been employed for economic transaction in the pre-Maurya times in the different areas of Bengal and they were at least partly replaced by coin money with the introduction of Punch-marked silver coins in the territories of Radha and Pundra and the South-Western part of the Vanga region probably in the age of the Maurya administration from about the late 4th to early 2nd century B.C. The information available to us cannot definitely prove the regular use of coins of this class in other parts of Bengal, though a fair number of coins of that type have been excavated in the Vanga and Samatata regions of Bengal. It may be conceded that the silver punch-marked coins came into circulation in the Vanga and Samatata regions by way of trade, but no new coin was minted in those divisions.² Recently a hoard of 174 silver punch-marked coins has been found in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal³ and another hoard of about 600 similar silver pieces have been found in the Comilla district.³ In addition to silver punch-marked coins and the circulation of cowries in different regions of Bengal, copper punch-marked issues, struck on the weight standard of silver punch-marked pieces (32 ratties or 57.6 grains) were used in the Radha and the Pundra regions of early Bengal.⁴

The cast copper series (based on the weight system of silver punch-marked coins) was introduced in the 2nd Century B.C. in the territorial divisions of Radha and Pundra regions of early Bengal⁵ and in the 2nd Century A.D. it became, to some extent, metrologically and typologically, integrated with a copper series based on the imitations of Kushana coins which found their way to Bengal by way of trade. It has been recently discovered that a powerful class of traders from the North-Western sections of the Indian Sub-Continent migrated into the different areas of Bengal, particularly in the

Radha region, during the Kushana Age. This powerful section of traders started their activities in Vanga from about the 2nd half of the 1st Century A.D. to about the early 5th Century A.D. During this period a new series of cast copper coins developed which was based on the Kushana coins, but integrating, to some extent, metrologically and typologically, the indigenous cast species.⁶

A few gold coins of the Kushana Kings have been discovered in Bengal, but there is no evidence to show that they were used as medium of exchange within the territories. They might have come by way of trade, along with pilgrims or in the trail of an invading army.⁷

The coinage of Bengal took a turn with the establishment of the Gupta rule in Bengal. It is known from the epigraphic records of the Gupta period that two varieties of coins, namely the Dinara (gold coin) and the rupaka (the silver coin) were widely circulated in different areas of Bengal and the rate of exchange between the Dinara and the Rupaka coins was 1:16.⁸

Now it is not difficult to ascertain the ratio between two metals, if the weight of the gold and silver coins is definitely known. It is known that the exchange relation between the metallic value of dinara and rupaka was 1:4.⁹

However, a question naturally comes to our mind as to the steady fall of the value of gold in relation silver in the 5th century A.D. It may be due to the sudden stoppage of the importation of silver. This stoppage may be connected with the break-up of the Roman Empire in the 5th Century A.D. The more plausible explanation may be that the dinara did not refer to original gold coins of the Gupta monarchs, but rather to these light weight, debased gold coins which were usually described as "Imitation Gupta" coins and which had abundant supply in Bengal after the Gupta rule.¹⁰

It is said that feudalism involving payment for services in land instead of coins developed in an economy characterized by dearth of coins and absence of trade and commerce and this characteristic was prevalent in India after the fall of Guptas.¹¹ Some scholars take it otherwise. According to them, a large number of kings and other agencies of the post-Gupta age are known to have issued coins which have been found in all parts of the country. It is known from various sources that different gold, silver and copper coins like Purana (called also as Karshapana, Dharana, Dramma, Rupaka and Churni), Mada, Dinara, Nishka or Suvarna, Vimsopaka or Visa, Kalanja, Accu, Pana Varaha and Cowries were extensively used in various parts of Ancient India during that time.¹² On the other hand during that period, the right of minting money was leased to goldsmith who manufactured coins according to the demand of the traders and bankers who were responsible for deciding whether fresh coins were necessary at any particular time. They had to pay a commission for getting bullion minted into coins.¹³ According to Hiuen-tsang, who visited the different parts of India in the 7th Century A.D. "Rare precious substances of various kinds from the seaports are bartered for merchandize, but in the commerce of the country gold and silver coins, cowries, and small pearls are the media of exchange."¹⁴

The immediate successors of Bengal after the fall of the Guptas appear to have adhered to the Gupta gold coins, but silver coins were not unknown. This has been highlighted in the recent discoveries of silver coins of Sasanka as well as the silver coins of the rulers ruling in South – Eastern parts of Bengal.¹⁵ The cowries could have continued to be in use in the post-Gupta period and pre-Pala period when gold coins were issued in Gauda, Vanga¹⁶ and Samatata region.¹⁷

Two coins of King Samachardeva are known so far. They are both of gold. One of them, of the Rajalila type was found near Mahammadpur in Jessore district of Bengal along with a gold coin of

Sasanka and another gold coin of the light weight "Imitation Gupta" type as well as silver coins of Chandragupta, Skanda Gupta and Kumaragupta.¹⁸

A careful study of the two coins convinces any scholar that the name of the King is the same as on both the coins and it cannot be read as anything else than Samacha and the reading is confirmed when we come across the name of a contemporary King Samacharadeva whose copper plate inscription was discovered not far from the find spot of one of these coins (Rajalila coin) and the lettering of whose name as written on his copper plate, closely agrees to the lettering on those coins. The coins may be assigned to Samacharadeva of Ghugrahati plate.¹⁹

Mr. Allan attributes the 'Archar type' coins to a period earlier than that of Sasanka²⁰ and from the supplanting of Garuda standard of the Guptas by the bull standard on the coin, surmises that the coin was a devout Saiva. Samacharadeva must, on paleographic grounds, be placed earlier than Sasanka in chronology. It may be assigned that Samacharadeva was the predecessor of Sasanka in the Kingdom of Gauda.²¹

Jaya (naga) is known to us from some gold coins found in Bengal.²² Allan suggested that the full name might have been Jayanaga and he may be identified with Maharajadhiraja-Paramabhagavata-Sri-Jayanaga-Deva, the donor of the Vappaghoshavata charter issued from Karnasuvarna in the Murshidabad district.²³

On paleographic consideration the coins of Jayanaga may be placed between 550-650 A.D. It is known from the Manju-Srimulakalpa that the son of Sasanka had a short reign of 8 months and 5 days and was succeeded by a king named Naga. If this Naga is identified with Jayanaga, the reign of Jayanaga may be placed between 640-650 A.D. The Goddess on his coin folds her feet in the same manner that is to be seen in the reverse of the coins of Sasanka. But he was Paramabhagavata or Vaishnava and so he discontinued the obverse of Sasanka's coin which showed Siva standing on Bull. He replaced it by the well-established Archer type. The coins of Jayanaga are heavily adulterated and one of his coins in British Museum, No-614, which was tested had only 34% of gold.²⁴

The gold coins of the Samatata region have been wrongly described as imitations of Gupta coins. They really formed an independent coin series.²⁵ The ardhha-Satamana type of coin was introduced by Sasanka in that region, but they said coins bear the devices of the suvarna type of coin (Siva on bull Lakshmi seated on lotus). These were struck with the weight standard of 90 grains (ardha-satamana). Moreover, the percentage of gold in the metal content of the ardhha-satamana type of coins is higher than that of the issues of the Suvarna type of coins. It appears that Sasanka tried to introduce comparatively purer gold specie, perhaps for their ready acceptance in an area which became important in international trade from about the early 7th century A.D.²⁶

The gold specie adopted new devices in the post-Sasanka era, though it continued to follow the weight standard of about 90 grains. The best specimen, now preserved in Indian Museum, displays on the obverse a standing male figure holding a bow and an arrow and on the reverse an eight armed Goddess standing and holding an elephant headed baby. The latter obviously represents Gan-esa, the deity must be recognized as Durga or Sarvani, the mother of Ganesa. She has so far been wrongly identified with the Goddess Kali or with a Buddhist deity.²⁷

It became increasingly corrupt on later issues, so much so that after a certain stage of distortion the figure of Ganesa disintegrated. The quantity of gold in the metal content of the coins and the quality of minting also deteriorated. During this period some gold coins of the imitation Gupta type

have been found in the Bogra district of North Bengal and also in the Jessore, Faridpur, Dacca and Comilla districts of East Bengal and in Sundarban area.²⁷ These coins often have barbarous look, though some of them are better manufactured.²⁸

The find spots of the coins as well as their association with those of Samachardeva and Sasanka in some finds show that the rulers who issued these crude pieces held sway in Eastern Bengal. They were very considerably influenced by Gupta numismatic traditions, but were not slavishly following them, as is shown by the eight-armed Goddess on the reverse. In their weight and border of thick dots they imitate the half-satamana type of Sasanka. We may therefore attribute them to some local rulers in Eastern Bengal who ruled after the death of Sasanka. To judge from the uniformity of type, these rulers may well have belonged to the same dynasty.²⁹

It has been suggested by D.C.Sircar that about the middle of the Seventh Century, the Khadga King Deva-Khadga ousted the Rata rule from Samatata which was then annexed to the Khadga Kingdom. It seems that Deva Khadga and his son and successor Rajarajabhata ruled practically as independent rulers and it was during their rule that the gold coins of the type were issued.³⁰ It also appears that the same type of coins continued to be issued during the rule of the successors of the Khadgas (the Devas of Devaparvata).³¹

A gold coin of the imitation Gupta type was discovered in course of excavation at Mainmati near Comilla in East Bengal. The gold coin has been assigned to the Deva dynasty because it is said that the legend Bangala Mriganka is also found on the seal attached to King Bhavadeva's plate discovered at the Salvan Vihar site on the Mainamati hill.³² The excavations at Mainamati further yielded 52 silver coins (of three denomination), 172 silver coins of the highest denomination of the same type, the majority of which bear the legend Patikera (known to have been an early Medieval city near the Mainamati hills)³³. With the end of the rule of Bhavadeva of the Deva dynasty towards the end of the 7th or in the early 8th Century A.D. the gold specie ended in the territories of Samatata.³⁴

The series was supplanted by a class of silver specie bearing the regional name Pattikeda. It was based, typologically and metrologically, on the silver coins of Harikela.³⁵ Harikela region witnessed, in the 7th and 8th Century A.D, the circulation of a series of highly pure silver coins based, typologically and metrologically, on the coinages of the Chandras of Arakan. A coin of full unit weight c.8 gms. A piece of three quarter unit c.6 gms, a specimen of half unit c. 4 gms, and a sample of quarter unit c.2 gms. However the weight standard was changed and the flan was gradually made broader and thinner indicating the transition to second series. Palaeographic features of the legend (Harikela) on different coins indicated the circulation of series II from the 8th/9th to the 12th/13th Century A.D. when at times parts of Harikela were in the Pala or SENA Kingdom.³⁶

It is known from the available data that a complex system of currency prevailed in the Pala-Sena age (750AD-1206 AD. Its base was maintained by Kapardakas or cowries. No metallic money was coined in the major portion of the Pala or Sena Kingdom.³⁷ However some outside coins could have found their way to the territories of Bengal by way of trade and could have been used according to their intrinsic worth. The same silver coin popular in Northern India during the early medieval period is mentioned as Damma in the Bodhgaya inscription of Dharmapala(775-872 AD).³⁸ as Purana in the Bhaturiya inscription of Rajyapala(917-52)³⁹ and as Karshapana in the Gaya inscription⁴⁰ of Govindapala, though the last document also records the transaction in which the money was paid in Kapardakas or cowries.⁴¹ But large scale transactions could have been done regularly in units of silver and gold dusts (the former weighing 32 rattis and the latter 80 rattis).⁴²

Each unit of silver dust conformed to the weight standard of silver Purana which was equal to 1280 cowries and each unit gold 'dust' conformed to the weight standard of gold suvarna which was equivalent to 20480 cowries.⁴³ Thus 'dust' silver and gold money had exchange relations with the cowrie money. On the other hand the units of silver dust (mentioned as Churni in epigraphs) were exchangeable with the silver coin of Harikela having Purana weight standard. The Mehar plate of Damodaradeva of the Saka era 1156, which equates purana with Churni, suggests also the use of cowries (regulated numbers of which were equal in value of different fractions of Purana or Churni).⁴⁴ Silver coinage was maintained in Harikela because of the comparatively higher pressure of trade. This area probably had enough quantity of silver imported from outside, but genuine copper do not appear to have been minted in the Zone and period in question. The purpose of using copper coins for carrying on daily transaction of small value was perhaps served by cowries.⁴⁵

On the basis of above observations, based on the latest researches, it may be suggested that the different geographical divisions of early Bengal did not have uniform system of coinage. The development of currency in one region did not always lead to the similar development in other regions. Coins played an important role in the economic life of the people of Pundra and Radha regions of early Bengal from the Maurya to the Gupta age. Excavations in those regions clearly suggest that Pundravardhana and Radha regions were more prosperous than other regions from the Maurya to the Gupta age. These regions carried on international trade through the ports of Ganga and Tamralipta during that period.⁴⁶

The base of currency in all divisions was mainly maintained by cowries which were imported from outside. The intrinsic value of the cowries being incorruptible; they remained as a stable medium of exchange throughout the long period.

During the post Gupta and especially during the Pala-Sena time coins began to play significant part in the economic life of the people of the Vanga, Samatata and Harikela regions. However, the importance of the Radha and Pundra regions in the commercial life continued to about the 7th Century A.D. From about this period Samatata and Harikela regions became gradually more important in respect of internal; and international trade. The political and cultural centers of Mainamati and Lalmai which had grown into urban complex, had a considerable volume of trade sustained by a system of a standard monetary system. But it is hardly probable as P.K.Bhattacharyya has noticed that brisk trade was carried on in the narrow region of South-Eastern Bengal without having any impact over other areas of Bengal. The territories of South-Eastern Bengal might have used other regions of Bengal as hinterland and that augmented the trade and commerce of the area.⁴⁷

The problem of trade and currency in early Bengal has a theoretical bearing on the question of feudalism. The continuation of trade and the existence of currency may not at all negate the possibilities of agrarian economic forms. Moreover the kind of commercial activities could hardly originate a process of urbanization that might bring into being a stable commercialized middle class for profits from trade were either appropriated by foreign merchants or frittered away by feudal lords. Capital formation under these conditions must have been impossible and the ruralization remained unaffected by trade and money economy.⁴⁸

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