

## Coinage Of Ancient Bengal

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### ABSTRACT

Coins are important primary sources of history. Coins as a medium of exchange is important for trade and economy. The study of coinage in history is called '**Numismatics**'. Coins convey the names of Kings with their title's portraits, events, places, dates, dynasties, achievements, and logos. The composition of metals in the coins gives us information on the economic condition of the empire. Coinage began in India probably in the fifth century BC. This currency was used to pay the price for buying and selling from Magadha to Taxila to Persia. This means that coins have been in use since 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. So, coinage probably started in Bengal from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. A huge number of coins are found in South-Eastern part of Bengal. In this essay, I have discussed about various types and symbols of coins of Bengal and also, I discussed about coinage of Bengal during Kushan period, Gupta period and Pala-Sena Period.

**Keywords:** Copper coin, Imperial Series Coin, Caltis, Punch-Marked Coin, Mahasthanagarh Inscription.



### INTRODUCTION

In ancient times, Bengal did not refer to any organized territory. By ancient Bengal we understand the sum off four principal sub-regions. These four regions are: 1. Pundra Vardhan (originally North Bengal), 2. Radha or Rara (present day West Bengal includes Purulia, Bankura, Birbhum, Burdwan, Hooghly and part of Howrah district), 3. Bengal (present day Dhaka-Bikrampur and Faridpur districts of Bangladesh), and Samatat-Harikela (present day Noakhali, Comilla, Chittagong districts of Bangladesh i.e., the region on the east side of the Meghna River). The ancient currency of Bengal refers to the currency of these four regions. Before the introduction of coins, buying or selling of products was done through the Barter system and also some kind of commodity money could have been employed for economic transaction in the pre-Mauryan times in different areas of Bengal and they were at least partly replaced by coin money with the introduction of Punch-marked silver coins. Cowry Shells were first used in India as commodity money. Cowries, a particular type of shell are mainly shield of a sea animal. From the immemorial to recent passed up to 19<sup>th</sup> century, cowries were used as a currency for small trade or exchange in Bengal. Still now we do not know particularly when the cowries were introduced as medium of exchange in Bengal.

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According to Vedic literature, the circulation of coins is very ancient in the history of the world. In our India, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro coins were in circulation about 4 thousand years ago. After excavation some soft stone and some copper coins were found there. Although stone coins are not found, copper coins have been found in Bengal. But it is very difficult task to determine the exact history of the coin circulation in Bengal. The Printed currency or Punch-marked coin is the oldest coin in the subcontinent, namely Bengal. Its origin is believed to be approximately 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. Silver coins have been discovered in Mahasthanagarh, Rajshahi, Mymensingh, and Wari Bateswar Villeges in Narsingdi district of Bogra.

### **MANUFACTURING PROCESS OF COINS**

Silver Punch-marked coins are the oldest coins of Bengal as well as of the Indian subcontinent. The coin is so name from the method of preparation. Generally, these coins were manufactured by cutting a certain amount of metal from the silver sheet or by melting the metal or by dropping it on a hard object then stamping the metal with a certain die. One to five symbols or sometimes more than five symbols were stamped on these Bengal coins. Coins with four impressions have not yet been found outside the Wari-Bateshwar region.

### **SYMBOLS OF COINS**

Bengal coins do not have any writing or script, instead human figures, man-made objects, weapons, chaitya etc., animals, tree fruits, Shaiva and solar or planetary constellations were drawn. There was no name of the issuer or his effigy or any indication but certain symbols were stamped on the coin's obverses. The common symbols minted on the coins are sun, mountain or hill, hill top crescent, river, boat, tree, fish, bird, elephant, tiger, bull, rhinoceros, snake, arches etc. But fish dominates other ornaments on Bengal coins. As the exact meaning of the symbols has not been recovered, it is not known precisely when and who printed and circulated these coins. It is generally assumed that the symbols are depictions of contemporary beliefs, thoughts and culture, lifestyles of a particular period, people's artistic sense, or purely natural depictions. Coins identified as Bengal coins were found during general excavations at Wari-Bateswar village in present day Narsingdi district of Bangladesh. These coins have 4 symbols on the obverse; A miniature impression or blank on the reverse.

All the coins of Bengal have the sun and six-armed symbols which are also present in other royal series coins. These Bengal coins with 4 imprints are relatively thin and of heavy weight, but all the coins found are semi-heavy weight, 1.7 to .9 grams. Thickness 0.6 to 1.00 mm, measuring 15.20 mm on average.

### **CLASSIFICTION OF COINS**

Coins found in the Bengal region can be divided into two broad categories based on the number of obverse symbols:

1. Imperial series coins with five symbols on the one hand, which have been found in almost all areas of India and have also been discovered in all the minted areas of Bengal; they are more in number.
2. Regional or local coins with less than 5, 3 Or 4 symbols.

**Imperial series coins** found in Wari-Bateshwar, Raj Shahi, Mymensingh region. These coins have 5 symbols imprinted on one side and the other side is either blank or has only one imprint. Various symbols like sun, hexagon, mountain, elephant cow, pond fish, etc. are found in these prints. The shapes of coins are irregular or equirectangular, square and round.

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Anga and Banga identify two areas of Bengal regions as **local or regional coins**. The discovery of a total number of 23 stamped silver coins identified as Anga coins from the excavations of Bangar, Harinarayanpur and Chandraketurgh in three areas of Bengal. These coins have 3 imprints on one side (obverse), sometimes a small imprint or no imprint on the secondary side. Two types of coins found i.e., Karshapana and one-fourth Karshapana. The weight of karshapana coin is 3.3 to 3.7 grams and the weight of one-fourth karshapana coin is 0.8 to 0.9 grams. These coins have been dated to sometime before the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.

### COINS OF THE MAURIYAN PERIOD

The coins of the Mauryan era were not of very high quality but were in circulation all over India. An inscription found at Mahasthanagarh reveals that two types of coins, Gandaka and Karsha Pana or Pana, were also in use in Bengal. Pana was silver coinage, one-fourth of silver mixed with copper and one-sixteenth of a hard metal to make Pana coins and issued in the market with the imprint of the Mauryan emperors. Gandaka or Pana currency has not been found in Bengal so far. Even Pundranagar (Mahasthanagarh), the abode of Mauryan Mahamatra, was not found.

### COINS OF THE KUSHANA PERIOD

There is no evidence that Bengal was part of the Kushana Empire. But due to its connection with the Kushana Empire through trade, several Kushana coins have been found in Bengal. From the period of the Kushana and the Saravanan's, India's domestic and foreign trade expanded, and with it the supply of coins. Along with copper coins of superior quality and weight. 281 cast Kushan copper coins were found at Masuabazar, 32 miles south of Purulia.

### COINS OF THE GUPTA PERIOD

Gupta coinage began with some gold coins issued by Chandragupta 1, the third ruler of the empire. On one side of this coin is the portrait of Chandragupta and his queen Kumara Devi and on the other side the goddess seated on a lion and the word's 'Lichchavya' are engraved. Some examples of such coins were discovered from the twenty-four Parganas (North) and Burdwan district.



Coins of Chandragupta I

During the Gupta ruler Samudragupta, three types of coins are known to be common in Bengal namely Scepter, Archer and Horse. Coins bearing scepter have been discovered from Medinipur, Burdwan, Hooghly, and north 24 Pargana. Archer coin has been found in the district of 24 Pargana. On one side is a king standing with a bow and arrow and the word 'Sea' is inscribed below the king's left arm. The other side was similar to the 'Rajdanda' coin but emerged with the words 'Apratiratha' or 'Unrivaled Warrior'.



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'Aswamedha' coin was discovered from Comilla District.

### Aswamedha coin of Samudragupta

During the reign of Chandragupta II, we can know about the coins of two types in Bengal. During his reign the archer coins became the most popular. It has been found from Faridpur, Bogra, Jessore and Comilla district of present Bangladesh and Kalighat or Kolkata, Hooghly, Burdwan and Murshidabad in West Bengal.

During the reign of Kumara Gupta I 'Archer' coins have been found in Hooghly, 'Gajarudha' in Hooghly, 'Kartikeya' in Burdwan, 'Singh shikari' coins in Bogra, Hooghly and Burdwan. Among the coins, the most beautiful image is depicted on the 'Kartikeya' coin. On the one side the king is feeding a bunch of grapes to a peacock and on the other is engraved the words 'Mahendrakumar'. During Skanda Gupta's reign 'Tirandaj' coins are found at Faridpur, Bogra, Hooghly and Burdwan. 'Rajarani' coins are found in Medinipur, Rajarani is engraved on one side of the coin portrait of a king and a queen standing facing each other. On the other side is a portrait of the goddess seated on a lotus flower and the words 'Skandh Gupta' are engraved.

### COINS OF HARIKELA AND CHANDRADWIP

Coin circulation naturally declined greatly between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. During their reigns of Harshavardhana, Jayanaga and Samachar deva in the first half of 7<sup>th</sup> century, some gold coins were minted in imitation of the Gupta gold coins. This was the case in South and East Bengal. These coins, made of inferior metal, were of such poor quality and craftsmanship that they ceased to circulate by the mid- eight century. The metal coins found at Sri Hatta and Chittagong in Bangladesh were partly influenced by the Southeast Asian traditions. The bull-trisula-marked coins of the Chandra's of Arakan in Brahmadesh were kept in circulation by the Akara dynasty of the Mainamati region, so did Harikela.

Coins of Harikela



### COINS OF PALA AND SENA PERIODS

The golden age of the Gupta period ended during the Pala and Sena Periods. At that time there was a wide circulation of Cowries for exchange. Gold coins do not appear to have been in circulation during the reign of the Pala and Sena kings. Because till date not a single gold coin of theirs has been found in Bengal.

The coinage which was in circulation in a very limited form during the Pala period seems to have ceased completely during the Sena period. However, during the Pala period silver coins were in circulation which were called Drakshma. Dharmapala's Mahabodhi inscription mentions a type of coin called Drakshma. But not even in the Sena era.

### VALUE OF BENGAL COINS

Hundreds of Punch-marked silver and copper coins have been discovered in Bengal. In particular, the coins obtained from Wari Bateswar in Narsingdi district are said to be the oldest in the country.

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Their names or who made them are not known. Among the ancient coins, two types of coins named 'Gandaka' and 'Kaknika' are found in Mahasthanagarh Mauryan Inscriptions. 'Gandak' probably equal to the value of 4 cowries. 4 cowries= 1 Ganda, 20 Ganda=1 Pana, 16 Pana = 1kakan or karshapana.

The name of the coin mentioned in the ancient literature and later Inscriptions is called Karshapana. This Karshapana was a punch marked coin from the pre-Mauryan era. The name karshapana is derived from 'karsha' which weight 'one karsha' or 80 ratis or 146.4grains. The Periplus of Erythrean Sea mentions foreign trade along the south coast of Bengal in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and gold coin called Calties in this region. Not much is known about this coin.

By the end of the Gupta period, the value of Dinar and Rupee was 1:4. During the Gupta Period, the land was used for general purchase and sale, but the gold coin Dinar and silver coin Rupaya were used for buying and selling land and wealth. The Baigram Inscription (448) states that 3 Kulyabaps and 2 Drona baps cost 6 dinar and 8 rupees to purchase land each Kulya bap cost 2 dinars. The Paharpura Inscription states that 8 dronas equal 1 Kulya bap and 16 rupees equal 1 dinar.

Due to the use of gold and silver coins for foreign trade and the use of gold for internal transactions of the country, the Pala-Sena kings did not experience any great difficulty in exchange currency. The value of the cowries was tied to the traditional silver coin Drachma, Purana or Karsha Pana.

### **CONCLUSION**

Coins played an importance role in Bengal's economy in early medieval India. Ahuge number of coins are found in South-Eastern part of Bengal. As coins are primarily required in exchange related activities, these are invaluable sources of economic history, especially the history of trade of a given period. Although coins don't adequately compensate with literary sources but coins are an important source of history-political, economic, religious and culture. The motifs, symbols, stamp used on the Bengal coins since ancient times depict a lot about the ruler and their reign.

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