INTRODUCTION

Scope and Importance of the work

The coinage of the Guptas occupies an immensely important place in the domain of Indian numismatics. It furnishes us with a great deal of information, by which we may come to some vitally important conclusions about the political, economic and cultural conditions of the period. Through these coins we also get a good glimpse into the personal traits of the various Gupta monarchs.

Political Condition as reflected by the Gupta Coins

The legends as well as the devices on some types of Gupta coins enrich our knowledge about the political condition of the period. The legend Lichchhavayah on the Chandragupta-Kumaradevi type and also the marriage scene as depicted on the obverse of this type make us believe that there occurred an important matrimonial relation between the Gupta prince Chandragupta I and the Lichhavis who ruled in North Bihar (Mithilā). In all likelihood the underlying motif of this social contact was to facilitate the path of political friendship. The Lichhavis were the most powerful among the chiefs of Eastern India who ruled in the first half of the 4th century A.D. Samudragupta could not ignore this fact. He wanted to emphasise his might and right over the whole of Northern India. By issuing this type and also by depicting the marriage scene of his parents he confirmed the friendship on a solid foundation.
The Standard-type \(^2\) coins introduced by Samudragupta and continued by his successors perhaps represent the pre-eminent position and status of Gupta sovereignty. On the obverse of the concerned type the monarch is seen as standing with a Garuda-surmounted danda which is obviously considered to be the 'royal standard'.

The Chakra-Vikrama type \(^3\) of Chandragupta II is the best specimen for the projection of Gupta sovereignty. On this coin the king is seen as the direct recipient of God Vishnu's favour. It seems, that this type throws some light on the idea of divine power of kingship. Some of the later Gupta coin-types appear to indicate the limit of their territorial expansion. The Tiger-slayer type \(^4\) of Samudragupta bearing the 'tiger' on the obverse and the figure of Goddess Gāṅgā on the reverse quite justifiably indicates that the concerned monarch extended his sway over the Tiger-infested South-East Bengal through which the river Ganges flows. The non-issue of tiger-slayer type of Chandragupta II perhaps does not necessarily indicates that he maintained the Gupta hegemony over the newly acquired territory by his predecessor.

But the Lion-slayer type \(^5\) of Chandragupta II suggests his conquest over the western Malwa and Saurāstra which are still the abode of lions to this day in India. By issuing the Lion-slayer type \(^6\) Kumāragupta I proved that he retained his hold over the region conquered by his father.
But the independent issue by Kumāragupta I, the Rhinoceros-slayer type appears to commemorate his victory over the Assam region, where the Rhinoceroses are still found. So for the celebration of his victory over this region, he appears to have issued a coin type which bears a scene of the killing of a Rhinoceros.

Though Asvamedha-type coins of Samudragupta and Kumāragupta I do not directly signify any territorial expansion on their part, clearly indicate the concerned monarchs' supremacy over their surrounding Royal or Tribal counterparts and, consequently, the Asvamedha-type gold pieces of Samudragupta and Kumāragupta I have a great political bearing.

As we see, the Allahabad Pillar inscription acquaints us with the far-flung conquests of Samudragupta, but does not mention his performance of an Asvamedha sacrifice, which fact otherwise appears to indicate that Samudragupta performed the Horse-sacrifice after his wide-spread conquests in the north and the south of India, very probably at a later stage of his empire-building career. But though we have no epigraphic or literary evidence of the conquest of new territory on the part of Kumāragupta I, his Horse-sacrifice and consequent issue of the Asvamedha-type coins apparently indicate some possible and otherwise unrecorded conquests for the performance of Horse-sacrifice without any prior conquest is unthinkable.
The silver coins of the Guptas also provide us with a good deal of information about territorial expansion. Those of Chandragupta II modelled on the silver issues of the Western Kshatrapas and meant for circulation in their territories, corroborate his campaign against, and conquest of, the Western satraps, as "apparently alluded to in the Udayagiri cave Inscription of Virasena-Saba." For, Chandragupta II evidently issued those coins for use of the newly conquered subjects in Western India after the eclipse there of Western Satrap sway.

**Economic Condition**

All the Gupta rulers of the Imperial line issued gold coins in a large scale, but we are confronted with the problem regarding the actual source of the gold which went into the making of the profuse Gupta issues. It is generally held that extensive foreign trade, the mines of the Kalar region in Mysore and lastly the Kushana gold coins were the three possible sources of the extensive Gupta gold issues. However, from the prolific coinage of the Guptas, we may assume that the economic condition in the Gupta period was fairly prosperous.

**Cultural Condition**

The Gupta coinage also throws a welcome light on the cultural life of the Golden Age. That the creative art of the period was full of originality and vitality is proved not only
by the sculptures but also by its coins. It is true that in its initial stage the Gupta coinage was overwhelmed by the bewildering varieties of Kushāṇa prototypes, but very soon the Gupta mint-masters overcame the influence of the Kushāṇa coins and asserted themselves in the application of indigenous art style.

The superb craftsmanship and technique of the Gupta moneyers have been fully exhibited by the devices, specially of the gold coinage. The coin-types showing hunting scenes, viz. represented by those the Tiger-slayer, Lion-slayer and Rhinoceros-slayer types, exhibit the graceful virility of the monarchs, while the coins of the Standard type project their majestic personality. The Āsāmedha and the Lyrist type\textsuperscript{14} coins of the Gupta monarchs bear the testimony of originality of the artists, and the figures of standing queens and goddesses as seen on their reverse are gracefully depicted. Their voluptuous busts and huge hips speak of the contemporary conception of female beauty. The tribhanga posture of the goddesses, the manner in which they hold a lotus, scatter gold\textsuperscript{15} coins or feed\textsuperscript{16} the peacock very well reflect the classical taste of the age. The figures of gods and goddesses as seen on the coinage indicate the manner of their representation that was in vogue in that period. However, from the style of their depiction we get an idea about the complete mastery of the craftsman of the Gupta-mints.

The artists paid considerable attention to ornaments and costumes of the female as well as the male figures. It seems
from the figures as depicted on the coinage that sewn garments were in vogue in that time. On some coin-types we see the Gupta monarchs as appearing in trousers and tunics like their Kushana counterparts. On coins of other types we see them in purely national dress, i.e. in dhoti and an uttyariya. As regard the female figures, they were shown in tight-fitting bodice on the upper part of their person, while their lower part was depicted in a sari-like garment. As regards ornaments, both males and females wore necklace, ear-rings, bracelets and bangles, while women also used a beaded head-ornament and a chandrahāra around the belly.

The literary upliftment which characterised the Golden Age is also reflected in the coinage. For the first time in the Gupta Age the coin legends became mostly mythological. The style of composition and the rhythmic tune of these legends unquestionably testify to the high poetic merit of the court-poet or the composer.

The devices of the coinage throw some important light on the religious affiliation of the Gupta monarchs and also of the general people, at least to a certain extent. The gods and goddesses, as depicted on the coinage, are purely of the Brahmmanical sect. In fact, the personal inclination of the Gupta monarchs to Vaishnavism is clearly reflected on the coinage.

The obverse motifs of the coinage give us a good idea about the recreations and sporting activities of the issuers.
The Tiger-slayer, the Lion-slayer and the Rhinoceros-slayer types clearly show that the Gupta monarchs were specially inclined towards big-game hunting. Again, the Lyrist-type coins demonstrate the concerned Gupta monarchs' love for instrumental music, which evidently provided considerable recreation to the royal personages.

The weapons like bow and arrow, sword, dagger etc. and the household articles like wicker-tools as depicted on the coinage enlighten us about material life of the issuers.

**Characteristics of the Gupta Coinage**

Gupta coins are generally known in three metals, viz. Gold, Silver and Copper. Of course, there are a few recently published brass coins, which have been attributed to a Gupta King. Gupta gold coinage was considerably influenced by the later Kushāna prototypes. For obvious reasons, they followed the metrology of their Kushāna counterparts. Naturally enough, they were often known as dināras like the Kushana gold pieces. Silver Coins of the Guptas, which were modelled on those of the Western Satraps, followed the style, fabric and metrology of the latter. The Gupta copper issues appear to have been influenced by the preceding copper coins of the Kushānas; but they have a distinctive style of their own.
Metrology of the Gupta Gold Coins

The initial Gupta gold issues followed the standard of late Kushāna prototypes. The weight of Samudragupta's gold coins fluctuated from 118 to 123 grains. The average weight of his 'Standard', 'Archer', 'Chandragupta-Kumāradevi', 'Kācha', 'Lyrist' and 'Āsvamedha' types is 118 grains. Of course, some specimens of these types are of little more weight. However, the gold coins of Samudragupta were issued after the weight standard of the late Kushana coins of the third century.

Most of the coin-types of Chandragupta II followed the standard of his predecessor's reign, but there are some coins which record at least three standards. Of these, the first is that of 121 grains, the second of 125 or 125 grains, and the third of 132 grains. Interestingly enough, all these three varying weight-groups are to be found in the 'Archer type'.

The majority of the gold coins of Kumāragupta followed the standard of about 126 grains which corresponds to the weight of some coins of his father Chandragupta II as seen above. Of course, some coins of his 'Archer-type' were issued after the early standard, recording the weight of 118-123 grains of Samudragupta's issues.

The novelty of Skandagupta's gold coins is that he introduced two standards independent of late Kushāna types as well as of his predecessors. The majority of his coins weigh,
about 132 grains, and only one variety of his 'Archer' type was issued to the standard of about 144 grains. The last weight standard no doubt recalls the Suvarna standard of 20 ratis of ancient India. After Skandagupta all the Gupta rulers of the Imperial line issued coins in debased gold. But to conform to the Suvarna standard they mixed alloys in a considerable amount, so in the gold issues the gold content became less and less.

**Metrology of Gupta Silver Coins**

Chandragupta II introduced after his victory over the Western-satraps the silver coinage for the use of the people of Western India, who were accustomed to use the silver coins for about 300 years.

Now, as shown by Dr. A. N. Lahiri, the standard of the silver coins of the Western Satraps follow the silver weight-system introduced in India by the Indo-Greek King Eupatides I Megas (circa 170 B.C) and continued by his Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian, and Indo-Parthian successors, including the Western Satraps. These coins as shown by him, were known as Indian drachms. The concerned Indian drachms have the theoretical weight of about 36 grains which equal to 20 ratis. The 20 rati Indian drachms were extensively used not only by Chandragupta II but also by his Guptā, Valabhi, Maukhari, Pushyabhūti and Hūṇa successors.
The silver coins of Chandragupta which were used only in Western India, however, record weights between 32 and 34 grains. Kumāragupta I followed the standard of his father's coins in Western India; but the coins that he introduced for Madhyadesa record somewhat slightly heavier weight. They are of about 36 grains. Skandagupta perhaps followed the standard of his predecessor, both for his Western-Indian and Madhyadesa type coins.

"The Copper Currency of the Guptas apparently follows no definite weight standard." It was neither influenced by late Kushāṇa types nor by the metrology of the local dynasties.

Shape and Size

Gupta coins of all the metals, gold, silver, and copper, are invariably of round shape like most of those of the preceding foreign rulers.

Initial Gupta gold issues, i.e. the coins of Samudragupta and some early pieces of Chandragupta II, are of comparatively big size. But as time passed, Gupta gold coins tended to become dumpier in appearance, i.e. they became smaller and thicker in fabric. For obvious reasons, however, heavier Suvarṇa coins of Skandagupta were of much bigger flan than the common Gupta gold pieces. Initial silver and copper coins of the Guptas were of comparatively big flan, but with the passing of time, they tended to be smaller and thicker in fabric. The mode of manufacture after rendered silver coins of Skandagupta squarish in shape.
Devices of Gold Coins

So far as the coin-types of the Guptas are concerned, we see that different conventions were followed for coins of different metals. The obverse of the gold coins generally shows the figure of the King in different postures and in different actions. While the reverse is predominantly occupied by the figures of Gods and Goddesses, like the Kushāna prototypes.

As we see, the obverse figure of the King is depicted in differing postures and in different actions. He is sometimes in the posture of holding a standard, or shooting an arrow from his bow; he is sometimes also seen as slaying a lion or a tiger, or even killing a rhinoceros or proceeding on horse-back. Of course, there are some exceptions to this general convention as in the case of certain unusual types, viz. 'Apratigha'²² type, 'Chakravikrama' type and the Āsvamedha type. On the 'Apratigha' type there are three figures, the middle figure is taken for the King and there is a great deal of controversy regarding the other two figures as well as their actions. On the 'Chakravikrama' type we see the king as receiving prasāda from lord Vishnu and finally on the 'Āsvamedha' type we find the picture of a sacrificial horse.

The reverse of Gupta gold coins depicts the figure of female deities viz. Durgā-Ambikā, Lakshmi and Gangā. Durgā-Ambikā and Gangā have been depicted both with their attributes and mounts while we see Lakshmi without a vāhana but with her normal attributes.
Silver Coins

It has been mentioned earlier that among the Gupta rulers Chandragupta II first introduced the silver currency after the Western Satraps whom he had overthrown from Western India.

The silver coinage of Chandragupta II bears on the obverse the head of the King, as seen on the silver coins of the Western Satraps. And their reverse shows the figure of a Garuda. The peculiarity of the silver coinage of Chandragupta II is that the reverse legend does not give the names and titles of the king's father, as we see on the Kshatrapa prototype; it is either Paramabhâgavata mahârajâdhirâja-srī-Chandragupta-Vikramâdiyâ or srī Gupta kulasya Mahârajâdhirâja-srī Chandragupta-Vikramânsâya. Again, the year of issue is seen on the obverse behind the king's head as on the Kshatrapa coins, but this issuing date is naturally given in the Gupta era, instead of the Saka era. Incidentally, we may note that the imitating trend is sometimes too obvious: as on the Western Satrap prototypes, the traces of meaningless and somewhat ornamental Greek legends are seen as copied on some initial silver coins of Chandragupta II.

Kumâragupta I has left for us a considerable amount of silver currency. In the Western provinces of his empire, he continued the type issued by his father with some alteration in the legend, which is either Paramabhâgavata - râjâdhirâja - srî Kumâragupta Mahendrâditya or its abbreviation.
However, Kumāragupta introduced silver coins for the central provinces also. The bust of the king on the obverse of the Madhyadesa type is absolutely different from the stereotyped Kshatrapa-looking bust. The Gupta artists drew the portraits of their masters with comparatively flat nose and a charming facial expression unlike the Kshatrapas, who adorned the bust of their emperor with prominent nose and long moustaches. Again, there are also no traces of corrupted Greek letters. The date is given in front of the King's head instead of behind the back, as on the Kshatrapa prototypes. The legend of the Madhyadesa type coins is also somewhat different. As shown by Dr. Altekar, the legend on the Madhyadesa type coins is nothing but a metrical line, while the legend on the Western Indian type coins is a prose sentence. In any case, the Madhyadesa-type of Kumāragupta I bears some originality. The reverse of this type shows a fantailed peacock in place of Garuda of the Western Indian coins. At the end of Kumāragupta's rule the Gupta Empire was experiencing an acute financial crisis. Consequently, Kumāragupta was bound to issue in his Western provinces silver-plated coins, which are generally crude in execution.

Skandagupta also continued the types introduced by his predecessors. Besides Garuda, he introduced two new devices, viz. 'Bull' and 'Altar' for the reverse of his Western Indian coins, but the obverse is an exact replica of the Kshatrapa original.
For his Madhyadesa type coins, Skandagupta retained the fan-tailed Peacock as the reverse device. And the bust on the obverse betrays least foreign influence. The bust has been depicted with flat nose and without monstaches.

Copper Coins

Chandragupta II was also the first Gupta monarch to introduce copper coins. However, his copper coinage exhibits some varied obverse devices, such as, king offering oblations at an altar, the king being attended by an umbrella-bearer, or simply a wheel or Chakra instead of King’s effigy.

The reverse of Gupta copper issues usually bears the figure of Garuda in its hybrid form, though, of course, some specimens also show the depiction of a vase or a Kalasa.

The copper coins of Kumāragupta I are very few and far between. The obverse of his coinage shows either the standing king or an 'Altar', while the reverse bears either the figure of Garuda or of Lakshmi.

Script, Language, Legend and Symbols

The script in which the inscription or legend of Gupta coins is on the coinage is Brahmi and the language is Sanskrit. Though the inscriptions or legends are usually well-executed, sometimes we find them distorted for want of sufficient space.
As we have noted earlier, except some initial issues, the Gupta coins tended to become smaller and duller. However, the imagination and creative genius of the court-poet are also reflected on the coinage. The legends are mostly metrical, and they bear immense poetical merit. Thus the coins also testify to the claim of literary renaissance in the Gupta Age.  

The significance of the symbols occurring on the upper left quadrant of the Gupta gold coin offers a baffling problem to the scholars. It seems that the symbol was accepted by mint masters as a decorative element only. Of course, the Guptas took the idea of depicting symbols from the Kushānas, but it would be too much to say that they slavishly copied them. On the Kushāna coins, the symbols were very few, each king having one or two. The Gupta mint-masters were swayed by the artistic impulse of the classical Age and consequently they introduced as many artistic variations as possible. We have at least ninety different symbols on the Gupta coinage, whereas we observe only six or seven figuring on the Kushāna issues. However, there remains an unsolved issue: that these symbols bear any religious significance, or they have been depicted only as a decorative element.
Notes

2. Ibid., Pl. I, 1-17.
3. GCM, Pl. XVIII, 14.
5. BMGD, Pl. VIII, 11-17.
6. CGE, Pl. XIII, 1-10.
7. GCM, Pl. XXX, 5-8.
8. The Aśvamedha-type coins of Samudragupta
   BMGD, Pl. V, 9-14; The Aśvamedha-type coins of
   Kumāragupta I, CGE, Pl. XIII, 7-10.
10. CGE, Pl. XVI, 1-7.
12. Cf. U. Thakur 'Source of gold for early gold coins of
   India'. JNSI, XXXIX (1977), pp. 98 ff; MEH, p. 34.
15. CGE, Pl. X, 3; Ibid., Pl. VIII, 3.
17. Cf. Mrigayā coin types of the Guptas, JNSI, XXIV (1962),
   p. 58, Pl. III A.
19. Cf. 'Metrology of the Indo-Greek Silver coins'
   by A.N. Lahiri, JAIH, I, pp. 60-61.
21. Ibid., Pl. XVIII, 6-17.
22. Ibid., Pl. XIV, 1-3.
23. Ibid., Pl. XVI, 1; BMC (GD), Pl. X, 20.
24. CGE, Pl. XVIII, 9-10.
25. BMC (GD), Pl. XX, 15-16.
26. CGE, Pl. XVI, 11.
27. BMC (GD), Pl. XI, 2-4.
28. CGE, Pl. XVI, 18.
29. BMC (GD), Pl. XI, 22.
31. CGE, Pl. XVIII, 4-5.
32. Ibid., Pl. XVIII, 1-3.
33. Ibid., Pl. XVIII, 4-5.
34. Ibid., p. 17.
35. Cf. Ibid., p. 290.