CHAPTER II

RELIGIOUS MOTIFS ON COINAGE
Religious Motifs on Coinage

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section deals with the origin and derivation of symbols, which appeared on the coins. The second section discusses how the motifs and symbols of different religions and nature worship symbols formed the basis for the motifs on coins of ancient India.

Section – 1

Ancient religions were mainly originated on the natural phenomenon of family life. Many natural objects were explained with the religious ideas. Among the Greeks and Romans Ocean was the father, Earth was the mother and the Rivers were the children. Caves became symbols of the womb; arches, the entrances to caves or to tombs, became symbols of the “door to the womb”, the yoni. In India the linga and yoni, and various combinations of the two, are worshipped by many millions of devotees, as representing Siva and his Sakti Kali.¹

In the early stages of religious development, it’s same as that of every nations, based on two aspects i.e., theology and ritual. Ghosts and spirits and nature-gods, ancestral worship, family religion, tribal religion, anthropomorphism, the formation of a pantheon, individual religion, magical rites, purifications, prayers, sacrifices are become the common stock and the successive phases of religious humanity.²
In India the religious history starts from Vedic period. This is the period when the Indian has started transforming the method of worshipping by conducting rituals through sacrifices and chanting hymns. The religion which is transmitted to us in these Hymns is, in its principal features, this Nature is throughout divine. Everything which is impressive by its sublimity, or is supposed capable of affecting us for good or evil, may become a direct object of worship.

Prior to Vedic period, India was exposed to a famous civilization known as Indus Valley civilization. They used many sophisticated artifacts that includes seals, toys and utensils. The pottery produced during this period is wheel made one known as Harappan ware and is painted in black on the highly polished red surface. The shapes and the sizes of these utensils suggest that the Harappans were leading one of the most advanced civilizations in the world and has been date to BC 2500-1500. The signs and the symbols found on their seals and pottery become the most important source material to study and understand life enjoyed by the Harappa people. Many scholars have attempted to decipher the signs found on the seals and finding it difficult to co-relate with the existing script or legend to assign the language that was prevalent 4500 years before. Here an attempt is made to study the religious aspects and co-relate the symbols seen on the seals and pottery with the early Indian coins. Co-relating the sings that existed before 45 centuries before with the ancient coins would lead us to understand the existence, survival and the continuity of a particular found represented on both the periods.

To give an coherency to the study an attempt is also made to incorporate the graffiti marks found on the Indian pottery starting from the Neolithic period to pre-Harappan, Harappan, chalcolithic, and megalithic period ends somewhere in 3rd
century AD. These graffiti marks are of many verities and has classified into motifs depicting human figures, animals, trees, sun, moon, fish and many forms that formed with linear and horizontal lines.

**Indus seals and pot shards**

More than 4200 steatite seals are reported from various sites such as Mohenjodaro, Harappa, Lothal, Kalibngan, Chanhudaro, and many places from north-west India. Scholars have identifies more than 2200 signs that are engraved on the seals, and amulets. Large number of seals bear the character of five and at the maximum of 17 signs. Mostly, the Indus seals are square in shape and a few examples are known in circular and cylindrical. They bear one or two and maximum of three main motifs representing animal figure some with seated figure with horned head dress, generally accepted as the proto type form of Siva. Usually, the sign or letter appears on the seal. The precise use of these are yet to be ascertained and the finding of these seals from far off places other than Indus sites lead us to arrive a conclusion that they might have been used as an authentication object in facilitating the intercontinental trade. Most of the seals are depicted with animals such as bull, (Pl. I, Figs. 1-2 & Nos. 1-6) elephant, (Pl. II, Fig. 1 & Nos. 1-6) lion, unicorn, crocodile holding fish in its mouth etc. It is difficult to ascertain the significance of these motifs on the seals at present but it seems that they might have attached some sort of nature worship prevailing in those days.

The painting on the Harappan pot shards especially found at cemeteries depicts the human figures, animal, birds, viz., deer, peacock, tortoise, tree, branches, wavy lines. Peacock is very common on the burial jars.
The motifs depicted on the Indus seal and pot shards are having close resemblance between some symbols found on the silver punch-marked coin, early local and tribal coins from the both north and south.

The representations of human beings are found rarely among the Harappan painted pottery. There is a good example from Harappa itself and has two Hunan figures, birds, animal figure and a tree in front of the animal. Similar animal, birds and tree motifs are found on the silver punch marked coins of the Mauryas, and the local coins. (Pl. III, Figs. 3 - 4 & No. 4 - 9). They are very much akin to the Miruga Jataka story illustrated on the medallion the Bharhut Stupa. The human figure on this shard is shown with both the hands upraised. There are evidences for the simar motif on the coins issued by the Mauryas. Incidentally, the doe (antelope) seems to be less restrained by foreign conventions than any of the other Harappan quadrupeds. In Bharhut medallion the story of Miruga Jataka (Pl. IV, Fig. 2), is represented with standing doubled horned animal may be deer (Pl. III, Fig. 1 and Nos. 1-3), near and a tree in front, and a tortoise and fish tank (Pl. IV, Fig. 1) is depicted below.6

Further, the other symbols like peacock, fish, tortoise and the branches of trees too appear on the punch-marked coin from Mahismati.

Further, the symbols like hollow cross (Pl. IV, Fig. 3), wavy line and geometrical patron found on the pot shards of the Harappa pottery are invariably met with the symbols seen on the silver punch-marked coins of the Mauryas.
Graffiti marks

The occurrence of the graffiti marks are first noticed on the pot shards of the Neolithic period. Burzahom, Nagarjunakonda, Piklihal, and Kallur are the places where the Neolithic potteries bearing the marks are reported. Sun symbol had appeared on all the pot shards on the above sites either in graffiti or painted.

Pre-Harappan graffiti have been noticed on the pottery of the Quetta valley and numerous sites in the western and southern Baluchistan lying outside India. B. B. Lal has opined that these pre-Harappan graffiti become the proto type for the Harappan signs that appeared on the seals and amulets. The Harappan graffiti mostly consists of single sign or two. There are striking resemblance among the symbols found Harappan period, Chalcolithic and south Indian iron age culture.

Coming to the Chalcolithic period, almost all the ceramic wares known in India viz., Jorwe, Malwa, black and red ware, black on red ware bear graffiti. South India witnessed a large number of graffiti mark during Iron Age period especially from the magalithic burials.

The graffiti marks found on the Indian pottery numbering more than 513 among which sixty eight signs graffiti marks are found on the silver punch-marked coins of the Magadha – Maurya dynasties. These are mainly the linear marks consists of horizontal, vertical, curvilinear and circular lines forming square, circle, cross, swastika, Ujjaini symbol, hollow cross etc. The most important symbols are the damaru shape, bow and arrow, taurine and nandi pada symbol and sun motifs.
Thus the symbols and signs of pre-historic period became the basis for the motifs which appeared on the coins of Ancient India.

Section – II

Coins are one of the prime materials apart from sculptures to know the religious history of a region. They bring out not only the contemporary faiths that were prevalent in a particular area but also reflect the religious practices and worship which continued in the region through the ages. The sculptures representing various gods and goddesses and the symbols of worship might have perished since they were produced in perishable materials in the early period. But the symbols on coins are intact and came down to us. This certainly helps to know the religious history.

Among ancient coins the Indian, Greek, Roman and Persian were the best examples to know different deities and their attributes for the study of religious history during the early historic period. Indian coins dated from 6th century BC to 3rd century AD reflects the worship of nature, Vedic divinities, Brahmanical and Hindu Gods and Goddesses, Yaks̄ha and Yakshi, figures Tribal Gods and Goddesses, deities of Buddhism and Jainism. Hellenistic Gods and Goddesses on the coins issued by the Indo-Greek Governors and Iranian are found depicted on the coins of the Kushanas who migrated from the Central Asia to the Gangetic Valley.

The entire symbols and motifs seen on the coins from all over the world including India may be divided into two major groups. They are:

1) Coins with flora – fauna motifs, signs and images of Gods and Goddesses
2) Coins depicted with the figure of ruling authority or king on one side and the deities on the other side.
These two groups were known to the common public and there was easy acceptance of them. The first group is well represented in Ancient Indian Numismatics. It includes the silver punch-marked coins issued by the Janapadas and Magadha - Mauryan rulers, followed by the local rulers and tribal rulers. The tribal coins were issued by various tribes or ganas like Gandhayas, Sibi, Audumbaras, Vemaki, Kunindas, etc., ruled over the northern part of India from 6th century BC to 1st century AD. Whereas in south India this tradition was continued till 3rd century AD.

The second group of coins began in 2nd century BC with the arrival of alien rulers like the Indo-Greeks,6 Indo-Scythian, Indo-Parthians7 and continued by the dynastical issues under the Kushanas,8 Kshatrapas and Satavahanas. In South India very few coins are found with the depiction of royal portraits though it had direct trade contacts with the Roman Empire. Unlike the north India by the Greeks and their successors the south never witnessed any control of the alien dynasties of them. They had only trade relations with the Romans that does not influenced their currency system except for some anonymous copper coins portraying the bust and fish motifs attributed to the Pandyas and a silver series issued by the Mokkattai kings of the Cheras.9

All symbols and figures found represented on coins can be very well accommodated into these types. Even in the medieval period the basic concept mainly lies in these aspects. They are inscribed with the names of the Kalifs and, the religious preachers, Kalimas, the Quranic verses denoting the religious aspects and
the names of the rulers indicating the authority. Further, the modern coins and currency notes are too issued mostly based on these aspects only.

Worship of Nature

The silver punch-marked pieces, the earliest coined money, issued between 6th century BC and 2nd Century BC portraying a mixture of worshiping culture that was prevalent in India. Around four hundred symbols are documented from these coins. These symbols include the flora and fauna motifs, sun, river, mountain, linear and circular motifs, and figures of the Vedic and Hindu divinities.  

Subsequently, many cast copper coins were issued by the Mauryas and their successors with the same symbols. Coins also contain the animal motifs and tree-in-railing, hollow-cross, swastic and taurine symbols.

Among the post Mauryan coins, the Kausambi coins were mainly depicted with the animal motif along with the minor symbols like triangle headed standard, Ujjaini symbol, arched hill and tree-in-railing. However, the dynastical coins known from Ayodhya, Mathura and Panchala bear deities on one side and flora and fauna motif as secondary on either side. Further south the copper coins issued from Narmada valley by the people ruled in Vidisha and Eran from Madhya Pradesh are of mainly punch marked series. These coins bore the multiple symbols drawn from nature. The next important series in the category is of the urban centre issues from Kausambi, Suktimati, Varanasi, and Erikachha from Uttar Pradesh, Ujjaini, Mahismamati, Vidisha, Tiripuri from Madhya Pradesh. These series bear the animal, tree-in-railing and hollow-cross arched hill along with the name of the cities.
Among the tribal coins the major issues are known from Adumbara, Vemaki, Kuninda, and Yaudheya (Rajasthan and Punjab). These coins are depicted with symbols drawn from the nature.¹³

In western India the Kshatrapas¹⁴ issued silver coins that portrayed wavy line and arched hill representing the hill and river symbols. In south the lead coins issued by the Satavahanas¹⁵ and their contemporaries known as Kuras, Chutus, Sebaka, Hatis, Sadas, from Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka and the Chera, Chola and Pandya from Tamilnadu continued in depicting the symbols of animals and others drawn from nature.¹⁶

Vedic divinities

Many of the Vedic Gods who occupied so much in their thoughts were personifications of natural forces such as the sun, wind and fire, worshipped without temples or images and hence more indefinite in form, habitation and attributes than the deities of Assyria or Egypt.¹⁷

The four Vedas viz., Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva are basically a collection of hymns and have been employed in the rituals of different worship. The Sama-Veda, which contains mantra intended for the singers, and the Yajur-Veda, more especially adapted the formulae prescribed with reference to the various offers of sacrifice, while the Rig Veda and Atharva-Veda, include hymns that are chanted by the priests who performs the religious rites and rituals to the deity.¹⁸ The Vedas clearly explain through the hymns that the nature is god. Anything that affects the
human being either good or evil, had become an object of worship. Mountains, rivers, springs, trees, plants, are invoked as so many high powers. Animals and the weapons used in connection with sacrifice were consider as sacred and were regarded as themselves deities.

The prominent divinities of the Vedic period are Agni, Soma, Indra Varuna, and Yama. In the Vedic theology, lord Indra is identified with Brihaspati, Agni, and Varuna. In some occasion Agni is said to be Varuna, Mitra, Aryaman, Rudra, Vishnu, Savitri, Pushan. The people worshiped mainly nature, especially the sun, moon, fire, wind and water.

The silver punch-marked coins and the copper coins issued subsequently by various dynasties and the local rulers represented the sun motif representing Surya, caduceus the attribute of Indra, and the flora and fauna motifs worshiped during Vedic period. Similarly the sun and moon symbol is most common on the silver coins issued in the Deccan by the Western Kshatrapas and Satavahanas.

Interestingly, the local Panchala rulers were named after the Vedic divinities. Their coins are presented with the Vedic Gods. Vishnu is seen on the coin of Vishnumitra. God Agni with flamed hair is found on the coins of Agnimitra. The five headed snake is represented on the coin of Bhumimitra. The Sunga and Kanva rulers had the names of the Vedic divinities. Their faith in the Vedic religion reflected in their coins.
The Vedic religion underwent a drastic change in the worship of the divinities. The Vedic God Rudra (the storm god), became Siva. He is referred as Mahadeva, “the great god” in the *Yajur Veda.* In the *Rig Veda* hymns Rudra is usually said to be armed with bow and arrow. Rudra is also said to have wield with lightning and thunderbolt. In the *Atharva Veda,* Siva was denoted with the epithet ‘Sarva’ i.e., the wielder of arrow. Siva became one of the principal deities along with Vishnu and mentioned in the later Vedic literature, *Upanishads* and the *Brahmanas* described as Siva, Rudhra-Siva, Maheshvara and Ishan.

In the *Rig Veda,* Vishnu is a secondary deity and has been attributed with the Sun and Agni. In the *Yajur Veda* period Vishnu is gained more prominence than the *Rig Veda* time. In the *Brahmanas* Vishnu was identified as Cosmic Spirit.

The prominence of both Vishnu and Siva belong to the Age of reformed Brahmanism. Both deities were worshipped throughout the period when Buddhism was in ascendancy. The Greek ambassador Megasthenes, who resided in India between B.C. 311 and 302, and wrote ‘*Ta Indika,*’ furnishes interesting evidence in this regard. “By his description of the god Dionysus, whom they worshipped in the mountains, Siva, and Vishnu in the plains”, says Professor Macdonell.

The other Hindu divinities like Balarama, Kartikeya, Abisheka Lakshmi and their attributes and the animals symbolising their *vahanas* are found represented on the silver punch-marked coins issued by the Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian, and the
local and tribal rulers and the Kushanas. Among these, the coins issued by the Yaudheya and Kuninda were the first to symbolise Lord Siva and Kartikeya. The *Abisheka* Lakshmi motif is known to have issued by Ayodhya, Kaushasmbi, Mathura, Ujjainsi of the local and tribals and Indo-Skythians and Satavahanas. Lord Kartikeya is found on the coins issued by Adumbaras, Yaudheya, and Kushanas. Further, the first among the *trimurti*, Siva is represented on the Silver Punch-marked coins of the Mauryas, Kuninda and Kushanas and Vishnu on the coins of Panchala and Indo-Greeks. The representation of the attributes viz., trident, wheel, conch are also represented on the coins of Vemaki, Kaushambi and Kushana.

**Yaksha – Yakshi and Nāga worship**

The *Yaksha* was first mentioned in the Brahmanas and Sutras of the later Vedic literature. The *Jaiminiya Brahmana* refers to a *Yaksha* for the first time a wondrous thing. In the *Grhya Brahmana*, *Yakshas* are referred to along with the deities. They are called as *Bhutas* (Spirit or genius) usually associated with Kubera, the chief of the *Yakshas*. There are many references in the epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.31

The Inscribed *Yaksha* and *Nāga* sculptures found at Bharhut and Mathua reflect the popular worship of these minor deities. Further, certain trees were identified with certain *Yaksha*. For example the banyan tree was identified as ‘*pramana aitiha*’.32 Basically the *Yaksha* and *Yakshi* figures are found on the gateways of the great *Stupas*. The *Yakshis* were depicted with the left hand on the hip and the right hand holding a branch of tree. *Yakshas* are local deities or geni,
usually regarded as the powers of wealth and fertility.\textsuperscript{33} The early Yaksha iconography has formed the foundation of later Hindu and Buddhist sculptures.\textsuperscript{34}

Like Yaksha and Yakshi the worship of Nāga and Nāgini can be traced to the later Vedic period. The Yajur and Atharva Veda especially in the latter, various snake gods are mentioned in different contexts and they are associated with the Gandharvas, Apsarasas, Punyajanas (Yakshas) and Manes.\textsuperscript{35} Usually the male gods were found depicted with five hoods and the female deity is shown with single hood.\textsuperscript{36} The five names represented in the Atharva Veda denotes that they were the guardians of the four directions and the upper quarters.\textsuperscript{37}

The Epics and the Purnas are refer to the Naga king Kaliya of Mathura and his defeat in an encounter with Lord Krishna.\textsuperscript{38} This was corroborated by Nāga images found at Mathura and can be dated to the early centuries of the Christian era. Further, the inscriptions of the Kushana ruler Huvishka refer to the local Nāga deities establishes the fact that the Mathura region was famous for the Naga worship from historic period to the early centuries of the Christian era.\textsuperscript{39} The local coins of the Audumbara, Mathura, Kuninda, Panchala, depicts the Yaksha and Yakshi on their coins.

Buddhism and Jainism

Buddhism and Jainism were patronized by the ruling clans of India between 6\textsuperscript{th} century AD and 3\textsuperscript{rd} century AD. The followers of Buddhism were divided into two sects is well known. For the Hinayana sect there was no pantheon to worship, excepting the symbolic worship. But in Mahāyana a large number of deities was
included and later, in its more advanced form of Vajrayana this pantheon became surprisingly large with deities of a detailed description.\textsuperscript{40}

In the Buddhist art also the Buddha images are not met with in the earlier schools such as Bharhut and Sanchi and it is believed that the Greeco-Buddhists of Gandhara were the first to carve out his image in stone. In Bharhut and Sanchi the scenes connected with the life of the Buddha, such as the dream of his mother Maya Devi, and the symbols of Buddha like the Bodhi Tree, his head-dress, his footprints are depicted. The Mathura school of art had an equally strong claim to antiquity and probably for carving out the first image of Buddha.\textsuperscript{41} Jainism too flourished at the same period got the patronage of business community. The symbols of these religions are found on the coins issued by the rulers of various dynasties during this period. The coins bore the motifs like the Stupas and Viharas and also the symbols seen on the votive tablets found at Mathura.\textsuperscript{42} Most of the symbols found on the silver punch-marked and local tribal coins are also well represented in the Buddhist and Jain art and architecture.

**Hellenistic religion**

In BC 326, the Greek supremacy beyond the Indus collapsed and the large area, west of the Indus, were ceded by the Seleucid ruler Seleucus Nicator to the Maurya Dynasty. However, the chapter of Greek rule was not closed thereby. The Maurya Empire disintegrated after the death of Ashoka in BC 232 and at the same time the Greek governors of Bactria declared independence and began to lead expeditions across the, Hindukush. The Indo-Scythian and Indo-Parthian and from Central Asia, the Sakas and Yue-chis having conquered Bactria, gradually expanded
their territory into the limits of Greek power in India. The Indo-Greek lost their control and seems to have succumbed sometime in the second half of 1st century BC. It was about this time that the Roman Empire consolidated their power in the West and developed active commercial intercourse between India and the Hellenistic lands.

Immediately, after arriving south of Hindukush the Hellenistic rulers especially Demetrius, Agathocles, Pantaleon, Antimachus and Apollodotus-I issued coins with animal motifs like elephant, humped bull, lion and native symbols like tree-in-railing. Agathocles issued coins with the Hindu deities Krishna and Balarama and Indianised female deity. Later on, the Greek deities gradually started appearing on the coins issued by the Indo-Greek Governors for the circulation of India. Among them mention may be made of Heracles, Zeus, Apollo, Athena, Nike, and other motifs like Owl, horse, club, caduceus and tripod. 

Similarly the Indo-Scythian, Indo-Parthian, and the early Kushana coins issued for the Indian sub-continent have the Hellenistic deities except for a coin issued by azilises the Indo-Scythian king which is depicted with Sri Lakshmi on the reverse side and a standing Siva depicted on the copper coin of Gondo phrases, the Indo-Parthian ruler. These coins bear the bi-lingual script mostly inscribed with Kharoshthi on the reverse side. The alien governors who took special care by adding the local script on their coins for the circulation in India could not give importance to the religion prevalent in the respective area.
The Indo-Greeks were subjugated by Kujala Kadphises I, chief of the Yueh-chi tribe, about AD 45. For a while the Greek king and the Kushanas shared the Indian sovereignty, but gradually the Greek power was wholly obliterated, and the Kushan attained undisputed dominion. The political changes are reflected in the coins too. Initial Kushana coins bore the Hellenistic deities such as Nike and Heracles. Subsequently, the local Iranian, Buddhist and Hindu deities worshiped in Iran and the Indian Sub-continent were found represented on the coins. Interestingly, the divinities like Sun, Moon, Fire and Wind worshiped during the Vedic period in India became prominent in Iran during 1st century AD along with the Buddhism. These symbols were used by the Kushans on their coins to get the acceptability of the local public in Iran as well as in India. The later issues of the Kushanas got basically two motifs viz., the standing Siva with bull and the female deity Ardaksho symbolising wealth.

Notes and References:

Section – I

4. S. Gurumurthy, Deciphering the Indus script (from Graffiti on Ancient pottery),


Section – II


