

Elephant Motifs on Indian Coins and Their Significance

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Introduction

Significance of Elephants and their Motif: Elephant is regarded as the mountain of kings in India. It is a devastating weapon of war and could be symbolised as God of warriors. It is also a sign of wealth and power and denotes royalty, inner strength and nobility. On coins it is depicted in war scenes and to show royal extravaganza. The elephant has been represented as raining clouds, *Vahana* or vehicle of Indra, fertility of crops, the conception of womanhood, the sign of fecundation of mother goddess and her *Vahana*, the guardian of quarters, the symbol of the Sun, the Lord Buddha and Lord Mahavira.

Other than religious connotation, elephants were important politically. Seleucus I (306-281 BCE) traded several provinces in North-West to the Indian ruler Chandragupta Maurya in exchange for a herd of 500 war elephants plus handlers. These beasts and their descendants fought in the wars of his various successors over the next century. Interestingly, it is identified that during this Mauriyan period elephants were imported into Orissa from Sri Lanka¹. The elephant as the readily understandable symbol of strength and power and an animal associated with India was commonly found on coins of Seleucus I and Antiochus III, rulers who aimed some of their military might at India. Elephants were especially trained for battle and used in 3rd Century BC by Chandragupta Maurya in his duel against the Greek, Seleucus Nikator. The Greeks were so enamoured and fascinated with this huge and grand animal that it graced their coins with a few rulers also adopting an elephant head-gear on their portrait coins to signify their conquest of Indian territories.

In the medieval period, especially considering eastern and southern regions where elephants were a major constituent in battles, we come across several illustrations that signify the political importance of the elephant. In CE 1353 Shamsud'-din Ilyas Shah invaded the Orissa area and he retreated back only after obtaining elephants. Similarly Sultan Firuz Shah Tughlaq during the invasion of Ganga Kingdom obtained a treaty through which Sultan was offered twenty big elephants and an annual tribute of them. Ganga dynasty was consistently raided several times by other kingdoms for the want of elephants. Hushang Shah, the Sultan of Malwa treacherously seized many elephants from ruler Bhanudeva IV.

Religious significance of Elephant symbol

India has always been synonymous with and known for its Elephants since antiquity. The Elephant is still very much an integral part of the Indian psyche and can be seen in major cities strolling

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down the road as well as found in the jungles. The famous 'Guruvayur' temple of Kerala conducts an annual festival with richly decorated and caparisoned Elephants. No auspicious ceremony of the Hindu's is complete without invoking the blessings of Ganesha, the Elephant God.

Buddhists too hold the Elephant in high esteem as the birth of Buddha is associated with the dream of a White Elephant by his mother. Buddhist mythology, "Excellent Elephant or Gajatame" announces the arrival of Buddha in Queen Maya's dreams.

The Asian elephant appears in various religious traditions and mythologies. They are treated positively and are sometimes revered as deities, often symbolising strength and wisdom. Similarly, the African elephant is seen as the wise chief who impartially settles disputes among the forest creatures in African fables, and the Ashanti tradition (today in Ghana) holds that they are human chiefs from the past.

The Earth is supported and guarded by mythical World Elephants at the compass points of the cardinal directions, according to the Hindu cosmology of ancient India. The classical Sanskrit literature also attributes earthquakes to the shaking of their bodies when they tire. Wisdom is represented by the elephant in the form of the deity Ganesh, one of the most popular gods in the Hindu religion's pantheon. Sometimes known as Ganesha, this deity is very distinctive in having a human form with the head of an elephant. This was put on after the human head was either cut off or burned, depending on the version of the story from various Hindu sources. Lord Ganesha's birthday (rebirth) is celebrated as the Hindu festival known as Ganesha Chaturthi. In Japanese Buddhism, their adaptation of Ganesha is known as Kangiten ("Deva of Bliss"), often represented as an elephant-headed male and female pair shown in a standing embrace to represent the unity of opposites.

The Goddess of wealth Lakshmi is shown flanked with two elephants known as Gajalakshmi motif. The animal is not shown as a vahana but as the symbolic source of fecundation by representing two or more elephants flanked on either side of the Goddess of wealth and bathing her with waters of life.

Elephant motifs on Coins

Ancient India

Indus Valley- In India, the elephant motif appeared on Indus Valley seals. The mighty beast was punched either solely or along with other wild life. The seal with solo punch of elephant denotes the importance of the animal that was used for transport and in battles. The seal popularly known as 'man in a yogic posture' or Pashupati alias Tribal chief has elephant along with other wild animals descending away from the centre figure. It signifies that the area was well aware of these species and grouped them with forest wilderness. A very careful representation of elephant on seals and on copper

¹ T.R. Trautmann, Elephants and Mauryas. In India : History and thought (ed. S.N. Mukherjee), Calcutta : Subarnarekha,1982. 254.

plates makes us believe that the living species of the mastodon either attracted the administration of the people of the valley for its gigantic structure and strength or where depictions of elephants appear on amulets they were propitiatory in nature. Narain explains that early elephant cult in Indus valley culture where images of elephants appear on clay seals seems to be served as animistic totems²



fig. 1 Indus Valley Seals with elephant motif

Punch Marked series

The earliest appearance on coins is found on *Karshapana* or silver punch marked coins dating between 600 BCE to 300 BCE. A simple but a distinctive image of elephant appears along with bull, crescent, star and sunburst all mainly associated with primitive agrarian settlement. Three elephants with rides is a characteristic reverse mark on coin issued by rulers of Mathura where as single elephant was favoured by rulers of Ayodhya and Kausambi and so on. Coins attributed to Taxila and Eran has elephant to right and above a chaitya and elephant and Ujjain symbol respectively on them. These coins represent inclination of the issuer towards Buddhism and their provenience.



fig 2 Elephant symbol and Buddhism



fig 3 Punchmark series - elephant motif

Indo- Bactrian/Greek- The earliest representation of an elephant appears on their coins during Alexander's campaign in India. On the reverse of a rare commemorative silver 'dekadrachm', Alexander is shown lancing with hand striding his stallion, charging at an elephant ridden by Porus the

² Debrabrata Swain , Elephant in Art, Architecture and History of Orrisa, Orrisa Review, June 2008. p.36

Indian King of Pauravas and the elephant keeper (called mahout). Here the elephant represented purva or east and mainly Indian subcontinent whereas the horse represents west's strength and swiftness.

Another curious elephant imagery on ancient coins appeared on ancient coins as the 'elephant scalp' headdress, an adornment symbolizing the 'Conquest of India'. It first appeared on the coins of Ptolemy I in the name of Alexander. Ptolemy I issued gold and silver staters that depict a deified Alexander in an elephant quadriga, a huge triumphal chariot drawn by four elephants. Interestingly, on some of his other coins, the war goddess Athena is shown riding a similar vehicle. This may be compared to the parallel concept of *Vahanas* or vehicles in Indian mythology. The beast and troublesome animals are considered to have been tamed by Gods and Goddess which is represented by the animals being ridden by them. These animals become carriers of the Gods and Goddesses especially during wars. In analyzing the coins one may assert that Alexander is given that divine sanction and blessings of the war Goddess. Whether such ride was actually present is questionable but imagery suggests that it is certainly a part of celestial existence and has religious connection.

Alexander's coins from Susa and Ecbatana mint depicts the image of Alexander with an elephant headdress. The Seleucid kings of Syria and the Antigonids of Macedonia were successors to parts of Alexander's empire, and they valued war elephants brought at great expense from India. At Ipsus in 301 BCE, 400 Seleucid elephants defeated 75 Antigonid beasts in the greatest elephant battle of classical antiquity. Thus, starting from Alexander's epoch, the war elephants of Indian origin became an integral part of ancient historical documentation, like during the battle of Hydaspes and battles between the Diadochi which followed after this Macedonian conquest³.



fig 4 Seleucid- Athena driving elephants quadriga

In later period elephant portrayal is found on the coins of Greco-Bactrian rulers such as Demetrius I and III and Lysias. The additional information about war elephants can be mainly received from numismatics resources. The Greco-Bactrian King Demetrius I on his silver coins was depicted in the helmet in the form of the elephant's head. They are a bust facing right with a fragment of a robe visible fastened under the chin. No doubts are raised by a portrait of Lysias in the particular headgear known as *proboscis* or *exuviae elephantis*.⁴ A similar portrayal is also seen on a commemorative issue of the king Agathocles dedicated to Demetrius. Demetrius is known to have conquered territories of Indian subcontinent that were much bigger than Alexander's conquered region. Most probably, these campaigns of Greco-Bactrian troops were accompanied by battles with elephants. The helmets

³ Andrei Valerievich Bannikov and Artem Anatolievich Popov, War Elephants in Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek Armies, WASJ World Appl. Sci. J. 27 (9): 1206-1211, 2013.p.1207-209.

⁴ O. Bopearachchi, Un roi Indo-Grec: Telephe, Lusias Series 1 and 4, Schweizer Munzblätter, 39. 1989.

on the triumphant monarch's head are the peculiar symbol of his victories over the Indians and the conquest of India. A similar illustration is found in form of a statuette, probably depicting Demetrius I wearing elephant scalp head gear⁵.



fig 5 Elephant headdress of Indo Greek ruler and the statue

We also have coins depicting an elephant with a bell on his bronze coins that symbolises taming of the animal. It is suggested that Indian subcontinent was largely represented by elephants whereas the eastern aggressors with the horse. For example, the coin of Seleucus I commemorating his political and military important encounter with Chandragupta depicts a humbled elephant on one side and a up head bust of Alexander's horse Bucephalus. Thus, elephant image noted on their coins had a personal significance for the ruler as both a result of his Indian campaigns and also their effective use in his army. Furthermore, the journey into India represented through elephant headdress demonstrates a connection between Alexander and his successors over the region of Indian subcontinent. These coins are so attributed to commemoration of several events such as Seleukos campaign to India, victory of Ipsus and foundation of Seleucus on the Tigris⁶.

A reference is found of *Elephant: Deity (ED)* series of coins in copper from Malhar region (600 BCE). These coins have distinct stylized elephant image on obverse. Historically, these coins are considered very important due to its provenance. Historians have identified finding of these coins in South Khosla⁷ region till Orissa which gives more information on use of indigenous money and extent of empire⁸.

Another reference to the elephant is found on the coins of Vima Khadpis who issued coins depicting himself riding an elephant. A large number of imitation Kushan coins have been found in Orissa, popularly called Puri-Kushans coins that bear on obverse the elephant rider type of Huvishka. In Maharashtra and Vidarbha a large number of copper or potin coins issued by Satavahana rulers are found showing an elephant with the trunk upraised or hanging down side on one side and Ujjain symbol on the other. Later the feudatories of Satavahanas, the Ishvakus of Northern Deccan / Andhra imitated elephant and Ujjain symbol.

⁵ The Statuette is preserved in Metropolitan museum, New York.

⁶ Edward T Newell, *The Coinage of East ern Seleucid Mints: Seleucus I to Antichus III*, American Numismatic Society, first edition, June, 1978. P.28

⁷ This comprises the whole of Chhattisgarh state and the adjacent districts of Kalahandi, Samabalpur and Bolangir in Orissa.

⁸ Atis Chandra Mandal and et. , *Numismatic study of Malhar coins by the energy dispersive X-Ray Fluorescence (EDXRF) Technique*, Indian Journal of History of Science, 38.4 (2003), p. 354 & 363.



fig 6 Huvishka- Kushan Elephant rider gold coin

The south Indian coins as numismatist Vidya Prakash remarks, are generally identified on the basis of the dynamic emblem or cognizance. The Mysore Hindu rulers are known to have issued coins with pictures of Elephant, Siva and Parvati. The Cheras gold coins too have figure of an elephant often caparisoned on obverse and a scroll device on the reverse.



fig. 7 Some ancient south Indian coins with elephant motif

The Western Gangas dynasty with their capital Talkad was an important ruling dynasty of ancient Karnataka in India. Elephant was crest of the Ganga dynasty. They issued a type of un-inscribed gold coins having a prominent large caparisoned elephant on one side and a floral scroll on the other have been found from Mysore area and are called ‘Gajapati Pagoda’.



fig. 8 Gajapati Pagoda

Gajapati etymologically means a King with an army of elephants⁹. They are much similar to the ones issued by Harshadeva of Kashmir. Raja Tarangini mentions that his coins were imitated from those of the Karnataka. According to some numismatic scholars Gajapati Pagoda belonged to ruler Mallikarjuna of the Vijaynagar kingdom. Gupta coins series known as ‘elephant rider’ types too is prevalent.

⁹ Sarla Dasa has furnished war literature on Orrissa Kings warfare where he sincerely depict the role of elephantry during the times of Kapilendra Deva. Similarly, Godavara Mishra contemporary of King Prataprudra Deva, in his work Harihara Chaturanga stresses on the importance of elephants in battle.



fig. 9 Gupta period - Elephant rider coins, The Royal Procession and Royal Hunt

Medieval India

In continuation with the above stated depiction of elephant by Mysore rulers, we observe that later period Muslim ruler Hyder Ali of Mysore introduced copper coins showing elephant on the obverse and the date and mint on the reverse. Tipu Sultan continued with the same motif. The British numismatist W. Elliot writing about the Elephant motif on Tipu's copper coins again a continuation of the elephant on Ganga and Vijaynagara coinage says 'Even Tipu, notwithstanding his love of innovation and contempt of everything Hindu, continued to use it on his copper coins' .



fig. 10 Tipu Sultan copper coins

With the shift of power to Krishnaraja Wodeyar, the elephant motif continued to appear on coins with added words 'Sri' or 'Sri Chamundi'¹⁰.



fig. 11 Wadiyar Raja copper coin

Modern India – Indian Government released coins depicting elephant commemorating wild life animal series of India. Another interesting depiction is found on coins commemorating 150 Glorious Years of Indian Railways, also known as *Bholu the Guard* series (2003)¹¹. Indian Railways selected elephant as their mascot. Being questioned, why an elephant as a mascot? Echoed railway

¹⁰ Jayanti Rath, The Animal motifs on Indian Coins (Ancient and Medieval period), oHRJ, Vol. XLVII, No.1.p.61-63.

¹¹ bholu the elephant, flagged off the Karnataka express at 6.25 pm from platform number 1, created a flutter not just among children but also among the passengers and people on the platform.

officials that, ‘the big and reliable animal is widely used for carrying people and freight; despite its size, elephant is not aggressive. He is friendly and helpful. Bholu as a guard projects the big and friendly image for the Indian Railways’.



fig. 12 Indian Railways commemorative coin. Bholu the elephant

Gajashardul ~ Elephant motif and contest of strength

Considering the numismatic perspective, elephant symbolism at the beginning was an epitome of Indian subcontinent, later it represented Indian Kingship and with passing times signified Southern Kingship. This significantly was a result of the use of this mighty beast in war and its religious significance. As nature of warfare changed so did the significance of elephant. Northern region and further eastern side of the sub-continent had major Shaivaite cult and as a result more importance was given to Elephant and Bull. These animals symbolism received more importance. But as Vaishnavism swayed over the northwest region especially later emerged Rajputana, Tiger/Lion and Horse received more importance. The people in the region began to call themselves as ‘Singh’¹². And we come across the iconography of Gajashardul, that is elephant been subdued by tiger or lion. The representation depicts scene of a fight between two animals, which in literature is called Gajashardul (fight between Lion/Tiger and Elephant). Here Lion is operative and elephant seems to look helpless and raises its trunk in agony.



fig. 13 Eran- Vidisha coin

Numismatically, this can be observed in coins of Kalachuri Rajaputas of Ratanpura and southern Kalachuris before the advent of Veera Shaiva sect after which bull in the centre consistently show its presence. The Kalachuris of Ratanpura have issued coins of this types with the legend in bold nagari characters in two line,. The name of the issuer is prefixed by *Srimad* or *Srimaj* or *Srimat* and suffixed with *deva*. These coins were identified in several ways but general accepted version remains

¹² With advent of Sikhism in same part of Indian subcontinent too call them self as ‘Singh’.

to be as stated by B.B. Nath who named it as Gajashardul. This type of coins was mainly issued by the ruler Prithvi deva of the above mentioned dynasty¹³.



fig. 14 Gajashardul typr - Prithvi Deva

Before Kalachuris, similar symbolism is also found in Vidisha coins (present day Madhya Pradesh) where huge influence of Vaishnavism is seen, also in sculptures.

Another example is found in die struck gold coins prominently issued by the Kadambas of Goa Jayakesi-I (11th Century A.D.) They were issued in two types, one having Gajasardula (lion-elephant)¹⁴ and the other only a lion facing right.

Interestingly, the Gond kingdom in central India, having inclinations with Rajaputana have Gajashardul symbol as their royal insignia as seen on their clay tablets and on walls of regal architecture.



fig. 15 Crest of Gond kings

Similarly in Assam during Pala dynasty used Gajashardul imagery in sculpture¹⁵. They too were Vaishnavites unlike their Buddhist counterparts in Bengal and drew their lineage from Varman kings. This is prominently seen in stone labs remains in temple of Madan Kamdeva¹⁶

¹³ P.C. Roy, *The coinage of Northern India*, Abhinav publication, 1990. pp.19-21.

¹⁴ Arthur L. Friedberg, Ira S. Friedberg, *Gold Coins of the World: From Ancient Times to the Present : an Illustrated history*, .p.465.

¹⁵ Sutapa Sinha, A new light on the significance of Lion motifs appeared on coins and on single inscription of the Sultan of Bengal, *Journal of Bengal Art*, vol.16, 2011. pp.139-155.

¹⁶ Similar sculptures are found in the ruins of Nowgaon, Tezpur, Guwahati.



fig. 16 Gajashardul statues found temples in Assam

Conclusion

Thus, elephants were consistently represented on the coins of India from Ancient times to present. This symbol not only signified religious inclination but also pronounced their urge of self expression.

Elephant served as an elephant God Ganesha, symbolism for Buddhism and Vahana or vehicle in Hindu mythology. With changing times it once represented Indian subcontinent, then indigenous kingdoms and then South Indian dynasties, as can be signified from coins.

Thus, we may infer that the elephant motif appearing on Indian coins has both political and religious significance. It is also significantly related to usability of the animal in the wars. As the pace of battles and wars increased, elephants were replaced by horses, especially in north-west frontiers. So their imagery on coins too diminished and were replaced by more local or personalised motifs. However, elephant remained popular in southern part of India, where it extensively remained to serve transportation and war purpose due to its geography and resources. Therefore, the sustained use of elephant imagery on coins can be seen in coins of mainly in Karnataka, Assam and Orissa from ancient to medieval period.

Elephant imagery on coins that swathed the entire subcontinent slowly got limited to southern parts of the Indian subcontinent. The representation of elephant thus brought itself in contest with other powers that personified themselves as King of the beast royal and mighty Lion.

The imagery of elephant on Indian coins so form an important and interesting rendezvous with ancient and medieval times.

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