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Deities on Kushana coins – An Attempt to study the Kushana coins on Religious Perspective

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Abstract:

The Kushana coins serve as a captivating window into the religious landscape of ancient India and Central Asia. These numismatic artifacts feature a diverse array of deities, reflecting the syncretic blend of indigenous and foreign beliefs. From the revered Shiva and Vishnu to Iranian divinities like Ahura Mazda, these coins serve as visual testimonies to the cultural confluence of the era. Through intricate iconography and symbolism, the deities on Kushana coins encapsulate the spiritual tapestry of a dynamic civilization, exemplifying the interplay between art, faith, and historical evolution.

Key Words: Kushana, Coinage, Deities, Bactria, Indo-Scythian, Indo-Greek, Ardoxo.

The coinage of the Kushanas occupies a place of great importance in the history of Indian numismatics. The systematic study of the Kushana coins reveals so many facts about the Kushana rule in the subcontinent and outside. The present paper attempts to trace the various deities represented on the Kushana coinage and assess the significance of their occurrence. The Kushanas, ruled in the subcontinent between first century AD and third century AD, issued a large number of gold and copper coins with the device of portraying royal figure on the obverse and depicting deities on the reverse of the coins. It is noticeable that the Kushanas followed the tradition of the Indo-Bactrian coinage prevalent in the north-western part of the subcontinent and they also began the practice of issuing gold coins in the subcontinent. The artistic quality of the Kushana gold coins is very rich like the silver coins of the Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek rulers of the subcontinent.

The figures of the various deities occur on the reverse of the Kushana coins were drawn from a great variety of Greek, Indian and West Asian religious tradition. These deities are identifiable chiefly by means of the legends accompanying them. The Greek deities represented on the Kushana coins are Herakles, Zeus, Helios (Sun God), Hephaistos (Fire God), Salene (male Moon God), Serapis (a Greco-Egyptian divinity of Alexandria) and Uranus. Among these deities Helios, the Greek Sun god appears on the gold and copper coins of the Kushanas. In the contemporary Hellenistic art Helios is represented as driving in a chariot drawn by four horses. But on the Kushana coins he appears to be the same as Miir (Mihir, the Iranian Sun god) standing and facing to left (Image-1). It is also

interesting to note that although Salene, according to Greek mythology, is a Moon goddess and the sister of Helios but in the Kushana coins Salene is represented as a male god. On the reverse of the gold coins of Huvishka Serapis is depicted as seated on the throne with a sceptre holding in the right hand and a vase in the left hand (Image-2). Uranus is also represented on the gold coins of Huvishka. He is probably the Rain God and identification is clear from the reverse legend reading Uranus. Hephaistos, the Greek god of Fire, represented as a bearded figure, appears on the gold coins of Kanishka.



Image-1



Image - 2

We find the representation of Riom on the gold coins of Huvishka. Here Riom is possibly Roma and may be attributed to Zoroastrian or rather Iranian pantheon. Cunningham read the legend as 'Ride' which reminds us of Riddhi, the Indian goddess of fortune. Gardner, however, read it as Riom, which is nothing but the personification of the city Rome.

The Kushana coins were inspired by the ideals of both Buddhism and Brahmanism. The only Buddhist divinity found in the Kushana coins is the lord Buddha. He is represented as either standing or seating on the coins and the accompanying legend is either 'Boddo' or 'Sakamanro Bosdo' (Image-3). The Brahmanical divinities represented on the Kushana coins are Shiva, Uma, Vishnu, Mahasena, Visakha and Ganesha. The representation of Shiva has been found on the coins of Wema Kadphises, Kanishka, Huvishka and Vasudeva. The various forms of Shiva found in the Kushana coins are [1] theriomorphic form of Shiva, (Image-4) [2] two armed Shiva with or without bull, (Image-5) [3] three headed and four armed Shiva with or without bull, (Image-6) and [4] three headed and two armed Shiva with bull (Image-7).



Image – 3



Image – 4



Image – 5



Image – 6



Image – 7

The war god Kartikeya is represented on the Kushana coins under the designation of Mahasena, Skanda-kumara and Visakha. Mahasena is represented as a diademed and nimbate male deity adorned with coat holding a standard surmounted by a bird in right hand and a sword in the left hand (Image-8). Two nimbate male figures have also been found in certain Kushana coins. One of those male figures is holding a standard surmounted by a bird in right hand and the other holds a spear in the left hand. The accompanying legend is 'Skando Komaro Bizago' (Image-9). The two figures thus can be identified as Skanda and Visakha. On another coin, bearing the legend 'Skando Komaro Maaseno Bizago', Mahasena is seen standing between Skanda and Visakha.



Image – 8



Image - 9

Vincent Smith read the legend ‘Oosna’ on a copper coin of Huvishka and on the basis of the legend the deity has been identified with Vishnu. Although this reading is doubtful but it cannot be denied that the coins of Huvishka show greater acquaintance with the religious creeds of the Indian people. The change becomes more vivid in the coins of Vasudeva I. During his reign the number and variety of the reverse devices suddenly restricted and only three deities namely Nana, Ardoxo and Shiva gained importance. Among these deities Nana has been identified with Ommo (Uma), the consort of Oesho (Shiva), and Ardoxo, the ‘spirit of fortune’, might have developed atleast conceptual relationship with Nana, who had been shown on some earlier Kushana coins as holding the horn of plenty (Image-10).



Image - 10

The number of deities on the Kushana coins has far exceeded that of the god and goddesses represented on the coins of the Indo-Greek and Scytho-Parthians. The appearance of deities belonging to various faiths perhaps indicate the spirit of religious tolerance fostered in the empire. Gods and goddesses of the Iranian pantheon dominate the coins of Kanishka I and Huvishka. Some of them represented the popular form of religion and some personified abstract ideas. Apparently, these deities and ideas were known in Bactria which also became familiar with Hellenistic deities and cults at least from the period of the rule of the Greeks in Bactria. The traders of West Asia visited Bactria, through which international trade routes pass, could have made their faiths known to Bactria. Although the deities on the coins of Kanishka and Huvishka were not known to Bactria alone, some of them gained popularity in different parts of the Kushana Empire outside Bactria. Moreover, the appearance of a few deities of the Roman Empire on Kushana coins probably indicates the Kushana moneyers’ knowledge of the Roman specie on one hand and the contacts between the Kushana territory and the Roman orient on the other.

The desire of the Kushanas to propagate their imperial glory and grandeur could also have been responsible for the representation of such divinities as Pharos personifying the concept of glory and legitimacy of kings. However, it is noteworthy to mention that the Jainism is not known to have been represented on the Kushana coins, though Jain images have been found from localities within the Kushana Empire. It is also interesting to note that the river Oxus bordering Bactria has been personified as Oaxso on the coins of Huvishka. But

neither the river Ganga nor the Indus which were within the limit of the mighty Kushana Empire has been personified to be represented on the Kushana coins. These facts indicate that at the time of selecting reverse devices for coins, struck from the official mint, Bactria was given preference over other regions of the empire. Not only that on the majority of the coins of Kanishka I and his successor legends are written in Bactrian language. Indeed, Bactria, land between the Hindukush mountain range and the Oxus (Amu Dariya) river, gained much importance in the Kushana empire due to its favourable geographical location. Bactria became the core area of the Kushana power and from here the Kushana power expanded in different directions and over a vast area of the subcontinent.

It is obvious from the above discussion that the Kushanas had represented so many deities of various creeds on their coins. It seems that few factors were at work behind the ideas of having so many deities on the Kushana coins. One, the Kushana moneyers' knowledge of the Roman coin-types and some religious faiths of the Roman orient. Two, the state policy to emphasise on deities indicating the might of Kushana rule and lastly the desire to reflect on the coins the religious faiths and ideas prevalent in Bactria. The heterogeneous religious elements in Kushana coinage betray an eclectic attitude of the Kushanas towards religion. Actually, the Kushana empire was not only far flung, an immense variety of ethnic, religious and cultural groups in widely differing socio-economic conditions were included in it. Probably for this reason the Kushana rulers became more liberal in their religious policy than their forbears.

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