

In the name of the Queen

For solving the jigsaw puzzle that is history, we look into a wide plethora of heritage items/symbols — from monuments to artworks to chronicles and to even myths for that matter! Another such significant piece of that puzzle is numismatics, the study of coins.

After all, age-old coins reveal so much about our past: reigning monarchs, politics, religions, important dates, and so on. Coins give us answers. Coins spark questions, and curiosity too.

Case in point: the coins of the Indian subcontinent, issued by certain rulers, where names of their queens also appear in the legends ('legend', in numismatics, means inscriptions).

These coins may make you raise an eye-brow: it is understandable why reigning kings would often leave their mark on coins, but what would have motivated them to include the names of their queens as well? After all, those queens were not officially rulers themselves.

"This pattern is rare; the mention of queens in coins is very uncommon," said Shahrier Ferdous, an avid coin collector.

So, was it regal love? Or was it 'a game of thrones'?

"Even though Gupta coins are of the subcontinent, there are collectors all over the world fascinated with this dynasty," Ferdous opined.

He further mentioned that the coins were handmade and that gold was widely used metal for minting them.

The vast Gupta Empire also included Bengal. "One of the places where Gupta coins were discovered is Mainamati," Ferdous explained.

The Gupta period is often associated with prosperity and artistic excellence as well, often provoking among many people the thought of a 'golden age.'

Chandragupta I was an iconic ruler of this great dynasty. And his coins feature his queen along with him. Why so, you may rightly ask.

The reason might simply be politics. An immense boost for the Gupta dynasty came through Chandragupta's marriage with a princess of another kingdom, Lichchhavi. The eminent historian and numismatist A S Altekar in his book, 'The Coinage of the Gupta Empire,' wrote —

"It is admitted on all hands that the Guptas largely owed their rise to the imperial status to the matrimonial alliance of Chandragupta with the Lichchhavis, whose princess

continue to marvel upon the king-queen type coinage itself!

One side of the coin depicts the king and the queen facing each other, where he seems to be offering something to his wife. The object offered had been differently represented on different coins, wrote Altekar; sometimes, it may be taken to be a ring, sometimes a 'sindur-dani.'

One can also figure out what the royal couple wore — trousers, sari, headdress, armlret, necklace, earrings, and so on.

The other side of the coin depicts a goddess. In addition to the names of the king and the queen, the legend 'Lachchhavayah' may also be seen — a reference to the queen's clan!

THE QUEENS OF TRIPURA

It is now a state in India, but in medieval times, the Tripura kingdom included some parts which are now in Bangladesh as well, such as Cumilla.

The coinage of Tripura is another rare example in the subcontinent where we frequently find names of queens. But first, giving a little bit of historical background is in order.

Other than coins, another great record of Tripura's past is the historical poem known as Rajamala. "Initially the Rajamala appears to be more of a myth than history, but from the middle of the 15th century, it begins to be relatively reliable in its chronology," N G Rhodes and S K Bose, wrote in their book, 'The Coinage of Tripura.'

The first half of the 15th century saw rulers Maha Manikya and his son Dharma Manikya. After the death of the latter, the land was divided into 17 divisions, ruled by his 17 elder sons. Meanwhile, the youngest son, Ratna Fa, was sent as a hostage to Gaur, which was then under the rule of the Bengal Sultanate.

Sultan Rukn-al-din Barbak Shah, impressed by Prince Ratna, made an arrangement: he would provide military assistance to defeat the prince's brothers, in exchange of valuable gifts. And the campaign was successful: in 1464, the prince rose to the throne — with the title Ratna Manikya — as the ruler of the entire Tripura.

Now, back to coins! "The number of different types struck by Ratna Manikya is remarkable, and the quality of striking and the artistry of the designs is exceptional in comparison with the coins of the sultans of Bengal," Rhodes and Bose wrote.

The ruler had also issued coins which mention his queen, named Lakshmi.

"On coins of later rulers, the queen's name becomes a standard feature of the legend," the book informs.

Moving forward, in 1526, upon the accession to the throne, Deva Manikya issued coins without the name of any queen, only to revise it the next year.

"It seems likely that the king was not married at the time, but that omission was quickly rectified, because in the following year, a coin was struck with the name of Queen Padmavati," the book says.

Indeed, from Rajadhara Manikya (citing Queen Satyavati) to Dhanya



A CORNERSTONE OF THE GUPTA DYNASTY

The so-called king-queen type of coins, of Chandragupta I, comprise an early example of coins where the name of the queen had been mentioned. After all, we are talking about travelling back several hundreds of centuries — the ruler lived in 4th century AD.

Historians and coin collectors continue to hold a fascination for the Gupta period.

Kumaradevi was his crowned queen."

So much so, the historian referred to this union as the 'most dominating political event' that occurred during Chandragupta's reign. In fact, the author claimed that the earlier Guptas did not enjoy much glory, power or affluence.

There is a debate whether the coins were actually issued by Chandragupta himself, or his son and successor. But we shall not go into that now, but

Manikya (citing Queen Kamala), we find many such examples of Tripura rulers who have immortalised the names of their queens through coins.

But why was mentioning queens' names so important for the Tripura rulers?

"One can merely assume that the queen enjoyed a high status in the Kingdom, although if this was the case, why is it that the queens are never mentioned by name in the Rajamala (the poem)?" Rhodes and Bose ask.

The authors put forward an interesting theory: the reason behind the inclusion of the queen's name was 'more religious than secular.'

The inclusion of the lion in so many coins, then, could also be seen in this light. In Hindu iconography, goddess Durga is often shown with a lion. "The lion is also a symbol of royal fortune, but could it be that the queen was regarded as an incarnation of Durga?" the writers pondered.

The rulers also often acknowledged gods and goddesses in their coins. Tripura coins even hint to the local deities worshipped in the region - divine love?

AN ODE TO NOOR JAHAN

Plenty of magnificent structures were built during the Mughal era; and closely examining them may reveal to you many details of history. But visiting the awe-inspiring edifices is just one way of understanding the Mughal Empire. Coins are another.

"The Mughals literally had hundreds of mints in the subcontinent from where coins were struck," Ferdous said.

In general, Emperor Jahangir's coins show much variation in style or calligraphy, he added.

Perhaps, one may like to muse, that the emperor was a romantic, and nur-

tured a fascination for art and beauty. The couplet coins of Jahangir had paid tribute to his beloved queen, Noor Jahan:

"By order of Shah Jahangir gained a hundred beauties gold by the name of NoorJahan Badshah Begum."

- Couplets on Mughal Coins of India, chronicled by Manik Jain

The love story of Jahangir and Noor Jahan has become a part of popular culture; much has been made of it.

So, did the coins solely come out of love? Perhaps, the couple found this to be a way to celebrate their romance, or wanted their love to gain a permanent place in history?

Or do coins hint to a deeper political root? This Mughal empress, after all, had immense power.

"A gifted lady, she acquired such authority over her husband that she became the joint ruler of the empire," an article in Banglapedia, titled Jahangir, informs us.

Whatever the case may be, such coins of these dynasties where queens are mentioned make one wonder. Was it romance? Or was it all politics? Perhaps it was a mix of both? Could religion and culture play any role?

Coins certainly tell stories, and sometimes they demand the reader's interpretation of them.

And these stories collectively make a large part of history - such is the heritage value of coins, and hence the importance of studying, collecting and preserving them.

As Ferdous says, "As a collector, I find it fascinating how an object as tiny as a coin can carry so much history!"

By M H Haider
Photo: Collected

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