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Art and symbolism in Sikh coins and medals

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Abstract

A systematic study of coins, medals or paper money and related material is called numismatics. Numismatics also includes an analysis of the materials out of which coins are made, their fabric shapes and sizes, metrology etc. and for a historian using numismatic evidence, the inscriptions, designs, signs and symbols are of greatest fascination. A coin is a piece of metal stamped and issued by the authority of a government for use as money where as medals may be issued by the state or any private authority for commemorative purposes. Here, in this research paper I aim to throw light on a brief history of coins and medals, their technique of production, similarities and dissimilarities between coins and medals and numismatic evidence in the Punjab with special reference to the Sikh period.

Keywords: art; symbolism; coins and medals.

1. Introduction

Barter system is known to be one of the earliest medium of exchange. It was a system where livelihood was earned just by casting of goods. Cattle's have been used as a means of give and take is an undeniable fact but with the increase in trade and commerce we also see the adoption of new and better ways of keeping the business going. Using metal utensils and even pieces of metal of fixed weight in the form of bars for commercial purpose took trading one step further. Not only this, the Homeric poems such as the Iliad and Odessey provide us evidences of metal instruments, tripods, axes and kettles etc. being used as representatives of true monetary value. Copper bars going back to the early 3rd millennium B.C. have been found at Mohenjodaro in Pakistan. As the trade increased, the political authority of a state started using small rounded or spherical metals of predetermined weight to monopolize the issue by stamping its emblem on it so as to guarantee the weight and alloy of the metal. This not only made trade and exchange easier but also led to the birth of a coin.

The earliest Indian coins were silver ingots consisting of a rosette pattern which were called 'punch-marked coins' and they portrayed primarily the animal figures such as rhinoceros, lion, rabbit, fish and frog etc.. Of course, there have been foreign influences on Indian Coins and the Greeks are said to have directly impacted the Indian coins as a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great as some of the Indo-Greek mints were established in India Taxila being one of them. Other than the Greeks, the following rulers such as the Sakas and the Kushanas also introduced some remarkable coins in India. But Indianized coins in the true sense of the word were introduced by the Gupta dynasty in the 4th century A.D., which displayed the Hindu deity Vishnu and his vehicle Garuda surmounted by a sacred banner.

Trade connections initiated by the Arabs introduced Islamic coins in India by 712 A.D. but the earliest Islamic coins which reflected indigenous character were those minted by Mahmud of Ghazni from Lahore after the annexation of Punjab. Apart from minting coins for the enhancement of trade relations, they were also minted so as to commemorate a particular event in history, for example, Mohammad Bin Sam (1193-1206) not only got coins minted after defeating the rulers of Kanauj but also the coins bore imitated motifs and symbols of the rulers. In addition to the circular coins, square coins and *mihrab*-shaped coins, popularly known as the '*Mihrabi* coins' were also minted during the reign of Akbar. The coins of Akbar were secular in nature as were his paintings and marvels of architecture, the reason being, propagating his 'tolerance for all religions'- the Din-i-Ilahi. Emphasis was given to the calligraphic content, which included Persian phraseology, as well as floral and geometric patterns. The portrait of the emperor himself, however, does not appear on the coins. The tradition of mentioning the regnal year of the ruler and his various titles remained intact. Jahangir went a step forward by introducing the signs of zodiac on the coins along

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with the calligraphy instead of mentioning the name of the month in which the previous coins were issued. Couplets were especially formed so as to be engraved on the coins and during Jahangir's reign, the name of the empress Nur Jahan also finds place for the first time alongside the name of the emperor. Medals commonly known as "medallions" by the Romans, on the other hand were made to serve for commemorative purposes only. They were given by the emperor at special occasions to members of his family or the highest dignitaries who served at his court. The earliest medals were issued during the reign of Augustus during the first century A.D. Like coins, medals have also evolved with time when they were first issued in bronze and later in gold and silver. Coins and medals have the same method of production; the only difference lies in the latter being larger in size which provides more space to add to its decorative and stylistic element.

Body: My interest here is on Sikh Coins and Medals. The earliest Sikh tokens were first introduced by Guru Nanak Dev during the Guru Gaddi ceremony of Bhai Laalo or Angad when he was offered five copper tokens and a coconut symbolizing prosperity and abundance. The Sikhs started minting their special token during the time of Guru Hargobind, the sixth guru. The 17th and 18th century tokens depict the Mool Mantar on one side and Guru Nanak with Mardana, his Muslim companion on the other side. After defeating the Mughals, and attaining sovereignty over the north-western region of India in the battle of Sirhind, the first Sikh coins were struck from Lohgarh by Banda Singh Bahadur, which bore a Persian legend on it. The coins of Banda were to become an inspiration for the succeeding rulers of Punjab.

After Banda Singh Bahadur, the Sikh Empire was divided among twelve *misals*, who continued to issue coins. From the year 1764 A.D. till 1777, with a gap of two years in between, 1766 and 1777, which was the time of the last invasion Ahmed Shah Abdali, '*Gobind Shahi*' coins were minted at the Lahore mint, Dar-us-Sultanat, to commemorate the name of the tenth guru, Gobind Singh. These coins were very simple and had a much unsophisticated appeal. Next, in 1777, '*Nanak Shahi*' coins were struck for the first time at Amritsar mint which bore Persian couplets on it and a new feature which was found in these Sikh coins is the striking of appropriate year and date of the issue of the coin. Among a number of other coins issued during the *misal* period are the coins issued by the Phulkian Provinces which included a silver rupee of Mahendra Singh, Maharaja of Patiala in 1862. These coins were minted at Amritsar and were called '*Nanak Shahis*'.

Of the numerous coins minted during the Sikh rule, the coinage of Maharaja Ranjit Singh is of special interest. One of the most interesting facts about coins of the greatest rulers who ruled over the Punjab, Maharaja Ranjit Singh was that, while we see the coins of the preceding kings bearing their names and titles on the coins, this Sikh Maharaja never got his name minted over his coins, rather, his coins always mentioned the name of the first and the tenth guru, i.e., Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind respectively. Guru Nanak Dev is mostly shown flanked by Bala and Mardana, his Hindi and Muslim accompanists and Guru Gobind Singh is shown seated on a carpet with his back resting on a bolster and accompanied by his falcon. The scripts used for the couplets are Persian and *Gurmukhi*. This was an act of devotion and benevolence towards their gurus on the part of the Maharaja. But, for a change, in a silver Sikh rupee (fig. 1), struck at Lahore Mint in the year ca 1837, one can see the one and only coin of the Sikh period, where a human being has been represented. On the left

is Maharaja Ranjit Singh who is seen offering a lotus flower to Guru Nanak Dev and both the figures are divided by a *Nishan Sahib* between them which has a patterned outer border and an inner border segment while the other side bears inscriptions in the Persian script. It is assumed that the endeavour must have been inspired by Baron Hugel's suggestion (the German traveler). The coins were also abundantly provided with symbols which had metaphoric significance, for example, the lion symbolized power, the sword for protection of the poor and the helpless, the banner or the flag for victory, daggers, swords, the mango tree, and the *peepal* leaf. After the mints at Lahore and Amritsar, various other mints were established in the country, such as at Multan, Kashmir and Peshawar as per the requirements and demands of time.



Fig 1: Sikh Silver Rupee, Lahore Mint, ca 1837, Private Collection, Image Courtesy: Gurpreet Singh Gujral.

There is a short amusing story about Maharaja Ranjit Singh linked to the '*Moran Shahi*' coins that he got struck. One of his favorite mistresses was a woman called Moran who possessed captivating beauty and she asked Maharaja Ranjit Singh to get her name minted on his coins. However, the cunning Maharaja did not want to offend his subjects, but at the same time wanted to please Moran. So, what he did was he ordered to mint coins which had a peacock tail embossed on it. The Punjabi transliteration for peacock is '*mor*' and hence he named those coins as *Moran Shahi* coins. Another belief about this leaf-like structure is that, it might also be the representation of the leaf of the *Dukh Bhanjni Beri* or the healer of all sorrows in the vicinity of the Golden Temple at Amritsar (fig. 2).



Fig 2: Moran Shahi One Rupee Coin, ca. 1799, Amritsar Mint, Dalwinder Singh Collection.

Among the medals, *Kaukab-I Inqilab-I Panjab*, meaning "The star of the prosperity of the Punjab" is perhaps the most famous honour given by the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh to the Lord of Auckland, the Governor General. Innovations in striking of medals during the period of Maharaja Ranjit Singh must have been propagated by the Maharaja's curiosity to know about the orders and medals which his European generals such as Jean Francois Allard and Ventura wore

around their neck. Later in 1837 the Maharaja discussed in detail about them with Sir Henry Fane who was invited to his court on the occasion of the marriage ceremony of his grandson, Nau Nihal Singh. After the discussion, it was finalized that the orders and merits would be given to people who belonged to the three ranks; first being the glorious princes, second being the relatives of the Maharaja and the third being the dignitaries, commanders and chieftains who were honest and full of zeal.



Fig 3: The Order of Merit presented to Lord Auckland by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, 1838, Sheesh Mahal Museum and Medal Gallery, Patiala.

These orders and medals are of great stylistic appeal. They vary in shapes and sizes and were worked over with enamel, gold and inlaid with precious stones such as diamonds and emeralds. For example, the Order of Merit, presented by the Maharaja to the Lord of Auckland is an asymmetrical ten petal flower patterned medal enameled with gold and set with diamonds (fig. 3). It depicts the Maharaja seated on the terrace in a side profile, dressed in saffron coloured clothes, holding a white flower in his right hand and a rosary on the left. Other motifs used were floral, animal figures, geometric patterns with inscriptions in Persian language.

Thus, to conclude, I can say, that although coins were primarily used as a medium of buying and selling, it began to secure its position in some of the finest arts of the kingdoms. The gold and silver coins and medals were also used as pieces of jewelry. Along with the purpose it was supposed to serve, these coins as well as medals reflect the individual tastes of the rulers who got them minted at differing points of time which give us a glance back into our beaming history.

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