

ART MOTIFS IN SIKH COINAGE IN SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE COINS OF MAHARAJA RANJIT SINGH

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Abstract

In a culturally diverse country as India, art has been the most preferable medium for humans to express their emotions, religious sentiments, beliefs, and reactions. Apart from other art forms, the coins hold a unique prominence in digging out the historical, administrative, political, economic, social, religious and the artistic facets of Indian history. In India, apart from being a source of monetary exchange, coins have had served to ascertain the authority and sovereignty of Indian rulers or the invaders claiming their rule in the different parts of the country. The art over the coins, whether it be certain symbols, motifs, human and animal figures, text, or numerals, kept on varying depending upon the ruling power under which they were minted. Like other Indian dynasties, Sikh rulers also issued coins which bore inscriptions, design motifs, legends and certain symbols representing a rich artistic culture prevalent in Sikh community which absorbed various foreign influences common at that time; thus providing them the final form which people see today as one of the rich sources of art of the Sikh rulers. This study reads about the coins minted during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and offers a thorough investigation of

the concerned art motifs and their symbolic language. It will also unearth the role of geographically- foreign impacts, social ideological matrix, religion, administrative disturbance, influences of its contemporary art forms and the ruler's personal enthusiasm for art. Moreover, this study will also suggest how an ordinary piece of currency gained artistic merit and contributed to India's rich art history.

Keywords: Coins; Sikh Coinage; Iconography; Motifs; Calligraphy; Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Introduction

The present era defines a coin as a usually small, flat and a round piece of metal, bearing an authorized stamp of the government, used as a medium of exchange for the purpose of trade. It may possess certain image, text and numerals and some motifs. In earlier times, people used other sources like cattle for trade purpose; but traces have been found that ascertain their presence even as early as 6th century BC. Initially, coins were bars of metal in irregular shapes. They hardly carry any mark or stamp over them; thus, their value was determined only through their weight and purity of the metal.

In earlier times, coins served as an important medium for monetary exchange to proceed trade, acted as a symbol of sovereignty and sometimes issued to celebrate a political conquest. In early times, some monarchs also issued coins to celebrate their conquests. In India as well, usually cattle or food grains were used as a medium of exchange. In ancient times, horses served as the medium of exchange among the military class; the famous epic Mahabharata discloses the teacher's fee as steeds from the disciples; in agricultural stage, staple corn was used as currency; the Jataka stories also narrate that slaves and other food items were used as an exchange medium¹. There is still no stable evidences regarding the origin of coinage in India. Some

¹ Upendra Thakur, "Mints and Minting in India," in *The Numismatic Society of India: Golden Jubilee Volume*, ed. H.V. Trivedi (P.O. Hindu University, Varanasi-5: The Numismatic Society Of India, 1961), 175.

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scholars and art historians assume the origin back to the 3rd millennium BC, while some trace it nearly in 3rd century BC². The evidences have been noticed in the ancient literary sources as *Rigveda*, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, *Satapatha Brahmana* and *Katyayana Srauta- Sutra* confirms the use of gold and silver pieces of a hundred standard, called the 'Satamana', Katyyayan

Srautasutra and also in Jataka stories. But most evidently, the beginning of coinage in India can be considered to happen in the 6th century BC, contemporarily with the Lydians and the Chinese.

The earliest Indian coins which came into existence were the Punch- marked coins. Karshapnas, Puranas and Panas minted under the patronage of Janapadas and Mahajanapadas around 6th cent. BC lie under this category of coins. These coins were named so because the symbols inscribed over them were punched using hammer. These were categorized into two types, 'Mahajanpadas' were the coins found in a particular locality and those of other type included the coins found throughout the country. The latter coins bore five symbols uniformly and were current during the rule of Mauryas and Nandas. A passage in the *Visuddhimagga*, a Sinhalese work of late days suggests that every place, which issued coinage had its own distinguishing mark or marks stamped over it. Their mints were at Pataliputra, Kosla, Kasi etc.³ After experimenting with the Punch- marked coins, came the Cast coins in the 3rd century BC, which used the technique of using a mould in which all the symbols are put together rather than punching several symbols by separate dies. Molten metal was poured into the prepared mould to cast the coins. This technique was confined the Pre- Christian era. These coins possessed only one symbol on each side. This technique was used later only by Yaudheyas. A similar technique got introduced from 2nd century onwards that derived from the punch- marked method- 'striking a coin'. Here the entire

² M.K. Dhavalikar, "The Beginning of Coinage in India," *World Archaeology* 6, no.3 (2010): 330-338, <http://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.1975.9979613>.

³ Upendra Thakur, "Mints and Minting in India," in *The Numismatic Society of India: Golden Jubilee Volume*, ed. H.V. Trivedi (P.O. Hindu University, Varanasi-5: The Numismatic Society Of India, 1961), 180.

motif which was needed to be incised was engraved on a single die and was later stamped on the metal pieces. This way was preferred as it saved excessive labour in striking coins. The examples include the Sakas, the Kushanas and the Gupta coins which were produced using Die- struck method.

Coins in the Indian history as an Art piece

Indian sub-continent has witnessed a variety of coins since pre-Christian era. Various dynasties issued their coins either as a currency or to celebrate their conquests over a particular region. They coins were sometimes also given as rewards to the people by the ruling authority. In India, one may come across a large number of coins minted under Kushans, Guptas, Sakas, Pallavas, Mughals, Mohammadans, Cholas, Rajputs and the Sikhs. Apart from these issuing authorities,

the coins were also issued by some foreign rulers who had settled in various parts of the southern Asia as a result of conquests or invasions. This includes the Greek coinage, Archaemenid coinage, Sassanian coinage, Durrani from Afghanistan, Persian coinage, Indo- Scythians, Indo- Parthians, Scytho- Parthian (Saka- Pahlava) etc. These invaders issued the coins as per their native tradition of producing coins; moreover their style also influenced the locally produced coins in these areas. Thus the coins produced in India were an amalgamation of various individual styles.

Foreign Influences in Indian Coins

The finest examples can be noted in the coins found at the Kabul Hoard in the 4th century BC. This hoard consists of the **Archaemenid coins** and **the Greek coins** from around 5th century BC- 4th century BC. Here local coins were minted under the Archaemenid empire. It showcases some western influences such as the representation of a 'Bull head', 'stag', 'Persian column capitals' etc. over the coins. According to Joe Cribb, a numismatist, the use of punch- marked technique in India was introduced in India from Archaemenid empire during the 4th century BC. In addition to such examples, the earliest punch- marked Karshapanas produced in the 6th century BC are

known to be influenced by the similar coins produced in Gandhara under the Archaemenid empire, for example those of the Kabul hoard, Pushkalavati and Bhir Mound.

Another important foreign element which infused its own essence in the Indian coinage was the **Greek coinage**. During the Hellenistic period (320 BC- 30 CE), Egypt, Syria, Iran, the present day Afghanistan and some parts of north- western India saw the influence of Greek culture. As a result of increasing trade, Greek coins spread through a large part of the country and moreover new coins were produced under these newly formed kingdoms. But the coins so produced lacked the aesthetic delicacy of the earlier period. However, out of these Greek coins, Indo- Greek coins are considered to be the finest of them. They are an amazing blend of realism and idealization. The portraiture inscribed over these coins depict a degree of individuality which was absent in their contemporary numismatic art. Indo- Greeks were the first to establish the Inscribed tradition of coins in India. In early 2nd century BC, the Greek rulers of Bactria and India also introduced the system of producing coins from the dies covering the full flan of the blank⁴. From this era,

started an important stage in the development of coin legends in ancient India.⁵ Through Ionian Greeks, came the Persian influence into the Indian coinage as the Persians used to be their customers in the Greek coin market. The Persian bear some inscriptions or mostly the illustrations of animals over them and also motifs related to nature.⁶ Indo- Scythian coins possessed the representation of human figures most probably of Herakles and Pallas⁷. As India

⁴ B.N. Mukherjee, "Numismatics," in *Art of India: Prehistory to the Present*, ed. Frederick M. Asher (Britannica: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2003), 284.

⁵ Upendra Thakur, "Mints and Minting in India," in *The Numismatic Society of India: Golden Jubilee Volume*, ed. H.V. Trivedi (P.O. Hindu University, Varanasi-5: The Numismatic Society Of India, 1961), 189.

⁶ C.H. Biddulph, "Coins with Laminated Flans," in *The Numismatic Society of India: Golden Jubilee Volume*, ed. H.V. Trivedi (P.O. Hindu University, Varanasi-5: The Numismatic Society Of India, 1961), 155.

⁷ C.H. Biddulph, "British Indian Brockages, Countermarked and Defective Coins," in *The Numismatic Society of India: Golden Jubilee Volume*, ed. H.V. Trivedi (P.O. Hindu University, Varanasi-5: The Numismatic Society Of India, 1961), 158.

had always been a centre of attraction for the invaders because of its richness, various foreign traders tried their luck for acquiring its rule. In the 18th century, the British East India Company established its settlements in various parts of India. The company issued its own coinage to assert its authority over a particular area. Their coins bore the portraits of king/ queen and inscriptions. The Saka dynasty introduced itself in the Indian subcontinent under Maues in the early 1st century BC. It entered through the North, therefore the coins minted in these areas possess the influence of their coinage.⁸ This type followed the Indo- Greeks. The devices such as '*Shiva and Bull*' of Kushana coins, '*Bust and Fire- Altar*' of Sasanian coins, '*Bust and Horseman*' of Sasanian- Hunish coins were imitated for a long period of time in the north- western areas such as Punjab and Rajasthan and also in several places in central, western and deccan India. Kashmir also witnessed the Kushana's influence in terms of coinage.

Symbols

Besides being a documenting source for the political and economic situation of the country, Coins also acted as a mirror into its social, cultural and religious scenario. Earlier, the stamps over the coins were just a symbol of their authenticity assuring their standard weight and purity

of the metal but this marking actually changed the so called metal currency into a coin⁹. The art over the coins in the form of various symbols, emblems and designs reads about the issuing authority, the art culture prevalent at that time, the invading powers, the economic base and the significance of religion during that era. The Indian coins displayed inscribed text in the form of letters, monograms, inscriptions and legends whereas the visuals included the symbols, art motifs and the portraiture of human or animal forms. This presence of monograms has not been depicted

⁸ B.N. Mukherjee, "Numismatics," in *Art of India: Prehistory to the Present*, ed. Frederick M. Asher (Britannica: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2003), 284.

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on the coins in case of Saka- Pahlavas and Indo- Greeks. The inscriptions used Kharoshthi, Brahmi and Graeco- Roman characters.

The coins of Kushans represented portraiture depicting the king and Shiva in different postures. They displayed Bactrian and Greek legends. The deities depicted on the reverse of the coins were of Hellenistic, West Asian, Iranian and Indian origins. They depicted Shiva and Buddha, and moreover, represented the royal figures. In case of Guptas, one may notice the Indianized treatment of the figures inscribed on the reverse. The figures of the deities possessed sublimity and the legends used Sanskrit language and Brahmi characters. The deities portrayed on these coins either belonged to the Vaishnava sect or the cult of Shakti. In early 5th century BC., the coinage in the western India bears a motif of three arches, one set upon the other two. Moreover, it portrayed Buddhist symbols such as a *Chaitya* on the reverse. In the period between 6th and 13th century, the '*Bull and Horseman*' type coins of the Brahminical Shahis of the northwest were later imitated by several indigeneous dynasties of the period and also by some Muslim conquerors.¹⁰ The coins of the peninsular India revealed their dynastic origin either through the inscriptions inscribed upon them or through the dynastic emblem they possessed. The instances include the depiction of *bull* by the Pallavas, the *boar* by the Chalukyas, the *tiger* by the Cholas, the *fish* by the Pandyas and the *bow and arrow* by the Cheras.

⁹ B.N. Mukherjee, "Numismatics," in *Art of India: Prehistory to the Present*, ed. Frederick M. Asher (Britannica: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2003), 283.

¹⁰ B.N. Mukherjee, "Numismatics," in *Art of India: Prehistory to the Present*, ed. Frederick M. Asher (Britannica: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2003), 288.

In the Musim reign, the coins issued in the name of the ruler were considered to be a symbol of sovereignty. The Persian influence of the Ghaznavids had its way to India through the northwest.

They controlled the most part of the Punjab. Thus, the north and north-western areas of India saw a major minting of Islamic coins. The sultanate coins bore the inscriptions which depicted the name of the ruler and his title, the minting place, and the *Kalima*. They displayed different types of calligraphy for legends and beautiful geometric patterns.

The Mughal coinage further added to a new standard to the Indian coinage. These coins displayed high aesthetic value through their art of calligraphy which represented legends, dates, Persian couplets. Usually they lacked the icons; only inscriptions and other art motifs covered the obverse and the reverse. However, the coins during Akbar's reign possess geometric patterns and motifs and few pictorial devices such as the portraiture depicting Rama and Sita, and other figures like the Hawk and the duck. The portraiture reached a higher level during the reign of Jahangir. The coinage gained a new height in terms of variety, beauty and calligraphic merit.

Zodiac signs were inscribed over the coins for his 'Zodiac- series', which was a distinct case in the history of numismatics.

The pieces with iconic devices were produced in north, north-western, central, eastern and peninsular India. Examples include the coins of Manipur and those of Cooch Bihar that display the figures of Hindu deities- Radha and Krishna; also some symbols including letters, star, a lion, crescent, trident, birds, mythical dragon, group of dots, peacocks, two stupas flanking a lamp etc.

Unlike the coins in the upper regions of India, the coinage in the lower peninsular India relied more upon the iconic tradition during the late medieval age. They displayed various symbols like lion, star, crescent, trident, sword, peacocks etc. It had on its coins, the Vaishnavite features and other Hindu themes such as Shiva and Parvati, Ganesha, Hanuman, Ram, Lakshmana, Kartikeya and Nandi (Bull) and other symbols including Garuda, conch, disc (wheel), solar and lunar symbols, sword/ dagger etc., elephant⁹. The East India Company's coinage in the 17th and 18th

⁹ B.N. Mukherjee, *Numismatic Art of India Volume 1: Historical and Aesthetic Perspectives* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manohar Publishers PVT. LTD., 2007), 164.

century depicts the royal portrait and the symbols like that of a lion in front of a palm tree; or some designs.

Sikh Coinage

Coinage of Sikhs was earliest described by C.J. Rodgers in 1881. Like other coins produced under various rulers in India, the coins minted in the patronage of the Sikh rulers also hold a unique place in the Indian art history. The evidences are found in *Tazakirates- Salatin- i- Chaghtai*, a text written by Hadi Kamavan Khan. Basically, the Sikh rulers issued coins to assert their authority over a conquered area. Unlike other Indian coins, these were issued by the military leaders in the name of their gurus rather than by the royalty. It is believed that the earliest coins in Sikh history were introduced in the form of tokens by the first Sikh guru, Guru Nanak, when he offered some copper coins to Bhai Lalo (named Guru Angad afterwards) along with a coconut, symbolizing prosperity and abundance. Later, special tokens were minted by the Sikhs during the time of Guru Hargobind, the sixth guru. As north- western India was the most common and easily approachable way to enter in India, therefore the land of Punjab saw many invasions. Eventually, it got the influences from those of Afghans, Indo- Greeks and Indo- Sakas. The nearby areas such as Gujarat and Rajasthan possessed the Gadhैया coins dating back to 8th- 12th century AD. These coins reveal the Indo- Sassanian influence through their use of lines and dots which represented the old Sassanian fire Altar. Mughals were contemporary rulers during the Sikh rule therefore the coins struck under the Sikh rulers display the Persian effect as well through their inscriptions. These coins were basically based on Mughal prototype and are well equipped with beautiful calligraphy and ornamentation.¹⁰ The coins issued by the Sikh community mainly bear inscriptions, certain symbols and decorative art motifs. The inscriptions

¹⁰ B.N. Mukherjee, *Numismatic Art of India Volume 1: Historical and Aesthetic Perspectives* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manohar Publishers PVT. LTD., 2007), 163.

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inscribed are in Persian script and sometimes in Gurmukhi script. Most of the Sikh coins feature a prominent date in Persian numerals on the reverse. This date is called Vikrama Samvat date. The use of this date on the Sikh coins started from the initial Sikh Misl coinage and continued until the end of the Sikh empire in 1849.

India witnessed a major ruling power- Mughals, especially in its north- western areas in the 16th and 17th centuries. After the death of Aurangzeb, the disintegrating Mughal rule led to several

invasions in Punjab by Persian and Afghan rulers. In 1708, Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh guru instructed an ascetic named Madho Das whom he named as Banda Singh Bahadur, to go to Punjab to guide and lead the Sikh community against the Mughal atrocities. The Sikh coins were officially struck for the first time at Sirhind under the authority of Banda Singh Bahadur when he won against Wazir Khan in the Battle of Chappar Chiri in 1710. For Sikhs, these coins were a symbol of sovereignty over the conquered areas. The coins so issued possessed inscriptions regarding the capital of the Sikh state but did not have the name of the city minted over them. To assure this important conquest, he issued coins but these coins were in the name of the Sikh gurus or the supreme power rather than portraying the bust or name of the king and the regnal year. These followed the prominent Vikram Samvat and Nanakshahi Samvat calendars to follow the dates. In 1764, after the 7th invasion of Ahmad Shah Abdali in Punjab, the Sikh League got the official right to issue coins. The Sikhs began to produce coins in the traditional mint centres once Mughal power had started to decline and the Afghans had left the Punjab. Lahore had been a mint under the authority of both the Mughals and the Durrani dynasty. After Ahmad Shah Abdali's attack on the Sikh shrine, Harmandir Sahib, the Sikhs recaptured territories including their provincial capital, Sarhind in 1764 AD. These captured territories were divided along 11 independent misls. These misls together set up mints in Lahore in 1765 AD and then in Amritsar in 1775 AD. Sikh coins were struck in Lahore in 1765 in the name of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh guru. These were the first Sikh coins for regular use and were in pure silver. These

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were named Gobindshahi coins as the legend on the obverse featured Guru's name¹¹ whereas the inscription on the reverse revealed the name of the minting place and the year in Vikram Samvat in Persian language and were produced from 1764- 1777, except two years, 1766 and 1767. The city of Multan also had a functioning mint that continued to be used by the Sikh Misls and the coins were minted there until the end of the Sikh rule. With the expansion of the Sikh kingdom in the 19th century, more mints were set up at Amritsar, Peshawar, Kashmir and Derajat under Maharaja Ranjit Singh's dominion. The design and the inscriptions of these coins follow those of



1 Rupee VS 1822 (1765) – First Coin By Khalsa Dal.

Source- http://sikhcoin.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-coinage-of-maharaja-ranjit-singh_23.html

¹¹ C.J. Brown, M.A., *The Coins of India* (New Delhi: Indological Book House, Varanasi, 1973), 107.



1 Rupee Coin VS 1845 (1788), Amritsar Mint.

Source- http://sikhcoin.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-coinage-of-maharaja-ranjit-singh_23.html

Lahore and Amritsar mint with some modifications in them.¹² Later the Lahore mint was exchanged with the one in Amritsar in 1777 which produced Nanakshahi Coins in gold and silver. These coins had legend inscribed in praise of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh on

their obverse and on its reverse there was the name of the minting place, that is, Amritsar and the date of issue had been mentioned through an inscription in Persian language.

¹² Madanjit Kaur, *The Regime of Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Historians' Observations* (Mohali: Unistar Books Private Limited, 2007),4.



1 Rupee VS 1856 (1799), Amritsar mint, Collection- Dalwinder Singh

Later in 1788, in addition to the calligraphic inscriptions and art motifs, a leaf mark was added which had a hidden meaning. It conveyed the message to protect the environment after facing a famine in 1780. This leaf symbol continued to be in use over the coins throughout the Sikh empire. The early 19th century shows the introduction of symbols and art motifs in the Sikh coinage. Moreover, Devnagari and Gurmukhi scripts started to be in use apart from the traditional Persian script acquired from the earlier Islamic influence in the North and north-western areas of India. The reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh saw a prominent phase in the field of art. The coins minted under his patronage were more artistic and aesthetically enriched as compared to the earlier Sikh coinage.

Coins struck under the patronage of Maharaja Ranjit Singh

As already discussed, the art tradition of north Indian coinage relied more on the rich calligraphy of the inscriptions which can also be noticed in the Mughal paintings as well as the coins issued under those rulers. Misl rule in Lahore was followed by the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1799. As the political scenario of the country changed, it affected the economic, socio-cultural and the artistic facets also. The coins started adopting different symbols. The new ruler infused a fresh spirit into art practices of the Sikh community. The coins minted under his rule ascended in terms of artistic merit. Certain modifications were made in the iconography of the coins under his

rule. The special feature of his coins was that he didn't put his name on the coins unlike that in the coinage of the Mughal dynasty which was current in Punjab. Couplets were mentioned over the coins in praise of the Sikh Gurus and the Supreme power.

The coins struck were in gold and silver and copper. The copper coins were named as *Sikka Falus* in the regime of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. They carry the inscriptions in Gurmukhi script. The copper coins display only symbols and the name of the minting place. They do not carry the date of their issue. The symbols over the coins struck under the leadership of Maharaja are stylistically treated. The calligraphy is more refined as compared to that in case of the earlier coinage. 'Leaf' has been the most adopted symbol on the coins of the Sikhs. Apart from this, one can notice more features such as dots, stylized flowers, moon and stars and beaded borders. Few coins show human portraiture displaying the profile postures which has most probably derived from the Mughal style of art. For inscriptions, Persian and Gurmukhi scripts have been used. Those with the Persian inscriptions were minted in Lahore, Amritsar, Multan (after 1818), Kashmir (after 1819), Peshawar, Jhang and Pind Dadan Khan. The coins collected from these mints bear the word 'ZARB' inscribed on them, meaning 'Mint' in Persian language. Following are some prominent coin types produced under his patronage, with unique symbols and motifs.

- Several coins of Maharaja Ranjit Singh bear Brahmanical symbols like 'Om' in place of the religious couplet (during the rule of Kharak Singh i.e. 1839- 1840), the trident and also read inscriptions like 'Ram', 'Shiva' and in the name of Lord Krishna and his mother, Devki.¹³ Though the Sikh religion arose partly in reaction against the excessive ritualism in Hinduism, yet the Hindu tradition kept creeping in once a period of time religion. Thus one can find the proofs of Brahmanical influence in the numismatic art as well because basically there were Hindu customs and traditions usually prevalent in the Indian society before.¹⁴ Moreover the ruler himself had a strong belief in astrology. In the later years of his life,

¹³ Ramesh Vinayak, "Coining History," *India Today*, 2008 (February 2008):

<http://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/supplement/story/20080303-coining-history-735491-2008-02-21>.

¹⁴ Surinder Singh, *Sikh Coinage: Symbol of Sikh Sovereignty* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004), 201.

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Maharaja issued the Frozen series coins. They were named so as they had two dates mentioned over them, the first was the frozen date (Bikrami 1885) and the second one was

the date of actual issue year. To get rid of ill health, Maharaja didn't issue new coins and therefore the coins struck after were called the frozen series coins.



1 Rupee (Decorated Leaf Mint- Mark Coin)VS 1858 (1801), Amritsar mint.

Source- http://sikhcoin.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-coinage-of-maharaja-ranjit-singh_23.html



1 Rupee VS 1863 (1806) , Amritsar mint, Sprig with four leaves,

Source- http://sikhcoin.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-coinage-of-maharaja-ranjit-singh_23.html



1 Rupee VS 1892 (1835), Amritsar mint,

Source- http://sikhcoin.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-coinage-of-maharaja-ranjit-singh_23.html

- **Leaf-** Leaf is the most popular symbol used over the Sikh coins, identified as a Peepal leaf.¹⁵ Amritsar mint produced coins adorned with the symbol of a leaf in 1788. This symbol aimed at spreading the message to protect the environment after India faced a major famine in 1780 which also had influences in the north-western India. In 1801, Maharaja Ranjit Singh further adopted this symbol over the coins but in a more decorative manner. The coins so minted were named as Decorated Leaf Mint- Mark Coin. The leaf motif over these coins is more stylized. Other motifs such as group of dots and stylized flowers are also depicted over the coins. This motif could also be seen over the Gold Mohur and the Double- Gold Mohar minted in the years 1821 and 1827 respectively. The Double- Gold Mohar also had a bail attached to it. These gold coins were termed as ‘Butkis’. These coins played a vital role as offerings to the religious institutions. Also the coin with a bail was designed so that it could be used as an ornament. The leaf symbol over the coins saw a noticeable transformation in

¹⁵ Madanjit Kaur, *The Regime of Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Historians’ Observations* (Mohali: Unistar Books Private Limited, 2007),9.

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terms of its aesthetic sense and structure. The earlier leaf inscribed was simple whereas those used afterwards looked more artistic, stylized and delicate. At some places, the leaf is shown enclosed in a further outline or a beaded outline. This symbol continued to be struck over most of the Sikh coins throughout the Sikh rule. The Peepal tree called *Asivatta* in Sanskrit

holds a significant place in Hinduism and Buddhism. Evidences prove that tree worshipping has been a traditional practice since the Vedic period. It is possible that the leaf symbol over the coins could have derived from the Indian mythology.



Kangha symbol Coin (1802),

Source- <https://images.app.goo.gl/EZejUcMQwfSMu6r98>

- **Kangha-** The word *Kangha* is a transliteration of the English word ‘comb’. In 1802, Maharaja Ranjit Singh captured the holy city of Amritsar from the Bhangi misl. In order to commemorate this victory, coins were struck with the image of a comb inscribed over them. *Kangha* being one of the five *kakaars* of the Sikhs, left a religious impact on these coins. Apart from this motif, a small twig with leaves can also be seen on the other side of the coin.

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This symbol can also be noted on the coins issued in 1837. Here, the obverse of the coin shows the word 'Ram' in Devanagari script accompanied by a small 'Kangha' symbol on the left side.



Bershahi coins (1804),

Source- <https://images.app.goo.gl/7tEDMFF3AycAaK489>



Revised Bershahi coins (1805),

Source-http://sikhcoin.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-coinage-of-maharaja-ranjit-singh_23.html

- **Ber-** Another important symbol which added to the artistic beauty of the Sikh coins was *Ber*. In 1804, the earlier used *Kangha* symbol was exchanged with the *Ber* motif and these coins were termed as *Bershahi coins*. This also possessed religious relevance as the *Ber* (jujube fruit) symbol represents the holy *Dukhbhanjani Beri*, located on the banks of *sarovar* (a tank of holy water) in the Golden Temple complex. It is also believed that these berries or buds



Moran Shahi One Rupee Coin, ca. 1799, Amritsar mint, courtesy- Dalwinder Singh Collection

represent the feathers of a peacock.¹⁶ This motif can be noted over a silver rupee coin minted in 1799 at the Amritsar mint. It had a double sprig with buds/ berries though the motif just served a secondary purpose on the left side of the leaf which was the main motif over the coin. This coin seems to be the earliest example of the buds/ berries design. The similar motif could also be noticed as the main mark over the silver rupees struck at the Amritsar mint between the years 1801- 1806. Another example can be seen over the gold mohurs and silver coins struck at the

¹⁶ Saran Singh and Dalwinder Singh, "The Coinage of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839)," *Sikh Coins of Punjab*, (November 2013) :http://sikhcoin.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-coinage-of-maharaja-ranjit-singh_23.html?m=1. (no page no.)

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Amritsar mint. When the Sikh mint was shifted from Lahore to Amritsar, the Moranshahi coins were discontinued and the *Bershahi coins* were re-introduced with a bigger and more decorative *Ber* symbol. These coins exhibit a flower like motif which most probably represents a Berry flower. It was a substitute for the leaf symbol. These coins were named as *Arsiwala Shahi Rupees*.



1 Rupee VS 1862 (1805), Double sprig with the buds of the Berry flower,

Source- http://sikhcoin.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-coinage-of-maharaja-ranjit-singh_23.html

- **Peacock Feathers-** It is believed that after marrying a Muslim dancer in 1802, Maharaja Ranjit Singh issued a coin in 1805 that bore a peacock feather that symbolically represented his wife '*Moran*', who was named so because her dance moves resembled those of a peacock. Thus, these coins got the name, Moranshahi coins. '*Moran*' generally means peacock in Punjabi, but its secondary meaning was a long dry branch with twigs. So, the coins struck at Amritsar between 1804- 1806 bore highly stylized branches and berries, replacing the 'leaf' on the reverse side.¹⁷ These coins were discontinued thereafter as they were against the religious ethics of the Sikh community.

¹⁷ Patwant Singh, *Empire of the Sikhs: The Life and Times of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, ed. Jyoti M. Rai (The University of California: Peter Owen, 2008), 244.



1 Rupee VS 1885 (1828), Lahore mint,

Source- http://sikhcoin.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-coinage-of-maharaja-ranjit-singh_23.html



1 Rupee VS 1885 /93 (1836), Lahore mint, Courtesy- British Museum Collection.

- **Human Portraiture-** Although the Sikh community was totally against issuing coins in the name of the rulers or even getting their portraits inscribed over them but a later phase in the patronage of Maharaja Ranjit Singh witnessed two varieties of silver coins having the representation of beautiful human portraiture. In 1836, the first one of its kind depicted Maharaja Ranjit Singh offering flower to Guru Nanak, the first Sikh guru. The reverse side shows the Gobindshahi inscriptions in Persian and the fixed year date VS 1885. In the second variety, the obverse shows Maharaja Ranjit Singh offering flower to Guru Nanak and there is a flag in the background with the fixed year date VS 1885 below. The reverse had the actual year date, 1836. The figures have been shown in profile postures which assures the Mughal style influence.



1 Rupee VS 1885 /93 (1836), Lahore mint, Photo- British Museum Collection



Double- flag, Nishan- Sahib symbol coins, Amritsar mint, 1846.

Source-<https://images.app.goo.gl/xxsxHJTq8f5ZzTTh6>

- Nishan/ Dhvaja-** In 1836, the silver coins with the pictorial representation of Guru Nanak display a flag symbol. This coin shows Maharaja Ranjit Singh offering flower to Guru Nanak. There is a flag in the background dividing both the figures. This flag symbolizes the holy icon of Nishan Sahib, the religious and political flag of the Sikhs. This symbol can be noted on other coins that were produced in 1845 under the rule of Duleep Singh, while the other example can be observed in the Sikh coins in 1846 during the colonial rule of the British East India company. In latter case, the ‘flag’ motif was used over ‘Nishan Sahib’ coins to commemorate this moral victory for the city of Amritsar. Basically a flag symbolizes royalty and authority. It finds a deep history in Vedic and epic literature. It is regarded as an emblem of Sun god. It stands for victory as well. In ancient times, capturing the flag of the enemy was considered to be sign of victory. The Flag over the coins of Maharaja Ranjit Singh denote victory and authority.



1 Paisa (No Date), Amritsar mint, Katar- Daggar,

Source- http://sikhcoin.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-coinage-of-maharaja-ranjit-singh_23.html

- **Daggar (Katar)**- A few coins possessed the katar (daggar) symbol. *Katar* represents power and royalty. It is seen more on the copper coins than on the silver rupees.¹⁸ A silver Paisa minted in the Amritsar mint displays a horizontally placed daggar in the centre on its obverse with the text- '*Akal Sahaye*' and '*Nanak*' inscribed over it. The reverse shows the traditional leaf mark (two small leaves with the main leaf) along with some inscription. Group of dots fills the leftover space on both the sides. Sometimes these dots club up to form a flower. A similar proof can be seen over a silver rupee produced in the Amritsar mint in 1828 under Maharaja's rule. Although this coin has the leaf as its primary symbol on the obverse yet the simplified *Katar* motif grabs the spectator's attention.

¹⁸ Madanjit Kaur, *The Regime of Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Historians' Observations* (Mohali: Unistar Books Private Limited, 2007), 14.



Swastika symbol coins, 1822, Kashmir mint, Source- Live History India

- **Swastika-** The coins minted in the Kashmir mint in 1822 under the rule of General Diwan Moti Ram had the mark of a *Swastik* on their obverse along with a Persian inscription inscribed over them. Like other coins, these coins also had group of dots filling the vacant space and thus further adding to its beauty. The inscription is in Persian language. Coins with this symbol were mainly issued to please the Kashmiri Pandits which further helped the Sikhs to develop their rule in the valley and maintained their friendly relations.
- **Chattar (DURING DALIP SINGH AND SHER SINGH)-** Another symbol which is found on the coins minted under the rule of Maharaja is a *Chattar* (umbrella). According to the

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Indian Epics, the King was represented in art through an umbrella. The *Chattar* reflects royalty. This motif is another strong evidence of Maharaja's secular policy.¹⁹



1 Rupee VS 1885 /93 (1836), Lahore mint, British Museum Collection

¹⁹ Madanjit Kaur, *The Regime of Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Historians' Observations* (Mohali: Unistar Books Private Limited, 2007), 12.



1 Rupee VS 1885 (1828), Lahore mint,

Source- http://sikhcoin.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-coinage-of-maharaja-ranjit-singh_23.html

- **Flowers-** Most of these coins possess dots in grouped form. Most of the coins depict a flower like motif through the use of dots by arranging these dots in a circular manner around a dot in the center. This simplified and stylized flower is noticed along with other motifs used over Sikh coins. The popular Bershahi coins were re-introduced after the discontinuation of the Moranshahi coins, but in a modified form. The revised Bershahi coins had a flower like symbol constituted of tiny V-like shapes. This was a more advanced form of a flower which most likely symbolized the Beri flower. The flower motif also finds various distinctions in its execution. The coins in the earlier phase of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule possess a flower with petals, thus giving a little essence of realism to this motif. Apart from this, a coin is noticed where Maharaja is shown offering flower to Guru Nanak. The flower depicted here indicates to be a lotus flower. As per the Hindu mythology, lotus is the personification of goddess Lakshmi. It was adopted on the state issues of Maharaja Ranjit Singh as a symbol of good fortune and purity.



1 Rupee VS 1884 (1827), Kashmir mint,

Source- http://sikhcoin.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-coinage-of-maharaja-ranjit-singh_23.html

- **Dots, Star, Crescent-** The use of dots is quite common in the coins of the Sikhs. These dots were either used individually or in the form of groups. At some places, these dots have been grouped up to form a simple and stylized flower. The Persian text also includes dots. These dots play a vital role in creating a visual connection between the symbols and the inscriptions inscribed by filling up the vacant space over the coins.

The motifs such as ‘crescent’, ‘star’ were rarely seen over the Sikh coins.



1 Rupee VS 1892 (1835), 'Ram' symbol, Kashmir mint,

Source- http://sikhcoin.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-coinage-of-maharaja-ranjit-singh_23.html



- **'Ram', 'Har'**- In later years of the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Sikh coinage adopted some Vaishnavite words such as 'RAM' and 'HAR'. It is believed that the practice of Sikh empire was quite secular. The coins issued in 1837 bear the word 'Ram' in Devanagari script which personifies Lord Rama. The term 'Har' refers to the Supreme power as it could also be noticed in the religious terms such as 'Har ki Paudi' (present in the Golden Temple complex), 'Harmandir Sahib' etc.
- **Matsya**- The silver coins of Maharaja Ranjit Singh have the *Matsya* (Fish) and Conch shell symbols over them. This symbol can also be seen on some of the Mughal coins from Najibabad. This symbol depicts the Hindu symbolim in Sikh coinage. According to the Hindu mythology, *Matsya* is one of the eight incarnations of Lord Vishnu. It represents growth and continuity. The depiction of this icon over Sikh coins may be treated as a sign of wish fulfillment on part of the ruling class for its growth.²⁰
- **Trishul**- The Trishul (trident) symbol also relates with the Hindu religion. It is associated with both Shiva and Vishnu and is regarded as divine weapon. It is believed that worshipping

²⁰ Madanjit Kaur, *The Regime of Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Historians' Observations* (Mohali: Unistar Books Private Limited, 2007), 11.

the weapons of gods can assure protections from evils. It is probable that the Sikh community might have inscribed this symbol for the same reason.²¹



'Sat' Symbol Coin, 1847-48, Amritsar Mint ,

Source- <https://images.app.goo.gl/ZToQLwPvpXykPVgQA>

- **Sat-** The term 'Sat' in Gurmukhi script appears on some coins of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Later, this symbol was also struck on the coins by his successors. It stands for purity and truth. This use of this symbol over the coins confirms his concern for temporal and spiritual values.
- Also, the Kashmir mint produced 'Har' symbol coins under the patronage of General Hari Singh Nalwa after he was made the governor of Kashmir. The Har symbol has been inscribed on its obverse in Gurmukhi script whereas the reverse shows a wheat pod or flower bud on the other. Some people believe that the ruler Hari Singh got the coins struck in his own name by getting the word 'Har' inscribed over them. But many people also claim that the word

'Har' has been used for the Supreme power. The above said statement may be asserted by observing the names- 'Harmandir', 'Har ki Paudi', etc.

²¹ Ibid., 11.

Features of the coins minted during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh

The coins are mostly in circular or circle- like shapes usually in copper or silver. The coins minted before his era, commonly read inscriptions in Persian language but he got into use the Gurmukhi and Devanagri scripts also apart from the Persian script. During his time the Sikh numismatic art reached a higher level particularly in terms of Calligraphy and the representation of symbols and art motifs. The use of symbols as an important part of the Sikh coinage in the Majha region of Punjab was introduced during the reign of Maharaja. Through these symbols, the Coins became a powerful source to dive deep into the religious and artistic ideology of that era. Apart from the Persian and Mughal influences in the coinage, one can notice the Arabic impact as well, for example the Arabic word 'Fulu' which means a copper coin, was the another name for paisa in his reign. The use of words 'Ram', 'Har' and the symbols like 'Swastika' highlights the secular policy of the monarch which could also be seen during Akbar's time. The depiction of natural elements such as 'leaf', 'crescent', 'flower', 'buds', 'berries', 'twig' further adds to the beauty and thus enhancing its aesthetical value. The use of profile view in depicting the human portraiture clearly indicated the Mughal art influence over art in north and northwestern regions of India.

After the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, these symbols were used with little modifications. In 1840, Nau Nihal Singh, following the secular policy of his grandfather, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, issued coins with the symbols 'Om' and 'Kangha' inscribed over them. Other symbols which were used under various Sikh rulers were 'Leaf', 'Nishan Sahib', 'Double Nishan Sahib', 'Sat', 'Shiv' and 'Ram'.

Conclusion

The concerned study focuses on the iconography used in the Sikh coinage, highlighting the coinage of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The paper puts into limelight, the interrelation of art, religion, and society during his regnal years. The numismatic art was more refined and aesthetically rich

as compared to the earlier Sikh coinage. The use of symbols as an important part of the Sikh coinage in the Majha region of Punjab was introduced during the reign of Maharaja. Through these symbols, the Coins became a powerful source to dive deep into the religious and artistic ideology of that era. The simplified forms of the symbols and motifs give the coins a unique expression and thus providing these coins a significant status in the Indian art history. The revival of Vaishnavite, Shaivite and Devi cults during the 19th century Punjab found its exposure through the state issues of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Thus, the Sikh coinage of his time unveils the Impact of Hindu revivalism on the art and culture of the 19th century Punjab. The symbols used over his coinage were afterwards followed by the Dogras of Jammu after they established their independent kingdom. The coins of Maharaja Ranjit Singh provided a framework for the upcoming coinages in Punjab and nearby areas.

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