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## DASHAVATARA ON INDIAN COINS

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### Abstract:

*In the evolution of living species, it has been universally acknowledged that man represents the final stage, as the most evolved and sentient living creature. His first task had been to adjust himself with nature and other species. This close intimacy between man and nature was eventually reflected in art, sculpture and subsequently in coins. Culture is a collective activity. Art cherishes culture and culture creates art. Art and Culture gives rise to all human creativity and interaction.*

### KEY WORDS:

Creature, Nature, Sculpture, Art and Culture.

### INTRODUCTION

Art was the prime medium of expression; it has served the purpose of expressing the thought, belief and action of man very effectively. The primary concern of man in the very early days of civilisation was survival. Identifying all natural elements as deities endowed with supreme power, he started worshipping them, to protect him from natural calamities. This became his religion, and the various aspects of this religious life found expression in the fine arts. Numismatic evidences help us in reconstructing the religious values cherished in the olden days. Representation of various deities on coins, give us an excellent idea of the dominant religious leanings at a given time and place. Dashavataras of Vishnu are very popular. Artistic and imaginative depiction of avataras of Vishnu or representation of different motifs belonging to the avatar concept is a fascinating study.

It is an established scientific fact that life evolved on earth under water and Matsya avatar as fish incarnation symbolizes the forming of protoplasm and vertebrates. The mythical story behind Matsya avatar is also like Hindu variety of Biblical Noah or vice versa. This incarnation was taken by lord Vishnu during a deluge that submerged the earth. Vishnu commanded Manu (the progenitor of mankind) to gather samples of all species and wait in a boat. The gigantic golden fish then dragged the boat through the deluge and then enabled Brahma to start the act of creation all over again.

In Koormavatar, lord Vishnu took the form of a tortoise, which is an amphibious creature capable of living both on land and in water. It indicates the moving of life form from underwater to surface of the Earth. Lord Vishnu took the form of a gigantic tortoise to offer his back as a pivot on which to rest the Mount Mandara, used as a churning stick by gods and demons during Churning of the Ocean.

Varahavatar is the third incarnation of lord Vishnu and indicates life form has moved out of water and has adapted to land. Varah means boar and is a complete animal. The mythical version of this incarnation state that in Varah avatar, lord Vishnu lifted the earth out of the flood water after deluge which it had been submerged.

In Narasimhavatar fourth incarnation, lord Vishnu appeared on earth as half man-half lion.

This report has been submitted to Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Classical Dance (Bharatnatyam).

Vamanavatar is the first full human form of an avatar (incarnation) as a dwarf symbolizing the transition from the beastly form to human form and development of intelligence. His idols found are short, with a paunch and facial expression of a child adorning the sacred thread. In one hand holding an umbrella and a baton with the other.

The next four incarnations in this list of Dash avatar record advances in human civilization.

Parasuram was a forest dwelling hermit armed with an axe. This incarnation is unique. This is the only one of the traditional ten avatars that is not a direct descent of lord Vishnu. Also there is no separate mythological text about him unlike the incarnations preceding him. Only one comes across stories about Parasuram in the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and in some Purans. He is also one of the seven immortal ones as stated in Hindu mythology.

Ram avatar is one of the two most popular incarnations of lord Vishnu. Rama symbolizes society. The ability to live in cities, have laws, and many other things.

Balarama is portrayed with plough symbolizing the beginning of full-fledged cultivation. He is some time included as eighth incarnation in the list of Dashavatar and some school of thought replaces him by Krishna as eighth incarnation and instead adds Buddha in this list as ninth incarnation.

Krishna is the most popular incarnation of lord Vishnu and is the "one who knows sixty four arts" indicative of man's advancement in science, culture and civilization.

So far Lord Vishnu appeared nine times on earth and tenth, Kalki as a destroyer is expected at the end of the Kaliyuga.

#### MATSYA-KURMA MOTIFS ON INDIAN COINS

The Indus valley civilisation of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa regionalization era reaching back to the Neolithic period almost 5500-2600BC, there however is no consensus on whether the seals excavated from the sites were in fact coins. The first documented coinage is deemed to start with 'Punch Marked' coins issued between the 7th-6th century BC and 1st century AD. These coins are called 'punch-marked' coins because of their manufacturing technique. Mostly made of silver, these bear symbols. The fantasy and fascination of Indian mind for different varieties of animals make the coins of India highly kaleidoscopic. The first coins in India were [minted](#) around 6th century BC by the Mahajanapadas of the Indo-Gangetic Plain, much before the invasion of Alexander the Great in 4th century BC. The coins of this period were punch marked coins called Puranas, Karshapanas or Pana. They are mentioned in the [Manu](#), [Panini](#), and [Buddhist](#) Jataka stories and lasted three centuries longer in the south than the north (600BCE-300CE). During the Mauryan period (322-185BC), punch marked coins continued to be issued in large quantities. The style of these coins is not artistic, but they do show recognizable designs such as [Buddhist](#) Shrines and Chaitya, or animals such as the [elephant](#), [horse](#), [lion](#), etc. On the reverse side of the coins is depicted the so-called [Ujjain](#) symbol, which is "a cross with four circles at the end of the two crossing lines." The fish symbol is generally depicted in pairs and also in a tank (Uddehikas early 2nd C. B.C.). Sometimes a group of boars is also found on some punch-marked coins.

Animal symbols on the punch marked coins of the Mahajanapadas.

Janapada-Symbol on coins have been identified as under  
 North Panchal-Fish motif  
 Vanga desha-Ship, Chakra and six arrows  
 Magadha-Five symbols (sun, chakra, Fish, Turtle, bow-arrow)  
 Chedi-Lotus and fish  
 Andhra-Chakra with three fish motifs  
 Ujjain, Eran, Mathura-Fish motif  
 Ayodhya-Fish symbol with swastika  
 Takshashila-Fish motif on a pole

In the following table the emblem of some of the principal dynasties of Deccan and South India is given:

Sl. No.	Name of the Dynasty	Emblem
1.	Chalukya	Boar
2.	Rashtrakutas	Bull
3.	Kalachuri	Bull and Garuda
4.	Kadamba (Mysore and the Kanara region)	Hanuman
5.	Yadava (Devagiri)	Lion, Garuda and Hanuman
6.	Hoyasala (Jaipur, Belgaun, Dharwer region)	Tiger
7.	Ganga	Bull
8.	Mysore Hindu rulers	Elephant, Siva and Parvati
9.	Pallava (South Deccan)	Bull, Lion, ship, Fish, turtle.
10.	Chera (present day Kerala, and Bow Coimbatore and sales district)	Fish.
11.	Pandya (South and South-East Tamilnadu)	Fish
12.	Chola (Eastern Tamilnadu)	Tiger.

The Pandyas coins have been discovered at Madurai and other places in the Pandyan region. The coins of this dynasty are mostly in copper and sometimes in silver. They are usually die-struck but some are punch-marked. The motifs appearing on the obverse of the Pandyan coins are the elephant, horse, bull, tortoise, fish, Sivalinga, svastika, domed temple, etc. Some of these coins bear legends on the reverse in the Tamil language and Tamil Brahmi script which convey the name or the title of the ruler. The reverse of most of their coins portrays the fish which was their dynastic emblem. The copper coins of the Pandyas, besides the fish emblem also included the Chola standing figure or the Chalukyan devices associated with a fish. Among the ancient coin motifs the depiction of a Fish motif was very popular in north and south India. But the relationship of these motifs with Vishnu's dashavataras is not clear. The importance given to these motifs indicates that these symbols had religious importance in some ancient cults.

#### VARAHA

The evidence relating to the presence of wild boar is available from the prehistoric rock paintings in India. A number of seals from Mohenjodaro depict the wild boar in different forms.

In the gold coins of the kings of Nala dynasty of Central India, the words 'Shri-Varaharaja' and Shri Varaha are found embossed over the obverse of the coins. Though these legends refer to the ruler of the dynasty in the 5th century A.D., "shri Varaha" could possibly be interpreted to mean Varaha form of Vishnu as well.

Vishnu on coins of north India is not evident. However, in the region of the Gangetic valley, in mid-9th century AD, we come across the Varaha avatara (incarnation) of Vishnu on a coin of Mihira Bhoja. Mihira Bhoja I (836-885 CE) or Bhoja I was a ruler of the [Gurjara Pratihara dynasty of India](#). Bhoja was a devotee of [Vishnu](#) and adopted the title of Adivaraha which is inscribed on some of his coins. On a beautiful gold coin, the Varaha is shown holding Mother Earth by the tusk, with one hand on hip and the other on the knee of a raised leg. Adivaraha, the boar incarnation of Vishnu, wears a long "Vanamala" to right with his left leg raised. Below is a small lion, to the right a sun-wheel (chakra) symbol, a moon symbol and another dumb-bell-like symbol is above and a trident and conch shell on the left and a two-lined inscription Shrimad Adi Varaha.



Aadivaraha Vishnu Avatar Pratihara King Raja Bhoja (850-900CE)

This depiction matches very well with the adivaraha representation in cave no.5 of Udayagiri (M.P.). A similar motif is also found on a coin of Srimadadivaraha, identified with Mihira Bhoja. Vinayakapala, a successor of Mihira Bhoja, also shows the Varaha on his copper issues.



Purvi Chalukya, Shaktivarmana & Rajaraja Chalukya (Punch-marked Gold Coins)

Eastern Chalukya princes Shaktivarman(1000-1020AD) and the coin of Raja Raja-I (1019-1059 A.D.) bear the dynastic symbol of boar facing left flanked by a lamp stand on either side and surmounted by ankusa (elephant goad), a chhatra (parasol) and two chauries (fly-whisks) punched in the centre. The coin of Bharavarman Sundar Pandya I bear the symbol of Varaha with the sun and moon on Obverse. It also has an inscription "Sundar Pandya". The Vijayanagara Empire from 1336–1646, was situated in southern India and had a complex currency system. The structure of Vijayanagara currency was carefully standardized. The monetary system was made uniform throughout the empire. The standard unit of coin issued by the [Vijayanagara Empire](#) or [Varaha](#) of 3.4 gr. was also called the Hon, [Gadyana](#) or a [Pon](#) and came in the Ghattivaraha, Doddavaraha and Suddhavaraha coin. In the gold coins issued, the different coins came in Varaha; this is used as a reference for the value of other coins. These coins, now, are not just relics of the past. They furnish information pertaining to contemporary political, economic and cultural history.

#### NARASIMHA

The lion symbol gained more popularity than the horse in subsequent times. It came to symbolise power and might and ultimately royal dignity. Its entry in Indian art and mythology could have been from Western Asia. The earliest coins to bear lion figures were issued by the foreign rulers, i.e. the Indo-Greek kings called Pantaleon (C.185-175 B.C.) and Agathocles (180-165 B.C.). However, the lion device also

appeared on the Indian silver punch-marked coins. Lion symbol appears on the indigenous coin of Taxila, Agaras (Punjab) (late 2nd C.B.C.), Rajanyas (Punjab), Rajasthan (C. 1st C.B.C.) and Malva. The Buddhist contact with lion further transformed it as the power of the seeker of the liberation from all bonds of nature; The Buddha has been described as “Sakyasimha” i.e. the lion of Sakyas.

From the coinage point of view, the reign of Kumara Gupta (c. 415-455) is very significant. Kumara Gupta issued different type of artistic coins. On some coins, half body of the king and the date in Gupta era have been briefly represented on the obverse. Some of the coins also contain Greek signs. 'Parama bhagavata maharajadhiraj Sri Kumar Gupta Mahendraditya' is also written on the obverse of the coin. The coins of Simha-mahendra type have a Sanskrit legend, “sakshadiva narasimho simhamahendro jayatanisham”. This is in Upageeti vritta. It suggests that the king himself is Narasimha avatar of Vishnu. The Satavahana coins clearly show the lion motif and also on the coins of The Kadambas of Goa (11th C.A.D.) depiction of the lion motif can be found. Some special coins issued by Vishnukundin (5th C.A.D.) show the depiction of the lion on one side and the conch shell on other side.

By AD 1185, Yadava King [Bhillama V](#) had established his rule throughout the Maratha country, establishing his capital at Devagiri near present day Aurangabad ([Maharashtra](#)). The kingdom was a powerful presence in the thirteenth century, constantly involved in warfare with the south and north. The [gold](#) coin found during the prominence of Yadavas of Devagiri was not flat, but cup shaped due to the force of the central punch. These coins of [Yadavas of Devagiri](#) called 'padma tankas' in the literature from their central motif of a padma or lotus. It also bears the lion symbol. The Vijayanagara Empire fulfilled its mission for three and half centuries when it patronised and nourished the ancient Hindu culture of the country. The Coins issued by Harihararaya (AD 1376-1404) represent Lakshmi Narasimha sitting on obverse.

Vijayanagar (Gold Coin), Vira Harihararaya (AD 1376 - 1404)



Obverse:- Lakshmi Narasimha sitting Reverse:- Sri Pratapa Harihara in three lines (Nagari)

Metal: Gold

#### VAMANA

Some of the special coins that are issued by Kumara Gupta and Samudra Gupta can be mentioned below.

#### CHHATRA TYPE:

There is a figure of a king with a dwarf having a chhatra or umbrella. The left hand of king is on his sword and his making offerings by his right hand. The figure of a goddess is present on the reverse side of the coin.

Precise significance of the dwarf figure is not known.

#### PARASHURAMA

The Guptas were Vaishnavas and we find many symbols & emblems representing Vaishnava thought on their coins.

Samudragupta (c.335-375CE) issued different types of gold coins. His Battle-axe type is

important as it shows the 'Battle-axe' motif on the obverse, the King standing and holding a battle-axe in the left hand and his right hand is resting on the waist; sometimes a sword is also seen hanging from his belt. This variety has the letter Kri (presumably for Kritanta) under the king's arm. Circular Brahmi legend "Kritantaparashurjayatyajitarajayetajitah", describes the irresistible prowess of the emperor and states that "Victorious is the conqueror of unconquered kings, himself invincible and a veritable battle-axe of the God of Death". The legend is a line in Prithvi metre. We do not find the name of a particular deity written on the coin.

### RAMA

Among the later and post-Vijayanagar issues, we find Rama and Lakshmana (with or without Sita). These coins are also in gold.



Post Vijayanagar Ram-Seeta-Lakshaman(Gold Coin)

The three centuries between the 10th and 13th centuries AD was a period in Indian history when several Rajput families emerged to take control of specific territories in north and central India. One of these powers, The Kalachuris of Tripuri (Madhya Pradesh), introduced the gold coins depicting Rama with a bow, inscribed with 'Shri' and 'Ra' on the left side and 'Ma' on the right side. After the arrival of the Muslims in India coins became more verbally informative, and lost their pictorial depictions. The Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556-1605A.D.) brought some new introduction on the pattern of coins. He introduced the effigy of Rama and Sita. This coin, popularly called the 'Ram-Siya' type was issued in both gold and silver and bears the embossing of the protagonist of the Hindu epic Ramayana and his wife Sita on obverse whereas a word 'Ramaraj' in Devanagari script on reverse.



Akbar (AD 1556-1605) this coin was issued in both gold & silver



A rare 1818 coin minted by the East India Company, now in possession of Sh. Ashok Kamboj, Dehra Dun, a collector of rare manuscripts and coins, shows Rama, Lakshmana and Seeta and Hanuman.



East India Company Coin 1818, Rama Setu: Sri Rama pattabhishekam

#### KRISHNA-BALARAM

Agathocles Dikaios was a [Buddhist Indo-Greek](#) king, who reigned between around 190 and 180 BCE. He might have been a son of [Demetrius](#) and one of his sub-kings in charge of the [Paropamisade](#) between [Bactria](#) and [India](#). Coin of Agathocles with Hindu deities: Vasudeva-Krishna and Balarama-Samkarshana are interesting finds. The Hinduist coinage of Agathocles is few but spectacular. Six Indian-standard silver drachmas were discovered at Ai-Khanoum in 1970, which depict Hindu deities. These are the first known representations of Vedic deities on coins, and they display early Avatars of Vishnu: Balarama-Sankarshana and Vasudeva-Krishna. The dancing girls on some of the coins of Agathocles and Pantaleon are also sometimes considered as representations of Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu.

Krsna, Agathocles coin  
Balarama, Agathocles coin  
Ai Khanoum, Afghanistan, 2nd century B.C.

#### BALARAM & KRISHNA



Agathocles Balaram Krishna 1st century BC

Excavations at Ai-Khanum, along the border of Afghanistan and the Soviet Union, conducted by P. Bernard and a French archaeological expedition, unearthed six rectangular bronze coins issued by the Indo-Greek ruler Agathocles. The coins had script written in both Greek and Brahmi and, most

interestingly, show an image of Vishnu, or Vasudeva, carrying a Chakra and a pear-shaped vase, or conch shell, which are two of the four main sacred symbols of God in Vaisnavism. Many other finds of ancient coins also prove the antiquity of Krishna worship in India.

Vaisnavism was entrenched in the entire Indian society. In the famous Nanaghat Cave Inscription in the state of Maharashtra, where Vasudeva and Sankarshana (or Krishna and Balarama) are included in an invocation of a brahmin. Additionally, Raychaudhuri reports: The Nanaghat Inscription shows further that the Bhagavata [Vaisnava] religion was no longer confined to Northern India, but had spread to the south and had captured the hearts of the sturdy people of Maharashtra. From Maharashtra it was destined to spread to the Tamil country and then flow back with renewed vigour to the remotest corners of the Hindu world. On epigraphical grounds, this inscription is dated conclusively as coming from the second half of the first century BC.

The blending of the symbols of various dynasties on the Pandyan coins, were perhaps indicative of their conquests and defeats. A few of these coins bore the names Sundara, Sundara Pandya or merely the letter 'su' were etched. Some of the coins bore a boar with the doubtful legend 'Vira-Pandya' on one side and the figure of Venu Gopala (Murlidhara Krishna) on the flip side of the coin. It had been said that those coins were issued by the Pandyas and the feudatories of the Cholas but could not be attributed to any particular king. Both gold and silver coinage was used in the Yadava kingdom of South India. The figure of Dancing Krishna is depicted on the King Singhana's (1200-1247A.D.) coin.

#### VENKATESA AND BALAKRISHNA

The Ganda bherunda motif on coin appeared during the time of Achyutaraya which is a unique phenomenon in the numismatic history. On Vijayanagar coins, particularly on the gold coins of Krishnadevaraya (c.150-1529), is Krishna (also depicted as Bala Krishna), with conch and Chakra on either side of the deity.



Krishnadevaraya (C. 150-1529) Bala Krishna

The rulers of Karnata dynasty (1570-1646 A.D.) seem to have been much influenced by Vaishnavism. Venkatesa is prominently seen on their coins with Sankha and Chakra, the two main attributes of Vishnu. His vehicle Garuda and his incarnations as Rama and Varaha are found on the coin of Tirumalaraya (1570-1573 A.D.) During the last thirty years of the declining days of the kingdom, Vaishnavism dominated not only the capital but also at the local centres. During this period Vishnu in almost all the forms of his incarnation, appeared on the local coin.

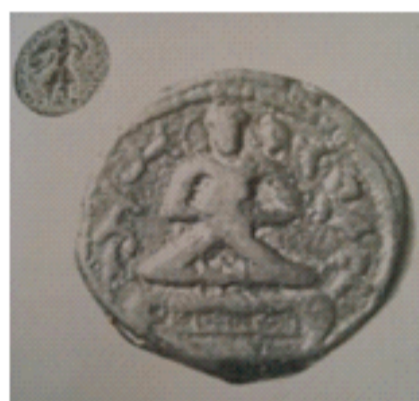
#### BUDDHA

Kanishka (128-154 AD) is the legendary ruler of ancient India and according to most historians the greatest ruler of Kushan dynasty. He was the first ruler of the ancient world ever to show shoulder flames and nimbus around the royal head on his coins (giving himself the divine status). He and his descendents called themselves 'Devputra' which means son of god, who ruled Aryavarta, or India. Kalhana, a poet and historian of Kashmir, who wrote a famous chronicle of Kings of Kashmir, 'Rajatarangini', a crucial historic document, testified that Kashmir was part of his empire. He also built a city called Kushka in Kashmir which was named after him. He was the first ruler (and perhaps only one in ancient world) who minted coins with image of Buddha. The coins depicting Buddha are extremely rare. There exist only 5 gold coins (2 dinars and 3 quarter dinars) in the world having portrait of Buddha. There are some copper coins which

show Buddha which are also rare. All these coins have been minted by Kanishka, most likely to commemorate the building of the great stupa of Purushpur (modern Peshawar, in Pakistan). There are two types of Buddha coins, Standing Buddha, Gautam, and sitting Buddha, Maitraya. Shown above is a very good example of Kanishka's coin portraying him sacrificing at the altar on obverse, while reverse shows Buddha sitting in his Abhaydan pose. Also shown below is another specimen where one can see standing Buddha on reverse of his coin.



Kanishka, Boddo



Kanishka, Boddo seated

### CONCLUSION

Animals have been represented on the coins of India from very ancient period. Almost all the reigning dynasties having sovereign authority to issue coins, have taken some animal motifs for their coins. These symbols not only signify their religious inclination but also pronounce their urge for self-expression. Their presence is still very much available in the modern coinage of India. The advance of science and technology will in no way be a hindrance to love and sympathy for animals.

The north-west was the stronghold of the early foreigners in India; their coins became more Indianised in respect of the deities depicted.

The representation of the boar incarnation of Vishnu, though evolved during the Sunga- Kushana period, became popular in the sculptural art of Gupta period where in both the theriomorphic and therioanthropic type occurred frequently.

Shiva and Vishnu, representing Shaiva and Vaishnava thought respectively, are much in evidence on coins of both north and south India.

The place given to Hindu deities by some medieval Muslim coinages is another significant factor. The reason was certainly to go with what was popular and well-accepted.

Among the ancient coin motifs, a very popular motif was the depiction of a deity on one side and the king's bust on the other. This union of Kingship and Divinity on coins could be a reflection of the importance of a divine inspiration as an instrument of kingship, and also as a popular sanction of the religious beliefs of the time and place.

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