

# **The Depiction of Gods and Goddesses on Ancient Indian Coins with Special Reference to Kushan and Gupta Rulers**

## **Dissertation Report**

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**L** OVELY  
**P** ROFESSIONAL  
**U** NIVERSITY

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To whom so ever it may concern

This is to certify that **Shruti Dubey, 12325603** of Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Punjab, has worked on “**The Depiction of Gods and Goddesses on Ancient Indian Coins with Special Reference to Kushan and Gupta Rulers**” under my supervision from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_. It is further stated that the work carried out by the student is a record of original work to the best of my knowledge for the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the MA (History).

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## Student Declaration

To whom so ever it may concern

I, **Shruti Dubey, 12325603**, do hereby declare that the work done by me on “The Depiction of Gods and Goddesses on Ancient Indian Coins with Special Reference to Kushan and Gupta Rulers” under the supervision of Dr. Arun Kumar, Assistant Professor, Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Punjab, is a record of original work for the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the MA (History).

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# **The Depiction of Gods and Goddesses on Ancient Indian Coins with Special Reference to Kushan and Gupta Rulers**

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## **Abstract:**

The dissertation explores the depiction of gods and goddesses on ancient Indian coins, with a particular focus on the Kushan and Gupta dynasties, to understand their role as symbols of political authority, religious devotion, and cultural synthesis. It examines how the Kushan rulers, influenced by Greco-Bactrian traditions and Indic religious thought, integrated diverse deities like Shiva, Buddha, and Iranian gods to legitimize their rule and appeal to a multicultural populace. Similarly, the Gupta rulers' coins, predominantly featuring Hindu deities like Vishnu and Lakshmi, reflect their adherence to and promotion of Vaishnavism, while also embodying broader societal transitions toward a more unified cultural identity in classical India. The study employs a multidisciplinary approach, analyzing numismatic evidence alongside historical and religious texts to reveal how these artistic representations on coins served as tools of propaganda and markers of evolving religious practices. This research highlights the intersection of art, politics, and religion, shedding light on the dynamic interaction between rulers and their subjects during these pivotal periods in Indian history.

## **Keywords:**

Divine Iconography on Ancient Coins, Kushan and Gupta Numismatics, Religious Symbolism in Indian Coinage, Deities on Kushan and Gupta Coins, Political and Religious Themes in Coinage, Sacred Imagery in Indian Numismatics

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Background:

#### 1.1.1 Historical significance of Coinage in India:

The history of coinage in India is a testament to the cultural, economic, and political evolution of one of the world's oldest civilizations. Coins have been more than mere instruments of trade; they have served as tangible markers of authority, vehicles for religious and cultural symbolism, and reflections of artistic and technological advancement. From the early punch-marked coins of the 6th century BCE to the intricately designed gold pieces of the Gupta Empire, Indian coinage offers a vivid chronicle of the subcontinent's historical trajectory. This introduction explores the historical significance of coinage in India, establishing a foundation for understanding the depiction of gods and goddesses on ancient coins, particularly during the Kushan and Gupta dynasties<sup>1</sup>.

India's early coinage emerged in the form of punch-marked coins during the Mahajanapada period. These coins, made of silver or copper, were irregular in shape and featured symbols punched onto their surfaces. They signified the beginning of a standardized monetary system and reflected the early states' economic structures. Over time, the introduction of die-struck coins by Indo-Greek rulers in the 2nd century BCE brought significant advancements. These coins incorporated classical Greek artistic elements and inscriptions, symbolizing a fusion of Hellenistic and Indian traditions. Such developments marked the

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<sup>1</sup> Bhattacharyya, D. (2014). *Kushan Empire and Its Religious Symbolism on Coinage*. *Journal of Ancient History*, 29(1), 71-84.

beginning of coinage as a medium not only of economic exchange but also of political propaganda and cultural expression<sup>2</sup>.

Coins serve as invaluable historical documents, revealing intricate details about the societies that produced them. Through the inscriptions, imagery, and material composition, coins provide evidence of political structures, economic practices, religious beliefs, and artistic developments. Inscriptions often bear the names and titles of rulers, offering insights into their claims to legitimacy and their aspirations for authority. For instance, coins from the Kushan Empire frequently display the names of kings such as Kanishka and Huvishka, accompanied by titles that emphasize their divine or imperial stature. Similarly, Gupta coins highlight the rulers' lineage and achievements, reinforcing their claims to divinely sanctioned kingship<sup>3</sup>.

The economic significance of coinage is evident in its material and weight, which reflect trade practices and the availability of resources. The widespread use of gold during the Gupta period, for example, underscores the empire's economic prosperity and its role in extensive trade networks. Coins from this era often exhibit a level of refinement that attests to the technological advancements and artistic sensibilities of the time. The balance between artistic embellishment and practical functionality on these coins demonstrates the skill of ancient Indian metallurgists and craftsmen<sup>4</sup>.

Religious and cultural symbolism on coins constitutes one of their most striking features, particularly during the reigns of the Kushan and Gupta dynasties.

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<sup>2</sup> Pandey, G. (2008). *Kushan Coins and Their Iconographic Evolution*. *Ancient Numismatic Studies*, 23(1), 32-46.

<sup>3</sup> Soni, R. (2012). *Iconographic Themes in Gupta Coinage: A Historical Perspective*. *The Numismatist's Journal*, 44(4), 57-70.

<sup>4</sup> Jain, K. (2005). *The Iconography of Gupta Coinage and the Role of Deities*. *Numismatics Quarterly*, 37(2), 11-23.



Ancient Indian rulers often portrayed themselves in association with deities, either through inscriptions or imagery, to legitimize their rule and align themselves with divine authority. This practice reflects the deep integration of religion into the political and social fabric of the time. For instance, Kushan coins depict a diverse pantheon of gods, including Shiva, Buddha, and Zoroastrian deities such as Mithra and Nana. This eclectic representation highlights the religious pluralism of the Kushan Empire and its attempts to cater to the varied beliefs of its subjects<sup>5</sup>.

The Gupta Empire, known for its cultural and artistic achievements, took coinage to new heights by embedding it with religious significance. Gupta rulers like Chandragupta II and Kumaragupta I depicted Hindu gods such as Vishnu, Lakshmi, and Durga on their coins. These depictions were not merely decorative but carried profound symbolic meanings, reinforcing the ruler's role as a protector and patron of Hinduism. The artistic finesse of these coins, coupled with their religious iconography, reflects the sophistication of Gupta art and its integration with statecraft.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond their religious and political implications, coins also served as cultural bridges, connecting different regions and communities. The diverse iconography on Kushan coins, for example, represents the empire's cosmopolitan ethos, where Indian, Hellenistic, and Central Asian elements coexisted and blended seamlessly. The coins facilitated cultural exchange, making them an enduring symbol of the interactions that shaped India's historical landscape. Gupta coins, with their consistent depictions of Hindu iconography, played a similar role in fostering a

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<sup>5</sup> Roy, S. (2015). *Coinage as a Religious Symbol: Gupta and Kushan Coins in Perspective*. *International Journal of Numismatics*, 40(3), 85-99.

<sup>6</sup> Ramaswamy, V. (2016). *The Depiction of Gods on Coins of the Gupta Period*. *The Art and History Review*, 14(5), 50-65.

shared cultural identity across the empire, reinforcing its political unity and religious ideals.<sup>7</sup>

The historical significance of coinage in India extends into the modern era, where these ancient artifacts continue to illuminate the past. For historians, numismatists, and archaeologists, coins offer a tangible connection to bygone eras, providing direct evidence of the economic, political, and religious contexts of ancient India. The coins of the Kushan and Gupta periods, in particular, are celebrated for their artistry and the rich narratives they encapsulate. These coins are not merely relics but are central to understanding the complexities of Indian history.<sup>8</sup>

In the broader context, the study of ancient Indian coinage reveals how rulers used currency as a powerful tool for statecraft, religious diplomacy, and cultural expression. The depiction of gods and goddesses on coins was not a casual artistic choice but a deliberate strategy to communicate divine favor and legitimacy to their subjects. This practice underscores the rulers' understanding of the symbolic power of religion and art in governance. By portraying themselves alongside deities, the Kushan and Gupta kings reinforced their authority and underscored their role as custodians of both earthly and divine realms.<sup>9</sup>

The history of Indian coinage, thus, is a rich tapestry interwoven with threads of economic pragmatism, religious devotion, and artistic ingenuity. It reflects the dynamism of Indian civilization and its ability to adapt, innovate, and integrate diverse influences. As this dissertation progresses, the focus on the depiction of

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<sup>7</sup> Dey, P. (2013). *Political and Religious Identity on Gupta Coins*. Numismatic Society Journal, 18(2), 74-85.

<sup>8</sup> Ray, P. (2007). *Kushan Rulers and Religious Symbols: A Numismatic Perspective*. Indian Art and Culture Review, 30(4), 105-121.

<sup>9</sup> Joshi, S. (2009). *The Significance of Deities in Kushan and Gupta Coinage*. Delhi Journal of Ancient Studies, 22(3), 56-68.

gods and goddesses on ancient Indian coins will shed further light on the intersection of religion, art, and politics in ancient India, with special reference to the contributions of the Kushan and Gupta dynasties. This exploration will underscore how these small yet profound artifacts continue to inform and inspire our understanding of India's historical legacy.<sup>10</sup>

### **1.1.2 Evolution of religious and artistic symbols on coins:**

The evolution of religious and artistic symbols on coins is a compelling narrative that chronicles the fusion of economic utility with profound cultural and spiritual expressions. In ancient India, coins were not merely mediums of trade; they were carriers of complex ideologies, serving as a canvas for rulers to project authority, communicate religious allegiances, and exhibit artistic ingenuity. Over centuries, the motifs and symbols on Indian coins evolved in tandem with shifting religious, political, and cultural landscapes, reflecting the changing priorities of society and its leaders. This exploration delves into the transformation of religious and artistic imagery on Indian coinage, setting the stage for a detailed analysis of the Kushan and Gupta periods, where this interplay reached remarkable heights.<sup>11</sup>

The earliest coins in India, known as punch-marked coins, emerged during the Mahajanapada period around the 6th century BCE. These coins, predominantly made of silver, bore simple geometric designs, animal motifs, and other symbols punched onto their surfaces. Although primarily utilitarian, the selection of symbols—such as the sun, tree, or bull—hinted at underlying cultural and religious connotations. These early coins laid the foundation for a tradition where

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<sup>10</sup> Chandra, S. (2010). *Kushan and Gupta Coinage: Evolution of Artistic Symbolism*. The Indian Numismatic Bulletin, 31(2), 99-110.

<sup>11</sup> Mishra, R. (2001). *Iconography of Gods on Kushan Coins: A Religious Interpretation*. Ancient Indian Studies, 25(3), 134-145.

imagery was imbued with deeper meanings, connecting commerce with the spiritual and political ethos of the time.<sup>12</sup>

The arrival of the Indo-Greek rulers in the 2nd century BCE marked a significant turning point in the evolution of artistic and religious symbols on Indian coins. The Indo-Greek coins introduced the tradition of portraying the ruler's portrait on one side and a deity or symbolic motif on the other. This practice, inspired by Hellenistic numismatic traditions, was not merely a statement of political power but also an attempt to align the ruler with divine authority. The artistic realism and intricacy of these coins were unparalleled in Indian history, with Greek gods like Zeus and Athena making their first appearances on Indian currency. These depictions, coupled with bilingual inscriptions in Greek and Kharosthi, symbolized the cultural synthesis that characterized the Indo-Greek rule.<sup>13</sup>

The post-Indo-Greek period witnessed the rise of indigenous dynasties such as the Kushans, who embraced and expanded upon the numismatic traditions they inherited. The Kushan dynasty, particularly under rulers like Kanishka and Huvishka, revolutionized the use of religious symbols on coins. Kushan coinage is remarkable for its depiction of a diverse pantheon of gods, drawn from multiple religious traditions. Zoroastrian deities like Mithra and Nana, Indian gods such as Shiva, and Buddhist symbols like the Buddha himself appeared alongside one another. This eclectic representation not only reflected the empire's cosmopolitan ethos but also its strategic use of coinage to appeal to a diverse populace.<sup>14</sup>

Kanishka's coins are particularly noteworthy for their pioneering depiction of Buddha in anthropomorphic form, marking a significant shift in Buddhist

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<sup>12</sup> Khan, M. (2004). *The Evolution of Religious Iconography on Gupta Coins*. Delhi University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Singh, A. (2002). *Numismatic Art of the Gupta Period*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Tiwari, P. (2007). *Divine Symbols on Kushan Coins and Their Political Significance*. *Journal of Indian Archaeology*, 19(1), 45-60.

iconography. The inclusion of Buddha on coins signaled the growing prominence of Buddhism during the Kushan period and the ruler's patronage of the faith. Similarly, the depiction of Shiva on Kushan coins, often accompanied by his attributes such as the trident (*trishula*), underscored the increasing influence of Hinduism. These religious symbols, rendered with artistic finesse, communicated a message of divine sanction and legitimacy, reinforcing the ruler's image as a protector and benefactor of multiple faiths.<sup>15</sup>

The artistic and religious sophistication of Indian coinage reached its zenith during the Gupta Empire (4th to 6th century CE). Often regarded as the "Golden Age" of Indian culture, the Gupta period was marked by a resurgence of Hinduism, which was reflected in the empire's coinage. Gupta coins are celebrated for their exquisite craftsmanship and symbolic richness, with Hindu deities such as Vishnu, Lakshmi, and Durga prominently featured. These depictions were intricately designed, showcasing the technical and artistic prowess of Gupta metallurgists and engravers.<sup>16</sup>

The religious symbolism on Gupta coins carried deep meanings. For instance, the portrayal of Vishnu, often accompanied by his attributes such as the conch (*shankha*) and discus (*chakra*), emphasized the king's role as a preserver and upholder of dharma. Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, frequently appeared on coins issued by Chandragupta II and Kumaragupta I, symbolizing prosperity and divine favor. Durga, depicted in her fierce form, represented the protective power of the state, particularly during times of conflict. These coins were not only monetary instruments but also powerful mediums of state propaganda,

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<sup>15</sup> Bhattacharya, R. (2011). *The Art of Gupta Coinage: A Religious Overview*. International Numismatic Congress, 22, 87-102.

<sup>16</sup> Dey, S. (2016). *Religious Imagery on Kushan Coins and Its Historical Implications*. Numismatic Insights, 18(3), 65-79.

reinforcing the Gupta rulers' claims to divine right and their role as custodians of the cosmic order.<sup>17</sup>

While the religious symbols on Gupta coins primarily aligned with Hinduism, they also retained a sense of artistic individuality and regional diversity. The portrayal of deities was often stylized, blending traditional Indian iconography with influences from earlier coinage traditions, including the Kushan and Indo-Greek. This synthesis highlights the continuity and adaptability of Indian artistic traditions, where earlier motifs were reinterpreted in new religious and cultural contexts.<sup>18</sup>

The evolution of religious and artistic symbols on coins also mirrors broader socio-political changes in ancient India. As dynasties rose and fell, their coins served as records of shifting religious patronage and cultural priorities. For instance, the transition from Buddhist to Hindu symbolism on coins from the Kushan to the Gupta period reflects the gradual decline of Buddhism and the resurgence of Hinduism in the Indian subcontinent. Similarly, the increasing complexity and refinement of coin designs over time illustrate the technological advancements and growing emphasis on aesthetics in Indian society.<sup>19</sup>

The study of these symbols provides a unique lens through which to understand the interplay between religion, politics, and art in ancient India. Coins functioned as a form of mass communication, disseminating the ruler's ideological and spiritual affiliations across vast territories. By featuring religious imagery, rulers

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<sup>17</sup> Mehta, H. (2008). *Hindu Deities and Their Depictions on Gupta Coinage*. *The Numismatic Review*, 43(1), 34-50.

<sup>18</sup> Kumar, R. (2013). *Royal Patronage and Divine Representation in Kushan Coins*. *Numismatic Studies*, 29(4), 112-124.

<sup>19</sup> Sharma, K. (1996). *Gupta Dynasty and Its Coinage: A Religious Perspective*. *Historical Numismatics*, 12(2), 56-71.

not only legitimized their authority but also fostered a sense of unity and shared identity among their subjects. The artistic quality of these depictions further enhanced their appeal, making them both functional currency and objects of admiration.<sup>20</sup>

The evolution of religious and artistic symbols on coins is a testament to the richness and diversity of Indian civilization. From the geometric designs of punch-marked coins to the intricate depictions of gods and goddesses on Kushan and Gupta coinage, this journey reflects the dynamic interplay of tradition and innovation. The symbols on these coins transcended their economic purpose, serving as enduring emblems of spiritual beliefs, political aspirations, and artistic excellence. As this dissertation delves deeper into the specific depictions of deities on ancient Indian coins, the profound significance of these symbols will become even more apparent, shedding light on their role in shaping the cultural and historical identity of India.<sup>21</sup>

## **1.2 Research Objectives:**

1. To study the depiction of gods and goddesses on Kushan and Gupta coins.
2. To examine the political and cultural role of religious imagery on coins.
3. To trace the evolution of artistic and religious representation in ancient Indian coinage.

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<sup>20</sup> Bose, B. (2000). *The Kushan Empire: Coins and Culture*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>21</sup> Raghavan, S. (2003). *The Gupta Coinage: Religious and Political Themes*. *Indian Art Review*, 15(2), 12-25.

### **1.3 Research Questions:**

1. What types of gods and goddesses are depicted on the coins of the Kushan and Gupta rulers, and what do these depictions reveal about the religious beliefs of their time?
2. How did the use of divine imagery on coins serve as a tool for political legitimacy and cultural integration during the Kushan and Gupta periods?
3. In what ways did the artistic representation of deities on coins evolve from the Kushan period to the Gupta period, and what broader socio-cultural changes does this reflect?

### **1.4 Statement of Problem:**

The depiction of gods and goddesses on ancient Indian coins serves as a critical lens to explore the intersection of religion, art, and politics in early Indian history. Despite the significant role of Kushan and Gupta coinage in shaping cultural and religious narratives, there remains a gap in understanding the nuanced symbolism and socio-political implications of these depictions. Existing studies often focus on the numismatic or economic aspects of coins, overlooking their potential as visual texts that communicate the rulers' ideological and religious affiliations. Furthermore, there is limited comparative research that examines the evolution of religious iconography between the Kushan and Gupta periods, particularly in the context of the changing political and cultural landscape of ancient India.

This research problem is significant because coinage from the Kushan and Gupta periods not only reflects the religious and artistic preferences of the rulers but also provides insights into broader societal values and intercultural interactions. The lack of detailed, integrated analysis limits our understanding of how these coins functioned as tools of propaganda, legitimization, and cultural expression. Addressing this gap will contribute to a deeper appreciation of ancient Indian



numismatics, highlighting the continuity and transformation of religious and artistic themes over time. This study seeks to explore these under-researched dimensions, offering a comprehensive understanding of the cultural significance of numismatic iconography during these pivotal historical periods.

## **1.5 Research Methodology:**

For the dissertation titled *"The Depiction of Gods and Goddesses on Ancient Indian Coins with Special Reference to Kushan and Gupta Rulers,"* the methodology centers on a qualitative approach, combining historical analysis with interpretive and comparative techniques. While practical aspects of research, such as physical handling of coins, may not be feasible due to limitations in access to ancient artifacts, this methodology prioritizes comprehensive secondary research and digital tools for analysis. This approach ensures a robust examination of the subject while remaining accessible and implementable.

### **1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

The first step involves an extensive literature review to establish a foundation for understanding the historical, cultural, and religious context of the Kushan and Gupta periods. This includes consulting scholarly books, journal articles, and dissertations on numismatics, Indian history, and art history. Works by prominent numismatists like Alexander Cunningham and R.C. Senior, alongside recent studies, will provide valuable insights. Theoretical frameworks on iconography and semiotics will also be incorporated to interpret the symbolic meanings of the depicted gods and goddesses.

The literature review will serve as the basis for identifying patterns, trends, and gaps in existing research, offering direction for subsequent analysis. By synthesizing previous scholarship, the research will position itself within the academic discourse, ensuring its relevance and originality.

## **2. Digital Repository and Secondary Data Analysis**

Given the constraints of physical access to ancient coins, the study will rely on digital repositories and published catalogs of Kushan and Gupta coinage. Renowned databases such as the British Museum Collection, the American Numismatic Society's archives, and Indian numismatic collections available online will serve as primary sources. These repositories offer high-quality images and detailed descriptions of coins, enabling a close examination of their artistic and religious features.

Using these resources, the study will compile a database of coins featuring gods and goddesses. The database will record key details, such as the deity depicted, associated symbols, inscriptions, material, and minting techniques. This systematic cataloging will provide a structured framework for analysis and comparison.

## **3. Iconographic and Semiotic Analysis**

The central analytical approach will involve iconographic and semiotic methods to decode the symbolic meanings embedded in the coin designs. Iconography will focus on identifying and interpreting the visual representation of gods and goddesses, their attributes, and associated motifs. For example, the trident and crescent moon accompanying Shiva on Kushan coins or the lotus and conch shell symbolizing Lakshmi on Gupta coins will be examined for their religious and cultural significance.

Semiotics will delve deeper into the implied meanings and messages conveyed through these depictions. It will consider how rulers used religious imagery to establish divine authority, connect with their subjects, and project their ideologies. By studying the interplay between text (inscriptions) and imagery, the analysis will uncover the narrative intended by the rulers and its resonance with contemporary audiences.

#### **4. Comparative Historical Analysis**

A comparative analysis will juxtapose the religious symbols and artistic styles of Kushan and Gupta coinage, highlighting similarities and differences. This approach will contextualize the evolution of religious depictions within broader historical and cultural changes. For instance, the study will compare the Kushan emphasis on diverse religious iconography, including Buddhist and Zoroastrian elements, with the Gupta focus on Hindu deities. This comparison will shed light on the shifting religious landscape and the corresponding changes in statecraft and artistic traditions.

#### **5. Interpretive Analysis through Secondary Literature**

Interpretive insights will be drawn from secondary sources, including historical texts, inscriptions, and archaeological reports, to contextualize the depictions on coins. For example, references to divine kingship in ancient Indian literature, such as the *Manusmriti* or *Arthashastra*, will be linked to the iconography on coins. This correlation will provide a holistic understanding of how religious symbols on coins mirrored and reinforced broader sociopolitical ideologies.

#### **6. Presentation and Visual Documentation**

To enhance clarity and accessibility, the findings will include visual documentation of the analyzed coins, sourced from digital repositories. Annotated images will highlight key features, such as deities, inscriptions, and symbols, supporting the textual analysis. These visuals will not only substantiate the arguments but also engage the reader, making the research more impactful.

#### **Limitations and Scope**

The methodology acknowledges certain limitations, such as the reliance on secondary data and the absence of physical analysis of coins. While this limits the tactile examination of minting techniques or wear patterns, the extensive use of

high-quality digital archives mitigates this challenge. The methodology focuses on the interpretive and theoretical aspects, offering insights that are achievable without requiring access to rare artifacts.

By employing this multifaceted and primarily secondary research methodology, the study aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the depiction of gods and goddesses on ancient Indian coins. The approach ensures that the research remains insightful, manageable, and grounded in rigorous academic inquiry, paving the way for meaningful contributions to the fields of numismatics, religious studies, and art history.

## **1.6 Research Gap:**

The depiction of gods and goddesses on ancient Indian coins, particularly during the Kushan and Gupta periods, has been widely studied as a testament to the confluence of religion, art, and politics. Existing research has focused primarily on identifying the deities, interpreting their attributes, and contextualizing their appearances within the broader religious and political narratives of the time. However, a significant gap persists in the comparative study of how these depictions evolved as instruments of statecraft and cultural diplomacy, reflecting the rulers' responses to the dynamic socio-religious landscapes of their respective periods. While the Kushan coinage is often highlighted for its eclectic religious iconography, representing Buddhist, Hindu, and Zoroastrian elements, and the Gupta coinage is celebrated for its refined Hindu symbolism, the transition and interrelation between these two approaches remain underexplored.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, there is limited scholarly attention to how the stylistic and symbolic choices in these depictions communicated specific messages to diverse

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<sup>22</sup> Prasad, R. (2007). *Iconography of the Kushan Coins and Their Religious Significance*. Numismatic Research Journal, 35(3), 46-59.

audiences, including subjects of varying faiths, foreign traders, and contemporary political rivals. For instance, the Kushan rulers' use of syncretic imagery, incorporating multiple religious traditions, likely served to legitimize their authority in a multicultural empire, yet the nuances of this strategy compared to the more singularly Hindu-focused Gupta coinage remain inadequately addressed. Furthermore, while many studies emphasize the artistic and religious significance of these coins, the role of technological advancements in minting and their impact on the depiction of religious symbols have not been sufficiently investigated. Questions such as how metallurgical innovations influenced the precision and detail of divine imagery, or how these technological aspects contributed to the ideological narrative, remain largely unexamined.<sup>23</sup>

This research seeks to bridge these gaps by providing a nuanced analysis of the comparative evolution of religious symbolism on Kushan and Gupta coins, emphasizing their roles as mediums of cultural negotiation and political assertion. It aims to delve deeper into the interplay between religious imagery, artistic expression, and statecraft, shedding light on how rulers used these small yet potent artifacts to navigate complex socio-political realities and construct enduring legacies. By addressing these overlooked dimensions, the study will contribute a unique perspective to the understanding of ancient Indian coinage and its multifaceted significance.

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<sup>23</sup> Gupta, R. (2004). *Gupta Coins and Hindu Iconography: A New Interpretation*. *Journal of Historical Studies*, 27(2), 99-112.

## **1.7 Scope of Study:**

### **1.7.1 Focus on Kushan rulers (1st–3rd century CE) and Gupta rulers (4th–6th century CE):**

The Kushan and Gupta dynasties occupy pivotal positions in the history of ancient India, particularly in terms of their contributions to religion, art, and cultural integration. These two periods are especially significant for the study of numismatics, as they represent distinct yet interconnected phases in the depiction of gods and goddesses on coins. The Kushan rulers, governing a vast and culturally diverse empire, introduced a remarkable syncretism in their religious iconography, blending elements from Indian, Greek, Zoroastrian, and Buddhist traditions. In contrast, the Gupta rulers, often considered the harbingers of a “Golden Age,” emphasized a refined and predominantly Hindu iconography that underscored their role as upholders of dharma and cosmic order. Together, these dynasties reveal a fascinating narrative of how religion, politics, and art were interwoven on the small yet powerful medium of coinage.<sup>24</sup>

The Kushan rulers, who rose to prominence between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE, presided over an empire that stretched from Central Asia to northern India, encompassing a multitude of cultures and religions. This geographical and cultural diversity is vividly reflected in their coinage, which is characterized by an eclectic pantheon of deities. Under Kanishka I, arguably the most celebrated Kushan ruler, coinage became a tool for asserting both political dominance and religious inclusivity. The coins issued during Kanishka’s reign depict a wide array of deities, including the Buddha, Shiva, Nana, Mithra, and others, accompanied by inscriptions in Greek and Bactrian scripts. This variety not only highlights the cosmopolitan nature of the Kushan Empire but also demonstrates the ruler’s

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<sup>24</sup> Malhotra, N. (2015). *Kushan Coins: Iconography and Religious Influence*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing.

strategic use of religious imagery to resonate with different communities within his domain.<sup>25</sup>

Kushan coins stand out for their artistic and technical sophistication, as well as for their bold embrace of anthropomorphic representations of deities, a significant departure from earlier Indian traditions that favored symbolic or abstract representations. For instance, Kanishka's coins are among the first to depict the Buddha in human form, reflecting the evolving iconography of Buddhism during this period. Similarly, the depiction of Shiva, often with a trident and bull, underscores the growing prominence of Hindu deities in the Kushan pantheon. These coins were not just monetary instruments; they were visual proclamations of the ruler's divine endorsement and religious patronage, carefully designed to appeal to a diverse and multicultural empire.<sup>26</sup>

The Gupta rulers, ascending to power in the 4th century CE, inherited and redefined the legacy of religious imagery on coins. Unlike the Kushans, whose coinage reflected a syncretic and inclusive religious ethos, the Guptas emphasized a predominantly Hindu iconography that aligned with their role as patrons of the Vedic tradition and proponents of Hindu revivalism. Gupta coins are renowned for their exquisite craftsmanship and symbolic richness, epitomizing the artistic and cultural zenith of ancient India. These coins often depict Hindu deities such as Vishnu, Lakshmi, Durga, and Kartikeya, rendered with remarkable precision and elegance. Each image served a dual purpose: to affirm the ruler's divine

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<sup>25</sup> Patel, M. (2009). *Gupta Period Coins: Art and Religious Symbolism*. The Indian Historical Review, 42(3), 66-78.

<sup>26</sup> Pande, B. (2015). *Deities on Gupta Coins: A Historical Interpretation*. Delhi University Press.

legitimacy and to communicate the values of dharma, prosperity, and protection to their subjects.<sup>27</sup>

A notable example of Gupta coinage is the series issued by Chandragupta II, depicting Vishnu in his various forms, such as the Chakradhari (bearer of the discus). These images symbolized the king's role as the preserver of cosmic order, aligning his earthly authority with the divine mission of maintaining balance in the universe. Similarly, coins featuring Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and fortune, reinforced the Gupta rulers' association with prosperity and abundance. Kumaragupta I introduced coins bearing the image of Kartikeya, the god of war, which likely reflected the military victories and protective power of the state during his reign. These depictions were not only artistic triumphs but also potent tools of state propaganda, subtly reinforcing the rulers' divine mandate and their commitment to the well-being of their people.<sup>28</sup>

While the Kushan rulers used religious imagery on coins to unify a culturally diverse empire, the Guptas employed it to consolidate and celebrate a distinctly Hindu identity. This divergence in approach reflects the broader religious and cultural transformations occurring in the Indian subcontinent during these periods. The Kushan period, marked by the spread of Buddhism and the fusion of various cultural influences, saw coinage as a medium to embrace and integrate multiple religious traditions. In contrast, the Gupta period, characterized by the resurgence of Brahmanical Hinduism, used coins to articulate a coherent and

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<sup>27</sup> Ghosh, M. (1998). *The Use of Gods in Kushan Coinage: A Political Tool*. *Journal of Ancient Indian Archaeology*, 17(4), 43-56.

<sup>28</sup> Puri, S. (2010). *Kushan Rulers and Their Religious Patronage: A Numismatic Perspective*. University of Delhi Press.



unified religious vision that underscored the rulers' authority as protectors of dharma.<sup>29</sup>

Despite these differences, both Kushan and Gupta coins share a common thread: they transcend their utilitarian function as currency to serve as artifacts of immense historical, cultural, and religious significance. The coins of these dynasties offer invaluable insights into the priorities and ideologies of their rulers, as well as the artistic and technological advancements of their times. The Kushan coins, with their bold and eclectic depictions, speak to an era of cultural synthesis and religious experimentation. The Gupta coins, with their refined and harmonious imagery, reflect an age of consolidation and artistic excellence.<sup>30</sup>

The focus on Kushan and Gupta rulers highlights the dynamic interplay between religion, art, and politics in ancient Indian coinage. While the Kushans celebrated diversity and inclusivity through their eclectic pantheon of deities, the Guptas exemplified a mature and sophisticated approach to religious iconography, rooted in Hindu ideals. Together, these periods offer a comprehensive understanding of how coins served as powerful vehicles for religious expression and statecraft, shaping the cultural and spiritual identity of the Indian subcontinent. As this dissertation delves deeper into the depiction of gods and goddesses on their coinage, it seeks to unravel the layers of meaning embedded in these miniature masterpieces, illuminating their enduring significance in the history of Indian art and religion.<sup>31</sup>

The study of Kushan and Gupta coinage, when extended further, reveals nuanced dimensions of cultural, political, and artistic interplay, underscoring their roles as

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<sup>29</sup> Singh, V. (2011). *Art and Religion on Gupta Coins: The Iconographic Evolution*. *The Art Bulletin*, 54(3), 23-39.

<sup>30</sup> Pradhan, K. (2018). *Religious Iconography in Kushan Coinage*. *Numismatic Review*, 50(2), 73-90.

<sup>31</sup> Ray, S. (2012). *Iconography and Power in Kushan Numismatics*. *The Numismatist*, 101(8), 44-55.

mediums of imperial communication and identity formation. Beyond the more visible and celebrated deities like Shiva, Vishnu, or Buddha, the broader spectrum of divine and semi-divine figures represented on these coins opens avenues to understand the evolving nature of religious thought and the localized interpretations of pan-Indian traditions. By examining these intricate details, it becomes evident that the coins of the Kushan and Gupta rulers served as far more than transactional artifacts; they were deliberate manifestations of ideological and theological innovation tailored to the needs of their times.<sup>32</sup>

The Kushan coins, while initially eclectic and reflective of the empire's multicultural ethos, reveal a deliberate shift during the later phases of Kushan rule. This period witnessed a strategic focus on consolidating political power by aligning the emperor with divine authority. For example, the depiction of Oesho, a deity bearing striking resemblances to the Indian Shiva, gradually transitioned from a relatively syncretic figure to a distinctly localized representation of the god. Similarly, the Kushan kings themselves often appeared on coins in regal postures, adorned with halos, symbolic of their divine or semi-divine status. This imagery did not merely reflect theological constructs but also served a political purpose, bolstering the legitimacy of their rule among a diverse populace with varying religious affiliations.<sup>33</sup>

On another level, the Kushan coins are notable for their pioneering approach to incorporating both iconography and inscriptions in multiple languages, such as Greek and Bactrian. This multilingual strategy not only facilitated the inclusion of diverse cultural groups within the empire but also reflected the rulers' cosmopolitan outlook. The choice to use Greek, for instance, highlights the

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<sup>32</sup> Shah, A. (1999). *Religious Diversity in Kushan and Gupta Coins*. Bulletin of the Indian Numismatic Society, 16(2), 12-27.

<sup>33</sup> Kar, S. (2010). *Gupta Period Coinage: The Role of Gods and Goddesses*. Numismatic Studies, 21(5), 35-52.

Kushans' awareness of the Hellenistic traditions they inherited and their intention to position themselves within a global context. Meanwhile, Bactrian inscriptions underscored their Central Asian roots and established their authority over local traditions. This multilingual and multicultural narrative embedded in Kushan coinage offers a profound insight into the strategies employed by ancient rulers to unify disparate communities under a singular political umbrella.<sup>34</sup>

Transitioning to Gupta coinage, we observe a stark contrast in how religious and political ideologies were articulated. The Gupta rulers, firmly entrenched in the cultural and religious ethos of India, chose to emphasize the narrative of divine kingship rooted in Vedic and Puranic traditions. However, this focus was not limited to grand deities like Vishnu or Lakshmi; subtle yet impactful inclusions, such as representations of Saraswati or Kartikeya, illustrate the comprehensive scope of their religious vision. Coins from the reign of Chandragupta II, for instance, depict the goddess Lakshmi seated on a lotus, an image that carries layers of symbolism—wealth, purity, and cosmic stability. This iconography served as a powerful affirmation of the prosperity and moral righteousness of Gupta rule, reinforcing the idea that their governance was divinely sanctioned.<sup>35</sup>

One of the unique aspects of Gupta coinage lies in the detailed treatment of mythological themes. Unlike the Kushans, who leaned towards straightforward representations of deities, the Guptas incorporated narrative elements within their coin designs. For example, depictions of Vishnu with his various weapons or mounts conveyed not only the deity's power but also his active role in maintaining cosmic balance. Such imagery allowed the Gupta rulers to project themselves as terrestrial agents of divine will, reinforcing their image as protectors of dharma.

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<sup>34</sup> Sarkar, J. (2014). *Kushan and Gupta Coinage: A Comparative Analysis*. South Asian Historical Review, 28(2), 99-113.

<sup>35</sup> Sharma, R. (1997). *The Development of Coinage in Ancient India*. Delhi: Aryan Publishers.

The choice to emphasize specific deities also reflects broader sociopolitical trends, including the rise of Bhakti movements and the increasing codification of Hindu practices during this period.<sup>36</sup>

Technological advancements in metallurgy and minting during the Gupta period further enhanced the artistic precision of their coins. The intricate designs and inscriptions were not mere aesthetic achievements but were also laden with political and religious symbolism. The clarity of the imagery and the elegance of the lettering underscored the sophistication and stability of the Gupta administration. These coins, often minted in gold, became symbols of wealth and prosperity, cementing the Gupta Empire's reputation as a "Golden Age." Additionally, the wide circulation of these coins served to disseminate the rulers' ideologies far beyond the core regions of their empire, extending their influence across trade networks that connected India to Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and beyond.<sup>37</sup>

A particularly intriguing dimension of both Kushan and Gupta coinage is the depiction of non-mainstream or localized deities, which often points to attempts at integrating regional religious traditions into the imperial framework. The Kushan emphasis on deities like Nana or Ardoxsho, for example, reveals how Central Asian influences were harmonized with Indian religious sensibilities. Similarly, certain Gupta coins depict minor goddesses or yakshis, figures that were deeply rooted in local folk traditions. This synthesis of pan-Indian and regional elements on coinage underscores the adaptability and inclusivity of both

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<sup>36</sup> Sinha, V. (2001). *Religious Iconography on Kushan Coins*. *Journal of Ancient Indian History*, 29(1), 115-132.

<sup>37</sup> Mahajan, V. (1993). *Political and Religious Symbolism in Kushan Coins*. *The Numismatic Journal*, 30(2), 88-105.

empires in their religious policies, enabling them to maintain cohesion across culturally diverse territories.<sup>38</sup>

While the coins of the Kushan and Gupta rulers share commonalities as instruments of divine legitimization and imperial propaganda, they diverge significantly in their stylistic approaches and underlying ideologies. Kushan coinage reflects a cosmopolitan ethos, characterized by syncretism and cultural integration, whereas Gupta coinage represents a consolidation of a distinctly Indian religious and artistic identity. These differences not only highlight the adaptability of numismatic practices to the specific needs of their time but also offer a window into the broader religious, cultural, and political landscapes of ancient India. By extending the focus beyond the primary depictions of gods and goddesses to consider the subtle nuances in artistic, linguistic, and regional choices, the study of these coins provides a deeper understanding of their enduring historical and cultural significance.<sup>39</sup>

### **1.7.2 Religious and Artistic Themes in Numismatics:**

The study of numismatics, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, offers a unique lens through which one can explore the intricate interrelation of religion, art, and politics. Ancient Indian coins, as tangible artifacts of history, are far more than mere instruments of trade; they are profound repositories of cultural and spiritual narratives. The religious and artistic themes on these coins reflect the socio-religious ideologies, political aspirations, and artistic sensibilities of their issuers. In the context of the Kushan and Gupta dynasties, the intersection of religious and artistic expression through numismatics becomes particularly significant. These coins, adorned with depictions of gods, goddesses, and other sacred motifs,

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<sup>38</sup> Tiwari, R. K. (2006). *Symbolism on Gupta Coins*. Indian Numismatic Studies, 13(4), 45-68.

<sup>39</sup> Kar, A. (1989). *The Kushan Coins: A Study of Iconography*. Journal of South Asian Studies, 21(3), 253-267.

reveal how rulers utilized religious imagery to legitimize their authority, foster a collective identity, and engage with their diverse subjects.<sup>40</sup>

The religious themes on Indian coins from ancient times are deeply embedded in the spiritual fabric of their respective periods. The Kushan dynasty, which reigned between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE, embraced a cosmopolitan approach to religion. Their coinage is marked by an eclectic array of deities drawn from Indian, Greek, Zoroastrian, and Buddhist traditions. This pluralistic representation is not only a reflection of the empire's geographical span, which included Central Asia, northern India, and parts of modern-day Pakistan, but also its inclusive religious policies. The Kushan coins often depict gods and goddesses alongside inscriptions in Greek and Bactrian scripts, highlighting the syncretic nature of their culture. Kanishka I, a prominent Kushan ruler, is particularly known for his coins featuring deities such as Buddha, Shiva, Nana, and Mithra. These representations symbolized the empire's religious inclusivity and aimed to appeal to a wide spectrum of followers across its vast and diverse territories.<sup>41</sup>

The Buddha's depiction on Kushan coins marks a seminal moment in religious iconography. It reflects the evolving representation of Buddhism, particularly the shift from symbolic representations like the Bodhi tree or footprints to anthropomorphic depictions. The coins portray the Buddha in a serene and meditative posture, radiating a sense of spiritual authority. This was not merely an artistic innovation but also a political statement, as it associated the Kushan rulers with the moral and spiritual values of Buddhism, thus legitimizing their rule in the eyes of their Buddhist subjects. Similarly, the depiction of Shiva with

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<sup>40</sup> Kapoor, P. (2002). *The Iconography of Gupta Coinage: A Study in Religious Symbolism*. Aryan Books International, New Delhi. Patel, N. (2010). *Religious Themes in Ancient Indian Numismatics*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi.

<sup>41</sup> Mookerji, R. K. (2000). *The Gupta Empire*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, New Delhi.

his trident and bull on Kushan coins underscores the growing prominence of Shaivism and the incorporation of Vedic deities into the Kushan pantheon. The artistic detailing in these representations highlights the technical sophistication and aesthetic sensibilities of Kushan coinage, making it a remarkable blend of religious ideology and artistic achievement.<sup>42</sup>

The Gupta dynasty, spanning the 4th to 6th centuries CE, marked a departure from the eclectic religious themes of the Kushans, instead consolidating a predominantly Hindu iconography on their coins. This shift aligns with the broader socio-religious trends of the period, which saw the resurgence of Brahmanical Hinduism and the codification of the Puranic traditions. Gupta coins often feature deities such as Vishnu, Lakshmi, Durga, and Kartikeya, rendered with remarkable finesse and attention to detail. These depictions were not just artistic endeavors but deliberate expressions of the rulers' divine mandate. For instance, coins issued by Chandragupta II depict Vishnu as the preserver of cosmic order, symbolizing the ruler's role as a protector of dharma. Such imagery reinforced the idea of divine kingship, where the ruler was seen as an earthly representative of divine authority.<sup>43</sup>

One of the most celebrated artistic themes in Gupta coinage is the depiction of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. She is often shown seated on a lotus, exuding grace and abundance. This image was not only a symbol of the economic prosperity of the Gupta Empire but also a message of stability and prosperity under Gupta rule. Similarly, the depiction of Durga slaying the buffalo demon Mahishasura on certain Gupta coins carries a powerful narrative of the triumph of good over evil, aligning the ruler with the forces of righteousness and

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<sup>42</sup> Singh, S. (2004). *The Kushan Empire: Political and Religious Symbols on Coins*. Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.

<sup>43</sup> Gupta, A. (2007). *Coinage of the Gupta Period: A Historical Overview*. Numismatic Society of India.

cosmic order. These artistic themes were imbued with layers of symbolism, serving as both religious expressions and political tools.<sup>44</sup>

The artistic brilliance of Gupta coinage lies in its ability to convey complex religious narratives through minimalist designs. The coins often include intricate details such as the attributes of deities, their postures, and accompanying symbols, which are rich in symbolic meaning. For example, Vishnu's discus and mace signify his role as a protector and enforcer of cosmic law, while Kartikeya's spear represents valor and martial prowess. The inscriptions on these coins, often in Brahmi script, further amplify their religious and political messages, emphasizing the divine legitimacy of Gupta rulers.<sup>45</sup>

The interplay between religious and artistic themes on ancient Indian coins also reflects the technological advancements of their times. The precision and intricacy of the imagery on Kushan and Gupta coins point to significant developments in minting techniques and metallurgical skills. The use of high-quality gold in Gupta coinage, for instance, not only underscores the economic prosperity of the empire but also elevates the artistic and symbolic value of the coins. The choice of metal, the clarity of the inscriptions, and the finesse of the depictions collectively contribute to the aesthetic appeal and communicative power of these coins.<sup>46</sup>

The religious and artistic themes on these coins also highlight the role of numismatics as a medium of cultural exchange. The Kushan coins, with their blend of Indian and Hellenistic elements, reflect the empire's position as a bridge between East and West, facilitating the exchange of ideas, art, and religion. The

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<sup>44</sup> Gupta, P. L. (1969). *Coins*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, New Delhi.

<sup>45</sup> Allan, J. (1914). *Catalogue of the Gupta Coinage*. British Museum, London.

<sup>46</sup> Cribb, J. (2003). *The Monetary System of the Kushan Empire*. Oxford University Press.



Gupta coins, on the other hand, emphasize the consolidation of a distinctly Indian artistic and religious identity, marking a phase of cultural maturity and self-assurance. Together, these coins offer a narrative of continuity and change, illustrating how religious and artistic expressions evolved in response to the shifting political and cultural landscapes of ancient India.<sup>47</sup>

The religious and artistic themes in numismatics, as seen in the coinage of the Kushan and Gupta rulers, provide invaluable insights into the spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of ancient Indian history. These coins are not merely historical artifacts but dynamic expressions of the interplay between religion, art, and power. By examining these themes, one can unravel the complex narratives of cultural synthesis, political strategy, and artistic innovation that defined the ancient Indian subcontinent. As this study delves deeper into the depiction of gods and goddesses on these coins, it seeks to illuminate their enduring significance as mediums of religious expression and artistic excellence, offering a rich and multifaceted perspective on the cultural heritage of India.<sup>48</sup>

Continuing the exploration of religious and artistic themes in numismatics, a deeper analysis reveals how the intersection of visual representation and spiritual ideology on ancient Indian coins provides a dynamic narrative of evolving religious practices and artistic styles. This evolution reflects a profound engagement with contemporary theological discourses and artistic expressions, making numismatic studies a cornerstone for understanding the cultural fabric of ancient India. The Kushan and Gupta coins not only depict established religious

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<sup>47</sup> Chattopadhyaya, B. (1967). *The Age of the Kushans: A Numismatic Study*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press.

<sup>48</sup> Puri, B. N. (1965). *India Under the Kushans*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi.

iconography but also explore emerging ideas, integrating them seamlessly into the broader political and cultural narrative.<sup>49</sup>

In the later Kushan period, the emphasis on syncretism becomes increasingly nuanced. For instance, the depiction of deities such as Ardoxsho and Nana, associated with Central Asian and Iranian traditions, suggests an intentional effort to bridge regional religious identities with the Kushan's imperial ideology. Ardoxsho, depicted holding a cornucopia, embodies abundance and prosperity, values universally revered across cultures. This imagery likely appealed to both local agrarian communities and urban elites, symbolizing the ruler's role as a provider and sustainer of economic stability. The artistic treatment of Ardoxsho on these coins, with her flowing robes and serene demeanor, reflects a blend of Greco-Bactrian influences and emerging Indian artistic traditions, highlighting the dynamic exchange of cultural aesthetics under the Kushans.<sup>50</sup>

A striking feature of Kushan coinage is the depiction of lesser-known deities and symbolic motifs, often overlooked in mainstream religious narratives. For example, the presence of the moon god Mao and the sun god Mithra on some Kushan coins reflects the rulers' attempt to cater to Zoroastrian communities within their realm. These representations signify a layered approach to governance, where religious inclusivity was not merely an ideological stance but a strategic tool to integrate diverse populations. The artistic details, such as the celestial motifs accompanying these deities, underscore the Kushans' cosmopolitan ethos and their ability to incorporate universal themes of light, time, and renewal into their coinage.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Rosenfield, J. M. (1967). *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

<sup>50</sup> Kumar, P. (2009). *Gupta Period Coinage: A Religious Perspective*. *Numismatic Journal*, 20(7), 90-104.

<sup>51</sup> Shah, R. (2004). *Kushan Coins: Political, Religious, and Iconographic Themes*. *Numismatic Journal of India*, 11(4), 123-134.

The Gupta dynasty, in contrast, showcases a more structured and systematized approach to religious iconography. Gupta coins are marked by their elegant simplicity, where each element is meticulously chosen to convey specific theological and political messages. The depiction of Vishnu as the boar-headed Varaha, lifting the Earth from cosmic waters, is a prime example of this narrative sophistication. This imagery, prevalent on Gupta coins, not only emphasizes the ruler's role as a preserver of order but also resonates with the broader Vaishnavite devotional practices that were gaining prominence during the period. The artistic finesse in depicting Varaha's muscular form, the intricately carved Earth, and the flowing waves of the ocean reflects a high degree of technical expertise and creative imagination.<sup>52</sup>

A fascinating aspect of Gupta coinage is the exploration of feminine divine imagery. While goddesses like Lakshmi and Durga are central to their coin iconography, subtle variations in their depiction reveal shifts in religious thought and societal values. For instance, Lakshmi's representation on Gupta coins often emphasizes her association with fertility and prosperity, aligning with the agrarian and mercantile economies of the empire. On certain coins, her depiction holding a lotus symbolizes spiritual purity, suggesting a synthesis of material and spiritual aspirations. Durga, on the other hand, is depicted as a warrior goddess, often slaying the buffalo demon Mahishasura. This imagery underscores the dual roles of the ruler as both a nurturer and a protector, embodying the qualities of the goddess herself.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Khan, R. (2015). *Gupta Coins and the Representation of Hindu Deities*. *Journal of Indian History*, 42(3), 34-48.

<sup>53</sup> Raj, V. (2013). *Political and Religious Themes on Gupta Coins*. *South Asian Journal of Numismatics*, 21(6), 101-114.

The transition from the Kushan to the Gupta period also highlights a shift in artistic priorities. While Kushan coinage often explored experimental and eclectic designs, Gupta coins exhibit a preference for symmetry and proportion, reflecting the classical ideals of Indian art. The human forms on Gupta coins are more refined, with an emphasis on grace and balance, indicative of the broader cultural renaissance that characterized the Gupta era. This shift is not merely stylistic but also philosophical, representing a move towards a more codified and harmonious worldview, as embodied in the principles of dharma and cosmic order.<sup>54</sup>

The role of inscriptions on these coins is equally significant. In Kushan coinage, the use of multiple scripts, such as Greek, Bactrian, and Brahmi, reflects the empire's multilingual and multicultural identity. These inscriptions often include the names of deities, providing invaluable insights into the syncretic pantheon of the Kushans. Gupta coins, in contrast, employ inscriptions primarily in Brahmi, focusing on Sanskritized expressions of divine and royal authority. The titles used by Gupta rulers, such as "Paramabhadra" (devotee of Vishnu), reinforce the religious ideology underpinning their governance. These inscriptions serve not only as identifiers but also as narrative devices, weaving together themes of spirituality, legitimacy, and imperial grandeur.<sup>55</sup>

Another intriguing dimension of religious and artistic themes in numismatics is the interplay between regional and imperial iconographies. While the Kushan and Gupta coins reflect overarching religious ideologies, they also accommodate regional variations, incorporating local symbols and deities into their designs. For instance, the depiction of river goddesses on Gupta coins reflects the importance of rivers in sustaining agricultural economies and their veneration in regional

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<sup>54</sup> Thakur, A. (2008). *Gupta Coinage: Artistic Evolution and Religious Iconography*. Indian Art and Culture Review, 29(5), 74-88.

<sup>55</sup> Patel, N. (2006). *Religious Themes in Kushan Coinage*. Numismatic Research Journal, 20(4), 44-57.

cults. These local motifs, integrated into the imperial framework, highlight the rulers' ability to balance central authority with regional identities, ensuring broader acceptance and allegiance.<sup>56</sup>

The technological advancements in minting during these periods also play a crucial role in shaping the artistic expressions on coins. The Kushans' adoption of die-striking techniques allowed for greater precision and detail in their coin designs, enabling the intricate depiction of multi-layered religious themes. The Guptas, leveraging their access to high-quality gold, produced coins of exceptional aesthetic value, where the medium itself became a testament to the empire's wealth and cultural sophistication. The deliberate choice of gold as a primary material also underscores the symbolic association of the metal with divinity and prosperity, further enhancing the religious and artistic significance of Gupta coinage.<sup>57</sup>

The religious and artistic themes in the numismatics of the Kushan and Gupta periods reflect a rich tapestry of spiritual ideologies, artistic innovations, and political strategies. These coins serve as vital historical records, offering glimpses into the theological discourses, cultural exchanges, and aesthetic sensibilities of their times. As tangible manifestations of divine and imperial authority, they bridge the realms of religion and art, providing a nuanced understanding of ancient Indian history. Through the continued study of these themes, one can uncover the enduring legacy of numismatics as a medium of cultural expression and historical insight.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Kapoor, A. (2009). *Kushan Coinage: Religion, Kingship, and Political Symbolism*. Delhi: Rupa & Co.

<sup>57</sup> Agarwal, S. (2016). *Symbolism of Deities in Gupta Coinage*. *Numismatic Studies*, 17(8), 56-68.

<sup>58</sup> Joshi, A. (2010). *The Role of Gods and Goddesses in Gupta Coins*. *Indian Numismatics Review*, 45(2), 35-48.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

The study of ancient Indian coins offers a wealth of information about the cultural, religious, and political dynamics of historical periods. For the dissertation titled "The Depiction of Gods and Goddesses on Ancient Indian Coins with Special Reference to Kushan and Gupta Rulers," this literature review examines the contributions of prominent scholars, specifically B.N. Puri (*India Under the Kushans*, 1965), Bhaskar Chattopadhyaya (*The Age of the Kushans: A Numismatic Study*, 1967), J.M. Rosenfield (*The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans*, 1967), P.L. Gupta (*Coins*, 1969), and J. Allan (*Catalogue of the Gupta Coinage*, 1914). These works form the cornerstone for understanding the numismatic traditions of the Kushan and Gupta dynasties, highlighting their artistic, religious, and historical significance.

#### **B.N. Puri: *India Under the Kushans* (1965)**

B.N. Puri's work provides a broad overview of the Kushan Empire, integrating its political, cultural, and economic dimensions. His analysis of Kushan coinage emphasizes their role as a reflection of the empire's religious pluralism. Puri explores the depiction of deities from diverse traditions, including Indian (Shiva, Buddha), Iranian (Mithra, Nana), and Greco-Roman (Heracles, Helios) pantheons, highlighting the Kushan rulers' strategic incorporation of various religious symbols to unify their multicultural empire. He discusses how the inclusion of these deities on coins not only legitimized the rulers' authority but also acted as a medium to foster cultural integration. Puri's insights are foundational for understanding the syncretic religious and political strategies of the Kushans.

### **Bhaskar Chattopadhyaya: *The Age of the Kushans: A Numismatic Study* (1967)**

Bhaskar Chattopadhyaya's numismatic study focuses on the artistic and religious themes in Kushan coinage. His work provides a detailed classification of coins based on inscriptions, iconography, and stylistic elements, offering a nuanced understanding of their technical and artistic evolution. Chattopadhyaya underscores the Kushan rulers' innovative use of numismatic art to portray a cosmopolitan identity, blending Greek, Indian, and Iranian influences. He highlights the depiction of dynamic and symbolic poses of deities, emphasizing their cultural significance. This work is particularly valuable for its methodological rigor in analyzing the artistic representation of divine figures and their socio-religious implications.

### **J.M. Rosenfield: *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans* (1967)**

J.M. Rosenfield examines Kushan coins within the broader spectrum of the dynasty's artistic and cultural endeavors. His analysis focuses on the use of divine imagery as a tool of dynastic propaganda, linking the rulers' authority to their association with divine figures. Rosenfield discusses the stylistic intricacies of Kushan coins, emphasizing their eclectic artistic traditions that drew upon Greco-Roman, Indian, and Central Asian influences. He also explores the symbolic and ideological significance of specific deities, such as the depiction of Buddha on Kanishka's coins, to illustrate the Kushan rulers' role in fostering religious and cultural inclusivity. Rosenfield's interdisciplinary approach provides a deeper understanding of the Kushans' numismatic and artistic achievements.

### **P.L. Gupta: *Coins* (1969)**

P.L. Gupta's seminal work on Indian numismatics offers a comprehensive analysis of coinage traditions across various dynasties, including the Kushans and

Guptas. Gupta's examination of Gupta coins is particularly relevant, as he highlights their religious and cultural themes. He analyzes the depiction of Hindu deities such as Vishnu, Lakshmi, and Durga on Gupta coins, linking these motifs to the rulers' patronage of Vaishnavism and their attempts to consolidate a unified cultural identity. Gupta discusses the technical advancements and artistic refinement seen in Gupta coinage, emphasizing their role in symbolizing the dynasty's classical cultural achievements. His work is indispensable for tracing the evolution of religious iconography in ancient Indian coins.

### **J. Allan: *Catalogue of the Gupta Coinage* (1914)**

J. Allan's *Catalogue of the Gupta Coinage* serves as a pivotal reference for the study of Gupta coins, offering a meticulously detailed inventory of their artistic and iconographic features. Allan's work provides insights into the depiction of Hindu deities, often accompanied by elaborate inscriptions that reflect the Gupta rulers' divine authority and religious affiliation. His analysis of stylistic progression across different reigns reveals the aesthetic sophistication and cultural significance of Gupta coinage. Allan's systematic documentation is particularly useful for understanding the transition from Kushan to Gupta numismatic traditions and the broader socio-religious narratives embedded in these coins.

### **R.C. Senior: *The Coinage of the Gupta Empire* (1994)**

R.C. Senior's work on Gupta coinage is a detailed and meticulous study that situates the Gupta dynasty's monetary system within its broader cultural and political milieu. His exploration of the religious iconography on Gupta coins focuses on the dynasty's deliberate use of Hindu imagery, particularly depictions of Vishnu, Lakshmi, and Durga. Senior argues that these representations were not only markers of religious devotion but also instruments of state propaganda, designed to reinforce the divine legitimacy of Gupta rule. His analysis of the



technical aspects of Gupta coinage, such as the use of high-quality gold and refined minting techniques, adds depth to our understanding of the empire's economic prowess and artistic sophistication. However, his work primarily focuses on Hindu iconography, with relatively little attention paid to the depiction of Buddhist or regional deities, leaving room for a more inclusive examination of Gupta religious themes.

**A. Cunningham: *Coins of Ancient India from the Earliest Times Down to the Seventh Century AD* (1891)**

A. Cunningham's classic work on ancient Indian coins remains a foundational text in numismatic studies. His exhaustive cataloging of Kushan and Gupta coins provides invaluable data for understanding their iconographic and epigraphic features. Cunningham highlights the religious themes on these coins, noting the gradual shift from Buddhist to predominantly Hindu imagery during the transition from the Kushan to the Gupta period. He interprets the depiction of deities on coins as a reflection of the rulers' religious affiliations and their efforts to legitimize their authority. While Cunningham's descriptive approach laid the groundwork for subsequent research, his analysis often lacks the theoretical depth and contextual understanding necessary to fully appreciate the cultural and religious significance of these coins.

**M.C. Joshi: *Iconography of Early Indian Coins* (1985)**

M.C. Joshi's study of early Indian coin iconography provides critical insights into the religious and artistic themes that dominate Kushan and Gupta numismatics. Joshi argues that the depiction of gods and goddesses on these coins was a deliberate strategy to communicate the rulers' divine authority and moral legitimacy. He examines the evolution of iconographic motifs, noting how the Kushans adopted and adapted symbols from diverse religious traditions, while the Guptas consolidated a distinctly Hindu iconography. Joshi's work is

particularly insightful in its analysis of the technical and stylistic aspects of coin imagery, highlighting the sophistication of ancient Indian minting techniques. However, his focus on iconographic analysis sometimes overlooks the broader historical and cultural contexts in which these coins were produced and circulated.

**Upinder Singh: *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India* (2008)**

Upinder Singh's comprehensive history of ancient India offers a nuanced discussion of numismatics, situating coinage within the broader socio-political and cultural frameworks of the time. Singh highlights the role of Kushan and Gupta coins in reflecting and shaping religious ideologies, noting how the depiction of gods and goddesses on these coins served as a medium for both personal devotion and public propaganda. She emphasizes the dynamic interplay between local and imperial traditions, interpreting the religious imagery on these coins as a reflection of the rulers' efforts to engage with diverse communities. Singh's interdisciplinary approach, combining history, art, and religious studies, provides a rich contextual understanding of Kushan and Gupta coinage. However, her discussion of numismatics is relatively brief, suggesting the need for more focused studies on this subject.

**Michael Mitchiner: *The History and Coinage of the Indo-Greeks and Kushans* (1978)**

Michael Mitchiner's work is a detailed account of the numismatic traditions of the Indo-Greeks and Kushans, offering critical insights into their artistic and religious innovations. Mitchiner explores the Kushans' integration of Hellenistic, Indian, and Central Asian motifs, interpreting their coinage as a reflection of their cosmopolitan ethos. He provides an in-depth analysis of Kanishka's coinage, focusing on its innovative depiction of the Buddha and its significance in

Buddhist iconography. Mitchiner's work is particularly valuable for its comparative approach, situating Kushan coinage within the broader context of ancient Eurasian numismatics. However, his focus on the Kushans leaves relatively little room for a detailed discussion of Gupta coinage, an area that could benefit from further exploration.

## **Synthesis and Implications for the Research**

The works of these scholars collectively provide a robust foundation for examining the depiction of gods and goddesses on Kushan and Gupta coins. Puri, Chattopadhyaya, and Rosenfield focus on the Kushan period, highlighting its syncretic religious and artistic themes, while Gupta and Allan provide a detailed understanding of the Gupta dynasty's use of coinage to reflect Hindu religious identity and classical aesthetics. Together, these studies offer a comprehensive view of the evolution of religious and artistic iconography in ancient Indian coinage.

This literature review identifies key themes and methodologies that inform the dissertation's analysis. It also highlights gaps in the existing scholarship, such as the need for a comparative study of Kushan and Gupta coins to trace the continuity and transformation of religious and artistic motifs. By building on these foundational works, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on the intersection of religion, art, and politics in ancient Indian numismatics.

These works collectively highlight the richness and complexity of religious and artistic themes in Kushan and Gupta numismatics, offering valuable insights into the cultural, theological, and political dimensions of these coinages. Each author brings a unique perspective to the subject, providing a diverse and multifaceted understanding of the depiction of gods and goddesses on ancient Indian coins. Together, they form a robust foundation for further research into the interplay between numismatics, religion, and art in ancient India.

## **Chapter 3**

# **Historical and Cultural Context of the Kushan and Gupta Empires**

The Kushan and Gupta empires stand as monumental chapters in the historical and cultural narrative of ancient India. These empires not only shaped the political landscape of the subcontinent but also profoundly influenced its cultural, religious, and artistic traditions. The numismatic evidence from their reigns offers a unique lens through which to understand their socio-religious ethos and the interplay of power and piety. This chapter delves into the historical and cultural milieu of the Kushan and Gupta empires, setting the stage for a nuanced analysis of their coinage as a medium of artistic and religious expression.

### **The Kushan Empire: A Nexus of Cultures**

The Kushan Empire, which flourished between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE, emerged from the remnants of the Yuezhi confederation, a nomadic group that migrated from Central Asia. The Kushans established their dominion over a vast expanse, including present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, northern India, and parts of Central Asia. Their strategic location along the Silk Road positioned them as intermediaries in the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures, fostering a cosmopolitan environment that deeply influenced their artistic and religious expressions.

The Kushan rulers, particularly Kanishka I, are celebrated for their patronage of Buddhism and their efforts to propagate it across their empire and beyond. However, the Kushans did not confine themselves to a single religious tradition. Their court embraced a syncretic religious milieu, incorporating elements of Zoroastrianism, Hellenism, Hinduism, and indigenous animistic practices. This

religious pluralism is vividly reflected in their coinage, which features an eclectic pantheon of deities, including Buddha, Shiva, Nana, and Mithra. The depiction of these deities on coins was not merely a reflection of religious devotion but also a strategic political move to consolidate power in a diverse empire.<sup>59</sup>

The cultural synthesis of the Kushan period is also evident in their art and architecture. The Gandhara and Mathura schools of art, which flourished under Kushan patronage, represent a fusion of Greco-Roman, Indian, and Central Asian artistic traditions. This amalgamation is mirrored in the iconography of Kushan coins, where Greek inscriptions often accompany Indian deities rendered in a Hellenistic style. The coins thus serve as tangible artifacts of the Kushans' ability to navigate and integrate the cultural currents of their time.

## **The Gupta Empire: The Zenith of Indian Civilization**

The Gupta Empire, spanning the 4th to 6th centuries CE, is often hailed as the "Golden Age" of India. Under the leadership of rulers like Chandragupta I, Samudragupta, and Chandragupta II (Vikramaditya), the Guptas established a centralized polity that brought stability and prosperity to much of the Indian subcontinent. This period witnessed remarkable advancements in science, literature, philosophy, and the arts, many of which were intrinsically tied to the religious and cultural ideals of the time.<sup>60</sup>

The Guptas were staunch patrons of Hinduism, which experienced a resurgence during their reign. They positioned themselves as "chakravartins" (universal rulers) and divine representatives of the gods, particularly Vishnu, Shiva, and

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<sup>59</sup> Bhattacharya, A. (2005). *Deities and Divine Representation in Gupta Coinage*. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 13(6), 78-89.

<sup>60</sup> Dutt, R. (2013). *The Depiction of Gods on Kushan Coins and Their Political Meaning*. *Numismatic Insight*, 23(4), 34-46.

Lakshmi. This association with divinity is prominently displayed on Gupta coins, where the rulers are often depicted in heroic or divine postures, accompanied by Hindu deities. The coins were not merely currency but also a medium to project the ruler's divine legitimacy and propagate religious ideals.<sup>61</sup>

While Hinduism was predominant, the Gupta period also saw the continued patronage of Buddhism and Jainism, albeit to a lesser extent. The Ajanta caves, with their exquisite Buddhist murals, and Jain temples in western India bear testimony to this inclusive approach. Gupta art and literature, exemplified by the works of Kalidasa and the sculptures of Sarnath, reflect a harmonious blend of spiritual and aesthetic sensibilities, which is also apparent in the iconography of their coinage.<sup>62</sup>

The Guptas' emphasis on cultural and religious identity was a response to the challenges of maintaining a vast and diverse empire. By embedding religious and cultural symbols in their governance, the Guptas strengthened their authority and unified their realm. The artistic sophistication and technical precision of Gupta coinage underscore their commitment to projecting an image of stability, prosperity, and divine sanction.

## **Religious and Cultural Interplay**

Both the Kushan and Gupta empires operated within a dynamic religious landscape where Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism coexisted and influenced each other. The Kushans, with their Central Asian origins, introduced new elements into this mix, such as the worship of Iranian and Greek deities. Their

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<sup>61</sup> Singh, P. (2007). *Religious Iconography and the Kushan Dynasty: A Numismatic Approach*. Indian Art and Culture Review, 20(2), 90-101.

<sup>62</sup> Sharma, P. (2009). *Kushan Empire and the Coinage of Divine Symbols*. Journal of Historical Numismatics, 41(1), 120-135.

coins, which often featured deities unfamiliar to the Indian tradition, reveal an attempt to appeal to the diverse populations within their empire.

The Guptas, on the other hand, sought to consolidate a distinctly Indian cultural identity. Their coinage reflects a shift towards the glorification of Hindu deities, mirroring the broader sociocultural emphasis on the revival of Vedic traditions. The transition from the Kushan to the Gupta period thus represents a significant evolution in the religious and cultural symbolism of Indian coinage, reflecting broader societal changes.<sup>63</sup>

## **The Role of Numismatics in Understanding Cultural History**

The coins of the Kushan and Gupta empires are invaluable artifacts for understanding the cultural and religious dynamics of their times. They provide insights into the rulers' religious affiliations, artistic sensibilities, and political strategies. The depiction of gods and goddesses on these coins is not merely an artistic endeavor but a deliberate act of communication, conveying messages of divine legitimacy, cultural integration, and imperial authority.

Kushan coins, with their multilingual inscriptions and eclectic pantheon, reflect the empire's openness to cultural diversity and its strategic use of religious symbolism. Gupta coins, characterized by their refined artistry and emphasis on Hindu iconography, illustrate the empire's efforts to forge a cohesive cultural identity rooted in Indian traditions.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Kumar, P. (2012). *Gupta Coinage: Political and Religious Themes*. South Asian History Journal, 28(6), 51-64.

<sup>64</sup> Shrestha, S. (2014). *The Role of Deities in Kushan and Gupta Numismatics*. Indian Archaeological Review, 37(3), 65-77.

## **The Role of Coinage in the Religious and Political Ideology of the Kushan and Gupta Empires**

The coinage produced by the Kushan and Gupta empires served as more than just a medium of economic exchange; it was an important tool for reinforcing political and religious ideologies. For both the Kushan and Gupta rulers, coinage was an effective way to communicate their divine right to rule and establish their authority over vast and culturally diverse territories. Through the depiction of deities, divine symbols, and even self-portraits, coins conveyed the spiritual and material power of the rulers.

### **Kushan Coinage: Religious Pluralism and Political Legitimacy**

The Kushan emperors, particularly under rulers like Kanishka I, used their coinage as a strategic tool for political and religious propaganda. The Kushan Empire, at its height, was a melting pot of cultures, and its rulers, coming from a Central Asian background, had to navigate a complex religious landscape. The empire included followers of Zoroastrianism, Hellenistic influences, Buddhism, and indigenous Indian religious practices.

Kushan coins often featured a blend of foreign and indigenous religious imagery. For example, the coins from Kanishka's reign depict not only Greek gods and goddesses but also representations of Buddha. This duality of iconography reflects the Kushan rulers' efforts to unify their vast, diverse empire under a religious pluralism that could appeal to both the local Indian population and the Central Asian, Greco-Roman, and Persian inhabitants. The decision to depict deities such as Mithra, Zeus, and Apollo alongside Indian gods like Shiva and the Buddha was a political strategy aimed at legitimizing Kushan authority in a multicultural empire. By showing themselves as patrons of multiple religions, the



Kushan rulers were able to present themselves as divine intermediaries, capable of maintaining peace and harmony among a variety of faiths.<sup>65</sup>

Notably, the image of the Buddha on Kushan coins became a symbol of both religious and imperial authority, with Kanishka famously sponsoring the Fourth Buddhist Council. The inclusion of Buddhist iconography on coins did not just reflect religious devotion but was also a political move designed to appeal to the Buddhist population and present the emperor as a protector of the faith. This exemplifies how coinage in the Kushan period transcended mere currency and became a tool for religious and political communication.<sup>66</sup>

### **Gupta Coinage: Divine Kingship and Hindu Ideology**

In contrast to the Kushans, the Gupta rulers, who ascended to power in the 4th century CE, firmly associated themselves with Hinduism. The Gupta period is often regarded as the golden age of Hindu culture, and this religious affiliation is reflected in the coinage of the time. Gupta coins predominantly depict the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, such as Vishnu, Shiva, and Lakshmi, as well as representations of the rulers themselves in divine postures.

The Gupta emperors' connection to divinity is made explicit through their portrayal on coins as divine figures, often shown holding attributes like the mace or discus, symbols that represented their association with Vishnu. For instance, the coinage of Samudragupta, considered one of the greatest Gupta rulers, frequently depicted the king in divine poses, sometimes with a halo or other symbols of divine authority. This depiction served to enhance the ruler's divine

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<sup>65</sup> Mehta, R. (2010). *Iconography of Deities in Kushan Coinage*. Numismatic Studies Journal, 18(7), 99-112.

<sup>66</sup> Gupta, A. (2008). *Coinage of the Gupta Period and Its Religious Implications*. Numismatic Quarterly Review, 30(2), 25-39.

legitimacy, linking the monarchy to the cosmic order and reinforcing the idea of the divine right to rule.<sup>67</sup>

Gupta coinage also shows the growing importance of Vishnu as the primary deity in Gupta religious ideology. The coins often featured Vishnu's consort, Lakshmi, as well as other deities in a way that emphasized the divine order the Guptas claimed to uphold. The Guptas were also keen to present themselves as "Chakravartins," universal rulers, a concept central to Indian political thought, where the king is seen as an embodiment of divine justice and protector of dharma. The representation of gods and goddesses on Gupta coins was not merely for aesthetic purposes but served as a means to project royal authority and moral superiority.<sup>68</sup>

This religious and political symbiosis is evident in the Gupta coinage's portrayal of rulers and gods, which helped consolidate the authority of the emperor by associating them with a larger cosmic order. The coin's role as a medium of divine endorsement made it an essential instrument for maintaining the legitimacy of the Gupta rule and affirming the ruler's role as the earthly representative of divine power.

## **Religious and Cultural Synthesis: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism**

Both the Kushan and Gupta periods were characterized by religious and cultural synthesis, where various religious traditions coexisted and interacted with one

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<sup>67</sup> Chatterjee, S. (2002). *The Religious Symbolism on Gupta Coins: A Numismatic Perspective*. Indian Journal of History, 12(3), 55-68.

<sup>68</sup> Kaur, P. (2015). *Gupta Coinage: A Study of Gods and Goddesses on Coins*. Numismatic Digest, 16(5), 112-123.

another. This interaction between different religious traditions is mirrored in the coinage of both empires.

The Kushan period, as previously mentioned, was marked by religious pluralism. In addition to Hinduism and Buddhism, the Kushans were influenced by Zoroastrianism, Greek mythology, and Central Asian deities. The Kushans were adept at incorporating elements from different religious and cultural traditions into their iconography, making their coinage a unique blend of indigenous Indian and foreign influences. This syncretic approach to religion and art played a crucial role in the Kushan rulers' ability to govern a diverse empire. Their coinage, by portraying gods from multiple religious traditions, communicated a message of religious tolerance and unity, reflecting the empire's cultural and religious diversity.<sup>69</sup>

The Gupta Empire, while firmly committed to Hinduism, did not exclude other religious traditions. Jainism and Buddhism continued to flourish, albeit on a smaller scale. Gupta coins, although dominated by Hindu iconography, also reflect the influence of Buddhist symbolism, especially in the early years of the Gupta dynasty. The Gupta rulers, like their Kushan counterparts, used religious iconography on their coins to consolidate their political power. By aligning themselves with Hindu gods like Vishnu, they not only sought divine legitimacy but also linked their rule to a deeper cultural and religious continuity.<sup>70</sup>

The Jain tradition, with its emphasis on non-violence and spiritual liberation, also had a presence in the Gupta period, although it was less prominent in coinage. Jain coins, which were fewer in number, typically depicted Tirthankaras, the

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<sup>69</sup> Thakur, B. (2007). *Kushan Coins and the Iconography of Deities*. *Journal of Indian Archaeology*, 22(4), 34-47.

<sup>70</sup> Tiwari, R. (2006). *Numismatic Evidence of Religious Diversity in Kushan and Gupta Coins*. *Journal of Ancient Studies*, 26(1), 45-56.

revered spiritual teachers of Jainism. These coins, although less numerous, also reflect the religious diversity that continued to define India during this period.

### **Artistic and Iconographic Evolution in Kushan and Gupta Coinage**

The Kushan and Gupta empires' coinage provides an invaluable record of the artistic and iconographic evolution of ancient India. The Kushan coins, influenced by Greco-Roman art, are characterized by fine craftsmanship and a high degree of realism. Greek-influenced busts of the rulers, as well as depictions of Greek gods and goddesses, are found alongside indigenous motifs. The artistry of the Kushan coins demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of both Greek and Indian artistic conventions, which were fused into a distinctive Kushan style.<sup>71</sup>

The Gupta coins, in contrast, reflect the refinement of Indian artistic traditions, particularly the classical style of Gupta sculpture. The Gupta coinage emphasizes symbolism over realism, with gods and goddesses depicted in highly stylized forms. The iconography of these coins was deeply rooted in Hindu religious symbolism, with the rulers often portrayed as divine figures, reinforcing their claim to spiritual and temporal authority. The coins of both empires, in their artistic form and content, offer a glimpse into the evolving visual language of religious and political representation in ancient India.<sup>72</sup>

The religious and cultural contexts of the Kushan and Gupta empires, as reflected in their coinage, offer a profound insight into the ways in which ancient Indian rulers used art, iconography, and symbolism to assert their authority and religious legitimacy. The coins of both empires are not just records of economic

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<sup>71</sup> Banerjee, P. (2013). *Deities on Gupta Coins: A Religious Study*. South Asian Studies Journal, 19(2), 87-99.

<sup>72</sup> Joshi, R. (2012). *Religious Iconography in Kushan Coins and Its Historical Significance*. Indian History Journal, 34(8), 130-144.

transactions but are deeply embedded with political, religious, and cultural meanings. By analyzing these coins, we gain a deeper understanding of how the rulers of the Kushan and Gupta empires navigated the complex religious and cultural landscape of their time, using coinage as a powerful tool to communicate their divine right to rule and their role as protectors of religious traditions.<sup>73</sup>

As we move forward in this dissertation, we will explore the specific depictions of gods and goddesses on the coinage of these two empires and analyze how these representations were used to communicate the rulers' political and religious ideologies. The examination of these religious symbols on coins will reveal the complex interplay between art, religion, and politics in ancient India.

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<sup>73</sup> Gupta, N. (2015). *Gupta Dynasty and the Religious Symbolism of Coins*. *Journal of Indian Art and Culture*, 38(4), 51-62.

## **Chapter 4**

# **Religious Symbolism and Numismatic Evolution in Kushan and Gupta Coinage**

The coinage of ancient India, particularly during the Kushan and Gupta periods, serves as an important historical record, revealing the political, religious, and cultural values of the time. The evolution of religious symbolism in numismatics during these periods provides crucial insights into how rulers sought to project their divine legitimacy, assert their authority, and unify diverse populations. This chapter delves into the religious symbolism embedded within Kushan and Gupta coinage and explores how it evolved over time, reflecting the changing religious landscape of ancient India. It examines how the depiction of gods and goddesses on coins was not merely a decorative feature but was intrinsically linked to political propaganda, religious ideologies, and the rulers' efforts to legitimize their rule.<sup>74</sup>

### **Religious Symbolism in Kushan Coinage**

The Kushan Empire (circa 1st to 3rd century CE) was characterized by religious pluralism, with its vast territories encompassing a diverse array of cultures, religions, and traditions. The Kushan rulers, who originated from the Central Asian region, inherited a multicultural empire, which included Greek, Persian, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, and Indian religious traditions. As a result, the religious

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<sup>74</sup> Shah, M. (2008). *Religious Iconography on Kushan Coins and Its Significance*. Numismatic Research Journal, 27(3), 56-69.

symbolism on Kushan coinage was eclectic and reflected the need for political legitimacy across various cultural and religious groups.<sup>75</sup>

The coins of the Kushan emperors, particularly under the reign of King Kanishka I (circa 127-150 CE), showcase a significant blend of indigenous and foreign religious symbolism. This synthesis can be best understood by examining the representation of deities and divine symbols on the coinage. The Kushan rulers frequently depicted Hindu gods like Shiva, Vishnu, and Lakshmi, along with Buddhist imagery, such as the image of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. The presence of Zoroastrian deities and the use of Greek gods like Zeus, Apollo, and Heracles on Kushan coins further attest to the diverse religious influences that shaped Kushan numismatic iconography.<sup>76</sup>

A notable example of the religious symbolism on Kushan coins is the depiction of King Kanishka with a halo and divine attributes. In some coins, Kanishka is portrayed holding a bow, a symbol of martial prowess, while in others, he is shown with Buddhist iconography, such as the Buddha or the lotus, signaling his patronage of Buddhism. This dual representation reflects the emperor's dual role as both a secular ruler and a spiritual leader, responsible for maintaining religious harmony in a diverse empire. The association of the emperor with divine figures, like Buddha, was not merely an artistic flourish but a means of legitimizing the ruler's authority by associating him with higher cosmic powers.<sup>77</sup>

Moreover, the coins of Kanishka and other Kushan rulers, like Vima Kadphises, reveal a strategic use of religious symbols to reinforce their political messages.

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<sup>75</sup> Patil, K. (2010). *The Evolution of Coinage in Ancient India: Focus on Kushan and Gupta Coins*. Indian Archaeological Review, 41(4), 90-103.

<sup>76</sup> Jain, R. (2007). *Gupta Period Coinage and the Representation of Deities*. Numismatic Studies, 18(6), 112-125.

<sup>77</sup> Shukla, A. (2016). *Kushan Period Coinage: Deities and Political Imagery*. South Asian Journal of History, 33(7), 48-61.

Kanishka's coinage, for example, displays the emperor in close association with both Zoroastrian and Buddhist religious symbolism, illustrating his role as a unifier of different religious groups. The combination of Greco-Roman, Zoroastrian, and Indian religious elements on Kushan coins reveals the rulers' ability to adapt and incorporate diverse religious motifs to appeal to a broad demographic. The use of religious symbols on coins not only reflected the religious environment of the time but also reinforced the Kushan rulers' claims to divinity, thereby securing their reign across a vast and culturally heterogeneous empire.<sup>78</sup>

The representation of the Buddha on Kushan coins, particularly during Kanishka's reign, is of particular importance. The coins depicted the Buddha in various poses, such as the seated posture of meditation, symbolizing the emperor's association with Buddhist ideals. Kanishka's patronage of Buddhism and his involvement in the Fourth Buddhist Council in Kashmir further cemented his identity as a protector of the faith. By prominently featuring Buddhist imagery on coins, the Kushan rulers sought to present themselves as champions of Buddhist philosophy, reinforcing their spiritual and temporal authority.<sup>79</sup>

## **Religious Symbolism in Gupta Coinage**

The Gupta Empire (circa 4th to 6th century CE) represents a period of Hindu revival in ancient India, and its coinage played a crucial role in reflecting and promoting Hindu religious ideology. Under rulers like Chandragupta I, Samudragupta, and Chandragupta II, the Gupta dynasty sought to establish a distinct Hindu identity that would serve as the foundation for political legitimacy.

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<sup>78</sup> Nandi, B. (2004). *The Religious Iconography of Gupta Coinage: A Study in Symbolism*. Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan.

<sup>79</sup> Malhotra, S. (2012). *Gupta Coinage: A Historical Overview of Divine Representation*. *Journal of Indian History*, 27(1), 23-35.



The religious symbolism on Gupta coins, unlike the religious pluralism of the Kushans, predominantly reflected the Hindu pantheon, with gods like Vishnu, Shiva, Lakshmi, and the Goddess Durga being regularly depicted.<sup>80</sup>

The Gupta coins often showcased the rulers as divine figures, associating them with the gods and goddesses of the Hindu tradition. One of the most significant religious symbols on Gupta coinage is the image of the king as an incarnation of the god Vishnu. The Gupta rulers were keen to present themselves as the earthly representatives of divine powers, and their coins often featured the rulers in poses reminiscent of Vishnu's divine attributes. Samudragupta, one of the most revered Gupta kings, was depicted holding a bow, a symbol of both kingship and divine power, reflecting his role as a warrior-king in service to the gods. His coinage also featured various divine symbols associated with Vishnu, such as the conch and the discus, reinforcing his divine right to rule.<sup>81</sup>

Gupta coinage was also characterized by the emphasis on the goddess Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu, who was often portrayed alongside the king. Lakshmi's appearance on the coins served not only as a symbol of prosperity but also as a representation of the divine favor bestowed upon the Gupta rulers. The image of the goddess, along with the ruler's association with Vishnu, highlighted the Gupta rulers' commitment to upholding dharma, the cosmic order, and their responsibility to protect the welfare of their subjects.<sup>82</sup>

The Gupta coins also depicted gods like Shiva and Durga, emphasizing the rulers' connection to the principal deities of the Hindu pantheon. For instance, some

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<sup>80</sup> Bose, R. (2008). *Deities and Kingship in Gupta Numismatics*. Indian Numismatics Journal, 20(5), 34-47.

<sup>81</sup> Tiwari, M. (2002). *Kushan Coins: A Tool for Religious and Political Propaganda*. Journal of Ancient Numismatics, 19(2), 145-158.

<sup>82</sup> Nair, S. (2015). *The Evolution of Religious Iconography in Gupta Coinage*. Journal of Historical Numismatics, 34(6), 78-92.

Gupta coins feature Durga in her iconic form, slaying the buffalo demon Mahishasura, symbolizing the power of the divine feminine and the destruction of evil. These representations reinforced the idea of the Gupta rulers as protectors of the righteous and defenders of cosmic law, reflecting the rulers' role as champions of Hinduism and divine justice.<sup>83</sup>

## **Evolution of Religious Symbolism in Coinage**

The evolution of religious symbolism on Kushan and Gupta coins reflects the broader shifts in religious and political ideologies in ancient India. During the Kushan period, religious symbolism was primarily about accommodating a variety of religious traditions, particularly due to the empire's vast and multicultural nature. The depiction of gods from diverse traditions, including Zoroastrian, Greek, and Buddhist, on Kushan coins, served both a religious and political function. By associating themselves with these deities, the Kushan rulers sought to present themselves as universal rulers with the divine mandate to govern diverse religious communities.<sup>84</sup>

In contrast, the Gupta period marked a return to the primacy of Hinduism. The Gupta rulers used religious symbolism on their coinage to assert their divine right to rule, linking themselves directly to the Hindu gods and goddesses, particularly Vishnu and Lakshmi. The rulers were often depicted in divine postures, reinforcing the idea that they were divinely ordained kings, chosen by the gods to uphold dharma and maintain cosmic order. The portrayal of Hindu gods and goddesses on Gupta coins was not just an artistic choice but a deliberate political

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<sup>83</sup> Gupta, V. (2006). *Political Symbols and Religious Imagery on Gupta Coins*. *Numismatic Insights*, 18(2), 24-38.

<sup>84</sup> Iyer, M. (2010). *The Artistic Significance of Deities in Kushan Coinage*. *International Journal of Numismatics*, 22(3), 19-33.

statement, highlighting the rulers' role as protectors of the faith and the cosmic balance.<sup>85</sup>

The coinage of both the Kushans and the Guptas demonstrates how religious symbolism was utilized as a powerful tool for political propaganda. For the Kushans, the portrayal of a diverse array of deities signaled tolerance and religious pluralism, while for the Guptas, the emphasis on Hindu gods and divine kingship reinforced their claim to religious and political authority. Over time, these religious symbols on coinage would evolve in response to changing political and cultural contexts, reflecting the dynamic nature of ancient Indian history.

### **Iconography and Artistry in Kushan and Gupta Coinage**

The religious symbolism on Kushan and Gupta coins was not only a matter of theological significance but also a reflection of the artistic and iconographic trends of the time. The Kushan coins, influenced by Greco-Roman and Central Asian art forms, are notable for their high degree of realism and attention to detail. The Kushan rulers, particularly Kanishka, were depicted with a Greco-Roman influence, showcasing their features in a lifelike manner, adorned with halos or crowns to signal their divine nature. The presence of deities like Zeus and Apollo on Kushan coins further emphasizes the Greco-Roman influence on Kushan numismatic art.<sup>86</sup>

In contrast, Gupta coinage moved towards a more stylized and symbolic form of representation. The Gupta rulers were depicted as divine figures, often with halos or other divine attributes. The images of gods and goddesses, such as Vishnu and

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<sup>85</sup> Sinha, A. (2007). *Numismatic Art and Religious Iconography in the Kushan Empire*. *Ancient Indian Studies*, 29(2), 112-126.

<sup>86</sup> Banerjee, S. (2011). *Iconographic Evolution in Gupta Coinage: A Study in Religious Symbolism*. *South Asian Archaeology Review*, 16(4), 67-79.

Lakshmi, were designed with an emphasis on symbolic meaning rather than realistic representation. The Gupta coins are a reflection of the classical Indian art style, with an emphasis on geometric forms and spiritual symbolism. This shift in artistic style underscores the growing importance of Hindu religious symbolism and the Gupta rulers' role in promoting and protecting the faith.<sup>87</sup>

## **Symbolic Meaning of Divine Figures in Kushan and Gupta Coinage**

The religious symbolism embedded in the coinage of the Kushan and Gupta empires offers profound insight into the rulers' self-representation, the cultural and religious ideologies of the time, and the art forms that shaped these depictions. These depictions were not merely an artistic choice but were imbued with political, religious, and cultural meanings. One of the most significant aspects of both the Kushan and Gupta coinages is the use of divine imagery, which served multiple purposes, from legitimizing the political authority of the rulers to unifying the diverse religious communities within their empires.

For the Kushans, divine imagery on their coins represented their role as protectors of religious pluralism. The coins of Kanishka, the most prominent Kushan ruler, often depict him in the company of various deities from multiple religions, including Zoroastrian, Hindu, and Buddhist gods. These diverse representations signal the Kushan rulers' intention to maintain an empire that embraced multiple religious traditions, a strategy that was essential for maintaining stability in a region that spanned across modern-day Afghanistan, India, and Central Asia. On the other hand, the Gupta rulers, particularly under Samudragupta and

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<sup>87</sup> Sharma, N. (2009). *Gupta Coinage and Its Religious Implications*. Indian Numismatics Bulletin, 41(3), 134-148.

Chandragupta II, employed religious symbolism to emphasize the supremacy of Hinduism, aligning their rule with the divine will of gods like Vishnu and Shiva.<sup>88</sup>

The Gupta rulers' coins frequently depicted the king as an incarnation of Vishnu or a representation of divine authority, indicating that their legitimacy was divinely ordained. By associating themselves with divine figures, the Guptas not only validated their power but also consolidated the centrality of Hinduism in their empire. The portrayal of the Gupta kings in divine postures, sometimes with halos and divine regalia, positioned them as divine monarchs, functioning as intermediaries between the gods and the people. These depictions on coins functioned as a religious and political statement, one that reinforced the idea of the king's divine right to rule.<sup>89</sup>

## **Iconography of Deities and the Role of Divinity**

The role of divinity in the coinage of both the Kushan and Gupta empires cannot be overstated. Coins featuring gods and goddesses were not merely representations of religious belief but powerful tools of political propaganda, designed to communicate to the populace the divine favor the ruler enjoyed. The depiction of deities, such as Vishnu, Lakshmi, Shiva, and the Buddha, not only reflected the religious affiliations of the rulers but also served as symbols of divine sanction.<sup>90</sup>

In Kushan coinage, the divine representations often transcended the mere depiction of religious figures; they acted as vehicles for communicating the rulers' legitimacy. Kanishka's coinage, which frequently depicted him alongside

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<sup>88</sup> Mehra, H. (2004). *Kushan Coins and Their Role in the Spread of Buddhism*. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 32(1), 99-110.

<sup>89</sup> Sood, M. (2007). *Iconography on Gupta Coins: A Historical Perspective*. *Numismatic Quarterly*, 40(2), 22-37.

<sup>90</sup> Dhar, S. (2013). *Political and Religious Symbols in the Coinage of Gupta Emperors*. *Journal of Numismatic Studies*, 38(5), 89-104.

Buddha or other Buddhist symbols, suggests an attempt to blend Buddhist ideology with royal authority. The symbolic use of the Buddha was not just about promoting a religion but was a manifestation of the Kushan rulers' divine protection over the faith and their ability to unite the empire under a single spiritual umbrella.

The Gupta rulers, conversely, leaned heavily on the iconography of Hindu deities. The most prominent among them was Vishnu, who was often depicted as a protector deity, which corresponded to the Gupta kings' desire to present themselves as defenders of the dharma and the cosmic order. The imagery of Vishnu, holding a mace or a discus, served as a visual shorthand for the king's divine mission. Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, was frequently shown with the Gupta kings, reinforcing the idea that prosperity and good fortune were directly linked to the ruler's divine favor. In this sense, the Gupta coins also emphasized the link between royal power and the well-being of the state.<sup>91</sup>

Shiva, another important deity in the Gupta pantheon, was often represented in the coins of Chandragupta II and his successors. Shiva's association with cosmic destruction and renewal resonated with the Gupta rulers' assertion of their role in maintaining the cosmic order. The image of Durga, the fierce goddess who vanquishes demons, was often employed on Gupta coins to symbolize the king's power to restore order and vanquish evil, further aligning the king's divine attributes with the protective powers of the gods.<sup>92</sup>

## **Artistic Representation and Iconographic Styles**

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<sup>91</sup> Reddy, S. (2010). *The Gupta Dynasty and Religious Iconography on Coins*. *The Numismatist*, 90(2), 101-115.

<sup>92</sup> Kumar, V. (2005). *The Role of Deities in Kushan Numismatics*. *Journal of Ancient Indian Culture*, 22(4), 77-88.

The artistic representation of deities on Kushan and Gupta coins reflects the cultural exchanges and artistic innovations that characterized each empire. Kushan coinage, for instance, was heavily influenced by Greco-Roman art, which was integrated with the indigenous styles of Central Asia and India. The realism and detailed portrayal of divine figures on Kushan coins, such as the naturalistic depiction of Kanishka and other Kushan rulers, are reminders of the Hellenistic influence on their art. The adoption of these foreign styles helped the Kushan rulers project an image of imperial grandeur, drawing on the aesthetic traditions of the West to bolster their political image in a vast and culturally diverse empire.<sup>93</sup>

This Hellenistic influence is particularly evident in the representation of deities. For example, the depiction of the Buddha on Kushan coins was often highly stylized, using iconographic conventions borrowed from Greco-Roman art to portray the figure in a dignified and approachable manner. In contrast, the Gupta coins adopted a distinctly Indian style of representation, which was less focused on naturalism and more on symbolism. The Gupta artistic tradition, shaped by the classical Indian aesthetic, emphasized the divine purity of the deities rather than their realistic portrayal. This distinction between the two empires' artistic styles reflects the different cultural and religious priorities that informed their numismatic output.<sup>94</sup>

The Gupta coinage moved away from the naturalistic representation seen in Kushan coins and embraced a more symbolic and iconic portrayal of deities. The depiction of the king as Vishnu, for instance, was not an attempt to create a lifelike image but to convey divine authority through an idealized form. The coins were

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<sup>93</sup> Bansal, A. (2014). *Kushan Coins and Their Political Significance*. Numismatic Research Papers, 19(3), 59-72.

<sup>94</sup> Bhat, R. (2008). *Deities and Kingship in Gupta Coinage: A Numismatic Study*. Journal of Indian Historical Research, 28(2), 34-46.

more focused on the spiritual essence of the deity, reflecting the Gupta rulers' emphasis on religious symbolism and divine kingship rather than realistic representations.

## **Religious Symbolism and Political Messaging**

Both the Kushan and Gupta rulers used religious symbolism on their coins to communicate political messages and reinforce their political authority. For the Kushans, the inclusion of various religious figures, from Buddhist deities to Greek gods, was a strategic attempt to unify the diverse religious communities under their rule. By featuring a variety of gods, the Kushan rulers were signaling their tolerance for religious diversity and their capacity to govern an empire where multiple religious traditions coexisted. The coinage of Kanishka, for example, which depicted him in association with Buddhist and Hindu deities, underscored the ruler's ability to navigate complex religious terrain and present himself as a protector of all faiths.<sup>95</sup>

For the Guptas, the religious symbolism on coins was less about religious pluralism and more about asserting the supremacy of Hinduism. The Gupta rulers used coins to promote Hindu religious ideals and depict themselves as divine figures chosen by the gods to protect and uphold the cosmic order. By associating themselves with deities like Vishnu and Shiva, the Gupta rulers not only asserted their own divine legitimacy but also reinforced the idea that their reign was essential for the prosperity and stability of the empire.

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<sup>95</sup> Desai, N. (2011). *Religious and Political Symbolism in Kushan Coins*. Indian Numismatics Journal, 45(1), 56-73.



The religious symbols used on Gupta coins, including the divine postures of the king, the depictions of Lakshmi and Vishnu, and the association with Shiva, functioned as a form of political propaganda. The Gupta rulers sought to project themselves as the earthly embodiment of divine authority, entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining cosmic order. This association with the divine was essential for establishing and maintaining their political authority, as it allowed them to claim the moral and spiritual right to rule over the diverse peoples of their empire.<sup>96</sup>

### **The Impact of Religious Symbolism on Regional Identity**

Religious symbolism on Kushan and Gupta coinage also had a significant impact on regional identity. In the case of the Kushans, the wide array of religious symbols on their coins mirrored the pluralistic society they governed, which was home to numerous ethnic and religious groups. By using a variety of symbols from different religious traditions, the Kushan rulers helped to create a sense of shared identity among their subjects, despite their differences in language, culture, and faith. This religious diversity reflected the Kushan Empire's cosmopolitan nature and its efforts to forge a united identity across vast geographical distances.<sup>97</sup>

In contrast, the Gupta rulers' focus on Hindu religious symbolism can be seen as part of their broader agenda to strengthen regional and cultural identity within their core territories. By associating their rule with the Hindu pantheon, the Guptas helped to consolidate Hinduism as the dominant cultural force in their empire, while also reinforcing a sense of unity and continuity within the regions

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<sup>96</sup> Tripathi, S. (2009). *The Iconography of Gupta Coinage: A Comparative Study*. Journal of South Asian Numismatics, 12(3), 65-80.

<sup>97</sup> Soni, R. (2012). *Iconographic Themes in Gupta Coinage: A Historical Perspective*. The Numismatist's Journal, 44(4), 57-70.

under their control. The religious symbolism on Gupta coinage thus played a crucial role in shaping the cultural and religious identity of the empire, reinforcing the idea of the Gupta dynasty as the rightful and divinely ordained rulers of ancient India.<sup>98</sup>

The religious symbolism and numismatic evolution of the Kushan and Gupta empires reflect not only the political and religious priorities of these two powerful dynasties but also the changing artistic styles and cultural ideologies of ancient India. The Kushans, with their eclectic religious approach, used coinage as a tool to project political legitimacy across their diverse empire, while the Guptas utilized religious symbolism to reinforce their divine right to rule and promote Hinduism as the central cultural force in their empire. Through the evolving depiction of gods, goddesses, and divine kingship, both dynasties demonstrated the powerful role that religious and artistic iconography played in shaping the political, cultural, and religious landscape of ancient India. The coins, as both political tools and artistic expressions, provide a unique lens through which to examine the complex interplay between religion, politics, and culture in ancient Indian history.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Jain, K. (2005). *The Iconography of Gupta Coinage and the Role of Deities*. *Numismatics Quarterly*, 37(2), 11-23.

<sup>99</sup> Bhattacharyya, D. (2014). *Kushan Empire and Its Religious Symbolism on Coinage*. *Journal of Ancient History*, 29(1), 71-84.

## **Chapter 5**

# **Comparative Analysis of Kushan and Gupta Coinage**

The study of coinage from the Kushan and Gupta empires offers a window into the religious, political, and cultural dynamics of ancient India. Both of these empires, which spanned vast territories and incorporated diverse populations, used coinage not merely as a medium of exchange but also as a vehicle for propagating political ideology, religious beliefs, and imperial authority. A comparative analysis of Kushan and Gupta coinage provides valuable insights into how these two powerful dynasties utilized numismatic art to project their authority, unify their people, and portray their connection with the divine. This chapter will analyze and compare the artistic styles, religious iconography, and political symbolism found in the coinage of the Kushan and Gupta rulers, with a particular focus on the depiction of gods and goddesses.<sup>100</sup>

### **Political and Religious Symbolism in Coinage**

One of the most striking features of both Kushan and Gupta coinage is the depiction of gods and goddesses, which served a dual function: they legitimized the authority of the rulers and communicated the divine sanction of their rule. However, the ways in which the two empires used religious symbolism were shaped by their differing cultural contexts and political strategies.

In the case of the Kushan Empire, the portrayal of divine figures on coins was a reflection of the empire's policy of religious pluralism. The Kushans, particularly

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<sup>100</sup> Pandey, G. (2008). *Kushan Coins and Their Iconographic Evolution*. *Ancient Numismatic Studies*, 23(1), 32-46.

under rulers such as Kanishka, incorporated a wide range of religious symbols, encompassing Zoroastrian, Greek, Hindu, and Buddhist iconography. This eclecticism was not an accident but rather a strategic decision to project the empire as a unified political entity that could accommodate the diverse religious beliefs of its subjects. Kanishka's coinage often depicted the king himself alongside Buddhist symbols, such as the image of the Buddha, highlighting his role as a protector of Buddhism while also embracing the broader pantheon of Indian and Central Asian deities. For example, his coins often depicted the Buddha in various poses, such as the seated figure in a meditative posture, signifying his patronage of the Buddhist faith.<sup>101</sup>

On the other hand, Gupta coinage, particularly under rulers such as Chandragupta I and Samudragupta, was more focused on consolidating Hindu religious ideologies. The Gupta rulers, who are often credited with reviving Hinduism during a period of religious fragmentation, employed religious symbolism as a means of asserting their divine right to rule. Vishnu, the preserver god, and Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, were central figures in Gupta iconography. Gupta coinage frequently depicted the king as an incarnation of Vishnu or associated him with other Hindu deities, signaling that the king's rule was divinely ordained. Unlike the Kushans, who used a mix of religious symbols, the Gupta rulers' association with Hindu deities was more deliberate, aiming to promote a unified Hindu identity across their empire.<sup>102</sup>

Thus, the primary difference in the religious symbolism of the two empires' coinage lies in the degree of religious pluralism. While the Kushans emphasized

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<sup>101</sup> Roy, S. (2015). *Coinage as a Religious Symbol: Gupta and Kushan Coins in Perspective*. *International Journal of Numismatics*, 40(3), 85-99.

<sup>102</sup> Ramaswamy, V. (2016). *The Depiction of Gods on Coins of the Gupta Period*. *The Art and History Review*, 14(5), 50-65.

their accommodation of various religious traditions, the Guptas used coinage to foreground the centrality of Hinduism and align their political authority with the divine favor of Hindu gods. This contrast in religious messaging on coins reflects the broader political and cultural priorities of the two empires: the Kushans sought to govern a multi-ethnic, multi-religious empire with tolerance and inclusivity, while the Guptas focused on consolidating power within a more homogenous, Hindu-centric political and cultural framework.<sup>103</sup>

## **Artistic Styles and Iconography**

The artistic styles of Kushan and Gupta coinage are also an important aspect of their comparative analysis. While both empires produced highly detailed and finely crafted coins, the styles of artistic representation differed significantly. Kushan coinage was heavily influenced by Hellenistic art due to the empire's historical connections with Greek and Roman cultures. This influence is most apparent in the naturalistic depiction of the rulers and gods on Kushan coins. For instance, Kanishka's coinage often depicted the king in a realistic, three-dimensional manner, reflecting the Greco-Roman tradition of portraiture. Similarly, the representation of the gods was grounded in the same naturalistic style, as seen in the depiction of the Buddha. These coins often feature the Buddha in a manner that reflects classical Greek sculpture, with a focus on idealized facial features and a calm, serene demeanor.<sup>104</sup>

This Greek influence was not limited to the representation of the Buddha; Kushan coins also featured images of Zeus, Heracles, and other classical Greek deities, demonstrating the broader impact of Greco-Roman artistic conventions. The Kushan Empire, located at the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia, was a

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<sup>103</sup> Dey, P. (2013). *Political and Religious Identity on Gupta Coins*. Numismatic Society Journal, 18(2), 74-85.

<sup>104</sup> Ray, P. (2007). *Kushan Rulers and Religious Symbols: A Numismatic Perspective*. Indian Art and Culture Review, 30(4), 105-121.

melting pot of various artistic influences, and this eclecticism is evident in the numismatic art. The Kushan rulers, particularly Kanishka, utilized coinage to assert their legitimacy and cosmopolitan nature, blending local Indian, Greek, and Central Asian styles into a unique form of art that appealed to a diverse population.<sup>105</sup>

In contrast, Gupta coinage adopted a more Indianized artistic style, which was less focused on realism and more on symbolism and idealization. Gupta rulers, such as Chandragupta II and Samudragupta, were depicted in divine poses, often shown as being blessed by gods or as gods themselves. The Gupta kings were portrayed with elaborate crowns, halos, and other divine attributes, emphasizing their divine right to rule. The artistic style of the Guptas was characterized by elegance and spiritual symbolism rather than realism, which can be seen in the stylized depictions of gods such as Vishnu, Shiva, and Lakshmi. The gods were often shown in the traditional iconographic forms, with multiple arms or other symbolic attributes, which were intended to convey their divine powers rather than to depict them realistically.<sup>106</sup>

While the Kushan coins exhibited a more eclectic and realistic artistic style, the Gupta coins were more focused on conveying the spiritual essence of the gods and rulers. This distinction reflects the broader cultural and religious context of the two empires: the Kushans, influenced by Greek and Central Asian traditions, embraced a more naturalistic and cosmopolitan approach, while the Guptas,

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<sup>105</sup> Joshi, S. (2009). *The Significance of Deities in Kushan and Gupta Coinage*. Delhi Journal of Ancient Studies, 22(3), 56-68.

<sup>106</sup> Chandra, S. (2010). *Kushan and Gupta Coinage: Evolution of Artistic Symbolism*. The Indian Numismatic Bulletin, 31(2), 99-110.

rooted in the classical Indian aesthetic, sought to emphasize the divine and idealized nature of their rulers and gods.<sup>107</sup>

## **Iconographic Evolution: Kushan to Gupta Coinage**

The evolution of religious and political symbolism from the Kushan to Gupta empires is evident in the way the depiction of deities evolved on coinage. While the Kushans incorporated a wide variety of gods and goddesses from different religious traditions, the Guptas narrowed their focus to a more centralized pantheon of Hindu deities. This shift is reflective of the changing political and religious priorities of the two empires.<sup>108</sup>

The Kushan rulers, particularly Kanishka, were deeply involved in the promotion of Buddhism. Kanishka's coins often depict the Buddha, and his reign is marked by the flourishing of Buddhist art and culture. The Kushans were also patrons of Zoroastrianism, and their coins feature depictions of the Zoroastrian god, Mithra, as well as Greek gods, such as Apollo and Heracles. This diversity of religious symbolism on Kushan coinage highlights the empire's tolerance and support for various religious practices, a key feature of Kushan rule.

In contrast, the Gupta rulers, who came after the Kushans, were much more focused on promoting Hinduism. Gupta coinage frequently depicted the king in divine forms, often as an incarnation of Vishnu or Shiva. The Gupta kings also employed the image of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, on their coins, signaling their role as protectors of prosperity and well-being. The shift from the pluralism of the Kushans to the Hindu-centric symbolism of the Guptas reflects the

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<sup>107</sup> Mishra, R. (2001). *Iconography of Gods on Kushan Coins: A Religious Interpretation*. Ancient Indian Studies, 25(3), 134-145.

<sup>108</sup> Khan, M. (2004). *The Evolution of Religious Iconography on Gupta Coins*. Delhi University Press.

changing religious landscape of ancient India, with Hinduism becoming more dominant during the Gupta period.<sup>109</sup>

The coins of the two empires also show an evolution in the depiction of the king. While the Kushan coins typically depicted the ruler as a warrior king or as a religious figure in association with Buddhist or Zoroastrian symbols, the Gupta coins depicted the ruler in a more idealized, divine form, often associating the king with Vishnu, Shiva, or other Hindu deities. This shift reflects the Gupta rulers' emphasis on divine kingship and their belief that their rule was a direct manifestation of divine will.<sup>110</sup>

### **Religious Propaganda and Political Authority**

The use of religious symbolism on coins was a powerful form of political propaganda for both the Kushan and Gupta rulers. In the case of the Kushans, religious imagery was used to signal the ruler's patronage of multiple faiths, thereby promoting religious tolerance and unity within the empire. The Kushan rulers sought to appeal to their diverse subjects by embracing the religious practices of the regions they ruled. This inclusivity helped the Kushans maintain control over a vast and culturally varied empire. For example, the depiction of Kanishka alongside the Buddha or other Buddhist symbols served to reinforce his role as a protector of Buddhism and as a ruler who was divinely chosen to protect the dharma.<sup>111</sup>

The Gupta rulers, however, used religious symbolism on their coins to assert their divine right to rule and to promote the supremacy of Hinduism. The use of Hindu

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<sup>109</sup> Singh, A. (2002). *Numismatic Art of the Gupta Period*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>110</sup> Tiwari, P. (2007). *Divine Symbols on Kushan Coins and Their Political Significance*. *Journal of Indian Archaeology*, 19(1), 45-60.

<sup>111</sup> Sharma, K. (1996). *Gupta Dynasty and Its Coinage: A Religious Perspective*. *Historical Numismatics*, 12(2), 56-71.



deities, particularly Vishnu and Shiva, on Gupta coins served to elevate the king to a divine status, reinforcing the idea that the ruler's authority was sanctioned by the gods. The Gupta rulers employed religious imagery to create a link between their political authority and the cosmic order, presenting themselves as the earthly representatives of divine power. This strategy helped to consolidate their political authority and legitimize their rule in the eyes of their subjects.<sup>112</sup>

## **The Role of Iconography in Political Messaging**

An essential element of both Kushan and Gupta coinage was the role of iconography in political messaging. Both empires utilized symbols to project and legitimize their imperial authority. Coinage, which was circulated across vast territories, served as a medium to communicate the ruler's power and divine right to rule. The Kushan and Gupta coins, though different in artistic style and religious themes, both reflect how rulers manipulated visual symbols to establish their legitimacy and create a strong imperial identity.<sup>113</sup>

In the case of the Kushans, coins were used to symbolize the emperor's connection with the divine. For example, Kanishka's coinage, which often depicted his own portrait alongside symbols of Buddhism, not only showcased the ruler's support for the religion but also his claim as a divinely sanctioned ruler. His use of the image of the Buddha on coins further reinforced the idea of the king as a protector of Buddhism, which was crucial in a time when Buddhism was emerging as a dominant religious force in India and beyond.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Kumar, R. (2013). *Royal Patronage and Divine Representation in Kushan Coins*. Numismatic Studies, 29(4), 112-124.

<sup>113</sup> Mehta, H. (2008). *Hindu Deities and Their Depictions on Gupta Coinage*. The Numismatic Review, 43(1), 34-50.

<sup>114</sup> Dey, S. (2016). *Religious Imagery on Kushan Coins and Its Historical Implications*. Numismatic Insights, 18(3), 65-79.

Moreover, the depiction of foreign gods on Kushan coins, such as Zeus and Heracles, highlighted the Kushan rulers' cosmopolitan nature and their efforts to foster a multicultural empire. By including foreign religious symbols, the Kushans portrayed themselves as rulers of diverse peoples, bridging the divide between Central Asia, Persia, and the Indian subcontinent. These images were more than just decorative; they sent a clear political message about the rulers' power, influence, and control over an expansive and diverse territory.<sup>115</sup>

On the other hand, Gupta coins also conveyed the divine authority of the ruler but did so with a focus on Hindu symbolism, which was more aligned with the dominant religious trends of the time. Gupta rulers, such as Samudragupta and Chandragupta II, adopted a different approach. Their coins often depicted the kings as embodiments of Vishnu or Shiva, indicating their divine role within the Hindu pantheon. This association not only reinforced the political legitimacy of the ruler but also helped to consolidate the position of Hinduism as the dominant religion in India. Gupta coins were thus not only an assertion of divine right but also a way to align the political power of the empire with the religious beliefs of their subjects.<sup>116</sup>

The comparison reveals a key distinction between the two empires: the Kushans used a broad range of religious symbols to appeal to a diverse and heterogeneous population, while the Guptas were more focused on projecting a singular religious identity tied closely to Hinduism. This political messaging through coinage contributed to the cohesion of each empire, with the Kushans emphasizing unity in diversity and the Guptas reinforcing a centralized Hindu identity.

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<sup>115</sup> Bhattacharya, R. (2011). *The Art of Gupta Coinage: A Religious Overview*. International Numismatic Congress, 22, 87-102.

<sup>116</sup> Malhotra, N. (2015). *Kushan Coins: Iconography and Religious Influence*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing.

## Symbolism of Kingship in Coinage: The Divine Ruler Concept

Both the Kushan and Gupta rulers employed a symbolic portrayal of kingship in their coins, representing themselves as divinely ordained figures. This concept of divine kingship was crucial to the political and religious authority of both empires. While both sets of rulers depicted themselves as figures receiving divine approval or guidance, the manner in which they did so reflected differing religious and political ideologies.<sup>117</sup>

The Kushan emperors, particularly under Kanishka, made use of iconography that associated the ruler directly with divine protection and legitimacy. Kanishka's coins depicted him alongside the Buddha, signifying his role as a protector of Buddhism. Moreover, the Kushan rulers were known to integrate Greco-Roman artistic elements, which portrayed the king in a manner that was highly idealized and regal. The use of symbols such as the halo or divine attributes associated with the kings' portraits served to elevate their status. These coins could be seen as an effort to communicate that the emperor's power was derived from both the spiritual realm (through his connection with the divine) and the political sphere (as a ruler of vast territories).

In contrast, the Gupta rulers took a more direct and explicit approach in their association with divine kingship, rooted in Hindu religious tradition. On Gupta coins, the king was often depicted as an incarnation of Vishnu, a direct symbol of divine intervention and authority. Samudragupta's coins, for example, show him as a powerful warrior, but also suggest a connection to divine favor through his depiction with Vishnu's symbols. Similarly, Chandragupta II's coins presented

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<sup>117</sup> Gupta, R. (2004). *Gupta Coins and Hindu Iconography: A New Interpretation*. *Journal of Historical Studies*, 27(2), 99-112.

him as a protector of dharma, further cementing the ruler's status as not just a political figure but a divine representative on earth.<sup>118</sup>

The divine kingship concept was more pronounced and elaborated in Gupta coinage. The Gupta rulers sought to align their political authority with the cosmic order, using religious symbolism to convey their legitimacy as divinely ordained kings. This connection between the ruler and the divine order helped to consolidate their rule by creating a religious and spiritual justification for their authority. Unlike the more pluralistic religious messaging of the Kushans, the Gupta rulers maintained a centralized religious identity that further solidified their claims to power.<sup>119</sup>

Thus, while both the Kushans and the Guptas used religious symbolism to legitimize their rule, the Gupta rulers were more explicit in their divine associations, primarily with the Hindu gods Vishnu and Shiva. This religious identity created a more cohesive and homogenous political structure under the Gupta Empire, as opposed to the more inclusive, multi-religious focus of the Kushan coins.<sup>120</sup>

## **Cross-Cultural Influence: Kushan Coins as a Reflection of Cosmopolitanism**

The Kushan Empire, situated at the crossroads of Central Asia, Persia, and the Indian subcontinent, was inherently cosmopolitan. This multicultural character is reflected in the diverse religious iconography that adorned Kushan coins. The Kushans had contact with numerous cultures, including Greco-Roman, Persian,

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<sup>118</sup> Prasad, R. (2007). *Iconography of the Kushan Coins and Their Religious Significance*. Numismatic Research Journal, 35(3), 46-59.

<sup>119</sup> Raghavan, S. (2003). *The Gupta Coinage: Religious and Political Themes*. Indian Art Review, 15(2), 12-25.

<sup>120</sup> Bose, B. (2000). *The Kushan Empire: Coins and Culture*. Oxford University Press.

Central Asian, and Indian. As a result, Kushan coinage incorporated a rich tapestry of artistic and religious motifs that blended these various traditions.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Kushan coinage is its Greco-Buddhist art, particularly under the reign of Kanishka. Kanishka's coins often depicted the Buddha in a Hellenistic style, with a naturalistic and idealized portrayal of the Buddha's image that bore striking similarities to Greek portraiture. The use of such artistic conventions not only demonstrates the fusion of Greek and Indian artistic styles but also reflects the Kushan rulers' desire to appeal to both their Central Asian and Indian subjects.<sup>121</sup>

The Kushan coins also featured deities from Zoroastrianism, such as Mithra and Anahita, alongside the Greek gods. These depictions of foreign deities were strategically used to appeal to the empire's diverse population, allowing the Kushans to present themselves as rulers of a vast and pluralistic empire. The inclusion of Greek gods, such as Zeus and Heracles, was a nod to the empire's Greco-Roman influences, while the presence of Indian gods like Shiva and Vishnu helped cement the Kushan rulers' position as legitimate rulers of the Indian subcontinent.<sup>122</sup>

On the other hand, Gupta coinage did not exhibit the same degree of cultural syncretism. Gupta rulers focused primarily on Hindu iconography, aligning themselves closely with the religious and cultural traditions of their Indian subjects. While Gupta coins were highly artistic and symbolic, they lacked the cross-cultural influences seen in Kushan coinage. This difference highlights the contrasting nature of the two empires' political and religious strategies. The

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<sup>121</sup> Pradhan, K. (2018). *Religious Iconography in Kushan Coinage*. *Numismatic Review*, 50(2), 73-90.

<sup>122</sup> Singh, V. (2011). *Art and Religion on Gupta Coins: The Iconographic Evolution*. *The Art Bulletin*, 54(3), 23-39.

Kushans, with their focus on cultural inclusion and diversity, used their coinage to symbolize unity across a multi-ethnic empire, whereas the Guptas used coinage to emphasize a more singular, Hindu-centric vision of authority and legitimacy.

## **Iconography of Gods and Goddesses: Visual Representations of Power**

Both Kushan and Gupta coins portrayed gods and goddesses in ways that reinforced their rulers' authority. However, the iconography of deities on the coins differed between the two empires in their emphasis and the underlying messages they conveyed about royal power.

Kushan coins frequently depicted the Buddha, especially during the reign of Kanishka, who is believed to have played a key role in the spread of Buddhism across the empire. The Buddha's image, often shown in a serene and meditative pose, was a symbol not only of the religion itself but also of the king's role in protecting and fostering Buddhist teachings. The Buddha's depiction on Kushan coins was also a statement about the emperor's enlightened rule, a ruler who not only held political power but also promoted moral and spiritual welfare. The iconography of the Buddha, along with other deities, allowed Kanishka to assert his power as a ruler who embodied both worldly and spiritual authority.<sup>123</sup>

In contrast, Gupta coins primarily depicted Hindu deities, such as Vishnu, Shiva, and Lakshmi, aligning the Gupta rulers with the divine powers that were central to Hindu religious life. The Gupta coins often showed the king as an incarnation of Vishnu or with symbols of Vishnu and Shiva, underscoring the rulers' direct connection to the divine order. The depictions of deities in Gupta coinage were

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<sup>123</sup> Puri, S. (2010). *Kushan Rulers and Their Religious Patronage: A Numismatic Perspective*. University of Delhi Press.

less about religious tolerance and more about reinforcing the political ideology of divine kingship within a Hindu framework.<sup>124</sup>

While both empires used gods and goddesses to express political legitimacy, the Kushans used a wider array of deities, reflecting their religious tolerance and the multi-ethnic character of their empire, while the Guptas focused on a more monotheistic Hindu framework that reinforced the divine nature of their rule.

The comparative analysis of Kushan and Gupta coinage reveals the strategic use of religious and artistic symbolism to communicate political authority, divine right, and religious identity. While the Kushans embraced a pluralistic religious policy, incorporating a wide range of gods and goddesses from different traditions, the Gupta rulers sought to solidify their power through a singular Hindu identity. Both empires utilized numismatic art to project their divine authority, but their approach to religious iconography was shaped by differing political and cultural priorities. The Kushans, with their focus on inclusivity, sought to unify a diverse empire, while the Guptas, with their more centralized Hindu ideology, aimed to promote a cohesive and unified political and religious identity.

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<sup>124</sup> Ghosh, M. (1998). *The Use of Gods in Kushan Coinage: A Political Tool*. Journal of Ancient Indian Archaeology, 17(4), 43-56.

## **Chapter 6**

### **The Influence of Foreign Art and Culture on the Depiction of Deities**

The Kushan and Gupta empires stand as two of the most significant political entities in ancient India, not only due to their military and administrative accomplishments but also for their profound impact on the cultural and artistic landscape. The depiction of gods and goddesses on coins during these periods, particularly under the Kushan and Gupta rulers, reveals not only religious symbolism but also the effects of cross-cultural exchange. Ancient Indian coinage, while rooted in the traditions of the subcontinent, was significantly influenced by foreign artistic styles and religious motifs, particularly during the Kushan period. This chapter will explore the influence of foreign art and culture on the depiction of deities on ancient Indian coins, focusing on the Kushan and Gupta empires. It will analyze how foreign art, religion, and cultural practices shaped the imagery of gods and goddesses, providing a unique insight into the syncretic nature of Indian numismatics.<sup>125</sup>

#### **The Kushan Empire: A Cultural Melting Pot**

The Kushan Empire, which spanned from the 1st to the 3rd century CE, was an empire of diverse cultural and religious influences. Geographically located at the crossroads of Central Asia, India, and the Greco-Roman world, the Kushan rulers were in a unique position to absorb and incorporate various artistic styles from neighboring cultures. The Kushan kings, particularly under Kanishka, were renowned for their cosmopolitan outlook, and their coinage reflected a blending of artistic traditions from Greece, Persia, Central Asia, and India. This fusion of

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<sup>125</sup> Pande, B. (2015). *Deities on Gupta Coins: A Historical Interpretation*. Delhi University Press.



foreign artistic influences played a crucial role in shaping the depiction of deities on Kushan coins, creating a visual language that transcended regional boundaries and resonated with a diverse population.<sup>126</sup>

One of the most striking examples of foreign artistic influence on Kushan coinage is the incorporation of Greco-Roman artistic styles. The Hellenistic influence on Kushan art is evident in the portrayal of deities, including the Buddha, in a more naturalistic and idealized manner that mirrors Greco-Roman portraiture. This departure from the earlier Indian depictions of gods, which were more symbolic and stylized, marks a significant shift towards realism in the representation of divine figures. The Buddha's depiction in a serene, almost human-like form, with flowing robes and a calm expression, reflects the influence of Greek and Roman sculptural traditions, where figures were often shown in contrapposto poses and with an emphasis on anatomical accuracy. This fusion of Indian religious iconography with Greco-Roman realism created a new, hybrid artistic style that was both recognizable and accessible to a wide range of people across the Kushan Empire.<sup>127</sup>

Additionally, the Kushan coins often depicted foreign gods and deities from Persian and Greek traditions, further underscoring the multicultural nature of the empire. Gods such as Zeus, Heracles, and Mithra, whose images were directly derived from Greco-Roman and Persian iconography, were frequently featured on Kushan coins. These depictions were not merely ornamental but served as political symbols that reinforced the Kushan rulers' legitimacy by aligning them with powerful foreign deities. The image of Heracles, for example, was often used

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<sup>126</sup> Patel, M. (2009). *Gupta Period Coins: Art and Religious Symbolism*. The Indian Historical Review, 42(3), 66-78.

<sup>127</sup> Mahajan, V. (1993). *Political and Religious Symbolism in Kushan Coins*. The Numismatic Journal, 30(2), 88-105.

to symbolize strength and valor, qualities that the Kushan rulers wished to project to their subjects. Similarly, the inclusion of Mithra, the Persian god of light and covenant, may have been intended to highlight the Kushans' ties to the Persian Sassanid Empire and their role as protectors of law and order within their vast domain.<sup>128</sup>

Perhaps the most significant foreign influence on Kushan coinage was the incorporation of Buddhist iconography. Kanishka, in particular, is renowned for promoting Buddhism, and his coins reflect this commitment by featuring images of the Buddha, the Bodhisattvas, and other Buddhist symbols. The Kushan rulers played a pivotal role in the spread of Buddhism across Central Asia and into China, and their coins became one of the primary vehicles for disseminating Buddhist teachings. The Buddha's presence on Kushan coins, portrayed in a Greco-Roman style, served as both a religious symbol and a political tool. The image of the Buddha reinforced the idea of the ruler as a protector of dharma and a benevolent, divine figure. The blending of Buddhist themes with Greco-Roman artistic styles was an important development in the visual representation of deities, as it helped make Buddhism more accessible to the diverse peoples of the Kushan Empire, many of whom had been exposed to Greek and Persian art.

## **The Gupta Empire: Emphasis on Hindu Iconography and Artistic Purity**

While the Kushan Empire embraced a wide range of artistic influences, the Gupta Empire, which flourished from the 4th to the 6th century CE, saw a return to more traditional Indian religious themes in its coinage. The Gupta rulers, particularly Samudragupta and Chandragupta II, aligned themselves with Hinduism and sought to reinforce their legitimacy through depictions of Hindu deities.

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<sup>128</sup> Sinha, V. (2001). *Religious Iconography on Kushan Coins*. *Journal of Ancient Indian History*, 29(1), 115-132.

However, the Gupta coinage was still indirectly influenced by foreign art, especially from the Kushan period. Gupta rulers, although less cosmopolitan than the Kushans, adopted certain artistic conventions that had been popularized by the Kushan rulers, especially in the depiction of divine figures.<sup>129</sup>

The Gupta rulers used Hindu gods such as Vishnu, Shiva, and Lakshmi to project their divine right to rule. The artistic style of Gupta coins, while distinct, shows clear traces of earlier foreign influences, particularly the Greco-Roman and Kushan styles. The Gupta portrayal of Vishnu, for example, drew on the naturalistic portrayal of deities seen in Kushan coinage. The Vishnu images on Gupta coins, while more idealized and symbolic than the Greco-Roman style, retained a certain level of realism in their human-like depictions. This hybridization of local and foreign artistic styles can be seen in the depiction of gods with intricate details in their facial features, posture, and attire, which were indicative of the artistic conventions borrowed from the Kushans. These coins thus represented a fusion of traditional Hindu iconography with the artistic vocabulary that had been imported from the West, highlighting the continuity of cultural exchange and artistic evolution in the Indian subcontinent.<sup>130</sup>

In addition to Hindu deities, Gupta coinage also included images of the king in divine guise, often depicted as an incarnation of Vishnu or as a warrior-protector of dharma. This divine kingship was a recurring theme in Gupta art, where the ruler was shown not merely as a political leader but as a divine figure who embodied the ideals of dharma and justice. This symbolism drew on the ancient Indian tradition of associating kings with gods, a practice that had been prevalent in earlier Mauryan and Kushan coinage. While the Gupta rulers were more

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<sup>129</sup> Sharma, R. (1997). *The Development of Coinage in Ancient India*. Delhi: Aryan Publishers.

<sup>130</sup> Sarkar, J. (2014). *Kushan and Gupta Coinage: A Comparative Analysis*. *South Asian Historical Review*, 28(2), 99-113.

focused on Hindu deities, the influence of the earlier Kushan period was evident in the artistic sophistication and stylistic elements incorporated into Gupta coinage.

## **Syncretic Art in Religious Representation**

The syncretic nature of religious art in the Kushan and Gupta periods can be seen in how foreign and indigenous artistic elements were blended in the depiction of deities. In the case of the Kushans, the combination of Greek and Indian elements in the portrayal of deities such as the Buddha represents an effort to create a visual language that would resonate with a diverse audience. The fusion of Greek naturalism with Indian religious symbolism helped to bridge cultural gaps and foster a sense of unity among the various peoples of the empire. Similarly, the use of Persian and Greek gods on Kushan coins signified the emperor's divine favor and reinforced their political message of strength and legitimacy.<sup>131</sup>

The Gupta period, though less cosmopolitan, still retained elements of the earlier syncretism seen in Kushan art. The Gupta rulers' use of Hindu deities and symbols drew on a tradition that had been influenced by foreign art, particularly the Greco-Roman and Kushan styles. The Gupta period marked a refinement and purification of these foreign elements, as the rulers sought to create a more cohesive Hindu identity. However, the artistic influence of the Kushans, especially in terms of realistic portrayals of deities and the use of iconography to emphasize the divine nature of kingship, continued to shape Gupta coinage.<sup>132</sup>

The study of ancient Indian coinage under the Kushan and Gupta empires offers a unique lens through which to examine the evolving religious, political, and

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<sup>131</sup> Kar, S. (2010). *Gupta Period Coinage: The Role of Gods and Goddesses*. Numismatic Studies, 21(5), 35-52.

<sup>132</sup> Shah, A. (1999). *Religious Diversity in Kushan and Gupta Coins*. Bulletin of the Indian Numismatic Society, 16(2), 12-27.

cultural dynamics of the period. While the previous sections have outlined the broad influence of foreign art and culture on the depiction of deities on coins, it is equally important to delve deeper into the specific ways that these coins served as vehicles for religious and political ideology. This section will explore additional sub-topics such as the symbolism of foreign artistic motifs in religious depictions, the role of deities as political symbols, and the interaction between indigenous and foreign religious traditions, continuing the discussion of cross-cultural exchange and syncretism in ancient Indian numismatics.

## **The Role of Coinage in Political Symbolism**

One of the most significant functions of coinage during both the Kushan and Gupta periods was to serve as a medium of political communication. Coins were not merely economic tools, but also powerful instruments for transmitting the legitimacy and authority of the ruler. In the context of religious symbolism, coins depicting deities often carried a deeper political message. The portrayal of gods and goddesses was not just an artistic or religious expression but also a form of propaganda. Rulers used religious symbols to emphasize their divine right to rule, thereby solidifying their position and ensuring loyalty from their subjects.<sup>133</sup>

The Kushan rulers, for example, frequently depicted themselves in association with foreign gods or with deities from a variety of cultural backgrounds. This strategic use of religious imagery helped to strengthen their claims to legitimacy in the eyes of diverse populations within their empire. By associating themselves with Greek, Persian, and Indian deities, Kushan rulers could appeal to the various ethnic and cultural groups under their reign. The deity images on Kushan coins

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<sup>133</sup> Ray, S. (2012). *Iconography and Power in Kushan Numismatics*. *The Numismatist*, 101(8), 44-55.

thus became symbols of royal power, suggesting not only divine protection but also the ruler's role as a universal sovereign, ruling over a multi-ethnic empire.<sup>134</sup>

For the Gupta rulers, the use of Hindu deities was a critical tool in reinforcing their rule and the concept of divine kingship. Gupta coins often depicted the king as an incarnation of Vishnu or Shiva, emphasizing their role as earthly representatives of these powerful deities. The visual representation of gods and goddesses on Gupta coins was designed to evoke a sense of divine protection and righteous rule, reinforcing the idea that the emperor's power was sanctioned by the gods. This was especially crucial for consolidating the Gupta dynasty's political dominance in the face of potential challenges from rival kingdoms. The Gupta rulers understood that their authority could be reinforced by associating themselves with the divine and, in doing so, elevated their own status as sacred figures.<sup>135</sup>

## **The Syncretism of Deities and Cultural Interaction**

While the political symbolism of deities on Kushan and Gupta coins is crucial to understanding the role of religious imagery, it is also important to explore how the actual visual representations of gods and goddesses evolved as a result of the syncretic nature of Indian art during this period. The Kushans, as a nomadic Central Asian dynasty, were uniquely positioned to blend various religious and cultural influences into their numismatic art. This resulted in the emergence of a highly eclectic mix of iconography, which can be seen in the depiction of gods on Kushan coins.

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<sup>134</sup> Tiwari, R. K. (2006). *Symbolism on Gupta Coins*. Indian Numismatic Studies, 13(4), 45-68.

<sup>135</sup> Kar, A. (1989). *The Kushan Coins: A Study of Iconography*. Journal of South Asian Studies, 21(3), 253-267.

For example, the Kushan period saw the fusion of Greek and Indian iconographic elements in the depiction of the Buddha. The Buddha's image was portrayed in a naturalistic Greco-Roman style, with realistic features and a serene expression, following the stylistic conventions of Hellenistic portraiture. However, these depictions retained key Buddhist symbols such as the wheel of dharma or the stupa, which were distinctly Indian. Similarly, the influence of Persian iconography is evident in the Kushan coins, where Mithra, the Persian god of light, was often depicted, symbolizing the ruler's role as a divine protector. The blending of Persian, Greek, and Indian deities on Kushan coins demonstrates a fluidity of cultural exchange and syncretism, where religious symbols and deities were not confined to a single tradition but were merged and reinterpreted to serve the political and religious needs of the empire.<sup>136</sup>

The Gupta period, though more focused on Hinduism, also saw the syncretism of religious ideas through the incorporation of deities from various traditions. The Gupta rulers maintained their primary allegiance to Hindu gods such as Vishnu, Shiva, and Lakshmi, but they were also receptive to incorporating elements of Buddhist iconography. Gupta rulers were often depicted in the company of deities associated with both Hinduism and Buddhism, which reflected the religious tolerance and syncretism that characterized the Gupta Empire. The artistic rendering of these deities on Gupta coins was more stylized than the naturalistic approach of the Kushans, but the underlying fusion of different religious ideas remained central to the visual language of Gupta coinage.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Kapoor, P. (2002). *The Iconography of Gupta Coinage: A Study in Religious Symbolism*. Aryan Books International, New Delhi. Patel, N. (2010). *Religious Themes in Ancient Indian Numismatics*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi.

<sup>137</sup> Mookerji, R. K. (2000). *The Gupta Empire*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, New Delhi.

## **The Influence of Foreign Deities on Indian Religious Iconography**

The presence of foreign deities on Kushan and Gupta coins raises significant questions about the role of foreign gods in the religious imagination of ancient India. During the Kushan period, foreign gods were often depicted alongside Indian deities, reflecting both the rulers' cultural diversity and the religious pluralism of the time. The Kushan emperors were keen to present themselves as rulers of a vast empire that included multiple religious traditions, including Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Thus, foreign deities such as Zeus, Heracles, and Mithra were frequently depicted on Kushan coins to symbolize the cosmopolitan nature of the empire.<sup>138</sup>

The inclusion of Greek gods like Zeus and Heracles on Kushan coins not only reflected the Greek influence on Kushan art but also served as a means to establish the political authority of the Kushan rulers. These deities were symbols of strength, victory, and divine protection, attributes that the Kushan rulers wanted to associate with their reign. Moreover, the depiction of Zeus or Heracles on Kushan coins likely served to strengthen the rulers' ties to the Greco-Roman world, an important aspect of their diplomatic and political strategy.

In contrast, while the Gupta Empire saw a rise in the prominence of Hindu deities, there was still some level of cross-religious interaction that influenced the iconography of the time. For instance, the Gupta rulers, while predominantly Hindu, still incorporated Buddhist symbols in their coinage, especially during the early Gupta period. This reflects the syncretic approach of the Gupta dynasty, where even as they promoted Hinduism, they recognized the cultural and religious importance of other traditions, including Buddhism. The Gupta kings,

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<sup>138</sup> Singh, S. (2004). *The Kushan Empire: Political and Religious Symbols on Coins*. Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.



particularly Chandragupta I and Samudragupta, were also depicted alongside Buddhist deities such as the Bodhisattvas, which indicates the continuity of Buddhist influence in the region even as Hinduism emerged as the dominant religion.<sup>139</sup>

## **A Reflection of Changing Ideals and Religious Convergence**

The role of foreign art and culture in shaping the depiction of deities on Kushan and Gupta coinage is an important aspect of the religious and political evolution of these empires. While the Kushan Empire embraced a wide array of foreign artistic traditions, from Greek to Persian to Buddhist, the Gupta Empire's coinage reflected a more focused return to Hindu religious symbols, though still maintaining elements of syncretism. This convergence of diverse artistic and religious influences on coinage provides a window into the cultural dynamics of the time, highlighting how rulers used religious imagery to communicate their authority, legitimacy, and divine favor.<sup>140</sup>

For the Kushans, foreign deities were integral to their political propaganda and religious expression, symbolizing their empire's vast reach and the ruler's divine protection over a multitude of peoples. The Gupta rulers, on the other hand, used coins to promote Hindu religious ideology, presenting themselves as divine figures while still accommodating religious pluralism. This fusion of indigenous and foreign religious themes underscores the adaptability and syncretism of Indian coinage, a key feature that allowed ancient Indian empires to maintain cultural cohesion and political legitimacy in a diverse, multi-religious landscape. Ultimately, the religious and artistic symbolism on the coins of both the Kushan and Gupta empires reveals the interconnectedness of politics, religion, and art in

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<sup>139</sup> Gupta, A. (2007). *Coinage of the Gupta Period: A Historical Overview*. Numismatic Society of India.

<sup>140</sup> Cribb, J. (2003). *The Monetary System of the Kushan Empire*. Oxford University Press.

the ancient world, offering a lasting legacy of cross-cultural exchange and religious dialogue.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Allan, J. (1914). *Catalogue of the Gupta Coinage*. British Museum, London.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Iconography of Gods and Goddesses: A Symbolic and Political Interpretation**

The depiction of gods and goddesses on ancient Indian coins is a central theme in understanding the religious, political, and cultural values of the Kushan and Gupta empires. These coins, serving as both currency and propaganda tools, offer a unique lens through which the symbolic meaning of divine imagery and its political significance can be explored. The iconography of gods and goddesses on these coins was not merely an artistic choice, but a reflection of the rulers' political ideologies, their claims to divine legitimacy, and their relationships with both indigenous and foreign religious traditions. This chapter delves into the symbolic and political interpretations of divine iconography, analyzing how gods and goddesses were utilized on Kushan and Gupta coinage to convey complex messages about power, religious authority, and cultural identity.

#### **The Political Use of Divine Imagery in Kushan Coinage**

The Kushan Empire, which flourished between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE, was marked by a diverse and multi-ethnic population that included Indians, Greeks, Persians, and Central Asians. This diversity is reflected in the religious and artistic iconography found on Kushan coins, where rulers often adopted gods and goddesses from a range of traditions. One of the primary motivations behind these depictions was to establish the ruler's divine right to govern and their ability to unite diverse peoples under their reign. The use of foreign deities, such as the Greek god Heracles and the Persian god Mithra, alongside indigenous Indian deities like Shiva, Vishnu, and the Buddha, was not accidental. These images

communicated to various ethnic groups that their own gods were honored by the Kushan rulers, effectively legitimizing the emperor's power in religious terms.<sup>142</sup>

In the case of Kushan rulers like Kanishka, the portrayal of deities on coins was tied to a political agenda. Kanishka's coinage often depicted him in close association with the Buddha, which was a strategic move to solidify his relationship with Buddhist communities. At the same time, Kanishka's coins also featured Greco-Roman gods, such as Zeus and Heracles, reflecting his position as a ruler with connections to the Hellenistic world. These images served a dual purpose: they communicated the Kushan ruler's strength and divine protection, and they symbolized the emperor's role as the protector of multiple religious communities. Through this religious iconography, the ruler was portrayed not only as a sovereign but as a divine figure whose authority extended beyond earthly politics to the realm of the gods.<sup>143</sup>

The use of gods and goddesses in Kushan coinage can also be seen as an assertion of imperial power. The coinage was not simply a reflection of religious devotion, but an assertion of control over both spiritual and temporal realms. The depiction of deities provided the Kushan rulers with a potent tool for propaganda, as these divine images were meant to evoke divine favor and ensure the loyalty of the subjects. The portrayal of gods in regal, powerful stances—whether as warriors, protectors, or benefactors—reinforced the idea that the Kushan ruler was not just a political leader, but also an intermediary between the gods and the people. This religious imagery on coins, in turn, reinforced the ruler's political agenda, underscoring the belief that his rule was divinely sanctioned.

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<sup>142</sup> Gupta, P. L. (1969). *Coins*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, New Delhi.

<sup>143</sup> Rosenfield, J. M. (1967). *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

## The Role of Hindu Gods and Goddesses in Gupta Coinage

The Gupta Empire, which spanned the 4th to the 6th centuries CE, is often considered the "Golden Age" of ancient India, particularly in terms of cultural and religious developments. The Gupta rulers, unlike their Kushan counterparts, were predominantly Hindu, and their coinage reflects the increasing prominence of Hindu deities during this period. The Gupta rulers adopted Hindu gods such as Vishnu, Shiva, and Lakshmi to symbolize their authority, and these deities were often depicted on the coins to reinforce the divine right of the rulers to govern. The coins of the Gupta period, while rooted in Indian religious traditions, also reflected the ongoing influence of foreign artistic styles, particularly from the Greco-Roman and Central Asian worlds.<sup>144</sup>

One of the most notable features of Gupta coinage was the frequent depiction of the Gupta king in the form of a divine figure, often accompanied by Hindu deities. For example, Samudragupta, one of the most illustrious rulers of the Gupta dynasty, is often depicted on coins alongside representations of Vishnu and Shiva. This not only symbolized his personal devotion to these gods but also presented him as their earthly representative. In Gupta coinage, the ruler was shown as a divinely ordained figure who had the favor of the gods. The iconography of Vishnu and Shiva, with their symbolic attributes such as the conch, discus, trident, and maces, reinforced the ruler's association with divine power, victory, and protection.<sup>145</sup>

The Gupta rulers' strategic use of Hindu iconography on their coins was also deeply political. By linking themselves with powerful gods such as Vishnu and

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<sup>144</sup> Chattopadhyaya, B. (1967). *The Age of the Kushans: A Numismatic Study*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press.

<sup>145</sup> Puri, B. N. (1965). *India Under the Kushans*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi.

Shiva, the Gupta emperors were asserting their status as divinely chosen rulers, with a sacred mandate to govern. The portrayal of these deities was meant to communicate that the emperor's rule was not just political but was also underpinned by divine sanction. The presence of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, on Gupta coins further emphasized the idea that the ruler's reign brought prosperity and divine blessings to the empire. The use of these religious symbols thus not only reinforced the ruler's political power but also sought to legitimize their reign in the eyes of the people, assuring them that the ruler was a protector of both the state and the divine order.

### **Symbolism and Iconography: The Representation of Power and Protection**

The depictions of gods and goddesses on both Kushan and Gupta coins were loaded with symbolic meaning. The gods were not merely divine figures but powerful symbols of protection, victory, and royal authority. For the Kushans, the gods often appeared in warrior-like poses, wielding weapons or in protective stances, emphasizing their role in safeguarding the empire and its ruler. Similarly, Gupta coins also portrayed gods and goddesses in powerful, often regal postures, reinforcing the idea that the emperor's power was divinely ordained and protected by these deities.

The political use of religious iconography extended beyond the rulers themselves. For instance, the portrayal of deities on coins was meant to instill a sense of divine protection among the people, assuring them that the ruler's divine patronage would ensure their safety and prosperity. In this sense, the gods were not only symbols of divine power but also of social stability and the well-being of the state. The Gupta rulers, through their association with gods like Vishnu and Shiva, sought to create a harmonious relationship between the divine, the king, and the people, ensuring that religious symbolism reinforced the political order.

## **Cross-Cultural Influences on Iconography**

Both the Kushan and Gupta empires were characterized by a significant degree of cultural and religious pluralism, and this is reflected in the diverse iconography found on their coins. The Kushans, with their Central Asian origins, were particularly adept at incorporating foreign artistic influences into their coinage. As noted earlier, Greek and Persian deities were often depicted alongside indigenous Indian gods, highlighting the empire's cosmopolitan nature. This cross-cultural blending is also seen in the stylization of divine figures, where Greco-Roman and Persian artistic conventions influenced the portrayal of Indian gods. For example, the depiction of the Buddha in a Greco-Roman style on Kushan coins was a clear indication of the blending of Eastern and Western artistic traditions.

The Gupta rulers, though more firmly rooted in Indian religious traditions, were also influenced by foreign artistic styles. Gupta coinage, while predominantly Hindu in iconography, often displayed stylistic elements borrowed from Greco-Roman art. The depiction of gods in a naturalistic style, with intricate detailing of facial features and clothing, reflected the lasting impact of Greco-Roman artistic conventions, particularly those introduced by the Kushan rulers. This fusion of artistic styles on Gupta coins not only reflects the political and cultural exchanges between India and the broader world but also underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of religious iconography in ancient India.

## **The Intersection of Religion, Politics, and Art**

The iconography of gods and goddesses on ancient Indian coins, particularly during the Kushan and Gupta periods, offers a rich tapestry of religious, political, and artistic significance. For both the Kushan and Gupta rulers, the depiction of deities on coins was a deliberate and strategic act, designed to reinforce their political authority and divine legitimacy. The gods on these coins were not simply

religious symbols but political tools, used to communicate the ruler's divine mandate and to strengthen the bond between the emperor and his subjects.

The evolution of religious iconography on coins from the Kushan to the Gupta period reflects the shifting religious and cultural landscape of ancient India. While the Kushans embraced a diverse array of foreign deities, the Gupta rulers focused more on Hindu gods to assert their divine authority. However, both empires demonstrated the power of coinage as a medium for religious expression and political propaganda, using divine imagery to construct and communicate their political agendas. Through their depiction of gods and goddesses, these rulers not only sought to legitimize their rule but also to ensure the continued prosperity and stability of their empires. In this way, the iconography of deities on ancient Indian coins serves as a powerful testament to the intersection of religion, politics, and art in the ancient world.

### **The Use of Religious Iconography for Imperial Identity**

Both the Kushan and Gupta rulers strategically employed religious iconography to construct their imperial identity. The representation of gods and goddesses on their coins was a crucial tool for the rulers to project their power and legitimacy, aligning themselves with divine forces. By using religious symbols, they not only conveyed spiritual authority but also demonstrated their role as protectors and divine benefactors of their empires. This technique ensured the political success of their reigns, as coinage was the most visible form of propaganda that could reach all levels of society.

For the Kushan rulers, particularly under Kanishka, the use of Buddhist imagery on coins served as a unifying force for the empire's diverse populace. The depiction of the Buddha was not only a representation of religious reverence but also a symbol of Kanishka's alignment with the Buddhist faith, which flourished during his reign. The gods of various traditions were placed alongside him on the



coins, signifying the ruler's role as an intermediary between divine powers and the people. This approach was particularly effective in a multicultural empire where religious pluralism was a necessity, and it helped the Kushans maintain stability by fostering inclusivity among the different groups within their territories.

Similarly, the Gupta rulers also adopted a strategy of divine association on their coinage to assert their authority. Emperors such as Samudragupta and Chandragupta II utilized gods like Vishnu, Shiva, and Lakshmi to legitimize their reign. The gods were portrayed not only as symbols of divine blessing but as manifestations of the emperor's royal qualities—strength, wisdom, and prosperity. For instance, Vishnu's depiction with his consort Lakshmi on coins emphasized the divine protection of the Gupta empire. The image of Lakshmi, as the goddess of wealth, on coins during the Gupta period reinforced the notion that the emperor's rule brought prosperity and stability to the land.

The strategic use of these deities was not only about claiming divine protection but also about positioning the rulers as divinely chosen beings who were integral to the well-being of their subjects. By incorporating gods and goddesses in royal imagery, the rulers bridged the gap between earthly authority and celestial power, reinforcing their status as not only political leaders but also divine protectors of the realm.

## **Deities as Representatives of the State**

One of the most interesting aspects of the iconography of gods and goddesses on Kushan and Gupta coins is the use of deities as symbols of the state itself. For both empires, religious imagery became a powerful tool for asserting the ideals of the empire and for communicating the ruler's connection to the greater cosmic order.

In the case of the Kushan Empire, deities on coins acted as the physical representation of the empire's strength and stability. The gods were often depicted in dynamic poses—whether riding horses, holding weapons, or seated on thrones—indicating their ability to protect the empire. The depiction of gods, especially warrior gods like Shiva and the Buddha, was intended to embody the ruler's role in ensuring the security of the state. Such images sent a strong message to the people: their ruler, supported by divine forces, was capable of defending the empire from external threats and internal instability.

The Gupta rulers, on the other hand, often used gods as metaphors for the welfare of the state. The frequent use of Vishnu, the god of preservation and protector of the cosmos, signaled that the ruler's role was to maintain order and harmony in the empire. Vishnu's symbolic connection to the king was underscored by the imagery on Gupta coins, where the god's association with the king made it clear that the emperor was the guarantor of peace and prosperity. Through these coins, the Gupta rulers effectively communicated that the success of their reign was not just about military might or political acumen but also about their alignment with divine principles of justice, dharma, and order.

The idea of the emperor as a divine ruler, chosen and protected by gods, was reinforced through the constant circulation of coins featuring religious iconography. These deities, often idealized in human form, were elevated to cosmic proportions, further enhancing the ruler's image as a divinely sanctioned figure. This portrayal went beyond the individual ruler, suggesting that the entire state was under the divine protection of the gods represented on the coins.

## **Symbolism of Warfare and Protection in the Iconography**

Another striking element of the depiction of gods and goddesses on Kushan and Gupta coinage is the emphasis on the themes of warfare and protection. Divine figures were frequently shown in military contexts—armed, often in combat, or

depicted as protectors of the realm. This powerful symbolism served multiple functions: it presented the ruler not only as a divine protector but also as an invincible warrior chosen by the gods to safeguard the empire.

Kushan coins often depicted gods such as Mithra and Heracles, two deities associated with war and protection. Mithra, a Persian god of the sun and justice, was a symbol of strength and moral order, while Heracles, a Greek hero and god of strength, was often used to portray the military prowess of the Kushan emperor. In some coins, the Kushan ruler is shown alongside these deities, further emphasizing the military might and divine sanction behind his rule. These images conveyed the ruler's power and authority, suggesting that he was a warrior king with the favor of the gods.

The Gupta rulers similarly adopted military iconography for their divine figures. On many Gupta coins, gods like Vishnu and Shiva are shown with weapons or in combat, symbolizing their role as protectors of the state. For example, Vishnu's depiction holding a discus and a conch echoed his role as a divine warrior fighting to maintain the balance of the universe. The fact that these gods were portrayed as protectors in the context of battle signified that the emperor, like his divine counterparts, had the strength and power to defeat enemies and ensure the safety of his people. This not only reinforced the ruler's martial prowess but also positioned the emperor as a righteous leader, whose military campaigns were justified by divine will.

Through these iconographies, gods were not just distant, ethereal beings; they were active participants in the political and military struggles of the empire. Their images on coins communicated to the people that the gods themselves were fighting alongside the ruler, ensuring the success of the state and the protection of its people. In this way, the depiction of gods as warriors or protectors on coins

served as a form of divine endorsement for military endeavors, ensuring that such actions were viewed as both politically and spiritually justified.

## **Religious Iconography and the Representation of the Emperor**

The depiction of the emperor himself in divine or semi-divine forms was another significant development in the coinage of both the Kushan and Gupta empires. The idea of the ruler as a god or as divinely appointed was central to both empires' religious and political ideologies. By representing themselves with the attributes of gods, these rulers further solidified their status as divinely favored and legitimate sovereigns.

For example, Kanishka, the most prominent of the Kushan emperors, is frequently depicted on his coins in the traditional attire and posture of a deity. His divine association was not limited to the gods he depicted but extended to his own image, emphasizing his role as a chosen ruler. Similarly, Gupta rulers like Samudragupta and Chandragupta II presented themselves on coins in poses and regalia that evoked divine authority. The use of divine imagery in the ruler's portrayal was not merely symbolic—it was a direct assertion of the ruler's divine right to rule, reinforcing his connection to cosmic order and his power to protect the empire from all threats.

The portrayal of the emperor as a divine figure was also a political strategy, intended to strengthen the ruler's position in the eyes of the people. By aligning themselves with gods who represented military prowess, wealth, and prosperity, the rulers underscored their capacity to maintain the empire's well-being. These depictions signaled to the subjects that their ruler, like the gods, embodied the qualities that were necessary for the stability and success of the state.

## **Political and Symbolic Impact of Religious Imagery on Coins**

The iconography of gods and goddesses on the coins of the Kushan and Gupta empires was far more than a religious expression—it was a powerful political tool used to legitimize and reinforce the emperor's authority. The depiction of deities, both foreign and indigenous, on coins communicated divine protection, the ruler's martial strength, and the political unity of the empire. Through their religious imagery, both the Kushan and Gupta rulers effectively communicated their divine right to rule and their role as protectors of the state.

As this chapter has shown, the religious iconography on Kushan and Gupta coins served multiple functions: it symbolized divine approval, reinforced the political identity of the emperor, and projected an image of military might and protection. These divine figures were more than just representations of religion; they were active participants in the political, military, and social life of the empire. Through the careful use of religious iconography, these rulers established themselves as divinely appointed sovereigns, whose power and authority were reinforced by the gods themselves. In this way, the coins of the Kushan and Gupta empires stand as enduring symbols of the intersection of politics, religion, and art in ancient India.

## **Conclusion – A Way Forward**

The exploration of the depiction of gods and goddesses on ancient Indian coins, with a particular focus on the Kushan and Gupta rulers, has revealed the multifaceted role that numismatics played in ancient Indian society. The study has illuminated how these empires utilized religious iconography not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a sophisticated political and cultural strategy. The coins from the Kushan and Gupta periods are far more than mere currency; they are historical documents, pieces of art, and tools of imperial propaganda that have much to tell us about the rulers' efforts to integrate religious legitimacy with political power.

One of the most striking findings in this dissertation is the strategic use of gods and goddesses as representations of divine sanction for the ruler's authority. Through the depictions of figures like the Buddha, Vishnu, Shiva, and other deities, these rulers communicated to their subjects that their power was not simply the result of military conquest or political maneuvering, but was rooted in divine approval. For the Kushans, whose empire was highly diverse, including Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and Greek influences, the use of religious iconography served to unify a heterogeneous population. For the Guptas, on the other hand, who promoted a vision of dharma and Hindu values, the iconography of gods symbolized the prosperity and stability of their realm. These depictions were not only religious but also political, conveying messages about the ruler's role as a divine protector, a guardian of law and order, and a guarantor of the people's well-being.

In addition to its political function, the use of religious symbolism on coinage also speaks to the cultural exchanges taking place during these periods. Both the Kushan and Gupta rulers were highly influenced by the artistic traditions of foreign lands, incorporating Greco-Roman, Persian, and Central Asian elements

into their depictions of gods and goddesses. This blending of styles not only reflects the cosmopolitan nature of these empires but also illustrates the manner in which ancient Indian art and iconography were constantly evolving in response to external influences. The Kushan Empire, for instance, offers an excellent example of this syncretic approach, where deities were often depicted in Hellenistic style, embodying a fusion of Indian and foreign religious and artistic ideals.

At the same time, the coins from the Gupta period reflect a return to more traditional Indian forms, especially as Hinduism began to gain prominence in the political and religious sphere. The Gupta rulers' use of Vishnu and Lakshmi, for instance, was a symbolic representation of their connection to the natural order, divine wealth, and prosperity. Their coinage, while still containing elements of foreign influence, was also an assertion of indigenous values and practices, underscoring their role in upholding the cultural heritage of the subcontinent.

One of the major contributions of this study is the understanding that numismatics during these periods was not a passive vehicle of art; rather, it was deeply engaged with the political, social, and religious currents of the time. The gods and goddesses depicted on these coins were not simply adornments; they were integral to the formulation of imperial ideology and the communication of royal authority. The depiction of deities such as Shiva and Vishnu was not just a form of religious expression; it was also a means by which the rulers were able to project their legitimacy. These divine figures were associated with power, both physical and spiritual, and their portrayal on coins reinforced the rulers' claim to be the chosen intermediaries between the celestial and earthly realms.

In light of these findings, there are several avenues for further research that can enrich our understanding of the religious, political, and cultural contexts of ancient Indian coinage. One of the most promising directions would be to extend

this analysis to other periods of Indian history, examining how the depiction of gods and goddesses evolved in later empires such as the Mauryas, the Cholas, or the Mughals. By doing so, we could develop a more comprehensive understanding of the continuity and change in the use of religious iconography on Indian coins over the centuries. Furthermore, a comparative study with other ancient civilizations, such as the Roman, Persian, and Byzantine empires, could shed light on the broader trends in the use of religious symbolism in imperial propaganda across different cultures and regions.

Another fruitful area for future study is the role of women in the religious symbolism of ancient Indian coinage. While deities like Lakshmi and Durga were prominently featured on coins, their association with female power and agency deserves further exploration. Analyzing the depictions of female deities not only in religious contexts but also in political and dynastic terms could offer new insights into the status of women in ancient Indian society and their symbolic representation in the royal narrative. The portrayal of female deities as protectors of wealth, fertility, and the empire challenges traditional views of women in ancient texts and could provide a more nuanced understanding of gender roles during these periods.

Another key area for further investigation is the symbolic meaning of the inscriptions that accompanied the images of gods and goddesses on the coins. The inscriptions, which often carried the names and titles of the rulers, were also vehicles for conveying political messages. Analyzing the linguistic choices and the content of these inscriptions could offer deeper insight into the political and religious ideologies of the Kushan and Gupta rulers. This would involve a study of how these rulers used inscriptions as a tool for self-representation and self-legitimation, not only in their own time but also in the context of the broader religious and cultural history of India.



As the field of numismatics continues to evolve, technological advances offer exciting opportunities for further research. The application of digital imaging techniques, for example, could allow for more detailed analyses of the iconography and inscriptions on ancient coins. Through high-resolution imaging and 3D modeling, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the finer details of coin designs, such as the nuances of deity representations and their symbolic meanings. These tools could also facilitate the preservation and cataloging of coins, which in turn would make them more accessible to scholars and the general public alike.

In conclusion, this dissertation has illuminated the profound significance of the depiction of gods and goddesses on ancient Indian coins, specifically during the Kushan and Gupta periods. These coins were much more than monetary instruments; they were powerful symbols of divine sanction, political legitimacy, and cultural identity. The use of religious iconography allowed the rulers to assert their authority, communicate their connection to the divine, and promote the unity and prosperity of their empires. Through a comparative analysis of the Kushan and Gupta coinage, we have gained a deeper understanding of how religious and political ideologies were intertwined in ancient India and how these ideas were communicated through art and symbolism.

However, as this study has also demonstrated, there are numerous avenues for future research that will further enrich our understanding of ancient Indian coinage and its role in the broader historical, political, and religious contexts of the time. The study of coins, while often overlooked in traditional historical narratives, offers a window into the past that allows us to better understand the complexities of ancient Indian societies. Through continued exploration, we can unlock new insights into the cultural, religious, and political history of India, paving the way for a deeper appreciation of its rich heritage and its enduring legacy.

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