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Karttikeya on ancient Indian coins

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Abstract

Skanda-Karttikeya is well known to have been the god of war or the commander-in-chief of the divine army. Though he has not found a place in the stereotyped list of principal god but numismatic evidence proves that his images or emblems were highly venerated by a good many people of ancient India. He is known to the Vedas. The Mahabhasya of Patanjali also attests the popularity of Karttikeya. Skanda Karttikeya appears frequently on Yaudhaya's coins, Kusana's Coins and even on Gupta's Coins. During Kumaragupta I Karttikeya figured both theriomorphically and anthropomorphically on the coins. The representation of peacock stands in all likelihood for the theriomorphic representation of Skanda Karttikeya.

Keywords: Numismatic, Skanda, punch marked coins, Siva, Yaudhayas

Introduction

Coins are considered one of the important sources to know the past. Their importance increases when other sources fail to give the desired detail. The history of coinage in our country is quite old and its antiquity can be pushed back as early as 700 BC. The earliest coins found within the Indian subcontinent are ordinarily referred to as punchmarked. They are also helpful in understanding the religious outlook of the ancient Indian kings. They help us to trace the evolution of various religious beliefs. Moreover they provide us important material for the study of iconography. The devices or the symbols found both on the obverse and reverse of the coins are not meaningless, rather they represent symbolically different religious beliefs and faiths. Scholars may differ with regard to the origin of these symbols and devices but there is little doubt with regard to the religious motive behind the representation of various symbols, or deities on the coins. We found the earliest representation of symbols on the seals discovered from the Indus Valley Civilization. We found some similarity between the symbols found on early indigenous coins and seals discovered from Harappan and Mohenjo Daro. The devices on the coins represent, in most cases, the local religious beliefs and indicate the most popular way of representing the deities of particular localities.

Among the deities Karttikeya was one of the important deity which was represented on Yaudheya, Kusana and even on Gupta's coins. On punch marked coins we do not find iconography of Karttikaya but we found peacock images on that coins which was Karttikaaya's mount.

Antiquity of Karttikaya's Worship

Karttikaya is another member of Siva's family. His worship was extensively practiced in ancient India. General belief is that he is the son of Shiva and Parvati. The name Kumara occurs in the Rigveda but Skanda is nowhere mentioned. There are not many references to Skanda or Karttikeya in Vedic literature.

Karttikaya or Skanda appears in full-fledged form in the epics. Ramayana mentions Skanda as a son to Rudra though not directly begotten by him and Parvati. Agni seed fell in the Ganga who, unable to bear the heat, threw it on the Himalaya Mountain where Karttikeya was born. Indra and other Gods said that this son will be called Karttikaya and would be famous in three worlds. As he was brought up by six Kritikas or stars, he would be known as the son of Kritikas or Karttikeya. In Ramayana it was also mentioned that when Rama left for his exile, Kauslaya prayed for him. In her prayer she also pays homage to Skanda. This shows that worship of Karttikaya was quite popular during Ramayana period and he was considered as an important god.

The Mahabharata gave more elaborate accounts of the birth Skanda Karttikeya. Mahabharata tells us that the birth of Karttikeya is a result of prayer of gods to Siva, for a brave general to win their battles against a demon, so Karttikaya was born as an answer to the prayers.

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In Vayu Purana also, Skanda's relation with Rudra and Uma is established and mentioned that he had been nourished by Kritikas, thus he became famous as Karttikeya and his weapon is a sakti (spear) called Aparajita. So there are many versions about his origin but one thing is common that he had a relation with god Siva and his consort Parvati. He is also called the general of God's army, who is a lord and great master who is the conqueror of enemies. His qualities as a general are highlighted in Gita also where Krishna is made to say that he is Skanda among warriors. The Vishnudharmottara also states that four souled eternal god Vasudeva manifested himself as Kumara for leading the divine army. Therefore we can say that the association of Skanda with war was a fairly old idea.

Depiction of Karttikeya on Ancient Indian Coins

It would appear that Karttikaya enjoyed an independent cult in which his position was supreme though his relation with god Siva has been established beyond any doubt. We have a number of coins on which a peacock is represented which is associated with him as his mount. Besides this, we have many coins till Gupta age on which Karttikeya is depicted anthropomorphically.

Punch Marked Coins

On some early Punch Marked silver coins, a peacock symbol on the hill appears. Peacock is associated with Karttikeya which is proved by many ancient religious texts. In Epic accounts, Skanda is given a peacock by the gods. Cock and peacock are special insignia or emblems of Karttikeya and associated with him. The Vishnudharmottara Purana states that kukkata and ghanta would be placed in his right hand and Vaijayanti Pataka and shakti in the left one. Matsya Purana also associates the peacock with Karttikeya as his mount. Vayupurana also mentioned that a peacock and a cock were given by Vishnu to Skanda. Siva Purana gives information that peacock has been given by Garuda to Skanda, Mahabharata also establishes the relation of Karttikeya with cock and mentioned that Karttikaya play with cock and assume different forms. From the above evidence we can say that probably the peacock depicted on their punch marked coin represents the bird that was the mount of Karttikeya. In these punch marked coins, the sun symbol, Mountain symbol, is on the obverse and peacock on mountain on the reverse. There are other specimens which bear peacock on the hill on both sides of coins i.e. on obverse as well as on reverse along with other symbols like three arched mountains surmounted with a crescent, sun symbol etc. We found no human figure of Karttikeya is found on Punch Marked coins but the peacock depicted on the coins evidently proves that it is associated with Karttikeya and it may be theriomorphic representation of Karttikeya as Siva is depicted in bull form.

Local and Tribal Coins: We have depiction of Karttikeya in human form on local and tribal coins. Copper coin belonging to Devametra, ruler of Ayodhya, has a symbol which is being described as 'cock on top of post' on reverse and on the obverse bull symbol appears. Same device also appeared on the coins of Vijay Mitra of the same tribal kingdom. Prof. J.N. Banerjea presumed that these coins were based on a cock-crested column (Kukkatadhvaja) which is sacred to Karttikeya. Moreover an early representation of the cock-crested column has been found at

Lala bhagat near Kanpur. This red sandstone pillar has a large figure of cock. This strengthened the presumption that kukkatadhvaja was already popular when these Ayodhya coins were struck and cock-crested column is associated with Karttikaya and considered sacred to him.

Yaudhayas Coins

The anthropomorphic representation of Karttikeya appears on the coins of Yaudhayas. Karttikaya appears on one unique silver coin and several copper coins of Yaudhayas. The silver coin shows six headed Karttikeya, standing, facing, holding a spear in right hand (Sakti, the emblem of Karttikeya) and resting the left on hip on the obverse. It has a Brahmi legend which has been read by Allan as *Bhagavata-Swami Brahmanya Yaudhaya or Yaudheya-Bhagavata Svamino Brahmanya* (sa or sya). The reverse of this represents a six headed goddess standing facing on lotus who is identified as Lakshmi by Allan with a six-arched mount surmounted by chatra and nandipad on left. J.N. Banerjea also described this figure as Laxmi but V.S. Agrawala and Devendra Handa identify her as Shashthi or Devasena, spouse of Karttikeya. Cunningham described her as Kritikas who nurtured Karttikeya which does not seem correct as the goddess is not six headed. It may be Karttikaya's spouse Shashthi.

Prof. J.N. Banerjea thinks that the Yaudhayas had dedicated their state to Karttikaya who was regarded by them not only as their spiritual but also their temporal ruler. Moreover, the epithet Brahmanya has been used for Karttikeya in the Mahabharata also. So the Brahmanya of the coin legend appears to be identified with Karttikaya. Yaudhayas were a tribe of warrior-folk and they are known as Ayudha-Jivi-Sangha i.e. a tribe living by the profession of arm and it seems quite possible that they would worship a war god.

The iconographic type of Karttikeya differs from some other class of the Yaudheya coins. Karttikeya is found six headed, standing holding spear is depicted on obverse and on reverse deer, six arched mountain, tree in railing, swastika, Srivasta and wavy line below occurs. Sometimes on reverse, six arched mountains surmounted with Nandipada and Srivasta placed horizontally appear and on the obverse figure of Karttikeya remains the same.

Karttikaya also appears one headed on Yaudheya copper coins. On the obverse of the copper coin, the figure of Karttikeya standing, accompanied with peacock on the left, appears. The god holds a spear in his right hand while left hand rests on his hip. Matsya Purana mentions that the left hand of the god should be placed on a cock. It appears that iconographic features of the deity are similar to the description provided by the ancient text. A Shadanana deer type coin has been described by Devendra Handa. Karttikaya standing holding a spear in the right hand on obverse and on reverse deer to left facing a domed temple swastika above the face of the deer and a square box enclosing triangle headed standard. On this coin one headed Karttikaya is depicted.

The six headed male deity depicted on the above mentioned coins, has been rightly identified as Karttikaya and this tradition is followed by Kusana also. It has been mentioned in Vishnudharmottara Purana that there are four manifestations of Kumara, namely Kumara, Skanda, Vishakha and Guha.

*Chaturmurteh Kumararaja rupam te vachmi yadava
Kumarascha tatha Skando Visakhascha Guhastatha*

In the same religious text, it has also been mentioned that he should be represented with six faces.

Kumarascha Shanmukhah Karyah

So these figure are of Karttikaya and Yaudhaya dedicated their region to the Karttikaya, who was their tutelary god. They ruled in the name of Karttikaya.

Kusana Coins

The only foreign ruler to depict Karttikaya on his coin is Kusana King, Huviska. He depicted him under various names like Skanda, Kumara, Visakha and Mahasena. We have three aspects of Karttikaya. The first aspect is Mahasena, a form of Skanda, shown nimbate and diademed is holding a standard surmounted by a bird (rude peacock) in the right hand while his left hand rests on the hilt of a sword which is tied to his girdle with the Greek legend is *MAASENO* (Mahasena). The second aspect is Skanda Kumara and Visakha stands face to face, with similar dresses as on the coins of Huviska, where Skanda holds a standard surmounted by a bird and Visakha holds a spear in his left hand. The Greek legend is *Skanda Kumara Bizago*. The third aspect on the Huviska coins is Visakha, shown clasping the right hand of Skanda Kumara who touches him with his left hand. There is also a shrine consisting of an ornamented double platform with a levelier representation of super structure having inside three standing figures of Skanda and Visakha with Mahasena in the middle depicted on a pedestal. The Greek legend is *Skanda Kumara Masena Bizago*. We have evidence from religious texts which proves that these are different names of Karttikaya. The name Kumara has been mentioned in Rgveda and Vayu Purana. In Epic also this name frequently occurs as the name of Karttikaya. Visakha may be earlier a separate god who later became identified with Karttikaya. Both words Visakha and Kritika are associated with stars. May be in ancient times star worship had been prevalent, which on later stage merged with Skanda worship, who is supposed to be the son of seven Kritika. The Vishnu Purana and Ramayana mentions Visakha as one of the brother of Skanda. However Mahabharata accounts that Vishakha is another name of Skanda. We may conclude that originally Visakha may be a separate entity but later on it is considered as another aspect of the deity Skanda.

Therefore, we may conclude that all these names are not separate deities but they are the different aspects of the same deity i.e. Karttikaya. Dr. R.G. Bhandarkar thinks that the three different figures represent three names i.e. Skanda-Mahasena, Skanda Kumara and Skanda Vishaka.

I will conclude with the view of J.N. Banerjea that this is one god having different names. There may have been small entities or different gods before but later they were merged in the composite personality of the Karttikaya and their iconography shows that they were one and the same god.

Gupta Coins

During the Gupta period Karttikaya was accorded a place of honour. He was adopted as one of the devices of the coinage. Among the Gupta emperors Kumargupta-I was the first to issue the peacock and Karttikaya type gold coin. He depicted Karttikaya nimbate, riding on the Peacock

(paravan), holding a spear in left hand over shoulder, with his right hand sprinkling incense probably on the altar before him. The peacock is shown standing on a kind of platform. But the presumption of Allan of sprinkling incense on an altar with his right hand is negated by Banerjea. He has the opinion that the iconographic pose of Karttikaya has been varda, that is conferring boon. Smith described it as a female deity which is not an acceptable view. It is a figure of Karttikaya and it may be possible that Karmaragupta-I was in urgent need of the graces of god Karttikaya as he was being troubled by the invasion of Hunas and Pusyamitra. Peacock and Karttikaya type coins were introduced to pay homage to Skanda-Karttikaya. Almost all the Gupta rulers were the devotee of Bhagvatas but Kumaragupta-I depicts Karttikaya on his coins which shows that he has belief in him and wants his favour. It may also be possible that he has named his son, Skanda Gupta, after the name of Karttikaya. Peacock, the mount of Karttikaya appear on the horseman and tiger slayer types of coins of Kumaragupta-I. The bird with outspread wings and tail appears also on the reverse of his silver coins. Peacock on the Gupta coins, signifies a bird having religious significance as it is related with god Karttikaya as his mount. Peacock, on Kumaragupta-I coins was not borrowed from anywhere but it is a religious symbol associated with god. The peacock type coins has been followed by Skandagupta who is his son and successor. There is no doubt about the fact that Skanda Karttikaya continued to enjoy royal patronage during the reign of Skandagupta. We can also say that during Gupta age, royal patronage has made Skanda, a popular god in India. Hence, the position of Skanda was quite high in Gupta age but as the mighty Gupta empire declined so did Skanda's popularity. It lost its individuality and was amalgamated into the family of Siva. Till Gupta period it was a separate and a popular war god whose grace was aspired by many powerful rulers of India.

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