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**NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**



**TWENTYTHIRD SESSION
TRIPURA UNIVERSITY
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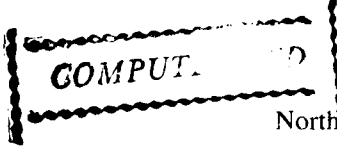
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Preface

The Twenty-Third Session of the NEIHA was hosted by the Tripura University, and was held at Agartala, Tripura from 26-28 September 2002. The Session was inaugurated by His Excellency the Governor of Tripura. The three days of the Annual Conference was very well attended by historians and other social scientists from different parts of the region and also from other parts of the country and the academic sessions, the most important part of the Annual Conferences of NEIHA, saw the active participation of all NEIHA members present. We place on record our thanks to the Vice-Chancellor of Tripura University for hosting the XXIIIrd Session of NEIHA and also our very sincere thanks to Prof. Mahadev Chakravarti the Local Secretary, and his colleagues in the Department of History and other departments in the University and Colleges who worked untiringly to make the session a success.

This volume is a collection of the papers presented in the various academic panels of the XXIIIrd session and also the proceedings of the business meetings of the session. We regret that the Audit Report and the Treasurer's report could not be printed because these were not received on time. The Association is grateful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for the financial support advanced towards the publication of the Proceedings volume.

May we reiterate a point for the information of members that if the papers presented do not follow the **NEIHA style sheet** for referencing and if the revised drafts do not come to us within the last date announced in the business session it becomes very difficult for the editors and the Editorial Board to function. It was mainly for these reasons and also of course for the considered opinion of the Panel Chairpersons, whose comments on every paper were clearly recorded and the deliberations of the Editorial Board, that a number of papers had to be abstracted or listed. We request all NEIHA members to kindly follow the NEIHA style sheet of reference published in **Appendix F of the NEIHA Proceedings Volume of the XVIIIth Session (Agartala)** and also to send in their revised papers within the last date

decided upon in the business session of every Annual Conference. The task of editing, proof reading etc. of such a large number of papers within a very limited period is very time consuming and we can do the work to the satisfaction of all NEIHA members only with the co-operation of all the paper presenters.

Finally we would like to say a very special word of thanks to the members of the Editorial Board, Prof. J. B. Bhattacharjee, Prof. Mignonette Momin and Prof. F. A. Qadri who made our work much lighter by giving much of their time to sit through the Editorial Board meetings to decide on the status of the papers and also editing and doing the proof reading of the papers. We thank Mr. Pradeep Shaha and his staff of *Modern Offset* for their interest in the work and getting the volume ready in time for release in the 24th session.

Shillong
11th July, 2003



(Manorama Sharma)



(D.R. Syiemlieh)

Contents

	Page No.
1. Presidential Address — <i>Lal Dena</i> ...	1 - 17
2. Saga of the Assamese Middle Class : 1826-1921 ... — a review article — — <i>Amalendu Guha</i>	18 - 25
3. Interrogating Traditions : Towards A Conceptual Framework — <i>Manorama Sharma</i> ...	26 - 32
✓ 4. Witnessing History : The <i>Kalika Purana</i> Examined ... — <i>Mignonette Momin</i>	33 - 40
5. <i>Rajmala</i> and the Historical Writings in Tripura ... — <i>J B Bhattacharjee</i>	41 - 47
6. The Coinage of North-East India ... A Historical Perspective — <i>Nicholas Rhodes</i>	48 - 55
7. Tea Garden Tokens – New Finds ... — <i>S.K. Bose</i>	56 - 58
8. A New Coin of Ratna Manikya - I ... — <i>Jahar Acharjee</i>	59 - 61
9. A few Coins of Muslim Rulers Preserved in ... Tezpur District Museum — <i>Sarharuddin Ahmed</i>	62 - 67
10. A Note on the Biswanath Pillar Inscription ... — <i>Madhab Ch. Das</i>	68 - 70
11. Pottery in Assam : Historical Analysis ... — <i>Krishnajyoti Handique</i>	71 - 75
12. The Worship of Surya in Ancient Guwahati ... — <i>Paromita Das</i>	76 - 81
13. Bhaskaravarman and the Downfall of the Varman ... Dynasty A.D. 1380 to 650 — <i>Bharati Barua</i>	82 - 87
14. Horse Sacrifice by Kamarupa Kings ... — <i>Karabi Bharali</i>	88 - 91
15. Dr. Moidul Islam Bora : Contribution to the ... Writing of History with Special Reference to the History of Medieval Assam — <i>Anowar Hussain</i>	92 - 98

16. The Ahomisation Process in Early Mediaeval Assam ... 99-104
— *Romesh Buragohain*
17. Some Thoughts on Continuity and Change in Ahom Society ... 105-109
— *Kasturi Prava Devi*
18. Peasants' Revolt At Sarukhetri : The Rajimel ... 110-118
— *Moushumi Pathak*
19. Opening Up of Nambor Forest for Settlement : A Missed Opportunity ... 119-127
— *Priyam Goswami*
20. Railroads and Equalisation of Trade in Assam ... 128-132
— *Sarah Hilaly*
21. Sibsagar Town : Spread of English Education in the Colonial Period ... 133-140
— *Punyadhar Gogoi*
22. The Growth of Colleges in Assam and its Impact on the Development of Higher Education ... 141-150
— *Rajib Handique*
23. The Gana-Natya (Ipta) Movement in Assam: A Retrospect (1943-55) ... 151-156
— *Susnata Das.*
24. Labour Migration in an Earlier Phase of Global Restructuring : The Nepali Dairy Farmers in Assam ... 157-173
— *Lopita Nath*
25. Collective Memory of Violence : Ethnicity and Opinion Formation in the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley, 1979-1985 ... 174-180
— *Makiko Kimura*
26. Introduction of the Assam Act IX, 1961 ... 181-186
— *Gajendra Adhikary*
27. Historical Perspective in the Assamese Oral Literature ... 187-193
— *Tua Katak & M.Minal Bora*
28. Early Nyingmapa Monasteries of Tawang ... 194-201
— *S.Dutta*
— *B. Tripathy*
29. Origin and Migration of the Tagins of Arunachal Pradesh ... 202-207
— *Ashan Riddi*
30. The Havi Tangsas of Tirap Valley : A Historical Study of their Origin and Migration ... 208-216
— *Narayan Singh Rao*

31. Factors Leading to the Acceptance of Christianity : ... 217-230
A Case Study of the Bokars of Arunachal Pradesh
— *Marto Etie*
32. Women's Market and State: Experiences of ... 231-239
the Manipur Valley — *Sudhir Haorongbam*
33. Some Aspects of Social Development of the ... 240-246
Phom Nagas during the Post-Independence Period
— *Abdur Rahman*
34. On the Funerary Customs among the ... 247-250
Chakhesang Nagas — *Zokho Venuh*
35. Origin, Growth and Nomenclature of the ... 251-270
Localities of Shillong — *Zahid Husain and*
— *Jenita Mary Nongkynrih*
36. The Kheroni Seal of King Ratnapala ... 271-274
— *Satish Chandra Bhattacharyya*
37. The Religious History of Unakoti on the Background ... 275-279
of Rites and Myths — *Priyabrata Bhattacharjee*
38. The Patron Sultan of King Ratan Manikya ... 280-285
— *F.A. Qadri*
39. Christianity and Social change - A case study ... 286-296
of Kokborok Speaking People
— *Sukhendu Debbarma*
40. The Cropping Pattern in Tripura - A Retrospection ... 297-306
— *Sanjoy Ray*
41. Health Care in Princely Tripura ... 307-313
— *Satyadeo Poddar*
42. A Critique of Hunter's views on the reasons ... 314-327
prompting the shifting cultivators of Tripura
not to change their own system of cultivation
and take up settled cultivation by 1876
— *Malabika Das Gupta*
43. Gumti Hydel Project & the Displaced ... 328-334
Persons of the Area — *Malaya Banerjee*

Abstracts of papers - I

1. Socio Political Participation and Tribal Development ... 335-336
in Tripura Since Independence — *Suchintiya Bhattacharya*

Abstracts of papers - II

1. Origin of Clans Amongst Vishnupriya Manipuris ... 336-336
— *Braja Gopal Sinha*
2. Amaibi : The Spirit Medium of Manipur ... 337-337
— *Rangitabali Waikhom*

Abstracts of papers - III ... 337-337

Appendix

- A. Minutes of the Executive Committee held at ... 338-340
Agartala, on 26th Sept. 2002
- B. Minutes of the Annual Business Meeting ... 341-345
- C. General Secretary's Report ... 346-348
- D. Life Members of the XXIII Session ... 349-382
- E. Life Members who are longer with us ... 383-383
- F. Annual Members ... 384-392

The Coinage of North-East India

A Historical Perspective

Nicholas Rhodes

Introduction

Coins are valuable contemporary historical documents, and in this respect, they are extremely important for the history of the North-East, as few other early documents are available. However, the coins were originally struck for specific economic or political purposes, and the information available from them could go far beyond the information written on them. The purpose of this paper is to identify the data available from coins, and to show how this data can be used by historians, using specific examples taken from north-east India.

What is Numismatic Data?

The raw data that can be obtained from a study of the coinage includes at least the following :-

1. A monetised economy is very different in nature from a non-monetised economy, so it is important to know whether or not coins existed.
2. Legend on the coins - this often includes the name of the king and/or queen, sometimes coupled with a date, religious invocations, and occasionally other information. In Muslim coinage a mint name is often present, but a mint name hardly ever appears on any of the Hindu coinages of the North-East states.
3. Letter forms - the exact form of the letters on the coins can be compared with those on other contemporary written documents and inscriptions.
4. If a pictorial image is present on the coin, the artistic treatment, the iconography and the origin of the image can be compared with images in other media.
5. The method and technical competence of manufacture can be compared with that of other metal objects or images manufactured at the same time.
6. The metal content can be analysed, and the source of the metal considered. If not mined locally, the metal must have been acquired as a result of trade.

7. Denomination - a low value coin is useful for small-scale purchases in local markets. A high value coin is only useful as a store of value or for large-scale purchases.
8. Volumes issued - a large-scale coinage must have had a major effect on the economy, whereas a small-scale coinage will have had little effect, and may only have been issued as a political statement.
9. Control mechanisms - consistency of style and weight, secret control marks on the dies, and a lack of contemporary forgeries found in circulation, all point to a well-controlled coinage. If coinage was well controlled, other aspects of government may have been handled competently.
10. Hoard evidence - it is always interesting and instructive to determine the composition, burial time and location of hoards. Hoards are often buried during a time of political unrest, and a concentration of single finds of small denomination coins may indicate the location of a market place.

So far no integrated study of the coins of the North-East has been published, although I wrote such a survey in 1995, when I gave a series of Prof. H.K. Barpujari memorial lectures at NEHU. This manuscript has been with a publisher since then, and has not seen the light of day, but it is available to researchers at NEHU, and it has received limited private circulation among numismatists, particularly in Kolkata. A basic listing of coins is given in *The Standard Guide to South Asian Coins and Paper Money Since 1556 AD*, but without these sources, it is quite difficult for historians to get a true picture of the extent and availability of the coins.¹ A basic summary of the relevant coinages is set out below “-

Tripura : Coinage started by Ratna Manikya in AD 1464 and continued until 1931. Mainly silver coins of c 10.5g. A few gold coins and minor silver denominations.

Cooch Behar : Coinage started by Nara Narayan in AD 1555 and continued until 1922. Initially silver coins of c 10.5g, but after the mid-seventeenth century, mainly silver coins of c 4.8g. Large volumes of silver coins issued until about 1789.

Kachar : One coin possibly dating from c 4.0g in AD 1520, but the main coinage commenced in AD 1559 mainly a quarter denomination issued.

Jaintiapur : First coin undated, but probably issued cAD 1560, and continued until c 1800. Initially rare silver coins of c 10.5g were

struck, becoming increasingly numerous and debased after the early eighteenth century

Ahom Kingdom : First coin issued AD 1648 and continued until 1821. Initially silver rupees of c 11.6g, but minor denominations also issued after c 1700. Coins are rather plentiful, but only an average of about three pairs of dies used for rupees each year. Scarce gold rare copper coins known dated 1817.

Manipur : Base 'bell metal' coins issued early in the eighteenth century, and continued until c 1891. Rare silver rupees, and even rarer gold and minor silver denominations, issued from 1756 until c 1815.

All these coinages have common features. Apart from Manipur, most of the coins are silver, of about the weight of the Bengali tanka and the Moghul rupee, standards clearly taken from India. Almost all the coins have legends in Assamese Bengali script and have invocations to Hindu deities. Most of the coins are dated in the Saka era that began around AD 78. Many of them were struck in relatively small numbers, so commerce was certainly not always the motivating factor.

How can Historians use the Numismatic Data?

It is useful to consider the different ways that numismatic data can be used under different headings, as follows :-

Political

So far historians have used the coinages as dated historical documents that give life to the traditional chronicles. They provide a firm chronology, and often give interesting insights into the political history of the various kingdoms. In Tripura, for example, without the coins, it would not have been possible to give an accurate chronology. In particular without the evidence of the coins, Ratna Manikya was dated to the thirteenth century, instead of to the fifteenth century. Also certain kings, such as Virabhadra Manikya (1599 AD) and Dharma Manikya (1601), find no mention in the *Rajamala*, and the coins show that this latter ruler was a vassal of Selim Shah of Arakan.

There is, however, another aspect of the coinages, which has received less attention from historians. The first coins struck by each state coincide with the time when each of these previously tribal regions came under the influence of Brahmanical Hinduism.² This process of conversion to what is now commonly known as Hinduism, took place at different times

in different places and throughout the North-East the introduction of coins became a part of this Hindu state formation process.³ The Muslim rulers of Bengal had been striking silver coins since the thirteenth century, so the issue of coins could perhaps be seen as part of a process of "civilization", instigated by the king of each kingdom, at the behest of the new immigrants from Bengal, and in particular new Hindu immigrants.

The coins of all the state have, apart from the name of the king, religious invocations to Hindu deities. In Tripura, there are sometimes pictorial images of the deities. In this way, the coins give the clear political message that the king was the head of a Hindu state, and indicate which deities he worshipped.

Although the initial motivation behind the introduction of coins may have been political, rather than economic, their existence often had other important effects. For example, Pathan and Portuguese mercenaries were paid in coins by the Tripura kings in the sixteenth century, enabling Tripura to become a regional military power. This would not have been possible had the Tripura rulers not had silver coins available.

Economic

One common element of any state is the levying of taxes. In non-monetised societies, taxes are levied as a share of production, a share of goods imported or exported, or as a labour tax. In a monetised society, taxes can be, and very often are, levied in cash.⁴ Also, the mint was an important source of revenue for the State, as often the coins were "worth" more than the cost of production. Also, in many states, such as Nepal, the import of bullion and foreign coin was permitted, but export was forbidden and silver and gold had to be taken to the mint for striking into local coin. In that way, the mint could provide significant finance to the state.

Once cash entered the state treasury, it could be used for a variety of purposes, such as the building of a power base through bureaucracy. Also food prices could be stabilized by the purchase of surplus production in times of plenty, and the sale of stored surplus in times of famine. We have no evidence of the use of coins to stabilize prices in the north east, but it was common in China during the reigns of strong emperors.

Once the economies became monetised, there was the possibility of a private sector developing. Foreign traders could conduct their business without direct patronage from the ruling princes, and the

development of urban centers could be facilitated. In a non-monetised society, market trading has to be very different in nature. As has been said "only strangers need coin, people who know each other can do without".⁵ In the north-east, only Manipur struck low denomination coins that were useful for market trading, while cowrie shells were often used by ordinary people in other areas.

However, the possession of the silver coins would have given people considerable economic, and hence political, power. It is very likely that possession of coins was largely limited to those close to the palace, and would have given the possessors status, power and a degree of personal freedom. Those with money could, in the last resort, go to Bengal and would be able to support themselves, whereas in the premonetary society, anyone wanting to leave their local village would have had to go with trade goods that could be exchanged.

Another area of economic activity to which coins can provide an insight is trading patterns. There are no silver mines in the North-East, so the silver must have reached the states in the course of trade, probably from Burma or China, either directly or via Bengal. Cooch Behar provides an interesting case study, as the silver coinage was very plentiful at several periods. After 1562, it is recorded in the local chronicles that Cooch Behar acquired a lot of silver as tribute from the various states conquered by Sukladvaj during his military expedition. Much of this booty was struck into coins by Nara Narayan. Later kings, however, did not acquire silver through conquest, and it is likely that these coins were struck from the profits earned from transit trade between Tibet and Bengal that passed through Bhutan and Cooch Behar. The size of the coinage provides a crude measure of volumes of this trade. In particular, no coins were struck in Cooch Behar between 1683 and 1695, which probably indicates that the trade was disrupted during this decade.

Findspots of coins can indicate trade flows, so the absence of finds of Manipuri coins outside Manipur may indicate that trade with Manipur was limited. On the other hand the fact that silver coins of Kachar are occasionally found in northern Bangladesh indicates trade flows from Bengal to Kachar.

As the use of coins increased, so opportunities would have arisen for money changing and money lending, an activity in which Hindus in general, and Marwaris in particular, excelled. In this way, the economic power structure in the new Hindu states would have shifted from local

people to Hindu immigrants, initially to Brahmins, but closely followed by tradesmen.

Social

Many aspects of social structures in a monetary society differ from those in a non-monetised society. For example rents for land can be paid in cash, and a market can develop in land. In a non-monetised society, land ownership will depend entirely on physical power or patronage from the king or the state.

Labour taxes in a monetised society can be commuted into cash taxes, which means that people with money can devote all their energies to working for their own benefit and generating more cash. New occupations can develop, such as bankers and money changers. Opportunities in these areas are usually taken advantage of by immigrants from regions more used to using coins. For an example of how bankers can become as powerful as kings, one has to look no further than Jagat Seth in Bengal during the eighteenth century.

Looking at the subject of monetisation the other way round, it is instructive to consider the Sena period in Bengal. No coins were issued by the Sena rulers, although they must have been fully aware of the concept of coins. It is probable, therefore, that coins were intentionally suppressed in order to limit the trading activity, and hence the social mobility of the people. This would have helped the strongly Brahmanical rulers at this time to maintain social stability and hence their political control. When Bengal was conquered by the Muslim invaders in the thirteenth century, the introduction of coins would have helped increase the power and influence of the trading castes, and consequent erosion of the power of the Brahmins so that the Muslims could more easily control the country at the political level.

Cultural

The religious inscriptions on the coins, together with the name of the King, reinforced the religious identity of the monarch and of the state. In Tripura there were images on the coins, and the iconography of these images was occasionally chosen in order not to alienate the population during the transition from a tribal society to a Hindu society. For examples, an image showing the traditional attributes of the tribal mother goddess Nowi, took the role of Garuda as the *Vaharna* of Visnu,⁶ and Naranarayana is depicted as a human-faced dragon, which may have been recognized by the tribals as a local deity.

Apart from the propaganda effect, monetary donations to temples and to Brahmins would have increased the economic power of these pillars of the new Hindu states. The patronage could come, not only from the King, but also from private traders. In this way, when traders became rich, arts could flourish. An example of this occurred in Nepal during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when Newari traders in the Nepal valley became rich, thanks to the increase in trade with Tibet,

Another interesting area on which coins can shed light is technology. If coins can be made, for example by casting, then the same artisans should be capable of casting other metal objects such as religious images. In Nepal, for example, it appears that both coins and bronze images were first produced about AD 575 probably by artisans who came from India. Similarly, if metal images were produced, then, if coins were not made, that must have been the result of a conscious decision.

Conclusion

The article only touches the surface of how numismatic evidence can be used in the study of a society. Coins were produced for particular reasons, and if a historian can figure out why the coins were manufactured, why particular designs were chosen, why a particular metal content and weight standard were chosen, and what the coins were used for, then he will understand much more about the culture he is studying.

Numismatists need to work harder at producing proper corpuses of the coinages that exist, giving the sort of information that historians might find useful. In this context, rare coins, which really excite coin collectors, probably have less to teach the historian than the very common coins which would have passed through the hands of every citizen of the time. Naturally both museum and private collections are often very biased towards the rare coins, and this bias may make numismatic evidence easy to misinterpret in the hands of the layman. It is my hope that historians and numismatists will work together more in the future, so that the numismatic evidence can be used in the most effective way.⁷ The numismatist should understand the nature of the coins, but it is the historian, with his knowledge of the wider cultural context, who can use the evidence to best effect.

Notes and References

1. Over recent decades, numisatists have tended to publish their new discoveries one by one, in short articles published in a wide range or periodicals. I have recorded over 200 such articles related to the North-East, so it is very easy for researchers to miss key pieces of information.
2. For example Tripura first issued coins in AD 1464, Cooch Behar in AD 1555, Jaintiapur in c AD 1563, Kachar in AD 1566, the Ahom kingdom in AD 1648 and Manipur in AD 1555.
3. For a general discussion of the process of Hindu state formation, See *Social and Polity Formation in Pre-Colonial North East India*, by J.B. Bhattacharjee, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1991. But the author was not aware of the extent to which coins formed part of the process.
4. Taxation methods have not been widely studied in the north east, but in the Ahom kingdom, the raising of taxes in cash became quite common during the eighteenth century.
5. Verbal comment by Dr. C.E. Challis.
6. Cf. J.P. Singh, "The Garuda or Nowi on a Tripura Coin", *NI Bulletin*, Dec. 1981, 11.392.
7. Any member of NEIHA who wishes to discuss any aspect of this articles or wishes to use numismatic evidence in his or her resources is welcome to contact me on my e-mail ladenlarhodes @hotmail.com.