



PUṢYABHŪTI GOLD-COINAGE

On Historico-Numismatic Examination of Gold-coins of Rājya-Vardhan and Harṣa

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Abstract: Early Medieval India is known in numismatic annals for its stark absence of gold coins, considered an integral part of imperial paraphernalia in its preceding Gupta Age. Silver currency became the new normative construct, and was used extensively across North India, with the causative factor of this phenomenon variably linked with feudalism to trans-national market collapse to evisceration of imperial will. However, against the stereotyped description of this period have recently come two gold-coins, issued by two consecutive Puṣyabhūti monarchs- Rājya-Vardhan and Harṣa, which not only challenges the standard socio-historical contours of c. 6th-7th Century CE, but also rightly call for a fresh examination of extant numismatic evidence in its proper circumstantial configuration. Herein, this lacuna needs to be filled by re-examining Puṣyabhūti gold coinage, and situating them in the politico-economic scenario of their times. In this exercise, the heavily outnumbered historical presence of the two gold-coins in silver-saturated echelons will be considered, and also briefly comment upon the nature of fraternal relationship between Rājya-Vardhan and Harṣa. Through this, valuable revelatory light shall be thrown on the existential complex of gold-coins in post-Gupta period, and further on the historico-numismatic contours of the Puṣyabhūti regime.

Keywords: Rājya-Vardhan, Harṣa, Puṣyabhūti, silver, gold-coins, Maukharis, Gupta Age, Early Medieval.

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Introduction

Coins are a powerful instrument to study the ancient past from differing angles and vantage points that adds a hitherto unknown chapter to extent literature about any historical event or epoch. Here, the rare Puṣyabhūti gold-coinage issued by Rājya-Vardhan and Harṣa, has been

analysed. They were two of the best-known historical personalities from c. 7th Century CE. This would naturally throw welcoming light on socio-historical context of gold-coins, and would accelerate the process of rethinking the older presumptions regarding gold currency in Early Medieval India.

A Survey of Gold Coins in Indian History

Gold-coins are often used as a measure of imperial power (Kaul: 2018: 57), and secondly to assess trade and commerce of the times concerned. In Indian History, their function varies on a spectrum, with the two poles formed by trade and commemoration (Mukherjee:1999: 12). Their presence is first seen during the reign of Indo-Hellenic kings, notably Diodotus I, Diodotus II, Eucratides I and (possibly) Agathokleia and Strato (Holt: 1999: 104-05; Lahiri 1965: 23-28); these were at best, commemorative issues, meant to record royal ascension, celebrate alliances, register military victories etc. Trade in this period relied extensively on silver and bronze coins (Tarn: 1951: 58). It was under the Kuṣāṇas that gold-coins not only became integral to international trade, but also signified imperial glory (Shrava:1985: 16-18).

On account of their prolonged circulation, especially between c. 1st-3rd Century CE, Kuṣāṇa gold-coins became the stereotypical medium of exchange in high-value economic transactions (Göbl:1984: 67), both domestically and globally, for Kuṣāṇa gold was modelled closely after the Roman denarius (Rosenfield:1967: 34). This made them immensely valuable, and deeply entrenched them in politico-economic domains, such that their imitations and models prevailed in Bengal and Odisha till c. 8th Century CE (Bose and Nasir:2016: 34), and also greatly influenced early Gupta gold-coins, especially ones issued by Chandragupta I and Samudragupta (Kumar: 2024: 78). Under the Guptas, India experienced its Golden Age (Altekar:1957: 10-12), as gold-

coins occupied the entire spectrum, becoming both idioms of imperial power, and standard instruments of trade. Iconic scenes, mythical narratives, and Epic-Paurāṇic legends, immersed in prevalent politico-economic contexts, became a staple feat of Gupta gold-coinage, which was idiomatically carried forth by succeeding dynasties (Roy:1980: 112; Deyell 1991: 30).

The fag-end of Imperial Guptas saw not only a tremendous decline in aesthetics and noble-metal content of gold-coins, but also collapse of international trade and commerce with Europe and West Asia. While it is difficult to extrapolate this circumstantial premise to favor growth of feudal tendencies (Kulke 1982), it would be right to say that gold-coins had lost their functional utility, on accord of following reasons- a) decrease in supply of gold-bullion, matched with removal of gold from international monetary circulation (Metcalfe:1991: 126); b) extreme debasement in prevailing gold-coinage, which made them loose both value and trust. Hoard-analysis in Bengal and Uttar Pradesh posits production of fake, posthumous and imitative coins on large-scale; c) monetization of relatively peripheral, isolated areas which, due to novelty of coin-use, depended primarily upon low-value coinage, which was invariably of silver and copper (Thakur:1972: 40), and d) the absence of inscriptional mention of gold-coin in purchasing land, exquisite commodity and in markets points to the almost absolute saturation of monetary-exchange processes with silver or copper coins, where introducing gold currency required setting-up inter-metal exchange rates, currency-conversion protocols, etc., all of which would have further complicated matters. Additionally, the biggest cause was Gresham's Law- gold-coins in an economy with silver coins would have been certainly melted and deployed elsewhere, for e.g. jewelry (Grierson:1975: 71).

It is not that gold-coins completely disappeared from pages of history. In fact, their appearances become pronounced in realm of

Śaśāṃka and later, the Pālas (Tandon 2012). These gold-coins were possibly minted for international trade, as after the collapse of commerce with Roman domains, Indian merchants, particularly those situated along the eastern coast, shifted their attention towards Southeast Asia, where new kingdoms were swiftly emerging as formidable power players (Dalrymple:2024: 55). Majority of mints producing gold-coins in Bengal region were located in Samatāṭa (Bose and Nasir:2016: 38), where the traditional usage of good currency continued for long (Mukherjee:1992: 88). Later, with the change in politico-economic equations, issuance of gold-coins resumed under the Chandelas, Kalachūrī and Gāhaḍavāla regimes (Deyell: 1991: 18-20), which was viewed by Roy (1980) merely as ‘religious token’ sharing symbolic continuity with Guptas, while Bhandare (2008) saw in them monetization of bullion available through inter-regional trade, especially around the riverine routes of Ganges, that connected Bengal with Vārāṇasī, the Gāhaḍavāla capital (Niyogi:1959: 22).

Such politico-economic networks were later utilized by Muhammad of Ghor (c. 1173-1206 CE), whose reign saw revitalization of large-scale production and circulation of gold-coins throughout northern India (Bosworth:1968: 131-36). Gresham’s law failed to act against this medieval flourish as gold-coins in India were now not acting in a geo-political orbit lying within Indian subcontinent, but had actually developed integration with the sprawling Central Asian, Arabic and Southeast Asian economic networks as well (Dalrymple:2024: 67). Maritime revenue and trade-venues supplied gold-bullion to the mints of Multan, Delhi and Khurasan (Thakur:1972: 56). Under Alauddin Khilji (c. 1296-1316 CE), the expansion of Delhi Sultanate up to the Deccan brought more avenues of bullion-flow, especially with the addition of historic connections between South India and Southeast Asia (Biddulph:1968: 12). The consequence of this historical event

was deftly managed by the Khilji administration, which not only systematized fiscal discipline, but took precise measures to maintain purity of gold-coins, and inspire public confidence in them (Eraly:2014: 121-23).

In this *longee duree*, the rare and enigmatic Puṣyabhūti gold-coins enlightens one in respect of the Early Medieval period, where paucity of gold-coins became pronounced. It is however slightly difficult to label them as trade-currency. But, going by Bhandare’s views, the find-spots of Rājya-Vardhan’s coin, and extreme wear in those of Harṣa’s possibly shows extensive circulation, either economic or ritual-based. Thus, on the spectrum between trade and ritual, these two coins occupy dynamic position on the two poles. It would be pertinent therefore to situate these coins in the currency-situation of Early Medieval India.

Puṣyabhūti coinage in Early Medieval India

The earliest unambiguously assignable coinage to any Puṣyabhūti King is the electrum ‘Śrī Pratāpa’ coins that were issued by Prabhākara-Vardhan (c. 575-606 CE), whom Bāṇabhaṭṭa also refers to as ‘Pratāpaśīla’. Earlier, these coins were assigned by various scholars to Lalitāditya Mukṭāpīḍa (c. 724-760 CE), whose army probably minted these coins during the Gangetic campaigns (c. 732-36 CE) against Yaśovarmana of Kanauj (Mishra 1972: 66). However, the stylistic distance between other Kashmir issues, absence of ‘Kedare’ legend, metrological differentiation and paucity of their provenance in Kashmir itself suggested involvement of another hand. Deyell (2018) insightfully demonstrated how the Puṣyabhūti, rather than crafting any organic coinage-tradition of their own, paid due obeisance to prevalent localized coin-types. After his assaults on Hūṇas, Prabhākara-Vardhan moulded his coinage in olden forms, to possibly avert circulatory shock, and avoid stipulated

innovation-costs. Pratāpaśīla coins were possibly continued by Harṣa (Kumar:2024: 521), as proven by their geo-political spread upto Bihar (Deyell 2018). This became a core structural principle of Puṣyabhūti coinage, which was duly followed by Harṣa in framing his silver coins after the prevalent, typologically immobilized Madhyadeśa-variety when his imperial reigns engulfed Maukhari domains in Gangetic valley. From this conceptual perspective, the two gold-coins analyzed herein become even more special, as they exhibit both phenomenal continuity and definitive change in relation to the numismatic idioms of Gupta coinage. (Fig. 5.1)

Rājya-Vardhan and his Gold Coin

Rājya-Vardhan was the elder brother of Harṣa-vardhana, and occupied the imperial Puṣyabhūti throne probably some months, before eventually succumbing to the schemes of Śaśāṃka of Gauḍa (Mookerji:1966: 89; Devahuti:1970: 42). Reading Harṣacharita, one gets the impression that Rājya-Vardhan was interested more in asceticism than governance (Beal:1906: 55), and his rule was merely a footnote to the glorious epoch of Harṣa (Pollock:2006: 245-48), which prompted scholars to doubt the historical accuracy of Bāṇabhaṭṭa's narrative¹(Sreedharan:2004: 133) believed that Bāṇabhaṭṭa not only altered timing and sequence of events, but also deliberately tempered with them for dramatic impact (Singh:2011: 332; Goyal:2009: 45-48). Harṣa's inscriptions too merely refer to Rājya-Vardhan as *jyaiṣṭha-bhrātr* (elder brother), and utilize Rājya-Vardhan as an abridgment between his reign, and that of Prabhākara-Vardhan (Agarwal 1989). The existence of this solitary specimen corroborates epigraphical testimony, wherein Rājya-Vardhan is remembered as *Paramabhaṭṭāraka Mahārājadhirāja*. This provides fodder to arguments of scholars who hold Harṣa complicit in assassination of Rājya-Vardhan. However, deletion of Rājya-Vardhan from mainstream

Puṣyabhūti records could equally be interpreted to mean that death of Rājya-Vardhan was a tragedy that catastrophically threatened the very existence of Puṣyabhūti empire. It is possible that by reducing focus over the inauspicious reign of Rājya-Vardhan, Harṣa intended to steer the Puṣyabhūti realm to a newer epoch.

Whatever be the circumstantial configuration, a consequence of this socio-political condition is the small number of avenues to better understand the life-history of Rājya-Vardhan. Herein, this solitary gold-coin becomes our guiding light. It was firstly studied by Bose and Nasir (2016: 355), who categorized it under non-Gupta register of SAME.1 category. Later, the standard coin-type was described by Kumar (2024) as a solitary gold coin-type of Rājya-Vardhan of Puṣyabhūti lineage, with the following specifications-

Obv: The king has a halo and earrings. He stands to left wearing a long tunic with jewels. He cradles a trident (*Trisūla*) with a battle-axe in his left arm and is gesturing with his right hand in an *abhaya mudrā* pose. Traces of an obverse circular legend is visible but has not yet been deciphered.

Rev: Male and female figures (river god and goddess?). Both figures stand facing right, and both have halos. The male holds a water pot in his right hand and a fish hanging down with his left hand. Both are shown with a halo and a *vanamālā*. The legend on the reverse is *Śrī Rajayā*. (Fig.5.3)

The typological facets of this coin exhibit both continuity with Gupta idioms, and definitive change in it. To get a good glimpse of the message and motifs that run rampant on this coin, it is important to sequentially examine each constitutive element so as to glean off and reconstruct its contextual lineaments-

Attribution: Nasir (2025) on account of personal communication) highlighted certain difficulties in assigning this particular gold-coin to Rājya-Vardhan merely on the basis of reverse legend. We shall herein attempt to sequentially assuage highlighted concerns- a) *provenance-*

these coins have been mostly found in southeastern Bengal- the data about figure 3 lacks clarity, though it is possible that this gold-coin circulated in Bengal not because of political-control, but due to its noble-metal content. Presence of this coin-type in excavations at Naokhali-Cormilla belt, which lie in the geo-cultural orbit of ancient Samatāṭa, makes it possible that the coin reached there through trade; b) it resembles Samatāṭa coins that carry legends like *Sa-Ja*, *Śrī-jaya*- there are, however, two important differences between the two coin-types- Samatāṭa coins have such letters on obverse, invariably between the king's legs, or below his arm, and not on reverse. Secondly, the two-figures on reverse are stunningly new, and not seen on any other Bengal coin. Though typological degradation commonly occurs in this geo-cultural orbit, this reverse almost appears as a meteor, disappearing after inaugural appearance; c) Rājya-Vardhan had no authority in the region- Numismatics presents several examples where gold-coins issued by particular kings are found in areas way distant from their heartland; for e.g. Tirukoilur hoard of Gupta gold coins, gold coins of Rājārāja I found in Gujarat and Maharashtra (see Biddulph 1968). Possibly, the socio-economic networks created by Pratāpaśīla coins permitted Rājya-Vardhan's issue to circulate in the region. Moreover, it is known that Rājya-Vardhan first strongly competed with Śāśāṃka, and it was possibly through deception, and not in battlefield, through which Rājya-Vardhan died; d) Weight-standard resembles Samatāṭa- the average weight-band of Samatāṭa coins exists between 5.60-5.80 g, while this coin inclines towards 6.68 g on the lower side, which strictly places it in the orbit of a different series of weights. Even though some Samatāṭa coins actually waiver from strict weight-ranges, its attribution to a post-Gupta period comes mirthfully from imposition of Gupta fabric on Kuṣāṇa background-design and exergue. Moreover, spot-findings further present them in association with objects of c. 6th-

7th Century CE archaeo-cultural strata (Bose & Nasir:2016: 53-55).

Some confusion still persists regarding the attribution of this coin particularly to Rājya-Vardhan (II), Harṣa's elder brother, as c. 5th-6th Century CE knew three kings named Rājya-Vardhan-

1. the first was a local chieftain of Mandasore, and father of Prakāśadharman (Agarwal:1989: 250-56). However, the Risthal inscription does not accord him any distinguished imperial title, and it was after him that the Aulikara kings struck political stardom. Secondly, no coins, whether gold or silver, have still been definitely attributed to the Aulikaras (Balogh 2019).
2. The second candidate is close enough- Rājya-Vardhan (I), grandfather of Prabhākara-Vardhan; this particular coin cannot be assigned to him due to- Puṣyabhūti coinage acquired form and shape under Prabhākara-Vardhan, wherein his earliest coins show distinct Hūṇa influence, a phenomenon that succinctly asserts the integral links between military campaigns of Prabhākara-Vardhan and incipience of Puṣyabhūti coins. Secondly, the purported temporal proximity of this coin, if it truly was issued by Rājya-Vardhan (II), with the definitively attributed gold-coin of Harṣa, further distances it from Rājya-Vardhan I. Thirdly, no politically stirring information exists about Rājya-Vardhan I, whose only publicly attested endeavor is his worship of Sūrya (Srivastava:1972: 53). Additionally, this coin-type succinctly exhibits the martial valour of Rājya-Vardhan II, a fact even attested in Harṣacharita.

Legend- Though the coin carries legends on both sides, the obverse is completely effaced,

although it is visible on some other specimens of this coin-type. The reverse presents *Śrī Rajayā*, which Kumar (2024), following Bose & Nasir (2016) reconstructed as *Śrī Rājya-Vardhan*, after minute examination and due cross-functional comparison with other existent specimens of the same coin-type. On a preliminary perusal, *Śrī Rājya-Vardhan* seems odd, due to its emphatic focus over the eponymous issuer, and abbreviated form. Such ambiguity disappears when it is compared with other gold-coins of this epoch- sword and standard coin-types of Mahāsenagupta (c. 580-605 CE) only carry the legend *Mahā* on obverse, and *Śrī Padmayaśa* on reverse. In fact, the legend on coins of Rājya-Vardhan do not differ much from other Gupta-era coin-types, which carried abridged legends such as *Śrī Kumāraguptaḥ* (Kumar 2024). Furthermore, it is possible that the legend in Puṣyabhūti case was an ode to the reverse-device (*vide infra*).

Metrology- The coin illustrated herein weighs about 6.68 g (=103 grains), relatively light as compared to standard Gupta-era coinage, which reached as high as 144 grains, possibly to assume the form of traditionally sanctioned *Suvarṇa* standard (Gupta 1974: 20). However, other specimens of the same coin-type of Rājya-Vardhan reach up to 6.9 g, nearing the weight of Harṣa's coin (*vide infra*). The reduced weight could be a consequence of lesser availability of gold-bullion (Thakur: 1967: 112), or a response to market conditions (Singh:2011: 398), where coins of reduced standard weight were preferred; keeping a higher weight in an economy saturated by low-weight coinage was not rational choice. Possibly, the gradual increase in weight points towards Puṣyabhūti attempts to commence a new numismatic trend- circulation of gold-coins had slackened in c. 6th Century CE (Deyell:1991: 55-58), which left not much blank-models to work with. Probably, after the Pratāpaśīla electrum (silver also) attained circulative ubiquity, Rājya-Vardhan authorized production of gold-coins,

to mark not just his own conquests, but also to showcase, *in toto*, the commanding prowess of Puṣyabhūti polity.

Devices- The most unique and aesthetic element of Rājya-Vardhan's coin is its figurative execution of die-devices. The obverse shows Rājya-Vardhan wearing overcoat, standing over a grounded battle-axe which has a trident attached to its stem. The royal pose and weapon remind of the battle-axe coin-type of Samudragupta (c. 325-375 CE), while the attribute is Śaivite, the ancestral religion of Puṣyabhūti. Though the trident-device recurrently occurs on both Kuṣāṇa and Hūṇa issues, its appearance with battle-axe is definitely an innovation. Though the overcoat is commonly deemed foreign clothing (Kulkarni 2007: 388), S.V. Sohoni (1949, *vide* Srivastava:1996: 187) considers it perfectly Indian, calling it a war-time armor. That it was not a lingering Kuṣāṇa influence was confirmed by Kumar (2023) who cited its occurrence even on coins of Skandagupta. The reverse carries an enigmatic die-device, and shows male and female figure standing together. After duly evaluating alternate possibilities², it is tentatively suggested herein that reverse figures are possibly Rājya-Vardhan and Śrī (Fig. 4)

Context- The obverse categorically places this coin in military contexts, occasions of which do not lack even in 'filtered' narrative of Bāṇabhaṭṭa. Such a historic-numismatic narrative gets further corroborated by the reverse device, which asserts the possession of royal glory and fortune by Rājya-Vardhan, underlining his royal epithet of *Śrī Samanvita*. Issuance of atypical gold-coins following military triumph has been fairly the standard practice in ancient India (*cf.* 20 stater coin of Eucratides I). Harṣacharita narrates several instances that provision relevant context in this regard- the clash with Hūṇas in Himalayas, contest with Devagupta, struggle of attrition with Śāsāṃka, where, as per ministerial reports, Rājya-Vardhan gained the upper hand in initial phase of

combat. If one sequentially arranges the train of events, a coherent scenario emerges- it is possible that these coins were issued by Rājya-Vardhan to commemorate his conquest and expansion of Puṣyabhūti domains into Gangetic plains as well, which explains Gupta idiom, and influence of Bengal. The idea of military valour possibly came from Mahāsenā-gupta, while representing the king in Śrī's company resembled innovative issues of Samāchāradeva (Fig.5.5)

To cut the story short- after rounding-off the Hūṇas, Devagupta and Gauḍa army as well, Rājya-Vardhan contained the expansionist ambitions of Śaśāṃka around Rohtasgarh, a territory that acted as the forward frontier of Śaśāṃka (Sinha:1977: 270). The struggle of attrition then continued for some months, which gave Harṣa time to find and rescue Rājyaśrī, and consolidate Puṣyabhūti control in Gangetic plains of Madhyadeśa, commencing a transition from Maukhari to Puṣyabhūti regime (Majumdar:1957: 88). In this period, Rājya-Vardhan possibly authorized the minting of commemorative gold-coins. Due to his incidental presence in Bengal, and saturation of market by Gupta fakes, debased or posthumous gold-coins, alongside by standard Madhyadeśa silver currency, Rājya-Vardhan chose to experiment with base-models from Bengal, electing the hybrid Kuṣāṇa-Gupta coin-type (with Kuṣāṇa fabric and Gupta weight/idioms). However, it was innovated beyond reckoning, with new devices, style of legends etc. Their association with archaeo-cultural deposits dated c. 6th-7th Century CE (Lahiri 1991), testify their chronology. It is possible that shortly after the production of this numismatic innovation, Rājya-Vardhan succumbed to death in the hands of Śaśāṃka, which not only ended the production of these coins, but also made them politico-culturally inauspicious for Puṣyabhūti polity, who began to resort back to Pratāpaśīla and Maukhari-inspired silver issues. With this, the circulative area of Rājya-Vardhan coins shifted to Samatāṭa region,

an ancient hub of gold-coinage (Mukherjee:1992: 18), where it found temporary favor due to its superficial resemblance with earlier 'Kuṣāṇa-emulative' local coins, and most importantly, due to its noble-metal content.

Harṣa's Gold Coin

The solitary gold coin of Harṣa-Vardhan (c. 606-647/48 CE) was discovered from Farrukhabad, Uttar Pradesh by K.D. Bajpai in early 1960s, who later published it³(Bajpai:1964:18-20), provided a detailed documentation and analysis (Bajpai:1976: 252-58), and Thaplyal and Srivastava (1998: 241-46; pl.4.3) provided an illustration and description of the device, with the additional observation that the legends on the coin comply with some copper-plates of Harṣa, hinting towards a chronological correlation. The coin weighs about 113.5 grains (=7.34 g), surpassing the general weight standard for the silver coins of Harṣa, which abide to a standard of 37.037 grains (= 2.4 g). The diameter is about 2.1 cm, which aligns with gold coins of Mahāsenā-gupta⁴. The coin's authenticity has been intermittently confirmed by Bajpai (1976:123), Thaplyal & Srivastava (1998: 264), as recently referred by other publications as well (see Goyal 2006). Following Thaplyal & Srivastava (1998: 265), numismatic features of this coin, such as the legends and devices inscribed and minted, can be described in the following manner (Fig.5.6).

Obv: Legend written in the center-field, in five vertically arranged consecutive lines, with no other device or symbol accompanying/ surrounding it-

*Parama bha/
ṭṭāraka Mahārā/
jādhirāja parame/
śvara śrī[-]mahārā/
ja Harṣa[-]devāh*

Rev: Śiva and Pārvatī seated on a recumbent Nandi, Śiva holding an *akṣmālā* in his upper right-hand, with his lower right-hand resting on the respective lap; his upper left-hand holds the

characteristic *triśūla*, while the lower one is round the neck of his consort, *jaṭāmukuta* on head, rings in ears. Pārvatī has her left leg resting on the right thigh, left-hand outstretched, right-hand resting on thigh of Śiva. She is looking at Śiva, wearing *lalāṭikā*, *ekāvalī* and *kuṇḍalas*. Both deities are nimbate. Below, the bull Nandi is shown seated facing to the right. (See fig.5.2).

The titles used and near resemblance of the art-motif with the Banskhera and Madhubani copper-plate inscriptions of Harṣa, it is not quite helpful to doubt the veracity of this coin. But we are still left in the dark regarding the actual or functional purpose served by this outstanding currency, since its affiliation to any specific numismatic group defies all solutions. The use of emperor's name-Harṣa also invites attention, since on all known coins (mostly silver) of his issuance, the title of choice is *Śīlāditya*. It will be better, as a matter of principle, to individually analyze the different constitutive elements of this coin.

Titles- The use of legend signifies authorization by the issuing authority, which in most cases, is naturally the king. Here, the sequence of titles is unique, for it corresponds to all epigraphs of the sovereign, but relates to none. This oddity holds key to chronologically locate this specimen. In his Nālandā clay-seal, Harṣa uses the additional title- *Sārvabhauma* (World-ruler). The seal signified his visit to Nālandā (Tripathi 1948: 65), which could have only happened after the demise of Śaśāṃka (c. 595-627/28 CE), who Xuanzang calls 'recently deceased' in c. 639-40 CE. Shortage of 'writing-space' is not an issue, since the repetitive title Mahārāja could have been easily replaced by *Sārabhauma*, provided the latter was *in use*. Madhuban inscription of Year 25 (= c. 630/31 CE) does not employ it, which makes it a reasonable to put Nālandā seal after, and the gold coin before this date.

Legend- The calligraphy on obverse uses Siddha-Mātṛkā script of c. 7th Century CE (Singh 1989: 108). Harṣa used this particular script

for inscribing his stylish signature on his seals. The angular verticals and floral turns atop the letters point towards temporal equivalence with Puṣyabhūti copper-plates. However, strangeness lies in the placement of the legend. Usually, legend was clockwise arranged, as also seen on silver coins of Harṣa. This highlights the element of difference, and might connect the pattern of legends to an event mentioned in *Harṣacharita*. After his ritual anointment, Harṣa was greeted by mercantile-groups of both Sthāṇeśvara and Kanauij, who collectively offered him a circular gold object (medal/coin?), whose obverse had his name and royal titles inscribed (Beal:1884: 252). Accidentally, the object fell from Harṣa's hands on Earth, which was considered as a bad omen. On the contrary, Harṣa considered it as the indication of his 'name over all of Earth'. Probably, this coin was conceived in a similar vein.

Metrology- The fabric of this coin has been demurred by rough handling. The obverse legend on top-right stands partially effaced, with traces of original letters still intact (Thaplyal & Srivastava: 1998: 266). On the reverse, the figures of Śiva and Pārvatī show maximal corrosion. Bajpai (1976) believed that the coin remained long in circulation, which caused corrosion and fabric wear. However, it can be conjectured that the damage resulted from faulty storage, absence of conservation, and rough handling. Also, the fabric of the coin was not sturdy enough, as the coin was produced in a large number, which affected qualitative dimensions of the coin. The last hypothetical setting could hold true, in light of graphical descriptions of Harṣa's donations, which obviously included gold coins (Beal:1884: 38). The occasion of their issuance, would then have been of much significance, as we shall specify later.

Die-devices- The reverse artistically depicts Śiva and Pārvatī, in a style reminiscent of Gupta art, as seen in the suppleness, soft body-contours, lack of exactitude in execution (to highlight

divine background- (Raven 2015), and attention to iconographical attributes (Williams:1982: 04), all of which suggest that the figure can be labelled as that of Umā-Maheśvara (Rao:1916: 113). The art-motif of divine couple started to assume popularity during mature phase of Gupta Art (c. 380-420 CE), and was used as a decorative motif in temples. The presence of Umā-Maheśvara signifies Śaivite inclinations. In Early Medieval period, Śaivism acted as a powerful instrument of political action, as it supposedly gave the monarch formidable powers with cosmological potency (Murthy: 1991: 26; Sanderson:2009: 36). For Harṣa, Śaivism effectually denoted ancestral religion (Bajpai: 1976:156) and military ideology (Goyal:1986: 55), alongside other connotations. Umā-Maheśvara have been referred to in the *Mangalāchāraṇa* verse of the two plays of Harṣa-*Ratnāvalī* and *Priyadarśikā* (Bajpai:1976: 156), where the visualization sees Pārvaṭī sitting on the left of Śiva post-marriage, with Rāvaṇa trembling Kailāsa mountain with his ferocity. The serpent wraps itself around rosary, a scenario mentioned in *Priyadarśikā* (I.4.2). Pārvaṭī keeps her right-hand on the thigh of Śiva, a feat also reported in the same text. In the drama, *Kumāra* sits on the left-thigh of Pārvaṭī. As observable, barring some traits, the narrative on coin bears resemblance to the induction verses of *Priyadarśikā*. The omission possibly illustrates the intended motive- here, the happy marital life of Śiva and Pārvaṭī is being depicted, with the basis being served by the writings of Harṣa. In a way, the coin shows Umā-Maheśvara as inspired from the dramatic compositions of Harṣa himself.

Another possibility can be highlighted- it was a common practice of Indian rulers to mint gold-bullion/coins for some special events- celebration of military achievements, lineage-procreation, marriage etc. (Altekar:1949: 57). Possibly, Harṣa minted these gold coins and gifted them to the learned assembly consisting of his sub-lords, nobles, and most importantly, Brāhmaṇas, who

would have extensively participated in ritual ceremonies (Bronkhorst:2016: 323f.). A gift of these gold coins to such a congregation would have introduced this coinage in different levels of circulation, for it is known that Brāhmaṇic land-tracts enjoyed a symbiotic relation with business-communities (Olivelle :2006: 272ff.). This echoes the donative ceremonial of Harṣa, which he carried out at Prayāga (Mookerji:1966: 53). The existence of a parallel, if not similar precedent (*cf.* ‘legend’ section) helps us to posit the possibility of our hypothetical suggestion⁵.

The study of Puṣyabhūti gold-coinage firstly proves true that gold-coinage did not vanish into thin air, but rather became heavily commemorative, possibly due to exhaustion of bullion-supply of gold on accord of reconfiguration of trans-national trade. But, even in their numerical rarity, these two specimens help us fill gaps not only in history of Indian gold-coinage, but also in the numismatic history of Puṣyabhūti empire. Coins of Rājya-Vardhan extend the core principle of Puṣyabhūti coins, i.e. locality-based adaptation, to gold-coins also. Probably due to his prolonged involvement on the Bengal frontier, Rājya-Vardhan emulated prevalent Bengal gold, which he innovated to indicate his authority. After his death, the gold-content of his coins kept them in circulation, and that too around Samatāṭa, where gold-coins dominated trade-activities. Keeping in view the trends that are observed in c. 8th-9th Century CE, it can be said the *ritualization* of coins effectively started from reign of Harṣa, whose pioneering, event-based gold-token circulated in differing sections of society, proved by its wear and tear. This circulation was backed by pilgrimage networks and temple-economies.

Moreover, though coins of Rājya-Vardhan and Harṣa were conceived in different space-time contexts, their comparative study underscores interesting interlinkages, in terms of the conception of imperial personalities, exhibition of religio-cultural affiliations, and show distinct

iconographies of powerful and piety. All these throws welcoming light over complex historical narratives as well. Rājya-Vardhan based his legitimacy-mode on his military accomplishments, while Harṣa derived his legitimation exclusively from the emerging Śaivite world of *Skandapurāṇa* (Bakker:2014: 59-61), thereby giving his numinous legitimation Brāhmaṇical sanction (Bronkhorst:2016: 211). It is possible that the death of Rājya-Vardhan prompted Harṣa to ‘course correct’ and consolidate his legitimacy differently, and through a more divine route.

Notes

1. In early medieval inscriptions, it is rare to find iteration of names of non-imperial, cadets or short-term ruling members of the royal family, and further without any title being accorded to them. It is known that Rājya-Vardhan ruled for a few days, if not months, in which he successfully calmed the Hūṇas, snatched Kanauj from Devagupta of Malwa, and also crossed swords with Śaśāṃka. But, the Banskhera copper-plate inscription, for example (Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. III, p. 261ff.), gives the relevant section of the genealogy reads approximately: *Tasya putrau- jyaiṣṭhaḥ Rājyavardhanaḥ, kaniṣṭhaḥ Śrī-Harṣaḥ*” (Translation: Of him (Prabhākaravardhana), the elder son was Rājya-Vardhana, and the younger was Śrī-Harṣa), though the record becomes somewhat contradicted by Madhuban copperplates and Varanasi copperplates of Year 23, which give full royal titles to Rājya-Vardhan (Goyal 2004). Goyal also rightly highlighted the cryptic reference in Harṣacharita to the allegations faced by Harṣa over the murder of Rājya-Vardhan, by equivocating Harṣa with Śakra, who had to wash off the stain gained after murdering Śunahṣepa. See A.A. MacDonnell. *Vedic Mythology*. (Strassburg: Karl J. Trübner. 1897), pp. 102-08.
2. Only few gods in Brāhmaṇical creed enjoy some degree of relationship with fish (Matsya); while this apparently could not be Viṣṇu, Śiva seems a tempting option, further intensified by the presence of water-pot. Varuṇa too could be suggested, as he was revered on important occasions, and a Purāṇic legend directly links him with Thanesar. However, it would become difficult to explain his presence in conjunction with the female figure. Given that Rājya-Vardhan is frequently called ‘worshipper of Sugata (Buddha)’ in inscriptions, Buddhist deity-figures could also have been envisaged in some capacity. However, none of these suggestions fulfill the criteria for ease of public comprehension and unambiguous vision. But, given the descriptions of Rājya-Vardhan in Harṣacharita, one may envision Rājya-Vardhan as the reverse figure, with water-pot denoting asceticism and fish denoting restraint (Cowell 1897: 256). His association with Śrī naturally invokes his celebrated epithet *Śrī Samanvita*.
3. Bajpai later attempted to connect it further to sculptural evidence discovered from adjoining areas of Kanauj (Bajpai 1973: 112). However, the exact purpose of this solitary marvel remains beyond comprehension.
4. See Kumar 2024: 494; PC 0267/68), which could have served as a blank-model for the minting of this variety, though all parallels are limited to only size, shape and fabric. The provenance of later Gupta coins lies heavily concentrated in the region of northern Bihar (Kumar 2024: 577) which makes it more sensible to aver that both varieties of gold coins evolved separately from the general stock of Gupta gold coins that circulated in their erstwhile territories even after collapse of dynasty (Altekar 1957: 62), a feat also observable in the coinage of Bengal in c. 6th Century CE (Mukherjee 1992: 19).
5. Iconographical figuration too supports our proposition. Umā-Maheśvara denote marriage environs filled with glee and gaiety, along with the promise of conjugal love, ardent affection and promise of lineage extension (Banerjee 1956: 132), as it was the form undertaken by Śiva and Pārvatī to conceive Kumāra, poetically described by Kālidāsa in his penultimate work-Kumārasambhavam (Mann 2012: 238; Mirashi and Navlekar 1969: 16). Continuation of lineage was a principal concern of monarchical houses, and political stability too depended upon it (Sharma 2005: 288).

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Figure 5.1: (Left)- Above. OEŠO-Śiva on a coin of Vasudeva (Courtesy- Oliver Hoover© American Numismatic Society, 230.1944.100.63676), Middle. Archer-type coin of Narasiṃhagupta Bālāditya, 9.44 g, die-axis 12 o' clock, Diameter 21 mm (Source- CNG Coin Gallery; Mudra Art Collection), Bottom. Gaṅgeyadeva coins featuring Lakṣmī (Courtesy- CNG Coins, No. 222, Lot 516, Deyell 119, VF), (Right)- Above. Lion-conqueror coin of Kumāragupta I (Courtesy- Tandon Collection, Inventory No.- 591.07), Middle- Kuṣāṇa imitation in Bengal (Courtesy- The British Museum, Reg. No. 1999,0609), Bottom. Gold Ghurid coin, issued by Ghazna mint (Courtesy- Dr. James A. Lawrence © CNG Coins, Triton XIX, Lot 2211).



Figure 5.2: Distribution map above showing pre-Puṣyabhūti coinage in late c. 6th Century CE (top- Śrī Narendra coins found in Gandhāra and Jalandhara; bottom- Avantivarman Maukhari coins found in Kanauj and adjoining regions), which served as base-models in structuration of standard Puṣyabhūti coins, starting from the electrum Pratāpaśīla dināras (shown below), with their find-spots indicated by yellow dots. (Courtesy- John S. Deyell © *Numismatic Digest*, 2016, figure 4, map 2, p. 121).



Figure 5.3: Possible gold-coins of Rājya-Vardhan (Courtesy- Sanjeev Kumar © *Treasures of the Gupta Empire*, PC. 1248).



Figure 5.4: (Left)- The Battle-axe coin-type of Samudragupta (Courtesy- The British Museum, Reg. No. 1910,0403.17, Catalogue No. IG [BMC India (Gupta); (13) (34)(13], Purchased from H. Nicholas Wright); (Right)- Swordsman-type gold-coin of Mahāsena-gupta (Courtesy- Sanjeev Kumar © *Treasures of the Gupta Empire*, figure 988, PC 0268, p. 492).



Figure 5.5: Gold-coin of Samāchāradeva, showing the king seated in *Mahārājjalāsana*, with a divine and earthly consort, possibly issued from Samataṭa mint (Courtesy- B.N. Mukherjee © *The Indian Gold*, p. 119).



Figure 5.6: Gold coin of king Harsha, a rare specimen (Courtesy- Prashant Srivastava, digitally restored by the author).

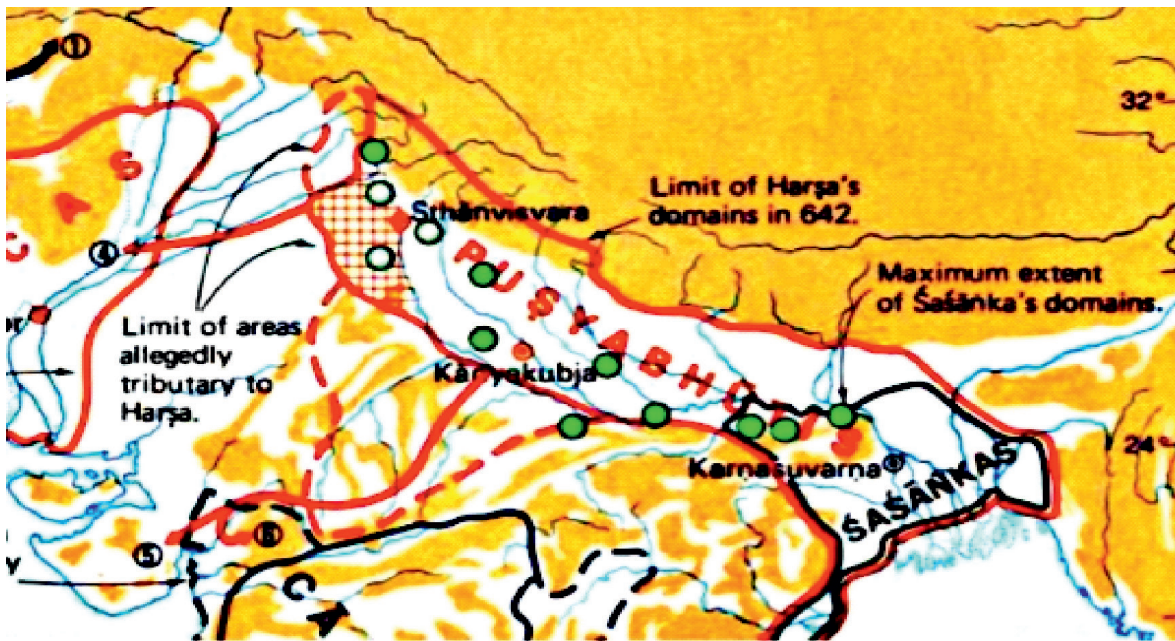


Figure 5.7: Geo-political outlines of the Puṣyabhūti empire in c. mid-7th Century CE (Schwartzberg © AtlasSouth Asia, p. 126).