



## THE FISH MOTIF ON INDIAN COINS AND SEALS

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Indian coins and seals are not only important sources of knowing the history of dynastic rulers and political events but also they provide of glimpse of cultural scenario of the contemporary life. Though their surfaces have a very limited space to accommodate the portrayal of varied subjects, they illustrate a host of themes including flora and fauna. As a matter of fact various motifs and symbols are depicted on them from the very beginning to make the coins and seals lively and living. Among the aquatic animal mina (Fish) is found its representation on both coins and seals. The purpose of its assimilation appears to be different at times.

### **Mina on Coins**

Mina or Matsya (Fish) has been very dear to the people of India even in the remote past. Many myths and legends are connected with this animal creature and it remains sacred to all three important religions of India Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. It embodies the qualities of decoration, auspiciousness, Fertility etc. Its use on coins and seals may not necessarily indicate any specific purpose but in many cases its adoption appears to fulfill more than one objective. As we notice the fish symbol is found on

the coins of different ages and belonging to the different dynasties.

The punch-marked coins are supposed to be the oldest currency of India and they are found in large numbers particularly in silver. The coins bear only punched symbols of different varieties and neither dates, nor names of datable rulers are given on them. Thus their dates of prevalence remain a point of debatable among scholars. P. L. Gupta an authority on punch marked coins is of the opinion that the earliest of them existed in a particular area in the eleventh century B.C. and continued to be spread the whole country by the end of the fourth century B.C. The appearance of fish symbol on punch marked coins also suggests that it carries the sense of auspiciousness as that of the symbols of sun or moon. Generally the fishes are seen in groups of two, three, four and five. The coins of Uddehikas belonging to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. also bear the motif of fish. The coin of Suryamitra of Udehika depicts three fishes uprightly placed in a row along with some other symbols. Similarly on a series of Mathura ruler Gomitra has the figure of Lakshmi or goddess standing above a river with fishes on obverse. The date of these coins approximately comes to 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. These are the local rulers and usually they adopted



the symbols of local importance. The motifs of fish particularly shown in the lower region suggest the presence of water. Here also 3 or 4 fishes are as seen floating under the current of river. A fish-pair appears on the coins of Satavahans also. A coin illustrating the same motif was found at Chandravalli in 1947. The king of Kashmir Amsuvarman of 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. preferred to depict cow on the obverse and fish motif on the reverse. Probably they were assimilated on the ground of their religious significance.

The fish motif is also found on the coinage of some south Indian dynasties. Actually it was shown with some other motif. The cholas, powerful dynasty of Tamil desh issued gold coins the credit also goes to them for issuing silver currency in south. The chola king Uttam Chola took the lead having his name in Nagari letters on one side and other side includes a number of symbols in which a motif of two upright fish, all placed under an umbrella flanked by two fly-whisks is important from our point of view. Generally an umbrella is placed over the head of royal figure or a deity and the waiving of fly-whisk is another character, which is meant for royalty and divine figures. It can be very well presumed that the chola kings adopted the fish motif as the representation of an incarnation of god Vishnu. So far their two number is concerned, it became traditional to show them in pair. Mina-mithuna was considered as the most auspicious mark

as we see its portrayal in a number of artifacts. The motif was continued to be represented on the coins of the successive Chola kings. The successor of Uttam Chola Raj Raja I (985-1015 AD) stamped his gold and silver coins with the same device only adding his name. The next chola ruler was Rajendra Chola (1014-1044 AD) who also issued gold coins under his own name with similar device. Some gold coins have a fish and a seated lion on one side and tamil legend Chanta-cholahon on the other. These coins are attributed to Rajadhiraja I (1044-1052 AD).

The Pandayans are believed to have the leading role in the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. after cholas in Tamildesha. But their power could not sustain longer. A few gold coins are supposed to be issued by the Pandayan rulers but some doubts were raised about their authentic issuance. On these coins a fish is shown sometimes singly and sometimes in pairs along with a symbol of bow, a conch, discuss etc. These coins are attributed to Maravarmana Sundara Pandaya I (1216-1235 AD) to jatavarmana Sundara Pandaya and to Marvarmana Sundara Pandaya II (1238-1253 AD). There are some coins which can not be definitely attributed to any particular ruler. The coins bearing the fish motif have the titles like Kodandaramam and Kanchi Valamgum Perumal. There are some coins which clear a figure of king on one side and fish on the other. This is due to the continued struggle for power but there



was no immediate change in the coin devices.

The Mughal emperor Jahangir issued some gold and silver coins on which zodiac signs are depicted on their obverse side. The fish pair (minamithuna) is also one of the twelve zodiacal signs, which is also represented on such coins. Such coins are rarely available but the State Museum Lucknow has a good collection of some specimens.

Sadat Khan, the Wazir of the Mughal empire was made subedar of Awadh in 1720 A.D. His successor Ghaziuddin Haidar assumed the title of king in 1819 but he was hesitant to issue coins in his own name. He retained the name of Shah Alam's name on the obverse but introduced his court of arms two fish-facing each other surmounted by a crown and a tiger on either side holding a pennon as a support. These coins bear the regnal year 26 of the Mughal emperor, along with the Hijari year 1234. A beautiful medal of the Ghaziuddin Haider shows a pair of fish on its reverse in between tigers. The obverse shows the portrait of Ghaziuddin Haider. Probably it was issued on the occasion of his assumption of kingship. Some scholars are of the opinion that the fish is depicted as a mint mark. But a fish pair can be seen on several monuments of the Nawabi period. Particularly the big gates at Lucknow, their capital seat, have the beautiful portrayal of fish as decorative pattern as well as a sign of auspiciousness. And its

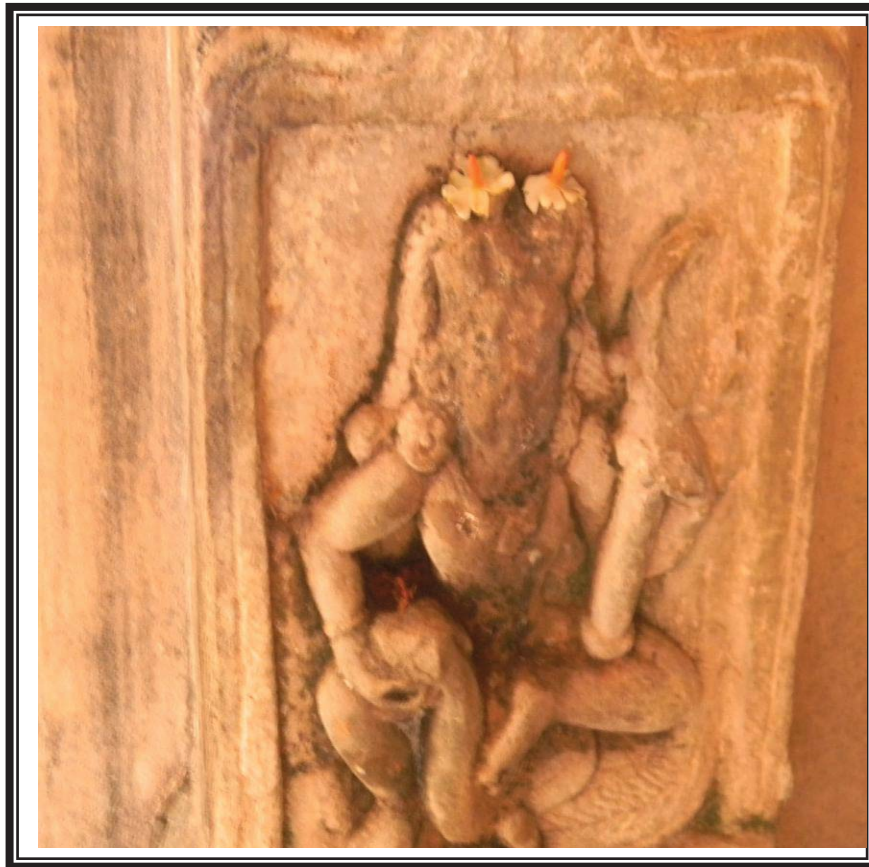
appearance at the time journey is also regarded as a good omen.

### **Fish on Seals**

Seals and sealings are also considered as a primary source of history and culture. They depict various symbols and motifs apart from a variety of subjects including religious and secular both. Fish is frequently represented on the seals of Harappan culture but it is generally in pictorial characters used for short epigraphs. A seal from Mohanjodaro depicts a crocodile approaching a fish. The motif of crocodile devouring a fish was a favorite subject for the artists in historical period. It appears that the concept comes from Harappan culture. A terracotta seal die from Rajghat (near Varanasi) bears a standard surrounded by a fish within railing. The legend at right angles to the device, reads *Upachadasa* in character of circa first century A.D. Similar device is also used in a copper object from Kaushambi. Actually this is the representation of God of love. *Mina-Ketana* is also one of the names of Kamadeva. A silver signet noticed by Rapson also depicts as staff surmounted by fish with railing along with other devices. It is also to be pointed out here that the fish symbol stands for fertility and conjugal bliss (Saubhagya). A symbol of fish also occurs on a sealing from Bhita (Dist. Allahabad), and this depiction appears to denote the first incarnation of God Vishnu. The hind part of fish is occasionally joined with some other animal to give it fabulous character.

Several representations of fish tailed animals are found in the plastic art, particularly in the Kushana art of Mathura. A Rajghat sealing bearing the legend Buddhasya in Kushana Brahmi is flanked on either side by a standard with a chakra and a fish tailed on as capital.

Thus, the importance of coins and their significance and are depicted on the Indian coins right from the age of punch marked coins, harappan age and continued down to Muslim period throughout the country and the fish symbol was treated as auspicious symbol in Indian culture.



This Photograph is from inside of **Shiva Temple at Karchhalipur,**  
A. S. I. Protected Monument