
NUMISMATIC INSIGHTS: UNVEILING THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF LICHCHHAVI CURRENCY IN ANCIENT NEPAL

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the significance of currency (numismatics) as a vital source in understanding Nepal's history and culture of the Lichchhavi Period. Currency has been a fundamental means of exchange since ancient times, serving economic purposes and as a reliable source of historical and cultural information. By analyzing the seals, symbols, inscriptions, and craftsmanship on coins, this research reveals insights into women's socio-political environment, religious practices, and status during the Lichchhavi era. The study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing secondary data from academic articles, historical texts, and digital archives. It meticulously examines the physical characteristics of Lichchhavi currency, comparing it with contemporary currencies from neighbouring countries to understand cross-cultural influences. The findings underscore the importance of numismatics in historical research, highlighting how currency serves as a strong and reliable foundation for understanding the cultural and historical context of the Lichchhavi Period. This study fills a critical gap in the existing literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the role of currency in studying the history and culture of ancient Nepal, particularly during the Lichchhavi era.

KEYWORDS

Lichchhavi Currency, Numismatics, Historical Research, Cultural Significance, Cross-Cultural, Influences

INTRODUCTION

Currency has been an essential medium of exchange since ancient times and is often regarded as a reliable source for studying history and culture (Dulal, 2017). Its use in human society dates back to the earliest civilizations. For instance, the origins of writing can be traced to ancient Mesopotamia, where a system of clay tokens was used for counting and record-keeping from 7500 to 3100 BC. This system eventually evolved into the first writing system in Sumer around 3200 BC, initially for accounting purposes (Schmandt-Besserat, 2010). As the complexities of the barter system became apparent, societies began using currency to simplify exchanges. In the study of economic history and culture, currency is considered a highly reliable source because it often bears dates, special events, and other contextual information. In Nepal, the currency has been in circulation since ancient times, with metal, clay, and stone coins being common (Kafle, 2019). History and culture are interrelated; studying one often sheds light on the other, highlighting their complementary nature.

From a human development and settlement perspective, Nepal is considered an ancient region, with its cultural history deeply intertwined with the history of human civilization. Evidence of Nepal's long history in terms of human development is demonstrated by the discovery of Ramapithecus teeth on the banks of the Tinau River near Butwal in western Nepal, found in December 1981. An archaeological team led by American researcher Dr. J. H. Hadgchin uncovered a jawbone of Ramapithecus embedded in rock (Sharma, 2001). This species is believed to have lived around 11 million years ago, indicating that Nepal has been a site of human development since ancient times.

Like its political history, the cultural history of Nepal can be studied by dividing it into distinct periods: the Prehistoric Period, the Gopal, the Mahishapal, the Kirat, the Lichchhavi, the Malla, and the Shah or Modern Period (Dulal, 2018). The antiquity of Nepal is generally considered to extend from the beginning of human civilization up to 879 AD, after which the Medieval period began.

The history and culture of the past are not merely topics to be documented; they require thorough investigation through archaeological activities, such as the exploration and excavation of sites where ancient materials or documents are found. These activities uncover archaeological, literary, and foreign sources, which form the foundation for studying history and culture. Among these sources, currency holds particular significance as an archaeological material. Currency has played a crucial role in the writing and analysis of Nepal's history and culture, especially from the Lichchhavi period to the present day (Khatri, 1998). As such, currency is regarded as a reliable and authentic source material for the study of history and culture.

Currency serves not only as a medium of economic exchange but also as a valuable source of information about history and culture. By studying currency, researchers and historians can uncover details such as the names of rulers, ministers, nobles, queens, and crown princes of the time, as well as information on manufacturing methods and techniques (Kafle, 2019). This makes currency a key material for historical and cultural research.

Currency is an important archaeological source that provides insights into the era in which it was produced. Various symbols engraved on currency, such as seals, flags, inscriptions, scripts, dates, gods, goddesses, rulers, and the names of royal family members serve as essential elements for understanding history and culture (Walsh, 1990). Additionally, the materials, craftsmanship, styles, forms, and scales used in currency production are significant indicators of historical and cultural contexts (Dulal, 2019). In this sense, currency is regarded as a strong and reliable foundation for the study of history and culture.

The tradition of creating currency and using it for trade in Nepal developed later than in many other regions. The study and research of currency as a historical and cultural artefact began even later. However, the currency is now recognized as a significant source of information about history and culture, classified as an archaeological artefact. In some instances, currency provides insights that cannot be obtained from any other source material (Dulal, 2019). Undoubtedly, currency is a reliable and authentic source for studying history and culture, often comparable to archival documents in the depth of information it offers (Swain, 1994). Despite this, the specialized study of currency to history and culture is still not widely developed.

In Nepal, it appears that rulers did not begin issuing currency until the Lichchhavi period. The Lichchhavis, who migrated from Vaishali, India, had been circulating currency since the third century. After more than a dozen Lichchhavi rulers, Mandev I introduced the first known currency in Nepal (Bazaracharya, 1996). This marked the beginning of Nepal's recorded history. Following this, various currencies like Gunanka, Shrayanshu, Vrisha, Vaishravana, Jishnuguptasya, and Pashupati came into circulation during the Lichchhavi period.

However, despite the significance of these currencies, there is a notable lack of published research exploring the various aspects of history and culture from that period. This gap in academic literature presents a challenge for researchers. To address this gap, the present study examines the importance and usefulness of currency in

studying the history and culture of the Lichchhavi period in Nepal. Specifically, it explores the contribution of currency to understanding the cultural aspects of this era. This study aims to contribute to the study of the history and culture of the Lichchhavi period, addressing the identified research gap.

In the study of the history and culture of Nepal's Lichchhavi period, there is a noticeable lack of research materials that explore the importance and usefulness of currency. This gap in the literature poses a challenge for scholars. This study aims to address this issue by filling the existing research gap. The primary objective of this study is to investigate the significance and utility of currency in understanding the history of the Lichchhavi period. Additionally, it seeks to analyze how the currency minted during that time contributed to the study of the historical and cultural aspects of the Lichchhavi period.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs an analytical and descriptive framework to explore the significance of currency (numismatics) in understanding Nepal's history and culture of the Lichchhavi Period. The research is qualitative, relying on secondary data to conclude. The study extensively utilizes secondary sources, including Academic articles, books, and historical texts related to Lichchhavi currency. Electronic media sources, including digital archives, databases, and online publications. Source materials focusing on the political, cultural, religious, and historical aspects of the Lichchhavi Period. Examination of the antiquity and characteristics of Lichchhavi currency, including the depiction of women and religious symbols, to understand cultural and societal values. Study of how currency reflects the cultural and religious practices of the time, providing insights into the period's socio-political environment. Identification of key themes related to the role of currency in Lichchhavi society, such as the influence of religion, the status of women, and economic practices.

Descriptive documentation of findings related to the physical characteristics of Lichchhavi currency, including iconography and inscriptions. Comparison of Lichchhavi currency with contemporary currencies from neighbouring regions to understand cross-cultural influences and trade relations. Based on the analysis of secondary data, the study concludes the importance of currency in understanding the history and culture of the Lichchhavi Period. The findings highlight currency's cultural, religious, and socio-political significance (numismatics) in historical research proper citation and acknowledgement of all secondary sources used to maintain academic integrity.

Finding and Discussion

This study is based on secondary data. The source materials used in this research were reviewed to identify gaps in existing literature. After analyzing the collected data, the results and discussion are presented as the main findings of the research. In this process, various aspects of Lichchhavi currency, the importance and usefulness of numismatics in historical studies, and the contribution of currency to understanding historical and cultural aspects have been thoroughly analyzed.

Currency of Lichchhavi period

The history of currency circulation in Nepal predates the creation and issuance of official coins. Even before King Mandev I introduced the Sri Mananka currency, Panchmark coins and Kushan coins were already in circulation, particularly in areas like Tilaurakot of the Kapilvastu state (Rijal, 1979). Among the ancient currencies discovered in Nepal, the Panchmark coins unearthed in Lumbini and Kapilvastu, as well as the Kushan period coins found in the Kathmandu Valley, are significant examples from this early period (Dahal, 2016).

During the Lichchhavi period, several types of coins were in circulation, including Srimananka, Gunanka,

Shrayanshu, Vrisha, Vaisravana, Jishnuguptasya, and Pashupati. Key features of Lichchhavi coins include the use of metal, the emphasis on the issuer's name rather than the date, the lack of fixed value, religious influences, and the use of moulds for minting (Rijal, 2017). Some coins, particularly Manangaka, Shrayanshu, and Jishnuguptasya, clearly identify the ruler who issued them, such as King Mandev, King Anshuvarma, and Jishnu Gupta, respectively (Kaningham, 1963). However, other coins like Gunanka, Vrisha, Vaisravana, and Pashupati do not mention the ruler's name. The Pashupati coin, featuring religious symbols, suggests a connection to the Shaiva sect. Given that King Anshuvarma, a known supporter of the Shaiva or Pashupat sect, was a prominent ruler, it is possible that he issued the Pashupati coin (Regmi, 1969).

The absence of dates on these coins makes it challenging to pinpoint the exact ruler and time of issuance. Nevertheless, this study aims to explore the cultural contexts related to these Lichchhavi period currencies based on the available evidence (Dulal, 2016).

Importance of Currency in the study of history

The English word 'history' is derived from the Greek word 'historia' (Rowse, 2016). It refers to the study, exploration, and analysis of past activities and events. Scholars have various interpretations of history, but most agree that it is a scientific and systematic examination of the past that helps inform the present. History is seen as a collection of past events and records (Toynbee, 1961).

While history encompasses past events, it requires evidence to be meaningful. It serves as a reservoir of past experiences, providing valuable insights and guidance for current situations. In this way, history is not merely a study of the past but also a crucial source of direction and understanding for the present, based on historical events. Studying human civilization reveals that history has evolved alongside the development of societies, serving as a means of understanding human progress (Toynbee, 1961). Just as humanity has transitioned through various eras and conditions to reach the modern age, history itself has also transformed and adapted through different periods.

Supporters of this perspective argue that a complete understanding of human beings and their activities is impossible without a thorough study of history. Therefore, the study of history is fundamental to understanding any other subject.

Studying human civilization shows that as societies developed, history became crucial for understanding human progress. Just as humanity has moved through various eras and conditions to reach the modern age, history itself has evolved through different periods.

History, which begins with the origin of the Earth, is a crucial field that provides detailed accounts of past events (Harari, 2011). It serves as a continuous record of the changes and developments in human life and the world. As a social science, history aids in the study and analysis of human societies, bridging the gap between the present and the past. It offers valuable insights into the Earth's history and human existence from its earliest days to the present (Toynbee, 1961). Many scholars argue that a complete understanding of human beings and their activities cannot be achieved without studying history. Therefore, history is essential for the study of any other subject.

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History encompasses authentic accounts of past events and integrates various fields such as society, culture, religion, tradition, justice, law, philosophy, psychology, and politics. It is regarded as a comprehensive discipline that brings together these diverse areas of study. Historians often divide history into two main periods: prehistory and proto-history. This classification is based on the types of research materials available. For studying history, a range of research materials is required (Majumdar, 1075). Among these, archaeological sources are particularly important. Within archaeological sources, currency plays a significant and valuable role in historical research.

Honours and Respect

During the Lichchhavi period, particularly in the currencies of Kings Manadeva and Anshuvarma, terms such as 'Manapadavi' and 'Prashasti' (honoured) were notable. Manadeva's currency featured the term 'Shree,' while Anshuvarma's currency included titles like 'Shree' and 'Maharajadhiraj' (Jaisawal, 1976). During this time, titles like 'Shree' and 'Maharajadhiraj' were symbols of high status and were bestowed upon and accepted by distinguished individuals. The title 'Maharajadhiraj,' meaning 'great ruler' or 'respected ruler,' was first used by Anshuvarma to denote a prominent or esteemed leader (Dulal, 2019). Anshuvarma was one of the earliest rulers in Nepal to adopt the title 'Maharajadhiraj,' signifying his high rank and honour.

Nominees of the Queens

During the Lichchhavi period in Nepal, practices such as Sati, slavery, and polygamy were prevalent, reflecting a challenging situation for women. Although Sati was not compulsory (Shrestha, 2019), widows who did not perform Sati were expected to live in devotion to their deceased husbands. This involved abstaining from sexual activities, controlling their senses, fasting, and praying for their husbands' salvation (Shrestha, 2018). Widows were also expected to engage in charitable activities and rituals, such as Yagyan. Over time, as their sons grew up, they were required to follow their sons' guidance. Consequently, the status of women during the Lichchhavi period was generally weak and difficult.

Despite these challenges, women from the elite or ruling classes were somewhat active in politics, record-keeping, religious activities, and supporting the construction of monasteries and temples. Kings also honoured their queens by mentioning their names on the currency. This practice began during the Lichchhavi period, notably under King Manadeva, and continued until the reign of King Birendra in modern Nepal (Dulal, 2017).

During the Lichchhavi period, King Manadeva notably inscribed the name of his queen on the reverse side of his currency (Dhungel, 1986). This practice marked a significant development in Nepal's numismatic history, as it was one of the earliest instances of a queen's name appearing on currency.

Following Manadeva, other rulers also included their queens' names on their currency. For example, King Jaya Indasihdev of Dolakha during the Malla period featured Queen Vijayalaxmi Devi's name on his currency. This tradition continued with Rupmati Devi appearing on the currency of King Pratap Malla of Kantipur, Rajya Laxmi Devi on Parthivendra Malla's currency, Mahendra Laxmi on Mahendra Malla's, Kumidini Devi on Jagajjay Malla's, Mrigawati Devi on Srinivasa Malla's, Jayalaxmi Devi on Jyotiprakash Malla's, and Yoga Laxmi Devi, Jaya Laxmi Devi, Narendra Laxmi Devi, Pratap Laxmi, Yogamati, and Rajjeshwari Devi on the currency of Yoga Narendra Malla. Additionally, Bhagyawati Devi and Mateshwari Devi were featured on the currency of Indra Malla (Kafle, 2019).

Among the currency of the Shah period, various queens were honoured by having their names inscribed on the

currency. Queen Narendra Lakshmi in the pose of Prithvi Narayan Shah, Queen Rajendra Laxmi in the currency of Pratapsingh Shah, Queen Rajarajeshwari and Lalittripurasundari in the currency of Rana Bahadur Shah, Suvarna Prabha Devi and Siddhi Laxmi Devi in the currency of Girwanyuddha Vikram Shah, Queens Samrajya Laxmi Devi and Rajya Laxmi Devi in the currency of Rajendra Vikram Shah, Queen Surraj Laxmi in the currency of Surendra Birvikram Shah mentioned the names of queens in their currency. Similarly, Queen Laxmi Divyeshwari Devi's name in Tribhuvan's currency, Ratna Rajyalakshmi's name in Mahendra's currency and Aishwarya Rajya Laxmi's name is mentioned in Birendra's currency. (Shreshtha, 2018).

Educational Status

During the Lichchhavi period, education had reached a highly advanced stage, as evidenced by the sophisticated scripts used on currency. The refined and mature scripts, along with the modified Sanskrit language and literary references, indicate a well-developed education system of that time. The quality of the inscriptions on the currency reflects the level of civilization, culture, and education among the people of the Lichchhavi period. This is further supported by the sophisticated scripts, language, and literature found in the records from that era (K.C., 1971).

Construction Technology

During the period of writing, wax was used by artisans to create currency. Initially, the shape of the coin was crafted from wax. This wax model was then encased in clay and left to dry in the sun. Once dry, the clay was heated to remove the wax, leaving a hollow mould in the clay. Molten metal was then poured into this mould. After the metal cooled and solidified, the clay was broken away, leaving behind the metal coin. Before the metal cooled completely, inscriptions were stamped onto it (Joshi, 1985). These inscriptions on the currency are a crucial source of historical information.

Weight and size

Coins from the Lichchhavi period are predominantly circular. A key feature of the currency from this era is the similarity in size, although there is considerable variation in types and scales. For example, the weight of Mananka coins ranges from 8 to 14 grams, Shrayanshu coins from 5.606 to 15.926 grams, Pashupati coins from 5.29 to 10.5 grams, Brisha coins from 2 to 9.93 grams, Vaishnavana coins from 12.443 to 12.828 grams, Gunanka coins from 6.5 to 11 grams, and Jishnuguptasya coins from 10.560 to 14.75 grams (Dahal, 2016).

In terms of size, standard Lichchhavi period coins typically measure between 2.5 cm and 2.7 cm in diameter. Pashupati coins range from 1.7 cm to 2.35 cm, Anshuvarma's coins from 2.15 cm to 2.55 cm, Gunanka coins from 1.87 cm to 2.45 cm, Brisha coins from 1.35 cm to 1.55 cm, Vaishnavana coins average 2.55 cm, and Jishnuguptasya coins average 2.45 cm (Joshi, 1976).

Contribution of currency to the study of culture

Culture is fundamentally about good deeds and proper conduct. It represents the process that ensures tasks are completed effectively (Pant, 2013). The term 'Sanskriti' (culture) originates from the Sanskrit word 'sanskari' (rituals) which refers to the purification of the soul through rituals and laws (Tylor, 1974). The culture encompasses all laws and rituals that refine, purify, and develop a person from birth to death (Dulal, 2017). Culture is a collective creation shaped by human intellect, encompassing traditions such as knowledge, beliefs, customs, wisdom, religion, behaviour, emotions, imagination, and thinking. These elements are also recognized

as part of folk culture (Pokharel, 1982).

The foundation of Nepal's cultural history, much like its political history, was established during the reign of King Mandev I. This period marks the beginning of what is recognized as cultural history. The Changunarayan inscription from King Mandev I is a crucial source that authentically initiates this cultural history (Joshi, 1985). This inscription covers various aspects of culture, including language, literature, art, religion, food, clothing, knowledge, customs, traditions, values, behaviour, and speech (Dulal, 2017). Similar cultural expressions are also evident in the currency from the Lichchhavi period. Consequently, currency serves as an important record and source for studying the culture of that era.

According to historical sources, including archival records and Lichchhavi period stamps and currency, these artefacts are reliable sources for understanding the culture. Some cultural traditions depicted in these currencies have been preserved in their original form, while others have evolved or changed over time (Regmi, 1969). Many of these traditions continue to be practised today. This study provides a detailed examination of significant cultural aspects represented in the currency from the Lichchhavi period.

Script, Language and Literature

The currency from the Lichchhavi period provides valuable insights into the script, language, and literature of that time in Nepali society. The Brahmi script, widely used and modified in India from the early Christian era to the Gupta period, was also employed in Lichchhavi currency. This script was used and evolved in Nepal for about four hundred years. By the 6th century, changes began to appear in the script, leading to two main types: the Purvalichchhavi (pre-Lichchhavi) script from earlier times, and the Uttarialichchhavi (post-Lichchhavi) script from the era of King Anshuvarma (Joshi, 1976). As the Brahmi script was adopted in the ancient Kathmandu valley, local scribes began to incorporate distinct features to reflect Nepalese characteristics (Khatri, 1998).

The Brahmi script was commonly used in ancient Nepal's records and had significant influence from the Gupta script of India. As a result, early Nepali scripts were sometimes referred to as Gupta scripts. This script continued to be in use until the early Medieval period, around the ninth century. In 1960, Nepal's Department of Archaeology officially designated this script as the Lichchhavi script (Rijal, 2017). Over time, the Lichchhavi script changed and was divided into two phases: early-Lichchhavi, covering the earlier period, and late-Lichchhavi period, before the beginning of the medieval era (Rajbanshi, 1974).

The Lichchhavi period is distinguished by the use of both the early Lichchhavi script and the late Lichchhavi script, as well as the Sanskrit language (Dahal, 2019). The script and language used in the Lichchhavi period currency were in pure Sanskrit, indicating that Sanskrit was widely used as a local language. This is further supported by the fact that Sanskrit was used not only in currency but also in the creation of significant texts and books (Dulal, 2016).

Religious Belief and Worship Tradition

Currency from the Lichchhavi period features a variety of symbols, marks, and seals. For instance, Manaka currency displays figures of a lion and a goddess, while Gukanak currency depicts an elephant. Shrayshu currency includes images of a lion, cow, calf, and Kamadhenu (a mythical cow), whereas Jishnuguptasya coins depict a horse. Pashupati currency features inscriptions of Pashupati, a damaru (a small drum associated with Lord Shiva), a bull, and a trident. Vrisha currencies showcase a water vessel and a male figure, and Vaishnavana currency includes images of Kumar and a cow (Shrestha, 2018). These symbols and designs offer valuable insights into the religious beliefs and deities worshipped during the Lichchhavi period (Shrestha, 2019).

Arts and Crafts

Creating currency is a remarkable example of art and craftsmanship. The process involves mining metal from various remote locations and shaping it into different forms, showcasing exceptional artistic skill (Sharma, 1969). The inscriptions, prints, symbols, animal figures, and human images engraved on the currency highlight the specific craftsmanship involved in its production.

Metal of Currency

The currency of the Lichchhavi period was primarily made from copper. This marked the first significant use of copper in Nepal's monetary history (Dahal, 2016). This indicates that copper was extensively utilized for currency production and other purposes during the Lichchhavi period, highlighting the establishment of a copper industry.

Protection of Natural Resources and Animals

Among the currency from the Lichchhavi period, various figures and inscriptions are present, such as the elephant on the Gunanka currency, the lion, cow, calf, and Kamadhenu inscription on Anshuvarma's currency, the horse on Jishnuguptasya currency, and the bull on Pashupati currency. These symbols not only reflect religious beliefs and devotion but also appear to emphasize the importance of protecting animals and natural resources essential for human life (Kafle, 2019). This suggests a broader reverence for nature and its preservation.

CONCLUSION

History and culture are deeply interconnected and mutually informative. To study these fields, it is essential to rely on important and authentic sources, which often require archaeological activities such as exploration and excavation. Among various historical and cultural sources, currency stands out as a reliable and significant material. Currency has played a crucial role in documenting and analyzing the history and culture of Nepal, particularly from the Lichchhavi period to the present day. As a primary source, currency provides a wealth of information about historical periods, including financial seals, figures of animals and deities, and the metals used, currency offers insights into the historical context and cultural aspects of its time. The study of Lichchhavi period coins, in particular, reveals valuable information about the era, making currency an essential resource for understanding Nepal's historical and cultural heritage.

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