TRIBE, TRIBAL, AND INDIAN NUMISMATICS VIS-À-VIS NEOEVOLUTIONARY PARADIGM

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ABSTRACT

The study of the evolution of human society has always been an attractive field for social scientists, albeit so far dominated by anthropologists. In recent years, some archaeologists have also addressed this issue. However, archaeologists’ dilemma is that the dynamics and complexities of past socio-political organizations cannot be explained through modern analogies. Therefore, this study attempts to explain that numismatics is an indispensable source material not only for unravelling the dynamics and complexities of past political organizations but also for identifying the various stages of political evolution, beginning with ‘tribe’. Significantly, numismatics also helps in tracing transitional stages of early polities from simple to complex ones, which are otherwise missing from the literature on evolutionary studies that is based purely on ethnographic and archaeological records. In addition, numismatics shows that ancient Indians used a variety of terms to signify different political societies, which, frozen in time, are analogous to ‘tribe/rank society’ and ‘chiefdom/stratified society’ as used in the neoevolutionary paradigm.

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"TRIBES OCCUPY A POSITION IN CULTURAL EVOLUTION. THEY TOOK OVER FROM SIMPLER HUNTERS; THEY GAVE WAY TO THE MORE ADVANCED CULTURES" (SAHLINS 1960: 14)

1. INTRODUCTION

Social scientists studying the evolution of society often base their arguments on analogies with contemporary or near contemporary primitive human organizations. These analogies can be formal or relational, and their proper use can lead to better understanding of the social organizations of past societies (Hodder 1982: Ch. 1). Accordingly, social organizations are categorized on the basis of certain traits, and archaeologists try to identify these various traits in the archaeological record for explaining evolutionary typology. However, ethnographic evidence would suggest 'great variety between different types of society and a lack of determinacy in associations between the various traits described' (Hodder 1982: 154). Thus, the use of analogies in classifying social organizations of past societies in the archaeological record is beset with assumptions.

However, there is no denying the fact that there existed various types of social organizations in the past, and that these can be identified through their material culture. Interestingly, Indian numismatics offers fascinating data for the study of evolutionary typology. It also shows the limitations of studies that are based on cross-cultural generalizations about human behaviour, because tribal coins reveal complexity, since tribal society is not always as simple as it is thought to be.

Sadly, scholars engaged in neoevolutionary studies have paid little attention to India in general, and to numismatics in particular. Social archaeology in India has few takers, and there is hardly any work on the identification of different stages of evolution of society in the archaeological record. Thus, while concluding his essay on the city and state formation, Alchin (1989: 15) observes:

Finally, let it be repeated that the emergence of cities and states is a neglected subject, both for archaeologists and historians of South Asia, deserving far more attention than it has so far received. Effective progress would be greatly enhanced by the wider adoption by archaeologists of a problem-oriented approach; by more discussion and exchange of views both nationally and internationally; by planning and co-operation of research programmes in the countries of South Asia; and by the encouragement of wider international co-operation in excavation and field research.

Alchin's wishful thinking is yet to attract scholars. The scope of this paper is exceedingly vast. However, I will confine it to numismatics, which offers fascinating prospects for understanding the behaviour of ancient political societies, as will be clear from what follows.

In ancient Indian numismatic studies, the application of the word 'tribe', and 'tribal' thereof, in association with certain class of coins is first noticed in Vincent Smith's Catalogue of the Coins in the Indian Museum. According to Smith's classification, there are seven main classes of ancient
Indian coins of which 'tribal coins' form one class, which he describes in Section VII of his catalogue (Smith 1906: 160-83). Introducing these coins Smith says (Smith 1906: 160):

...ancient India exhibited a greater variety of political constitutions, and large areas were occupied by nations, tribes, or clans, who managed to dispense with the commonplace despot, and governed themselves under some form of aristocratic or democratic constitution – the Greek writers give us glimpses of such communities – the Malloi (probably Mâlavas), Oxydrakai (Kshudrakas), and others – in the Panjab during the fourth century BC; and in later times occasional notices in inscriptions prove that the 'kingless' peoples still held their ground in various regions. To such peoples, apparently, must be assigned the curious coins described in this section.

Smith's introduction, however, betrays reality for, while describing these coins, he himself admits not only representation of the person of 'king' on certain types of 'tribal' coins, but also the occurrence of the personal names of certain 'kings' together with the titles Râja or Mahârâja in the coin-legends (Smith 1906: 167, 174-77). Thus, we may notice that while attributing a certain class of coins to tribal organizations, Smith does not differentiate between the organizations of monarchies and 'kingless peoples'.

J. Allan's Catalogue of the Coins of Ancient India appears to have been inspired by Smith for, while classifying the coins of ancient India, Allan distinguishes certain types of coins as 'tribal' coins. These comprise Part V of his catalogue (Allan 1936: lxxix-cliii; 117-278), and include six out of seven types of the 'tribal' coins described in Smith's catalogue, namely, the Ārjunāyana, Audumbara, Kuṇinda, Mālava, Rājanya and the Yaudheya. Since Allan's catalogue included coins dating from the earliest to 'about 300 AD', he did not take account of the Nāga coins (datable to the fourth century AD), the only remaining type of the tribal coins of Smith's catalogue.

In addition to these six, Allan also includes the coins of Achyuta, Almora, Aparânta, Ayodhyâ, Eranâ, Kâda, Kannauji (?), Kauśâmbi, Kûlûta, Mahârâja, Mâlava, Mathura, Pañchâla, Puri, Taxila, Trigarta, Tripuri, Uddehika, Ujjayini, Upagoda, Upatikya, and Vataśvaka in the class of 'tribal coins'. It is interesting that some of these types are listed by Smith in the category of 'local coins', for example Ayodhya, Kosam, and Taxila (Smith 1906: 148-56), the coins of 'kings' of Pañchâla (Smith 1906: 186-88), and of Râjas (kings) of Mathura (Smith 1906: 192-97). However, as we have already seen, Allan's classification of the 'tribal coins' rests on the same ground as that of Smith. Allan (1936: lxxix) argues:

They may be conveniently called tribal coins; indeed, on several, the word gāna (tribe) actually occurs in combination with the proper name: thus we have the gāna of the Yaudheyas and of the Ārjunāyanas.

Moreover, like Smith, Allan does not differentiate between a 'kingless/tribal' polity and a 'monarchy'. Thus, a majority of the coins attributed to 'tribal' polities by Allan are in reality monarchies, as is clear from the use of the titles Râja (king) and Mahârâja (great king) adopted by the issuers of these coins. Likewise, S. K. Chakrabortty (1935-36) also adopts the same position.

That this arrangement continued to persist in the writings of subsequent scholars follows from the fact that two seminars were held on 'local coins' (Narain, Singh and Ahmad: 1968) and 'tribal
coins' (Singh and Ahmad: 1977), respectively, to resolve this tangle, but there was no consensus among scholars concerning the use of these terms. Lallanji Gopal (1977: ix) has summarized this issue as follows:

There is a reasonable difference of opinion among scholars about the precise use of the term tribal coins, especially in relation to the other contemporary coins... One suggestion is to describe all these coins as regional or local coins, whereas another prefers the use of the term tribal coins. Among the different possibilities about subdividing these series three have received greater attention: (a) local and tribal, and monarchical, (b) local and tribal, and (c) janapada and naigama.

This citation from Gopal's foreword to the Proceedings of the Seminar on the Tribal Coins of Ancient India shows the confusion of numismatists concerning the term 'tribe' and, thereof, 'tribal coins' of ancient India. This confusion stems from the fact that the term 'tribal' is an arbitrary signifier of the signified concept - a class of coins termed 'tribal coins'. In using the term under reference, little concern is shown in explaining the object, i.e., the 'tribe'.

Mukherjee appears to be the first scholar to have used an anthropological formulation to explain the term 'tribal' in the context of Indian numismatics in a paper presented to the Seminar mentioned above, in 1972. Mukherjee notes (1977: 22):

According to anthropological concept, a tribe is 'a social group, usually with a definite area, dialect, culture, homogeneity, and unifying social organization. It may include several subgroups, such as sibs or villages. A tribe ordinarily has a leader and may have a common ancestor as well as a patron deity. The families or small communities making up the tribe are linked through economic, social, religious, family or blood ties.'

However, when Mukherjee (1977) applies this definition of the tribe to what he calls 'coins struck by the kings, leaders, chiefs, or the administration of such a compact social and ethnic group', he is no different from Smith and Allan.

Using both Winick's and H. H. Risley's description of a tribe, K. K. Dasgupta (1974: 24) explains the term 'tribe' as follows:

A social group, a tribe usually occupies a definite area, dialect, cultural homogeneity and its constituent families or smaller communities are linked through economic, social, religious, family or blood ties.

This interpretation of the term 'tribe' is so general that it can be applied to any social group in India, whether 'tribal' or 'non-tribal'. Interestingly, Dasgupta is careful in attributing 'tribal coins' to only those 'social groups' whose coins bear 'tribal names', namely, the Agra, Ārjunāyana, Aśvaka, Audumbara, Kulūta, Kuṇinda, Mālava, Rājanya, Śibi, Trigarta, Uddehika, Vemaki, Vṛishi, and the Yaudheya. He adds that 'I would like to use the composite word jana-gosṭhī to signify the tribal peoples studied here' (Dasgupta 1974: xxv).

Obviously, here Dasgupta follows the position of Smith (1906: 160), Allan (1936: lxxix), and Gupta (1951: 197-209). Nevertheless, it goes to the credit of Dasgupta to present a seminal work on the ethnography of the issuers of 'tribal coins' on the basis of literary and numismatic
sources. However, while his use of the term ‘tribal coins’ is agreeable in the loose sense of the term, it does not conform to the precise concept of a tribe (and tribal thereof) because, as in the works of Smith, Allan, Chakraborty, Gupta, and Mukherjee, Dasgupta’s study also includes coins issued by the Rājas (kings) and the Mahārājas (great kings).

Thus, we see that these attempts to explain the term ‘tribe’ are casual and half-hearted, and therefore self-contradictory insofar as the internal evidence of the coin-legends is concerned. As we will eventually see, the ‘tribal coins’ of ancient India can easily be identified on the basis of their legends — a fact which has not received the attention of scholars.

2. THE ‘TRIBE’ AND ‘TRIBAL COINS’

In the neoevolutionary paradigm the term ‘tribe’ (now also termed ‘segmentary society’) signifies an evolutionary stage. It has been discussed at length by Sahlin (1960; 1968) and Service (1962), on the basis of which I have suggested elsewhere (Joshi 1989: 137) that, in the context of Indian numismatics, a tribe is:

...an organized sedentary community bonded by kinship relations with no remarkable differential social traits. The tribesmen practice agriculture and trade for their subsistence. The gains and losses from their economic pursuits are pooled for the communal activities by a corporate ruling body which receives ‘legitimacy to govern’ from the majority of the society.

Evidently, the very act of issuing coins stems from legitimacy. Ethnographic accounts show that the tribesmen occupy a relatively small territory and their economic resources are limited. They use simple technology. Such a socio-political organization hardly allows any scope for socio-economic differentiation. That is why, structurally, all tribesmen are equal. Interestingly, whereas the presence of the above-mentioned traits can only be inferred from the settlements of issuers of the ‘tribal coins’, which are rather scarce (see endnote 3), we will eventually notice in the following sections of this essay that numismatics clearly unfolds their tribal character.

It is interesting to note that ancient Indian coins contain a variety of coin legends and symbols. Gupta (1951) was the first scholar to notice differences in the contents of legends on the coins of ‘tribal republics’, but he could not explain it (Gupta 1977: 49-50):

What the organizers of this Seminar [on the tribal coins] mean by this term [tribal] is not clear to us. So in the absence of any indication from them, I have accepted this term in the limited sense of the coins issued by the Tribal Republics, which I feel is its proper definition [?].

However, as we will eventually see, the legends on the ‘tribal coins’ of ancient India do indicate pronounced difference between ‘tribal’ and ‘non tribal’ issues. In fact, the legends on ancient Indian coins reveal that ‘tribal’ dynamics played a significant role in terms of the evolution or devolution of political society.

So far I have examined, from the perspective of the neoevolutionary paradigm, some fifteen types of ancient Indian coins attributed to some or the other ‘tribes’, namely, Agra, Arjunāyana, Aśvaka, Audumbara, Kāḍa(?), Kulūta, Kuṇinda, Mālava, Rājanya, Śibi, Trigarta, Uddehika, Vemaki,
On the basis of legends, these may be classified into four categories as follows (Joshi 1989: Appendix I):

Class 1: Coin-legends bearing the names of particular 'tribes' only

a. Agodaka Agōcha janapadasa – (Coin of the) province of the Agra (tribe of) Agodaka
b. Ārjunāyanaṇāṁ jayah – Victory to Ārjunāyana (tribe)
c. Vajāsaka – (Coin of) Aśvaka (tribe of) Vaja
d. Kādasa (Kāda?) – (Coin of) Kāda (tribe?)
e. Mālavānāṁ jayah – Victory to Mālava (tribe)
f. Mālavaganāsya jayah – Victory to Mālava people/tribe
g. Rajaṇa janapadasa – (Coin of the province of) Rājanya (tribe)
h. Majhamikāya Śibijanapadasa – (Coin of the province of) Śibi (tribe of) Majhamikā
i. Śibijanapadasa – (Coin of the province of) Śibi (tribe)
j. Trakatajanapadasa – (Coin of the province of) Trigarta (tribe)
k. Udehaki – (Coin of) Uddehika (tribe)
l. Vemakajanapadasa – (Coin of the province of) Vemaki (tribe)
m. Yaudheyānāṁ BahudhāṁAKE – (Coin of) Yaudheya (tribe of) Bahudhānaka
n. Yaudheyaganāsya jayah – Victory to Yaudheya people/tribe

Class 2: Coin-legends bearing the name of certain deities with or without mentioning the name of the 'tribe'

a. Bhagavata Mahadevasa Rajaraṇa – (Coin of) divine Mahādeva king of kings (Audumbara tribe)
b. Bhagavata Chatreśvara Mahātmanah – (Coin of) divine Chatreśvara, the noble-souled (Kuninda tribe)
c. Bhagavata-svāmino-Brahmanyadevasya Kumārasya – (Coin of) the divine lord Brahmanyadeva (alias/of) Kumāra (Yaudheya/Kumāra tribe) (Ahmad 1977)
d. Bhagavata-svāmino-Brahmānya Yaudheya – (Coin of) the divine lord Brahmānya (of the) Yaudheya (tribe)

Class 3: Coin-legends bearing the name of both the 'tribe' and the issuing authority

a. Mahadevasa Raṇa Śivadasasa (obv.); Odubarisa Śivadasasa (rev.), [and others] – (Coin of) Mahādeva (and) King Śivadāsa (obv.); (Coin of) Audumbara (tribe and) of Śivadāsa (rev.)
b. Vīrayaśasya [or Vijayamitraśya] Rājīṇa Kulūtasya – (Coin of) Vīrayaśa [or Vijayamitra], King of Kulūta (tribe)
c. Rājīṇa Kuṇiṁdaśa Amogabhūtisā Mahārājasa – (Coin of) Rāja (i.e., king) of Kuṇiṁda (tribe) Amogabhūti (who is a) Mahārāja (i.e., great king)
d. Udehaki Suyamitasa – (Coin of) Sūryamitra (of) Uddehika (tribe)
e. Raṇa Vemakisa Rudravarmasa Vijayata – (Coin of) Rudravarma, the victorious king of Vemaka (tribe)
Class 4: Coin-legends bearing the personal names of issuing authorities (chiefs) alone
a. Raṇa Ajamitasa [and others] – (Coin) of King Ajamitra, (attributed to Audumbara tribe)
b. Sachamitasa; Āryasya – (Coin) of Satyamitra; (Coin) of Ārya, (attributed to Kulūta tribe)
c. Raṇa Vijayabhutisa; [and others] – (Coin) of King Vijayabhūti (attributed to Kuṇinda tribe
representing Almora series of the Kuṇinda coins)
d. Maraja; Mapaya [and others] – (Coin of) Maraja; Mapaya, (attributed to Mālava tribe)
e. Sudavapa Suyamitasa; Sudavapa Dhruvamitasa – (Coin) of Sudavapa Sūryamitra; (Coin)
of Sudavapa Dhruvamitra (attributed to Uddehika tribe)
f. Raṇa Bhānuvasya – (Coin) of King Bhānu/Bhānuva (attributed to Yaudheya tribe)

We should note that, of the above-mentioned four classes of coins, the first one alone
conforms to the concept of a tribe, because the legends on these coins suggest that they were issued
collectively in the names of some or the other ‘tribes’.

Obviously, in such a situation all the tribesmen are structurally equivalent, and there is no
social differentiation. Legends on the remaining three categories are indicative of socio-political
differentiation, which is the hallmark of a ‘non-tribal’ polity.

3. DISCUSSION

By using the neoevolutionary paradigm while studying the evolution of political societies,
anthropologists and archaeologists are trying to identify different evolutionary stages, including
‘tribe’. Since the present essay purports to define ‘tribal coins’, it will focus on the ‘tribal’ stage of
society in the context of coins.

According to the pioneering neoevolutionary paradigm of Sahlins (1960; 1968) and Service
(1962), tribal society is a developed stage of ‘band’ organization. Tribal organization may be
distinguished from other organizations on the basis of technology and social organization. Although
tribal culture emerged during the Neolithic period, yet, in places where nature was bountiful,
food-collecting bands reached the cultural average of Neolithic communities. Sahlins (1968: 3)
oberves that:

Neolithic techniques equip societies to creatively transform their environments. Neolithic
communities do not operate under the same natural constraints as hunters: food domestication
allows agriculturists to maintain comparatively high degrees of cultural order in a variety of
geographic settings.

It is interesting to note that the issuers of the ‘tribal coins’ of ancient India lived in a variety of
geographical settings as is clear from the distribution of their coins (see, for geographical distribution
of tribal coins, Allan 1936: Introduction). They are found in the Himalayan region, in the alluvial
plains of Punjab, in northern Rajasthan, and in the Malwa region of central India. Significantly, even
in modern times, natural surroundings in the aforesaid geographical settings (with the exception of
Punjab) have afforded existence to the tribal way of life because of the finite resources, as may be
gleaned from anthropological accounts (Majumdar 1965).
Ethnohistorical evidence from the Central Himalayas would indicate that these ‘tribes’ not only subsisted on agriculture, they also made the most of available natural products. In other words, for subsistence they adapted with nature by means of available simple technology, such as relatively better agricultural methods, notably: raising two crops (i.e., Rabi and Kharif), use of manure and irrigation, and of metal in manufacturing hunting, agricultural and household tools (e.g., iron arrowhead, spear, knife, ploughshare, axe, sickle, etc.), weaving and knitting (particularly woollens), as well as collecting natural products from forests, exchange of commodities, etc. (Joshi 2005; Tamta 2007).

Social organization is closely linked to population and technology. Scientific researches have shown that a large population, which is a hallmark of a complex society, cannot be maintained without adequate technology permitting sufficient food and social surplus for specialists to engage in literary and scientific pursuits, administration, non-agricultural production and the like, which are activities required in higher levels of political organizations such as chiefdoms/stratified societies and empire states (Johnson and Earle 1987: 3-5; cf. Segraves 1982). As regards the social organization of the tribe, it is noted that (Sahlins 1968: 15-16):

Families are joined in local lineages, lineages in village communities, villages in regional confederacies, the latter making up the tribe or ‘people’ – itself set in a wider, inter-tribal field. The smaller groups are usually cohesive kinship groups. The larger appear as social compacts of the smaller, integrated perhaps by personal kinship, clanship, or intermarriage. Ordinarily, the tribe as a whole is identified and distinguished from others by certain commonalities of custom and speech.

Now the strength of a tribe is generally homestead and hamlet, the smallest groups and narrowest spheres. Here at the tribal infrastructure, social interaction is greatest and cooperation most intense. This cohesion expresses in a general way the limitations of Neolithic or advanced hunting communities: small scale production, restricted division of labour, underdeveloped transport and communication, and comparatively low productivity.

This summary of the social organization of a tribe indicates that a tribal organization cannot be very large and economically prosperous. In this connection it may be mentioned that we come across exceedingly small and modest settlements and a total absence of monumental architecture associated with the issuers of tribal coins in the Himalayan region.3 The finite resources of the Himalayas limited population growth and, in the absence of significant technological progress, agricultural and non-agricultural production could not be augmented. This is suggestive of their poor economy and small population, which allowed little scope for change in political society. This accounts for the limited circulation of the tribal coins of ancient India, both in time and space. In connection to this, it is worthwhile to add that simple technology and economy both cause the social system of a tribe to grow weaker where the social system is greater (Sahlins 1968: 16):

...the degree of integration decreases as the level of organization increases, and degrees of sociability diminish as fields of social relation broaden. The tribe (as a whole) is often the weakest
link in the segmentary chain. Its peripheral communities develop close relations and cultural similarities with neighbouring peoples, setting in motion a marginal erosion of tribal integrity, and rather than a definite inter-tribal border one comes upon an ambiguous zone of transition.

Significantly, ancient Indian coins do suggest that the 'tribal' stage of the issuers of Class I of the above-mentioned coins was short-lived, and that it developed into 'other' evolutionary stages. This is evident from the coin-legends suggesting group-oriented, quasi-individualizing, and individualizing chiefdoms replacing the tribal polities.

Social archaeology in India is not very advanced, and we hardly come across any work on the neoevolutionary paradigm in the context of Indian archaeology. So far as numismatic studies are concerned, they are more or less stereotyped, and do not go 'beyond the obv.-rev. [obverse-reverse] description which is commonly understood as numismatics' (Shastri 1992: 234). This may partly explain why differences in coin-legends remained unexplained in Indian numismatic studies, although coins provide extremely valuable information for unfolding the various evolutionary stages of political societies of the past.

According to the neoevolutionary paradigm, human societies progressively advance from one stage to another in the following order: band, tribe, chiefdom, empire state, and classical empire or archaic state. It may be noted that it is not necessary that all societies pass through these different stages successively, i.e., what is termed unilinear evolution. In fact, examples are not wanting of political societies reverting to lower levels of organizations, e.g., from empire state to chiefdom. This was the case after the liquidation of the Mauryan empire, which resulted in the proliferation of several post-Mauryan petty polities, particularly the issuers of the so-called 'tribal coins'. Societies have also 'devolved' from chiefdom to tribe, as in the case of the Yaudheyas, Arjunyanas, Mālavas, etc., which seem to fluctuate between chiefdom and tribal organization as evidenced in their respective coin-legends mentioned above.

It may be noted here that the concept of 'tribe' has been challenged by Fried (1966; 1967: 154-84). Instead, he uses the term 'rank society' which, in his scheme, develops from the 'egalitarian' society (Fried 1967: 182-84). Interestingly, despite his careful formulation, Service (1971: 157) surrendered to the critique of Fried. However, Renfrew (1974) has found Service's earlier postulate relevant to archaeological practices. While reconstructing the evolution of Prehistoric societies of Europe on the basis of archaeological record, Renfrew (1974: 73) has outlined twenty distinguishing features of chiefdoms (see also Flannery 1972); and he adds:

Archaeologists are now beginning to find means for recognizing almost every one of the 20 features listed above... Of course in this sense the concept 'chiefdom' is not very specific, if it indicates simply the coexistence in a society of a number of these features.

On the basis of those twenty features, Renfrew has formulated two kinds of chiefdoms: group-oriented, and individualizing. In the former, according to Renfrew (1974: 74):

...personal wealth in terms of valuable possessions is not impressively documented, but... the solidarity of the social unit was expressed most effectively in communal or group activities.
In the individualizing chiefdoms, the role of individuals is much more marked. Renfrew (1974: 79) observes that:

Individualizing societies of this kind, by definition, allow us to distinguish the individual leader, either by the number, richness and symbolic value of his possessions, or by the scale and prominence of his residence.

More recently ‘chiefdoms’ have been subjected to extensive and intensive research, showing significant variability in their constitution (Earle [ed.] 1991). It has been found that societies in antiquity developed both simple and complex chiefdoms. However, the structure of chiefdoms was ‘distinguished as group-oriented vs. individualizing’ (Earle 1991: 3). Earle (1991: 3-4) observes:

Despite a utility in developing evolutionary theory, further cross-cultural studies of ethnographic cases have limited utility. Emphasis on ethnographic cases tends to stress functionalist theories with little possibility for rigorous evaluation. Rather research should now document archaeological and historical sequences and evaluate the similarities and differences in societal change from region to region (emphasis added).

Sadly, despite huge archaeological and historical records, India does not figure in the literature on chiefdoms, nor do we come across any cognizance of numismatics as a source material for reconstructing the evolutionary stages of political society.

It may be noted that chiefdom societies have relatively larger population and territorial areas. As such they consist of a number of tribes. The union of such a group of peoples generates complexity leading to the emergence of leadership, and social, economic, and political differentiation. In group-oriented chiefdoms this differentiation was played down as the leaders kept a low profile, and solidarity of the social unit was expressed most effectively in communal or group activities.

This situation is reflected in the Class 2 coin-legends mentioned above. Thus, these coins have been issued on behalf of the peoples in the name of their tutelary deity – indicating a ‘communal or group activity’. Here, religion played as one of the prime movers in the evolution of political society. Indeed, there are certain interesting coins with the legend Vrishiñirājañāgaṇasya tratarasya (according to one reading) and Vrishiñi-rājanyagaṇasya trāṭaḥ (according to Shastri 1992: 239). In case we follow the former reading, it refers to Vrishnirāja (king of the Vrishni tribe), and in case of the latter it refers to the Vrishni and Rājanya tribes jointly. In either case, the legend does not mention the personal name of the issuer of the coins, and suggests a group-oriented organization.

4. CONCLUSION

I will briefly show how the ancient Indian coins mentioned in Section 2 of this essay bring to our knowledge issues involving different evolutionary stages of political society. It already has been shown that only Class 1 of the coins under reference qualifies to be termed as ‘tribal’, that the ‘tribal’ stage of the issuers of this class was short-lived, and that it developed into ‘other’ evolutionary stages, which scholars term ‘chiefdoms’. We have noted that evolutionary studies indicate that
chiefdom societies comprise group-oriented and individualizing stages. However, our coins clearly show that in between these two there is one more stage – that of quasi-individualizing chiefdom.

The quasi-individualizing stage of political society represents the transitional phase between the group-oriented and individualizing chiefdoms, which sadly remains unnoticed in the archaeological record discussed by Renfrew. In fact, the transition from tribal to chiefdom is a critical stage in the evolution of political society. It is a result of complexity in political society, and needs detailed treatment. Therefore, new avenues need to be explored to study this development, and, as we have seen, numismatics is one such possibility.

Obviously, the quasi-individualizing stage of political society can be easily recognized in Class 3 of our coin-legends, which refers to the names of tribes together with the personal names of their respective issuers – the chiefs. Obviously, here the issuing authority proclaims his chieftainship but, at the same time, continues to honour tribal solidarity by adding the name of the tribe on the coin-legends. Thus, in this situation the chief attempts to differentiate himself from the rest of the tribesmen, albeit without undermining the importance of the community. In this context, archaeological remains and coins belonging to the pre-Sātavāhana period in the Deccan, particularly from the Krishna valley (Parashar-Sen 2007), are interesting. The coins found here contain legends bearing names of their issuers ending with ‘Sada’. ‘Sada’ may have been a dominant tribe of the Amaravati region.

The individualizing chiefdom can be recognized without doubt in Class 4 of the coin-legends, which allows us ‘to distinguish the individual leader’ by virtue of the ‘prominence’ shown to his personal name as the issuer of the coin in question, without any tribal affiliation whatsoever. Compared to the contents of coin-legends in the other three categories, these show a marked difference in proclaiming the ‘status’ of the issuer of the coin. It is significant to note that here, owing to his superior status and power, the chief differentiates himself from other tribesmen by issuing the coin in question as an individual, as if he has shed off his tribal affiliation. In fact, despite scanty archaeological and literary sources, the author has tried to recognize in our coins at least seventeen of the twenty features of chiefdom formulated by Renfrew. The remaining three, being very common in such societies, may be accepted by analogy (Joshi 1989: 94-97). However, this seminal study needs further research, for not only coin-legends, but the symbols on the coins also convey equally meaningful messages.3

In this connection it should be noted that the issuers of the tribal coins under reference flourished when South Asia had already witnessed the rule of the Persian Achaemenid empire and the Greek Macedonian empire in the North-west, and that of the Nandas and Mauryas of Magadha in the east. Therefore, it would be reasonable to suggest that they may have adopted some of the complex features of the empire states. Should we identify such occurrences as ‘secondary phenomena’ following Fried (1967: 172 ff.)? Or, were these ‘secondary tribal polities’, for some of these tribal organizations seem to have emerged from the dissolution of the aforesaid empires? There is no doubt that these tribes participated in inter-regional trade and created social surplus, part of which was diverted into minting coins (see for details, Joshi 1989: Ch. 6). These developments may have given a fillip to economic differentiation and, in turn, led to social stratification.
Thus, coins can add considerably to our understanding of tribal dynamics, and show that tribes are not always simple societies as commonly thought; indeed, they also have complex social organization. Coins also suggest that ancient Indian tribesmen were well-versed in their constitution, and styled it gana – a fact supported by teeming literary references (Jayaswal 1955: Pt. I, Ch. IV, and in passim; Sharma 1991: Ch. IX). Sadly, these have not attracted the attention of numismatists.

Undoubtedly, numismatic sources shed significant light on tribal dynamics. Thus, for example, numismatists have been deciphering coin-legends and identifying their issuers accordingly since the nineteenth century. However, no attempts have been made to glean the dynamics of the political society represented by the issuers of the coins in question. Witness, for example, the well-known Kushan coins which circulated over a vast area. Volumes have been written on different aspects of Kushan archaeology, culture, and history. However, no scholar has ever attempted to explain why only some varieties of Kushan coins bear the ‘tribal’ name ‘Kushāṇa’ in the legends. The answer lies in the dynamics of the political society of the Kushans. It seems that the ‘tribal’ character in the political society of the Kushans always loomed large, and that whenever the authority of a Kushan ruler fluctuated, ‘tribal’ affiliation was invoked to strengthen it. This and other similar issues can be explained with the help of numismatics vis-à-vis the neoevolutionary paradigm. In the light of their coins, it equally holds true in the case of the ‘Greek experience’ (cf. Ferguson 1991).

Thus we see that the term ‘tribe’, and ‘tribal’ thereof, can be applied only to a particular variety of coins represented by Class 1 of our classification, which bear only the name of a ‘tribe’ as the issuing authority. Tribal organization was based on egalitarianism. Functionally, it may have created a ruling body of certain dominant persons, but structurally all the tribesmen were equal. That is why we find the coins under reference were issued collectively in the name of the ‘gana’ or ‘jana’ – thus treating all its members equally. Technologically, they were not very advanced; as such, they could barely improve their economic condition beyond subsistence. This is obvious from the fact that most of tribal coins have been issued in base metal and that too in small quantities, suggestive of meagre social surplus. This accounts for the paucity of sizable settlements and monumental architecture within the territorial limits of the issuers of these coins. Significantly, the tribal stage is distinctly recognized in ancient Indian polity as vairājya, gana and jana (Jayaswal 1955: Chs. IV, X, XV, XVII-XVIII; Altekar 1977: Ch. VI; Sharma 1991: Ch. IV), and the chieftain stage as svarāj, jaishṭha, rāja-sabdīn satāṅga, kula, rājanyaka-gaṇa, etc. (Jayaswal 1955: Chs. IX-X; Altekar 1977: Ch. VI).

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Professor Colin Renfrew for his brief comment (dated 7 November 2008) on this paper wherewith he agrees that ‘numismatics can be of help in these matters’ (taken up in the present study), and that my ‘general argument is supported by the case of Greece. There, Professor Anthony Snodgrass and others have shown that in archaic times (seventh and sixth centuries BC) there were some areas or regions of Greece organized as cities (poleis) and others as tribes (ethnos). The cities certainly issued coins in their name, but so did some of the tribes. The Indian example seems a relevant and perhaps comparable case. So I feel that the Greek example goes along well with the points you are making, and is perhaps worth citing.’
Endnotes

1. Some noteworthy examples related to studies in state formation in ancient India are by Seneviratne (1978), Thapar (1984), Nandi (1987), and Sharma (1989). However, these are based mainly on literary sources. Ratnagar (1991) has discussed at length the nature of Harappan polity in the context of chieftdom and state-level organizations as evidenced in the archaeological record. Shaffer's (1992) study of the evolution and devolution of the Harappan civilization is an interesting example of its kind. Using Early Historical archaeological data, Allchin (1989) suggests that growth of settlement size resulted in the formation of cities in clusters in different regions. This in its turn gave rise to the need for the machinery of state (Allchin 1989: 14). According to Parashar-Sen's (2007) recent paper, antecedent material culture flourished in natural resource rich parts of the Krishna and the Godavari valleys and accounts for state formation under the Sātavāhanas in the Deccan. However, these studies have little to add to the evolutionary paradigm taken up in the present essay.

2. The coin-legends classified here, along with their free translations, are based on the readings of Allan, (1936), Sircar (1968), and Dasgupta (1974). Shastri (1992) has questioned my (Joshi 1989) readings of certain coin-legends and attribution of some coins. However, this absolutely does not affect the interpretation offered by me, as the purport of the legends remains unchanged; Shastri has conveniently avoided the analytical aspect of my work.

3. Early Historical archaeology of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand has been poorly defined and described. Thus, while reporting pottery from the explored/excavated sites it is invariably described as Kushan pottery, or else the site itself is called a Kushan settlement, irrespective of the fact that the Kushans never ruled in the area from where it is reported. However, material remains discovered in this region consist of modest dwellings with simple utility pottery forms and household paraphernalia based on simple technology, totally lacking in luxury items such as jewellery made from costly metals and stones, deluxe and fashionable pottery, and suchlike, (see for Himachal Pradesh: Indian Archaeology – A Review, 1987-88: 135-36; 1988-89: 26; 1989-90: 26; 1992-93: 36; 1996-97: 32; 1999-2000: 49; Chakrabarti and Hasan 1984; for Uttarakhand: Joshi 1990; Nautiyal and Khanduri 1991; and Khanduri 2002). Significantly, in the plains region also, where the tribal polities held sway, the situation is not very different, and we do not witness the emergence of a centre evolving into the seat of an empire state.

4. See note 2.

5. It is worthwhile to add here that coins issued by the petty polities (all the four categories mentioned in Section 2) bear considerably large number of symbols in contrast to the imperial coins (for example, of the Kushans and of the Guptas) which are almost devoid of symbols. It seems that these symbols played a vital role in the display of tribal solidarity.


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