

The Impact on Early Bhutanese Coinage of Contentious Relations Between Bhutan and Cooch Behar from 1772 to 1774

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Abstract

Bhutan's coinage has been thoroughly documented related to design and mintage variability. In addition, as noted for the first time in this paper, one of Bhutan's late 18th to early 20th century core governmental missions is reflected through changes in Bhutan's coinage. This is based on Bhutan's conflict with Cooch Behar including interactions with the British East India Company and the legacy and aftermath of that conflict. While 18th to early 19th century versions of the symbols on Bhutanese coins reflected Hindu and national icons of Cooch Behar, the later versions to 1910 contained Cooch Behar symbols and definitive Buddhist symbols reflecting the sovereignty and a core mission to promote a Bhutanese Buddhist state where citizens became Enlightened.

Keywords: Bhutan, Cooch Behar, British East India Company, numismatic, Narayan, Buddhism

Introduction

This paper will examine the historical context and governmental and societal purpose of early Bhutan as reflected in early Bhutanese coins first minted in 1772 and then to 1910. For this paper, modern (versus early) Bhutanese coinage is defined when only Bhutanese symbols, starting in 1910, appeared on the coins (Bronny, 2014; Royal Monetary Authority, 2015). Several scholarly publications have been written concerning the design and mintage variability in Bhutanese coins before 1910 (Bose, 1996; Bronny, 2014;

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Cruyce, 2015; Eden, Permberton, Griffiths, & Bose, 1865; Panish, 1989; Rhodes, 1991, 1993, 1999, 2000; Rhodes & Bose, 1999; Royal Monetary Authority, 2015). Also prior to 1910, the script appearing on the coins has been utilized by scholars and coin collectors primarily only to distinguish the coins from one another, and to divide them into “types” (Bronny, 2014; Rhodes, 1999, 2000). These types are, for the most part, based purely upon literal deviations of symbols and defined spans of time.

However, with respect to the symbols on the coins themselves, no scholarly work other than this paper has addressed, in detail, the overall historical intent, context, and symbolic meaning of the coins associated with Bhutan from 1772 to 1910. Numismatics makes up an important part of archaeological evidence and its development offers ways in which to trace the historical development of the country and its national identity (Davies, 2002; Dorji, 2004; Dutta, 2013; Menger, 1892). More specifically, the overall purpose of the mintage of money in a society is a socially-constructed concept that reflect set societal beliefs, norms, and political agendas and is not neutral (Davies, 2002; Ingham, 2004). For example, expansion of the money and credit supply has been utilized as one modern policy approach to promote greater consumer demand (Davies, 2002).

Trade routes between Tibet, Nepal, and other larger countries represented an early direct outside influence on Bhutan’s usage of coins for payment of imports and exports (Karma Phuntsho, 2013; Rhodes, 1999, 2000). Cooch Behar coins circulating in Bhutan due to trade likely existed in limited quantities on or before 1583 (Rhodes, 2000). The other early and major usage of coins in Bhutan, which was almost entirely a barter economy were for the exchange of ceremonial and monastic gifts (Bose, 1996; Pemberton, 1837-1838; Karma Phuntsho, 2013; Rhodes, 1999, 2000). At the beginning of the conflict in 1772 between Bhutan and Cooch Behar, Cooch Behar coin dies were removed and used inside Bhutan to mint

replicas of Cooch Behar coins (Bose, 1996, 2013; Rhodes, 1999). As a result, many of the conclusions made in this paper are based upon Bhutan's historical interactions with Cooch Behar, as Bhutan's coins originated from this neighboring country.

Methods

In the investigation of the Bhutanese coinage system, this research focused on the broader historical view and context of its changes across multiple decades. In the first section of this paper, there is a succinct chronological review and overview based on scholarly documents of any underlying historical trends from 1765 to 1774 of Bhutanese relations and conflicts with respect to Cooch Behar and the British East India Company. The year 1765 was used as this was the starting point of the events that led to the military conflict between Bhutan and Cooch Behar in 1772 and then Bhutan and Cooch Behar and the British East India Company in 1773. The military hostilities ceased in 1774.

As a crosscheck to this historical analysis, an examination was made of the plain meaning of national symbols on any early Bhutanese coins minted from 1772 to 1910. The year 1772 was used in this analysis because this was the time when Bhutan first commenced minting coins using Cooch Behar coin dies. Were the symbols on the coins from 1772 to 1910 solely from Cooch Behar, a combination of Cooch Behar and Bhutanese symbols, or solely Bhutanese symbols? This analysis was done to determine whether Bhutanese coin designs were influenced in total, in part, or not at all by Hindu Cooch Behar icons and symbols. And whether Bhutan minted coins in part or in entirety with symbols and icons representing its own unique culture and governance. If Bhutan minted coins representing its own unique culture and governance then the symbols on the coinage would reflect the nature and meaning of these symbols and icons.

Sources for the historical research from 1765 to 1774 and Bhutanese coin research from 1772 to 1910 included: Google

Scholar, JSTOR, LexisNexis Academic, Cooch Behar government sources, and *Journal of Bhutan Studies* online archive located at: <https://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/category/journal-of-bhutan-studies/>. Search terms for all databases other than Cooch Behar government sources and *Journal of Bhutan Studies* included: “Bhutan and coin,” “Bhutan and numismatic,” “Bhutan and Koch Bihar,” “Bhutan and Koch Behar,” “Bhutan and Cooch Bihar,” and “Bhutan and Cooch Behar.” The symbols on Bhutanese coins are interpreted “as is” in terms of their meaning derived from definitive interpretations from the above scholarly sources.

An additional “audit trail” method of quality control and countering bias has been employed for this article in which all research and reporting steps in this methods section have been transparently described above (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2021) All relevant publications that directly reference Bhutanese history related to Cooch Behar or meanings of Bhutanese coinage are also listed in the text and bibliography section of this paper for examination by interested third parties.

Results

Cooch Behar, was a Hindu Kingdom, situated in the Himalayan foothills and south of modern-day Bhutan (Dutra, 2015; Chandra, 1989; Booth and Dendup Chophel, 2021). In 1765, Dhairjendra Narayan became the ruler of Cooch Behar. (Cooch Behar Princely State, 2017; National Infomatics Centre, 2012; Whyte, 2002). During this period the Ambassador to Cooch Behar from Bhutan, Pensuthma, effectively and behind-the-scenes, governed Cooch Behar (Cooch Behar Government, 2018).

In 1770, Dhairjendra was no longer favored by the Bhutanese who captured and then imprisoned him in the Bhutanese national capital in Punakah (Pommaret, 2000). Later in 1770, the Bhutanese placed Rajendra Narayan, Dhairjendra’s second

oldest brother, into power (Cooch Behar Princely State, 2017; National Informatics Centre, 2012; Whyte, 2002). In 1772, Rajendra died of a severe fever and infection (Cooch Behar Princely State, 2017). Cooch Behar court officials then tried to promote Dharendra Narayan, a son of Dhairjendra, but this was opposed by Bhutan with at least 18,000 troops (Cooch Behar Princely State, 2017; Whyte, 2002).

Beginning in 1772, Bhutan engaged in a brief military occupation of Cooch Behar. Due to this occupation, Cooch Behar signed a military pact on April 5, 1773 with the British East India Company (Bowman, 2000). In 1774, Cooch Behar and British East India Company military forces succeeded in removing Bhutan from Cooch Behar (Bose, 2013).

This led to a Peace Treaty in 1774 between the British East India Company and Bhutan (White, 1909; Whyte, 2002). The terms of the Peace Treaty were based on a prior Bhutanese proposal that included: withdrawal and return of Cooch Behar lands by Bhutan; return of Dhairjendra Narayan; free trade without duties through Bhutan; disputes in British East India Company territory decided by a Magistrate of the British East India Company; harvesting of timber being duty free and without interference; a ceasefire; mutual exchange of prisoners; and return of deserters (British East India Company & Kingdom of Bhutan, 1774; Whyte, 2002). With the signing of the Peace Treaty, this began an era of peace between Bhutan and Cooch Behar.

Early Bhutanese coins

From the 1580s to 1772, trade between Cooch Behar through Bhutan to Tibet resulted in very few Cooch Behar coins circulating in Bhutan (Table 1) (Bose, 1996; Deb, 1973; Dutta, 2013; Panish, 1989; Pemberton, 1837-1838; Rhodes, 2000). The main purpose of the very limited amount of coins circulating in this period were for gifts particularly monastic, trade payments, and exchange for Bhutanese silver bullion (Table 1) (Rhodes, 1999, 2000; White, 1909). Also, during this period up to 1772, Bhutan was almost totally a barter society

(Rhodes, 1993, 1999). Bhutan continued to be almost entirely a barter society up to 1910 and then into the 1960s (Rhodes, 1999).

Table 1. *Timeline of history of early Cooch Behar and Bhutanese coinage*

Date	Historical milestone
1587-1627	Reign of Lakshmi Narayan in Cooch Behar; fine silver rupees were struck.
1619	Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, founder of Bhutan, received presents from the Raja (King) of Cooch Behar, including silver and gold coins.
1627-1633	Reign of Vira Narayan, Lakshmi's successor. Few coins are known of this ruler.
1633-1666	Reign of Prana Narayan, Vira's successor. Struck large numbers of half rupees, and a few full rupees.
1640-1643	Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal receives ma-tang (silver) coins as gifts from India.
1680	Tenzin Rabgye enthroned as Fourth Druk Desi (secular ruler) of Bhutan; received presents of 1000 gold and 1000 silver coins from the Raja of Ladakh, and 700 gold coins and 1000 silver coins from the Raja of Cooch Behar.
1707	Enthronement of the Eighth Druk Desi of Bhutan, one silver coin given to each monk and general public of Bhutan.
1744-1763	Rule of the 13th Druk Desi, Sherab Wangchuck, who distributed gifts of one silver coin to each citizen eight times during his reign.
1747	Coronation of second reincarnated Shabdrung, Jigsmed grags-pa, where gifts were described in detail and valued in Ma-tam (copper coins).
1770-1772	Rajendra Narayana coins are minted in Cooch Behar. Only pieces with a cross to the right of 'RNDRA', and hence are easily identifiable.
1772-1910	Bhutan mints coins identical, nearly identical, or somewhat identical to Cooch Behar mintage. Coins that were nearly or somewhat identical contained Bhutanese symbols.

1783	British Diplomat Samuel Turner visits Bhutan and describes the Narainee, a base silver coin struck in Cooch Behar and now minted in Bhutan.
1785	First outside reference to coins in Bhutan in a letter from Bhutan's Deb Raja to Governor General of India.
1788	Cooch Behar mint closed by British East India Company.
1823-1831	Druk Desi Chhoki Gyaltsen's reign, during which he distributed gifts of one silver coin to each citizen of the country four times.

In 1772, as noted earlier, Cooch Behar dies made it to Bhutan resulting in the first mintage of Cooch Behar coins in Bhutan (Bose, 1996; Panish, 1989). These first coins minted in Bhutan were under the auspices of several powerful regional rulers (Royal Monetary Authority, 2015). According to Rhodes, these rulers included: the Penlops (Governors) of Paro, Daga, and Trongsa and Dzongpens (administrator of forts) of Thimphu, Wangdue Phodrang, and Punakah (Rhodes, 1999). In 1783, British Diplomat, Samuel Turner also corroborated this in a diplomatic report and description of Cooch Behar coins that were minted in Bhutan (Lipscombe, 2016; Turner, 1800).

In 1785, the Bhutanese requested to Cooch Behar that a limited amount of Narayana coins for a short period be minted by the mint at Cooch Behar in exchange for silver payment by the Bhutanese (Ahamada, 1942; Rhodes, 1999). This is the first confirmed reference outside of Bhutan to the mintage of these coins (Rhodes, 1999). This request was approved by the ruler of Cooch Behar (Ahamada, 1942). In 1788, the British East India Company closed the mint in Cooch Behar (Rhodes, 2000). In line with the usage of coins in Bhutan mostly as gifts and for ceremonial reasons, Druk Desi of Bhutan, Chhoki Gyaltsen, in the 19th century provided a limited number of silver coins to Bhutanese citizens as gifts (Rhodes, 1999).

Interpretation of symbols on Bhutanese coins

As noted in Table 2, from 1772 to 1774 and from 1774 to 1790, coins minted in Bhutan continued to contain only Cooch Behar symbols. These coins were minted in silver from 1772

until 1790. The only alteration was part of a succession of Cooch Behar Narayana rulers' names with the inscription being: 'NDRA' or 'RNDRA' (Bose, 1996; Panish, 1989).

From 1790 to 1910, the Hindu and national symbols of Cooch Behar were partially replaced with Buddhist Bhutanese symbols (Table 2). These coins were minted in copper and brass (Bronny, 2014; Rhodes, 1999, 2000). From 1790 to 1910 and to the present, the core beliefs of Mahayana Buddhism in Bhutan have included impermanent, non-dualistic, and egoless reality; Karma; transmigration or rebirth; and Enlightenment (Givel, 2015, 2019). Like all types of Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism focuses on practices like meditation to become Enlightened by acquiring deeper insights into the realities of the universe (Kakol, 2002). This includes deeper understandings of the nature of a non-dualistic universe (Gethin 1998; Keown 2013; Leighton 2012; Williams, 2008).

Table 2. *Evolution from 1772 to 1910 of Bhutanese minted coinage*

Historical period	Coins include Bhutanese, Cooch Behar, or both?	Description of metal content and appearance of coins
Period 1: 1772 - 1774	Entirely Cooch Behar symbols	Silver
Period 2: 1774 - 1910	Entirely Cooch Behar symbols from 1774 - 1790; Cooch Behar and Bhutanese symbols from 1790 to 1910	Silver until 1830; Weight of coins reduced due to being silver washed from 1830-1840 without alteration of general appearance or silver content; After 1840 copper and brass

Non-duality in Mahayana Buddhism means that all in the universe is interconnected and unified with any seeming dualities being illusions (C. T. Dorji, 2008). Additionally,

Mahayana Buddhism, teaches that undue and excessive ego craving of things, political power, and sensual pleasure promotes suffering and prevents an individual from becoming Enlightenment. A primary goal of Mahayana Buddhism, therefore, is to counter and eliminate egoism (Givel, 2015 and 2019). Finally, transmigration in Mahayana reflects the practice of good or bad Karma or deeds in past lives that provide the conditions for a future birth (Snelling 1998). If an individual's present life is full of bad Karma they may be reborn in a more hellish realm. On the other hand, practicing good Karma leads to a possible future birth that is more Buddha-like (Lopez, 2001). In Buddhism, enlightenment occurs with a growing awareness of the vast and infinite cosmos, which is a place beyond death and known space-time limitations (Gethin, 1998). This is known as cosmic emptiness or Shunyata. When one is enlightened, Buddhists believe this results in a state of compassion, harmony, bliss, and joy (Gethin, 1998).

Hindu icons appearing from 1772 to 1910 on Bhutanese coins included such symbols as a trident (a weapon of Lord Shiva) or swastika (derived from Sanskrit and meaning good fortune) (Bronny, 2014; Rhodes, 1999, 2000; Rhodes & Bose, 1999; Sullivan, 2001). Buddhist symbols appearing on Bhutanese coins from 1790 to 1910 were primarily the Eight Auspicious symbols reflecting Buddhist beliefs. The Eight Auspicious symbols include: two golden fish (living in happiness and fearlessness without drowning in a sea of suffering); conch shell (sound of the Buddha); endless knot (awareness of eternity and Enlightenment); victory banner (victory of Buddhism and Enlightenment); lotus flower (purification of body, speech, and mind in blissful liberation and Enlightenment); wheel of life (symbolic of teachings to become Enlightened); treasure vase (treasure of Buddhist doctrines); and parasol (wholesome and good Karmic activities) (Bronny, 2014; Buddha Dharma Education Association & Buddhnet, 2018).

Discussion and conclusion

From 1772 to 1774, Bhutan and Cooch Behar maintained acrimonious relations. In 1772, during the final era of brief occupation and control, Cooch Behar dies were removed to Bhutan. Subsequently, from 1772 to 1774 and the period ending in 1910, various forms of coinage was minted in Bhutan with Cooch Behar symbols. There was no change in the design of Bhutanese coins except occasionally 'NARA' or 'RNDRA' reflecting Narayan leaders in the original Cooch Behar symbols until 1790. Over the next 120 years until 1910, Bhutan added Buddhist symbols to the original Hindu and national symbols of the Cooch Behar coins. From 1910 to the present in the modern era of Bhutanese coinage, the coins only contained Bhutanese symbols (Royal Monetary Authority, 2015).

This study shows that the legacy of some conflicts lasts for a long period of time. This legacy of conflict is not only the socially constructed narratives and depictions of nations that were formerly occupied (Prakash, 1990; Said, 1979; Tibawi, 1964). Also, inherent in the power relationship between Bhutan and Cooch Behar was the use of solely Cooch Behar narratives and symbols from 1772 to 1790 in Bhutanese coinage for the direct material and economic advancement, uses, and benefit of Bhutan. From 1790 to 1910, Bhutanese coins contained Cooch Bihar and Hindi symbols and Bhutanese and Buddhist symbols. It took 138 years until Bhutan moved out of this legacy in 1910 as reflected in the mintage of modern coinage with strictly Bhutanese and Buddhist symbols.

The use of Buddhist icons and symbols on Bhutanese minted coinage from 1790 to 1910 also reflected a direct confirmation of a primary core mission of sovereign rule of Bhutan in this period. This was the governmental promotion of Buddhism to obtain Enlightenment, bliss, and happiness. Governmental rulers of Bhutan through state power and authority were announcing and promoting on Bhutanese coinage the national necessity and need for individual Bhutanese and Buddhist

citizens to become Enlightened. This meshing of religion and governmental authority also reflected the nature of the Bhutanese governmental system at that time, namely, the theocratic two-fold system of government known as *Chhyosi Nyidhen* (Givel & Figueroa, 2014). The study of the history of coinage, which is not only a neutral source of exchange, as shown in this case study, provides a vivid portrayal of this key orientation of Bhutan from 1792 to 1910.

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