



A Study on James Prinsep and Indian Coin

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ABSTRACT

“A Study on James Prinsep and Indian Coin” analyses Prinsep's substantial contribution to Indian numismatics and the historical understanding of ancient Indian coinage. The pioneering research of nineteenth-century scholar, antiquarian, epigraphist, and numismatist James Prinsep helped reconstruct India's ancient history. His meticulous study of coins, inscriptions, scripts, symbols, portraits, stories, weights, and denominations illuminated ancient India's political, economic, social, and cultural situations. The study emphasises Prinsep's classification of ancient Indian coins and his efforts to identify monarchs and dynasties using numismatic evidence. His research on Indo-Greek, Indian, and other ancient coins established links between coins, inscriptions, kings, and areas. His decipherment of Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts helped explain coin legends and link them to monarchs and political events, boosting their historical significance.

The study examines Prinsep's way of comparing coins' inscriptions, historical data, weights, symbols, and artistic aspects. His research proved that coins were more than currency and crucial to reconstructing ancient Indian history. His groundbreaking work set the groundwork for scientific Indian numismatics, but later researchers amended some of his conclusions. The study relies on books, scholarly articles, numismatic publications, historical records, inscriptions, and Indian coin catalogues. Prinsep's legacy is assessed thru historical and analytical research. In conclusion, James Prinsep was a pioneer in Indian numismatic studies and his research continues to illuminate ancient India's monetary, political, and cultural history.

Keywords: *Indian Numismatics, Brahmi Script, Kharosthi Script, Indo-Greek Coins, Epigraphy, Coinage, Economic History.*

INTRODUCTION

During the nineteenth century, James Prinsep was one of the most significant academics involved in the study of ancient Indian history, epigraphy, numismatics, and archaeology. His groundbreaking research significantly advanced the methodical examination of Indian coins and inscriptions. Prinsep was especially interested in interpreting coin symbols and legends, identifying dynasties and kings, and deciphering ancient scripts. His research contributed to the recognition of numismatics as a

crucial resource for recreating ancient India's political, economic, and cultural history. Prinsep had a significant platform for carrying out and disseminating his research because to his affiliation with the Asiatic Society of Bengal. He tried to determine the identity and chronology of several Indian monarchs by closely examining and comparing coins, inscriptions, scripts, weights, symbols, and pictures. His attempts to understand the Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts were intimately related to his studies on ancient Indian coinage. Inscriptions and coin legends that had previously remained inexplicable could now be read by experts thanks to the successful decipherment of Brahmi in the 1830s.

Prinsep's research on the coins of ancient Indian kingdoms and Indo-Greek monarchs was one of his greatest accomplishments. He showed how coins could offer important historical evidence by analysing their legends, portraits, symbols, denominations, and metal composition. Along with helping researchers comprehend the political and commercial ties between India and the larger ancient world, his study also helped identify monarchs like the Indo-Greek kings. Prinsep also produced significant findings about the denominations and weights of Indian coinage. His comparative method made it easier for academics to comprehend how monetary systems evolved and how various coins were circulated. As a result, his research went beyond the identification of specific coins and advanced knowledge of India's monetary and economic history.

James Prinsep examined coins and inscriptions as historical records rather than just as items of antiquarian curiosity, which is why his work is significant. Subsequent generations of Indian numismatists and historians were affected by his classification, comparison, interpretation, and documenting techniques. His groundbreaking research established a crucial basis for the scientific study of Indian numismatics, even though some of his conclusions were later changed by other academics. As a result, James Prinsep holds a unique place in the annals of Indian historical study. His work in epigraphy and the deciphering of ancient characters, along with his contribution to the study of Indian currency, created new opportunities for reconstructing India's ancient past. In order to comprehend political power, economic activity, trade, religion, art, and cultural contact in ancient India, his research revealed the enormous historical worth of coinage.

SOME IMPORTANT FINDINGS OF JAMES PRINSEP

James Prinsep had earlier served as the Assay Master and the Secretary of the Mint Committee at Benaras (1820-29) and, after the abolition of the Benaras Mint in 1829, as Deputy Assay Master at Calcutta Mint (1830-1832). In January 1833, when the then Assay Master Dr. H.H. Wilson left for England to take up his new assignment as the Boden Professor of Sanskrit in the University of Oxford, James Prinsep succeeded him as Assay Master of the Calcutta Mint and Secretary of the Mint Committee.

Immediately after assuming these responsibilities, James Prinsep got an opportunity to review the question of weight and measures of India and formulate, *inter alia*, a plan for establishing the uniformity in the weight and fineness of the principal silver currencies of British India.

The occasion was provided by an error which Prinsep discovered in the table of weights of various coins that was prepared by H.H. Wilson before his departure for England. This table was printed by the order of Government and circulated for guidance of the revenue officers of the Bengal Presidency. In his letter dated 11 April 1833 addressed to the Mint Committee of Calcutta, Prinsep pointed out that in this table the new Farrukhabad rupee has been 'inserted as weighing 180 grains troy [11.66g.] instead of 180.234 [grains= 11.67g] as provided by Reg. XI of 1819, Sec. 5.

Prinsep then described the existing twin weight and fineness standard for the same specie, viz. the Farrukhabad rupee, coined at Farrukhabad, Calcutta and Benaras mints on the one hand and at Saugor mint on the other.



James Prinsep 1799-1840

Minting of Farrukhabad Rupee (1819-1833)

Mint	Years	Weight		Fineness	
		Grs	Gms	Grs	Gms
Farrukhabad	1819-1824*	180.234	11.67	165.215	10.70
Calcutta	1819-1833§				
Benares	1820-1829*				
Saugor	1825#-1833 ⁹	180	11.66	165	10.69

*Mint abolished # New Mint established § Minting continued till 1833

While the Farrukhabad, Calcutta and Benaras mints followed the weight and fineness standard prescribed by Regulation XI of 1819, the Farrukhabad rupee coined at Saugor, followed right from its inception, the weight and fineness standard of the Arcot rupee established in 1818, and to which standard Bombay rupee was assimilated in 1829. Thus by 1829, uniformity of weight and fineness of principal silver currency circulating in a large part of British India was virtually established.

However, the existence of two differing weight and fineness standards of the same specie caused both loss and confusion, as noted by James Prinsep in his letter to the Mint Committee, referred to above. He records, '... it is a waste of silver to coin heavier money to circulate at par with them [lighter coins]' and adds that 'confusion at the Collector's office will prevail in ascertaining when the current coin is to be deemed of short weight what are still issuable at one Treasury will have caused to be so at another and vice versa as long as the two weights remain.

Referring to the 'expressed desire' of the Court of Directors 'to equalize the coin of the whole of their Indian possessions, both in weight and standard', Prinsep advocated the adoption of 180 grains (11.66g) as the standard weight for the Farrukhabad rupees minted at Calcutta in a hope that 'the adoption of the smaller weight will tend to keep the present currency afloat for a longer period.

As the weight of 180 grains was :th of 192 grains (12.44g) – the weight of Calcutta Sicca, comprising 16 annas, the problem of conversion was also expected to be simplified, 'since the commonest understanding could comprehend the calculation of one anna per rupee which would be leviabie upon all fixed settlements in excess of their jumma [revenue] if paid in new Farrukhabad Rupee.

Prinsep hoped that if this arrangement was adopted, 'the abolition of the [Calcutta] Sikka Rupee (or the suspension of any further coinage of it) might be at once effected. Thus Prinsep's plan was two fold:

First, to reduce two principal currencies of the Bengal Presidency to one and, secondly to assimilate it to the weight and fineness standard of Arcot and Bombay rupees, and thereby complete the process of uniformity of currency that was started in Madras in 1818, in accordance with the roadmap laid down in Court of Directors' despatch of 1806. Associated with the reform of the coin was the problem of weight that was in general usage. During this time the weights throughout the country were expressed in terms of the principal coin and thus *ser* and *man* were simply the multiples of the principal coin current in that area:

Thus, throughout the Marathi states, the ser is referred to the Puna or Ankusi rupee: in Gujarat, to the Baroch rupee: in Ajmir to Salimsahi; in Bengal, to the old Murshidabad rupee

In Bengal two systems of weights were prevalent. First was the Factory weight, based on the English avoirdupois pound system, while the second, called the *Bazaar* or the *Sikka* weight, was based on the old Murshidabad rupee weighing 176.666 grains (11.64g). In those parts of the Bengal province where Farrukhabad rupee was in circulation, the *ser* and *man* were expressed as the multiples of that coin. Prinsep was aware that any change in the weight system was not an easy task. He writes:

However desirable it may be, in theory, to reduce the system of weights throughout the vast continent of India to order and uniformity; in practice, it is well known that insuperable difficulties oppose the execution of such a project.

To start with, such a change required a corresponding adjustment in all the weights in use at the Mint, the Custom House, the Treasury, the banks, Collector's offices, and a number of other Government offices.

Undeterred by the apparent difficulties, Prinsep, by his mathematical calculations and statistical analysis, successfully demonstrated that only by a slight modification in the Sicca weight, it could be adopted as the standard unit for the weights as well as for the new rupee coins.

When the weight of the Calcutta Sicca rupee was increased from 179.666 grains (11.64g) to 191.916 grains (12.43g) by Regulation XN of 1818, corresponding alteration on weights of general use was not carried out.

... it was not deemed expedient to extend the alteration to the weight founded upon the old coin and consequently a Sikka weight was retained as the unit of weight contradistinguished from the Sikka Rupee of the new currency.

Prinsep found a great opportunity in this anomaly as the old Sicca weight (179.666 grains) was 'but a trifling fraction of a grain lighter than the proposed Rupee of 180 grains. This difference of 0.333 grains (21mg) or nearly 600th part was too negligible and was, therefore, readily adaptable 'without the smallest difficulty or inconveniences in commercial or revenue transactions.

Having had studied the coin and currency systems of India through the ages, Prinsep was also aware of the fact that the traditional Indian weight of *tola* was in fact the weight of the silver rupee, 80 of which went for a *ser*. The *tola*, in turn, matched closely with the weight of the Farrukhabad rupee (180 grains) that was proposed by Prinsep as the sole silver currency unit for the Bengal Presidency. On the other hand the multiples of *tola* also synchronized with the English troy weights, viz.:

8 rattis = 1 masha = 15 grains troy = 0.97 g.

12 mashas = 1 tola = 180 grains troy = 11.66 g.

80 tolas = 1 ser = 2Y2 lbs. troy = 933.1 g

40 sers = 1 man = 100 lbs. troy or bazaar maund = 37.32. kg

Prinsep, therefore wanted the weights to be fabricated on this system, for the distribution of general use. He also preferred the use of 'the universal Hindi word *tola*' in contrast with 'Sikka weight' which he found objectionable — '*... it is an English compound and cannot be translated into the native language.*'

The plan proposed by Prinsep was forwarded to the Governor-General on 12 April 1833. In his reply dated 1 July 1833, G.A. Bushby, Officiating Secretary to the Government in the Financial Department, informed the Mint Committee of Calcutta about the decisions of the Governor-General in this regard. First of all the proposed alteration in the weight of Farrukhabad Rupees to be coined at the Calcutta mint from 180.234 to 180 grains as well as that of the Calcutta Sicca rupees from 191.916 to 192 grains was approved. Similarly, the assimilation of the Sicca

weight, 'contradistinguished to the Sicca Rupee', with the weight of the Farrukhabad rupee (180 grains) as well as the substitution of the term *tala* for 'Sicca weight' was also approved. However, regarding the enforcement of 'the general use of the uniform weights and measures' in all public transaction, the Governor-General observed that the same 'could not be effected without prescribing penalties for employing others than those of the Regulation standard.' As an alternative, therefore, he suggested that 'where application is made to the Mint and Assay Offices for the verification or manufacture of Sicca weights, that a standard of 180 grains ought to be adopted.'

Subsequently, on 13 July 1833, Regulation VII of 1833 was passed which converted Prinsep's proposals into a legislation. By this Regulation the weight of the Farrukhabad rupee- one of the principal coins of the northern India, was fixed at 180 grains troy, corresponding to the traditional Indian weight for the silver rupee, i.e. one tola of 12 mashas. This coin was then adopted as the unit of a general system of weights for Government transactions throughout India.

At the same time, by this alteration in the weight, the Farrukhabad rupee was also assimilated to the weights of the Bombay and the Arcot rupee –the principal coins of the Bombay and the Madras Presidency respectively. Now all the three Presidencies of the East India Company had their principal coins of the Uniform Weight. A Uniform Coinage was *afait accompli*.

Table: Uniformity of Silver Rupee at The End of 1833

Presidency	Silver Rupee			Fineness		
	Denomination	Weight		Grs	Gms	%
		Grs	Gms			
Bengal	SiccaRupee	192	12.44	176	11.40	91.63
	Furrukhabad Rupee	180	11.66	165	10.69	91.68
Bombay	Bombay Rupee	180	11.66	165	10.69	91.68
Madras	ArcotRupee	180	11.66	165	10.69	91.68

Prinsep at the same time was also convinced that such a wide ranging change touching almost every aspect of the public life cannot be affected by force. Thus, we find that the said Regulation expressly avoided any penal provision for default. The decision of the Government as well as a copy of the Regulation VII of 1833 was forwarded to the Court of Directors by Governor-General's letter dated 9 September 1833.

The Uniformity of Currency thus achieved, the next target in the plan for currency reforms was the introduction of a Universal Coinage throughout the Indian possessions of the East India Company.

Based on the recommendations made by the Mint Committee of the Bengal presidency, the Bengal government had initiated a systematic process of reforming the colonial currency. The regulations passed by the Governor General in Council in 1793 established the Company's silver coin- the Sicca Ruppee- as the principal currency of the Bengal presidency. As new territories were added into the Bengal presidency new currencieswerestandardizedfor

these regions – the Farrukhabad rupee for the Ceded and Conquered Provinces and the Benares rupee for the Benares province. Initially the currency system was modelled on bimetallism but in 1806 the Court of Directors decided in favour of monometallism, and consequently silver rupee was not only standardized but also firmly established in regions like those under the Madras presidency, which traditionally had predominantly a gold-based currency system. By 1824 the principal rupees of the Madras and the Bombay presidencies – the Arcot rupee and the Bombay rupee – had been assimilated in weight and fineness to establish a uniform currency within a large part of Company's territorial possessions in India. In 1825 the same weight and fineness was adopted for the Farrukhabad rupee coined at the newly established mint at Saugor, which catered to the monetary requirements of the Saugor and Nerbudda territories. Finally in 1833, the Farrukhabad rupee coined in the Company's mints at Farrukhabad, Calcutta and Benares, which was the principal currency of the northern India, was also assimilated with the Arcot and the Bombay rupee. Thus a uniform currency was established in the entire territories of the East India Company, excepting the Bengal province, where the Sicca rupee of slightly higher weight but of lesser fineness was still retained.

The process of currency reforms that was carried out by the East India Company between the years 1793 and 1833 addressed the liquidity crisis faced by the Company in its multifarious activities ranging from revenue collection to military campaigns. With the establishment of a uniform standard (silver monometallism) and assimilation of weight and fineness of the principal currencies of different regions, the velocity of money was greatly enhanced which, in turn, helped the Company to meet the currency crunch in one region by mobilizing surplus money from other regions. These reforms also struck down the menace of discount (*batta*) charged by the money changers, which resulted in streamlining the rates of exchange between different species of rupees circulating in a particular region.

The currency reforms also addressed the need for technological up gradation of minting process in India. Screw presses were introduced for the first time in Indian mints, which resulted in manifold increase in the output of these mints. This quantum leap in mint production greatly facilitated the replacement of various sorts of currencies in the region by the Company's coins. It also helped in meeting the demands of an expanding area of money use in the society.

Finally, by exempting the import and export of bullion from duty, the Company encouraged its free flow into its mints. The incidence of counterfeiting the established coin was curbed to a large extent by incorporating provisions for strict penalties for the violators, in the legislations dealing with the administration of criminal justice in the British India.

Thus, within a short span of four decades, the East India Company was able to integrate the currencies of its dominions and secure the currency administration firmly into its hands. This provided to the Company a powerful tool which not only helped her transform from traders to full-fledged administrators- a role bestowed upon it by virtue of the Charter Act of 1833 – but also in establishing an imperial currency to serve as the facilitator of the imperial finances.

CONCLUSION

James Prinsep made a substantial contribution to the advancement of Indian numismatics, epigraphy, and the reconstruction of early Indian history, as can be seen by studying Indian coinage. One of the most significant academics in nineteenth-century British India, Prinsep's methodical examination of coins, inscriptions, weights, measures, and scripts contributed to the conversion of dispersed archaeological material into significant historical information. His research showed that coins were more than just tools for trade; they were also important historical records that revealed details about rulers, political power, religion, trade, art, language, and administrative procedures. Prinsep's meticulous analysis and categorisation of Indian coins is among his most notable accomplishments. He examined and contrasted the legends, symbols, portraits, metals, weights, and patterns of coins from various places and eras. He helped identify a number of monarchs and dynasties that were previously unknown or poorly understood throughout these investigations. In addition to providing evidence for comprehending the chronology of ancient and mediaeval Indian history, his numismatic research assisted in establishing links between various political regimes.

Prinsep's groundbreaking research on ancient Indian characters was intimately related to his study of Indian coins. Because it allowed historians to read inscriptions that had hitherto remained unreadable, his successful decipherment of the Brahmi script in 1837 was especially significant. The interpretation of Ashoka-related inscriptions has increased our understanding of the Mauryan era. By combining complementing evidence from coins and inscriptions, researchers were able to more confidently establish historical identities, political links, and chronological sequences. The creation of a more scientific method for studying Indian numismatics was another significant contribution made by Prinsep. He meticulously documented the metal, weight, inscriptions, symbols, and artistic elements of coins. For later researchers and collectors, this methodical record laid the groundwork. His research also promoted the preservation and study of Indian coins as significant archaeological and historical artefacts.

However, Prinsep's writings must be interpreted in light of colonial academia from the eighteenth century. Some of the interpretations of his time reflected the conceptual presumptions of colonial scholarship, and his research was conducted inside the institutional framework of British India. However, his empirical approaches and findings served as a crucial basis for later research in India and beyond. Many of the conclusions drawn during his time might be expanded upon, corrected, and revised by later historians and numismatists. Additionally, the study shows that Indian coins are crucial primary materials for reconstructing the subcontinent's political and economic history. Coinage can provide information about religious views, artistic traditions, political sovereignty, trading patterns, monetary circulation, and cross-cultural interactions. Prinsep's work demonstrated the integration of numismatics with epigraphy, archaeology, history, and languages and helped establish the significance of such data.

In conclusion, James Prinsep holds a prominent place in the annals of Indian historical studies and numismatics. His work on ancient characters and inscriptions, along with his methodical examination of Indian coins, greatly advanced our knowledge of India's early history. Not only did he identify and

categorise coins, but he also contributed to the development of a more comprehensive analytical framework that allowed for the reconstruction of historical events using artefacts. Thus, the analysis of James Prinsep and Indian coins shows how numismatic evidence may be a crucial resource for comprehending India's political, economic, social, and cultural legacy when it is critically and methodically explored.

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