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# Durgā of the Guptas: A Numismatic Re-Examination

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**Abstract:** Coins of the Gupta Dynasty bear witness and testimony to the emergent trends in the interconnected world of Imperial Politics, Religious-Systems, Trade-organizations and Monarchical Propaganda of the times. Their study acquaints us with the prevalent iconographic conventions and ritual imagery of popular deity-figures, in a way inspired by the preceding Kuṣāṇa Numismatics. While the feminine deity-figure on the reverse of these coins is generally identified as Lakṣmī and river-goddess Gangā, a female deity-figure sitting atop a couchant or recumbent lion awaits attributional definitiveness and identification with certitude. Some have proposed to see in her an early form of Durgā with her characteristic feline mount, while others have labeled her as Lakṣmī in a dramatic numismatic communion with the reigning King, who occupies the obverse-device in myriad actions, styles and poses. Using two renowned numismatic cases of her occurrence as the chief reverse-device of gold Gupta Coins, i.e. Chandragupta I-Kumāradevī type and Lion-slayer type, and utilizing the contextual delineation and discourse that forms the numismatic essence of Gupta coinage, this paper shall make an attempt to unravel the mystery of the Goddess Mystique, and put forth arguments to astutely and affirmatively identify her as Goddess Durgā.

**Keywords:** Durgā, Chandragupta I-Kumāradevī, Licchhavis, Lion-slayer, Siṃhavikrama, Goddess-figure.

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## Introduction

The coins of the Gupta empire offer a unique and unparalleled glimpse into the world of its issuing sovereigns. While these intricate and immersive specimens served an obvious economic function, there was more to them than economics. These coins stood at the intersection of imperial politics, religious inclinations, personal propaganda, dynastic allegiances and much more. They also present afore us contemporary iconographical conventions and cultic affiliations, along with ideological discourses and socio-cultural contexts enmeshed into a singular unit of action. Production of gold Gupta coins ostensibly starts from the eventful reign of Chandragupta I (c. 310-325 CE), whose Chandragupta I-Kumāradevī type of coinage unveils a mysterious deity-figure, whose possible attribution ranges from Durgā to Lakṣmī. This Goddess-figure is further evinced on other coins minted by subsequent Gupta Emperors, upto Kumārāgupta I (c. 415-448 CE). This paper shall make an attempt to infuse alacrity and eloquence in the consideration of the mysterious and mystical Goddess occupying the reverse-devices of some coins issued by the Gupta Kings. Recent studies have highlighted the *evolutionary processes* that resulted in the conception of the deity-figure of Goddess Durgā. Exactitude in this endeavor has long eluded scholars, and that too with much perturbation and perplexity. Herein, we shall offer first a general summation of the standard analytical trend, with all opinions credibly recorded and carefully scrutinized. After somewhat attempting to decipher the Goddess Mystique through the dictums ostensibly alluded by the veterans of the field, we shall throw yet another cap in the arena of intellectual contests, and advance our colloquial but candid proposal in pursue of the relevant inquiry.

The Gupta period saw, not the re-emergence (Jayaswal 1934: 10), but rather the re-efflorescence of mainstream (or Brāhmaṇical) Hindu ideals and principles (Dandekar 1979: 24), which gradually gained foreground of political traction and socio-economic patronage from the elites of the Gupta-era society (Mahajan 2010: 389). This can be a consequence of counter-revolution against suppression by rulers and administrators of foreign extraction (Goyal 1967: 23-26), or a progression of socio-religious and iconographical-ritual ideas to gain eminent form and function, after duly getting inspiration from the outer, but intimately connected realm of the Greater Gandhāra Culture-complex (Kaniseti 2023), a process espoused in the sculptural and textural advancements achieved, especially in the domains of architecture, sculpture, and numismatics (Falk 2016; Mann 2012). Here, we shall chiefly take the numismatic evidence into account, and thereafter examine the emergence of a multimodal religio-cultural discourse on coins. Using the two most prominent occurrences of the deity concerned herewith, we shall offer a possible amicable solution to the conundrum that has persisted for long, and briefly explicate the causal mechanisms involved.

In this way, we will get a firm grasp of the numismatic maneuvers and tactics of Gupta rulers, who not only had to maintain and nourish a personality cult based on self and dynastic prowess, but also use intentional designs to influence and effect public view of their royal paraphernalia and sovereign capacity. Gold coins were issued only by a reigning monarch, who authorized different mints intermittently to manufacture coins depicting them in numerous *modes of interaction* with royal power, with additional benedictions provided by *The Sitting Lady* on the reverse, be it Lakṣmī, Chief Queen, or Queen divinized/Goddess humanized and vice versa (Goyal 1994: 58). Occasionally, benisons of Chakra-Puruṣa (by Chandragupta II), Kārttikeya (by Kumārāgupta I) and other deities of Brāhmaṇic socio-ritual order were sought for increasing *proximity to public* and signify *personal ritual bent* (Srivastava 2014: 32). Events to rever Durgā, the martial goddess, were not lacking in the expansionist imperial policy practiced by different Gupta kings time and again. However, most scholarly works have amalgamated the numismatic presence of Durgā with appellations such as *Lakṣmī riding a lion* (Raven 2010: 252), *Lakṣmī on the royal throne* (Srinivasan 2016 270) etc. Here, we shall prove the opposite, not only through numismatics, but also through the data gleaned from epigraphy and sculptures.

## Method

In the first section of our paper, we shall elucidate the chronological placement and attributional positioning of the discussed numismatic cases, followed by a brief and succinct review of literature in the form of categorical examination of views/opinions expressed by scholars veteran to the field of study. Points of analytical significance will be felicitously gleaned off from their initial milieu and employed to present a comprehensive account of existing academic contestations. Numerous debates relevant to our line of inquiry will be examined, and a workable solution sought to further our venture would be presented. The culmination of the first case will give us an analytical instrument to deploy forth, with the help of which we will inspect a related coinage as our Case II. Additional examples shall be recruited from different series of the same coin-type to prove the sanctity of our hypothesis. Lastly, the conclusion will succinctly summarize our findings. In this study, we will also complement the analytical stance with some principles which have been used in the numismatics analysis by Shrava (1985) and Handa (2007) etc. We shall briefly outline them herein for convenience-

**Associational-** This Principle focuses on finding and solidifying linkage between attribution-device and idea based on non-isolated occurrence, and thence take into note other numismatic features, such as Legends, devices, fabric, issuing-authority and ultimate-users under diligent consideration, and the contexts in which they function.

**Relational-** This principle shall focus and attempt to relate any specific coinage with other specimens in a specific series, or cross-relate with other series issued by one or other contemporary and related authority-structure, which side us in performing a comparative assessment of production conditions and regional influences on any unit, part of an interconnected mint-network. With this, we shall glean out the genealogical and numismatic positions of the coinage of concern.

**Contextual-** Here, we shall consider the presence of the coinage in a proper and perspectival connection. This will put into analysis statuary, sculpture, literary references, inscriptional and epigraphical evidence, and thus attempt to assemble a coherent, consistent and somewhat complete design of the mint-master and issuing-authority.

**Situational-** This principle shall attempt to analyze any specific and special coinage with a singular focus on its genesis, and mechanisms and pathways of it thereof. As Kumar (2022: 12) argued, the metrology and legends present on some Gupta coins illustrate the conditions facing Imperial mints; over-burdened mints produced coins with degraded designs, while financially unsound, troubling circumstances impelled the mints to produce coins with exquisite designs but reduced gold-content.

Now, we proceed to sequentially examine our premeditated cases from Gupta gold coinage, and locate and underline the surreptitious presence of Goddess Durgā in them.

### CASE I: CHANDRAGUPTA I- KUMĀRADEVĪ TYPE



Figure 1: Chandragupta I-Kumāradevī Type Coin (Courtesy-The British Museum, Reg. No. 1894, 0506.147).

The analytical confounding issue of much consternation and complexity revolves around The Sitting Lady on some of the earliest Gupta coins (Raven 2007), who was positioned by the Gupta die-cutters and mint-masters in innumerable poses/positions on the reverse. Altekar (1957: 30-38) describes the unique but extensively minted coins of Chandragupta I- Kumāradevī (King-Queen) Type of coins as follows-

**Obv:** On r. King facing left, wearing heavy coat, diadem-laden elaborately dressed crown, Central Asian style tunics underneath the long overcoat, offering ring/vermilion-box(?) to The Queen with extended right-hand, legend Chandra vertically placed underarm of King, Gupta in outer left-field; **on l.** Kumāradevī facing the King, wearing royal robes (Saree?), braided and tied hair, wearing anklets, slender-body, touching the King's offering with exclamation and surprise, legend Kumāradevī Śrī(yah) on left margin, starting from VII o' clock.

**Rev:** Goddess sitting astride on a couchant lion, feline creature sitting on its paws, heads bent downwards, holding cornucopia in left-hand and noose/fillet (?) in right, wearing long robes, Himation, waves observed in the lower garment feet placed on an upraised pedestal, wearing Turret crown, side-steps and uprights visible behind the seated figure. Legend Licchhavayah In the bottom margin.

The scene depicted on the obverse has invited considerable speculation: V.S. Pathak (*JNSI*, Vol. XIX, p.141) proposed it to be a betrothal scene, where, in accordance with the Śāstric *Hiranyakeśin-grhya-sūtra*, the spouse was supposed to sit on right of the husband, before completion of the espousal process. S.V. Sohoni (*JBRS*, Vol. XIX, p.152-53) on the other hand, described it as a battle entrenched scene, depicting the incoming departure of the King to battlements, after showing his lucky charm, an armlet (*Pratisara*), to the concerned Queen. The former would make Lakṣmī a prominent contender of reverse, while a battle context will make Durgā's grace crucial. Some scholars regard this as a commemorative issue, most probably minted under the aegis of Samudragupta (c. 325-375 CE), who wished to give regards to his father, mother and the Licchhavi community that supported him in his tumultuous civil war (Goyal 1967: 35-38), or because of his desire to flaunt the grandeur and rich legacy of his ancestral lineage (Mookerji 1947: 17-18). It is known that Samudragupta was a *Putrikā-putra* (Trautmann 1972: 4), and thence the rightful heir to both Gupta and Licchhavi territories (Majumdar 1980). Scholars since Allan (1914: 71; 1967: 80) started to label such issues as commemorative, with Altekar (1957: 4-12) vehemently advancing a different proposition. Here, we present a summarized discussion of the Allan-Altekar debate-

1. Allan contended that the issue was conceived after the conquest of Licchhavis by the Guptas. However, testimony of I-tsing renders it improbable, while Altekar highlights that the reverential position given to *Licchavi-dauhitra* in Allahabad inscription, along with that on coins, makes conquest least tenable. R.D. Banerjee (1914, 1922; *vide* Srivastava 1996) claimed rightly that the political alliance with the Licchhavis gave Guptas political and strategic advantages, and not necessarily a social one (Srivastava 1996: 138-154).
2. The fabric of the coinage compares well with the Standard and Archer types of Samudragupta, which would make such issues contemporaneous. However, the utilization of some standard mints, with tightly regulated weights and measures, in face of monetary initiatives of the Gupta monarchs, and limited provenance of earlier coinage makes unchanging fabric hardly a trifle in assigning King-Queen type to Chandragupta I.
3. Allan argues that standard type of Samudragupta is closer in imitation to the Kuṣāṇa issues than that of his father, which makes it a later issue chronologically. Altekar contends that some coins of Skandagupta portray the king wearing long, heavy coat, closely resembling Kuṣāṇa



royal wears, which obviously cannot make Skandagupta earlier than his predecessors!

4. It is asserted by Allan that Guptas became acquainted with the Kuṣāṇa coinage at a later point of time in reign of Samudragupta, due to the king's extensive western conquests, which makes its influence on Gupta Coins late. However, as Altekar illustrates, the discovery of Kuṣāṇa gold coins in the 1913 excavation of Kumrahar in Patna, along with the Ghazipur Hoard and Puri Kuṣāṇa coins, makes this point null and void in the first instance.
5. The faint traces of vertical uprights of throne behind the Lion & Goddess on the Tiger-Slaying and Archer type of Samudragupta is reminiscent of slavish copying from targeted Kuṣāṇa model of extraction, when compared with the artistic originality on coins of Chandragupta I. Altekar points out that some coins of Chandragupta II show even more traces of supposed Kuṣāṇa prototype, a fact whose acceptance would trot chronological semblance beyond recognition. Raven (2020: 276) avers that throne-arrangement was different for differing mints; while some quickly abandoned and innovated, some adhered to inherited designs of the Goddess' *seating-position*.
6. Allan believes that a monarch with the long-reign and stature of Chandragupta I could not have possibly remained content with issuing only joint-type coins. Altekar, aptly, brings political circumstances into bearing truth, which make the role of Kumāradevī and the Licchavis quite potent, while the ostensible long-reign of the first Gupta emperor cannot be placed beyond a decade at best (Thaplyal 2012: 24). Kumar (2017: 62f.) has recently argued for the existence of more coin-types of Chandragupta I, such as *Standard-type*, *Javelin-type*, *Archer-type* and *King-Queen on couch type*, which highlights well the innovative potential of Gupta celators. But, too radical a change in design at once irritates the market, limits acceptance and creates trust deficits among traders, which explain the limited number of types issued by Chandragupta I.
7. The long metrical legends, gaily cajoling the conquests and victories of Samudragupta, found on Archer/Standard types, when compared with the absence of metrical legends on coins of Chandragupta I place this coin quite late. However, the length of metrical praises never decides the veracity and temporality of claims, and can also signify extensive battles of Samudragupta against his lineal rivals. Also, the poetical interests of Samudragupta, who is called *Kavirāja* in Allahabad inscription (Thaplyal 2012: 56) must also be taken into account, as the metrical-poetical diversity of his legends remains unseconded.



Figure 2: A Comparative View of Gupta Goddess on lion and Nanā atop a lion (Courtesy- [Left] Raven 2010-Goddess seated in *bhadrāsana*. Baldwin's, New York auction 20 (07/01/2009), lot 510; W. 7,87 g, Ø unknown. DINARA database 163. Photograph courtesy of A.H. Baldwin & Son; [Right] Mukherjee 1969, Cover Page and Raven 2010, photograph on bottom-left page).

The deity on the reverse of Lion-slaying type of Chandragupta II shows a deity more favorably comparable to that on Kuṣāṇa coinage. However, there occur frequent variations in the reverse styles, and a streamlined proposal can only be made by keeping the reverse of this coin type at the front of consideration. The increasing quantum of device-diversity, if used as an indicator of chronology, still places the King-Queen type coin of Chandragupta I with its select pose, posture and position of the characteristic Goddess on Lion stylistically before Samudragupta.

Kumar (2024: 366), based on some recent findings, rightly suggests that some of the Chandragupta-Kumāradevī coin-types were in fact issued by later Gupta kings as commemorative coins, but this does not bereft them of their historical linkage with Chandragupta I. The King-Queen type of Chandragupta I shows much internal variation in terms of fabric and metrology, which possibly indicates their long-term production, though with a standardized gold-content of 92-93%. Kumar (2024: 268) believes that for sometime, Samudragupta too minted them, though with a reduced gold-content of approx. 83%, and rendering the king on obverse in *Tribhāṅga*, a pose that evolved quite late in his reign, in some later issues, the king is modelled after Kumārāgupta I, bare-chested, with curly-hairs, wearing dhoti and brandishing a sword. The queen wears sari, and possesses idiomatic traits of post-Chandragupta II coins (see Raven 2015). The reverse too bears the differentiated legend- *Śrī Kumārāguptaḥ*. It is possible that the Gupta-Licchavi alliance, that not only showed seeds of Gupta empire, but effectually secured the rule of Samudragupta's bloodline, was occasionally commemorated.



Figure 3: Internal evolution in style and fabric seen in King-Queen coin-types; Clockwise from top-left: Issued by- Chandragupta I (Sanjeev Kumar- fig.45, PC.1418), Chandragupta I (British Museum 1920, 1016.10), possibly Samudragupta (Sanjeev Kumar- fig.67, PC. 0117) and Kumārāgupta I (A.S. Altekar- Bayana Hoard, no. 1829); In the middle- King-Queen coin with post-Chandragupta II idioms (Sanjeev Kumar © Treasures of the Gupta Empire, p. 31, Coin no. 447).

With the requisite facts at our disposal, it will be prudent and promising now to examine and evaluate the dictums and disquisitions of eminent scholars of the field, in relation to the Goddess Mystique on Gupta Coins, especially that of Chandragupta I.

### *Altekar's Views*

Altekar (1957: 28-54) proposed that in attempting to consolidate a new coinage-tradition in lieu of the recent emancipation or victory over competing regional powers including Nāgas, Māghas, and possibly Muruṇḍas in a post-Kuṣāṇa power vacuum. Chandragupta I sought the aid and assets of the Licchavis, and successfully crafted a joint-power center to reckon with. To celebrate this success, and also to mark either the inauguration of a new epoch and era of Indian History, Chandragupta I-Kumāradevī jointly issued the aforesaid coins. However, since they could not depart much from existent and prevalent coinage, and to maintain semblance to order and royalty created by the Kuṣāṇa empire, they modelled their reverse deity-figure after the renowned Kuṣāṇa prototypes. But this could not be the Nanā on Lion motif from Huviṣka's coins, which were deemed to be too early. Thence, differential adaptation was used, where the attributes, dress and pose of the deity-figure were borrowed from the coins of Vasudeva II or Śaka (both in c.250-298 CE), while the Lion's gesture were copied from the coins of Kaṇiṣka III, and combined with remarkable ingenuity to create an Indian ambience in the numismatic art. However, the concept of differential adaptation hardly finds concordance, since it requires prevalence, acceptance, cognizance and most importantly existence of both temporally much distant coin-types together, and secondly, it does not provide us a satisfying identity vantage point.

### *Mukherjee's View*

Mukherjee (1969: 15-20) envisaged a novel and natural evolutionary progress in iconographical and numismatic realms in the framing of the coin concerned. Labelling the Puṣkalāvātī patron goddess as Tyche-Ambā, who later became solely Ambā, he postulated that the OMMO on Kuṣāṇa coins brought her mythical complex close to that of Nanā, from whom Ambā gained the lion mount, later to again transform into Durgā. The Gupta rulers, then simply adopted the Umā/Ambā of the Kuṣāṇas, and turned it into their goddess of protection, maternity, war and prosperity<sup>1</sup> (Mukherjee 1969: 18). However, the complex cultural borrowings involved in the process, along with an already abundant separate iconography of Durgā in Kuṣāṇa statuary, and marked absence of Durgā on Lion motif in early c. 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE India makes this claim somewhat untenable. But, with recent excavations, a gradual, slow and sure process of iconographical transformation has been observed in sculptures found from Sogdiana to Rajghat (Shenker 2014), a feature explored later in this paper.

### *Srinivasan's View*

Srinivasan (2016: 268-284) proposed to see Lakṣmī on the Lion, which she claimed had roots in both Indian literature and Gandhāran statuary tradition. In her view, the pose of the Goddess is typical of Lakṣmī on coins (though somewhat resembling that of Pārvatī in Parsurameshvar Temples, Odisha), the attributes again favor Lakṣmī, due to the presence of cornucopia, while the markers of Sovereignty make the deity-figure that of Rājya-Lakṣmī. Furthermore, the *Viṣṇu-Dharma-Uttara Purāṇa* provisions a lion-mount also for Rājya-Lakṣmī, a also feat observed in Khajuraho Temples of c. 9<sup>th</sup> Century CE (see Dehejia 1999; Srinivasan 2010). Also, the so-called noose in the right-hand of deity is identified as an investiture fillet, a device very common on Kuṣāṇa coinage, which surely had its contribution duly recognized in recent assessment of Gupta Era by Falk (2004), while the borrowing attributes of previous kings by Guptas is now accepted by most scholars (Cribb 2007). Analyzing Lakṣmī's conflation with Nanā and Ardochsho in northwest frontier, where her attributes in statuary gradually became cornucopia and lotus-stem, her adoption by Gupta mints becomes apparently possible. However, this line of inquisition has several fallouts- absence of any linkage between Lakṣmī and



the lion-throne (lion-motif cannot stand for an actual throne), separate adaptations of different seating positions of the deity on later Gupta coins, explicit negation of Nanā as a tangible source of inspiration<sup>2</sup> (due to absence of bowl, protome, and petora), and reliance on later era texts of c. 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, all of which make this claim, though relatively more reasonable, but not fully conclusive.



Figure 4: Different forms of Nanā on Kuṣāṇa Gold Coinage (Source: Falk 2004, p. 268, fig.01).

### Raven's View

Ellen Raven (2010) posited that the feminine deity-figure on Gupta reverse, due to differences in placement of deity, seating of the lion-mount, attributes assorted, and relation of narrative borne with the obverse is not one, but many, and possibly Lakṣmī in most cases. She considered the Chandragupta I-Kumāradevī type as a commemorative issue of Samudragupta, and thus placed it after Archer and Standard-type, just like Allan (1936). While her framing becomes somewhat at variance with our prospects, her analytical categories are of much recourse. In her perspective, the Gupta Kings followed adaptation by substitution, intention-based iconography, experimentation, differential formulation and narrative structuration while placing deity-figure on the reverse. The addition of cornucopia, and fillet was a deliberate strategy to forge links of concordance between obverse and reverse designs. Besides, the contextual numismatic program allowed a flexible strategy. In Raven's own words- 'The King defeats the lion, thus showing his courage, physical fitness and strength. A king who defeats the lion can make a lion serve his divine consort, the goddess of Royal Fortune, as a mount. The king's lion's courage is also captured in his epithet "*Simhavikrama*-" inserted in the right field'. Arguing for the fluidity of representation between Queen and Goddess of Royal Fortune, Raven highlights a verse from the writings of Kālidāsa- 'Though his harem abounded in Damsels, it is by that noble queen and the goddess of Royal Fortune that the king considered himself truly wedded' (*Raghuvamśam*- 1.32, as translated by Sivaramamurti 1983: 17). While Raven's arguments contain mirth, we are still in the dark regarding the deity on reverse. However, we may hold one information of much purpose-fluidity of representation. The change in pose and position of the goddess, her mount and her seating arrangement will come to be of much significance, especially in the observations of our last scholar.

### Ghose's Views

Ghose (2006: 18-26) extolled and explored a different path of statuary to understand the significance and nature of the deity-figure on the coinage of our principal interest. She purported that the gradual and deliberated merger of Nanā and Umā into a composite deity after appearing consecutively with OESHO on coins of Huviṣka, created an iconographical convention that rapidly subsumed artistry and statuary making in Kuṣāṇa domains, thereby causing chaos to become visible in making specific deity-forms. Apart from Yokochi's consort goddess figures, Nanā was becoming gradually Indianized,





Figure 5: The Gupta Goddess on Lion in different poses (Source: Raven 2010).

a feat whose best absolute form is achieved in Odishan and Mathurā sculptures, where the pose, the ornamentation and context is purely Indian. The cross-regional transfer is both possible and inevitable, due to intense competition among warring political dynasties and petty Kingdoms in the post-Kuṣāṇa period, which may have had affected patterns of patronage and networks of idea-exchange and sharing. After examining the statuary of Gandhāra, Taxila, Mathurā and Ropar-Chandaketugarh, she concluded that the absence of Nanā's major statuary motives and temples points to the fact that her esoteric practices and dynastic affiliations never became popular among masses, and her form, like in Near East, became absorbed in local deity cults; while her martial features were absorbed by the emergent cult of Durgā, her more fertile aspects were taken by Umā, Ardochsho etc. In Mathurā, her depiction was heavily Indianized, from where she entered the minds of both the emperor and die-cutters in Gupta mints. While in isolation, the opinions of scholars may seem docile, yet with a retrospective glance, the most fructiferous elements of their formulation can be extracted, explicated and extolled in a newer, refreshing light. From Altekar, we can borrow the significance of provenance, from Mukherjee iconographical mutation, from Srinivasan intercultural attributional exchange and crisscross allocations, from Raven contextual linkages, and from Ghose transfiguration of deity-forms with trans-culturation or absorption into a new cultural milieu. Establishing coherency of opinion and perspective might propel us in a new direction, and reveal comprehensively something of value. Treading further on Ghose's path, one can readily refer to her description of a statue excavated nearby the Deva-kula of Mat, where the Goddess is dressed in uttarīya Drapery, with hands in vyāvṛtta mudrā, holding triśūla in the other hand. This was the crucial juncture, where the Goddess, in opportune conditions and circumstances, transformed from Nanā into the Indian simhavāhinī, becoming Durgā with gradual ascendance of its artistic popularity in nearby regions, as attested by the findings in Rajghat, Bhita, and Nalanda. The stylization of the lion-mount, as also apparent on the Gupta Coins, was probably due to the unfamiliarity of North and East Indian region with the kingly creature. On this basis, it may be concluded here that the Guptas initially utilized a transitional form of Nanā-Durgā, but later transformed it contextually into Lakṣmī, the goddess par excellence of Royal Fortune, while Durgā and her lion-mount became enmeshed with her native Mahiṣāsura-mardinī art-motif. However, we are somewhat still perplexed with an issue not addressed even yet- the cornucopia in the left-hand of the Goddess. On this basis, Srinivasan (2016) and Raven (2010, 2005) rejected the proposal to identify the Goddess with Durgā, and alternatively alluded her as Lakṣmī, and not necessarily Durgā (Srinivasan 2016: 268-280). The familiarity of the deity-figure on reverse of Chandragupta I-Kumāradevī type

with Ardochsho is taken for sure, while that on the coins of Kaṇiṣka III are ceremoniously ignored. Some more grounds are occasionally referred to deny identification of our Goddess Mystique with Durgā.

1. The Gupta Kings were *Parama-Bhāgavatas*, had Lakṣmī as the reverse of majority of coins, Budhagupta installed a Viṣṇu-dhvaja outside a temple, as mentioned in Damodarpur Copper-plate inscription (*EI*, Vol. III), all of which suggests that Gupta Kings had Vaiṣṇavism as their personal religion. However, Dikshitar (1952: 60) negates such assertions pointedly: Parama-Bhāgavatas only means ‘supreme devotees of the Lord/Goddess, while Dhvajās in those times were placed in front of all temples as a tool of identification. Lakṣmī on coins denotes the wealth and prosperity of the issuer, and does not qualify for sectarian rancour. The presence of *Bhadryānyā* (another name of Pārvatī/Durgā), as both an epigraphical demarcation and figurative rendition, as a Goddess with Lion mount and Elephants, a feat also present for Nanā on Southern Ardochsho-type Kuṣāṇa coins (Rosenfield 1967: 114), on the Bilsad Pillar Inscription of Skandagupta, along with devotion to Śiva in other epigraphs of the day establishes the untenability of this suggestion.
2. Lakṣmī signifies prosperity, and on some coins, is depicted dispersing morsels/gold pieces (?), which testifies to the economic charisma and benediction of the issuing authority (Ghoshal 1972). But, we must be aware of the appearance of other deities, such as Gangā on Tiger-slaying type of Samudragupta, and Queen on Ashvamedha-type coins of both Samudragupta and Kumāragupta I. Context matters more in such delineations, and like Kuṣāṇa coinage, the reverse device must bear some semiotic or narrative relation with the obverse device. Also, the incipient and surreptitious inspiration of Nanā in the iconography of Durgā can also testify to the transfer of function of natural abundance, rather than *material* (Mukherjee 1969: 32).
3. Durgā is never shown holding cornucopia. Even Nanā does not hold cornucopia in majority of her depictions, while Ardochsho holds so, an attribute which is later either transformed into/replaced by lotus stems (Raven 2010: 45-48). However, as Mukherjee (1969: 15-17) poignantly remarks, on some Phase-I coins of Huviṣka, Nanā is shown in side-profile, holding cornucopia in right-hand, a feat which becomes associated with her due to her cross-mythical linkages with Demeter and Tyche-Ambā. Rosenfield (1967: 88) also avers that cornucopia is a symbol of abundance, and Nanā and Ardochsho both represent abundance, with the former expressing it in realms of nature (rainfall, harvest), and the latter in terms of Politics, Dynasty and Society. The cornucopia can be assigned to the deity-figure resembling Durgā on accord of- a] *Tyche-Ambā association* (which linked maternal prospects with bounteous prosperity), b] *Syncretic trials* (which were reproduced as speaking relics of trans-culturation and used later as copious coinage), c] *Commemorative issuing* (which linked attribute holding to specific events, not known now), and d] *Iconographic specificity* (which meant to show a particular idea/aspect of the deity).
4. Lakṣmī is known to have been assigned lion-motif in some instances, just as Pārvatī/Durgā is connected with the deer-motif in many examples highlighted by Chakrabarty (1971: 39-54). The cross-currents of mythical and numismatic attributions represent an important idea highlighted above: fluidity of representation. N.K. Bhattasali, while commenting upon terracotta votive statuary in West Bengal, linked a sculpture bearing some similarity to our Goddess Mystique was labelled as Bhuvaneśvarī, based on the annals of *Sarda-Tilaka*, a Tantra text of c. 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. The same text, as Mukherjee shows (1969: 16), and Chakrabarty (1971: 34) exhibits, also

assigns the goddess with characteristic attributes of Lakṣmī, but sitting on the lion, the label of Durgā. The same deity-figure holding lotus stems, can be argued as a contextually different but homologously akin to Puṣkalāvatī deity-form, which has more inclination towards Ambā, and possibly represents primitive-Durgā (Chakrabarti 1998: 44).

From the above discussion, the difficulties in explicitly referring to the deity as Durgā have been subsided, at best. However, since the narrative unveiling itself on the reverse remains undeciphered (Srivastava 1996: 146), we must rely upon speculations and suggestions, and forward our own formulations with this incapacitating feature. If we agree with Sohoni, the reverse makes this enterprise a *fait accompli*, since a King departing for war would surely love to rever Durgā, the Goddess of Victory and War (Sarkar 2017: 8-13). Her cultic worship was closely linked with the coinciding processes of military expansion, lineage formation, regional cultic assertions, and authorization of regional Kingdoms (Sarkar 2017: 20-32). However, if the obverse depicts a marriage scene, the relation between the two die-devices crashes to nullity. That the particular die-arrangement was not a mistake is proved by the extensive minting and widespread provenance of these coins (Altekar 1957: 20). Four necessary inferences must also be considered prophylactically before we commence our venture-

1. It is not a mindlessly copied imitation, but rather more inspired from a coinage-tradition commanding ready and right acceptance of all players of the Gupta Era market, as proved by the wide range of experimentation done with devices on both obverse and reverse, and variety still persistently patent on surviving samples, in a way somewhat similar to the excellent and insightful suggestion of A.H. Dani, who, in a different context, wrote- “A model can provide inspiration, and to some extent, also influence the nature and content of the inspired product. However, it cannot be said that it has been derived, or is a daughter of the original, for the simple fact that the latter had been generated in a context, where the genius and ingenuity of the enterprising learner reign high.” (1986: 34).
2. It was either jointly issued from two different mints, as highlighted by T.P. Verma (1971) on accord of slight but distinctive difference in weight, purity, style, fabric and legend arrangement, or by different mints gradually coming under Gupta control. The far-flung provenance and diversity of designs for a short-lived coin-type also proves the veracity of this tenet.
3. The controlled method and manner of manufacturing this coin-type, maintaining unanimity and uniformity in devices, together with lesser degree of artistic variation suggests pointedly the short but socio-culturally budding and politically ambitious reign and vision of Chandragupta I.
4. The influence of Kuṣāṇa numismatic convention is patently evident, since the magic of Indianization needs a base to work upon in the first instance. However, as said afore, the imitation and resemblance were deliberate, in order to prevent a circulatory shock to the financial system, and to readily exploit icons of power (Singh, 2008). The Guptas were aware of Kuṣāṇa socio-cultural panorama, and if Falk (2004) is in the right, they also used it surreptitiously to cement their announcement of the commencement of their dynastic career.

Based on the inferential observations in hand, the following suggestions can be made-

**Love and Valor:** It is well-known that the political and strategic alliance of the Guptas with the Licchavis was a crucial stepping stone to supremacy for aspiring Gupta kings. Also, scholars agree on identifying the obverse devices as depicting a marriage scene. Combining the two, it can be said that the die-cutter, and through him, the mint-master intended, or was commanded to depict a fructiferous



alliance turned into marriage, witnessed and blessed by the Goddess of victory herself- Durgā, closely modelled after Kuṣāṇa royal deity-figure Nanā, who by then had underwent marked *Indianization* (Ghose 2006), and was possibly given some attributes of Lakṣmī deliberately to celebrate the abundant harvests of militant prowess that would be yielded after fruition of this marriage-cum-union of two houses of power, a feat accomplished by the birth of Samudragupta. It is possible that Durgā was chosen as the benedictive divinity on accord of her intimate religio-cultural affiliation with Licchavi clan (Verma 1994: 26), whose modes of reverence were evidentially influenced by Kuṣāṇa idioms (Michaels 2018: 142-43), which thence made Simhavāhinī was no stranger to Licchavi audience.



Figure 6: (Left) Mahiṣāsura-mardinī-Āśvamedha seal from Rajghat (Courtesy- K.B. Iyer); (Right) Sealing depicting a horse and a Yūpa. Legend: para(a)krama. In 1901 in the I. White King Collection. D: 2.3 cm. (After Rapson 1901: fig. 3).

Now, for valor- it was through Licchavi aid that Chandragupta I established the base of Gupta empire, and assumed title of *Mahārājadhirāja*, which possibly asserts that Chandragupta possibly performed an *Āśvamedha Yajña* as well. A terracotta seal, discovered in 1969, shows Mahiṣāsura-mardinī on obverse in hunting pose, with tri-cephalic Śiva, a copulating couple, and a horse bound to Yūpa (not visible in the representational space) on reverse; while its temporal allegiance also remains unclear, presence of Samudragupta coins in the same stratum somewhat alleviates chronological concerns, see Iyer 1969 [*vide* Kumar 2024: 58]). In the *Devī-māhātmyam*, Mahiṣāsura is oft proclaimed as ‘the one who obstructs directions’ (Kinsley 1988: 108). It is possible that post-Āśvamedha, Chandragupta I deployed deity-figure of Durgā to proclaim both his triumph and numinous beneficence (Kumar 2024: 58; Sarkar 2017: 15ff.). It is certainly not beyond possibility that the ontological roots of this seal lay in the Chandragupta-Kumāradevī gold-coin, which also feature a royal couple blessed by Simhavāhinī Durgā on reverse. A similar seal shows the decorated sacrificial-horse with term *Parākramaḥaḥ*, the epithet of Samudragupta<sup>3</sup> (Thaplyal 2012: 24). To summarize- since Chandragupta I reached imperial echelons due to Licchavi support, he probably gave their patron-deity Durgā chief space on his new coin-type (Kumar 2024: 112), an act that showed not only divine grace over his lineage, but also granted him numinous legitimacy. Furthermore, the concomitant occurrence of this feat with performance of Āśvamedha crystallized the two phenomena together, asserting valorous establishment of both a promising power, and a new imperial epoch.

**A New Epoch:** Scholars have noted the persistency and utilization of Kuṣāṇa era sculptural and architectural contrivances in Gupta Era, especially in reference to Mathurā, a power center of the Indian wing of Kuṣāṇa polity (Puri 1996). Kuṣāṇa era symbols were also not discarded, and in some instances, copied without any variance, as proven by archaeological findings in Rajghat (Ghose 2006). Standard-type coins of Samudragupta betray a unique but distinctive semblance with its Kuṣāṇa precursor on



coins of Vasudeva II (Göbl 1984). That the Guptas also used Kuṣāṇa era reckoning has been established by Falk (2004), which impels us to suggest, albeit tentatively, that the Durgā (=disguised Nanā), was impressed on obverse to not only bless the couple (as in Kuṣāṇa era renditions), but also to highlight the beginning of a new Era, the Gupta Era, which was commenced by Chandragupta I (Mookerji 1947: 12). While this may have had not envisaged an actual chronological pronouncement, it might have been connected with a spectacular event or occasion, such as throne-ascendancy, empire-establishment, royalty-inauguration, or beginning of a new season of cultivation, the last being a favorite of Kaṇiṣka I, who, in Falk's perspective, intentionally commenced an era coinciding with beginning of rainy season in July/August, a feat connected with the bowl in right hand of Nanā on Kuṣāṇa coinage. While the distant Rabatak pronunciation maybe regarded as quite indifferent to Gangetic Valley, it does link symbols of power with actual power over nature, and abundance of Natural forces upon the people.

Recently, Raven (2020: 272f.) has again proposed to identify the Goddess on Lion in Gupta coinage as Lakṣmī rather than Durgā. For brevity, we will here list her arguments, along with our refutations in a pointed manner. Raven considers this coin-type to be a product of Samudragupta's reign, an assumption dealt with definitively afore. This dialogic style shall both save space and provide a comprehensive outlook.

1. Raven traces the sculptural history of the Goddess on Lion art-motif from the *Kanawara* sculpture, which shows an elephant-headed deity with a female accompaniment. However, this is a step in the wrong due to- a]while ideas about art and craft travel afar, the iconographical feats of Kanawara laid in absolute isolation, with the site showing no sign of rehabilitation or resettlement after 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE, b]the *squatting pose* of female divinity is a characteristic posture of *Mātṛkā* sculptures, quite common throughout India, as a representative of fertility, c] theriocephalic and theriomorphic deities have many partners from the animal world, which is not exclusive to Lakṣmī/Durgā, d]the seating-styles of Goddess figure on Kuṣāṇa coinage and Mathurā sculptures stand as an obvious *source of emanation of style*, which brings us back to our conjectural reconstruction of our Goddess on Lion from existent Kuṣāṇa numismatic specimens.
2. Raven stresses upon the fact that iconography of Lakṣmī was *fairly flexible*, absorbing symbols of power and prosperity from different but neighboring cultures, circumscribed by an artistic boundary which handed her fillets and flowers. However, both Ghose (2006) and Mukherjee (1969) have shown that Nanā too absorbed different cults, and when Indianized at Mathurā (possibly), rendered her attributes to Durgā, or the figurative idea of Durgā was complementarily created by adding more Śaivite attributes to her statuary, as Nanā had already developed remarkable proximity with Śiva/OESHO on Kuṣāṇa coins (Shrava 1985: 58). Durgā too underwent numerous culture-ritual modifications by 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE, till reaching complete crystallization with the formulation of *Devī-māhātmyam* (Kinsley 1988: 202). The assessment of Chakravarty (1971: 34) also proves that though there was *attributional flexibility* in literary sources, it was apparently less in archaeological evidence.
3. Raven draws a scenario where 'The king defeats the lion, thus showing his courage, physical fitness and strength. A king who defeats the lion can make a lion serve his divine consort, the goddess of royal fortune, as a mount. The king's lion's courage is also captured in his epithet "*simhavikrama*-" inserted in In the right field'. While this works well for the Lion-slayer type coins, the same conceptual vision fails to convince in case of King-Queen type, which obviously requires a distinctive interpretative function, which we have attempted to provide



Figure 7: The numismatic evolution of Lakṣmī on Gupta Coinage (Source: Kumar 2022, p. 15, fig.05).

here (*supra.*). Moreover, Lakṣmī is alternatively seen in various poses and postures, with or without throne, on wicker stool, on lotus-throne, standing in profile etc., and undergoes a systematic evolution to reach perfection according to Indian traditions (see Fig. 7 and 8). On the other hand, the Gupta Goddess on Lion maintains a remarkable consistency in form and outline, and appears only on reverse of Lion-slayer/conqueror and King-Queen type, somewhat similar to Gangā, who exclusively appears on the reverse of Battle-axe type of Samudragupta, thereby carrying a geographical function (Altekar 1957: 19). This shows that use of reverse-device was always contextually connected to the idea on obverse. While Durgā performs the intended role well, the same cannot be said of Lakṣmī.

4. Fourthly, Raven assesses the positioning of Goddess and her mount. While generally, the lion sits in a docile pose, with its head placed on front paws, appearing akin to a protome, hind legs visible on the other field (directional-dependent), and goddess atop the creature, either squatting or sitting in *Ardha-paryanka pose* or *Lalitāsana* etc. The positioning of Goddess Durgā on her lion in statuary contexts moves in parallel to her presence on coins. Many terracotta and sandstone figures show a Goddess atop Lion bearing resemblance to Nanā, but greatly Indianized (see Fig. 7). If Nanā of the Kuṣāṇas developed cultic proximity with Śiva, it was more natural for her to assume a position of significance in Śaivite sect as Umā, Ambā etc., which she in sooth did on one of the gold coins of Huviṣka (c. 150-195 CE). The Mahiṣāsuramardinī mythological complex got connected with the Goddess later in 5<sup>th</sup> Century CE (Kinsley 1988: 208), and became intimately enmeshed with her *Simhavāhinī* attribute, which gradually developed out of the multicultural Kuṣāṇa prototype in the form and shape of Nanā (Ghose 2006: 102).

Moreover, no intention of Gupta celators is evinced from the envisioned Iconographic process, who depicted her lavishly sitting on throne or lotus, dispersing coins and offering an investiture fillet to Gupta King. Some scholars have argued to witness noose (*Pāśa*) in place of the fillet (Srivastava 1996: 368), which appears to be so in some specimens. While such an attribute ill suits Lakṣmī, the image



of Durgā, standing as an Indianized derivative of Nanā fits the frame amicably. It is possible that the image was crafted to make Gupta coins competitive in a multi-ethnic, segmented market bloated with debased Kuṣāṇa currency, and working thus in an economic environ with well-established principles of Numismatic devices. Lessons learnt here will serve the Gupta Kings in good stead in Saurāṣṭra later.

Thence, to forward here a tentative proposal, we may say here that the ascribed coin was produced to highlight the victory of the joint forces of Guptas and the Licchhavis against other competing forces, along with the intense desire to seek benedictions of the Victory Goddess to ordain the new martial and political couple to literally begin a new Era of Indian History. Later, with characteristic innovation of the ever-enterprising Gupta mint-artists, the Goddess was changed to reflect other obverse narrations of the aspiring Gupta King, depicted in innumerable poses on obverse (Raven 1994). We may here also briefly view the Goddess on reverse of Lion-slaying type, where the chronological progression and iconographical manipulation make placement of Queen/Rājya-Lakṣmī quite possible, but still beyond suspicion. Our second case, examined below, shall act to further our argumentation with alacrity. Our next case shall effectively utilize the hypothetical conjecture developed herein, and test it on our second case. Also, this will help us to evaluate the Lion-slayer type coins of Kumāragupta I, who imitated the issues of his predecessor.



Figure 8: Clockwise from Northwest- a| Enthroned goddess seated on a lion, c. second century CE, Gandhāra, Schist, 23.2x12cm, Sherrier Collection, UK. (Source: Ghose 2006: 111); b| Goddess standing on a lion, c. second/third century CE, Mathurā, red Sandstone, H: 27.5cm, Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin, Germany (MIK I 5894). (Photo courtesy: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin–Preußischer Kultur-Besitz, Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin) (Source: Ghose 2006: 112); c| Durgā with trident seated on a lion. Terracotta Roundel from Śrāvastī, now in the State Museum Lucknow B.592. Photograph J.E. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw. (Source: Raven 2020: 267).

## CASE II: LION-SLAYER TYPE OF CHANDRAGUPTA II-



Figure 9: Lion-slayer type coins of Chandragupta II (Courtesy-The British Museum, Reg. No. 1910, 0403.31).

Altekar (1957: 125-130), and Allan (1914: 195) differentiated between two poses of the lion-slayer and lion-trampler and the lion-retreating. Raven (2005) proposed that based on pose, posture, gesture, attributes and mounts, scenes on Gupta Coins may be grouped into Iconic and Narrative types, with the former frequently linked to geo-political expansions, such as Battle-axe type of Samudragupta (for victories South of Gangetic Valley), Rhinoceros-slaying type of Kumāragupta I (for conquests in Brahmaputra river valley), where the deity-figure on reverse also changes to reflect the ritual patronage and stance of the King. Raven (2005:78; 2004:36) postulated that coinage for a particular ruler must be evaluated in terms of his portrait and activities as depicted on other linked types. By this time, maneuvering Lakṣmī in numerous postures, linking her to the King's glory, and metaphorically using her in terms of the mundane wives (Queens) of the Gupta Kings had become a new norm, as evinced in Eran Inscription of Samudragupta. This sequence puts the Lion-slaying type in Iconic issues. Alternatively, it may be referring to Durgā actually in its reverse, due to the particular epithet used for the King-Siṃhavikrama. Here, it will be much felicitous to adduce yet another dimension into this complicated equation- plastic art. While plastic art is situated in a different dimension, yet the commonality of art and artistic imagination/convention can be quite easily reciprocated on numismatic surface, or it can inspire the die-artist (Mann 2012), who was given the duty to draw divinities on coin surface.

The problem in identifying the deity with Lakṣmī can be enumerated in terms of- 1] relative temporal lateness of texts and scriptures which link Lakṣmī with lions, 2] absence of any depiction of either Ardochsho or even Indianized Lakṣmī on lions in both Kuṣāṇa and its inspired Indian derivatives in Gupta and pre-Gupta age, 3] Presence of Durgā sculptures with the deity placed on lion, but without the cornucopia, 4] associated references to Pārvaṭī and Śiva in epigraphs annexed or in filiation with the sculptures. Revising Ghose's arguments, one can safely presume that the iconographic feats of Durgā were heading two ways: with the Maḥiṣāsura-mardīnī art-motif, and with the feminine Śakti of Rudra-Śiva. In early years of her plastic modelling, it is possible that her engravers and artists were inspired by depictions of Nānā, and kept the cornucopia as a relic. Here, in order to verify the sanctity of our hypothetical formulation, the four principles enunciated afore are used-



1. On associational grounds, it might be postulated that the scene on obverse depicts Chandragupta II slaying a lion, who is shown to be crouching dangerously, but the slight deflection of his posterior body shows its inversion against the earlier motive of continuing the attack, possibly due to the heroic stance of Chandragupta II, lending him the legend *Siṃhavikrama*. This may show an interesting play of words, for *Vikrama* is etymologically derived from  $\sqrt{\text{vi}}$ =work, and *krama*=stride, translating into One who has the stride of a Lion, a praise most deserving for no God/Goddess other than Durgā.
2. On relational grounds, it can be furthered that *Vikramāditya* was the *Āditya* biruda (epithet) of Chandragupta II, which was used in a series of combinations, based on the deity on reverse (Altekar 1957: 124), exemplified by *Chakra-Vikrama* (with *Chakra-Puruṣa*/ *Viṣṇu*). This may show, on the realistic realm, conquest of *Saurāṣṭra*, and in the mythical realm, Chandragupta II receiving the ordination of Durgā, in a way the *Chakra-Vikrama* coin-type shows Chandragupta II as the conqueror of the three worlds (*Lokas*), and in mythical realm, his anointment as the best among kings by none other than *Viṣṇu*, the sustainer of worlds, and an ideal of kingship par excellence (Gonda 1966: 48).
3. On contextual grounds, the device seen on the reverse can be compared with numerous depictions of Durgā, such as the pristinely moulded Durgā sculptures discovered in Rajghat, which shows the Goddess sitting on a lion, with *triśūla* and wreath placed in her hands, and *Durggah* inscribed on the pedestal in 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE Gupta script (Iyer 1969: 174; see fig.10). Innumerable similar depictions have been excavated, belonging to Gupta period.
4. On situational grounds, when this coin is viewed in isolation, we can simply and sufficiently construct a narrative by linking the device on obverse and reverse. The methodology of Raven (2004) is both tedious and cumbersome, and requires is to make the coin user a number of presumptions, regarding extent but hidden Gupta Queen-motif, her conflation with *Rājya-Lakṣmī*, the King's endeavor to make *Lakṣmī* sit on the supposed Lion-throne, even when the coinage-tradition of placing *Lakṣmī* on throne was at an arm's distance.
- 5.



Figure 10: Terracotta Seal discovered from Rajghat, bearing legend *Durggah* in c. 5<sup>th</sup> Century CE Gupta Brahmi Script (Source: Wikimedia Commons).

With this exposition clear, we can see another specimen where the role of Goddess Durgā as a *patron of King's valour* was expressed on coins. It is well-known that Kumāragupta I was an *imitative genius* (Altekar 1957: 148), who brought back many designs of his predecessors that were abandoned, if not stopped from manufacturing by his immediate predecessor Chandragupta II. This list includes the *Battle-axe type*, *Lyrist-type*, *Aśvamedha-type* of Samudragupta, while combining other different forms to create a novel design. Here, Kumāragupta I imitated his father's Lion-slayer type coinage, while changing the legend on reverse to *Simhamahendra* on one Variety, and to *Mahendrasimha* on the other. While encountering another similar legend of *Mahendragajaha* on the reverse of another Gupta gold coins, Raven (2019: 206) interpreted the legend as *Kumāragupta's Elephant*. While this will indeed serve the hidden propaganda in good stead, it can also be averred that the celators working under Kumāragupta I simply replaced the *biruda* (epithet) of Chandragupta with that of Kumāragupta. This same reverse-device was used to produce the famous but rare Lion-trampler type, an issue that possibly commemorated the triumph of Kumāragupta in Saurāṣṭra campaign against Rudrasimha III (c. AD 380-415), the last of the Kṣatrapas (Jha & Rajgor 1994: 72). An interesting interpretation of this strange device could be that the *King trampled the lion with the benediction of Goddess Durgā*. The suggestion is further strengthened by the conspicuous absence of *Lotus symbol* and *wealth-dispensing* from such scenario. But, Tandon (2018: 25) posits that the device probably narrates the placing of Sāmarājya-Lakṣmī by Kumāragupta I over the conquered throne. While this certainly could be true, we must not ignore the probability of re-soldering of previous devices to create new die-combination. This conjecture of our elicits support from two additional points of consideration-



Figure 11: Lion-conqueror type of Kumāragupta I (Source: Lucknow Museum; Exhibit No. 11586)

Raven (2019: 109f.) describes the Lion-trampler type of Kumāragupta I, along with its three varieties. That the coinage was a *semi-innovation* is proved by the relative newness of only the obverse, and not the reverse, which kept on using older and already circulating reverse-devices. An interesting feature is the relatively greater degree of *type-degradation* seen on these coins, which does not indicate a sound and stable financial functioning of Gupta economy.

Kumar (2022: 208ff.) asserts that the quantity of gold-content undergoes noticeable diminishment in coins issued under Kumāragupta I. While the weight underwent a roughly average increase of about 8 grains, nearing 131.5 grains by the end of Kumāragupta's reign, percentage of gold saw deduction from 90.2% to 88.4%, which gradually increased to about 88.9%, and reached the olden standard threshold only during the initiation of regime of Skandagupta. The Lion-trampler types form the Gupta series during its downward trend.



Figure 12: Comparative View of the Goddess Figure on Lion-conqueror/Slayer type (Source: Tandon 2018: 3-5).

It is therefore probable that the Lion-trampler type wanted to present not a new rendition and action of the Goddess on Lion on reverse, but rather slavishly copied, or was compelled by the circumstantial contrivance to use older devices in newer situations. This was possibly to counteract the stress on Gupta mints after the expansion and consolidation of the Empire in Gujarat. Vast resources and riches of the State machinery were deployed to bring a definitive ultimatum to the protracted struggle of attrition (c. AD 390-416), which deeply scarred Gupta treasury, thereby causing the inglorious downturn. But, with establishment of peace and purpose, and greater resource-flows from the newly integrated economic centers of Gujarat, the economic power of the Guptas revived, resulting in the perceivably small but important upward movement in gold-content. The coins issued during this period of *political and military turmoil* were relatively less exquisite type-wise, and due to minimization-protocols, innovation became hard. When celebration of victory made it imperative, the Gupta monarch issued and authorized coins that were visibly new, but in spirit older. However, it served the propaganda potential well, which calls for another reason to consider the Goddess on reverse as Durgā.

Even though Lakṣmī could have symbolized the enlargement of Gupta *sphere of influence*, this was not ever meant in *numismatic terms*, for the Gold Coinage of Kumāragupta I was not specifically meant for circulation in Gujarat; silver coins, heavily inspired by the Kṣatrapa fabric and style of execution, were instituted by Gupta Kings. Kumāragupta further innovated in this design, producing the famous *Madhyadeśa* variety which would be opted by later dynasties of Early Medieval Period (Altekar 1957: 221). Moreover, the defeated, berated lion on these coins served various *representational roles*; while it chiefly emphasized prowess and deftness of Kumāragupta I in hunting and archery, it could have also stood for Rudrasimha III, along with the battered Kṣatrapa throne, given the semantic propinquity. Tandon (2018: 2) points out that the left field of Lucknow Museum coin (No. 11586) has the letter Śrī, while three lotus-petals spring out from the lion-throne, and proceeded to label the deity-figure as Lakṣmī (see Fig. 10, a). However, another coin of a similar variety lacks these features (Fig. 10, b), and seems to be an exact reiteration of the Lion-slayer type of Kumāragupta I (Fig. 10, c). It can be averred that our hypothetical conjecture holds in all but one case, which could either be a mint-innovation, or an attempt by the celator to bring the deity-figure close to one on other gold-coins, which was obviously Lakṣmī. The lotus stems and petals are a common artistic trait shared by all deities of mainstream Brāhmaṇic pantheon, and is well associated even with Pārvatī and Durgā in other related sources (*vide supra*). With the gradual narrowing of variety of gold-coins, the Archer-type coins became the sole imperative of Gupta mints, since the desperate political circumstances



obliterated potential for any numismatic innovation. Therefore, deity-figures affiliated to particular die-combinations also saw a stoppage in numismatic appearances.

Thus, it can be tentatively proposed herein that the reverse device represents Durgā, blessing the Gupta monarch, just like Lakṣmī sitting on throne, disperses coins and ingots of gold, reordering the economic prowess of the Guptas. It can be colloquially averred that the iconographical contexts of Durgā underwent two different iconographical streams: one to show a ferocious *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī*, and other without the demonic association, as an accomplice of valiant and valorous monarchs, to become the valiant and vigorous *Simhavāhinī*; later, the two were conflated to evolve a comprehensive exposition and delineate a discourse in the period of regional kingdoms, where her role grew more prominent from c. 7<sup>th</sup> Century CE (Sarkar 2017: 4), and absorb local deities, through the process of Hinduization and instalment of Brāhmaṇic idioms of power.

## Conclusion

We have thence advanced many arguments in support of our contention, i.e. the deity-figure seated on lion on the reverse of Gupta coin-types, such as Chandragupta-Kumāradevī and Lion-slayer type of Chandragupta II and Kumārāgupta I show none other than Goddess Durgā. The Guptas deliberately and deftly employed the numismatic devices as items of advancing political agendas, along with expressions of power and piety (Singh 2011: 326). Their relation to gods and goddesses occupying the reverse was complex and complicated, filled with explicit and latent meanings and musings. In a way, it showed the king deriving legitimacy to govern and rule from his divine stature. This derivation was multi-directional. From one perspective, the King was the mortal par excellence, possessing exceptional qualities of physique and intellect, agility and bravery, and thence became the apt recipient of deities' benisons (Altekar 1957: 20). Another perspective posits that the king had the benedictions of divinities, making him the *best of all*, and thus most befitting to rule (Kumar 2017: 53). This latter interpretation syncs well with the preponderance of kings over the issue of legitimacy, a valid question whose consideration made Kumārāgupta I the innovator *par excellence*, at a time when he was faced in a deadly struggle for succession (Bakker 2022: 191-207). In this context, the mythical, ritual and symbolic value of Goddess Durgā laid in emboldening the Gupta monarch to face his rivals with valiant valour, and receive the benedictions of the Warrior-Goddess.

Yokochi (2005: 298) labelled Durgā before c. 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE as a mere *consort-goddess*, carrying the attributes and symbols of her consort Śiva. However, the spread and provenance of her worship, connected to many facets of quotidian lives, including abundance, fertility and martial spirit crafts for her a reverential niche much more than one dependent solely on consort. The relation of Durgā with fecundity and protection is well known (Majumder 2021: 144-147), which was a happy consequence of the *cultural hybridity* in which her iconographical form first met iteration. Probably, this facet of her cult was primarily responsible in making her divine complex employable to adopt and appropriate regional Goddesses with more or less similar functions and faint cultic outlines (Kinsley 1988: 288). This could have also attracted the attention of Gupta rulers, under whose patronage Purāṇas began to be firstly shaped (Hazra 1958: 19). The upcoming centuries would see the Goddess Durgā assume highest degree of veneration in Tantric affiliations and also in the Śākta cults across the subcontinent, while acknowledging the power and piety of aspirant kings and conquerors.

## Notes

1. The Guptas had plenitude of examples to adapt deity-figuration from. At Mat, we come across Nanā, firstly depicted in an Indian context. From Sikhri and Ambala, statuary has been discovered which exhibits Indianization of Nanā



- (see Figure 06), indicated by heavy anklets, use of traditional drapery (Chandra 1977: 45), infusion of mytho-cultural elements of Ambā (Mukherjee 1969: 25), and induction of Śālabhanjikā motif, which is strictly Indic in its socio-cultural milieu (Gupta 2002: 17). From Mathurā, it is possible that this iconographical innovation spread to other parts of India, as her statuary hails from Gandhāra to Chandraketurgarh, Orissa (Ghose 2006: 191).
2. Nanā should clearly be regarded as of vital significance, since her mythical character has been employed to auspiciously inaugurate Year I of Kaṇiṣka Era (Falk 2015: 280). The flattering religious description finds footing in this tendency in lines 9-10 of Rabatak inscription- “glorious Umma leads the \*service here, (namely) the \*lady nana and the.... Lady Umma, Aurmuzd, the gracious one, Sroshard, Narasa, (and) Mihr. [interlinear text: . . . and he is called Maaseno, and he is called Bizago] And he likewise.” The grammatical and syntactical structure of the description makes it permissible to believe that Nanā and Umā herein were considered as equivalents. Equating Nanā with Umā perhaps allowed Kaṇiṣka to address his newly conquered Indian subjects, for whom Umā was a prominent Śākta goddess. Interestingly, the image of Nanā sculpted in the vicinity of Rabatak inscription is shown sitting atop a lion in profile, an iconographical fact that has much significance in the metamorphosis (more aptly, Indianization) of Nanā into Durgā.
  3. It is known that even after being elected, Samudragupta had to fight a civil war against rival claimants to throne (Gupta 1974: 28). It is possible that Samudragupta used the semiotic linkage among Aśvamedha, Durgā and initiation of Gupta rule/era, to present himself a righteous and legitimate candidate in royal-circles, and thence intentionally showed Maḥiṣāsūramardīnī Durgā on his seals, a goddess-form popular among the Licchavis, and which also mythologically affirmed the *Apratiratha* epithet of Samudragupta (Kinsley 1988: 75-76). Thaplyal (1973: 442) asserted that such seals were probably used by Gupta officials in inspecting and sanctioning sacrificial resources, which again shows the popularity of Durgā in Gupta royal house. Even Chandragupta II sponsored the same form of the Goddess at Udaygiri (Willis 2009: 56), a site which he built to propagate his triumph against Kādamaka Śakas.

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