

Trident: The Aniconic Representation Of Siva (Numismatic Study)

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Abstract

Trident is regarded as sacred symbol not only by Hindus but also by the Buddhist and Jains. In Hindus Trisula is an emblem of Siva which denotes his function as creator, Preserver and destroyer. The trident has often been interpreted as further development of the Nandipada symbol. This attribute of Siva is quite commonly depicted on ancient Indian coins and it is regarded as the aniconic representation of Siva. Earlier trident was considered only an attribute of Siva but this study emphasizes that trident is not only an attribute but it is an aniconic representation of Siva. It is as sacred as Siva himself. From this study we will come that trident has its antiquity even before Siva's anthropomorphic form came into light. We found first depiction of anthropomorphic on Ujjain coins but we have trident from the punchmarked coins. Even in Gupta period where vaishnavism was popular, a coin has been found having trident depicted on it. This trident represents Siva himself. Thus trident is even more ancient than Siva himself and it is aniconic or symbolic form of Siva.

1. Introduction

The history of coinage in our country is quite old. The earliest coins found within the Indian subcontinent are ordinarily referred to as Punch-marked coins. Coins provide useful corroborative evidence to literary and epigraphic sources. It has been found that the symbols appearing on the

early Indian coins are not meaningless. They have religious significance and they constitute the earliest source in point of time to study the development of religious ideas and conception in history. The numerous symbols appearing on these coins have been variously interpreted but majority of scholars agreed that there is a religious motive behind the representation of symbols on the coins. Symbols appearing on the Indigenous as well as foreign coins of India includes trident which can be interpreted as Saivic emblems.

Trident is not only an attribute of Siva but it is more than this. It has been described by many scholars as an *ayudh* on the coin but is definitely a symbolic representation of Siva because when Siva was not anthropomorphically depicted on the coins he is represented either in trident or in linga or bull form (theriomorphic form of Siva) In this paper I want to submit that however we found Siva for the first time in the anthropomorphic form on the coins hailing from Ujjaini and its environ but he is symbolically or iconically depicted on the coins from very earliest time. from Harappan civilization to tribal and local coins the trident has been continuously being depicted on the coins. After wards on Kusana coins it is depicted in the hand of Siva as an attribute. So I will discuss in this paper that trident had a religious aspect and is related to Siva- when it is depicted alone or combined with battle axe it is not only an *ayudh* like damru, snake, crescent moon but more then all of these.

2. Objective of the present Research


Siva is considered as the oldest and powerful God in Hindu Pantheon. He is part of Hindu trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, Siva). He has been assigned the destructive functions but when we go through the religious literature, we came to conclusion that in all the three aspects he has important role to play. His phallic emblem and his bull Nandin is a sign of reproduction and they are as sacred as Siva himself. His third eye symbolizes the destructive aspect Even now society worships Siva with much dedication because he is considered the God who is easily appeased. This paper emphasis that trident is also as sacred as Siva himself and has its antiquity even before Siva's anthropomorphic aspect came into light. It is symbolic or iconic representation of Siva.

The present study is an attempt to find out the background of Trisula or how it originated.



It is also an endeavour to prove that Trisula, which we find on the coins, is not only an ayudh or an attribute of Siva but it is an iconic representation of Siva.

A huge literature is available on ancient Indian numismatics which deals with the religious, cultural, political and economic aspects of various dynasties. Various works have been done on the iconography during ancient Indian coins also.¹ But regarding the trident no such attempt has been made. The present work is based on numismatical sources. Epigraphic, literary and other source will be liberally used and references will be drawn from them as and where necessary.

3. How trident originated



Trisula is the special weapon of Siva with the vaisnava (brilliance of Vishnu) obtained by churning Surya.² It denotes Siva's function as creator, preserver and destroyer or those of the three gunas of instruments of the evolutionary process.³ Sometimes it is also associated with poseidan⁴ and vishnu also.⁵ In India it is associated with Siva but how it came in its present shape is a matter of discussion. The trident or trisula has often been interpreted as further development of Nandipad symbol . The Three pronged symbol just above a small circle with bindus (dots on either side formed the Nandipad. If the upper part of the whole symbol is detected it clearly represents the trident of Siva.⁶ But if we go back to the Indus Valley civilization a new interpretation came. Trisula is traced in the three pronged horns on the head of Mahayogi depicted on the seal discovered at Mohanjodaro. The

Harappan Siva who is also lord of beasts has the horns of bull, although we miss the bull among the animals that grouped about him. Similar horns appear on the heads of various figures at Mohanjodaro as well as on the teracota musks.⁷ The horns which appear on various figures of Indus valley civilization definitely had a special sacred significance. Rudra Siva when entered into aryan pantheon probably had horns and described as a bull (Rg. 11.33.8) Agni who was repeatedly associated with Rudra Siva is said to have a pair of horns (vii. 9). Marshal⁸ states that these horns which were pre-Aryan emblem of divinity were not adopted by the Vedic, Aryans but they did not entirely die out. These horns are the forerunners of Siva's trisula (trident). It denoted the three aspects of god as creator, destroyer and regenerator and it is continued to be the special attribute of Siva. In the epic period the existence of horns on the head of Siva was not forgotten. In Mahabharata it is stated that, "a Mortal would reach Siva's city on seeing the horn of a trident bearer made by (The God Siva) himself besides the Pagosni river."⁹

The taurine symbol  which appeared in Indian art and also on punchmarked Silver coins has resemblance with horns, Nandipad and trident. It can also possible that taurine symbol which appeared on the head of Pashupati was considered as pair of horns of bull and it may be transformed into Nandipad  which later on took the form of trident symbol.

Trisula is the symbol of Siva from Harappan civilization. The Harappan Siva has horns and these later on transformed into trident as we do not find representation of Siva with horns on tribal or later coins where Siva is anthropomorphically represented. The trident represents symbolically the qualities of Siva i.e. the supreme soul as the creator, the preserver and the destroyer. Further, we will study representation of trident on the ancient Indian coins.

4. Trident on Punchmarked coin

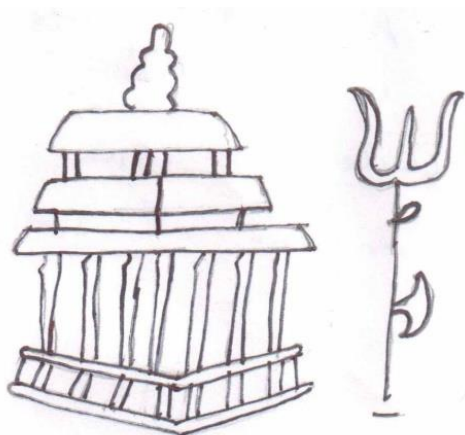
The silver satamana from the North-western bear a distinct symbol or emblem. It consists of a circle (with a dot inside) surrounded by six circles with perhaps a short opening on the outside. The outer circles are intersected by a line. In several cases the line goes beyond the orb of the circle and touches the inner circle. The other end of the intersecting line reaches the short opening in the outer circle. Thus six tridents are formed around a central circle .¹⁰ A study of the symbol shows that this is the initial stage of the emblem in which tridents became the main components. The worship of Siva was prevalent in North West before the invasion of Alexander. In that case the symbols may be considered as a Saivite emblem. These are the first evidence of Siva's trident on the Punchmarked coin. Trisula within railing seems to occur on the reverse of some un-inscribed cast copper coins. These coins described by Allan.¹¹ These coins represent a trident with broad flattened prongs issuing out of a railing which contains also two parasols like objects on its two sides . If we look at the other symbols on the coins, they are taurine symbol and mountain. These symbols are also considered as saivite symbols. We can safely conclude that the symbol depicted on un-inscribed caste coins is trident symbol which is aniconic representation of Siva.

5. Tribal and Local Coins

The reverse side of the coins of the Pancal King Dhruvamisra bears a device which has been described by Cunningham¹² as a fixed on basement of Buddhist railing and he remarks that Dhruva is the North Polar star but as it is also a name of Siva and trident which is depicted on the coin refers to Siva. Allan¹³ however not agreed with this and stated that the object in question which stands on a platform in the position usually occupied by the deity between two pillars with crossbars at top but it

is not a trident. On No 53 (Pl. xxvii.5) it looks like a battle axe, but on no. 55 (pl.xxvii.6); the sniff is clearly bent. It must be symbol of Dhruva, the Pole-star. But even if it be a battle axe then that would also a symbol of Siva, because Dhruva is one of the epithet of the same God.

The two coins of the Pancala King Rudragupta are described.¹⁴ Cunningham¹⁵ described reverse of both coins as trident fixed on basement of Buddhist railing but Allan in his introduction put forth the suggestion for the coin (Pl. xxvii.2) that on the reverse there is a trident between two pillars, the emblem of Rudra-Siva.¹⁶ Banerjea has also the same view that the central object in a trident placed inside a railing.¹⁷ But for the other coin (Pl. xxvii.1) Allan mentioned; railing with three pillars above having uncertain objects at top of each.¹⁸ But in his introduction (page cxviii-cxix) he put forth the suggestion that the object may be a star or a kind of double trident with prongs below as well as above, on the other hand Banerjea described this coin as the two figures on either side of the enshrined trisula emblem which may represent the votaries before the object of their devotion. He compares this coin with the coin of Taxila on which he finds a trisula emblem with votaries on either side.¹⁹ Whereas Allan on the same coin finds, 'Tree in centre, standing figure on either side.'²⁰ But Chattopadyaya has another view point and he said that tree worship was quite in vogue in ancient times and it is unreasonable to show three projecting branches of a tree symbol as three prongs of a trident. But when we examine the coins of Pancala rulers they were no doubt they were brahmanists. Moreover the names of the rulers like Rudre Gupta, Dhruva Gupta, all shows their inclination towards Siva as Dhruva, Pole Star, Rudra all are the other names of Siva.



Trisula sometimes with a Parasu or battle axe appears along with the two storied building on Audumbara coins. On the reverse side of Sivadasa coins there is a two storeyed domed stupa,²¹ trident with axe on right.²² Cunningham described it as a pyrammidal temple of two or three storeys or a pointed roofed temple.²³ R.D. Banerjea²⁴ followed Cunningham and described it as a temple. Allan's view can't be accepted because there is nothing in these coins which could be connected with Buddhism. The trident battle axe shown on the right near the temple in very important feature of the structure and its shows that the temple being dedicated to Siva. Moreover the names of Audumbara

Kings Sivadasa and Rudradasa also corroborates their saivite beliefs. The trident with battle axe attached to its shaft is definitely a Saiva weapon. On obverse²⁵ of the silver coin of Dharaghosha, 'on left filleted trident with a kettle drum below the prongs and battle-axe attached to the shaft further below on the right tree in an enclosure on right. On rev. bearded Visvamitra standing facing with right hand raised and holding a (lion?) skin on the left hand. Cunningham²⁶ identifies the tree as fig (udumbara) tree and he names the enclosure as Buddhist railing. He may be right regarding fig three as it is also a sacred tree for Saiva worshippers but for Buddhist railing his view is not acceptable as all the figures appearing on the coin points towards the Siva. Moreover the rulers who issued this coin were believers of Brahmanist and Saiva worshippers. The figure appears on the coin was identified as Siva by Cunningham²⁷ and J.N. Banerjea²⁸ (Siva-visvamitra being one of the appellation of Siva). Visva here mean world and mitra means friend and this is an epithet which is used for Siva. Kettle drum is also attached to the shaft just below the prongs of the trident and kettle drum is also an attribute of Siva. We can safely conclude from the above discussion that

Audumbaras professed the Saiva faith and trident battle axe symbol occurred on their coin show their inclination towards Saiva faith.

Coins of Mahadeva also bears the trident battle axe device. However it is controversial whether this ruler belongs to Audumbara or vemaki, Historian have different view about his belonging.²⁹ Cunningham mentioned a coin having trident battle-axe of Siva on obverse and humped Indian bull to r., lotus flower under head to r on reverse.³⁰ Allan also mentioned two more coins.³¹ One coin bears humped bull, circle with dots around on, Nandipad on obverse and elephant and trident on reverse. Other coins bears tree in enclosure; forepart of elephant on reverse and stupa and trident with axe on reverse. All these coins have trident on their reverse side and also has a humped bull which is also emblem of Siva. Devendra Handa also mentions many coins bearing trident battle axe .³² All the above mentioned coins show that whichever tribe the ruler Mahadeva belongs his favourite device is trident battle axe and he was a worshipper of Siva because trident belongs to Siva.

The Vemakis/Vaiyamaka rulers also have trident battle axe of Siva on their coins. Cunningham³³ described the first silver coin of Raja Rudra Verma (king Rudravarman) but he regarded Rudraverma as Audumbara King because his coins too showed the elephant and trident battle axe. He described the coin as follows, obv. elephant with upraised trunk moving, toward trident battle axe of Siva, humped bull having flower under head on reverse. Allan³⁴ though followed Cunningham but he was probably doubtful of this attribution. K.K. Dasgupta³⁵ attributed this with to Vmakas. Another coin belong to unknown Vemaka ruler is also described by Devendra Handa³⁶ bearing humped bull with the lotus flower and a wavy line on obverse, and on reverse a tusked elephant and trident-axe rising from a base shaped like a Purna-Ghata or stupika (vase with foliage or pitcher like finial of a religious edifice), probably placed on a platform in front and brahmi legend. Both coins follows the same style and pattern and has similar legends, the only difference is the name of ruler. A copper coin of Vemaka ruler is also found bearing, elephant to right with trunk upraised (holding) a flower of dots above the head, only the three Prongs of the trident-axe visible below the tusk on obverse and humped bull to left nandipada above the hump and a svastika above the back, flower of dots below the face of the bull on reverse.³⁷ From the scrutiny of the above mentioned coins we can say that all the coins have similarity regarding the symbols and I safely conclude that the vemaka rulers, like those of the Audumbaras bore saivite names and we can see their faith in Siva by the depiction of the bull and trident axe on their coins. Both Bull and trident has connection with Siva. Bull is theromorphic form of Siva and trident in aniconic representation of Siva.

This symbol also appears on Yaudheya coins. On a coin a double trident depicted with tree in railing on obverse and plan reverse.³⁸ On another coin triangle headed staff tree in railing sun symbol on obverse and an inverted trident on the reverse has been depicted.³⁹ But many historians like R.R. Tripathi⁴⁰ Nisar Ahmad⁴¹ had not included them in their catalogue. Devendra Handa⁴² also rejected their attribution to the Yaudheyas. But Yaudheyas are worshippers of Siva and presence of trident on the coins strengthens the above mentioned view. A new type of coin named temples on shadanana-deer type coins also came in light⁴³ on which the existence of Siva shrines is confirmed by a pillared domed structure surmounted by a trident the emblem of Siva (pl. Lx.3) Trident atop is another four pillared double domed structure (pl. Lxi.1) which also confirms the saivite affiliation of such shrines. A coin shows square shrine with triangular division or decorations of the fronton and is capped by a trident. Another coin betrays a triangular

structure with flattened top and surmounted by a trident ☪. From the above description we may say that these shrines were not restricted to particular shapes or form. As Audumbara temples (as described earlier having trident battle axe) the Yaudheya temples too were dedicated to their deities. Trident on their temples show that Siva's worship have been very popular at that time and the trident on the top of the temple shows the presence of Siva, hence it is the aniconic representation of Siva.

When we study these temple coins having trident on top then we can't ignore the possibility of Allan's class I coins having double trident or inverted trident belongs to Yaudheyas because Siva's worship was popular and is indicated by the predominance of Siva temple and trisula is also the popular emblem of Siva it also indicates the Siva faith of the issuer.

A trisula with a bull also appear on the coins of Kausambi. On the coins of Asvaghosa, 'Bull with, uncertain object (trisul?) in crescent above is depicted.⁴⁴ On Dhandadeva and jethamitra coins Bull with trident behind three arched mountain in front on obverse and tree in railing on reverse is represented.⁴⁵ When we examine the other symbols of the coins like crescent, tree in railing and bull, all belongs to Siva then the uncertain objects mentioned by Allan may be trisul because it is also emblem of Siva. In other words rulers of Kausambi also believe in Siva that why they have depicted trisula on their coins.

A trident is also represented on the reverse of copper coins of Indo Greek Ruler Demetrios but here it is difficult to regard it as a Siva emblem because on these coins it may be depicted as an attribute of Poseidon.⁴⁶

We also find combined trident and battle axe on reverse of Kadphises II coins of Kusana dynasty. It no doubt associated with Siva as Kusanas are the worshippers of Siva. We find coins having representation of Siva holding trident or combined trident and battle axe during the Kusana King like Kanuska, Huvishka and Vasudeva. From then onwards it becomes the important attribute of Siva.

Gupta rulers were the devotees of Laxmi but Siva was not totally ignored at that time. A. S. Altekar⁴⁷ mentions a coin of Kumaragupta I having trident with two ornamental loops below the prong on either side. He has of the view that this is the only coin of this type which has been found during the Gupta period. But Allan rejected the contention and said that reverse of this type was really Garuda, which on some coins does resemble a trident. But I do not agree with Allan because it can be possible that Kumaragupta I issued coin having trident as he also issued peacock type coins. Peacock is a vahana of Karttikeya. May be these are little changes which may develop in the beliefs of the Gupta rulers.

6. Conclusion

The early genesis of trident traced during Harappan Civilization. The horns on the head of Pasupati later developed on trisula because we do not find any representation of horned figure on any of the coin later but we find plenty of coins having trident. We do not have trident alone but it is also depicted with bull or linga also which are considered as theomorphic representation of Siva. The three pronged fork of trisula denotes the three functions of Siva on creators, preserver and destroyer. On punchmarked coin we find initial stage of the trident. Then gradual changes took place in its formation. The tribal and local coins also bear this device which is definitely Siva's trident and not associated with Buddhism. We found trident symbol on Pancala Kings, Audumbara kings Vemaki rulers, Yaudhaya rulers and Kausambi coins. The trident are also depicted on the top of Saiva shrines which shows its importance and association with Siva. It also appears on Indo Greek Rulers Demetrios but here it may be an attribute of Poseidon, Kusana king Kadphises II, and also on Gupta

rulers coins who are Vaisnavites. But in comparison with the vaisnava motifs, those pertain to Saivism in Gupta period are indeed very few but continuity is there. Rulers used this symbol as the aniconic representation of Siva and it is mostly depicted when Siva's anthropomorphic form is not so popular on the coins. Once Siva is being depicted anthropomorphically or in his human form then trident became his important attribute as on the kusana coins.

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- [15] Cunningham op-cit, Pl.vii fig. 1 and fig.2, p. 81,
- [16] Allan op-cit, p.cxviii
- [17] J.N. Banerjea', op.cit, p. 115
- [18] Allan op-cit, Pl.xxvii.1, p. 192
- [19] Banerjea-op-cit, p. 115
- [20] Allan op-cit, No. 2, Pl. xlv.1, p. 237
- [21] Devender Handa, described it as a storeyed temple.
- [22] Allan op-cit, pl.xv.1, p. 122
- [23] Cunningham *Archaeological Survey of India Reports*, Volume xiv, p. 136
- [24] *Numismatic Supplement, Volume xxii*, p. 249
- [25] From the view point of the issuers of these coins the side with the Brahmi legend Devender handa takes here as a obverse while Allan Cunningham takes them as reverse.
- [26] Cunningham, op cit, p. 68
- [27] Cunningham, *ibid*, p. 68
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- [29] Allan (catalogue of Ancient Indian coin), Cunningham (coins of Ancient India) K.K. Dasyptra (Tribal History of India) regarded Mahadeva as a Audumbara ruler bearing the fragmentary legend Mahadevasa rana adu(m) barisa but Ajay Mitra Shastri in "Some observation on Audumbara coinge" (JNSI xxvi, pp 157-61) raised objections. Devender Handa (Tribal coin of Ancient India) has the view that coins published were issued neither by a king named Mahadeva nor in the name of god Mahadeva (siva) but indicates that who so ever the issuer was a great king who ruled for a long time and had flourished trade with the west.
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