

## Ethnology of the Kunindas

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**Abstract:** *Of all the ancient Indian republican tribes the Kunindas have the distinction of issuing the largest number and most beautiful of silver, billon, copper, brass and bronze coins. Indian literary sources refer to them under various variants like Kulinda, Kulinga, Pulinda, etc. but the coin-legends generally mention the name of the tribe as Kuninda. Their silver coins were struck on the model of the Indo-Greek hemi-drachms weighing about 2.0 – 2.2 g, probably for trade with them and others. The discovery of their coins from Taxila corroborates it. Their brass and bronze coins also betray their trade with tin and zinc producing communities. They bear legends in Brahmi and Kharoshthi. The latter script was employed by alien rulers also along with Greek on their coins. The devices, however, are purely indigenous. The Kunindas occupied the mid-western Himalayan region of Himachal and Uttarakhand with adjoining plains and have been identified with various peoples and sometimes branded as non-Aryans or of low lineage and thus having debatable ethnology. The present paper is an attempt to show that they were indigenous people following Vedic rituals and worshipping Hindu deities.*

**Keywords:** *Cunningham, Lakshmi, Kunets, Kuninda/Kulinda/Kulinga/Pulinda, Prinsep, Purola, Sanghol, Śyenachiti*

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### Introduction

The Kunindas occupy a place of pride in the galaxy of ancient Indian republican tribes and their name shines forth with the brilliance of their silver currency. Though literary texts refer to them under various variants like Kulinda, Kalinda, Kalinga, Pulinda, Kaulinda, Kauninda, etc. we find the name of the tribe spelt as Kuninda on their coins. The *Valmiki Ramayana* mentions them as Kulindas (Kishkindha-kanda, XLI.17; XLIV.12) and Kulingas (Ayodhya-kanda, LIV. 16-17). It also refers to their town named Kulingapuri which fell on the way of the messengers who were sent by Vasishtha to bring back Bharata

and Śatrughna from Kekaya after the death of Daśaratha. Kulingapuri may be regarded as a variant of Kulindapuri. The *Mahabharata* also contains numerous references to the Kun(/l)indas (Sorensen 1904: 433) as a people constantly living in the mountains (*parvata-vāsa-nityah*) (Vana-parva, 264. 8), having hundreds of groups (*K/Pulinda- śata-samkulam*), occupying different territories (Mbh, III.177, verse 12: *deśān Kulindasya*) (Law 1943: 142) and to their king (III. 161, 25-6) (*Kunindanāmīśvarah*), living on both the sides of (still unidentified) river Śailodā, conquered by Arjuna during his conquest of the northern quarter, presenting lumps of *paipīlika* (dug out by *pipīlikā* ants) gold to Yudhishtira at the time of his coronation ceremony (Sabhā-parva, 48. 3-4). At another place (*Mbh*, Gita Press edition, Sabhā-parva, 51.8-10) a Kuninda king, chief amongst the twice-born, is described as presenting him a conch which was beautifully adorned by Viśvakarmā with a golden garland and a thousand *nishkas* ‘round gold pieces/coins’ rendering it worth seeing. It was offered by all the brothers to Arjuna. Besides referring to Kulinda as a *janapada* ‘state’, the *Mahabharata* alludes to Kulinda as a king also (Sabhā-parva, XIV.26). The Kunindas also find mention in various Puranas like the *Bhagavata*, *Brahmanda*, *Markandeya*, *Vayu*, etc. The *Vishnu Purana* refers to both the Kulindas and Kulindopatyakas (I.207, 51-3) and describes Kunideśa as falling on Bharata’s journey across the Vipāśā (river Beas). The *Vishnudharmottara Purana* (I.2, 2-3; I.207, 51-53) refers to Sarvadamana as a king of the Kulindas.

The Buddhist text *Mahāmāyurī* ascribable to the early centuries of the Common Era (Levi 1915: 52, 101) alludes to the popularity of the worship of *yaksha* Ushtrapāda amongst the Kulindas (*Ushtrapādah Kulindeshu*). Ptolemy’s *Geography* (VII.1, 42) mentions *Kulindrine* ‘where the Vipāśā, Śatadru (Satluj), Yamuna and Ganga take their rise’ (Mc Crindle 1927: 109), i.e. in the Western Himalayas, which is supported by the literary references as well as the provenience of their coins.

Cunningham (1970: 125-35) identified the Kunindas with the modern Kunets whose ‘population in the hill States between the Beas and Tons rivers cannot be taken at less than 400,000 persons’ and concluded that the Kunindas “seem to have occupied the hill districts on both sides of Satlej from time immemorial”. S.B. Choudhary (1955: 125) derived Kulinda from Kalindi and associates the tribe with the Yamuna. The earliest discovery of the coins of silver, billon and copper struck by this tribe was made by canal diggers at Behat near Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh in 1837 and brought to light by Prinsep (1858: 203). Cunningham (1891: 72) was the first scholar to decipher the legend on these coins correctly. During the last about 185 years Kuninda coins have been discovered, sometimes in large hoards also, from a number of sites extending from Sirkap near Taxila to Almora, mostly from the mid-western Himalayan ranges of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand and the adjoining plains of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh (Handa 2007: 55-7) (Fig. 1).

The silver coins of the tribe are beautiful specimens of numismatic art. They were not struck on the indigenous weight standard of *Puranas* or *Dharanas* of 32 *rattis* (*abrus precatorius*) or 56 grains (3.7 g). The size of the coins is not uniform and generally varies from 0.65 to 0.75 inch (16.25 to 18.75 mm) while copper coins show more variations. They are struck on the model of Indo-Greek hemi-drachms weighing roughly 2.0 to 2.2 g, probably for purposes of trade with them and others. At Jwalamukhi and Tappa Mewa (Hamirpur in Himachal Pradesh) Kuninda coins have actually been found with the silver coins of Indo-Greek ruler Apollodotus which may have been in circulation during the second century BCE. Allan (1936: cii-iii) has rightly observed that “Economically the silver coins of the Kunindas represent an attempt of an Indian ruler to issue a native silver coinage which would compete in the market with the later Indo-Greek silver.” Brass and bronze coins of the tribe indicate their trade with tin and zinc producing communities. They invariably depict the deer/stag/sambhar to right facing a female deity identified as Lakshmi with some subsidiary symbols and Brahmi legend around on the

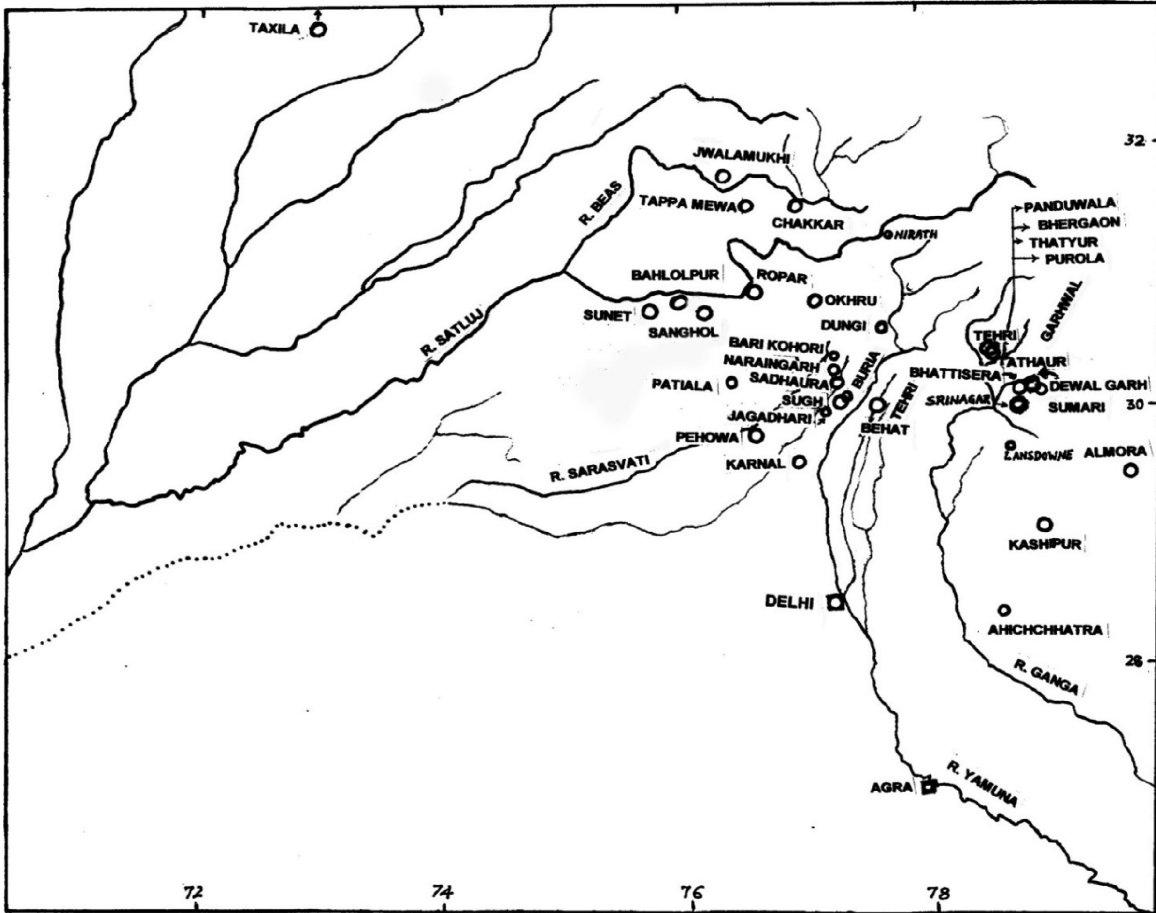







Fig. 1: Distribution of Kuninda Coins

obverse and a group of symbols with Kharoshthi legend around on the reverse (Allan 1936: ci-iv & 159-68) representing purely indigenous devices (Fig.2). They may be described as following.

Obverse: A deer or stag to right with a female figure (generally identified with goddess Lakshmi), sometimes standing on a lotus, enface or slightly turned to her right, holding flower/s in uplifted right hand; *śrīvatsa* (or two cobras ) between the horns of the deer and a square box with parasol on its back (); with or without some auspicious symbol embedded in the legend around, under the deer or between the deer and goddess; and the Brahmi legend around from about VIII-IX to III-V o'clock reading *Raṇa(o)/Rājña(h) Kuni[m]das(y)a Amoghabhūti(s)y)a* with *Mahārājas(y)a* below in the exergue.

Reverse: Six-arched hill surmounted by an umbrella and a *triratna* or *nandipada* () in the centre, tree-in-railing having three or four horizontal branches with drooping leaves on the right, *svastika* above an *Indradhvaja* (triangle-headed standard ) on the left and a wavy line below (). The Kharoshthi legend from about 5 o'clock along the border is *Raṇa Kunidasa Am[o]ghabh[u]t[i]sa* with *Maharajasa* in the exergue.

The ethnology of the Kunindas has been a debated question amongst the scholars. The *Amarakosha* calls them as *mlechchhas* (*Kirāta-Śabara-pulinda mlechchhajātayah' ity=Amarah*). They have been called as *mlechchhas* because they were living in the *Vāhika* country about which there was the general



Fig. 2: Kuninda silver coins

impression of its being the habitat of foreigners and people following their way of life and not adhering to the traditional Vedic customs and hence called non-Aryan. The *Brihatsamhitā* of Varāhamihira (sixth century CE) refers to them at many places, as lawless people living in the western division at one place (XIV.21: *Nirmalyādā mlechchhā ye pashchima-dik-sthitās=te cha*) and elsewhere at other places. The same text associates them with Shabaras who too were people mentioned with hunters and thieves (LXXXVI.10: *Śabara-vyādha-chora-sangha*). As noted above Cunningham had connected them with the Kanets/Kunets who according to him were the pre-Aryan associates of the Khasies and the original inhabitants of the whole of the lower slopes of the Himalayas from the banks of the Indus to the Brahmaputra (Cunningham 1891: 87-8). Hodgson (as quoted by Dasgupta 1974: 108) thought that they were “clearly of mixed breed aboriginal Tartars by the mother’s side but Aryan by father’s”. Powell-Price (1930: 14) connected the Kunindas with Kartripura of the Prayāga *Praśasti* and regarded the modern day Katyurs as the successors and perhaps the actual descendants of the Kuninda dynasty’. Dwelling upon some place-names like Kainyur, Kanalichhinna, Kanyalikot, Kunalta, Kulantesvar, Kunelkhet, etc. and many Brahmin and Rajput surnames like Kanyal, Kanaunia, Kulalul, Kanyani, Kundal, Kanet or Kanedi, Kanwal and Kanauli, all of which appear to be corrupt survivals of the tribal name Kuninda or Kulinda, M.C. Joshi considered them to be ‘a people of Indo-Aryan origin with several sections and sub-sections’ (Joshi 1960: 45-50). We thus see that different views have

been expressed about the alien and indigenous ethnology of the Kunindas. Their coins betray their Vaishnavite predilection as we have noted above and have been found from Sanghol (Margbandhu 1997: 177-8) and Purola (Nautiyal and Khanduri 1988-89: 68-69) associated with sacrificial altars. Some coins show *kamandalu* which is generally associated with sages and sacrifices and also *śankha* 'conch' and *chakra* 'wheel' which are the attributes of Vishnu.

The name Amoghabhūti on their coins too indicates their Brahmanical association as Amogha is one of the names of both Vishnu and Śiva. Kuninda coins have been found from a *Śyenachiti* (brick altar of the form of an eagle) found at Purola in Uttarakhand. Khanduri (2005: 65) has observed that "Purola *Istika Vedika* by all its evidences thus appears to have been an eventful episode in the history of this region, when a great sacrifice such as the Asvamedha, Agnishtom etc., was performed here in the 1<sup>st</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. by some ruling king of the region; may be a king of the Kuninda lineage." This evidence, together with that of the existence of a similar *Śyenachiti* at Jagatgram near Kalsi on the bank of the Yamuna river, corroborates the performance of Vedic rituals in the region which is confirmed by the literary evidence recorded in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* down to the *Mahabharata* (Khanduri 2005; 67). A large number of bricks of the fire altar at Jagatgram are inscribed with a recurring verse in Sanskrit meaning that "this was the scene of the fourth asvamedha sacrifice performed by king Silavarman" who may have been a king of Yaudheya (Ramachandran 1953: 1-31; *India Archaeology – A Review* 1953-54: 10-11; Sharma 1952-53: 140-1) or Kuninda lineage (Joshi 1989: 51). I therefore feel that the Kunindas who were performing sacrifices like the Aśvamedha, Agnishtoma and Agnichayana and following Vedic rituals and whose king has been described as *dvijamukhya* 'chief of the twice-born' in the *Mahabharata* (Sabhā-parva, LI, 8) as noted above cannot be branded as pre-Aryan or foreigners or people of low lineage but indigenous people performing Vedic sacrifices and worshipping Hindu deities like Lakshmi and Vishnu.

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