

Origin and History of Rama-Tankas

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Abstract

This paper examines the production and cultural significance of Rāma-tankās, religious tokens manufactured by private agencies like temple authorities in Northern India, used primarily by pilgrims. It categorizes the diverse types of Rāma-tankās, detailing their materials, dimensions, and the historical narratives they depict, particularly those related to Rama and other deities. The study further explores the origins and distribution of these tokens, suggesting that their emergence was significantly influenced by the interplay of religious dynamics during the late medieval period, particularly in centers like Agra.

Keywords: Rama-tankas; Religious tokens; Temple; Iconography; Numismatics

Rāma-tankās were manufactured by private agencies, such as temple authorities, and sold to the pilgrims at the holy places of Northern India. They are generally associated with Rama and on them many events connected with Rama are depicted. We can divide them into several types, such as Rama-Lakshmana, Rama-abhisheka type (JNSI, XXVIII (I), p.92), Rama- Sabha type (JNSI, XXVIII (I), p. 92.) . and Hanuman trying to pick-up the sun type (ibid). Apart from these there are two other types recently published by A, K. Maurya (JNSI, XXVIII (I), p.91.), of which one is known as 'Yantra type' and the other as 'Hanuman carrying mountain type.' Then there are some tankās with the representation of other deities, with or without Rama's association, e.g. Dana-Lila (Radha- Krishna), Gopala (cowherd) Krishna type; Jagannatha Triad-Rama-abhisheka type; Kali, Radha-Krishna type (Ibid, p. 93.); and Cow-Lakshmi type (ibid).

The Rama-tankās are made of silver, base silver, billon, and brass. Their shape is round, and the size varies from 2.3 cms. to 2.9 cm. The weight ranged between 7.4 gms. and 11.79 gms. The script used for legends is Old Nāgari and in the case of some pieces later Bengalisircar.

According to D. C. Sircar (JNSI, XXXII (II), p. 215.), Devendra Handa (JNSI, XXXIII (I), p. 136), and some other scholars the Rama-tankas were originally manufactured at Ayodhya and traveled to other important religious centers and circulated in different regions during the late medieval period.

But I venture to suggest that these-Rama-tankas were originally minted at Agra and later on at other religious centers. As is well known:

Akbar died of dysentery at midnight on 25-26 October, 1605, in his palace at Agra. The last part of his life was spent at Agra (JNSI, XXXVII (I-II), p. 174.). Before his death in A. D. 1604, he issued some coins both in gold and silver. Among these coins one (JNSI, XXXIX, pp. 186-87.) is in the British Museum. The description is as follows:

Metal: Gold; Weight: 74 grains; Mint: not known.

Obverse: Within a dotted circle, two figures: a man, wearing a crown of three cusps and carrying a sheaf of arrows and a stretched bow, followed by a woman, who draws back her long veil from her face.

Reverse: Within dotted circle, legend in Persian. 50 Farwardin = 1013 A. H.

Another coin (Lanepoole 34) made of silver is now at the Bharat Kala Bhavan, B. H. U. Its particulars are as follows:

Obverse: A handsome man holding a bow and arrow going onwards, followed by a woman holding a flower bud. Legend between the heads of the two persons is in the Davanagari script: Rama-Siya.

Reverse: Within dotted circle, legend in Persian Language: 50 Farwardin.

Rai Krishna Das of Bharat Kala Bhavan has remarked (Rai Krishna Das, 1973-74, pp. 20-22) that the name of the place where the coin was minted occurs on this silver coin. But this is wrong. The name does not appear either on this coin or on the gold coin mentioned above:

The last years of Akbar's life were spent at Agra, and considering that he issued these coins during this period, it is reasonable to infer that they were most likely minted in Agra (Tulsidas, 1523-1623 A. D.) was undoubtedly a contemporary of the Great Moghul Emperor Akbar (1556-1605 A. D. or 963-1014 A. H.)

But it is hard to accept that the Emperor was influenced by Tulasi Das to such an extent that he struck a coin in honor of Rama and Sita. Tulasi Das and Akbar are not known to have ever met. It is, however, possible that the Bhakti movement connected with the cult of Rama grew increasingly popular during the later years of Akbar's reign. It may be conjectured that to secure the support of the Hindus, particularly the Ramabhaktas, Akbar issued these coins.

According to K. D. Swaminathan (JNSI, XXXIV (II), pp. 263-264.), this coin can be dated back to 1683 A. D., as the date occurring on the reverse of the coin is Vikram Samvat 1740. A. M. Shastri (JNSI, XXXVII (I-II), pp. 172-176.) dates this coin back to the 18th or 19th century (JNSI, XXXVII (I-II), p. 174) based on the paleography of the legends. Thus, these Rama-Tankās are to be placed after the 17th century A. D., i.e., after the death of Akbar.

The religious conflict between Hindus and Muslims was kept in control by Akbar. But his successors were quite unable to curb the religious animosity. They favored their own religion. They seem to have stopped the minting of the Rama-Sita type of coin issued by Akbar. People of the two religions adopted new methods for propagating the cause of their own religion. Most probably at this time the Rama-tankās were manufactured by private agencies, like temple authorities at different religious centers to popularize the Vaishnava cult. Thus the Rama-tankās appear to have come into vogue as a result of the conflict between the Hindus and Muslims.

The Rama-Sita type of Akbar further suggests that the Rama-tankas were possibly issued about the same period when Akbar and the Hindus felt the influence of the Bhakti cult as advocated by Tulasi Das. Thus the origin of the Rama-tankas has to be connected with Agra. Later the Rama-tankās were issued from many religious centers in the country and depicted, besides Rama, Jagannath, Kali, Lakshmi Krishna, etc.

The Rāma-tankās were primarily meant for preservation rather than circulation as currency. Some pieces display the same design on both the obverse and reverse sides but bear different dates and shroff-marks. It appears probable that such pieces were periodically struck and underwent alterations in their size, weight, etc. (JNSI, XXXII (II), p. 215.)

The Rama-tankās mentioned above evidently fall into the category of religious tokens (tankās). However, the general term "Rama-tanka" cannot be universally applied to all religious tokens (JNSI, XXXVII, Parts I & II. p. 176). In certain instances, the name may be retained if the depicted scenes have associations with the Rama story (JNSI, XXXVII, Parts I & II. p. 176).

Note: This article originally appeared in the Journal of the Numismatic Society of India, A.K. Coomaraswamy Centenary Volume, 1978, minus an abstract and keywords.

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