

ORIENTAL NUMISMATIC SOCIETYINFORMATION SHEET NO. 16THE COINAGE OF BHUTAN, byN. RHODES

Bhutan is an independent Buddhist monarchy with a population ca 1.1 million and an area of about 18,000 square miles, lying between India and Tibet, to the East of Nepal and Sikkim. Until this year it was one of the few countries in the world which had never been open to tourists, and few outsiders have been fortunate enough to visit it.

Very little is known about the history of Bhutan prior to 1600. Each valley had a largely self-sufficient existence, and there was little or no political unity. Certain valleys benefited from the trans-Himalayan trade between India and Tibet, as the route to two of the easiest passes across the mountains pass through Bhutanese territory. In the early 17th century a powerful leader emerged in Bhutan, the Shabdung Ngawang Namgyal. A lama from Tibet, the Shabdung unified Bhutan and built Dzongs (castles) all over the country. He set up a code of laws and a system of Government, which was to remain unchanged for over 250 years, with the Shabdung, or Dharma Raja, as religious and political head, whose successor was dependent on reincarnation, as with the Dalai Lamas of Tibet. Since the Shabdung was usually under age, there was a Regent, or Deb Raja, in charge. The Regent was elected by, and ruled through, a State Council consisting of ten of the most powerful local chieftains each of whom controlled a region of the country on feudalistic lines.

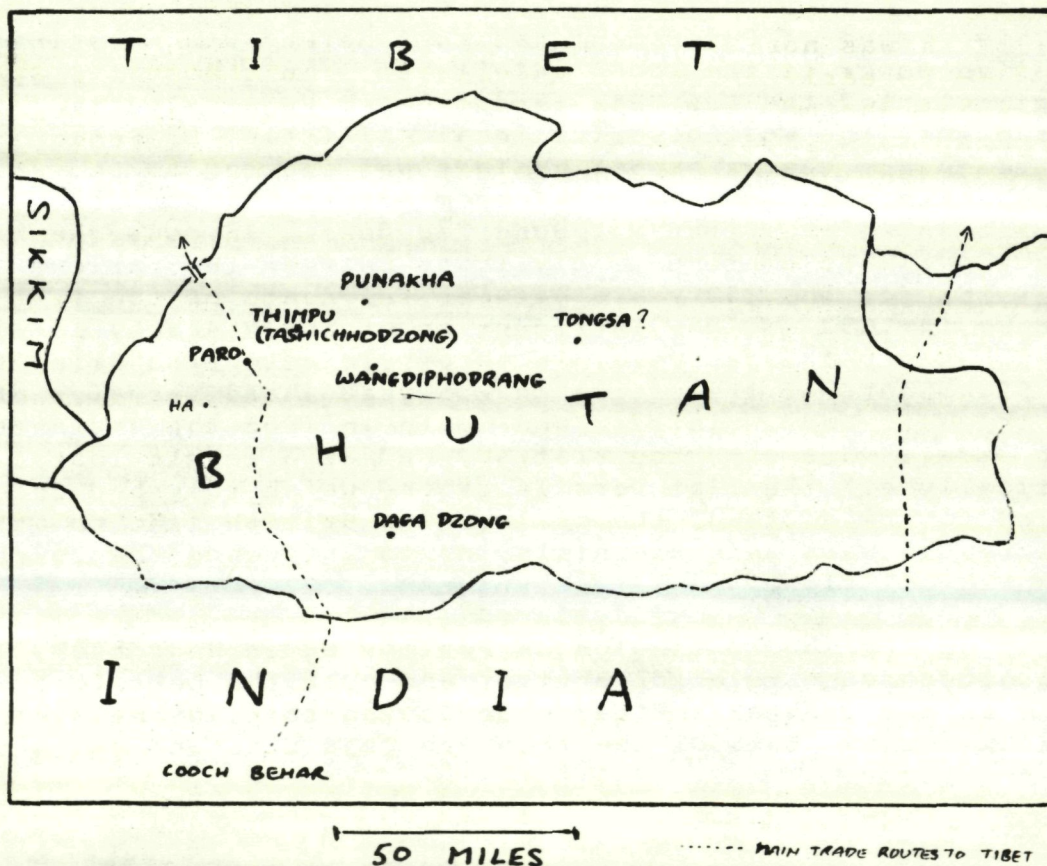
This system of Government had an inherent weakness in the excessive power of the local chieftains. In theory the State Council elected the Deb Raja, and the Deb Raja ruled the country. In practice, the most powerful local Chieftain, or Penlop, was able to ensure that a puppet nominee was elected as Deb Raja. Even when the Dharma Raja attained majority, he was never able to rule Bhutan as the first Shabdung had done. In consequence there was almost continuous civil war between the various local chieftains for the 250 years between the death of the first Shabdung in 1652 and the introduction of the Monarchy in 1907. Although the Deb Rajas were, in theory, elected for life, there were 55 holders of the office in 255 years, and very few of them died in their beds. In 1772 and again in 1865 the Bhutanese fought small wars with the British, and as a result lost practically all the flat fertile ground which they had once controlled to the south of the hills. The British made no attempt to carry the wars into the hills, or to influence the course of Bhutanese politics.

During the 1880's the Tongsa Penlop, Ugyen Wangchuck, emerged as an outstanding ruler of Bhutan, and over the next forty years was to have a greater influence on Bhutan than anyone since the first Shabdung. In 1901 the then Deb Raja died and was succeeded

by one Yeshe Ngodub, a very religious man, who left the administration of the country entirely in the hands of the Tongsa Penlop. Two years later the Shabdung died and, as no successor could be found, it was decided in 1907 that the interests of the country would be best served by strengthening the Central Government and electing Ugyen Wangchuck as the first hereditary King of Bhutan, the posts of Deb Raja and Shabdung being abolished. The King continued to rule through a State Council or Council of Ministers, but the power of the local Chieftains was greatly reduced, and there was peace in the country. In his foreign policy, Ugyen Wangchuck saw the advantages of friendly relations with the British in India. Claude White, the Political Officer in Sikkim was invited to attend the Coronation in 1907 and in 1910 a Treaty was signed whereby the British agreed not to attempt to exercise any control over the internal Government of Bhutan, and Bhutan agreed to be guided in its foreign relations by the advice of the British Government.

Since the death of Ugyen Wangchuck, in 1926, the country has been ably governed by his son, his grandson and now his great-grandson, Jigme Singe Wangchuck, who ascended the throne in 1972. Indian independence has not changed the relations between Bhutan and India, and close ties are maintained. In 1971 India sponsored Bhutan in joining the United Nations, and Bhutan is now gradually emerging into the arena of world politics.

Map Showing Probable Mints In Bhutan



Numismatic Sources

The following account of the coinage of Bhutan is an initial study based on a personal interpretation of the very limited evidence available, supplemented by much intuitive guesswork. Other people may interpret the evidence differently and the main source material is therefore set out below. Readers are invited to approach this paper with due scepticism, and to point out any errors or omissions.

The identification of the date and place of issue of Bhutanese coins is not yet possible to any satisfactory degree. In recent Bhutanese publications there are two differing accounts of the introduction of coins into Bhutan. The first says that the "copper coin formerly known as Chhetrum Ghatikhagpa was first minted in 1681 to commemorate the accession to the throne of Tenzin Rabgye, fourth Debraja of Bhutan, with the assistance of the neighbouring King Padma (Prana) Narayan of Ghatikhage State (Cooch Behar)." (1) The second version merely states that "in the sixteenth century copper coins known as Zangtam were introduced." (2) Neither of these stories can be trusted in detail, but it is probable that coins of Cooch Behar were introduced into Bhutan in the 16th century and it is not impossible that Prana Narayan may have encouraged the Bhutanese to strike coins during his exile in Bhutan from 1661 to 1663 when the Moghuls occupied Cooch Behar.

There were no urban communities in Bhutan and coins must have played only a small part in the economy being used as a convenient supplement to the barter system. Taxes and wages were paid in kind, and wealth was normally held in grain, rather than coin. The use of coins in early Bhutan is mentioned by Lobpon Nado in "A Short History of Bhutan". (3) He records that the first Shabdung (1616-52) was presented with a sack of silver coins by Darcho Gyatsen of Chapcha, and that the 8th Deb Raja, Druk Rabgye (1707-20), "presented to every monk in Punakha a rug of sheepskin, a piece of Indian cloth and a silver coin, and to each member of the public he also presented a silver coin". The coins used on these occasions were probably struck in Cooch Behar and it seems that the Bhutanese used to send silver to Cooch Behar for minting, as on 17th January 1785 the Deb Raja wrote to the Governor General of India requested assistance in recovering Rs. 5000 of silver sent to Cooch Behar for striking into coins and not yet returned. (4) A parallel can be found in the arrangements between Nepal and Tibet at this period. Relations between Cooch Behar and Bhutan became strained in 1771 when there was a dispute over the succession to the throne of Cooch Behar. The Bhutanese invaded Cooch Behar, installed their candidate on the throne, and carried the rival off to the hills. The British seized this opportunity of extending their sphere of influence and sent a company of soldiers to Cooch Behar, defeating a small Bhutanese force, and installed a son of the previously unsuccessful candidate on the throne. Soon afterwards Treaties were signed between the British and Cooch Behar and Bhutan under which Bhutan agreed not to interfere in the affairs of Cooch Behar which passed into the British sphere of influence.

The British did not at first interfere with the Cooch Behar coinage, but in 1789 they closed the Cooch Behar mint thus making it impossible for Bhutan to have silver struck into coin, and probably providing the incentive for the first Bhutanese mints. The exact date of the first Bhutanese coins is not known, but it was probably not long after 1789.

The first mints were situated entirely in the west of the country, probably because this was the area of circulation of Cooch Behar coins.

The first account of coinage in Bhutan is by the Bengali, Kishen Kant Bose who visited Bhutan in 1815.

"There was formerly no mint in Bhutan, but when the Bhuteas carried away the late Raja of Cooch Behar (in 1772), they got hold of the dies, with which they still stamp the Narainy rupees. Every new Deb Raja puts a mark on the rupees of his coinage, and alters the weight. The Dherma Raja also coins rupees, and besides them no one else is permitted to put their mark upon the rupees, but there are mints at Paro, Tongsa and Tagna". (5)

From this account it is clear that by 1815 there were at least three mints in Bhutan and marks were used to differentiate the issuing authorities. It would seem that as the various Deb Rajas altered the weight of their coins, the Bhutanese issues should not be as consistent as the Cooch Behar issues in this respect, but as no mention is made of the metal content we may assume that the coins appeared to be made of silver. Bose's account should not be accepted in detail and the story about taking the dies from Cooch Behar may have been made up to explain the curious fact that Bhutan struck coins of the Cooch Behar type. The location of the mints should not necessarily be trusted as at this period the Penlop of Daga had no power and people in Bhutan today are of the opinion that no coins were ever struck as far east as Tongsa.

The state of the coinage about 20 years later is described by Capt. R.B. Pemberton, who went to Bhutan on behalf of the East India Company in 1837/8. (6) He mentions that the Bhutanese coins was now called the "Deb rupee" and that the standard of purity of the metal was dependent on the personal honesty of the official who struck it; "so great a variety is found in the standard value of the coin that it is altogether rejected by the inhabitants of the plains." He also says that the Bhutanese used to take silver coins from the plains, melt them down, debase the alloy, and then strike their own coins, indicating that the Deb Rupee must have circulated at very much in excess of the metal value. It must be assumed that some control was exercised over those entitled to strike coins, as a clause was put into the 1865 Treaty of Sinchula between the British and Bhutan by which Bhutan could demand the extradition from British territory of Bhutanese subjects accused of "counterfeiting current coin, or knowingly uttering false coin". (7) This authority was presumably granted by the Deb Raja and the Dharma Raja and because of the profits which could be made from coining, the right to strike coins must have been a jealously guarded privilege, vested only in those powerful enough to demand it.

Although contemporary accounts give a general framework into which the coins must fit, none of the visitors to Bhutan in the late 19th and early 20th century saw fit to describe the coinage in any detail, so any further information must come from the coins themselves.

The Coinage

The accompanying plates show a representative selection of Bhutanese coins. They are divided chronologically into five periods, and within each period into a number of types. These sub-divisions are by no means watertight, and it is occasionally difficult to decide the appropriate period or type for a particular piece.

Period I (c 1790-1840)

The "Deb rupee" which was intended to be a silver coin and to circulate at the same value as the "Narayani rupee" of Cooch Behar. The Bhutanese issues can be distinguished from the Cooch Behar issues by the high relief, errors in the reverse design and slight differences in the obverse design with sometimes the addition of a Tibetan letter. Bhutanese pieces have the horizontal line across the centre of the reverse extending to the edge of the coin

i.e.



instead of



as on normal
Cooch Behar
coins.

Until about 1830 the coins were struck of relatively fine silver with weights of 4.2 +/- 0.4 gms. During the 1830's the silver content was reduced in rather a haphazard way, with different mints producing coins of different standards at the same time. Some coins are copper with a silver wash which is often completely worn off, making it impossible to distinguish between the last coins of Period I and the first of Period II. Two parallel series of coins can be distinguished, "dot" coins and "cross" coins, probably from two different mints or issuing authorities. They may be the issues of the Deb and Dharma Rajas, or else the issues of Punakha and Thimpu or Paro.

Period II (c 1840-1865)

The "Zangtam" (copper coin), often colloquially called the "Matam" (red coin). From some date around 1840 there was no longer any attempt made to strike a silver coin, the silver "Deb Rupees" virtually disappeared from circulation and the remaining coins in circulation rapidly fell in value. Large numbers of these copper coins were produced with virtually unchanged designs and weighing 3.9 +/- 1.0 gms. The two series of "dot" and "cross" coins continue, indicating no change in the "mints".

Period III (c 1865-1900)

In the second half of the 19th century, after the war of 1865, the workmanship and weight standard of the "zang-tam" became much more variable. Central control over those entitled to strike coins had always been weak but during the civil wars which lasted intermittently until the 1880's, became virtually nonexistent. Many unofficial mints were set up, but the forgeries produced were accepted into the currency and it is rarely possible now to separate official and unofficial products. During this period there were many new experiments in design, probably mainly at minor mints, as the major mints continued to strike coins indistinguishable from the issues of Period II.

Period IV (c 1900-1928)

During the last quarter of the 19th century, as the Bhutanese coinage deteriorated in quality, foreign coins became increasingly popular. As most of the foreign trade of Bhutan was with Bengal, Indian coins were particularly popular, but Tibetan coins also circulated widely. This deterioration in the popularity of the Bhutanese coins prompted Ugyen Wangchuck, who had controlled the country from the mid-1880's, to improve the quality of the coinage in an attempt to restore public confidence in it. The weight standard was improved and the designs were changed to make the coins more distinctively Bhutanese. For the first time a bimetallic coinage was attempted with both silver and copper or brass striking. Some of the silver coins were equivalent to the Indian $\frac{1}{2}$ rupee, whereas others were probably intended to be equivalent to the Tibetan tangka. Forgery was virtually eliminated, although Ugyen Wangchuck allowed the most powerful of his officials to strike coins at their own mints. This currency reform probably began around the turn of the century and perhaps not until after Ugyen Wangchuck was confirmed as hereditary king in 1907. Unfortunately this new coinage did not reduce the popularity of Indian coins and the exchange rate dropped to a level which did not allow any profit from the striking of coins in Bhutan. Before 1928, all the Bhutanese mints had ceased production.

Period V (1928 onwards)

By 1928, two years after the death of Ugyen Wangchuck, Bhutan had given up the struggle of maintaining a mint, and had placed an order with the Calcutta mint for silver half-rupees and copper paisa. The coins were designed by the chief engraver to the Calcutta mint, Mr. A.P. Spencer, after drawings supplied by the Bhutanese Government. The first half-rupees had an error in the obverse inscription, which was corrected for the later half-rupees and for the copper paisa. The coins were the same weight and fineness as the Indian coins, and the silver piece circulated widely, although the copper paisa was never popular.

After Indian independence in 1947, the price of silver rose steeply, and forced the old silver coins out of circulation and into the hands of the bullion dealers. In order to replace them India struck nickel coins, and Bhutan followed suit in 1950. The new half-rupees were identical in design to the 1928 issue, and even included the error in the obverse inscription. At the same time a copper paisa was struck with a new design. In 1954 a further order was placed for more coins, and this time the date on the half-rupee was changed to 1950 and the die of the paisa was recut. In 1967 an order was placed for a large number of half-rupees using exactly the same design, even though King Jigme Namgyal Wangchuck, whose portrait appeared on the coins, had died in 1952.

In 1974 it was decided to extend the range of the Bhutanese currency so that the shortage of small coin and notes in India would not spread to Bhutan, the new currency not being legal tender in India. Between April and August 1974 a range of coins and notes from 10 Ngultrum (= 10 Rupees) and 5 Chetrum (= 5 Paisa) were issued, and these now form a significant proportion of the currency in circulation in Bhutan, although Indian currency remains legal tender. Apart from the above issues, which were all for circulation, some coins were struck in London in 1966 in cupro-nickel, gold and platinum and a gold coin was struck in 1970. These pieces were struck entirely for sale to collectors, although a few did reach Bhutan where they were used as gifts.

Catalogue of Coin Types

No catalogue of Bhutanese coins can ever hope to be complete. Until 1928 every die was hand cut, and most of these dies differ from all other dies in some feature. The accompanying plates show a representative selection of hand struck Bhutanese coins, and together with a critical description, may serve as a catalogue.

The Cooch Behar Prototypes

A	Dhairyendra Narayan (1766-72, 1780-3)	AR ½ Rupee.
B	Rajendra Narayan (1772)	AR ½ Rupee.
C	Darendra Narayan (1772-80)	
or	Harendra Narayan (1783-1839)	AR ½ Rupee.

Note that the coin of Rajendra Narayan is the only Cooch Behar coin to have the cross to the right of the letter "ndra" on the obverse, whereas all Bhutanese copies seem to have the inscription "...rendra..." of Coin C.

Period I Coins which were intended to be silver

Dot coins, i.e. with a dot to the right of "ndra".

1. Hook in centre of rev: "Sa" to left of "ndra" on obv.
2. - ditto - "Sa" above "ndra" on obv.
3. - ditto - "Ma" at top right of obv.

Period I Dot Coins (Continued)

4. No hook on rev: "Sa" to left of "ndra" on obv.
5. - ditto - "Sa" above "ndra" on obv..

Cross Coins, i.e. with an "x" to right of "ndra" on obv.

6. No further marks.
7. Swastika to left of "ndra" on obv.
8. Tree to left of "ndra" on obv.

Coins 1 to 3 are only found in relatively fine silver, whereas the others occur in varying degrees of baseness. Coin 5 die-links pure silver specimens with pure copper ones, and as this is a small compact issue it must be late in the period. Coin 6 comes in many minor varieties, and double weight and half weight specimens are known; perhaps attempts at a multidenominational coinage. Nos. 7 and 8 use very few pairs of dies, and are always silvered copper and hence must be late in the series. The meaning of the letter "sa" (ས) which appears on so many coins of this and later periods is not known. It literally means "earth", but may here indicate "homeland". Since coins with this letter are the most common of all Bhutanese coins, it is probable that this was either the mint mark of the capital, Punakha, or else the mark used by the most powerful man in Bhutan, the Deb Raja.

Period II Copper or brass coins of good traditional style and weight.

Dot Coins

9. "Sa" to left of "ndra".
10. "Wang" to left of "ndra".
11. Swastika to left of "ndra".

Perhaps 50% of all hand struck Bhutanese coins are similar to No. 9. There are innumerable varieties of this type, with dots in various places, crescent above "ndra", variations in the inscription on either side, style, weight, metal, etc. By contrast No.10 is very rare and as the weight averages only about 3.5 gms. were probably struck late in the period, or even early in the next.

The meaning of "Wang" is not certain, but it may be short for "Wangdiphodrang" (རང་ཁོང་པོ་གྲོང་ཁོང་པོ་), a Castle to the south of Punakha and the seat of the Dzongpon of Wangdiphodrang, one of the most powerful chiefs in the mid-19th century. Two pairs of dies are known for this piece, whereas No.11 although more common, is known only from a single pair of dies.

Cross Coins

12. No further marks.

13. "Ma" above the letter "ndra".

No. 12 is the second most common of early Bhutanese coins, also appearing in innumerable varieties. By contrast, No. 13 is one of the rarest, with only one specimen recorded so far. The meaning of the letter "Ma" is unknown.

Period III Mainly light weight coins of more variable style.

14. "Sa" coin, with obverse design in mirror image and a swastika on the reverse.

15. "Sa" coin, with a tree added on the reverse.

16. "Cross" coin, with style similar to No. 25 below, and hence probably late in the period.

17. "Cross" coin with unusual obverse design. This reverse die is also found with more normal obverses.

18. "Cross" coin with unusual reverse design.

19. Two fishes in the centre of the reverse, and a "mace" on the obverse.

20. The first completely original Bhutanese design for a coin with a flower on the obverse and a swastika on the reverse.

21. Mule, with obv. of No. 20 and reverse of No. 19.

22. Crude coin, with legend "Sa Dar" to left of "ndra". This may be short for "ས་ངར་ཀར་" or the territory of Daga Dzong, the seat of the Daga Penlop, who may well have struck coins in the late 19th century.

23. A knot to the left of "ndra" on the obv. and a conch shell in the centre of the reverse.

24. A strange coin with "Ma" in the centre of one side and "Sa" written backwards in the centre of the other.

These coins are only a small selection of the most unusual coins of Period III. In addition to these pieces there are many variations on the theme of Nos. 9 and 12 above and coins of these types were certainly struck throughout Period III. In spite of the profusion of variations in design and style, only a single obverse die is known to combine a "cross" with the letter "Sa". Nos. 20, 21, 22 and 24 are very rare with few pairs of dies and all the other pieces illustrated are unusually fine examples of basically common types. One exceptional piece, similar to No. 19, is known struck in silver.

Period IV Coins of good weight with original Bhutanese designs.

Group A Coins with "ndra" on obv. and swastika on rev.

25, 26 & 27. All share one obverse die. Each variety is known in both silver and copper, and at least one further reverse die is known in silver only.

28 & 29 Each share a reverse die, and are each known in both copper and brass.

The "cross" and the similarity in style to No. 16 above, show that this issue was probably struck by the same authority as the "cross" coins of the previous periods. Weights vary from 3.4 to 5.4 gms., with an average of about 4.3 gms., with no noticeable change between metals. The silver coins may have been intended to circulate on a par with the Tibetan tangka.

GROUP B

Coins with four emblems, or the letter "sa" on each side. There is no "cross" in the design and these are successors of the dot series. The first two varieties have the letter "ndra" but this is omitted on later varieties.

30. A rare type, known in copper only.

31. Also rare, known in both copper and silver. The silver coins, weighing between 4 and 4.5 gms. were probably intended to be tangkas.

32. The same reverse as the last type, but no letter "ndra" and the letter "sa" appears on the obverse. Copper only.

33. Same obverse die as last, several different reverse dies are known, all variations on the one illustrated. Known in base silver only, with weights between 3 and 4 gms., and perhaps intended as tangkas.

34-37 Silver coins with weights between about 5.3 and 6.3gms. and probably intended as half rupees. Several more varieties exist, with slight variations in the placing of the symbols.

38-39 Copper versions of the previous coins, but although designs are similar, no die links are known. The copper coins are slightly lighter than the silver, averaging 4.8 gms for 38 and a variety of 39 with pellets on obv. whereas No. 39 only weighs about 3 gms.

40. Same reverse die as No. 39, but obv. with inscription "Wang". This coin also weighs about 3 gms. The meaning of "Wang" is literally "power", but here it may stand for Ugyen Wangchuck, the first King of Bhutan.

Group C

41. Coins with 4 Buddhist emblems on each side in the angles of a swastika. This type was thought by the present Home Minister of Bhutan to have been struck in Paro by the Paro Penlop, Dawa Paljor, who ruled in Paro from 1876 until 1918. The coins are mostly in copper, with average weights of 3.6 gms. but a few silver $\frac{1}{2}$ rupees are known. The following combinations of reverse and obverse dies have been seen and others probably exist:-

In copper Aa, Ab, Ac, Ae, Ba, Bb, Bc, Bd, Be, Ce, Df
In silver Ef.

Group D

42. Coins struck with dies much larger than the flans, and hence only showing a small portion of the design, which is of Buddhist emblems in the squares formed by interlacing lines. Most specimens are copper, weighing an average of about 3.4 gms., but some pieces in copper weigh double or half this, and large silver pieces are also known weighing about $8\frac{1}{2}$ gms. The following die combinations and weights exist:-

In silver	(Wt. 8.5 gms.)	Eb
In copper	(Wt. 6.4 gms.)	Not recorded
In copper	(Wt. c3.4 gms.)	Aa, Ba, Ca, Cb, Db, Eb.
In copper	(Wt. cl.8 gms.)	Aa, Ba.

Group E

43. Machine struck coins with plain edge. The variety illustrated weighs about 4.4 gms. and a second variety, with a mongoose on one side and a swastika in the centre of the other weighs only about 3.3 gms. The coins are well struck, although not up to the standards of the Calcutta mint. Probably the only person in Bhutan capable of issuing such a coin was Raja Sonam Tobgye Dorji, the Deb Zimpon. Undoubtedly the most progressive of the Bhutanese chieftains, he administered the territory bordering on India, and may have struck coins in his castle at Ha. It is interesting to note that there is a Dorji, or thunderbolt in the design of both types.
44. No account of the coinage of Bhutan would be complete without an incident which occurred in 1910. At this time the Chinese has strengthened their hold over Tibet, and the Dalai Lama had fled to India. The Chinese in Lhasa also made several attempts to assert a claim over Bhutan, and among other things issued a proclamation to Bhutan demanding that Chinese rupees be allowed to circulate in Bhutan. The Bhutanese rightly ignored this demand, and although Chinese rupees are occasionally found in Bhutan, they never circulated at more than their bullion value. This rupee however, is occasionally found countermarked with the letter " ↻ ", so often found on Bhutanese coins, and it is possible that this mark was added by the Chinese authorities or by some Sinophile, in an attempt to make the coins more acceptable to the Bhutanese people.

Period V

Since the post 1928 coins from Calcutta have been reasonably described in modern catalogues such as Yeoman and Mishler it is worth mentioning only a few details which have previously escaped publication.

Two varieties of the rupee, Y.4, exist, differing in the first word in front of the head on the obverse. The first 20,000 pieces, struck in 1929, had "འཇམ་ལྷོ་མོ་", which was corrected the following year to "འཇམ་ལྷོ་མོ་" when 30,000 more pieces were struck. The first variety exists in proof striking and there are trial strikings in tin with milled edge (wt. 6.8 gms.) and plain edge (wt. 5.4 gms.). The copper coin of this issue, of which 10,000 were struck in 1931, exists also in proof striking.

The 1951 and the 1954 strikings of the 1 pice, Y.3, can be distinguished since the die was recut for the 1954 issue. The two easiest features to recognize are the top of the conch shell and the eye of the fish.



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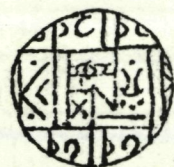
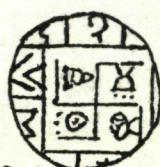
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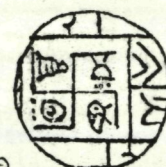
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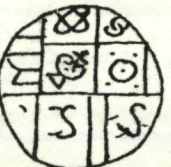
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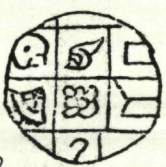
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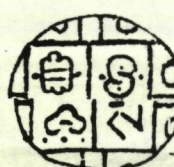
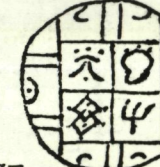
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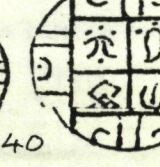
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39



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41 Obv.



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B



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b



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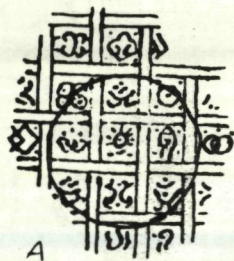


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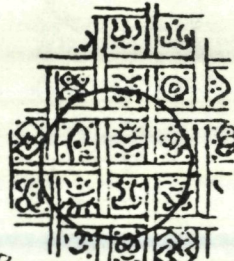


f

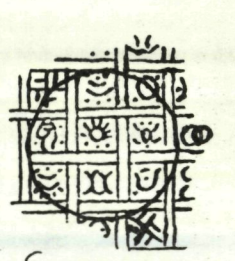
42 Obv.



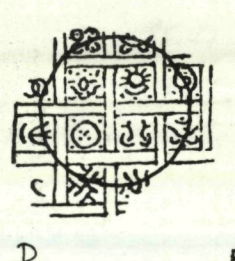
A



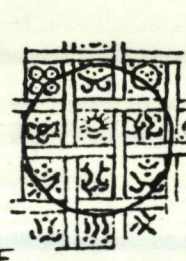
B



C

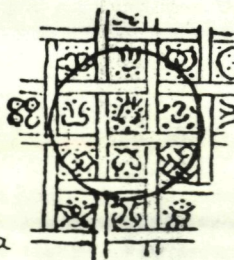


D

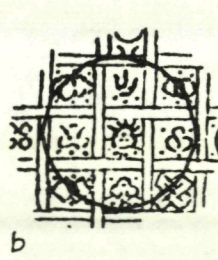


E

Rev.



a



b



43



44