



## The priceless legacy of P.L. Gupta

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

We owe a great debt to coin collector P.L. Gupta, whose career continues to shape the study of the monetary and numismatic history of India

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Parmeshwari Lal Gupta was without question one of the most influential numismatists of India.

He transformed the previously known but enigmatic punch-marked silver coins of ancient India into a usable source for economic and political history. (Made available in his 1961 doctoral thesis, *Punch marked coins in the Andhra Pradesh Government Museum* and numerous subsequent publications.)

His work at museums in Varanasi, Mumbai and Patna embedded numismatics in the landscape of heritage curation in India.

His role in the foundation of the [Indian Institute of Research in](#)



monetary history.

Over the course of his career, Gupta wrote about, reviewed publications on and edited collections including the study of almost every coin series known from pre-modern India, as well as archaeological remains and other antiquities, such as statuary. (A few examples: *The Amaravati Hoard of Silver Punch Marked Coins* (1963); "Early Byzantine solidi from Karnataka", *Numismatic Digest* (1984); *Numismatics and Archaeology: 2nd International Colloquium*, edited with A. K. Jha (1987); *Kusāna Coins and History* (1994).)



That these remarkable achievements in numismatics constituted only one aspect of Gupta's public and professional activity suggests something of the story of a life which has the power to inspire and encourage.

There are biographical accounts of Gupta available, upon which this one is substantially based, and an article such as this cannot and ought not seek to replace warm and detailed accounts by those who knew him.

As a numismatist whose career began only a few years after Gupta's death, I have developed an interest in his life from reading his articles and books and the accounts of his life by others, and offer this article as a personal reflection on his influence.

(The biography of Gupta summarized here and the anecdotes reflected upon come substantially from the introduction by the editors of the two-volume *Indian Numismatics, History, Art and Culture: Essays in Honour of Parmeshwari Lal Gupta*, D. MacDowell, S. Sharma and S. Garg, as well as the commendations to prizes and acceptance letters by P. L. Gupta included in volume 1.)



interest in the campaign for Indian independence from British rule. He was expelled from school in 1930 for organizing a peaceful protest in support of this cause.

His formal schooling thus ended at the age of only 16 and he became a well-known activist and campaigner until Independence in 1947. With this aim achieved, he withdrew from politics, though he continued to organize local initiatives to create, among other things, a public library and a school for girls in his native town.

From 1947, he worked for several years as a journalist before returning to study. He gained an MA in ancient Indian history and culture and, in 1959, aged 45, a PhD from the Benaras Hindu University.

During this time, in addition to freelance journalism, he began his career in museum curation. After receiving his doctorate, he continued to work as a professional curator and, ultimately, museum director, publishing extensively and working to foster numismatic collaboration and communication within and beyond India.

His doctoral research had entailed work in almost every major museum collection in India to clean, catalogue and record silver punch-marked coins. During that time, Gupta had also been in correspondence with scholars in the UK, and especially at the School of Oriental and African Studies.

This strong scholarly network, enhanced in 1962 by a fellowship at the British Museum, enabled Gupta to play a crucial role in the development of numismatic societies and collections throughout India.

Numismatics is and always has been a field which brings together university and museum academics, professional collectors and amateurs—a tradition of inclusivity and collaboration exemplified by Gupta's career.

His interest was first kindled by examining the coin collection of a lawyer, Rama Shanker Rawat, with whom he worked in the 1930s and '40s as a member of the Indian Congress movement. It entailed a lifelong commitment to museum work and engagement with academic research and teaching.

The final major project of his career reified many of these themes. The



numismatist K. K. Maneswari to create a place of study and learning available to anybody with an interest in South Asian numismatics.

Today, the institute organizes numismatic training courses for museum personnel and early-career researchers and houses Gupta's own numismatics library and collection of photo-cards of coin finds, in addition to new acquisitions.

It also offers residential stays to researchers seeking to use the collection as well as managing a public exhibition on numismatics. It has become a familiar publisher for any scholar of South Asian numismatics, producing catalogues, edited volumes and monographs.

In his lifetime, Gupta was recognized for his work on numismatics by numerous societies and international organizations, including the Numismatic Society of India (the Chakravikrama Medal in 1954, the Nelson Wright Medal in 1962 and an Honorary Fellowship in 1972), the Royal Numismatic Society (the Lhotka Memorial Prize in 1971 and an Honorary Fellowship in 1975), the Asiatic Society of Calcutta (the Sir Jodunath Sarkar Gold medal in 1975), the International Numismatic Commission (Honorary membership in 1986), the American Numismatic Society (the Archer M. Huntington Medal in 1987) and the Asiatic Society of Bombay (an Honorary Fellowship in 1993).

The South Indian Numismatic Society has also created the P.L. Gupta Medal to honour the services of others to numismatics.

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The life of Gupta is inherently interesting for many reasons and from various perspectives, whether the history of Indian independence, local civic philanthropy or adult education. This breadth alone deserves recognition.

Gupta demonstrated a willingness to engage with and influence people in many spheres and life and exhibited a lifelong belief in the individual capacity and responsibility to effect change. Something that still resonates in our current political environment.

In the face of global-scale transformation, it is easy to become disheartened by the apparent insignificance of individual action, and much harder to find, as Gupta's career illustrates, a route which



Nevertheless, within this general lesson, specific aspects of Gupta's life hold particular significance for me as a scholar.

In his acceptance of the Royal Numismatic Society Medal in 1977, Gupta was keen to emphasize the collaborative nature of that focus—the support and encouragement he had received from other scholars. This is a feeling familiar to most numismatists. The field is, as a rule, a welcoming and open one.

Gupta also, however, made a point of crediting another key figure in his intellectual development—his wife Annapurna. Again, acknowledgements to spouses are by no means uncommon in scholarly literature. But the detail which struck me as a young, female researcher reading Gupta's acceptance letter in the summer of 2009 was his assertion that, "though barely literate, she (Annapurna) had been a constant source of inspiration to me in my activities and researches, without whom many of the numismatic findings for which the medal was awarded would have been impossible".

Gupta and his wife married very young, shortly after Gupta was expelled from school, and had five children. It is a trajectory which remains typical for hundreds of thousands of couples in rural India and around the world, from an early marriage to discrepancies of education between men and women.

It is a given that I believe passionately in the right and benefit of full and equal education for all, regardless of gender. Nevertheless, Gupta's relationship with his wife and his public openness about the value of her contribution to his intellectual life strikes a chord for me because it is a reminder that even in a world in which the value of academic education is loudly and sincerely espoused, there will be those for whom it does not define their lives, who lose out or make other choices or come to study later in life.

In India, the pressures of population size, GDP and administration will likely make illiteracy a fact of life for thousands for the foreseeable future.

Without advocating complacency, such a reality begs the question of how inequalities of education translate, beyond structural inequalities of



those who do not, to respect other sources of experience and knowledge, to see that modes of expression taught in a classroom are not necessarily more valid because more polished, without resorting to an anti-intellectual fetishization of “homespun wisdom”?

This is not, of course, a question with an answer, so much as a perpetual obligation to consider the implications of our own views and opportunities.

As a scholar, I find the life and work of Gupta furthermore reflects two levels between which any historian operates.

“Close detail” and “broad overview” provide a constant, usually creative, tension in any study of the past. For the numismatist, they are expressed in the stereotype of us as preoccupied only by the minute and the concomitant fear that when our work takes us into broader questions, we might inadvertently miss some crucial specificity.

Gupta’s career and public activities reflect careful negotiation between these two poles, and an awareness of the interaction of the pragmatic with the theoretical in numismatic scholarship.

One of the first works of Gupta which I came across in my doctoral research into Byzantine coins found in India was his 1972 article “An interesting treasure-trove from Weepangandla (Mahboobnagar)”, published in the *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*. It concerned a hoard discovered in 1964 in Andhra Pradesh, containing a selection of jewellery and a few coins identified by Gupta as being Roman or Byzantine.

The article tells a fascinating story, not just of the discovery of the hoard, but also of the subsequent disposal of the jewellery found with the hoard since it was felt by a worker in the museum service to have no historical value.

That Gupta even found out about the hoard to tell this story, and took the time to examine its contents, reflects his breadth of interest and the strength of his network within India. His treatment of it in his short article reflects his keen eye for detail, commitment to the preservation of scholarly knowledge and constant eye on the “bigger picture” within which all scholarship takes place.



example, that on the obverse of one of the coins could be seen "bust to front with beards and moustaches; two pearl-strings and a cross over the head, fillet-like object on either side of the bust; meaningless scribbling around".

He correctly and cautiously identified the coins as imitations of Byzantine coins of the seventh century, observing that this was a subject little studied. But also that it was not possible to say whether the imitation occurred in India or elsewhere.

Subsequent study by the present author can confirm not just that the Weepangandla coins are imitations of seventh-century Byzantine issues, but that on the basis of other finds in India they were most likely produced in India and that such finds from the seventh century are extremely rare in comparison to those from the fifth and sixth.

These were conclusions easier to draw, however, in 2016 in a context in which both Gupta's and other scholars' work on Roman and other foreign coins in India provided local comparators. Also, crucial work unavailable in 1972 has since been done on the classification of Byzantine coins.

Detailed work follows on detailed work and gradually makes possible the drawing of new conclusions. It only remains to lament, with Gupta, that the finds of jewellery discovered with the coins were discarded, since they could have provided an invaluable clue to the dating and classification of notoriously challenging objects for the archaeologist, including necklaces and rings.

His attribution of the fault in this case, however, returns to the broad view. The erring museum official is never named, but the decision-making processes which enabled the error are lambasted: "This is one glaring instance of the irreparable loss that has happened by having a non-technical Officer in a technical department".

Loss is, naturally, an inevitable component of the work of any historian or numismatist. We study what remains in the full knowledge that the majority of potential evidence does not. But Gupta's work within the museum system of India to improve procedures and policies has undoubtedly helped to maximize the resources available to the modern researcher.

His own story, though, also featured loss and is the final anecdote upon



The ability to edit, revise and easily produce multiple copies is taken for granted. Nevertheless, lengthy study is dogged by the chilling panic of having lost an irreplaceable scribbled note, of not having backed up the latest copy or of realizing too late that a half-remembered detail seen in a museum storeroom far away has become crucial to an argument one never expected to make, thus requiring repeat journeys and extra note-taking.

This constant anxiety about data management for numismatists entails the additional challenge of having to keep track of notes about and records on potentially hundreds and even thousands of unique objects. When these must be seen at great personal expense in time, travel and prior arrangement for viewing time, the problem is compounded.

In the accounts preserved of Gupta's path-breaking study of Indian silver punch-marked coins, it is recorded not just that he personally ordered the collections of many of India's great public museums or that he created systems of classification still used today.

It is also recorded that, undertaking his doctorate at a distance from his supervisor and while also in employment—not an uncommon experience for PhD students worldwide—he once took his almost finished draft and working notes with him to Lucknow by train to visit his supervisor for a discussion. Somewhere on the journey, the suitcase was lost.

This was another tale of Gupta's career which has stayed with me from the early days of my own studies. It is easy to empathize with the sinking feeling, the clenching gut, upon discovering that the expected suitcase was not where it was left, the desperate hope that it might somehow turn up or be found.

This is an act of imagination, not fact, an empathetic reaction somewhere in the connecting space between the past and history, but not a difficult one for anybody who has brought something almost to fruition and imagines its sudden loss to guess at.

The end of this anecdote is clear from the fact the Gupta in due course did become the published authority on punch-marked coins, but it makes the middle no less inspiring.



pieced his notes back together, recovered and recreated his conclusions.

It is a simple tale of determination which provides encouragement on days when nothing seems to be going right and deadlines loom out of the chaos of everyday obligations.

It is also a reminder that technology makes scholarship easier in innumerable ways but does not alter the fundamental requirement upon numismatists to engage personally and creatively with enigmatic objects often from centuries ago; and to feel, in feeling for Gupta's historic loss, that one is part of a community and an endeavour shared across space and time.

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The career of Gupta continues to shape the study of the monetary and numismatic history of India. His legacy in the museum collections he curated and the institute he helped to found is a thriving South Asian numismatic community and collections and publications with international relevance and impact. His writing still communicates with clarity and methodological good sense.

These aspects of his career have received praise from others with greater experience. This article, instead, offers a personal interaction with a figure known to me only from the published work by and about him, which nonetheless highlights the power of research to create communities and conversations across generations and between continents.

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