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Numismatic Narratives: Sovereignty, Identity, and Devotion in the Parvinder S. Khanuja Collection of Sikh Coins

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Abstract

This paper is a case study of the role of coin collecting in the Sikh diaspora in the United States, with comparative references to broader sources on Sikh and non-Sikh coin and medal (i.e., numismatic) collecting beyond this one collector and collection. Here we briefly survey the collection of Sikh coins assembled (within a much larger collection of Sikh and Punjabi art and heritage) by Dr. Parvinder S. Khanuja, examining the collector's criteria used to select coins as a preferred or important collectible, and also the criteria used to ascribe value to particular coins based on their characteristics (original mint or place of manufacture, age or date of manufacture, materials of manufacture, and physical condition), as well as their prior line of ownership (i.e. their "biographies" as objects). We also survey current literature on Sikh coin collecting in comparison with the broader collecting and study of numismatics, looking for generalizations about Sikh vs. non-Sikh coin collecting and how value is ascribed to coins. We find that the importance of coin collecting for Dr. Khanuja, and in the literature on Sikh numismatics, is closely tied to the concept of former Sikh sovereignty or political control that (in the past) made an autonomous coinage possible. This paper illustrates some exemplary coins that Dr. Khanuja and his family highly prize, documenting the importance ascribed to sovereignty, identity, and devotion. The significance ascribed to coinage as a symbol of sovereignty, the relevance of his collecting to the collector's strong Sikh identity, and the fact that collecting may be an expression of Sikh religious devotion, all seem to constitute motivations for the formation of this collection. Based on references to such concepts in Sikh numismatic literature, these motivations seem very likely to be characteristic of a broader Sikh collecting tradition rather than an idiosyncratic one used only by this collector.

Keywords: Sikh art, Numismatics, Collecting, Sikh studies, Sovereignty, Art collectors

Introducing the Collector: Parvinder S. Khanuja

Dr. Parvinder S. Khanuja, managing and founding partner of cancer and research centers in Phoenix, Arizona, has always maintained a strong interest in Sikh heritage, as Taylor (2019) has outlined in a recent paper about Khanuja's collecting of Sikh art, in the journal *Arts of Asia*. The present paper, which draws on that earlier one in the initial description of his family background and several observations about his art collecting¹, focuses specifically on his numismatic collecting. This was inspired

¹ Specifically, the next four paragraphs after this one, briefly summarizing Dr. Khanuja's family and professional background, are drawn from Taylor 2019.

by his comment (quoted in Taylor 2019) that he began his collections by collecting Sikh coins. This has led to a closer look at this aspect of his collecting and the collection itself which provides a useful overview of the range of Sikh coinage.

Dr. Khanuja's ophthalmologist father, Darshan Singh Khanuja, was born in 1917 in Jhelum (modern-day Pakistan) and fled eastward to the new state of India in 1947 during the partition of the Indian Subcontinent with his wife, Ajit Kaur Khanuja, who was herself born in Nairobi before her own family had moved back to South Asia. Their son Parvinderjit ("Parvinder"), born in 1959, completed his medical degree in India before immigrating to the United States in 1983, continuing his training and practice in Detroit until moving to Phoenix in 1993. He says he was drawn to Phoenix by the same things that draw so many people there, "the weather and the opportunity."

Admitting his religiosity is not as "bookish" as that of many Sikhs, Khanuja (Figure 1) generally considers art collecting a form of religious practice. "At the end of the day," he says, "collecting is for the community, and also to safeguard this art." He finds inspiration in several verses of the *Guru Granth Sahib* about *seva* or service. "One who performs selfless service, without thought of reward, shall attain his Lord and Master" (SGGS p. 286); and more simply, "You shall find peace, doing *seva*." (SGGS p. 25). Khanuja also feels collectors help preserve Sikh heritage of which he believes much has already been lost in Pakistan as well as India (Taylor 2019:107; cf. Amardeep Singh 2016).



Figure 1. Parvinder Singh Khanuja at his home in Phoenix, Arizona. To his left is a 19th century marble sculpture, purchased at auction, featuring Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839), who ruled a 19th century Sikh empire from his base at Lahore.

Though he had long been interested in Sikh history, Khanuja only began collecting around 2007, feeling he could use artworks to explain his own heritage to Americans

around him. “I collect,” he explains, “to bring an awareness of the Sikh religion to a wider public. I feel the collection belongs to the Sikhs, but it should also have an impact in the broader community.” Based in Phoenix and occasionally returning to visit India, he builds his collection relying on a combination of personal networks and bidding at auctions.

Recently he succeeded in fulfilling his long-held dream for building local public awareness of his Sikh culture and religion, by funding the permanent Khanuja Family Sikh Heritage Gallery at the Phoenix Art Museum (Figure 2). The Museum inaugurated the Gallery with its first-ever Sikh exhibition, entitled “Virtue and Valor: Sikh Art and Heritage,” which opened on April 22, 2017 (Figure 3). All the works displayed there were loaned from the Khanuja family collection. Khanuja hopes that by means of this gallery at the Phoenix Art Museum, and other opportunities for public dissemination, he can spread awareness of his Sikh religion and heritage through art.



Figure 2. Exterior view of the Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, Arizona.



Figure 3. A view of the exhibition “Virtue and Valor: Sikh Art and Heritage” (April – November 2017), the first of a series of exhibitions in the Phoenix Art Museum’s new permanent gallery of Sikh art, funded through a donation by the Khanuja family.

Dr. Khanuja started by collecting Sikh coins during visits with his family in Chandigarh, India. He recounts that coins attracted him at first because the Sikh Kingdoms' former ability to mint coins expressed their sovereignty and self-rule but he quickly expanded from this focus on coinage to a broad variety of Sikh art, buying from friends and other collectors as well as auction houses.

The Khanuja collection now includes over 800 coins, of which the collector suggests about 50 are "rare." Coins illustrated in this paper were selected as a small sample of coins representing this collection.

Literature on Sikh Coinage

The main corpus for the study of Sikh coinage today has been *Coins of the Sikhs* by the Swiss scholar Hans Herrli, first published in 1993 with a "revised and augmented" second edition 11 years later (Herrli 1993, 2004), which has become a standard reference on the subject, and Surinder Singh's PhD thesis and later monograph *Sikh Coinage: Symbol of Sikh Sovereignty* (Singh 2000, 2004). Herrli's research visits the sites of all former Sikh mints, and is laid out in geographic order, while Singh uses the study of Sikh coins to trace Sikh sovereignty or territorial rule. Singh (2003:15-24) also discusses prior literature on Sikh coinage, which he considers a very inadequately studied topic characterized by few systematic studies of coin collections themselves but rather numerous accounts of political history in which coinage is briefly and often incorrectly mentioned. He writes:

Sikh coinage has been erroneously treated by numismatists as merely one of the many currencies of the native states which emerged in the chaotic conditions which accompanied the downfall of the Mughal Empire. While the currencies of some native states continued to exist until India gained independence in 1947, Sikh coinage went out of circulation with the annexation of Punjab in 1849 and the declaration of Sikh coinage as dead currency. Sikh coins have some very unique and fascinating features defining the concept of Sikh sovereignty, but the study of Sikh coins has virtually remained a neglected subject till recent times; no significant research on this subject has taken place in Indian universities. (Singh 2003:16)

One of Surinder Singh's concerns about the field of Sikh numismatic studies is that collections themselves are largely unpublished (a lack of published catalogs), as scholars generally lack access to good collections in this field (Singh 2003:21). This

is a broader concern for the field of Sikh art, which has only recently benefited from an increased visibility in well-illustrated scholarly exhibition catalogs (e.g. Stronge 1999, Goswamy and Smith 2006, Taylor and Pontoen 2014, Triton Museum of Art 2019), along with studies of diasporic private collections of Sikh art (Taylor and Dhani 2022; Husain 2020), including some major compendia in which one author of this paper (Taylor) was involved, compiling information and illustrations of major Sikh art collections assembled by Dr. Narinder S. Kapany (Taylor and Dhani 2017) and the wider Sikh and Punjabi art collection of the Khanuja family (Taylor 2022), as well as other collections (e.g. Toor 2018, Runjeet Singh 2018). Rai (2017) authored the chapter on Sikh coins in Taylor and Dhani's (2017) book on the Kapany collection; however, Rai essentially provided an overview of the history of Sikh coinage rather than a study or survey of coins specifically in the Kapany collection.

As editor of the 2022 publication of Dr. Khanuja's collection, Taylor worked with Dr. Khanuja to produce the 432-page book *Splendors of Punjab Heritage: Art from the Khanuja Family Collection*, a richly illustrated sourcebook of images and information of this major collection assembled by the Khanuja family. The book includes one chapter on coins with a four-page essay by Dr. Parvinder S. Khanuja providing considerable insight into the collector's criteria of selection. The essay (Khanuja 2022, on pp. 355-358 of the book) is entitled "Symbols of Sovereignty: Sikh Coinage." The author does not mention here that his collecting of Sikh art began with or developed from collecting coins, but the importance of coinage to him is clear from the essay, which begins: "The most glorious, yet the most neglected aspect of Sikh heritage is its coinage." He then expresses thanks to Hans Herrli who "cast light on the topic of Sikh numismatics for the first time" with his 1993 publication. He also credits Surinder Singh for "appropriately" calling Sikh coins the "symbols of Sikh sovereignty," recalling the greatness of past Sikh empires. He notes that Sikh coins were unique for their period in not carrying the names of the rulers but rather were always "dedicated to the Divine through the blessings of the Sikh gurus, a fact that reflects the respect paid to them as providers and protectors" (p. 355).

Khanuja's (2022) essay, alongside Taylor's interviews with Dr. Khanuja while preparing Taylor's *Arts of Asia* article (Taylor 2019) and the book *Splendors of Punjab Heritage*, provide considerable insight into this collector's criteria of selection. The focus on coins as a symbol of a country's or people's sovereignty is, by contrast, rarely found among general numismatic collectors, as described for example in Clain-Stefanelli's (1970) survey of numismatic history. Lotis and Lee (2011), as part of their study of a private collection of Korean ceramics assembled by a Korean-American collector, looked closely at how the collector used his focus

on a collection of Korean art to maintain and celebrate his Korean-American identity within a multiethnic American society. They also surveyed general psychological literature on collecting and collections for additional insight into how those who assemble collections, especially art collections, are motivated. They summarized conclusions of psychologists who distributed questionnaires to collectors asking them about influences that motivate them. Other cited psychologists examined collecting as play and as aesthetic enjoyment, assessing that objects become “reframed, recontextualized, and classified into belonging to a particular category” after which collectors find no two objects within that category alike, enjoying the aesthetic play of differences and similarities providing “a certain visual rhyme to them, that appeal in such a way that a poem cleverly rhymes words” (Lotis and Lee 2011:14). Some psychologists have examined the satisfaction of ownership and control of a collection. Still others emphasize the way some collectors desire or pursue the closure that comes from having a complete set of one of each type within a series having a limited number of types (Lotis and Lee 2011:13-15). Many collectors, in our experience, are both “guilty” and “blessed” with most or all these sources of motivation identified by psychologists who have studied this topic – fortunately for all of us who benefit from the collections they have assembled.

Dr. Khanuja’s expressed attraction to coins as symbols of “sovereignty” can thus co-exist with other collecting motivations, and the title of Surinder Singh’s (2004) book cited above, *Sikh Coinage-Symbol of Sikh Sovereignty*, emphasizes the connection between coins and sovereignty. Surinder Singh, however, was writing as a numismatist historian attempting to identify the chronology of Sikh rulers properly through the study of coins struck, often finding fault with historians who do not take such evidence into account (Singh 2004:18-22, 158-166), since the dates and locations where Sikhs assumed sovereignty (i.e. governing authority) were marked by the fact that they struck their own coins at those times and in those places. However, outside the realm of numismatics and the historical study of political history in a region through coinage, there is a considerable literature on the present-day importance of Sikh sovereignty or Sikh nationalism among Sikhs in India as well as diasporic Sikhs worldwide, as surveyed for example in Singh and Shani 2022. They note, for example, that efforts Sikhs use to “define their subjectivities” or identify themselves as part of a Sikh community today use “competing narratives” (Singh and Shani 2022:3). First, Sikhs see themselves as members of a world religion, like Hindus or Christians – this view diminishes the idea of a territorial homeland. Another view is as a “vulnerable minority” as defined or listed in various registers of religion and ethnicity, which may lead Sikhs to find “common cause with other cultural minorities in pursuit of minority rights.” But importantly for the

present paper, these authors note a third major “narrative” of contemporary Sikh identity as well, especially relevant to this collector and his coin collection, when they state that “the narrative of a nation continues to be an important signifier rooted in the attachment to the Punjab, the historical myths and memories of the Sikh empire in the nineteenth century, and the territorialization of Sikh identity....” This seems to be the idea of Sikh homeland and (past) sovereignty that served as a source of inspiration for Dr. Khanuja personally, as perhaps for many in the Sikh diaspora, when he stated in Taylor’s earliest interviews with him that he began his collection by collecting coins, because the Sikh Kingdom’s coins “expressed their sovereignty and self-rule” (Taylor 2019:107).

We admit that, in this case, we were not investigating another potential motivation for numismatic or art collecting, by examining the market value of collections as investments that may go up or down in value, partly because this seems less relevant (and harder to quantify) for a private collector who is collecting but not selling. We nevertheless recognize that this topic is worthy of study in the future, ideally with price data from regular transactions over time, e.g., among art dealers.

Surveying the Khanuja Coin Collection

The chapter on coins within *Splendors of Punjab Heritage* (Taylor 2022:354-369) illustrates 133 coins and tokens from a collection of over 800 carefully selected coins and tokens in the Khanuja collection (with the exception of two coins illustrated, attributed to Banda Bahadur, that are historically important but not represented in this collection). They, alongside Parvinder Khanuja’s accompanying essay (Khanuja 2022), illustrate the importance of associating coins with the various mints and sovereign states to recount the history of Sikh polities and heritage during the Sikh Empire. The beauty and rarity of the coins, the messages of the inscriptions and quality of calligraphy, and the ability of the coins to illustrate important aspects of Sikh heritage are all among the criteria for selection in this collection, and inclusion within the publication. Among the objects illustrated also are “Sikh religious tokens which are often mistaken for coins” (Khanuja 2022:358) and also often included in numismatic collections. (Such small coin-like metal “tokens” may depict religious figures but are not generally considered coins because they are not a monetary medium of exchange.) The Khanuja family collection, as Dr. Khanuja’s essay notes, is “fortunate to have more than 800 Sikh coins, including some extremely rare ones such as gold *mohurs*, gold and silver fractions, unusual mints, as well as some unique coins such as square-shaped ones.” A well-illustrated selection of the coins is

presented in this new publication, a few of which are also reproduced here² including coins of the Sikhs from Lahore, prized for the quality of calligraphy as well as rareness (Figs. 4, 5), a pictorial rupee from the Lahore mint (Fig. 6) valued not only for its rareness but also for its pictorial insight into life at that time, an example from the Multan mint (Fig. 7) and a few examples of quite rare coins from mints seldom represented in collections including Mint Islamgarh (Fig. 8) and Mint Dera Ghazi Khan (Fig. 9).



Figure 4. Silver rupee of the first year of rule by Sikh misls from Lahore in the year VS 1822 (1765)



Figure 5. Rupee of Lahore mint of VS 1856 (1799), the year in which Ranjit Singh took over Lahore from Bhangi Misl



Figure 6. Pictorial rupee ostensibly minted for Naunihal Singh's wedding.

² Illustrations and captions presented here are taken from Taylor 2022:354-369.



Figure 7. Multan, first occupation by misls VS 1829 (1772).



Figure 8. Mint Islamgarh



Figure 9. Mint Dera Ghazi Khan

Conclusion.

Through this brief “case study” about one collection of Sikh coins assembled (within a much larger collection of Sikh and Punjabi art and heritage) by one collector, we examined the collector’s criteria used to select coins as an important collectible. We also surveyed literature on Sikh coin collecting in comparison with the broader collecting and study of numismatics. We find that the importance of coin collecting for Dr. Khanuja, and in the literature on Sikh numismatics, is closely tied to the concept of former Sikh sovereignty or political control that (in the past) made an autonomous coinage possible – a consideration absent in accounts of their collecting by many non-Sikh collectors. The significance ascribed to coinage as a symbol of

sovereignty, the relevance of his collecting to the collector's strong Sikh identity, and the fact that collecting may be an expression of Sikh religious devotion, all seem to constitute motivations for this collector. Based on references to such concepts in Sikh numismatic literature, these motivations seem likely to be characteristic of a broader Sikh collecting tradition rather than an idiosyncratic one used only by this collector.

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