

# Ashwamedha Yagya: Gupta Dynasty Coins and Inscriptions

Mamta Saxena<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(Former) Director General, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation

**Abstract.** The Ashwamedh Yagya, an ancient Vedic ritual extensively documented in Indian epics and Vedic texts, holds significant historical importance. This ritual, detailed in texts such as the Rig Veda and Yajur Veda, is also elaborated upon in the Mahabharata's Ashwamedha Parva. Despite its ancient prominence, the frequency and depth of the Ashwamedh Yagya declined over time after the Gupta dynasty. Archaeological evidence, including inscriptions and rock edicts, provides substantial insights into the practice of the Ashwamedh Yagya.

The Gupta dynasty's inscriptions, particularly those issued by rulers like Samudragupta and Chandragupta II, provide critical genealogical and historical data regarding the Ashwamedh Yagya. These inscriptions mention the performance of the ritual and highlight its significance during their reigns. Samudragupta, in particular, revived the Ashwamedh Yagya and issued commemorative Ashwamedha coins, which serve as crucial historical artifacts. These coins depict the ritual's elements and were used to honor the Ashwamedh Yagya, showcasing the advanced metallurgical technology of the Gupta period. Furthermore, archaeological discoveries, including inscriptions and rock edicts, illuminate the extensive practice of Ashwamedh Yagya among the Gupta rulers to build the nation and culture against foreign attackers of the time.

Overall, the Ashwamedh Yagya's practice and its documentation through archaeological findings, inscriptions, and coins reveal its extensive significance in ancient Indian history, particularly within the Gupta dynasty, for reviving Vedic culture through Ashwamedh Yagya.

**Keywords.** Ashwamedha Yagya, Archeological, Inscription, Gupta dynasty, Coins

\*CORRESPONDENCE

saxenamamta@hotmail.com

PUBLISHED BY

Dev Sanskriti Vishwavidyalaya  
Gayatrikunj-  
Shantikunj Haridwar, India

OPEN ACCESS

Copyright (c) 2024 Mamta Saxena

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License



## Introduction

The Ashwamedh Yagya, an ancient Vedic ritual documented extensively in Indian epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, as well as in Vedic texts such as the Rig Veda and Yajur Veda, holds significant historical importance. Detailed references to the ritual are found in Rigved Mandal 1.162 and 1.163, [1]. along with explanations in the Yajur Veda [2]. The Mahabharata's Ashwamedha Parva, authored by Rishi Ved Vyas, provides elaborate insights, including Lord Krishna advising Yudhishtira to perform the ritual after the war [3].

Despite its historical significance, the Ashwamedh Yagya's frequency declined over time. Records indicate only two rulers, Rajaraj Chola and Raja Jai Singh, performed it over the past millennium.

Inscriptions offer substantial evidence of ancient Indian kings conducting the Ashwamedha ritual, the most esteemed within Vedic culture. Lasting three days, with preliminary rites beginning a year prior and concluding ceremonies extending a year afterward, the ritual includes significant sacrificial rites and the construction of grand fire-altars.

According to Satapathabrahmana, performing the Ashwamedha expiates transgressions and remedies afflictions, even absolving the grave offense of killing a Brahman [4]. Traditionally performed after wars to mitigate environmental pollution and psychological impact, the Ashwamedh Yagya restores natural balance. The horse, central to the ritual, serves as a sacrificial offering to appease the overseeing deity Prajapati, with detailed procedures outlined in texts like the Taittiriya Brahmana (11, 1, 8, 6; 11, 2, 2, 6) [5].

Archaeological discoveries, including inscriptions and rock edicts, provide vital insights into ancient societies. Prajapati [6] identifies numerous instances of Ashwamedha Yagya: 1. Ghosundi Inscription: Among the earliest Sanskrit inscriptions, possibly from the 1st century BC, it mentions the Ashwamedha Yagya. 2. Ayodhya Inscription: Describes an Ashwamedha Yagya by Shunga ruler Pushyamitra Shunga. 3. Naneghat Inscription: Mentions two Ashwamedha Yagyas by Satavahana ruler Satakarni. 4. Moosana-

gar Brick Inscription: Records Devimitra's Ashwamedha Yajna in the Kanpur-Allahabad region [6].

These findings illuminate ancient Indian history and the practice of Vedic rituals like the Ashwamedha Yagya. In Dehradun, the 2000-year-old site Jagatram has unearthed three rare eagle-shaped fire altars, associated with the ancient ritual of horse sacrifice known as Ashwamedha Yagya. Inscriptions reveal King Silavarman of Yugsaila performed four Ashwamedha Yagyas during the 3rd century AD [7].

P. V. Kane [8] lists Indian emperors who performed Ashwamedha Yagya, drawing from ancient texts like Shatpath Brahman. Historical records suggest Udayachandra and Prithivivagrah conducted the ritual in the 9th century AD. Additionally, an inscription from 757 AD mentions the Chalukya emperor Pulakeshi's participation in Ashwamedha Yagya. These findings indicate the widespread practice among Indian rulers in ancient times [9].

## Gupta dynasty genealogy

The archeological evidence (fig. 1) issued by the princess Prabhavatigupta in Poona and Riddharpur provides the genealogy of Gupta dynasty. As mentioned in the first 10 lines of the first plate of the Poona copper plates of Prabhavatigupta the genealogy commences with Mahārāja Ghatōtkatcha, the inaugural king of the Gupta dynasty. His successor was Mahārāja Chandragupta (I), whose Son, from the Mahādevi Kumāradevi, was Mahārājādhirāja Samudragupta. Samudragupta was the grandson of the Lichchhavi chief and performed numerous aśvamēdha sacrifices. His heir was Mahārājādhirāja Chandragupta (II), a devout worshipper of the Bhagavat. Chandragupta II's daughter, born to the Mahadevi Kumaradevi beranāgā of the Nāga lineage, was Prabhavatigupta. She held the position of chief queen to the Vākāṭaka Mahārāja Rudrasēna (II) and was the mother of the Yuvaraja Divakarasēna.

Inscriptions -

1 द्विष्टम् [\*] सिद्धम् [1] जितम्भगवता [1] स्वस्ति [1]  
नान्दिवर्द्धना 'दासीदुसादि [राजो] महाराज]- 2 श्रीघटो-

त्कचस्तस्य सत्पुत्रो महाराजश्रीचन्द्रगुप्तस्तस्य सत्पुत्रो- 3  
नेकाश्वमेधयाजी लिच्छविदो (द) हित्रो महादेव्यां कुमारदे-  
व्यामुत्पन्नो 4महाराजाधिराजश्रीसमुद्रगुप्तस्तस्य (त्स) तु त्र-  
स्तत्पादपरिगृहीतः 5 पृथिव्यामप्रतिरथस्सब्रवराजोछे (च्छे)त्ता  
चतुरुदधिसलिलास्वादित- 6 यशा नेक गोहिरण्यकोटिसह-  
स्रप्रदः परमभागवतो महारा- 7जाधिराजश्रीचन्द्रगुप्तस्तस्य दु-  
हिता धारणसगोत्रा नागकुलसम्भू- 8 ताया (यां) श्रीमहादेव्यां  
कुबेरनागायामुत्पन्नोभयकुलालङ्कारभूतात्यन्त भगवद्भक्ता 9 वा-  
काटकानां महाराजश्रीरुद्रसेनस्याग्रमहिषी युवराज- 10 [श्री]  
दिवाकरसेनजननी श्रीप्रभावति (ती) गुप्ता सुप्रतिष्ठाहारे

Translation

“There was the Mahārāja, the illustrious Ghatotkacha, the first king of the Guptas!! His excellent son (was) the Mahārāja, the illustrious Chandragupta (1). His excellent son (was) the Mahārājādhirāja, the illustrious Samudragupta, (who was) born of the Mahadevi Kumāradevi; (who was) the daughter’s son of the Lichchhavi

(chief); (and) who performed several horse- sacrifices. His excellent son (is) the Mahārājādhirāja, the illustrious Chandra- gupta (II), graciously favoured by him<sup>12</sup> (i.e., Samudragupta), who is a fervent devotee of the Bhagavat (Vishnu); who is a matchless warrior on the earth; who has exterminated all kings; whose fame has tasted the waters of the four oceans<sup>14</sup>; (and) who has donated many thousands of crores of cows and gold (coins). (Line 7) His daughter, the illustrious Prabhāvatigupta of the Dharana gōtra, born of the illustrious Mahadevi Kubēranāgā, who was (herself) born in the Naga family;-who is a fervent devotee of the Bhagavat (Vishnu); who (was) the Chief Queen of the illustrious Rudrasena (II), the Maharaja of the Vākatakas; who is the mother of the Yuvraja. [10] (page number 8)



Figure 1: Pune plate issued by Prabhavatigupta, first plate mentioning the genealogy of Gupta dynasty [11].

The poona plates were found in Ahamadnagar from Maharashtra, though they were originally issued at Nandivardhan (at present

Ramtek, Nagpur Maharashtra). That plate also states that the King Samudragupta performed several ashwamegh Yagya in his ruling time, the

Son of Samudragupta was Chandragupta II [10].

The Allahabad pillar inscriptions created at the time of Samudragupta ruling period also provides the information about the Gupta dynasty. The study of Vishnu Puran, Bhagwat puran and vayu puran reveals that the Guptas probably ruled over Prayag, Saketa and along the river Ganga to the north of Bengal [12–15]. According to the archeological studies of Pune and Riddhapur inscriptions constructed by the Gupta princess Prabhavati-gupta, the daughter of Chandragupta II, state that she belonged to the Dharana gotra (clan) [10] (inscription line number 7). None of the Gupta records mention the dynasty's varna but Samudragupta proudly mentioned his maternal ancestry from the Licchavis in his Allahabad pillar inscriptions.

### Samdragupta

Samudragupta Parakrama is a title given to the third king and Son of the Chandragupta I, the title means the one who is protected by the sea up to which his domain was extended. scholar reveals the original name of the Samudragupta as Kacha who has issued coins describing himself as sarvarajochchhetta (the exterminator of all the kings) [15]. Samudragupta also known as (chirotsannasvamedhaharta) cause he had revived the Ashwamedh Yagya after a long time [16]. Samudragupta also issued coins after conducting the Ashwamedh Yagya. Samudrgupta's Allahabad Prashasti (inscription) is a panegyric composed by Harisena and written half as prose and half as verses.

The quote written over the coins also abides with the basic principle of Yagya and states that heaven can be conquered only by dharma, by the performance of a religious ceremony like Ashvamedha, by good deeds. In a archeological site of Khairigarh Uttar Pradesh a horse sculpture, is believed to represent horse of Ashwamedha Yagya by Samudragupta [17]. During the period around 335-380 CE, Samudragupta issued a coin of the Ashwamedh type. On one side, the coin features a horse standing to the left on a platform, with a sacrificial altar depicted to the left emitting smoke. A pennon is shown above the horse's head, and an upturned crescent is

depicted above its rump. The inscription "si" in Brahmi script appears below the horse. On the other side of the coin, Goddess Vijaya is portrayed standing left on a circular mat, with a chāmara (fly-whisk) held over her shoulder and either a pāśa (lasso) or paṭṭa (fillet). A filleted śakti (spear) is positioned to the left of the goddess [18].

The king Samudragupta issued different kinds of coins that have an important place in the history of coinage of India. The coins issued by Samudragupta include standard type, archer type, tiger type, battle axe type, lyrist type, Chandragupta I type, kacha type and Ashwamedh type. The Ashwamedh type coins were issued when the king Samudragupta conquered North and South and gifted them to the Bramhins who performed the Ashwamedh Yagya. This type of coin is very rare only 43 coins have been discovered between Patna and Saharangpur [15]. The diameter of these coins ranged from 19 to 23 mm while the weight varied from 112.5 to 119 grains. The average weight was 115 grains [18].

The elevated structure on which the horse is positioned is referred to as a "vedi" or altar. The yupa's foundation is situated partly within the altar and partly outside. This configuration is informed by the Taittiriya Samhita, which asserts that fixing the yupa entirely within the vedi results in the victory of the sacrifice exclusively within the divine realm. Conversely, if the yupa is fixed entirely outside the vedi, the triumph is confined to the realm of humans. However, by fixing the yupa partially outside and within the altar, it is believed that the sacrificer achieves success in both realms. In artistic representations, the yupa is commonly depicted as being partially affixed to the vedi and partially extending outside. On some rare coins, a low pedestal is observable above the platform on the vedi [18]. A depiction of the ceremonial post utilized during Samudragupta's Asvamedha is present on each Asvamedha coin minted in his honor. It is widely believed that these gold coins were specifically produced for this event and disbursed as fees and gifts associated with the sacrificial ceremony, in accordance with the essential



requirements of executing this ritual of renewal and abundance. Due to the likely connection to such a significant event, scholars frequently designate the Ashvamedha coins as 'commemorative medals.' Strictly speaking, this term implies a form of non-currency gift money [19, 20]

Inscriptions on coin of Samudragupta [21]  
 First side  
 राजाधिराजः पृथिवीमवित्वा दिवं जयत्यप्रतिवार्य-वीर्यः  
 Second side  
 अश्वमेध-पराक्रमः (Ashvamedhapamkramah)



Figure 2: Ashwamedha coins of Samudragupta [22]

### Ashvamedha Coins of Kumaragupta I

No epigraphic evidence has been discovered thus far documenting Kumaragupta I of the Gupta Empire engaging in the Ashvamedha sacrifice. Nonetheless, his coins substantiate the occurrence of at least one Ashvamedha ritual under his rule. Kumaragupta I's Ashvamedha coins are uncommon and exhibit artistic shortcomings

compared to those minted by Samudragupta. On the obverse, the horse is adorned in some coins, and the yupa appears crudely executed. The depiction of the queen on the reverse is characterized by a stumpy, bent, and corpulent figure. The Brahmi letter 'si' is notably absent beneath the horse. All coins adhere to a standard weight of 127 grains (15). however In the period

of Kumar Gupta I Mahendraditya as well, the Damodar copper plate grant of A.D. 443 records the sale of land by government to a Brahman to assist him in the performance of his Agnihotra

rites. Another Damodarpur grant dated 447A.D. records the sale of a land by government donated to a Brahmana for the maintenance of five daily sacrifices (Panchmahayajnas.) [23].

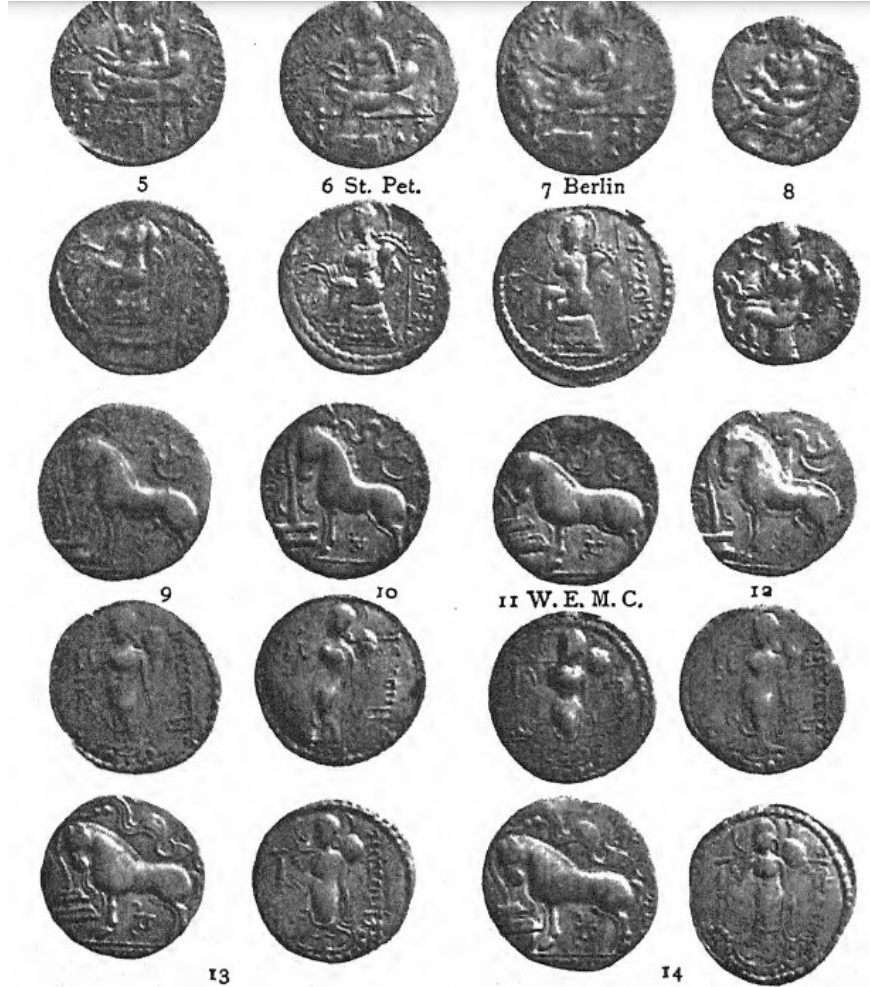


Figure 3: Ashwamedha coins of Samudragupta [22]

Inscriptions and description on coin of KumarGupta [21] (page number 297).

First side : Description “Horse standing to right, wearing breast-band and saddle, before yūpa on alter, the pennons from which fly over its back; between the legs of the horse, inscription in the Sanskrit language and Brahmi characters of the northern class.” Inscriptions - श्वमध ( = अश्वमेधः or अश्वमेधाश्वः )

Second side : -अश्व [मे]ध-महेन्द्र (Śrī Asvamed-

hamahendrah). Description of coin “Mahishi Anantadevi standing to left, nimbate, holding chowrie over right shoulder and some object in left hand, wearing ear- rings, necklace, armlets and anklets; sacrificial spear bound with fillets on left; border of dots; inscription in Brahmi characters” Inscriptions - -अश्व [मे]ध-महेन्द्र

#### AdityasenaGupta

He was acknowledged for performing 3 Ashwamedha yagya. According to the inscriptions

of Deo-Baranark Inscriptions of Jivitagupta- II (positioned at right hand side pier in porch) Adityasena had performed 3 Ashwamedha yagya in 7th century at Bihar. [24? ].

Stone Inscriptions of Deo Deo-Baranark Inscriptions of Jivitagupta- II

1. Sasta samudī anta-vasundharayah yasht-  
Aśvamedh-Adya-maha- kratūnam |

Adityasenah prathita-prabha-

2. Vo babbūva raj-Amara-tulya-tējah II  
Maghyam Visakha-pada- samyutavam  
Krité yuge Chola-purād-a-

3. pētya maha-maninamayuta-trayena  
trilaksha-chāmikara-tańkakéna II Ishty-  
Aśvamedha-trita-

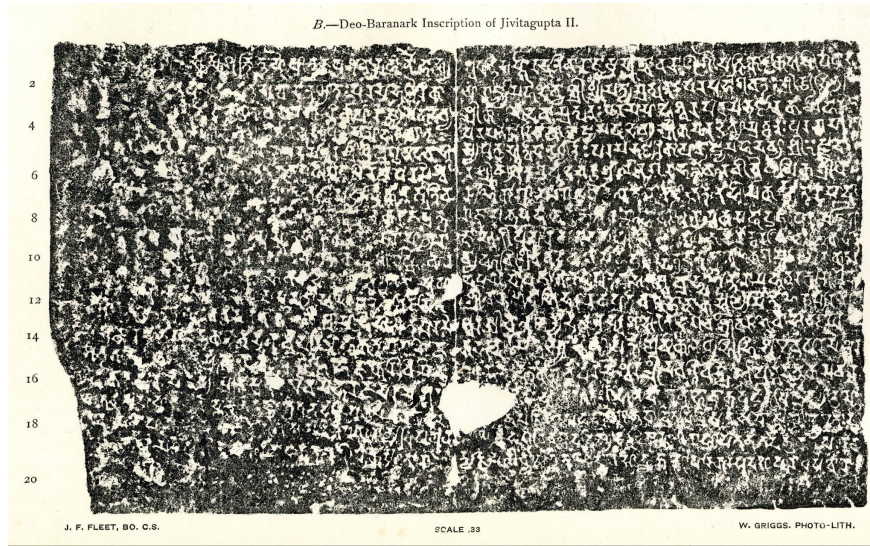


Figure 4: Deo Baranark inscriptions Jivita Gupta II [25]

## Discussion and conclusion

A lot of information is derived about the earlier kings who issued Coins with engravings on them. As we know the first (gold) coins were issued by the kings of Gupta Dynasty (AD c.320-550 A.D.), in India [26]. We learn that there was significant advancement in metallurgical technology by seeing the pristine gold coins of that age. Two great rulers, namely Samudra Gupta (r. 335–380 A.D.) and his grandson, Kumar Gupta I (r. 415-455 A.D.) issued several types of coins. They brought out special coins with Inscription of Ashwamedha ritual on them, now popularly known as Ashwamedha Coins.

**Compliance with ethical standards** Not required.

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

## References

- [1] Sharma S, Sharma B, eds. Rigved Samhita. Revision. Mathura: Yug Nirman Yojana Vistar Trust, Gayatri Tapobhumi; 2013.
- [2] Sharma S (Pandit Shriram Sharma Acharya), Sharma B (Bhagwati Devi). Yajurveda Samhita. Yugnirman Yojana Trust. 2002. Available from: [literature.awgp.org](http://literature.awgp.org).
- [3] Pandey RN, trans. Vedvyas Pranit Mahabharat, Ashwamedha Parva. Vol 6. Gorakhpur: Geeta Press; 1998. Available from: [archive.org](http://archive.org).
- [4] Sayanacharya, Shri Hari Swami. Shatpathbramhin. Vol. 1. Delhi: Nag Publisher; 1990.
- [5] Dumont PE. The Horse-Sacrifice in the Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa: The Eighth and Ninth Prapāṭhakas of the Third Kāṇḍa of the Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa with Translation. Proc Am Philos Soc. 1948;92(6):447–503. Available from: [jstor.org](http://jstor.org).
- [6] Chandel, E. (2024). Performers and Sites of the Ashwamedha Yagya in Medieval India. Dev Sanskriti Interdisciplinary International Journal, 23, 34–48. <https://doi.org/10.36018/dsij.23.340>



- [7] Ghosh A. *Indian Archaeology Review 1953-54*. Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, Government of India; 1954. p. 10. Available from: [asi.nic.in](http://asi.nic.in).
- [8] Kane PV. *History of Dharmasastra Vol II, Part II*. Poona: Bhandarkar Research Institute; 1941:1233-1234. Available from: [archive.org](http://archive.org).
- [9] Agrawal N. *Indian Antiquary vol. VIII*. Swati Publications; 1879:278. Available from: [archive.org](http://archive.org).
- [10] Mirashi VV. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, Vol. V*. Ootacamund: Government Epigraphist for India; 1963:6. Available from: [archive.org](http://archive.org).
- [11] Mirashi VV. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, Vol. V*. Ootacamund: Government Epigraphist for India; 1963:36-37. Available from: [archive.org](http://archive.org).
- [12] Rai R. *A history of Gupta age*. Amritsar: Lajpat and company educational publisher; 1965:25.
- [13] Goyal S. *Problems of Ancient Indian History: New Perspectives and Perceptions*. New Delhi: Book Enclave; 2001. ISBN 978-81-87036-66-1:150.
- [14] Ganguly DK. *The Imperial Guptas and Their Times*. New Delhi: Abhinav; 1987. ISBN 978-81-7017-222-2:1-2.
- [15] Rai R. *A history of Gupta Age*. Delhi: Lajpath and company; 1965:34. Available from: [ignca.gov.in](http://ignca.gov.in).
- [16] Willis M. *Later Gupta History: Inscriptions, Coins and Historical Ideology*. *J R Asiatic Soc.* 2005;15(02):131-150. doi:10.1017/s135618630500502x.
- [17] Jha DN. *Early India; A concise History*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers; 2016:174.
- [18] Raven EM. *Samudragupta's Asvamedha Coins in the Patterning of Early Gupta Coin Designs*. *Pratna samiksha Kolkata*. 2016;7:95-126.
- [19] Altekar AS. (1935 [1937]) 'Three Maukhari Inscriptions on Yupas : Krita Year 295', *Epigraphia Indica* 23: 42-52. —(1948). 'Asvamedha Coins of Samudragupta', *Bharata Itihasa Salsodhaka Mapdala* 29/3-4: 1-7.
- [20] Agrawal A. *Rise and Fall of the Imperial Guptas*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; 1989:315. ISBN 978-81-208-0592-7.
- [21] Sircar DC. *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization*. Vol. 1. Calcutta: University of Calcutta; 1942:267.
- [22] Allan J. *Catalogue of the Coins of the Gupta Dynasty*. London: 1914. Plate V. Available from: [archive.org](http://archive.org).
- [23] Willis M. *Later Gupta History: Inscriptions, Coins and Historical Ideology*. *J R Asiatic Soc.* 2005;15(02):131-150. doi:10.1017/s135618630500502x. (p77-78).
- [24] Fleet JF. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, Inscriptions of the early Gupta kings and their successors, The Gupta inscriptions No. 46 plate number XXIX*. Varanasi: Indology Book House; 1960:213. Available from: [archive.org](http://archive.org).
- [25] Fleet JF. IN00214 Deo-Baranark Inscription of Jivitagupta II. Zenodo. 2019. doi:10.5281/zenodo.3552880.
- [26] Ganguly DK. *The Imperial Guptas and Their Times*. New Delhi: Abhinav; 1987. ISBN 978-81-7017-222-2:1-2.