India's Kuka Movement Coin Depicts Executions

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LORD MACAULAY'S ADDRESS TO THE BRITISH PARLIAMENT FEBRUARY, 1835:

"I have traveled across the length and breadth of India and I have yet seen one person who is a beggar, who is a thief, such wealth I have seen in this country, such high moral values, people of such caliber, that I do not think we would ever conquer this country, unless we break the very backbone of this nation, which is her spiritual and cultural heritage, and, therefore, I propose that we replace her old and ancient education system, her culture, for if the Indians think that all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own they will lose their self esteem, their native culture and they will become what we want them, a truly dominated nation."

Two coins issued by the Republic of India in 2013 are the most recent of the few coins to ever depict the act of human execution. These coins commemorate the 150th year of the Namdhari, or Kuka Movement. The dates celebrated are 1857 - 2007, and while the design was completed in 2009, they were not dedicated until 2012 and not released for issue and sale until April 2013. The five Rupees coin, shown here, was released for circulation, while the similarly designed silver 100 Rupees is a low mintage 'non-circulating legal tender' issue. For anti-counterfeiting reasons it is the policy of the Republic of India not to publish mintage figures, even for NCLT coins.

150 Years of Kuka Movement, 5 Rupees coin in a brass alloy of 6 g. and 23mm.

Obverse feature are the Lions of Ashoka standing over the wheel of Ashoka Chakra.

Reverse central figure is Satguru Ram Singh Ji with executions occurring behind.

The most interesting feature of this coin's design is the background theme depicting two forms of execution, one by hanging, and the other by canon blast. As with many coins, when you delve into the history surrounding them, you will reveal a fascinating story, of which you may know little about.

First of all, a little background on the world's fifth largest religion with about 30 million adherents. The Sikh faith is a revealed monotheistic religion that is without a priesthood, but are guided by a gurus. Through a succession of ten gurus spanning the formation of the faith in the 15th century, to last guru in the 18th century, the tenets of this highly moralistic religion were solidified. Men reaching a high degree of adherence were initiated into the faith, and were said to be Khalsa (genuine and pure). With the First and Second Anglo-Sikh wars these Khalsa were formed into an army to physically and spiritually defend the faith. Namdhari Sikhs (Kukas) are a sect of the main Sikh faith with a major difference being the belief that the guru line of succession continues to the present day. In outward appearance the Namdharis always wear white cotton robes and their turbans are wrapped in certain fashion.

The central figure on the reverse of the coin is that of Satguru Ram Singh Ji, a Sikh and a soldier in the Khalsa army. Born in 1816 in the village of Bhaini, in the Ludhiana district of the Punjab (NW India) he participated in the Battle of Mudki (Dec 18, 1845) in the First Anglo-Sikh war. This critical battle of Sikh forces against the British forces of the East India Company was a defeat for the Sikhs even though the British lost many men, including prominent officers. Satguru Ram Singh (aka Baba Ram Singh) gave up service in the Sikh Khalsa army soon after the occupation of Lahore and returned to the village of his birth. There he gained a considerable following in the Namhdhari Sikh faith after preaching and organizing for nearly twenty years. Upon the death (1862) of Bhai Balak Singh the duties of guru fell to Satguru Ram Singh. With his ascendancy Satguru Ram Singh began to organize a shadow government with the main purpose of promoting and expanding the Namhdhari Sikh faith. His beliefs were very liberal for the time and became popular among some of all the various classes of people. The main tenets were: 1) abolish all class/caste distinctions; 2) advocate marriage among all the former classes, including widows, and restrict dowries and marriage expenses; 3) abstinence from liquor and drugs; 4) abolish the infanticide of girls; and, 5) increase the reverence for cows. Taken together, these, and the other tenets, were designed to purify their religion and to strengthen their society for the impending struggle.

While the near total domination of the British brought new technologies and opportunities to the Indian subcontinent, strong armed methods and societal changes also brought considerable disruption, particularly for rural Indians. Therefore, by 1857 several Indian independence and religious movements had risen to resist these undesirable foreign influences.

The 'Indian Revolt of 1857' (aka “The Sepoy Rebellion”) lasted until June of 1858 and led directly to the dissolution of the British East India Company, and to Queen Victoria becoming the Empress of India. The spark that sent off the wider revolt was the rumor among the *sepoys* (Indian infantrymen in the service of the British E. India Co.) that the new Enfield rifle cartridge packages were greased against corrosion by beef tallow and pork lard. The Hindu and Muslim troops could not avoid contact with this substance in the bullet packaging, which they tore open with their teeth. Hindu soldiers had religious restrictions to contact with beef products and Muslims soldiers had serious objections to pork product contact. Thus, the British had managed to offend nearly everyone in their army used to quell revolt and enforce policy. This was all the impetus needed for other disaffected groups to join the revolt. Princely state rulers were aggrieved by new changes in the inheritance laws that forbade their families from maintaining ownership of areas nominally independent of British control. Land reforms that confiscated the property of large land owners, distributing it to the peasants, came with heavy taxes that could not be paid by the new owners. Additionally, the Company meddled in traditional and religious practices. The Hindu practice of *sati* was forbidden in an attempt to modernize the culture. This practice involved the burning, or burial, of the widow when her husband died. While often a

voluntary sacrifice, too often it appeared to be enforced by the use of drugs and coercion to gain compliance. British sensibilities felt that the *caste system* was unfair and they tried to undermine that ingrained tradition as well. Christian missionaries were actively preaching to the *sepoys.* The Indians believed, quite reasonably, that their religions were under attack by the East India Company. Finally, the Indians had serious objections to the British legal system that was forced upon them. When the Indian people entered the British legal system, justice was swift and often brutal. However, when a British soldier committed a crime against the inhabitants, traditional judicial recourse could not be applied. This type real, and perceived, injustice was also a major factor in the Boxer Rebellion in China some forty years later.

Satguru Ram Singh's tactics against British domination were characterized by non-violence and non-cooperation, but these methods too raised the ire of the new British administration (Raj). After the 1857 revolt all resistance groups were under surveillance and various forms of suppression. Satguru Ram Singh began a policy of shunning everything that was British. The English school system, law courts, and goods were boycotted and replaced. The British postal system was avoided, and he began his own clandestine postal system (India's first) to prevent being spied upon. In a practice called *Swadeshi,* British goods were boycotted and replaced by Indian native crafts. The self production of white cotton cloth that was universally worn among the Namdhari Sikhs, called *khadi,* was encouraged and this renewed cottage industry bolstered the incomes of the poor. He even began diplomatic relations with neighboring countries like Russia, Nepal and Afghanistan. In effect, Baba Ram Singh had set up a parallel government to resist the British. This effort by the Namdhari Sikhs lasted from 1857 to 1917.

Every momentous movement has it's set backs. The Kuka had theirs when a group of them decided to break from their practice of non-violence. In June 1871, in response to sacrilege at certain Sikh religious shrines, these Kukas attacked a Muslim operated slaughter house, killed several butchers and set the cows free. They fled but the British desire for swift justice led to the executions of twelve innocent Hindus and Sikhs. Baba Ram Singh urged the guilty to come forth and confess and thus four additional Kukas were executed in September of 1871. The quick trial and execution of twelve innocents reinforced the low regard Indians had for the British legal system as it applied in the British Raj.

Further attacks by renegade Kukas led to the executions depicted on the coins celebrating the 150th Year of the Kuka Movement. Against the advice of Baba Ram Singh a large group of Kukas attacked Malerkotla in January 1872. Here, about 88 Kukas were captured and eventually executed or imprisoned for life. Some were hanged but the majority suffered execution by being tied, and blasted by cannon fire! Satguru Ram Singh, and eleven of his closest followers, were deported to Rangoon Burma where some believed he died in 1885. His methods of non-violent resistance to the British Raj were proven effective when similar tactics were employed successfully by Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi, and others, beginning in 1919. India declared of independence on August 15, 1947

The martyrs' gruesome form of execution lives on in the minds of Namdhari Sikhs and on the coin design celebrating the 150th Year of the Kuka Movement. Other coins struck celebrating the events of the mid-19th century period of revolt and resistance are the '150th Year of the Indian Postal Service', and the '1857 First War of Independence' commemorative coins.

Nearly all of the coins of the coins of the Republic of India feature the Lions of Ashoka (sometimes called the column, or pillars, of Asoka) on the obverse, either prominently or in miniature. These pillars with their exquisite sculptures were mostly erected by the Maurya Empire's King Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE. The history of King Ashoka and his pillars is very interesting, to learn more about them, and see photos and maps, I direct the reader to the following link:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pillars_of_Ashoka