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Episode name: Interview with Dr Paul Stevens on collecting Indian coins by Shreya Gupta (July 10, 2024)

People: Paul Stevens, Shreya Gupta, Shailendra Bhandare

Transcript

KEY

SG: Shreya Gupta

PS: Paul Stevens

SB: Shailendra Bhandare

SG: Hello, I'm Shreya Gupta. I'm a third year PhD researcher at the University of Exeter and the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, working on an AHRC funded collaborative doctoral project, titled decolonizing collections, investigating knowledge formation networks in colonial India with special reference to numismatics. The project looks at the history of four collections of Indian coins that are currently held in the Ashmolean, the British Museum in London, and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. While these collections are named after four European male coin collectors, we know very little about the Indian dealer scholars and collectors who helped them in assembling these collections. My aim is to uncover their role in creating these coin collections, and in producing expert knowledge about Indian history and numismatics on their basis. This interview was conducted as part of my PhD research under the topic afterlife of South Asian coin collections in UK museums. Here, I'm interviewing coin collectors, curators and scholars who work with Indian coins to inquire about the afterlives of these collections after they're acquired by UK museums, as well as understanding the interests and motivations of coin collectors and curators in collecting, studying and working with coins from South Asia.

Today I am interviewing Paul Stevens. So, I'm going to start by asking what sparked your interest in studying coins from South Asia?

PS (1:29): Well, so my grandfather was a coin collector. So, when I was a little boy, he showed me lots of coins. And I started collecting pennies, mainly from change. And in those days, one could get pennies, actually, most copper coins back to 1860 from change. So, I used to go to the bank with a five-pound note and get a bag of pennies. Because in those days 200 to 40 pennies to a pound. So, for five pounds, you got lots of pennies. And I'd sort through them all, choose a few that I needed for my collection, take the bag back and ask for another bag. And in those days, there were five or six different banks in each town. So, I would go down high street getting all the bags of pennies from each bank. And in fact, the bank started especially putting the bags that

I'd already had in one corner of a vault and giving me others. So that's how I started. But I formed a collection which, when after I got married the, we wanted to move from a ... at we bought first of all to a bigger house, and I said but we can't afford it. And my wife said what about all those coins. So, I'd sell and we bought at another house, but the deal was I could start another collection.

SG: Okay.

PS (3:09): And the time I was looking around to see what I could start collecting because I didn't want to collect the same things. And the catalogue from Spink came, which hadn't looked, in those days used to get a month catalogue from Spink and a lot of Indian Rupees, Victorian rupees, which were really quite cheap. So, I started buying them and it sort of grew from there. Obviously, the uniform coinage, sort of post 1835 stuff were like English coins.

SG: Right

PS (3:50): So, I collected a lot of those and actually it was when I went to Baldwins, who are a big London dealer that Peter Mitchell at the time had ran the company, said oh I've got all these other coins we haven't got many uniform coinage but they were all East India Company things, so that started me going backwards.

SG: Okay

PS: I suppose that was sort of in my 20s, really. So that's how it all started mainly because Indian coins were cheap.

SG: Yeah. And then, then it grew from there on to other types of coinage or, or that's

PS (4:32): Well, once had started on the East India Company stuff up I formed quite a big collection of that, and then wanted to collect others. So, well, I can't remember exactly how it happened. But certainly at one point there was another collector who had a big collection of princely state coins, and he wanted to stop collecting, so I bought most of its collection. But also, around about that time or perhaps a few years earlier, I started to get friendly with Stan Goron who just written a book on Indian Sultanate coins, and he tempted me into starting to collect those as well. And it just happen to coincide with a massive collection that came onto the market, which again Baldwins had, so I started buying those.

SG: So, it sort of diversified from starting on. Your collection.

PS: Yeah, working backward. But because I'm not very good at reading foreign scripts, of course, I needed people to help me. And so that meant I had to recruit Stan and Shailen to help me read all these coins

SG (6:06): Right

PS: Which I still do now that I am writing this massive catalogue of Indian coins.

SG: So so to study them, you sort of took other people's help. And then was there a time where basically, you could sort them and catalogue them yourself, in.

PS (6:24): Yes, exactly. That's exactly what I started doing. So from a cataloging point of view, I started writing a catalogue in a book, just to record, I'd already bought one, so I knew what I wanted to buy next. And that gradually developed into a list of all the coins that I could find available in various catalogues. Pridmore, the obvious one in those days it catalogues on the East India Company Indian coins, and I think he'd also done all the other Commonwealth coins, but also the uniform series. So I just made a list from his book of all the coins that he had recorded and ticked the ones that I've got. And once I started going for Mughal coins and native states coins that weren't really any decent catalogues. So like everyone else, I use the Krause Mishler catalogue, which, although it's not very good, because there are lots of errors, it does provide a starting point anyway. And of course, once I started on Sultanate coins, I use Stan's book on Sultanate coins.

SG: So these were basically other collectors and other people who worked with Indian coins that you were sort of collaborating with.

PS: Yes, certainly.

SG: Yeah. But there are people you mentioned auction houses as people in auction houses you were reaching out to?

PS (8:02): Yes, I mean, to start with, I suppose that the three major dealers in London were, Seaby, Spink, and Baldwins. Yes, I mean, to start with, I suppose that the three major dealers in London were Seaby, Spink, and Baldwin's. And when I was young, I can't remember exactly when, probably round 10, my grandfather had taken me up to London to visit all of these places, but in particular Baldwins. And the people in all of those, particularly Seaby and Baldwins all helped me to start with, because, of course, I didn't know any other people who collected Indian coins. So those dealers really were extremely helpful.

SG: So they put you in touch with people beyond the two

PS: No, no, no, they, I mean, to a certain extent they did. I can't remember now. You know, I met people in different places

SG: Okay

PS: And somebody at some point in that 1990s roughly, said, oh, you should meet this young Indian chap, who has been at the British Museum so, so I met him and asked him if he'd be interested in helping me write a book on the East India Company coins, which he said he would. And he is still helpful in places, in ways but writing books, it's not his forte.

SG: Okay, and amongst these places that you met, other contacts, etc, you you're now involved with the ONS, was that also one of these forums where you could meet other people interested in Indian...

PS (9:46): Yes, exactly. So, I had been a member of the British Numismatic Society, the Royal Numismatic Society and the Oriental Numismatic Society, but I found that the British and the Royal are really driven by, well, museum people, shall I say, to be polite. And well, I was a member of council twice, I think of the British. I just found them so tedious and boring. They're really not the meetings and I would turn up at the meetings, nobody spoke to each other. But the Oriental Numismatic Society, but it was completely different. It's mainly composed of collectors and people are very interactive and friendly. So they are the sorts of meetings that I like going to.

SG: Okay

PS: And in a way I suppose the other two British and Royal have become sort of old-fashioned places. And I hope that the Oriental doesn't do that, that it keeps being a place to meet people and talk about coins and so on.

SG: So when you were when you were a member of the Council for BNS and for RNS, for BNS sorry? Were there people who were interested there in South Asian coins are not that much.

PS: No, not really.

SG: Yeah, so ONS became sort of the alternative.

PS (11:31): Yes. I mean, the British had a, sort of, I don't know, what was it, it did extend to colonial numismatics. And I was invited to give talks, I think twice about East India Company coins. But there weren't really that many other people who were interested, and obviously, the Oriental Numismatic Society, a lot more people interested in those sorts of coins.

SG: Makes sense. And were you publishing in their journals? Your research that you were coming up with? In the ONS journal, for instance?

PS: Oh, yes. I publish lots of things in that. I think I'll publish some things in the British as well.

SG: Okay.

PS: Yes, was a sort of a fundraiser anniversary edition or something. And I wrote a paper on something.

SG: Okay.

PS: I can't remember

SG: That's fine, that's okay.

PS: But I've written a lot of papers for the ONS.

SG: Yeah, yeah, I thought so. Yeah. The reason I'm asking is to understand essentially, what are some of the forums in which research on South Asian coins is happening currently, and has been happening in the UK? So

PS: Well, in the UK, it's almost exclusively the ONS. There are a few things published in the royal, whatever it's called. What's the journal of the Royal called?

SB: Numismatic Chronicle

PS: Numismatic Chronicle. So there are a few things occasionally published there on Indian coins. But the main place is definitely ONS.

SG (13:19): Okay. And the books that you've written, how did you? You mentioned at the beginning a little bit, but how did you come up with the idea, what made you realize that this is a book that is needed in the numismatic world? And we need to study..

PS: Okay, well, my books and everything that I do, is really aimed at collectors. So it's not so much for academic things, although there is an element of academic stuff in it. And I suppose that it was the academic background, research scientists are interested in doing research in coins. So I decided, well, you probably don't know but Pridmore's books, he's he wrote about East India Company coins are excellent. But he gives no references at all. And so we have no idea where he got the information from he published, and a chap called Ken Wiggins approached me about writing a book on coins of the East India Company, together with another chap from Canada called Bob Puddester, they both came to see me and we drank a lot of wine and talked about the books and I showed them, what I created on the computer. This would have been in the 1990s, so before any ..

SG: modern technology

PS: stuff was really on computers.

SG: Yeah

PS (15:07): And they said, Oh, wow, you know, this is the book offering. So let's get together and do it all. So, I said that's great, you know, thanks for asking me, and we went to Australia, my wife and I, and daughter for a few weeks. And when I came back, Ken had died, and Bob said he didn't think he could continue without Ken. So I was sort of left with this thing, well, just vaguely sketched out. And so I thought, well, to do this properly, it can't just be a list of coins, I need to find out where Pridmore got all these

information from. So I started going to the, in those days, it was the India Office Library. Actually, I've started doing this before. But anyway, and I found the records

SG: Okay.

PS: And over the next 10 or so years, I visited the library because of course, I was full time employed. And I'd go on the occasional day off or on Saturdays, when it was open and collecting information from the records. And I found almost everything that people had found and more, so I thought, this is going to be interesting, from the point of view of adding more, but also being able to give the exact references to all the work that had been done. Plus, of course, by then it was 20 or 30 years after Pridmore had done these books. So lots more coins have been added to the list.

SG: So there was the need for an updated

PS: So I thought I'd have a go at writing a different one. So I started off with Bengal and the idea there was to write in each chapter, all of the information that was available, and follow it with a catalogue. And I did that for each period, if you like, of the coinage. And the book was published by Baldwins. And it wasn't very successful, because most collectors didn't want to have to look to the end of each chapter to find a catalogue.

SG: I see.

PS (17:53): So a few years later, I thought, well, I'll publish another catalogue, only this time on all of the coins of Madras, Bombay, and Bengal. And I'll just make it a catalogue with a few bits of text, not pages and pages of text. So I did that, that was very successful and now the standard work. And there was another chap in Canada called Randy Weir, who was exclusively interested in the uniform coinage, so that's post 1835 stuff, all the modern coinage basically. And he said, what about writing a catalogue of those coins?

SG: Okay

PS (18:44): So, I agreed with him, to do and we did it together. And that was really quite difficult actually working with somebody else because he had different ideas from mine. So although the book has become a standard reference work, it's not quite what I wanted it to be.

SG: Are you going to come out with an updated version?

PS: Well, I have thought about it I don't know if I can be bothered. The problem is writing books is getting all the formatting and it takes a long, long time. And it's very tedious, you know, if get it all formatted, and suddenly realizing missed out a bit, and it messes up the formatting for the entire book. And you have to go through the whole thing again, repaginate again

SG: Especially with a book, which is on coins and has a lot of photographs.

PS: Yes. So it's very tedious and I don't know I can bothered. I was going to update the East India Company book and issue a second ...

SG: edition

PS: .. edition, and I approach Spink and at the moment, who published the last one, they have stopped publishing books.

SG: Okay.

PS: So, I hope to see Emma Howard who is in charge of the book department, actually, at Shailen's

SG: Okay.

PS: In August, she's been invited. Hopefully, she'll be. I'll ask her what's happening? But books are

SG: becoming tough to

PS: Tedious to do. So what I'm doing instead is building this enormous website.

SG (20:40): I was just going to ask you, yeah, so this website, the what was the idea behind starting this, of course, you have a tech background. So you're interested in

PS: Well tech limited, I mean, mainly, I managed a big function. Really, I am just a manager, but I did know a bit about technology, but not very much. I mean, mainly I had 100 people working for me ...

SG: Okay. So you were managing them.

PS: ..doing what I asked them to do. But I, no, the thing that really inspired me, actually was going to see a chap called Bob Senior, in Somerset. And he lives in this really lovely place, it's just part of this massive house. And he's got a tower and things, in the office up in this tower.

SG: Interesting.

PS (21:43): Anyway, I went to see him, it would be 1980s I think. And he had started scanning coins with a handheld scanner, and getting photographs that he could put in the computer. And that really stimulated my interest in trying to get photographs of coins into computer. So that's why when Ken Wiggins and Bob Puddester turned up, they found that I already had a lot of stuff in the computer.

SG: I see, yeah.

PS: Because I've been playing with this since I'd seen Bob Senior.

SG: Yeah.

PS (22:26): He is a very inspirational person and that has just grown really. So obviously, I started off with the uniform coins East India Company and then Stan gave me his entire card catalogue of the Sultanate coins. So I've got boxes and boxes, full of cards, photographs stuck on them that he made in order to write the book. So I scanned all of those, and built a sort of a catalog, which has every entry from his book. And then I keep adding a certain person sitting not so far away, sending me photos of new discoveries, which I add to the catalog.

SG: And

PS: So then that's just sort of growing, you know, I bought this collection of native states coins so then I had to have a catalogue of native states coins so instead of just doing a catalogue of the coins I had I started building a catalogue of all the known coins and I'm still doing that so. The other thing that became quite clear to me was that a lot of people seem to have lists of coins with no evidence that the coins actually existed, ...have lists of dates.

SG: Yeah, but no specimens

PS (24:12): How did they know that list was right? And so I thought well, what I really want is at least one photograph and often many, of coins showing that they do exist so that's what I've been doing and you might say well you know you can rely on, so the people to be sure that if it says a coin, it does, but that's not true I am afraid. Even Pridmore, I have found one date so far, of a coin that nobody has ever seen an example of as far as I know, it doesn't exist. So unless you have evidence that these things exist, they might not.

SG: Yeah.

PS: And that's what I'm trying to do with this catalog.

SG: So your key focus is to have photographs on there besides other information, of course.

PS: Yes, exactly. So then, of course, I started discovering that you could put links from one place to another, so I could make a list of all the mints and then put a link from the mint to all the places that coins was struck, and I could put links from particular places to texts, things.

SG: For references

PS: So, this has become basically my everyday work now. And, right, so I'll tell you another problem that's recently.

SG: Okay. Yes, please.

PS: Not sure how relevant this is to what you want. The putting everything on a computer, which is now must be by far the largest catalogue of Indian coins, anywhere, is all very well, and I've put it up as a website, it's built on my PC, I just copy it out to the web. So I don't feel like.. until, because I've been ill for a few months now, it's made me realize that one day, I suppose I might shuffle off this mortal coil, put it in shape. And what's gonna happen then? And I mean, I'm sure I can get my daughter to keep paying for the website to be there, but obviously won't be updated anymore, because nobody else will know how to do it. And eventually, she's not interested in coins, she's gonna stop. So that's the end of it. So does everything just disappear?

SG (26:55): Well it won't disappear but yes, I see that you'll have to find somebody to train if they're interested.

PS: Yes, well, that's one possibility. But I've been discussing with various computer people and even if it can be kept going, sooner or later, the people who produce the web searching stuff are going to stop making that software work with the software that I've used, because the software I've used is from the 1990s, because that's when I started. So even now it's fairly old fashioned.

SG: I see.

PS: So even if that website kept being, I don't know, eventually, it's not going to work. So I thought, well, perhaps what I wanted to do, how do people preserve everything else? Well, it's all in books. I thought, well, I'll print it out. Yeah. So I started doing it.

SG: Great. Okay.

PS: Well, not the end of the story.

SG: Okay.

PS (28:00): Once I filled up one file, and I hadn't even completed the George the fifth coins, I realized it would take hundreds of files, and years and years just to print it out.

SG: Okay.

PS: So I gave that up.

SG: Okay. So the length is an issue.

PS: So I don't know what I'm gonna do about that yet.

SG: I see. Yeah, it's a difficult dilemma. But I hope you can find someone you can train who can keep it up in the future.

PS: I think it probably needs rewriting a more modern technology, that people could do that, but it would cost a lot of money. Because there are now 10s of 1000s of photos, maybe more than 100,000. I don't really know as I wasn't counting them and to transfer all that data to somewhere else may not be very easy at all. So anyway, that's ..,

SG: No, that sounds really exciting. A quick follow up, how much information on this website do you put about provenance and X collectors and collections that it has come from?

PS: So I always put

SG: Every time it's available? Yeah

PS: Yeah. Yes, whatever it's, I mean, occasionally, I have to put anonymous, and occasionally, people say, I don't want my name mentioned, so I just put private collector.

SG: Yeah. But but you try to, if the information is available, it will be on there.

PS: Yes, I mean, a lot of the information comes from auction houses, of course.

SG: Yeah, definitely.

PS (29:50): But some comes from collectors. There's a chap in America at the moment who's extremely keen on helping me and he sends me hundreds if not thousands of photographs.

SG: Okay.

PS: So. He is on holiday at the moment, so I've got a bit of a break.

SG: Oh, good for you. You need it.

So, you've mentioned some people that you've been meeting in the UK who work on Indian coins. Have you been in touch with or have got the chance to meet people from India who work on these collections?

PS: Well. Yes, I mean obviously.

SG: Besides Shailen, yeah

PS: Yes, some of his friends, collectors come over here, I meet with them and chat with them. Indeed, some of them even buy my coins. There are quite a few that contact me by email that I've never met

SG: Okay but you have been in touch with

PS: And some of the Indian dealers as well I have been friendly with for years.

SG: Okay. I see. And

PS: And America of course there are people, and the, Continental Europe, Heinz Bons for instance, springs to mind immediately.

SB: Were you in touch with somebody like Hans Hedley

PS: No, I don't know him. But that's you know, constantly changing, people contact me, all the time, I get an email from somebody I don't know and it will turn out to be a collector in London, for instance. Not long ago a chap contacted me and I hadn't realised, I had never heard of him before.

SG: I see. Okay. So. Sorry to go back to the website but have, I am sure people have reached out to you to tell you if it's been useful to them, and how accessible do you think it has been to collectors and to other people interested in researching these coins?

PS: Well, a lot of people contact me about the East India Company, uniform company stuff. I put old collection of Iranian coins up on it, they are not exactly Indian, but they, somebody sent me about a thousand photos and somebody from America contacted me and said how good it was. So, I get the occasional people contacting me. The numbers that access the website vary enormously. It can be from one week it can be over 100 and then for several weeks, it's only about 20. I mean, on average, I would say, probably about 50 people a week. But whether it's same 50, or

SG: or different, you can't tell

PS: I don't, I really don't know

SG: No, of course, no. And do you know, do you know where these people are accessing it, from?

PS: No.

SG: Okay.

PS: No.

SG: Okay, np but so so essentially, people are keen to both use it but also to contribute if they have collections to the ..

PS: Some people are, yes.

SG: Okay. That's great. Okay. Let me just go through my list again. So essentially, right now, just to sort of wrap it up, besides the website, what is your focus in terms of studying these coins or attending meetings? You're meeting other collectors. And you're basically updating the website?

PS: Yes. Yes. I mean. Not, now, I don't collect these coins. I collect Roman coins. So...

SG: Okay, what made you change to Roman coins.

PS: Well essentially the value of my collection had become so enormous, it was time to dispose off it. And I wanted to, well, tax avoidance, I suppose. So I had to put the money from there into trust for my daughter. And then I started another collection. I didn't want to collect the same things again. Yeah. So I looked around for something interesting. And Roman coins are very interesting. So, but basically, I'm a collector.

SG: Yeah, I was just about to ...

PS: I need to be collecting something.

SG: Yeah, I was just going to ask that, that the collector's zeal or enthusiasm hasn't gone away.

PS: No. No.

SG: Yeah.

PS: No. And you know, it's not just those I've collected old books, I've collected paintings from various times. Basically, I'm a collector,

SG: Yeah, collector by habit. I see.

For the Indian coins that you were collecting, you bought some from other people, but what what are some of the other places that you were

PS: Oh, dealers

SG: Dealers were the main source.

PS: Yes, yeah. Umm, Baldwins I bought lots from, coz I bought from all over the place.

SG: And mainly from auction houses in the UK.

PS: Yes.

SG: Okay.

PS: Not only auction houses, in those days, there used to be a much bigger retail market. So, you know that dealers would have huge stocks of coins. And there weren't many auctions, actually, there might only be one auction a year of coins. Maybe two a year, there was only one auction house that sell coins. There was Glendining, which is gone

SG: Which is shut down, yeah

PS: But now, just from a commercial point of view, to hold a stock of coins obviously cost a lot of money. It means you've got a big investment in the coins, whereas running at auctions, you don't actually have to pay for the coins. You just catalogue them and sell them and take the money. Buyers have to pay a buyer's premium. So it's commercially it's much more attractive to dealers nowadays. But when I was seriously collecting Indian coins, Baldwins in particular had a huge stock of coins, including Indian coins.

SG: And when was this approximately?

PS: 1980s, 1990s into the noughties, yes.

SG: Okay.

PS: Must be because I had all the Sultanate coins. That's when I collected those. So it's probably since well, actually, it's it's Baldwins was sold from the Baldwins family that all that stocks been disposed off. So they don't do that really anymore. Well, they do but they're much smaller. So

SG: Okay, great. I think that's pretty much it. Thank you very much

PS: Pleasure

SG: That's really useful.