

Buddhism in Bengal: A Brief Survey

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Abstract. The history of Indian Buddhism may be understood in relation to the thriving and decaying of the state of Buddhism in Bengal. Bengal holds a unique place in the history of Indian Buddhism for several reasons. First, it was in Bengal that Buddhism survived and flourished longest, until the twelfth century A.D., well after its disappearance from other parts of India. Second, Bengal is said to be the home of what is called a degenerate and corrupt form of Buddhism known as Tantric Buddhism that developed during the Pala period (ninth to twelfth century). This assertion raises some pertinent questions that need to be considered with caution and care. Third, Buddhism was eventually wiped out from Bengal for several reasons, the most important ones being the withdrawal of royal support, the revival of Brahmanism and the Turkish Muslim invasion. Fourth, Buddhism in much later times made a resurgence in the eastern part of Bengal in what is now independent Bangladesh. The small minority of Buddhists inhabiting this area, with roots going back to before the arrival of the Mughals and the British, makes an interesting subject for further study and research.

In the time of Gautama Buddha in the sixth century B.C., Bengal was not mentioned as one of the sixteen regions, *mahajanapadas*, that constituted the political structure of ancient India. The entire area that is known now as Bengal was divided into several small kingdoms such as Samatata, Harikhela, Anga and Banga in the east, Tamralipti and Radha in the west, and Pundra and Barendra in the north. The Vedic religion that was prevailing in India and predominant in that period could not be termed an organized religion as such – it was rather a cluster of complex rites and rituals associated with nature worship and animal sacrifice. The rise of Buddhism challenging the justification of the Vedic rites and rituals heralded the beginning of the history of definite and systematic religious traditions in India as a whole and so in Bengal.

For lack of historical evidence it is difficult to ascertain the exact nature of the political state and its relation to religion in India before the Magadhan empire came into being in the sixth century B.C. The rise of the Magadhan empire not only constituted the emergence of a strong monarchical state in ancient India; it also marked the beginning of a definite history of relations between the state and religion. It is in relation to the policies of state power regarding different religious traditions that the history of Indian Buddhism and so of the Buddhism of Bengal has to be seen. The thriving of Buddhism throughout India and especially in Bengal was due largely to royal patronage at different times by the reigning monarchs, the most notable ones being Bimbisara and Ajatasatru of Magadha, Ashoka of the Maurya dynasty, Kanishka of the Kushanas, Harsavardhana of Thaneshwar and in Bengal the Palas and Chandras as late as the twelfth century A.D. This, however, is not to say that Buddhism received unflinching support and

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sympathy from all Indian rulers. Some of them, notably Pushyamitra of the Sunga dynasty, Sasanka of Gauda and the Senas, were very hostile to its progress. The latter were instrumental in the eventual collapse of Buddhism in Bengal, its last stronghold in India.

It is difficult to say if Buddhism first made its appearance in Bengal during Magadhan rule, although it may be suggested that since Bengal was adjacent to Magadha (modern Bihar), perhaps Buddhism was not unknown to the people of western and northern Bengal bordering on Magadha. That Buddhism was firmly established in Bengal during Mauryan rule in the third century B.C. is evident from epigraphic and other sources such as a Mauryan inscription in Brahmi characters found at Mahasthana in the district of Bogra (northcentral Bengal) and a large number of Mauryan coins as well as other artifacts. In his travel record the Chinese traveler, I-tsing is said to have seen Ashoka's *stupas* (monuments enclosing relics) in several places such as Tamralipti (Tamluk), Karnasuvarna (Burdwan and Murshidabad) in western Bengal, Pundravardhana in northern Bengal and Samatata in eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh).

Not long after Ashoka's death, the Mauryan empire came to an end when its last emperor, Brihadratha, was killed by his commander-in-chief, Pushyamitra. This political upheaval was a severe setback for Buddhism as not only did it lose all Mauryan support and sympathy, but also it encountered the hostility of the regime of Pushyamitra, the founder of the Sunga dynasty. A foremost patron of Brahmanism, Pushyamitra is said to have revived the Brahmanic ritual of animal sacrifice forbidden during Ashokan rule. Pushyamitra is described in *Divyavadana* and by Tibetan historian Taranatha as a cruel persecutor of Buddhism. (Hazra, 1984) Some Indian scholars, notably, R. C. Majumdar (1963/1943), Dr. R. S. Tripathy and H.C. Chaudhury, however, hold different views and argue that the Sunga kings were in fact quite tolerant of Buddhism. (Hazra 1984 and B.N. Chaudhury 1969) They cite as evidence the erection of the gateways at Bharut and Sanchi during the Sunga period. That Sanchi, Bodh-Gaya and Saranath remained important Buddhist centers during the Sunga period shows that Buddhism was still in a robust state even under Sunga rule. The discovery of terracotta figurines at Mahasthangarh, two votive inscriptions recording the gifts of two inhabitants of Pundravardhana (both sites in northern Bengal) and a terracotta tablet found at Tamralipti (in southwestern Bengal) and exhibited at the Ashutosh Museum of Calcutta University all attest that Buddhism was surviving in Bengal during the Sunga period in the second century B.C.

If Buddhism was persisting despite encountering some hostility from the Sunga kings in Magadha and northern Bengal, it was, on the other hand, positively thriving in north-western India at the hands of the Indo-Greek kings. Kushana rule gave Buddhism a new impetus and helped it flourish gloriously again during the reign of Kanishka. The greatest Buddhist emperor to rule India since Ashoka, Kanishka raised Buddhism to the status of state religion and undertook various measures to promote its cause. These measures included building monasteries, erecting *stupas* and *caityas* (votive monuments), rock-edicts

and pillar-edicts, and, like Ashoka, sending missions abroad. It is, however, difficult to ascertain if Bengal was a part of Kanishka's vast empire. The fact that Kushana coins were discovered in many places of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa cannot be taken as evidence that Bengal as a whole or any part of it was under Kushana rule for the simple reason, according to R. C. Majumdar (1963/1943), that coins cross the frontiers of their origin and go far beyond by way of trade and travel.

The religious history of India took a new turn with the rise of the Gupta empire in the fourth century A.D. The period extending about a century between the downfall of the Kushana rule and the rise of the Guptas, however, has been termed "one of the darkest in the whole range of Indian history." Virtually nothing is known about the state of Buddhism during this period. With Gupta rule came political integration and restoration of political unity to much of India and such remarkable progress in every field of Indian culture that it has been called the golden age of Indian civilization. What is especially significant about Gupta rule in Bengal is that while Brahmanic Vaisnava and Saiva theisms were predominant, Buddhism was still flourishing in Bengal and other parts of India. The reason is that Gupta rulers, while patronizing Brahmanism, at the same time showed marked tolerance and even sympathy towards Buddhism. To the Guptas Buddhism was never treated as a religious rival. Rather it was granted a favoured position in that the Buddha was accepted as an *avatar* of Vishnu by the middle of the sixth century A.D.

The story of Buddhism in the post-Gupta period, however, is often one of repression and persecution very similar to what Buddhism had encountered at the hands of Pushyamitra in the second century B.C. In the midst of the political disintegration that befell India after the downfall of the Gupta empire, several political powers emerged, of which the Pushyabhutis of Thaneswar in north India and two independent kingdoms, Gauda and Banga, in Bengal are worth special mention as far as Buddhism is concerned. Buddhism encountered severe hostility and repression from Sasanka of Gauda, who also captured Banga later. The atrocities that Sasanka carried out against Buddhism, as Hiuen Tsang's account tells us, included the king's standing order to exterminate the Buddhist monks, cutting down the holy Bodhi-tree at Gaya, removing the Buddha image there and replacing it with the image of Siva.

By contrast Harsavardhana of Thaneswar, like Ashoka and Kanishka, was a great patron of Buddhism. Unlike Sasanka's acts of cruelty against Buddhists and their religion, Harsavardhana's rule was one of rejuvenating and helping Buddhism to emerge as a cultural force of India and so of Bengal. Originally a worshiper of his two family gods, Siva and Surya (the sun), Harsavardhana, like Ashoka and Kanishka, became a devout Buddhist. The contributions of Harsavardhana as a Buddhist emperor to the promotion of Buddhism included building monasteries at Buddhist sacred places, erecting a thousand *stupas* on the banks of the Ganges and banning the slaying of animals. His activities also included benevolent works such as building hospitals and rest houses, construction of highways, planting trees and digging tanks

and wells and, most importantly, convening quinquennial Buddhist convocations. Harsavardhana is believed to have established his supremacy over Gauda (northwestern Bengal) after defeating Sasanka or after Sasanka's death. But there is no evidence that Harsavardhana ever ruled Banga or Samatata, further to the east and south. It is known from Hiuen Tsang that Samatata was ruled by a Brahman dynasty in the first half of the seventh century. This Brahmanic dynasty is believed to have been overthrown by the Khadga dynasty (ca. 625/650 to ca. 700/725 A.D.), the first Buddhist dynasty to rule an independent Bengal.

The next remarkable event in the history of Indian Buddhism and so in the history of Buddhism in Bengal was the rise of the Pala dynasty that ruled Bengal from the middle of the eighth to the later half of the twelfth century A.D. The Pala rule in Bengal is especially significant for three reasons. First, prior to Pala rule, Bengal was in a state of what is called *matsya-nyaya* meaning lawlessness, chaos and anarchy in which everyone was the prey of his neighbour. Gopala 1st, the founder of Pala dynasty, and succeeding Pala rulers brought an end to this miserable state of affairs and restored political integration and social unity in Bengal. Second, the Palas were the last Buddhist dynasty to rule Bengal and the only dynasty in India to reign for a period of four hundred years. Third, Pala rule is held to be responsible for the rise of Tantric Buddhism. The Pala era may well be regarded as the golden age of Buddhism in Bengal for the wide range of development and advancement of Buddhism during this period. The discovery of copper-plates and inscriptions stand as evidence that Buddhism received lavish patronage from the Pala kings. Epigraphic, archeological and other evidences also testify to the thriving state of Buddhism under Pala rule.

Amongst other activities that the Palas undertook in promoting the cause of Buddhism were establishment of religious schools, building the great Odantapuri Vihar, the famous Vikramsila Vihar on the top of a hill on the bank of the Ganges, Somapura Vihar at Paharpur of Rajshahi district in northern Bengal, facilitating Buddhist philosophy taught at the religious schools and patronizing Buddhist writers and teachers. The Vikramsila Vihar, which was transformed into a famous international centre of learning, attracted Tibetan scholars who composed numerous books in Sanskrit and translated them into Tibetan. Among a good number of monasteries besides Odantapuri, Vikramsila and Somapura that were built during the Pala rule were Jagaddala, Troikutaka, Pandita, Devikota, Pattikeraka, Sannagara, Phullahari and Vikrampur. Pala rule came to an end with the death of its last king, Rampala, and with it Buddhism lost royal patronage for good.

Meanwhile, in the second half of the tenth century A.D., two small Buddhist dynasties, namely Deva and Chandra, are known to have ruled some parts of Bengal. Two kings of the Deva dynasty, named Kantideva and Layahachandra, are believed to have ruled a small independent kingdom known as Harikhela, and Trailokyachandra and his sons, Srichandra and Govindachandra, established their

supremacy in the eastern part of Bengal. The Salvan Vihar, the Buddha *stupa* and inscriptions found near the Mainamati hills in the district of Comilla testify to the fact that Buddhism was in a flourishing state under the rule of the Chandra kings. The famous Tibetan scholar, Atish Dipankar, hailing from a place called Vikrampur near Dhaka, is believed to belong to this Chandra dynasty.

As regards the development of Tantric Buddhism in Bengal during the Pala period, there are two lines of thought. Charles Eliot brands Tantric Buddhism as degenerate, decadent and corrupt, and attributes it to the Pala period. Trevor Ling disagrees, saying that the Buddhism of the Pala period was no different from the classical pattern of Buddhism that was prevailing from the time of Ashoka to the Pala period. Quoting the views of Barrie Morrison, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee and Taranatha, Ling (1973) opines that the Pala period was an era of progress in culture, religion, education, literature, art and sculpture. The Pala kings played a pioneering role in promoting Bengali language and literature. The earliest specimens of Bengali literature, known as *Carya-padas*, are a Tantric work of twenty-two Buddhist Tantric Acharyas known as Siddhas. (Rana 1981; Sen 1995; Dey 1960; Rahman 1998) The number of Siddhacharyas is generally put at eighty-four, the principal ones being Naropada, Tilopada, Luipada, Kahnupada, Saraha, Nagarjuna, Kukkuri, Dambi and Indrabhuti.

As regards the origin of Tantricism, there are the following conflicting views as cited in Joshi (1977) and Vasu (1986/1911). H. P. Sastri is of the opinion that "Tantra came from outside India. Most probably it came with the magi priests of Scythians." P.C. Bagchi finds the possible existence of foreign elements in Tantricism. Alex Wayman thinks that there are Graeco-Roman concepts in the Buddhist Tantras. On the other hand, L. M. Joshi, Gopinath Kaviraja, Pande and John George Woodroffe tend to trace the origin of Tantricism to the pre-Buddhist religious practices of India. Other scholars, such as Moriz Winternitz, B. Bhattacharya and Sushil Kumar De, trace the origin of Tantric Buddhism to Bengal in particular and adjacent Assam and Orissa. Joshi considers Andhradesa in central India to be one of the earliest seats of such esotericism and puts forward twelve points in support of his view.

Whatever may be the exact place of origin of Tantric Buddhism, there is no denying the fact that this esoteric form of Buddhism had profound impact on the course of history of Buddhism in Bengal. The Tantric elements in Buddhism made it assume a very distinctive form emphasizing mystic syllables (*mantras*), magical diagrams (*yantras*), ritualistic circles (*mandalas*), physical gestures (*mudras*), spells (*dharanis*) and other strange and sexo-yogic practices. As a result of these esoteric practices engulfing it, Buddhism evidently lost what may be called its original form and purity, or what Trevor Ling called the classical pattern involving the three-cornered relation among the Sangha, the king and the people. The earliest form of Tantric Buddhism is believed to be *Mantrayana*, deriving its name from the word '*mantra*.' In course of time, the cult assumed other forms, namely, *Vajrayana*, *Sahajayana* and *Kalacakrayana*. This Tantric type of Buddhism eventually was assimilated into Saktism with its focus on female

sacredness. The fusion of Buddhist mysticism with Saktism gave rise to other popular forms of religion, namely, Kaula, Nathism, Avadhuta, Sahajiya and Baul. It is in these newer marginal religious movements that Buddhist mysticism is believed by some to have survived to some extent. But precisely how the Buddhist mystical elements remain present in these newer forms is not easy to determine.

It is evident from the religious history of the Buddhist tradition of India and thus of Bengal that in order for Buddhism to thrive royal support and sympathy were needed. In the post-Pala period, Buddhism lost all royal patronage at the hands of the Sena dynasty. The Senas were orthodox followers of Saivism and Vaisnavism from Karnataka in southern India with little sympathy for Buddhism. As a result, while Brahmanic Hinduism was getting stronger and becoming dominant in Bengal, Buddhism was losing ground. There was another important factor which may be characterized as the internal weakness of Buddhism. Buddhism had no thorough system of domestic rituals to satisfy the aspirations of the common lay people. On the other hand, Brahmanic Hinduism was able to attract the attention and engagement of the common people by an array of rites and rituals focused on their domestic concerns. While Buddhism in its last phase in Bengal was in a state of disintegration and decline, it received the severest blow from Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji, a Turkish soldier of fortune who, by means of plundering raids, conquered Bihar and Bengal while destroying Buddhist monasteries and killing Buddhist monks. This sudden onslaught of the Muslim invaders led to the exodus of Buddhists lay persons and Buddhist monks to neighbouring countries, namely, Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan. Those Buddhist laity who did not manage to flee were either converted to Islam or integrated into the fold of Hinduism.

It is, however, believed by some that the decline of Buddhism in Bengal and Bihar did not mean its total disappearance from the place of its birth as it is said to have survived in many debased forms of popular practices such as Jagannath *puja* or Dharmathakur *puja*. The resurgence of Buddhism in modern independent India may be attributed to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, who led the mass conversion of lower caste people (eventually several million) to Buddhism beginning in 1956 in Maharashtra and other places. In Bengal the revival of Buddhism seems to have taken place long before the neo-Buddhist movement inspired by Ambedkar. A small Buddhist minority in Chittagong and Chittagong Hill Tracts in the eastern part of what is now Bangladesh had been practicing a form of Buddhism blended with Tantric practices long before the Moghuls and the British arrived in Bengal. The practice continued until Theravada was established in Chittagong Hill Tracts and Chittagong after a reform movement that took place in the middle of the nineteenth century. The reform came into effect in 1856 when Saramedha Mahathero, the head of the Arakanese Theravada Sangha, paid a visit to the region and taught the futility of the Tantric practices while justifying the significance of the *vinaya* practice of the Theravada. A very small number of Buddhists also now live in the district of Patuakhali in south-central Bangladesh. There is no evidence, however, that the Buddhists of modern Bangladesh are directly linked to the Buddhists of ancient or medieval Bengal. From historical and other sources it is

known that the 'hill Buddhists' (Chakma and Marma) were originally the inhabitants of Arakan (area comprising the southeastern tip of Bangladesh and western edge of Myanmar) who fled to Chittagong between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries to escape repression by the Arakanese kings. The Chakmas have a very eventful history of their own. They fought several times against the Moghuls and the British to defend their independence. They were granted autonomy by the British, but this was curtailed during Pakistani rule (1947-1971) and again since the independence of Bangladesh. As regards the 'plains Buddhists', it is claimed that Magadha was their ancestral abode. But this claim needs to be substantiated. Another view, also in need of substantiation, is that during mass exodus of Buddhists to escape the Muslim invasion many fled to Assam and from Assam came to settle in Chittagong. These people are said to constitute the plains, or lowland, Buddhists. However it may be that Buddhists came to settle in what is now Bangladesh, the fact is that the Buddhist tradition is present here along with other religious traditions.

The future, however, of the Buddhist tradition and of the ethnic groups who adhere to it is in jeopardy due to serious threats and pressures from elements within the dominant Bangladeshi Muslim population. The migration of a huge Bengali Muslim population into the Chittagong Hill Tracts was sponsored in the 1980s by the military regimes of General Zia and General Ershad. These poor Bengali Muslims from the plains, some with criminal records, were given settlement in the lands of the ethnic peoples who fled into the Indian state of Tripura or were turned into internal refugees due to the insurgent activities of the Shanti Bahini, the military wing of the Hill peoples' political party, the Jana Samhati Samity (JSS). Insurgency ceased in the Chittagong Hill Tracts after the signing of a peace agreement between the Jana Samhati Samity and the then Awami League government in December, 1997. Unfortunately, peace accord is yet to be implemented thirteen years after the signing of the agreement. The land rights are yet to be restored to the original owners. The sponsored Muslim migrants who are now believed to be the majority in the Chittagong Hill Tracts have kept on occupying and gradually grabbing more of the lands of the ethnic peoples. This is a severe setback to the preservation and promotion of the ethnic cultures and traditions. The glorious tradition of holding century-old "Bouddha Melas" (Buddhist fairs) annually on the occasion of important Buddhist festivals has now come to a permanent halt. What is yet more alarming is that with the arrival of the Muslim migrants came also the Islamic missions to persuade and entice the poor ethnic peoples to embrace Islam and receive immediate financial benefits and other facilities.

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