

Buddhism In Bengal, (Eight -Fifteenth Century C.E.)- A Critical Study

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Abstract-

The destruction of the Viharas caused by the marauding Turko-Afghan forces in the early part of the thirteenth century challenged not just the existence of Brahminical Hinduism (as practised by the Senas) but also of Buddhism in Bengal. The questions therefore arise are the following: What was the status of Buddhism during the Pala rule in Bengal? What happened to the Buddhists in Bengal who survived the onslaught of the Turko-Afghan invasion? How did the Buddhist philosophy assimilate with the new politico-social order in Bengal? While trying to answer the raised problematic the research methodology adopted is primarily Case study analysis through which there would be an attempt to analyse the state of Buddhism in Bengal from eighth to sixteenth centuries CE along with providing a new insight into the raised questions. Thus throughout the discussion in this article the principal aim would be find out what happened to Buddhism during the Turko-Afghan rule in Bengal. Here we had to deal with Hermeneutics although in a partial way trying to interpret certain contemporary texts of the period.

Keywords- *Pala period, Sena Period, Buddhism, Bengal, Turko-Afghan Rule*

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I. Introduction

The destruction of the Viharas caused by the marauding Turko-Afghan forces under Ikhtiyar Uddin bin Bakhtiyar Khalji in 1203-1204 challenged not just the existence of Brahminical Hinduism (as practised by the Senas) but also of Buddhism in Bengal. The questions therefore arise are the following:

What was the status of Buddhism during the Pala rule in Bengal?

What happened to the Buddhists in Bengal who survived the onslaught of the Turko-Afghan invasion?

How did the Buddhist philosophy assimilate with the new politico-social order in Bengal?

While trying to answer the raised problematic the research methodology adopted is primarily Case study analysis through which there would be an attempt to analyse the state of Buddhism in Bengal from eighth to sixteenth centuries CE along with providing a new insight into the raised questions. Thus throughout the discussion in this article the principal aim would be find out what happened to Buddhism during the Turko-Afghan rule in Bengal. Here we had to deal with Hermeneutics although in a partial way trying to interpret certain contemporary texts of the period.

With the revival of Vedic Hinduism in the form of Vaishnavism, Bhagvatism and Shaivism, Buddhism somewhat lost its relevance as a separate faith but continued to thrive and prosper. The fluidity in worship and reverence in the society assimilated Buddha and its followers as yet another philosophical tradition of the Hindu religion. Majumdar and Altekar opined 'The society as a whole had come to take a commonsense view that there was a substantial uniformity underlying their (Hinduism & Buddhism) fundamental principles; an individual may make such synthesis of their principles as appealed to his temperament and extend his patronage to all without distinction' (Majumdar & Altekar, 1946, p365).

The Islamic forces were not interested in serious polemics. Its concern was to establish itself as the only source of deliverance for the mankind. The 'Shashtrarthas' stopped completely. There were no rooms for such dialogue and discourses among those very people who once came and conquered the north-west of India and imbibed the culture and wisdom prevalent at that time and assimilated harmoniously. They even preached and propagated their new found knowledge, that is Buddhism. (Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 1964, p394) Once the conversion to Islam happened, the only impetus was to wage war and advance the idea of Umma, which is essentially a political force bereft of any spiritual fervor. Hence, any vestiges of earlier civilization were not tolerated and systematic destruction started happening since 11th Century CE.

One particular question always burdens the mind of a scholar who is trying to understand the progress of Buddhism during this phase of struggle for existence is -how did Buddhism face this initial onslaught and continue to survive in some form or the other? The answer lies not just in the flight of the monks to distant lands along with the scriptures and lives, but in the ability to evolve, assimilate and create syncretic discourses which became a kind of safe house of the ideas of Gautama Buddha. Why Buddhism came and flourished in Bengal?

The advent of Buddhism in Bengal is traditionally believed to have occurred around the 6th century BCE, with its spread being closely tied to the broader history of Indian Buddhism. Bengal, as part of ancient Magadha, played a significant role in the development and dissemination of Buddhist teachings. Historical and legendary sources suggest that the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, visited various regions of ancient India during his lifetime, including parts of Bengal. Some texts mention that he may have passed through the region, teaching his doctrines (Puspa Niyogi, 1960, p2). One reason why the eastern part of India attracted Buddha and his followers was that this region was outside the realm of traditional Brahmanism. The areas which consisted Bengal was diverse and had different religious and social practices. Dr.Nihar Ranjan Roy writes that the indigenous people of India, like many other indigenous peoples, used to worship deities on special trees, rocks, hills, fruits, flowers, animals, birds, special places etc.(Nihar Ranjan Roy *B.E1385*, p469). Hence it was free from the Brahmanical orthodoxy and provided a fertile bed for the propagation and practice of Buddhism. Buddhist tradition says that Buddha had visited Pundravardhana which is present day West Dinajpur in West Bengal, India and stretches up to Rajshahi and parts of Rangpur in Bangladesh. Accounts of Xuan Zang too shows that Buddha stayed at Pundravardhana for three months and spend seven days each at Samatata and Karnasuvarna (Niyogi,1963, p2). Mahasthangarh, which was the ancient capital of Pundravardhana still has remnants of the past. Archeological excavations have been carried out since 1920s the mounds, structures coins, sculptures, inscription-plaques, pottery etc found till now, go back to the 3rd century BCE. According to Haraprasad Shastri, during the first half of the seventh century there were 97 monasteries with 11,500 priests and it too one family to support one such priest, hence it may be estimated that there were equal number of Buddhist families who were residing between Munger and the Bay of Bengal (Haraprasad Shastri,1897,p2). Xuan Zang mentioned about eight to nine cities of Bengal which had crores of Buddhist population. Thus Buddhism seemed to be quite a natural choice for the people of Bengal since its inception.

If the primary reason for this is its detachment from orthodox Brahmanism, another reason may be the vibrant urge to establish separate identity in the socio-political spectrum - an essential culture of dissent, to come out with an anti-thesis. Hence Bengal was already a place for Jains and the Ajivikas. Buddhism came as a synthesis to this dialectics in Bengal. Such an intellectual atmosphere in Bengal encouraged the adoption of Buddhism, as it became associated with scholarly pursuits and spiritual development. The simplicity and depth of Buddhist philosophy, combined with its practical focus on mindfulness and ethical conduct, made it attractive to a broad range of people. Hence, Buddhism's emphasis on compassion, non-violence, and the possibility of personal enlightenment resonated with many people in Bengal, contributing to its appeal.

Another reason why Bengal welcomed Buddhism with open arms was its proximity to the traditional trade and cultural routes of south-east Asia, China and the far east. This allowed for the easy transmission of religious ideas, including Buddhism, from India to neighbouring regions like Tibet, China, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. The constant flow of people and ideas through Bengal made it a fertile ground for the spread of Buddhism.

Haraprasad Shastri wrote that even when after the destruction of the Buddhist monasteries and universities by the Turko-Afghan invaders, Buddhism lingered in the eastern part of India (Shastri,1897). He cites the following examples (Shastr,1897,pp3-5):

- A Kayastha copying Buddhist manuscripts in 1446 CE. This manuscript had found its place in Cambridge.
- Discovery of an inscription in Mahet (present day Bodh Gaya) dated 1219 CE.
- The Bodh-Gaya temple was repaired by a king of Arakan in 1305 CE.
- Buddhist monks were still at Bodh-Gaya in 1331 CE.
- Cudamanidasa, a biographer of Sri Chaitanya wrote of Buddhists celebrating the birth of Sri Chaitanya.
- A millionaire of Satgaon, a Sonarbania(subarna banik) refused to accept Vaishnavism on the ground that he would not like to be saved when the whole world is in a state of misery - a typical Buddhist way of looking at life.

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Thus Buddhism in Bengal has a long history. The text Divavadana mentions that Buddhism existed even in Pundravardhana which shows that it existed in Bengal during the Mauryan rule. Discovery of Buddhist images in Chandraketurgarh proves that Buddhism existed in Bengal in the second and third centuries C.E. Kunal

Chakraborty mentions that when Fa Xian visited India he found flourishing Buddhism in Tamralipta during the reign of Chandragupta II. "Xuan Zang, in approximately ce 639, saw twenty vihāras in Puṅḍravardhana, thirty in Samatata, and ten each in Karnasuvarna and Tāmralipta, inhabited by thousands of monks despite the pronounced hostility of Sasānka, the king of Gauda, to Buddhism." (Kunal Chakrabarti, May–June 2016 pp. 11-27)

During the Pala period Buddhism reached its pinnacle particularly the Mahayana Buddhism. Thus from the eighth to the twelfth centuries Buddhism found royal patronage and could establish some excellent centres of Buddhist learning. It was during the Pala period as Kunal Chakrabarti notes that Mahayani Buddhism came under the influence of Tantrism which was a religious and philosophical movement originating in sixth century C.E. This resulted in the common Buddhist practitioners to be more influenced by magical practices emphasising the 'importance of mantra and mandata, dhāranā and bija. Mantrayāna was the first phase in the evolution of Mahayanism. The following stages came to be known as Vajrayāna and Sahajayana'.(Kunal Chakrabarti May–June 2016, pp. 11-27)

Niharranjan Ray in his magnum opus *Bangalir Itihas- Adi Parva* notes that during the rule of the Palas there were efforts on assimilation in social aspect in greater sense. To create a sense of syncretism of the Bhramanic religion and Buddhism. In N.Roy's opinion Buddhism and the Shaiva Tantrism created a great chain of assimilation whereby the Buddhists came to accept a lot of the Bramhanic gods and goddesses along with the 'Arjetaras'(lower Aryans) while the Bhramnas came to accept the Buddhist and other lower Bhramhanic gods and goddesses. Thus syncretism was the ideal which can be noticed during the Pala reign. This assimilation, socialisation and ideal of syncretism came under question during the Sena period when only the Bhramanas and the Purahitas came to gain prominence. (Niharranjan Roy, 1356 BE pp420-421) Buddhism which flourished during the Palas naturally came under decline. However Kunal Chakravarti is of opinion that 'Buddhism's loss of identity in the perception of the laity was the primary reason why Buddhism began to fade away and for Puranic brahmanism to thrive in early medieval Bengal'.(Kunal Chakravarti, May–June 2016, pp. 11-27)

Sahajyana which declared that every individual could attain Buddhahood and that the state of Buddha resides in the body of any mortal was critical of both Brahminism and 'ritualist Buddhists' The Sahajiya doctrine which a group of Buddhists practised were the Siddhacharyas who were instrumental in the compilation of the Charjajarjavinishchaya which are extant Bengali poems dating back to the ninth century.

However it is mentioned by Buddhist historian Taranath's in *History of Buddhism in India* that the tirthika (Brahmins) were increasing in number in Magadha. However the monks in Vikramshila and Odantapuri still remained. It was during the Turkish invasion that Taranath alleges that the Buddhist monks worked a messengers to the Turkish king one 'Chandra'. 'As a result, the petty *Turuska rulers of *Bhamgala and other places united, ran over the whole of *Magadha and massacred many ordained monks in *Odantapuri. They destroyed this and also *Vikramasila.' (Taranath, 1970 p-319) Niharranjan Roy drawing inference writes that the Buddhist Bhikshus acted as spies and facilitated the entry of Ikhtiyar-uddin-bin-Bakhtiyar-Khalji.(N. Roy, B.E. 1356, p 425) Before the advent of the Muslims in Bengal it was a scene of dismay and destruction in Bengal in its entirety.

Odantapuri which was the prime seat of importance of Buddhism during the Pala and the Sena period faced massive destruction during the Muslim invasion. Pandit Haraprasad Sastri is of opinion that Buddhism did not die after this. He made references whereby he pointed out that there were traces of practices of Buddhism in Bengal and Bihar. (Haraprasad Sastri, 1897, p-3) Niharranjan Roy also reiterates the observation and remarks that references such as the author of 'Madhukosh' was Bijoy Rakshik who had the title of Arogyashali which was a Buddhist name belonging to thirteenth century; again kabibharati Ramchandra had a great affinity towards Buddhism due to which he had to leave for Sri Lanka in 1245 since he faced severe opposition from the people. (N.Roy B.E. 1356 p.558). Despite few other references it can be argued that Buddhism in the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries did not retain its former glory. The advent of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu happened in 1486 through whom the Bhakti movement received a remarkable reorientation.

This was the time when the Hussein Shahi dynasty was ruling in Bengal. This was also the time of Buddhist degeneracy in Bengal. However during the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries Dharmamangal became an integral part of the Mangalkavyas.

While most of the Mangalkavyas tell of the glory of goddesses, Dharmamangal on the other hand deals with the male god. Worshipping of Dharma was being followed in western and southern Bengal where people from all social strata were involved. Mahamahopadhyay Haraprasad Sastri found several texts on 'Dharmamangal', Dharmathakurer Chhora (Dharmathakur's poem), Sunya Purana etc. in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Haraprasad Sastri showed that Dharmapuja is more popular among the Dom(untouchables) and other lower castes within the Hindu society. According to Sastri perhaps Dharmathakur is a form of sublime Buddhism.(Haraprasad Sastri, 1355 B.E pp 95-101) No such image worship is practised, only stone image is worshipped in

many cases. In Dharma Puja Bidhan (Dharma Puja Rule Book) this image is mentioned as Sunya murti (Zero image). In many places it is mentioned as 'Buddha-Bouddha'. His name is Dharma Niranjana.

Although influence of Buddhism has been imposed on Dharmathakur some researchers have attributed to the worship of Dharmathakur to the Vedic age and even searches show resemblances with Vedic god Narayan. Dharmapuja saw the assemblage of Brahmanic and non Brahmanic rituals. Even today Dharma Puja is practised in western Bengal among the Dom (untouchables). Besides he is worshipped by other sub-castes like Jele(fisherman), Napit(barbar), Bagdi (farmers and labourers),

Sadgope (landholding community), Moyra (traditional confectioner) and other sub-castes. The earliest writer of Dharmamangal was Mayurbhatta who was present in the twelfth century. Besides, there are Manik Ganguly, Rupram Chakraborty, Ramdas Adak, Jadunath all of whom belonged to the seventeenth century. Dr. Sashibhusan Das Gupta in his *Obscure Religious cult, as Background of Bengali Literature* remarked, 'In the Hindu Tantras, we have seen, all men and women have been held to be nothing but the incarnations of Siv and Sakti manifested in the physical form- and in the Buddhist philosophy they have been spoken of as the embodiment of Upya and Prajna respectively and this philosophy has most probably influenced the Vaisnava Sahajiyas in their belief of men and women being Krsna an Radha in this Svarupa'. (S.B. Dasgupta- *Obscure religious Cult, as Background of Bengali Literature*, 1946, C.U., p.149).

Haraprashad Shastri elaborately describes a curious form of worship where 'low castes' like Doms, Pods and Hadis were the priests of such worships. (Shashtri,1897,p9). The practice has no deity as such, sometimes a vermilion, sandal paste smeared stone is used to represent a deity, facing east contrary to the Brahminical practice. The deity goes by different names -Dharma Thakur, Dharma Raya or Dharma Raja depending on the locality. People are free to worship it as per their preferred form of deity - Vishnu, Shiva etc. With regarding the formula of meditation, there Shastri cites a Sanskrit mantra which translates into:

'He has no beginning, no middle, no end; neither hands nor legs nor the germ of the body. He is the Lord of the Yogis, approachable only by knowledge, pervading all men and Lord of all the various worlds, he who fulfils the desires of his votaries and grants boons to gods and men alike, that deity in the form of a void should be meditated.'

(Haraprasad Satri,1897, p.13)

The idea of Shunya as Shastri points out that has been borrowed from Buddhism as Shunya and Mahashunya are the goals of Buddhism.

In some parts of Bengal Dharma is accompanied by Sitala, the goddess who heals small pox.

Dharma abhors sacrifice and is revered in Sri Lanka. Hence, it is evident that Dharma here referred to is Buddha.

Thus, the core idea of divine protection in Dharmamangal kavya, where deities intervene to protect individuals or communities, aligns with Buddhist ideas of compassion (karuna) and the alleviation of suffering. While Buddhist figures such as Avalokiteshvara (the Bodhisattva of Compassion) and Metteya (the future Buddha) embody compassion and protection, similar attributes are ascribed to Hindu Gods in Dharmamangal kavya. The Mangalkavyas utilized allegorical and symbolic storytelling methods that could have been influenced by the Buddhist tradition of using narrative forms to convey moral lessons and spiritual teachings. Like Jataka tales and Dhammapada, which are Buddhist works, Dharmamangal kavya too uses stories to convey moral lessons about righteous living, compassion, and overcoming suffering.

II. Conclusion:

In Bengal Buddhism carried on in its essence. Its influence persisted through cultural and intellectual channels. Buddhist ideas were incorporated into local folklore, arts, and philosophy, continuing to exert its influence in the lives of the common masses. While Buddhism lost its dominant position, its legacy continued to influence the region in various forms, contributing to the diverse religious and cultural landscape of Bengal. Buddhism survived due to its ability to adapt culturally, the flexibility of religious practices, the integration with local Hindu traditions, and occasional tolerance from Brahmanic rulers. The relation between the prevalent Hindu practices and beliefs like Gaudya Vaishnavism, Shakta and Shaiva traditions and Buddhism was not of philosophical contestation. The constant Shastric or philosophical debates prevalent in the early phase of Buddhism were somewhat absent in Bengal. It is not that Bengal did not possess high quality intellectuals from the Vedic or Brahmanic traditions, but as stated earlier that Bengal always had an independent and critical bent of mind. So Buddhism flourished during the Palas but acquired a more acceptable form of faith for the lowest of the lower castes of Bengal. Hence, Swami Vivekananda was correct in his assessment of Buddha whom he revered as one who brought hopes in the lives of the downtrodden. Therefore, as Haraprashad Shastri concludes that the number of followers of Buddha has not really diminished which may not be reflected in the Census report, but continued to thrive over the years in the form of syncretic faiths and beliefs prevalent in the length and breadth of Bengal.

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