

# Development of Buddhism and Spread of Education in Bengal during Early Medieval Period: An Analytical Study



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## Abstract

In Indian Subcontinent '**Buddhism**' was most popular religion during early medieval period and the nature of Buddhism had been changed in this period from early times. Bengal was a superior zone for flourishing new concept of Buddhism during early medieval period. Pala Kings were very much appreciating for developing Buddhism in Bengal during early medieval period. Another important aspect of this paper is '**Education**' which was much relevant for developing culture and society in Bengal during early medieval period. However early medieval period was the most remarkable for developing the specific mode of education system in Bengal. *Pala* and *Sena* dynasties were very much responsible regarding the development of education system in Bengal during early medieval period.

In this paper the author would like to analyze the nature of Buddhism and transformation form of it and the successive stages of Buddhism under the patronized of *Pala* Rulers in Bengal during early medieval period. In this study the author also intend to analyze the educational conditions in Bengal during early medieval period under the rule of *Pala* and *Sena* dynasties. Thus this paper deals with the development of Buddhism and Education and how these two components play an intermingle role for constructing an innovative culture and society in Bengal during early medieval period.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Education, Early Medieval Period, Early Medieval Bengal, Educational Conditions, Development of Buddhism, Buddhism in Bengal during Early Medieval Period.

## Introduction

Indian history basically history of ancient India was so much influenced by religious context. From early period many religion doctrines had emerged in Indian subcontinent. "Buddhism was originated in India in 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. onwards by Gautama Buddha, and gradually developed and covered almost the whole subcontinent. Most significant period for developing Buddhism was Pala age in early medieval Eastern India. After the decline of Gupta Empire many regional kingdoms had been emerged in North and Eastern India. After the death of "*Shashaanka*" ruler of *Gauda*, Eastern India was politically disturbed and naturally disintegrated. In this situation Pala kingdom had been emerged in eastern India in the middle of 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and gradually extended over northern part.

Pala age was not only important for politically surprised but also more significant for social, culture, and religious context. "Buddhism" was one of religious approach in early India among various religions which had been developed and reconstructed during Pala period.

Another important component of this article is 'Education'. Education is an integral part for developing civilization in every Country. We all concerned about origin and evolution of Education in India, but in the study a historical analysis would be made on the Educational conditions of Bengal during early medieval period. Education is a powerful instrument for individual and social development. It is indeed difficult to determine the system and nature of education in ancient Bengal; moreover these are ample evidence of the flourishing conditions of nourishment of various branches of knowledge in ancient Bengal. However early medieval period was the most remarkable for the developing a specific mode of education system in Bengal. The Pala period was remarkable for Buddhist education and also development of Sanskrit literature. The period of *Senas* is considered to be a golden period for the cultivation of various branches

of knowledge through Sanskrit language and the extend texts best testimony to it.

In this study the researcher would like to analyze the development of Buddhism and educational conditions of Bengal during early medieval period with reference to social conditions. This study will also be conducted to identify the changes occurred in the society during this period along with the development of Buddhism and education system in Bengal during early mediaeval period. The study will intend to focus intermingle roles of Buddhism and Education of Bengal during early medieval period for constructing a new society and culture in Bengal during significant period.

Several books, Literature studies were either written or organized by many authors, scholar & historians in the different issues during early medieval period in Bengal such as, Bangalir Itihasa: Adi Parva by Niharranjan Ray(1950), The History of Bengal, Vol.-I by R.C. Majumdar (1963), The University of Nalanda by H.D. Sankalia (1934), The Making Early Medieval India by B.D.Chattapadhyaya (1994), India's Ancient Past by R.S.Sharma (2008), A History of Education by Nurullah and Naik (1951), Banga Sahitya Parichaya-II by D.C. Sen (1911), Some Aspect of Society in Bengal by T.C. Dasgupta (1935).

Niharranjan Ray's (1950) 'Bangalir Itihasa: Adi Parva' discussed on the origin of Bengali peoples and nature and characteristics of the land of ancient Bengal. This work also traced on economic life, caste patterns, class patterns, village and towns and administrative patterns of Bengal. The author also focused on Religious thought and practices, language, literature and learning and also the Fine Arts and Music. R.C. Majumdar's (1963) 'History of Bengal, Vol.-I' gave a systematic account of ancient Bengal. H.D. Sankalia's (1934) 'The University of Nalanda' discussed on the origin and evaluation, contemporary educational institutions, roles of Teachers, nature of students, content, teaching methods etc. B.D. Chattapadhyaya's (1994) 'The Making of Early Medieval India' traced on social, economic, religious and cultural conditions of India during early medieval period.

Among the modern works, Brahmanic Settlements in different divisions of Bengal by Puspa Niyogi, Everyday Life in Pala Empire by Sahanara Hussain, Some Historical Aspects of the Inscription of Bengal Binoy Chandra Sen, Aspects of Economic History of Bengal by Kamrunnesa Islam, Historical Geography of Ancient and Early Medieval Bengal by Amitabha Bhattacharyya, Social and Religious Life in Bengal Inscriptions by Ratikanta Tripathi, Some Aspects of Socio-economic History of Early Medieval Bengal by Bedasruti Bhattacharya, The State and Society in Early Medieval Bengal by Soumantra Mitra Puspa Niyogi expressed her idea on among the modern works, Settlements in different divisions of Bengal. Sahanara Hussain gave a systematic account on Pala Empire of Bengal during early medieval period. Bedasruti Bhattacharya discussed of her work on socio-economic history of Bengal during early medieval period. Edward Conze (2003) in his study 'Buddhism: Its Essence and Development' mentioned

that Buddhism as both religion and philosophy, discusses its common ground with other faiths throughout the world, contracts monastic and popular Buddhism and defines old and new schools of thought, including the Mahayana, Yogacarins, and the Tantra. Bedasruti Bhattacharyya's (2012) in her work 'Varman's Incursion and Sacking and Burning of Sompura Mahavihara (Varendri): An Enquiry into the Religious Atrocity in Early Medieval Bengal' asserted that the cases of religious intolerance and animosity are not confirmed to any particular age and region. Then she came back to the history of undivided Bengal in 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and also discusses the history of origin and evolution of Varamanas. Abhijit Datta (2016) in his work 'The Arts and Crafts of Early Medieval Bengal- A Cultural Paradigm' expressed an idea on arts, crafts, agriculture, and industry in Bengal during early medieval period.

#### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To analyze the condition of Buddhism in Bengal during early medieval period.
2. To study the educational scenario in Bengal during early medieval period.
3. To identify and analyze the various changes had been found in education and social conditions in Bengal during early medieval period.
4. To estimate the role of Buddhism and Education for constructing an innovative culture and society in Bengal during early medieval period.

#### **Buddhism in Bengal during Early Medieval Period**

Buddhism was one of religion which had been flourished in Bengal during early medieval period under the patronage of various regional dynasties such as Pala, Chandra etc. Buddhist artifacts have been found throughout the different parts of Bengal such as Wari-Bateshwar, Chandraketugarh, Paharpur, Mahastangarh and Mainmati. Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism were promoted by Pala rulers. During this period many Buddhist temples, monasteries and works of art had been created by Pala rulers.

#### **Pic.1. Sompura Mahavihara from the Pala Dynasty, a UNESCO World Heritage Site**



<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>

**Pic.2. Sculpture of Sompura Mahavihara in Bangladesh**

<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>

Sompura Mahavihara is located in Rajshahi District of Bangladesh. It was built under the patronage of Pala king Dharmapala in 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. It is considered one of the most important archaeological sites in Indian Subcontinent for knowing the development of Buddhism in Bengal during early medieval period. A great Buddhist Scholar Atisa Dipankar Srijnana (980-1054 CE) had been stayed and taught at this mahavihara for many years. The another important Buddhist archaeological sites of Bengal is Salban Vihara at Mainamati was founded by King Shri Bhavadeva at the end of 8<sup>th</sup> century. After archaeological excavation unearthed the Buddhist monastery, it was identified as the Salban Vihara from the terracotta seals and copper plates discovered nearby.

In early medieval period the important Buddhist monastery was Jagaddala Mahavihara and famous for the development of Vajrayana Buddhism in Bengal. It was founded by later Pala King Rampala probably. Tamralipti was another important Buddhist centre in Bengal during this period. Here Xuanzang encountered 10 monasteries, each with 1000 monks in residence. Jagjibanpur monastery of Malda District, is another important Buddhist sites in Bengal, was established during the reign of Pala King Mahendrapala in 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Archaeologists had been found five major mounds at this site such as Tulabhita, Akhridanga, Nimdanga, Nandagarh, Maibhita in and around village of Jagjibanpur. Archaeologists said that this monastery bears a resemblance with great Vikramsila Mahavihara. Mogalmari in West Mednipore was another important Buddhist settlement in Bengal during early medieval period. This site was excavated by Prof. Ashok Kumar Dutta of the University of Calcutta, Department of Archaeology who identified the site as an early medieval Buddhist settlement flourished from 6<sup>th</sup> century to 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Many archaeological remains and artifacts had been found from this site such a large number of medieval coins bearing Buddhist scriptures, pottery and ornate bricks, brick stupas and the figure of Buddha and Bodhisattvas. Tamralipti began to decline from the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

but there was evidence that Mogalmari monastery survived until 12<sup>th</sup> century due to major trade route Subarnarekha River was nearby this Buddhist site.

The 'Pala age' may be regarded as the golden period of Buddhism in Bengal. The Pala rulers invoked the Buddha at the beginning of their official records. Buddhism flourished and survived in Bengal up to four centuries more or less under the patronage of Pala rulers, while it was almost break down other parts of India. According to Tibetan tradition Gopala build a monastery in Nalanda and established many religious schools.

**Pic.3. the Mainamati Buddhist ruins in Southern Bangladesh**

<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>

Dharmapala continued the religious policy of his father Gopala and extended the Buddhist settlement around his empire. He established famous *Vikramsila Vihara* on a hill top on bank of Ganges in *Maghadha*. The *Vihara* soon rose to achieve to an international University. In 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. number of Scholars of *Vikramsila* was more than 3000, composed numerous books in Sanskrit and also translated them into Tibetan. Dharamapala was a great patron of Buddhist writer Haribhadra, and during his reign many distinguished Buddhist Teachers were flourished such as Purnavardhana, Prabhakara, Kalyangupta, Sagarmegha etc.

**Pic.4. Ruins of Vikramsila Mahavihara**

<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>

**Pic.5.A Buddhist Temple on Maheshkhali Island, Chittagong**

<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>

Successor of Dharmapala were also played important role for enhancing Buddhism in Bengal during Early Medieval Period such as Devpala, Mahipala I, Rampala had been taken various activities for developing Buddhism in this Subcontinent.

#### **Education System in Bengal during Early Medieval Period**

Early Medieval Bengal was more significant regarding the discussion on education system not only in Bengal but also in India, its nature, characteristics, transformation and forms of evolution, innovative approaches etc. were very much effective in contemporary society and to construct a well culture in the Sub-continent. Before the discussion on education system in Bengal during early medieval period we have must known about the conditions of socio-economic and political structure of Indian Sub-continent. B. D. Chattapadhyay (1994) attributes his idea about features of early medieval period; the essential issues are Political decentralization, the emergence of landed intermediaries, a change over from the market or money economy to self sufficient villages as unit of production, Subjection of peasantry, the proliferation of castes, The feudal dimension of the ideology and culture of the period.

Niharranjan Ray (1950) says that the history of learning in ancient India generally begins with the Vedas, Brahmanas and Upanisads; as for pre-times the shortage of materials allows us little means to say anything. However, the learning and scholarship embodied in the Vedas, Brahmanas and upanisadas, even in the Dharmasastras and the Dharmasutras,

had no effect on Bengal for quite a long time. Meanwhile, people lived in this region as social beings with a tradition of learning as well as an artistic, literary and musical culture and for times to come this tradition and culture were preserved by the particular written language of each people or community. In the seventh century when Yuan ch'ung travelled in Kajangala, Pundravardhana, Kamrupa, Samtata, Tamralipti and Karnasuvarnha, Buddhist, Jaina and Brahmanical learning had progressed even further. He repeatedly praised the inclination to learning and its cultivation amongst the people of all these settlements. According to Ray (1950) Bengali scholarship in the sixth and seventh centuries was closely connected with Nalanda Great Monastery, and the endeavours towards the advancement of that monastery on the part of Bengal's scholars, teachers and rulers cannot be overlooked. A number of Chinese travelers have written of the scholarship of Tamralipti. Prof. Ray (1950) clearly discussed about the language of ancient Bengali people and also emphasized on study of Bengali literature and discussed about its historical background of Bengali literature. In this study the author also formulated an idea of learning of ancient Bengali peoples and teaching learning method also. According to the author music and fine arts may be more subtle than literature and scholarship. Yet they may be more manifest and pervasive. Here the author used various primary sources for pointing out the fine arts of different region of Bengal and parallel the writer also elaborately discussed about the music of ancient Bengal. The author also point out the development of fine arts and music of ancient Bengal. Education of Bengal had been influenced by so many Universities of Ancient India and Bengal also. Such Universities were Nalanda, Vikramasila, Valabhi, Odantapuri etc. According to H.D. Sankhalia (1934) of all the contemporary Universities, the only University worthy of standing in comparison with Nalanda was Vikramasila, with its magnificent buildings and eminent personalities, like Atisa and Jetari. But even this University did not reach that pinnacle of glory, which Nalanda acquired in the days of Vasubandhu, Dinnaga, Dharmapala and Dharmakirti. According to R.K. Mookerji (1947) like Nalanda and Valbhi, the University of Vikramasila was also result of royal benefactions. Building and Staff, Administration, Colleges and Central Hall, Dvara-Panditas were very well. R.K. Mookerji (1947) also stated that Nadia is the popular name of Navadvipa on the Bhagirathin at its confluence with Jalangi. The court of Lakshman Sena (A.D. 1106-1138) became a great centre of learning.

Sanskrit language was very much significant in Bengal during early medieval period. It was much useful to Bengali Scholars and Court of King. Religious text had been also written and studied in Sanskrit language. So there was no confusion that the study of Sanskrit represented as higher education of Bengal during early medieval period (*Gauda lekhamala*, pp. 6). According to Mahabodhipili which had discovered by Alexander Cunningham in 1879 near Mahabodhi temple in Bodhgaya, a Shiva image

had established in Buddhist Pilgrimage centre (*Gauda lekhamala*, pp. 30). Ghoshraban Lipi is a Buddhist inscription; it had assured the condition of Buddhist Education in Bengal during the regime of Devpala (*Gauda lekhamala*, pp. 45).

#### Summary and Conclusion

Buddhism developed in India not as a rival religion of Hinduism but as a supplementary religion of a large section of people who were tortured and deprived from upper caste people of Brahmanism. During early medieval period the territory of Bengal restricted in the area as demarcated during British period but it was included a large portion of north-east religion in India. During the period a wide spread Buddhism was observed in vihara and many Sanghas were established in that region. During the period some short religious crisis had been found in Bengal among the rural poor Hindu community. To fulfill the religious crisis Buddhism spread over in different areas of Bengal accordingly Sanghas were established in Bengal.

During early medieval period education was also restricted within upper class Hindu people and economically established class. The common were deprived from education. Therefore, some demand were raised from common people who spread education for that community. The development of Buddhism somehow helped to spread education among common people in Bengal during early medieval period. As a result it was observed that the rate of education was increased within the common people due to the development of Buddhism in Bengal during early medieval period. Although there was no wide spread of education but it may be mentioned that the development of Buddhism to some extent expedite the spread of education system in Bengal during early medieval period within the common people. Continuity of the development of Buddhism and education performed an intermingle role for constructing a new culture and society in Bengal during early medieval period.

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