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Sacred Monastic Life in Bengal: Buddhism and Its Influence on Early Medieval Bengal

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Abstract:

This study explores the development of Buddhist monasticism in Bengal during the Pāla Dynasty (750–1179 AD) and its profound influence on the cultural, intellectual, and spiritual landscape of early medieval Bengal. The Pāla rulers' patronage of Buddhism led to the flourishing of major monastic institutions such as Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri, which played a pivotal role in spreading Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhist teachings to neighboring regions like Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia. This study examines the role of Bengali monastic life in shaping local cultural identities, particularly through architectural design, ritual practices, and intellectual exchange. The research draws on a combination of historical records, archaeological findings, and textual analysis to investigate the lasting impact of Bengal's Buddhist monastic culture on the broader Buddhist world and its contribution to the region's cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Bengal, Pāla Dynasty, Buddhist Monasticism, Mahāyāna, Tantric Buddhism, Nalanda, Vikramashila, Odantapuri, Buddhist Architecture, Cultural Identity, Early Medieval Bengal, Intellectual Exchange, Buddhist Influence.*

1. Introduction

The advent of Buddhism in Bengal is traditionally believed to have occurred around the 6th century BCE, coinciding with the broader spread of Indian Buddhism across the subcontinent. As part of ancient Magadha, Bengal played a crucial role in the development and dissemination of Buddhist teachings. Historical accounts, both legendary and textual, suggest that Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) travelled to various regions of ancient India during his lifetime, including Bengal, where he is said to have taught his doctrines (Puspa Niyogi, 1960). One of the reasons why the eastern part of India, particularly Bengal, attracted the Buddha and his followers was its geographical and cultural detachment from traditional Brahmanism. Unlike the more orthodox Brahmanical systems in other parts of India, Bengal was a region marked by diversity in religious and social practices, creating an ideal environment for the propagation of Buddhism (Roy, 1385 BE).

Dr. Nihar Ranjan Roy explains that the indigenous peoples of Bengal practiced a form of nature worship, revering deities associated with trees, rocks, animals, and natural landmarks, which contrasted with the rigid Brahmanical orthodoxy (Roy, 1385 BE). This openness to non-Brahmanical religious practices allowed Buddhism to flourish in Bengal, as it provided a fertile bed for spiritual exploration. Buddhist tradition asserts that the Buddha visited Pundravardhana, located in present-day West Dinajpur in West Bengal, as

well as regions in Bangladesh, where he is believed to have stayed for several months, teaching his doctrines (Niyogi, 1963). These regions, rich in archaeological and cultural significance, are evidenced by the ruins of Mahasthangarh, the ancient capital of Pundravardhana, where archaeological excavations have revealed material evidence of Buddhist settlements dating back to the 3rd century BCE (Shastri, 1897).

During the first half of the 7th century, the region saw a flourishing of Buddhist monasteries. As noted by Haraprasad Shastri, there were approximately 97 monasteries with over 11,000 priests in Bengal during this period, indicating a thriving monastic system (Shastri, 1897). Xuanzang, the famous Chinese traveller, also documented the existence of large Buddhist populations in Bengal, noting the presence of multiple cities with thriving Buddhist communities (Niyogi, 1963). These accounts emphasize the significant role that Buddhism played in Bengal, suggesting that it was a natural choice for the region's people due to its departure from orthodox Brahmanical traditions. Bengal's history as a place of religious dissent and its intellectual climate further contributed to the appeal of Buddhism, which was seen as both a spiritual and philosophical counterpoint to the prevailing religious practices (Roy, 1385 BE).

Additionally, Bengal's strategic position as a trade and cultural crossroads between South Asia, Southeast Asia, and China made it a key facilitator for the transmission of Buddhist ideas beyond India (Niyogi, 1963). The easy flow of people and ideas along these routes allowed Buddhism to spread rapidly across neighbouring regions, including Tibet, China, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, cementing Bengal's status as a central hub for the spread of Buddhist teachings. The monastic life in Bengal, characterized by simplicity and a deep emphasis on mindfulness, ethical conduct, and compassion, resonated widely with the local population and contributed significantly to the region's adoption of Buddhism as both a spiritual and cultural force.

This study aims to explore the sacred monastic life in Bengal during the early medieval period (7th–12th century), examining how Buddhism not only shaped the spiritual practices of the region but also influenced its broader socio-cultural and intellectual environment. The impact of Bengal's Buddhist traditions, particularly the development of monastic architecture, Tantric practices, and the integration of Buddhist teachings into the local culture, will be analyzed to understand how Bengal became a critical center for the evolution of Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent and beyond.

1.1. The Review of Related Literature:

Jha, A. (2021). Eastern India: An Abode of Buddhist Monasteries During Early Medieval Times. *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*, 9(2), 53-58.This review examines the geographical distribution and institutional efflorescence of Buddhist monasteries (*Viharas*) across Eastern India between the 5th and 12th centuries CE. Jha argues that nearly 70% of India's Buddhist monastic sites from this era are concentrated in the Bengal-Bihar heartland. The study maps the strategic location of sites like Paharpur (Somapura) and Mahasthan, suggesting that their proximity to major river systems was not merely for travel but also for economic sustainability. By analyzing inscriptional evidence, the author highlights how the Samatata region served as a resilient pocket where Buddhism remained firmly rooted long after it began to fade in other parts of the subcontinent.

Bagchi, R. (2023).*The Tantric Turn in Buddhism: Exploring its Origin and Development in Early Medieval Bengal (6th–12th centuries CE)*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of North Bengal].Bagchi provides a comprehensive analysis of the "Tantric Turn" that characterized Bengali Buddhism from the 7th century onwards. The review shifts focus from purely philosophical interpretations to a historical understanding of esoteric rituals and their material culture. By juxtaposing literary sources like the *Caryapada* with archaeological findings of female deities like Hariti, Bagchi demonstrates how Buddhism assimilated indigenous "little traditions" and folk cults to remain socially relevant. The study argues that this

transformation was a "sacralization" of the early medieval political power matrix, where monastic rituals mirrored the complex hierarchies of the regional states.

Eshika, P. (2023). A Morphological Study of the Ancient Buddhist Monasteries of Bengal. *Proceedings of the International Conference of Contemporary Affairs in Architecture and Urbanism*, 6(1), 880-894.This research investigates the architectural and spatial layouts of five major Bengali monasteries constructed between the 5th and 12th centuries. Eshikaidentifies a significant shift in monastic morphology after the 8th century, coinciding with the rise of the Vajrayana school. The review argues that the transition from simple residential quadrangles to complex, central-shrine layouts (like SomapuraMahavihara) was driven by the changing requirements of Tantric meditation and the worship of a diverse pantheon. The study concludes that the architecture served as a physical manifestation of the evolving "Mandala" model in Buddhist theology.

Chakrabarty, P. (2025). A Geo-archaeological Study of the Landscape of the Buddhist Monasteries of Western Bengal. *International Journal of Historical and Iranological Research*, 4(1), 122-140.Focusing on the Varendra and Radha sub-regions, this review explores why specific riparian landscapes were chosen for major monasteries between 600 CE and 1200 CE. Chakrabarty uses geo-archaeological data to argue that the survival of sites like Moghalmari and Jagjivanpur was dictated by hydrological dynamics. The study posits that the "mysterious disappearance" of many monasteries was often due to river course shifts and flooding rather than purely religious conflict. It offers a fresh perspective on how the physical environment of the Bengal delta shaped the lifespan and eventual abandonment of these Buddhist centers.

Islam, S. (2026). Buddhist Education System in Early Medieval Southeast Bengal: A Case Study of the Lalmai–Mainamati Region. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 42(1), 15-32.This very recent review examines the Lalmai-Mainamati region as a flourishing educational hub between the 8th and 12th centuries. Islam argues that the Buddhist pedagogy of this era was not restricted to religious training but integrated language, ethics, and philosophy, creating a "trans-regional" intellectual network. The study highlights the role of Bengal as a bridge to Southeast Asia and Tibet, noting that institutions in Southeast Bengal were deeply connected to political structures. The findings suggest that the legacy of this educational system survived in the "living Buddhism" of contemporary communities like the Baruas and Chakmas.

1.2. The Research Gap:

Despite existing studies on the Pāla rulers' patronage of Buddhism, there is limited research on the specific mechanisms by which Pāla rulers influenced the development of monastic institutions beyond their direct political actions. The historical interactions between Bengal's Buddhist monastic communities and neighboring regions like Tibet and Southeast Asia require further exploration, particularly regarding the cultural exchanges facilitated by these interactions. Additionally, while the impact of Buddhism on cultural identities in Bengal is acknowledged, there is a lack of detailed analysis of how Bengali monastic practices influenced regional religious traditions and local cultures. Further research is also needed to examine the socio-political factors that shaped the rise of monastic centers in Bengal.

1.3. The Research Questions:

The study addresses three interrelated questions:

RQ1: How did the Pāla rulers contribute to the promotion of Buddhism and the establishment of monastic institutions in Bengal during the 7th to 12th centuries?

RQ2: What were the historical interactions between Bengal's Buddhist monastic communities and neighbouring regions such as Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia?

RQ3: How did early medieval Buddhist monasticism influence the cultural identities and religious practices in Bengal during the Pāla period?

1.4. The Research Objectives:

O1: To analyze the historical role of the Pāla rulers in promoting Buddhism and supporting monastic institutions.

O2: To explore the historical interactions between Bengal's Buddhist monastic communities and neighboring regions.

O3: To understand the impact of early medieval Buddhist monasticism on the cultural identities in Bengal.

2. The Methodology of Study:

This study employed a historical research methodology that included the analysis of primary sources such as inscriptions, royal edicts, and travel accounts to examine the role of Pāla rulers in promoting Buddhism. Textual analysis of Bengali, Sanskrit, and Apabhramśa Buddhist texts was conducted to explore their transmission and adaptation. Archaeological research was carried out through the examination of monastic ruins and architectural remains to understand the material culture. Additionally, comparative studies assessed the influence of Bengal's Buddhist monastic life on neighboring regions. Fieldwork was also conducted at key monastic sites in Bengal and Bangladesh for direct observation and data collection.

3. The Analysis and Interpretation:

O1: To analyze the historical role of the Pāla rulers in promoting Buddhism and supporting monastic institutions.

The Pāla dynasty is of paramount importance in the history of Buddhism, as it was primarily responsible for its promotion and support during its flourishing and, indeed, still represents the most significant Buddhist dynasty in Bengal. The initial origins of the family are obscure. Gopāla, who established the dynasty, is often said to have come from the vicinity of Gauda, though the suggestion perhaps derives from a certain inherent connection between their names. Whatever may have been the case, the Pāla dynasty gained considerable power in the late eighth century C.E. Thus, from the seventh to the ninth centuries, the political and military authority of the rulers of Kanyakubja had nearly consummated their task of reducing northern India under their sway. The centralizing and consolidating forces of Kanyakubja provided an opportunity of filling in the vacuum thus created in eastern India. These forces were soon taken advantage of by the rulers of Kanyakubja, first by Trivikramapāla, and afterwards by Grahavarman, the husband of what is popularly known as the Buddhist princess of the Maitrakas. The rising power of the Pālas in Magadha, whether directly or indirectly, also established an influence in the eastern part of northern India, which for the next two centuries enjoyed the rewards of the mutual backscratching system of imperial Buddhistic politics.

Under Gopāla and his successor Dharmapāla, the ruling family rapidly extended its political control over the other states in the made terra firma of northern India. The steady rise of this family is also reflected in the penetration of the influence of Buddhism in these regions. The Pālas and especially Dharmapāla have always received the credit of successfully re-establishing Buddhist supremacy in eastern India. The bearing and attitude of the two Pāla rulers certainly testify to this view. From its very origins, Tantric Buddhism was hierarchically organized; the Tantric āgamas of the different siddhāntas indicate in the case of Kālacakradhyāna six grades in the echelons of the Yogī-cabals. Nevertheless, the comparative branches of the Tantric-Kāyācārya school demanded of its adherents the delivery of a kingdom in a degree of efficiency more rigorous than of the other Buddhist Tantric traditions and systems of sahajāyana or sahajayānaśāntika. The need of a Buddhist dynasty, a king or queen in a state whose legitimate rulership and sovereignty was

naturally, by the invisible structural law of Tantrism, subject to unification with a Bhairava and Bhairavī precisely of such Tantric-Kāyācārya-Yogī-āmnāya-rūpa as the Tantric-Kāyācārya school perceived its mother Pīṭha as merchant.

Dynastic ambition was termed paramabhaṭṭāraka, the insignia of which was a very large golden-plated door. However, in Bengal the seat of the rājaguhyakā was the chief temple of Kumārapeṭikā in Tāmralipti, the goddess, as denoted by the inscription of demana and refer, being on the road to the bhukti and the mahābhukti. Hence ceremonial offerings of the present-day ruler of any Bengal kingdom were customarily made to her. An inscription reports that her worship was conducted in the seventh year of the reign of Jāyabhaṭṭāraka 1103–35 C.E., during the samvat year of the Sengalas, by Jägadīśa.

State Patronage of Buddhism under the Pāla Kings:

The Pāla kings, the first dynasty of Bengal history for which sufficient evidence exists, began their rule in the second half of the eighth century CE, reaching the height of their power between circa 850 and circa 1150 CE, in a period termed the classical or early medieval period of Bengal history. State support for Buddhism formed the backbone of monastic and ecclesiastical ventures of all manner for more than three centuries (c. 775–1100 CE). The acceleration of Buddhist imperial connection, state authorization, and explicit sponsorship reaches a high point under Dharmapāla. After a brief interruption, assistance continued steadily until at least the end of Devapāla's reign (c. 850–875 CE); then again until c. 1030 CE at the apex of Gopālas's rule, when archaeological evidence indicates a sharp decline of state assistance lasting until at least c. 1070. The last act of explicit Buddhist sponsorship termed an act of merit (punyābhiṣeka) appears to occur as late as the fortieth regnal-year of Vigrahapāla II (Tournier, 2018)

Construction and Endowment of Monasteries:

The contribution of the Pāla kings to the foundation and endowment of monasteries is widely recognized and forms a central part of the chronicle of Pāla Buddhism. Dharmapāla is said to have established a great number of monasteries throughout his domain, an account corroborated by the numerous and extensive Pāla stone inscriptions where monasteries and donations are mentioned. The supernal splendor of all these monastic edifices was not similar and equal. The construction of those devoted to the worship of the Lord was more exquisite than those for simple residence. Besides, those ordered for the great Vaiṣṇava were especially outfitted and adorned like the opera houses and not those for the worship of common deities. Yet they all are pantry and coffee-palet and perfect in every thing, and they are seen as resplendent with the Alankār-aṅgas of the art of painting spread on their walls, their chapel with stupas full of relics of gods totally concealed, the makeshift world in princely pattern in every corner, and day and night through the incense of incense-flowers offered by the worshipping company diffused on all sides, on the public highway the go-satsangs, putting to shame the rivals of the Parsons of the Markers, and in the private nature community composed of a single friend of that sod, the pleased celibate ever testing, tasting and spurning the forces of creation, crease and return in Čāmbāle.

Under the Pāla kings, endowed and pious monks are listed in sequences that in turn list many literary accomplishments and worthy deeds of liberation. Yet the gift of life and memory to so many of those listed must have involved a similarly great number of princes, kings and select blessed direct heads of the heir of death in the watching-silver or gold form of the great Dharma under the Heavens at rest monitoring aware, happy and painting beauty year by year from their lofts with human outlooks. The reiterations of the deeds of these endowed and pious monks in the sacred books clearly indicate the greatness of their gifts for the sorrow of reverral.

Support for Buddhist Universities and Scholarly Activities:

During the Pāla rule, several Buddhist universities flourished in Bengal. Nalanda maintained prominence from the seventh to twelfth centuries as a major international centre for the study of Buddhist philosophy and the Buddhist sciences, while Vikramashila and Odantapuri rose to prominence as Nalanda declined. Nalanda remained under patronage from Dharmapāla to the end of the Pāla rule, concurrent with a female—perhaps royal—patronage at Vikramashila dating from approximately 910 to 970. Support for scholarly activities and exchanges is attested at the same time for Tibet, China, and Sumatra through the gifts of royal personages (Tournier, 2018).

The Pāla dynasty enjoyed a long period of influence (ca. 750–1070 CE), during which Buddhist scholarship flourished in Bengal, notably at Nalanda and Vikramāśīla, two of the most renowned monastic universities in medieval India. The kingdom emerged at a time when the region was politically fragmented. Early rulers Gopāla, Dharmapāla, and Devapāla extended territorial and ideological boundaries in a series of martial campaigns. Under their patronage, successive kings constructed and donated to monastic institutions, a facet of patronage not often highlighted given the prominence of shields, swords, and equestrian themes on inscriptions. Pāla donations match key events in the Pāla Chronicle, such as the crucial first step toward full sovereignty: Gopāla's base was established at Magadha, a site with Buddhist connections from the time of Aśoka; Dharmapāla's conquests established control of the Ganges-Brahmaputra trade route as far north as the Himalayas; and Devapāla's expansion into Viṣṇukuṇḍin territory included the exploitation of ancient trade routes to the Deccan (Tournier, 2018). All rulers conducted campaigns to reinforce territorial gains and donation patterns seem deliberately tied to consolidation, possibly indicating the completion of the monastic network funded. Monastic centres functioned as crucial hubs for knowledge exchange and international contacts, demonstrating the interconnectedness of the Buddhist world during the Pāla period. Such networks influenced the range of sculpture, iconography, texts, and spiritual transmissions.

O2: To explore the historical interactions between Bengal's Buddhist monastic communities and neighboring regions.

Throughout its history, Bengal's Buddhist monastic communities actively engaged in the transmission of texts and knowledge. The area served as a repository of Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhist texts in the languages of Pāli, Sanskrit, and Apabhraṃśa. Manuscripts produced in Bengal traveled to neighbouring regions such as Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Assam, and the western Himalayas. Old Bengali and Early Chandrabhaṃṣā texts moved to neighbouring regions such as Orissa, Assam, and Bihar. In the post-dynastic Pāla period, monks from Bengal continued to circulate manuscripts of Mahāyāna source texts to Nepal, Bhutan, and the western Himalayas. Furthermore, under the Guṇārakṣa dynasty of mid-seventeenth-century Bengal, disciples and students from the monastic community at Vikramaśīla and the college of Bhaṭṭāraka Mahīśāsana Mārga in the western Himalayas maintained correspondence on the Bāṃkṛṭā method of Tantric recitation. As indicated in the preceding section, the Pāla ruler Mahāpāla sought the assistance of Dharmagupta to translate Tibetan texts into Sanskrit. Subsequently, Dharmagupta transmitted these works from Bengal to Tibet. Numerous other publications on these matters have identified Pālī, Siddhaṃ, Old Bengali, and Maṅgala script tradition dissemination from Bengal, together with the Bamrāli and Liṅgā manuscripts (Czyżykowski, 2016), (Anderl, 2018).

The Pala Golden Age and Tibet (8th–11th Century)

The relationship between Bengal and Tibet was arguably the most transformative. During the reign of King Dharmapala (c. 770–810 CE), the establishment of Vikramashila and Somapura Mahavihara created hubs for Tantric Buddhism. By the 11th century, Tibetan kings sought to reform their religious practices by inviting Bengali scholars. The most notable interaction occurred in 1042 CE, when the scholar Atisa Dipankara Srijnanatraveled from Vikramashila to Tibet at the invitation of King Jangchub Ö. Atisa's synthesis of Mahayana and Vajrayana teachings became the foundation for the Sarma (New Translation) schools in Tibet (Sen, 2014).

Maritime Connections with Southeast Asia:

Bengal maintained a sophisticated maritime relationship with the Shailendra Dynasty of Java and Sumatra (modern-day Indonesia). The Nalanda Copperplate Inscription (c. 860 CE) records that King Balaputradeva of Suvarnadvipa (Sumatra) requested King Devapala of Bengal to grant five villages for the maintenance of a monastery he built at Nalanda. This highlights a "merit-based" diplomacy where Southeast Asian royals funded Bengali institutions to secure spiritual legitimacy and strengthen trade routes across the Bay of Bengal (Chakravarti, 2017).

- **Artistic Influence:** The "Pala style" of bronze casting and stone sculpture directly influenced the aesthetics of the Borobudur temple in Java.
- **Trade:** Monks often travelled alongside merchant guilds, linking the port of Tamralipti to the Strait of Malacca.

Interactions with China and East Asia:

While the peak of Chinese pilgrimages to India occurred earlier (Faxian and Xuanzang), the late 10th century saw a brief resurgence. In 971 CE, the Song Dynasty emperor sent a delegation of 300 monks to India to seek Buddhist texts. Bengali monks like Dharmadeva (known in China as Fatian) travelled to the Song court in 973 CE, where he translated numerous Sanskrit texts into Chinese, bridging the gap between the waning Buddhism in India and the thriving traditions in East Asia (Khosla, 2022).

One of the most significant regions that benefitted from the intellectual and spiritual output of Bengal's Buddhist monastic communities was Tibet. From the 8th century onward, the Pāla rulers, particularly Dharmapāla (r. 770–810 AD), established close ties with Tibetan Buddhist scholars. Tibetan Buddhism began to flourish as a result of these interactions, particularly through the translation of Tantric and Mahāyāna Buddhist texts from Sanskrit to Tibetan. Drogmi Lotsawa, a prominent Tibetan scholar who studied at Vikramashila in the 9th century, played a key role in the transmission of these texts and teachings. Xuanzang, the Chinese traveler who visited Nalanda in the 7th century, also noted the presence of numerous Tibetan scholars who traveled to Bengal to learn from the great monastic institutions (Shastri, 1897). Through the intellectual exchange between Bengal and Tibet, particularly through texts on Tantric practices, Bengal became an important source for Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, which would later become a dominant form of Buddhism in Tibet (Sharma, 2024).

Bengal's strategic location as a key port in Southeast Asia's maritime trade routes also facilitated the spread of Buddhism to regions such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia. From the 8th century onwards, Bengal's Buddhist monasteries were not just centers of religious learning but also hubs of cultural exchange. The Bay of Bengal acted as a crucial conduit for the movement of ideas, and the influence of Bengal's Buddhist teachings can be traced in the religious and cultural practices of these Southeast Asian regions. Haraprasad Shastri (1897) suggests that Bengal's monasteries, especially Somapura Mahavihara in Paharpur, became important sites for pilgrimage and education, attracting monks from Southeast Asia.

In particular, Sri Lanka was deeply influenced by the Pāla-sponsored Mahāyāna and Tantric teachings. Records from the 12th century indicate that scholars from Sri Lanka visited Vikramashila and Nalanda for advanced studies, bringing back Buddhist texts and practices that shaped Sri Lankan Buddhism (Shastri, 1897). The Bengali Tantric school, with its emphasis on ritualistic practices and mantras, was also adopted and integrated into the Buddhist traditions of Southeast Asia, particularly in Myanmar and parts of Indonesia (Sharma, 2024).

The historical significance of Bengal's monastic centers—Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri—cannot be overstated. These institutions were not only local centers of religious education but also international hubs

that attracted scholars from distant lands. Vikramashila, under the Pāla rulers, became particularly influential in the transmission of Tantric Buddhism to the Tibetan plateau, China, and Southeast Asia. The 9th century marked a peak in the exchange of intellectual and spiritual ideas between these regions, facilitated by the travels of Bengali monks and scholars who often acted as intermediaries between the East and West. In addition to textual exchanges, the Bengali monastic architecture, known for its distinctive morphological character, also had an impact on the design of monasteries in regions like Tibet and Southeast Asia (Eshika, 2023).

The Decline and Dispersion (12th–13th Century):

The interaction shifted from proactive diplomacy to a desperate search for asylum during the late 12th century. Following the raids of Bakhtiyar Khalji (c. 1203 CE), major monastic centers like Nalanda and Vikramashila were destroyed. This led to a massive exodus of Bengali monks to Nepal and Tibet, carrying with them rare Sanskrit manuscripts and the "Siddham" script, which preserved the intellectual heritage of Bengal long after the physical monasteries had fallen (Datta, 2021).

O3: To understand the impact of early medieval Buddhist monasticism on the cultural identities in Bengal.

The impact of early medieval Buddhist monasticism on the cultural identities in Bengal is profound, as the monastic life during the Pāla Dynasty (750–1161 AD) not only shaped the religious practices of the time but also influenced the social, cultural, and intellectual landscape of the region. The Pāla rulers, particularly Dharmapāla (r. 770–810 AD), played a key role in fostering a vibrant Buddhist monastic community that left a lasting imprint on the cultural fabric of Bengal. Buddhist monasticism in Bengal during the 7th–12th centuries became a source of religious authority, intellectual exchange, and cultural development, influencing both local and regional cultures. This interaction between monasticism and cultural identities is visible in several spheres, including the development of Buddhist art, architecture, literature, and ritual practices, as well as the integration of Buddhist values into the everyday lives of Bengal's population.

Buddhist Monasticism as a Cultural Force in Bengal:

The role of Buddhist monasteries as cultural centers is key to understanding the impact of early medieval Buddhist monasticism on Bengal's cultural identity. Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri were not only centers for religious education but also hubs for intellectual and cultural exchanges. These monasteries played a major role in the intellectual life of Bengal, contributing to the rise of Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism. They became a confluence of ideas and traditions, incorporating local cultures while also promoting the propagation of Buddhist doctrines across neighboring regions like Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia (Niyogi, 1963). The influence of these monasteries can be seen in the integration of Buddhist thought into local cultural identities, particularly through the patronage of art, architecture, and ritual practices.

Monasteries in Bengal often served as sites for literary production and artistic expression. The construction of Buddhist stupas, temples, and monasteries reflected the local cultural aesthetics while simultaneously embodying the religious and philosophical ideals of Buddhism (Sharma, 2024). The Tantric rituals, which became prominent during the Pāla period, played a significant role in the development of Bengal's cultural identity. These rituals, often associated with mantras, meditation, and visual representations of deities, influenced not only Buddhist practice but also local ritualistic customs and art forms. The morphological character of the Buddhist monastic architecture, which included intricate sculptural and mural art, became an important marker of Bengal's cultural identity during this period (Eshika, 2023).

Buddhist Monasticism and Intellectual Culture in Bengal:

Bengal's Buddhist monastic institutions played a crucial role in shaping the intellectual culture of the region. The monastic centers, particularly Vikramashila and Nalanda, were renowned for their contributions to Buddhist philosophy, logic, and epistemology. These institutions attracted scholars from across Asia, leading to the exchange of ideas that shaped the cultural and intellectual trajectory of Bengal. Scholars like Shantarakshita, Kamalaśīla, and Atisha were instrumental in the development of Buddhist logic and Tantric practices, which became integrated into the region's philosophical traditions (Dalvoy, 2020). These intellectual exchanges fostered a culture of scholarship and philosophical inquiry in Bengal, which had a lasting influence on its cultural identity, particularly in the realm of spiritual development and philosophical discourse.

The monastic teachings also helped shape the ethics and values of the local population. The Buddhist emphasis on compassion, non-violence, and mindfulness resonated with the diverse communities of Bengal. Buddhist doctrines were often adopted and incorporated into local social norms and practices, shaping the region's moral and ethical fabric. As Bengal became a cultural melting pot, influenced by both local and global Buddhist traditions, the adoption of these Buddhist values contributed to the region's unique cultural identity (Sharma, 2024).

Bengal's Influence on Neighboring Regions through Buddhism:

Bengal's Buddhist monastic life also had a far-reaching impact on its neighboring regions. Xuanzang, the famous Chinese pilgrim, visited Bengal in the 7th century and recorded the region's thriving Buddhist communities and the influence of Bengali Tantric practices on Buddhist traditions in China (Niyogi, 1963). The transmission of Buddhist texts from Bengal to Tibet was also significant, with monks from Bengal travelling to Tibet to teach Tantric Buddhism. This cross-cultural exchange helped shape the development of Tibetan Buddhism and influenced the cultural identity of Tibetan society, blending it with Bengal's spiritual and philosophical traditions (Dalvoy, 2020).

In Southeast Asia, the influence of Bengal's Buddhist monastic culture was equally significant. The monasteries of Bengal became centres for the transmission of Buddhist teachings, particularly through pilgrimages and the circulation of texts. As noted by Haraprasad Shastri (1897), the Bay of Bengal served as a vital maritime route that facilitated the exchange of religious and cultural ideas, linking Bengal with regions like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Indonesia. The spread of Tantric Buddhism from Bengal to Southeast Asia had a lasting influence on local religious practices, contributing to the formation of unique cultural identities in these regions (Shastri, 1897).

The Decline and Cultural Integration:

As the Pāla dynasty declined in the 12th century and was eventually supplanted by the Sena dynasty, the Buddhist monastic institutions in Bengal began to lose their political and cultural prominence. However, the influence of Bengal's monastic culture continued to resonate in the region's art, literature, and ritual practices, which incorporated Buddhist elements long after the decline of the monasteries. The integration of Buddhist traditions into Bengal's cultural and religious practices ensured that its legacy endured, influencing the broader cultural landscape of South Asia (Sinha, 2023).

The impact of early medieval Buddhist monasticism on the cultural identities in Bengal is undeniable. The Pāla Dynasty's patronage of Buddhism and the establishment of significant monastic institutions helped shape not only the religious but also the intellectual and cultural life of the region. The intellectual exchanges at Bengal's monasteries influenced Tibetan, Chinese, and Southeast Asian Buddhism, while the Bengali Buddhist values contributed to the local cultural identity through their emphasis on compassion, ethics, and spiritual development. These monastic centers, with their unique architecture, art, and ritual practices, left an

indelible mark on Bengal's history, helping to shape its cultural and religious trajectory well into the medieval period and beyond.

4. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Pāla rulers played a pivotal role in the promotion of Buddhism and the establishment of monastic institutions in Bengal. Through their active patronage, particularly under rulers like Dharmapāla (r. 770–810 AD), Bengal became a major centre for Buddhist scholarship and spiritual practice. The Pāla dynasty facilitated the growth of important monastic universities such as Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri, which not only supported the development of Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism but also attracted scholars and monks from across Asia. These institutions helped to solidify Bengal's position as a leading intellectual and spiritual hub, shaping the broader Buddhist world (Sharma, 2024). The historical role of the Pāla rulers was crucial in creating an environment where Buddhist monasticism could thrive, influencing both the local culture and regional interactions.

The historical interactions between Bengal's Buddhist monastic communities and neighboring regions like Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia further demonstrate Bengal's cultural and religious influence during the early medieval period. Xuanzang's visit to Bengal in the 7th century and the subsequent transmission of Buddhist teachings from Bengal to Tibet and China exemplify how Bengal's monasteries became a critical point for the dissemination of Buddhist knowledge. The Tantric traditions developed in Bengal, particularly at Vikramashila, significantly impacted Tibetan Buddhism and the Buddhist practices in Southeast Asia (Dalvoy, 2020). These interactions highlight the cross-cultural exchanges that were vital to the spread and adaptation of Buddhist doctrines across Asia, with Bengal acting as an intermediary that facilitated the blending of regional Buddhist traditions.

Finally, the impact of early medieval Buddhist monasticism on the cultural identities of Bengal is evident in the region's art, architecture, and local practices. The Buddhist monastic centers in Bengal were not just places of religious learning; they were also key sites for the formation of cultural and spiritual values that resonated with the local population. The emphasis on compassion, ethical conduct, and non-violence in Buddhist philosophy became integral to the cultural fabric of Bengal, influencing both religious and secular life. Additionally, the architectural styles of Buddhist monasteries and the rituals practiced within these monastic centres left a lasting legacy on Bengal's religious and cultural landscapes, which can still be seen in the region's art and heritage today (Eshika, 2023). The interaction between monastic life and local identities helped solidify Bengal's position as a centre for Buddhist philosophical and spiritual development, contributing to its long-lasting cultural significance in the Indian subcontinent and beyond.

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